

The Serpentine Subterfuge

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Harriett Potter survived her first year masquerading as a pureblooded boy, but sinister forces are now moving through the wizarding world, and when something sinister starts moving through Hogwarts as well, Harry and her friends are pulled into another maelstrom-whether Harry likes it or not. Book two. Alanna the Lioness take on HP.

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Chapter 1

The Serpentine Subterfuge

Sequel to: The Pureblood Pretense .

Summary: Harriett Potter survived her first year masquerading as a pureblooded boy, but sinister forces are now moving through the wizarding world, and when something sinister starts moving through Hogwarts as well, Harry and her friends are pulled into another maelstrom-whether Harry likes it or not.

A/N: Here we are, back at the beginning. This story won't make much sense without reading the first book, just so everyone knows. For this book, I'm no longer going to mention the reviewers at the beginning of each chapter. I will instead answer the reviews in a pm or in the case of anonymous reviewers in a quick mention. That said, I'm behind on reviews like nobody's business, so I will try to answer all the reviews from the last chapter of pureblood pretense by the end of the week.

A/N2: Soo I went a little overboard on this chapter. Sorry! It's over 30,000 words, but I swear not all the chapters in this book are going to be so long or take so long to put out. I just had to get everything right this first chapter. As always, I don't own Harry Potter or Alanna the Lioness. Thanks for reading.

The Serpentine Subterfuge:

Chapter 1:

Sirius Black decided that his 33rd birthday party was going to be a pool party. Did he have a pool? No he didn't. Did he rent out a muggle pool or perhaps host the party at the house of someone who did have a pool? Of course he didn't.

Harry Potter, Sirius' niece, sighed heavily as she gazed down at what had once been a perfectly good, if admittedly unused, potions laboratory. The Black Family Potions Lab was now looking a lot like the Black Family Underground Tropical Getaway, and while Harry had never actually needed her uncle's lab, having a perfectly good one at her own house outfitted with everything she could ever want, she still thought it a sorry state of affairs when a potions lab was ruined to this extent.

"Cheer up, Harry," Archie, Harry's cousin and Sirius' son, told her as he stepped up beside her at the top of the basement steps, "You're always saying how labs need proper lighting."

Harry grimaced. Proper lighting indeed. Sirius had taken his inspiration from the Hogwarts Great Hall when designing his party grounds, and charmed the ceiling to look like an open sky instead of the dull grey stone it was made of. Unlike the Great Hall, however, the clear cerulean expanse with its golden sun beaming down on them was definitely not a sky to be found anywhere in the United Kingdom.

"It's supposed to be Aruba, I think," Archie said, squinting up against the bright sunlight.

"It's as hot as Aruba in here," Harry said, "If there were any actual ingredients around they'd be dried up and ruined in about ten minutes."

"Lucky you raided any salvageable ingredients when you were about seven, then, isn't it?" Archie grinned, "Though I don't think the ingredients would need to worry about drying out, as they'd be completely submerged in water as well."

Harry looked down into the basement lab, which was filled with about thirty feet of sparkling blue water, and smiled back ruefully, "It is a rather clever charm, I suppose."

"Why thank you, Harry," Sirius bounded up beside them, floating a cooler of drinks behind him, "It warms my heart to know that a potions enthusiast like yourself approves of my state-of-the-art improvements to the lab."

"You're welcome, Uncle," Harry hugged him briefly, "Happy birthday, Sirius."

"This is really cool, Dad," Archie said, "Are those treasure chests at the bottom of the pool?"

"Of course they are. What else is the Black Family gold good for?" Sirius swept by them and went down to where the water line stopped halfway up the stairs. He conjured a red floatation ring and secured the cooler inside of it snugly before sending it away to glide across the homemade pool. "Remus helped with the spells to keep the water insulated, and of course James transfigured most of the rafts, but the ceiling was all me."

"Who did the temperature charms?" Harry asked.

"Lily," Sirius said, grinning, "Her birthday present to me was an entire day of quiescence. No arguing and no scolding, and she also agreed to help however she could with the party decorations." Sirius grinned unrepentantly, "I've got her rounding up the snakes as we speak."

Archie and Harry exchanged a look.

"Can the snakes swim?" Archie asked dubiously.

"That's what we're going to find out," Sirius said, clapping his hands together, "Now go get your swimsuits on, kids, the party is about to start!" He headed back toward the kitchen to collect the food and Harry and Archie retreated to Archie's room to change.

Examining her swimsuit-clad form in the mirror, Harry couldn't help but think that she was experiencing a level of novelty most normal almost-twelve-year-old girls really shouldn't feel. Her swimsuit wasn't

pink or frilly, but it was so clearly a girl's bathing suit just by virtue of having a top that Harry felt awkward wearing it. She'd only been home from school a week and a half, and the idea that she didn't have to hide her sex was one she wasn't quite used to yet. She still got a mild shock every time she saw her bright green eyes staring back from her reflection, and there had been times when she forgot to respond to the name 'Harry,' but overall she was so glad to be home.

"You done staring at yourself yet?" Archie called from outside the bathroom door.

Harry opened the door, purely so that she could roll her eyes at him, not because she was giving in to his pestering, but the earnest look on Archie's face stopped her.

"What?" she asked, resisting the urge to shift self-consciously.

"You really have to stop doing that," Archie told her, "Staring in the mirror every chance you get is starting to get kind of noticeable. I think your parents are putting it down to puberty or something, but try not to look so surprised when you catch sight of yourself in every reflective surface, okay?"

Harry sighed, "Yeah, sorry. It's just weird."

"Yeah, I've been thinking about that," Archie lifted one foot to rub his other in a nervous gesture he'd perfected over the years, "I'm not sure we'll be able to keep going as we are for seven more years. How long will it be before one of the people who know you at school wants to meet both you and someone who actually knows what I look like at the same time?"

Harry nodded, "You're right. I'm working on it, sort of. I'll tell you after the party, okay?"

"Alright," Archie shrugged, "I figured you had something up your sleeve-you're the girl with the plans after all."

Harry thought to herself that she didn't feel very much like a girl with a plan, but Archie probably didn't need to hear that, so she smiled in what she hoped was a confident way and followed Archie back down to the basement.

The rest of the party guests, meaning the rest of their unofficial family including Remus, James, and Lily, were lounging about on the rafts James had transfigured when Archie and Harry finally arrived. Sirius had all of the snakes on his raft, and from what Harry could pick up from their disgruntled mutterings none of the reptiles were pleased with the situation. Sirius tossed Harry a bottle of sunscreen, and Harry glanced questioningly at Remus, not sure if Sirius was joking or not.

The werewolf shrugged from where he was lounging on his raft under an umbrella, "We're actually not sure if the charm gives off UV rays, so better safe than sorry in this case."

Archie laughed, "Someday when I'm a grown up I'm going to perform magic that I don't really understand, and no one will yell at me for it."

"Not on your birthday, at any rate," Lily muttered into her tropical beverage. Archie claimed a raft with an umbrella, but Harry picked a plain raft to sit on. She figured some sunshine would do her good after all those months practically cloistered in potions labs.

"Speaking of birthdays," Sirius said once they'd all settled in, clapping his hands together, "I know I've set the bar pretty high this year, but I don't want you two to think we aren't celebrating yours just as well when the time comes this summer. Is there anything in particular you want?"

Archie glanced over at Harry and then shrugged casually, "We'll think about it."

Harry nodded her agreement. She and Archie had been born just a few days apart, and as such always celebrated their birthdays

together to save effort. It only made sense considering they invited the same four people. This year, however...

"You should invite some of your friends from school," Lily suggested, "It'll make a nice change to have other kids around the house."

Lily often said 'around the house' when she really meant in or around the three houses their pseudo-family frequented. Each house unofficially belonged to all of them in a way.

Harry coughed slightly, "I'm not sure who I'd invite. Most of my friends from America actually live in America, and it's a long way to come for just a birthday party. International floo is so expensive."

Not to mention, Harry thought wryly, that all of the people that 'Harry' knew in America thought 'Harry' was a boy.

"What about that Hermione girl you're always writing home about?" James asked, "She lives in England, with her parents the dentists, right?"

"Oh yeah," Harry said weakly, "Right. I'll see what she's doing the last week of July."

"What about you, Archie?" Sirius prompted, "It would only be polite to invite the Malfoy boy after his family offered you a life debt."

"And if Pansy Parkinson is anything like her mother Rose, I'm sure she's a lovely girl," Lily chimed in, "We'd love to have them, regardless of politics and the like."

Archie curled his toes nervously over the side of his raft, "I would like to invite them, but I'm not sure their parents would let them come. You know how it is with the dark purebloods. It's unlikely they'd send their Heirs off to a pureblood's home they aren't familiar with."

"Oh, right," Sirius said, looking disheartened. Harry winced. He was still feeling the rift she'd inadvertently caused between he and his

son by not sending letters as often and as honestly as she could have. No doubt he was thinking Archie would resent him for making the Malfoy's and Parkinson's uncomfortable with letting their kids play at Sirius' house.

"It's no big deal, dad," Archie said cheerfully, "I saw them all year. I'd rather just spend my birthday with you guys like I always do."

"Still," Sirius said, though he looked a little more chipper, "A kid should have friends over for his twelfth birthday."

"What's so special about twelve?" Harry said idly, "We can have a big party when we turn seventeen or something."

"You just don't want party preparations to take away from your brewing time," Archie teased good naturedly, though Harry could see the slight relief in his eyes at the change of topic. Friends were a tricky subject when you were lying to and about them.

"Of course," Harry shrugged, "So what?"

"Careful there, Harry," James put in with a grin, "It's a wonder you made any friends at all this year with that kind of outlook."

"Maybe she didn't," Sirius flicked water at her from his raft as he floated by, "Maybe our Harry just wrote home about friends so we didn't worry, but really she's been hiding in the potions lab at AIM all year."

Harry shrugged, a smile tugging on her lips, "I guess you'll never know."

"You do look a bit pale," Lily said, pursing her lips, "You have been getting out, haven't you? James and I were surprised when you said you weren't going out for a Quidditch club this year."

"I just didn't think I'd have time," Harry said reasonably, "The Healer tract isn't exactly easy, and I'm keeping up with my potions work in

my spare time as well. I want to be able to get a Mastery by the time I finish school."

"In which one?" Remus said, surprised.

"Both," Harry shrugged, "Though I'll always enjoy potions more."

"Then why did you decide on the Healer tract?" James asked concernedly, "If you want to gain a Mastery so soon, you should go into the potions tract. Don't you just have basic potions classes in the Healer tract?"

"There are a couple of advanced classes later on," Harry said, "Because a lot of Healing has to do with Potions, even if the Healers don't brew them personally, but there's actually another reason I decided on Healing." She glanced toward Archie very obviously and said, as apologetically as she could, "I've actually been learning Healing so I could teach it to Archie. It was his dream to go to AIM and get Healer certified, so I'm helping him make it come true."

There were exclamations from all the adults.

"Oh, Harry," said Remus seriously, "It's wonderful that you're helping Archie, but what about your dreams?"

"I've got it covered," Harry said firmly, "Frankly, I don't need to be in the Potions tract to gain a Mastery by the time I leave school. My potions studies are progressing rapidly, and if I was in the potions tract I'd probably be bored with the level my classmates were at. This way, I learn something I don't already know, which will be useful to my potions work anyway, and Archie gets to learn Healing too. He's really good, you know."

Sirius turned surprised eyes to his son, "You've begun already?"

"Yes," Archie said carefully, "Harry and I are about at the same level, actually, because Harry writes me letters with instructions and assignments, and we found copies of the textbooks in the Potter

Library. I didn't tell you because I didn't want you to think I was ungrateful of the teachings I can get at Hogwarts-I'm not. I'm learning a lot at Hogwarts, and I'm glad you insisted I go there. I've made so many friends. This is just extra, so that I can follow my dreams no matter where I am."

"I think it's wonderful," Lily said, smiling at the both of them proudly, "You've both matured so much, helping one another and working so hard." She looked around at James, Sirius and Remus, "We've done a great job with these two."

"What are you talking about?" James sighed dramatically, "It's a disgrace!"

"Indeed," Sirius chimed in forlornly, "The next generation Marauders and they're doing extra studying for fun? Where did we go wrong, Prongs?"

"I blame Moony," James said sadly, "He gave little Fawn her first ever junior potions kit, and if she wasn't so far ahead she wouldn't have time to teach extra things to Pup, now would she, Padfoot?"

"I agree," Sirius said solemnly, turning his head toward Remus' raft, "Sorry old friend, but you've crossed an un-crossable line. Get him!"

Sirius and James moved as one and launched themselves onto Remus' raft. The werewolf barely had time to "oof!" before he and his attackers fell arms over ankles off the raft and into the clear, blue water. The three grown men sank thrashed about, wrestling in the water, and Lily ignored them with the ease of long practice, calmly sipping her drink and continuing the conversation as if there had been no interruption.

"Harry, I know you're rather advanced for your age, but are you certain you can learn all you need to without help? I was friends with a Potions enthusiast once, and I understand there are many things you can't learn from books," Lily said worriedly, "I think what you and

Archie are doing is great, of course, I just want to make sure you've got everything figured out."

Harry nodded slowly, "Actually, I was going to talk to you and Dad about this eventually, but I guess I'll tell you now. I was thinking of participating in a couple of summer classes, to help me with my extra studies, you know? Would that be okay?"

Her mother blinked with surprise, "Summer courses? Where at?" She frowned at Harry a bit sadly, "You know most places in England discriminate based on bloodlines, and your father and I were really looking forward to having you home for the summer."

"I know," Harry said, ignoring the confused looks Archie was sending her, "I was thinking more along the lines of an owl-correspondence program." At Lily's skeptical gaze, Harry rushed on, "It's true that most of them aren't very reputable, but they'll take any student who pays their fees. I've found a really good one, I think, and I'd be able to do all of the work from home."

"I suppose extra classes never hurt," Lily said finally, "I'll talk to your father later tonight."

"Speaking of," Archie said wryly as the three men finally surfaced, all three releasing their Bubble Head Charms with loud popping noises. They climbed back up onto their respective rafts and collapsed in boneless heaps while Archie, Lily, and Harry watched.

"Who won?" Archie asked with interest. All three of the participants grunted and waved their hands around tiredly in a way that conveyed no coherent answers whatsoever. "Ah, conceding the battle to Aunt Lily then? Good choice."

After a collective groan went up from the men, Lily laughed and said, "Alright, enough of that, when are we going to have cake?"

Sirius jumped up, starting the snakes, who had just begun to dry off once more, up hissing again, "Right now!" He dove off of the edge of

his raft and started swimming in long strokes to the basement stairs. Archie and James dove off after him, and even Lily decided to jump in and swim the distance to the 'shore.' Harry shared a look of agreement with Remus, who grinned and lifted his hands toward the water behind their rafts. After a moment's hesitation, the water began rippling, pushing against the rafts, and propelling them forward toward the exit.

"Hey Remus?" Harry said, watching the water lap against the rafts insistently.

"Yes, Harry?"

"How do you do that? Magic without a wand, I mean," Harry asked, "And without words, too."

Remus tilted his head as he considered the question, "Well, wordless magic you'll probably learn your sixth or seventh year at school. It requires great focus, and usually a very good familiarity with the spell you want to cast. Wandless magic, on the other hand, is much more difficult. To do magic without a wand requires extremely good familiarity with your own magic, to be able to direct it without a medium."

"But anyone could do it, couldn't they?" Harry asked, thinking back to her first Flying lesson, when she'd slowed Neville down without her wand, or in Transfiguration that one time, when she'd turned the match into a needle without words, "As long as they had focus and determination, I mean."

Remus frowned slightly, "Well, in theory every witch or wizard has the capacity to achieve it, but in practice most never do. It's not something like apparition, which about sixty percent of wizards learn how to do just by practicing it long enough. Wordless and especially wandless magic requires something that most wizards never bother to gain; that is, it requires an understanding of magic that doesn't come from copying the correct incantations and wand motions until a spell works."

"You can do it, though," Harry pointed out. They were at the bottom of the stairs, but neither made to climb off their rafts just yet, "Did you learn it yourself, or did someone teach it to you?"

Remus smiled a bit, "Well, I picked up what I know from my post-graduate studies in magical theory, though I wouldn't ever claim to be proficient in it. I can work a bit with raw elements, which is the easiest kind of wandless magic to do. Magic is, for lack of a better word, freer in nature. The sense of wildness that magic has in the elements, like water and fire and such, allows for easier manipulation without a wand or staff. I couldn't try and move a chair, for instance, without a wand."

"What about a person?" Harry said casually, "They're made up of elements, aren't they?"

"Oh, no," Remus said seriously, "It's very difficult to use magic on another person without a wand-that is, if you're talking about a witch or wizard. Muggles, maybe, but wizarding folk have too much magic of their own-shaped magic, not wild magic like is found in nature. The other wizard's magic would interfere with wandless magic, which lacks the focus necessary to retain its properties when it comes into contact with shaped magic, which seeks always to shape new magic in turn. Does that make sense?"

Harry frowned, "Sort of. So the magic in wizards isn't the same as the magic in nature?"

"It starts the same," Remus explained, "Every magical core is born of wild magic, but as a child grows he or she develops a barrier of shaped magic, ordered magic, around the wild magic core, and that shaped layer is what interacts with the magic of the world. A wizard's magic needs order and shape in order to function properly; without it, his magic would simply disperse without purpose, without effect, whenever he tried to use it. Because of this, all magic used by wizards is ordered, structured in a way that keeps the magic from going wild, bound by words and wands. Without the words, and especially without a wand, which channels the shaped magic, spells

are usually ineffective, because there is not enough willpower in the wizard to force the magic to keep the shape it needs to work."

Harry nodded slowly, "I guess that makes sense, but what if a wizard didn't have a wand, but was desperate or scared enough to make magic happen anyway?"

"Like a child's accidental magic?" Remus clarified.

"Sort of, but if the wizard isn't a child anymore."

"Well, accidental magic works because a child's magical core hasn't fully developed the secondary layer of shaped magic yet. Because their magic does not have a stable form yet, when the magic manifests itself forcefully it does so without the constraints that adult wizards need to make their magic work for them," Remus said, "For an adult, accidental magic like that is very rare. Only an unstable magical core could produce such a result, I believe."

Harry chewed her lip thoughtfully, "Okay, thanks Remus."

"Of course, Harry," Remus said, smiling, "I do enjoy our conversations, you know."

"Me too," Harry smiled back, "Let's go get some cake before it's all gone."

They made their way to the kitchen in silence, Harry thinking hard. In light of Remus' information, things were making a bit more sense. The reason wizards had primary and secondary layers to their cores must be because of the way their magic worked. The true core would be the wild magic. As Harry thought about it, most if not all of the true cores she had seen when she was helping cure the sleeping sickness had been elemental in nature. Fire, water, air, earth, or some variation therein. The outer layer of the core would then be the ordered magic, given more stable shape to allow the witch or wizard to utilize their magic in everyday life.

And her spontaneous bursts of magic from her first semester at Hogwarts could be explained by the fact that her core was still unstable at that time, like Remus said. She hadn't had a working wand, the magic in her core was unusually high, and if her core had still been a bit unstable or underdeveloped, that would explain the accidental magic she exhibited.

Or would it? Was it possible that her core was really underdeveloped then, when just a few months later Snape told her she had overdeveloped her magical core in her efforts to suppress her magic manifesting? She didn't know. She also didn't know why so many people spoke of magic like it were an unruly pet, to be forced to act a certain way, or a bar of clay, to be molded into the shape a wizard wanted. Harry had started out that way, of course, but as soon as she realized how much energy she was wasting trying to browbeat her magic into submission she'd changed her tune. Why didn't other people just get along with their magic? Or maybe they did, and they just spoke in terms of forcing the magic to do something out of long habit.

What about that time in Snape's office, though? Harry still hadn't figured out that, though she tried not to think about it much. From what she now knew of Legilimency, it was nothing like what she'd done at that time. She'd somehow felt everything Snape was feeling, and made him feel what she was feeling, just by wanting it and concentrating on it. That didn't seem like accidental magic, because it wasn't really done out of fear or great need, and it also didn't seem like the kind of wandless, wordless magic Remus had described as possible, because she wasn't familiar with either her own magic or the magic that she'd been performing at that point. She still wasn't sure what she'd even done, come to that.

All in all, she still didn't understand a lot about the way magic worked, but she supposed she had enough to be getting on with.

Luckily, the horde had saved them two slices of cake apiece (singing was forgone in favor of just eating the cake already), so Harry and Remus joined their family at the kitchen table and dug in.

When everyone was finished, Sirius cleared his throat and placed his napkin down pointedly on the table, sending meaningful looks at James and Lily, who in turn sent uneasy looks toward Harry and Archie, both of whom looked to Remus questioningly. The werewolf sighed in turn and gestured toward Sirius, who, upon having everyone's attention once more, began speaking.

"Normally I'm not one to tarnish occasions involving cake with serious talk, though of course if people want to talk about me, who am I to-" Sirius broke off as Lily kicked him under the table, "Yes, well, anyway, Harry, Archie, you two are already aware of what the S.O.W. Party has been most recently planning, are you not?"

"The new anti-muggle blood legislation," Harry said.

"Including the Marriage Law," Archie added, "Which makes it so that halfbloods can't marry anyone except purebloods."

"That's right," Sirius said, "And you also know that it was tabled after the sleeping sickness was cured, because Dumbledore's faction, which was against the laws, was supported so strongly." They nodded, so Sirius continued, "What you don't know yet is that the legislation is undergoing revisions while it is tabled, and from what Frank Longbottom has gleaned, it's going to be even nastier the next time it's up for ratification."

"Worse?" Archie frowned, "How?"

"Well, for instance there's talk of adding a clause that prevents a halfblood from turning down an offer of marriage from a pureblood," Sirius said. Lily pursed her lips angrily, but didn't say anything, and James took her hand comfortingly.

"But surely if they make it worse, it'll get even less support," Harry said, "Maybe if they get too carried away it won't pass at all."

"Maybe, though you have to remember that halfbloods are only about 25% of the population, muggleborns much less than that, so

the majority of witches and wizards simply don't care either way," Sirius said tentatively, "And maybe the Sow Party has got something worse than the sleeping sickness up their sleeves."

Harry blanched. What could be worse than comatose children?

"We don't know for sure that they were the ones behind the sickness," Remus said cautiously, "It could have been very inconvenient timing."

"But you don't think so," Archie said, looking from face to face, "You think they'll do something next year to make Dumbledore look even worse, and that they'll push the laws through after that."

"So we have a year before they possibly get approved?" Harry asked, thinking of all she would have to do in that year. She needed to read the laws carefully and see what they would forbid halfbloods from doing career wise. Usually the Potions Guild didn't allow the government to interfere with them, but then again they were a bunch of stuck up sexist snobs, so who knew if they'd recognize the new legislation or not.

"Worst-case scenario, yes, we have a year," Sirius said.

"But, Harry," James said quietly, "We don't want to you ever be put in a position like this law if trying to force you and others like you into."

"Are you going to fight the law?" Harry asked, "Isn't it against the ICW Equality Accords or something?"

"We are going to fight it, though the Equality Accords generally only recognize sex, race, and personal beliefs to be possible sites of illegitimate unequal treatment," Lily said, "But the thing is, Harry, we want you to be protected in the event that the laws do go through somehow."

"How is that possible?" Harry asked, confused, "Everyone knows I'm a halfblood."

"Oh, little Fawn, we'd never ask you to try and change or hide who you are," James said, reaching across the table to ruffle her short hair comfortingly.

"There is a loophole, of sorts, in the legislation," Lily said, "Particularly the laws related to the Marriage Law. If a halfblood is already... spoken for, then they cannot be claimed by another pureblood."

"So, you want me to find a husband before the laws go into place?" Harry asked incredulously. No way could she pick a pureblood to marry within a year.

"No, Harry, of course not," Lily said gently, "In fact, you won't have to marry anyone. We've been discussing it, however, and the best option at this point is to have you engaged to someone-not with the true intent to marry, just to make you off limits to other purebloods, if that makes sense."

Harry bit her lip, "And I suppose this would be a very *long* engagement. Since I'm so young, of course."

"Of course," Remus said, a smile tugging his lips, "No one could expect you to marry for at least another, oh, six or seven years."

Archie began to smile too, "Oh yes, you wouldn't want to rush into anything, especially before you come of age."

Harry grinned, "Okay, so I get a pretend engagement for the next six years, and surely by the time I'm seventeen we'll have either repealed the laws or I can find someone to marry for real."

"Yes, exactly," James said, "Are you okay with this? We just want you to be as safe as possible."

"I'm okay with it," Harry said, "Archie?"

Archie laughed at the surprised looks on the adults' faces, "Well of course, who else would put up with you for six more years?"

Harry flicked a small bit of icing from her fork to Archie's cheek, but he just laughed and wiped it off unrepentantly.

"So you two are really all right with all of this?" Remus asked, looking tentatively relieved.

"Well don't get us wrong," Archie said, glancing at Harry and wrinkling his nose, "It's totally gross, and if I really did have to marry her I'd probably move to Japan."

"Archie!" Sirius admonished, grimacing.

"Likewise, I assure you," Harry sniffed, her lips twitching as she spoke, "I couldn't ask for a better brother, but a boyfriend... yeah, Archie's not exactly my type."

"You have a type?" James asked, turning alarmed eyes on her.

"What? No, of course not, Dad. I hate boys. I was just using a figure of speech," Harry said, smiling innocently at her father.

"Oh, good then. Yes, Harry, boys are evil," James said, nodding judiciously.

"So predictable," Remus muttered.

Lily smacked her husband upside his head, "Don't forget who it was that proposed to me the first time when he was eleven."

"That was different," James said, highly offended, "I *loved* you."

"You didn't even know my name at that point!"

"Love is not hindered by the mere absence of a name," James said airily.

"Or an absence of brain cells, apparently," Sirius added.

"You really don't like any boys though, do you, little Fawn?" James turned his pleading gaze on her, and Harry sighed with exasperation.

"Oh please," Sirius scoffed, "Isn't it obvious that living with the Marauders has ruined her for any other man?"

"I'm sure you didn't mean that as creepy as it came out, Sirius," Lily muttered, shaking her head.

"So anyway," Harry said before the conversation could deteriorate further, "Do we need to sign a betrothal contract? I mean, just telling people we're engaged won't be enough, will it?"

"You'll definitely need a contract," Remus said, "I'll talk to the goblins at Gringotts. They should have some templates we can choose from, and alter if necessary."

"Yes," Lily said, "We need one that is binding until their seventeenth birthday, but which doesn't require chastity or exclusivity of the prospective bride and groom."

" *Eww*, Aunt Lily," Archie said.

"You'll thank me when you're older," Lily smirked.

"It should appear to be a loose but seriously intentioned contract," Remus said thoughtfully.

"With a clause for unsuitability that comes into play at seventeen, so that neither of them can break the contract before they are of age, to keep people from trying to break them up uselessly, but so that they can break it at seventeen if one deems the other unsuitable," Sirius added. He was well versed in pureblood laws and customs.

"What are possible grounds for unsuitability?" Harry asked.

"All kinds of things," Sirius said, waving a hand negligently, "If need be we'll make something up, but the point is that a clause like that puts the power to dissolve it in your hands, though not until you're both seventeen."

"That sounds good," Harry said "This should solve the problem of the Marriage Law, at least for now."

"There's more," Lily said, "If the laws go through, a lot of things-jobs, housing opportunities, magical insurance and that sort of thing-will be out of reach for muggleborns and halfbloods. The only good thing is that if a halfblood is married to or *betrothed to* a pureblood, then the restrictions don't apply to them."

"So by being temporarily engaged to Archie, I have the legal benefits of a pureblood?" Harry said incredulously.

"Yes," Sirius said, "This means that from the moment the laws go into effect, provided you sign the contract, you will for all legal purposes be pureblooded."

"We're not ashamed of our blood," Lily said firmly, "But we don't want bureaucrats standing in the way of your dreams, Harry."

"Unfortunately this doesn't apply to Hogwarts," James said carefully, "Most schools are run separately from the government, and the Hogwarts board of governors wrote the pureblood-only restriction into the school charter independently from the Ministry of Magic's stance on blood status."

"That's okay, Dad," Harry said, smiling to show she wasn't upset, "I'm really okay at AIM. I have friends, and I'm learning Healing, which means Archie is learning it as well. The engagement will be enough to make sure I can get a job. Thank you guys, Mom, Dad, Remus, Sirius, and especially you, Archie. Thank you for doing this for me."

"You deserve it, Harry," Remus said simply, "You and Archie deserve every chance you can get. I know both of you will do extraordinary

things one day."

"Besides," Archie said, pulling Harry's second piece of cake toward him with a winsome smile, "What's a secretly-fake betrothal contract between friends? You weren't going to eat this, were you?"

Harry shook her head, though she had, of course, been planning to eat that. What was the loss of a little cake when compared to the enormous gain that was her family? She forgot sometimes that other people were looking out for her too, and that she didn't have to do everything alone, or work out the whole future on her own. She didn't at all mind the reminder.

The next afternoon Harry found Archie in the Potter Library. Archie looked up as she entered, toting a bag of books with her, and put a bookmark in the medical journal he was reading through.

"What's up?" Archie asked, taking in Harry's determined face.

"I need you to tutor me in Healing, if you have time," Harry told him, plopping her books down on the Library table Archie was sitting at.

"Yeah, sure," Archie said, "I thought you said you were caught up, though."

"I am, at least in practice," Harry said, sitting down, "But I don't understand the theory behind what I'm doing."

Archie gave her a strange look, "How do you perform it in practice if you don't understand the theory?"

Harry grimaced, "My magic is weird."

"Explain," Archie said, raising his eyebrows, "Or do you just mean how it was acting out a bit around Christmas?"

"Not that," Harry said, "Though I guess it starts with that. Not long after school started up again, I came to a kind of accord with my magic. It stopped doing things I didn't want to do, or not doing things I wanted it to do, and now it's almost like magic comes *too* easily to me."

"What do you mean?"

"I can perform almost every spell I try on the first attempt," Harry whispered, leaning closer to Archie so they wouldn't be overheard, "Everything from Potion imbuing to Healing bruises-as soon as I ask my magic to do it, it just happens. That's not normal, is it?"

"It doesn't sound normal," Archie admitted, "You sure you're not just a super genius or something?"

"Definitely not," Harry said, "It's not that I easily understand everything I try to learn. It takes me as long as it would take anyone else to learn theory and remember things. I study theory vigorously to comprehend it all. But actually doing the magic... it's like breathing. I just imagine it happening, ask my magic, and it happens. I'm pretty sure I don't even need to know a spell for something for it to work, though of course I don't just throw the magic around without learning the spells first if I can help it."

Archie grinned, "You're like a classic superhero, Harry. Always so afraid of what you can do, determined not to abuse it."

"It isn't fair if I just do the magic without understanding it," Harry said, frowning, "It's like I'm taking advantage of it, and cheating with it."

Her cousin sighed, "Harry, it's not cheating in any way I can see. So you're really good at magic. So what?"

"It's not that *I'm* good at magic," Harry protested, "It's that my magic is good at... magic... if that makes sense."

"Not really," Archie said wryly, "So you're still sure of the idea that your magic has a mind of its own, and that your magic is the one responsible for doing all the, well, *magic* you do?"

"Yes," Harry said firmly. She didn't care what other people said. Her magic was separate from her, independent and an entity in its own right. She could feel it.

"Hmm," Archie scratched his head in thought, "Is that how you cured the sleeping sickness? Because I know you already explained it, but it didn't make much sense to me."

"Sort of," Harry said, "It wasn't that I asked my magic to cure the sickness though-I'm not sure asking it something that vague would work anyway. I just asked the other kids' magical cores to let me into their minds, so that I could help them take down the mental barrier."

"And Snape and the others told you that no one else can do what you were doing?" Archie checked.

"That's what they said," Harry nodded, "It seems strange to me, because it doesn't feel like a great new skill I have. It's natural. Easy."

"Can I try?" Archie asked.

"I suppose so," Harry said slowly, "I'm not sure what will happen though."

"I trust you to stop things if something really strange happens," Archie shrugged.

Harry hesitated, not wanting to hurt Archie unintentionally. On the other hand, she couldn't imagine anyone getting hurt doing what she'd done. It was so simple, and somehow beautiful. Archie would be fine. Harry trusted her magic now.

She took a deep breath and said, "I'm going to forge a connection between our magical cores, okay?"

"Whatever you say," Archie grinned.

Harry retreated into herself, looking inward to the place where her magical core rested in her gut. The familiar ball of fiery, writhing snake-like strands of magic greeted her inner eye, and Harry projected her consciousness toward that place within her until she felt her avatar manifest itself just outside of her magical core. She requested a strand from the outer layer of her core and directed it to shoot out toward the nearest magical core-Archie's. She felt the connection twang to life, and asked in her real-world voice, "Can you feel that?"

"Yes," Archie breathed wonderingly, "It's like a tug to the gut. What is it?"

"It's the connection. The place you feel that tug coming from? Turn your mind to that place and concentrate on seeing it, on feeling it, and on taking yourself to it," Harry said with her physical voice.

"Okay."

There were a few moments of silence, then Harry felt something brush against the connection between their cores tentatively. Harry smiled and sent her consciousness streaming along the connection until she reached the source of the experimental prodding. She looked around and, spotting Archie's avatar shifting uncertainly by his magical core, waved at him. He waved back, staring at her.

"You have long hair," he said, "Do I have long hair?"

He twisted around as if he could see the back of his head and Harry smiled, "No, you don't. I think I have long hair mentally because I associated my long hair with my girl self, my real self. To you it was probably just a hairstyle, so the cut assimilated into your consciousness more easily."

"Sure, Harry," Archie laughed, "So this is my magical core?"

They turned to look at it. The core was shrouded in soft blue mists that curled and swirled in a slow, playful pattern as they watched.

"It's kind of cool," Archie said.

"Let's get closer," Harry said. She walked forward until she could feel the cool air of the mists against her skin. "Will you let us in?" she asked the core. The mists began parting immediately before them, and Harry could hear the sound of running water up ahead.

Archie whistled, "Magic really just does whatever you want it to."

Harry shrugged, "Come on, I want to see your true core. It sounds like water."

"Water?" Archie moved forward through the swirling blue mists with her.

"All true cores seem to be pretty much elemental," Harry told him, "At least that's all I've seen. Water, fire, lightning, wind, or some variation of an element, like metal or magma."

"What's yours?" Archie asked.

"Fire," Harry said, "Look."

The mists parted completely and they could see Archie's true core. It was like a river, or more closely a babbling brook, but it flowed in a circle, forming the sphere-like shape that most cores took on. The water was a pretty cerulean blue and flowed lazily around and around the core, cool and tempting. Archie reached forward to touch it, and laughed with delight at the first touch of his hand to the moving water.

"It feels like magic," he said happily.

"It is magic," Harry smiled.

"I mean that I feel *this* when I do magic," Archie said, plunging his other hand into his magical core as well, "I just never realized what it was until now." He stayed there, up to his elbows in his magic's stream, until he took a deep breath and let it out on a peaceful sigh, "I feel better all of a sudden. Relaxed and soothed, and almost rejuvenated, you know?"

"Yes, my magic does the same for me," Harry said.

"So now what do we do?" Archie pulled his hands away reluctantly, marveling at how they were completely dry.

"Just like I projected my consciousness toward your magical core, you're going to do the same for mine," Harry said, stepping backwards from Archie's core and turning to move back toward the connection. The mists swirled back into place behind them, and when they reached the outside of the core once more Harry held out her hand, "Come on, I think I can pull you along with me."

Archie moved forward and took her hand without hesitating. Harry concentrated on moving back toward her magical core, but also on tugging Archie's consciousness along with her. They floated together through the connection and came out at Harry's core safely. Archie looked around with interest, examining the churning outside of Harry's core from different angles.

"Interesting," Archie said, "Your core is much more restless than mine is. The surface is moving faster, I mean, and I can feel the energy output even though I'm not very close to it."

Harry blinked with surprise. Now that she thought about it, compared to Archie's softly flowing stream and gently curling mists her magical core looked rather violent. It seemed as though the coils of magic on the surface, which so reminded her of snakes or ropes, were thrashing about mindlessly, constantly in motion, wildly shifting and twisting with abandon. In fact, thinking back over the other cores she'd come into contact with, she couldn't think of any that had moved as fast as her magical core moved. Even the core that was

lightning surrounded by storm clouds hadn't seemed so restless and unpredictable, and though she had encountered a core that was a tornado at heart, and had been moving pretty quickly, the winds had all been blowing the same way, in a circle, ordered. Her magic looked rather a mess in comparison, as if it had the barest seeming of order to hold it together.

"I suppose you're right," Harry said, "But try doing what I did to your core, so we can see if the adults were right."

"I don't know," Archie looked dubiously at the ball of roiling fire-snakes before him, "My magical core wasn't nearly so intimidating."

Harry frowned, "I know it looks sort of wild, but it feels like the warmest, most comforting fire, like a snug blanket or like Dad's most worn-out cloak." She put her hands to the core and felt the immediate tug as the coils wrapped around her wrists and fingers. They bathed her with light and Harry felt content, supported and protected, as well as energized and confident. She looked back, but Archie had not come any closer. She could tell he was struggling not to pull her back from the fire.

"I know it's strange, Arch, but remember when you pulled your hand back from the stream of magic and it wasn't wet? That's because it's not real water, just like this isn't real fire. It's just magical energy, manifesting as an element because of its affinity with the wild magic from nature."

"Magic can be just as destructive as fire," Archie pointed out, but he moved forward nonetheless, "So how did you make my mists move out of the way?"

"I didn't make them move," Harry said, "I asked."

"Okay," Archie approached her magical core determinately, "Hi, Harry's magical core. I'm Archie, a good friend of Harry's." The core seemed to pulse toward him with interest, so he went on, "Would you mind moving out of the way? I'd like to see what Harry's magical

core looks like underneath all this... lovely ropey stuff. I promise not to-ouch!" He jerked his hand back and hissed in pain, "It bit me!"

Harry whipped her head around to stare with confusion at her core, which was sure enough retracting a coil back toward the surface. It must have snaked around Archie's other side where Harry couldn't have seen it and zapped him or something. She glared at it, "Why'd you do that? He's my friend!" Harry turned to Archie, who was rubbing his hand irritably, "I'm sorry, Arch, I didn't know it would do that."

"It's okay, Harry," Archie said, "This is probably why other people don't try and do what you did to cure the sickness. I'm also starting to think you weren't exaggerating about your magic. It's sneaky."

"I thought we were getting along fine now," Harry sighed, "Does it still hurt?"

"Yes, but not as much. I think it was just warning me off," Archie said.

"Sorry," Harry said again, "I guess Snape was right about this at least. Good news is he had a legitimate reason for not believing me about it. Bad news is I'm officially a freak of nature."

"There are worse things to be," Archie said with a brittle kind of cheerfulness, "Let's go back to my magical core. I have a feeling if I put my hand back in my own core's river it will heal right up."

Harry forced a small smile, still feeling horribly guilty for hurting Archie, "Trust you to have a magical core that heals things."

"Better than a magical core that burns things," Archie teased. He closed his eyes and projected himself back along the connection to his core, and missed the pained flinch Harry gave at his words.

Is that true? Harry wondered as she broke off the connection between them, *Is fire really only good for burning things?*

When they got back to the Library, Archie shrugged off the incident as a failed experiment. He began going into the theory behind the Healing she'd been learning, teaching her faster and less painful applications of that theory in practice all afternoon. Learning to Heal properly, not just asking her magic to knit this and repair that without understanding what was happening, was tedious and mind-numbing work, but it made her feel that maybe a person's magical core didn't define them. If she could do good things, soft things, as well as scary destructive things with her magic, then the element at her core didn't really mean anything. Did it?

Harry went looking for her father in his study the next day to see if her mom had talked to him about the owl-correspondence classes she wanted to take. It was essential to her plans for the future that her parents agree to the classes, to throw off suspicion for the next part of that plan. She needed a reason to seem busy over the summer, because she was going to be very, very busy if everything worked out like she hoped.

Her dad's study looked more like a broken toy shop, because it was where all the products for the Marauder joke line were born. James, Remus, and Sirius were always moving in and out of the study in their free time, depending on who was working on the latest and greatest pranking tricks at the time. She found her dad hunched over something she couldn't see in his hand when she walked cautiously through the door. Her caution was justified by the number of times she'd walked into a demonstration of a new product, and this time was no exception-though it was certainly more literal than usual. She only took one step in the door before she ran smack into an invisible barrier of some kind and was repelled backwards onto her butt rather rudely.

James looked up and grinned apologetically. He reached over to snag a remote control off of his desk and clicked it twice. "You can come in now," he said, "Sorry about that."

Harry rubbed her backside ruefully, "I can't tell if that was an item from a new prank kit or your Auror's kit, Dad, but it definitely works."

Her dad laughed, "Doesn't it though? It's a remote-controlled mobile barrier. Sirius and I designed it. The joke is that you plant this on someone," he held up an ordinary, two-holed button, "And when you're out of the barrier's range, you activate it. It's completely invisible, but it repels anything with a magical core, so basically any witch or wizard, away from the button if they come within five feet of it. Imagine, you put this in your friend's pocket, turn it on, and anyone who gets five feet from him is knocked backwards instantly. It looks like he's the one doing it, but he can't control it because you've got the remote. Pretty funny, huh?"

"What will you call it?" Harry asked curiously. She could think of a few other uses for such a button.

"The Barrier Bubble Button?" James suggested, "Hmm, maybe Lily will have some ideas-she's good at naming things. Anyway, did you come here for something?"

"Yeah, did Mom ask you about me taking owl-correspondence courses over the summer?" Harry asked.

"She did," James said, setting the button and remote in a desk drawer absently, "I think you work way too hard, but I'd definitely get the worst parent of the year award if I forbid you from educating yourself when that's what you want to do. Just take the gold you need for the classes out of the account we set up for you when you started school last year. We'll consider it an educational expense just like textbooks for AIM and potions ingredients."

"Thanks, Dad," Harry stepped forward to hug her father tightly, "I really appreciate it."

"Hey, no problem," James said, wrapping his arms around her just as firmly, "You're my little Fawn, and if you want to change the world with a cauldron, well, I think that's just as good as changing it with a

wand. In fact it's more impressive, because everyone uses wands, but not many people can brew like you can."

Harry looked up at her dad in shock. He almost never complimented her potions work. She knew it was a left over from he and Sirius hating Severus Snape all those years, and by default viewing everything associated with his school rival with distaste, so she'd never blamed him for not supporting her quite as much as Remus and Lily had. For him to say this though...

"You're really okay with it?" she asked seriously, "I know it's not what you and mom were best at in school, but I really can't imagine myself doing anything else."

"Of course I'm okay with it," James said, smoothing her hair down reflexively, "I'm sorry I haven't been more involved in the past. I half-thought that you were only so interested in potions because it was the only magic you could do without a wand. I sort of thought once you went to school and learned about all the other kinds of magic, you'd get bored of potions, which you already knew so well, and become more interested in learning new kinds of magic. It was silly of me, though, and I can see now that it means much more to you than an interest or a hobby. If you need anything to help you reach your Mastery, just ask, okay?"

"Okay," Harry smiled, not a little smile, but a big, bright one, and leaned up to kiss her dad on the cheek, "You're the best dad ever."

"I know," James grinned, "And don't tell anyone, but you're my favorite daughter."

"That means a lot to me, Dad," Harry said solemnly.

They shared another smile, and then Harry stepped back.

"I'm going to sign up for the courses I want to take, then," she said, "Thanks again, Dad."

"Thank your mother, too," James called after her retreating form.

"I will," she promised, and she closed the door behind her.

Phase One: complete success.

Harry went in search of her mother and found her in the kitchen, charming the placemats different colors.

"Harry, is that you?" Lily smiled as she looked up from her work, "Oh good, come here and tell me what you think. I'm tired of the old pattern, but I can't decide on a new one."

Harry walked over to the table and looked at all the patterns Lily had laid out on it. Mostly they leaned toward blues and greens. She guessed her mother must really be tired of the old one, which had been a deep burgundy.

"I like this one," Harry said, pointing to a pale blue pattern with bronze flowers dancing along the edges, "The dishes are bronze, so it won't clash."

"Good point," Lily tilted her head, twirling a strand of her beautiful red hair around her finger, "That one it is, then." She waved her wand and turned all the placemats on the table to match the pattern Harry had picked out, and then tucked the wand in the sleeve of her robes. "So what's up, Harry?"

"Just wanted to thank you for talking to Dad about me doing extra school work this summer," Harry smiled gratefully and Lily patted her cheek.

"Of course, dear. What classes were you-" Lily was cut off by the kitchen door being flung open suddenly.

Archie came bounding into the kitchen, dusted with enough soot that Harry thought he probably hadn't bothered to brush himself off after coming through the floo.

"Harry, are you in here? I just got a-oh, hi, Aunt Lily," Archie faltered at the sight of the older woman, "How are you today?"

"I'm just fine, Archie," Lily said, crossing her arms over her chest and staring the boy down, "And what exactly has you running so excitedly into my kitchen?"

"Oh, um," Archie glanced anxiously at Harry, "I just wanted to tell Harry something."

"Something that you can't say in front of your dear Aunt Lily?" Lily asked reproachfully.

"Of course not, Aunt Lily," Archie said, laughing weakly, "I just didn't want to take up your free time with something so trivial. I know how hard you work during the week."

"Well, now I'm curious," Lily said blithely, "So tell us what's so exciting."

Archie swallowed, "Okay, sure. Well, I got a letter today from my, uh, friend Draco. He's invited me to a party next month, and I just wanted to tell Harry about it so that she could help me find something to... wear."

"You wanted to ask Harry, our Harry, for... fashion advice?" Lily repeated skeptically.

"Hey," Harry put in jokingly, "I didn't do so bad on those placemats, did I? Besides, you know Archie's learned everything he knows about fashion from Sirius. He might go in purple pinstripes if we don't help him."

Lily laughed, "Well, when you put it like that."

"Yep, I'm hopeless," Archie said, nodding, "You'll help me find something, won't you guys?"

"Of course," Lily said, "May I see the invitation?"

Archie took a gilded square of parchment from his pocket and handed it over. Harry leaned in to read it as well.

Arcturus Rigel Black

Is cordially invited to

The Malfoy's

Annual summer garden party

July 15

In addition

Mr. Draco Malfoy

Will be celebrating his twelfth year on this date

Floo and Apparition coordinates enclosed

Harry raised her eyebrows, but it was Lily who let out a shocked gasp.

"The Malfoy's Summer Party? You've been invited to this, Archie? Oh my, that's really unexpected," Lily ran a hand through her hair as she gave the invitation back to Archie, "The Malfoy's must be taking the life debt they owe you much more seriously than we'd anticipated."

"What do you mean?" Harry asked, "It's just a party invitation."

Lily shook her head, "No, this is a formal invitation to a formal dark pureblood party. In the past, select light-sided families also received invitations, but since the Split no light family has attended a dark pureblood event, and vice-versa. Society is supposed to be completely separated at this point except for those families that remain neutral, of course."

"But since they made Archie a Malfoy in name until the life debt is fulfilled, Archie is considered to be a dark pureblood as well as a light pureblood, socially speaking," Harry said, understanding suddenly why Lily was so surprised, "The fact that the Malfoy's actually invited him to the event as if he were a dark pureblood means that they're sticking by their words and treating him like a Malfoy, ignoring the fact that he's the son of a light-sided pureblood."

"Yes, exactly," Lily said thoughtfully, "I suppose it probably helps that you were sorted into Slytherin, Archie. People will be less likely to put up a fuss if you go. If you were Arthur Weasley's son... well, let's just say it would be a different story."

"If he goes?" Harry said, slightly alarmed, "He has to go. Surely it would be really rude to refuse. It *is* Draco's birthday party."

"Uh, yeah," Archie said, "I really do want to go. Do you think Dad will let me?"

"I'm not sure," Lily said, "I'll invite everyone over for dinner tonight and we'll discuss it, okay?"

"Okay," Archie said.

Dinner that night was an awkward affair.

"I don't like it," James said, stabbing a carrot rather violently with his fork, "Sending Archie into the hornet's nest, that's what it is."

"Darling, it's an extremely public event. No one would try anything in the open like that," Lily said soothingly, "Archie will be perfectly safe there, I'm sure."

"Maybe," James allowed reluctantly, "But you can't be too careful with dark purebloods."

"It won't be all dark purebloods," Remus pointed out fairly, "A lot of ministry officials are invited every year, and those aligned with the

ministry tend to stay out of light and dark politics by remaining neutral."

"All my friends will be there," Archie said tentatively after a pleading look from Harry, "It's Draco's birthday celebration after all, and Pansy, Theo, Millicent, and Blaise will probably all go."

Sirius toyed with his vegetables while he thought, "I don't want to keep you from your friends, Arch, I'm just worried about sending you by yourself, surrounded by political enemies, where I can't help you if you need it."

"Is it so different from sending him to school in the Slytherin dorms?" Lily said tentatively, "Those children are all dark purebloods, but Archie's made good friends of them."

"It's not the same as letting him go unchaperoned to a gathering of adult, fully-fledged dark witches and wizards," Sirius said apologetically, "There are teachers at school to watch out for trouble, and kids aren't nearly so ingrained in their prejudices and hatred as adults are."

Harry thought it was time for her to speak up, "Weren't we just the other day saying it was too bad Archie couldn't have his friends over for his birthday, because we didn't think their parents would trust our families to look after their Heirs? Now we're doing the same thing. Trust has to start somewhere, doesn't it? Why can't we be the bigger people, and trust that Archie's friends will watch out for him? Flint will probably be there, and Archie has known him forever. We can trust him to look out for Archie at least."

The part about Flint was a complete lie, as he wasn't exactly the protective older brother type, but Harry thought the rest of it was actually a good point.

"Archie also admitted he didn't really need to see his friends, because he's seen them all year," James protested somewhat half-heartedly.

"I said I didn't need to have my friends with me on my birthday," Archie corrected, "But that doesn't mean Draco should have to spend *his* birthday without one of his best friends because my family doesn't trust me to take care of myself."

"It's not that we don't trust you," James said quickly, "It's them we're worried about."

"How can we ask them to trust us if we don't trust them?" Archie said firmly, "It's like Harry said. If we want to tell ourselves we're different from the dark purebloods, then we have to act differently. Let me go as a gesture of goodwill, if my going to my best friend's birthday party has to be something political."

Harry took a bite of potatoes to hide her smile. Archie was really persuasive when he wanted to be, and he wasn't afraid to play dirty in a debate, like insinuating they didn't trust him and playing the 'kid who just wants to go to his friend's party' card.

Sirius sighed, "Do you promise not to make friends with any politicians?"

Archie whooped and Harry smiled victoriously.

"I promise," Archie said immediately.

"Then I guess you can go, but you're taking the emergency portkey," Sirius said firmly.

"Good idea, Dad," Archie said happily.

Harry spoke up before anyone could change their mind, "If Archie gets to go to his friend's house, I want to go see Hermione that day, too."

"That seems fair," Lily said, looking bemused at Harry, "You could have asked anytime if you wanted to go and see her, though."

"I want to spend time at home first," Harry shrugged, "But by July I'll probably want to see Hermione."

"Well, that's settled then," Remus said cheerfully, "Sirius this lobster is delicious, did you add something to the sauce?"

Harry and Archie shared a smile across the table. She would have to remember to get Archie something really awesome for his birthday this year.

Archie interrupted Harry's studying Occlumency in the Black Library the next day and dragged her outside to the courtyard. The snakes hissed their greetings and Harry stroked a few of them absently while Archie geared himself up to talk.

"Harry," he said finally, "I've been thinking, about everything, and I'm a little worried."

"Okay," Harry said, "I can't blame you for being concerned about what we're doing, but what exactly are you worried about?"

"It's just, this whole deception could be so easily unveiled as soon as someone really looks," Archie said, sitting down in the grass and plucking some of it absently, "I feel like it's only been successful so far because no one would think to look for such a deception."

"In a way, you're right," Harry said, "A lot of this depends on the fact that no one would expect a halfblood to ever dare to do what we've done, and they definitely wouldn't expect a pureblood to help a halfblood, which is the only way this could work. Even so, that hasn't changed. It was always true, so why are you worried now?"

"Before we were anonymous. No one wondered if Rigel Black was all he seemed, because why wouldn't he be? But now you've cured the sleeping sickness. You've said Professor Snape, one of the smartest men I've ever heard of, has taken an interest in you. The Malfoy's owe you a life debt, for Merlin's sake." Archie brushed a

curious snake away from his robe sleeve impatiently, "Now that people are looking, what if they notice something's off? Maybe we can get through this summer without anyone in our family getting suspicious that we only want to meet our friends on the same days, but the next summer? And the one after that? And what about the school year? How long can you keep pretending to be me-to be a boy? You're going to start your girly changes soon. And do you really think no one at AIM in seven years will hear that Harry Potter is a girl? All it would take is one person, one person who sees us both at school and not at school, and from there everything else is obvious."

"Is it?" Harry said, taking Archie's hand to stop him from ripping up more grass, "Is it obvious? Or does it only seem obvious to us, because we know exactly what's going on?"

"What do you mean?"

"I've been thinking about things too," Harry said, "And I've got a few things worked out. There are several major problems we're going to face, but I've got a plan to address each of them, okay? First is the problem of our lives at home and our lives at school being noticeably different. What if one of us got our picture in the paper? Either our friends from school or our parents would immediately know something was up. This would be easier if we were twins instead of just cousins who sort of look alike, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, I guess if we looked the same it would be easier to trade off personas," Archie said, frowning.

"Then that's what we have to make happen," Harry said, "I've been toying with the idea for a while, and this summer I'm going to start experimenting. I want to create a potion that will... blend our appearances, sort of, though not equally. It's hard to explain, but it would be semi-permanent in theory and it would allow us to look exactly alike in the end, which would mean that if someone saw us out of our usual context we could still get away with our pretense. I'll explain it further once I get it more figured out, but if the potion works it would also solve the problem of me starting to look noticeably

feminine in a couple years. It would blend out physiques in a way that made me look more masculine. I'll give you the full write up later, but suffice to say it would go a long way toward helping our plan work."

"Okay, you're the potions girl, so I'll let you handle that," Archie said, shaking his head, "Just so long as I don't actually have to become a girl."

"No, too many people know you as a boy at AIM already," Harry waved him off, "But that's okay. The second major problem comes if somebody finds out, right?"

"Yeah," Archie agreed, "If they figure out what we've done, you'll go to Azkaban."

"Yes, if they find out that Harry Potter took your place at Hogwarts, I'll go to prison," Harry said, "But if they find out any other possible combination of the truth, everything will be okay."

"How's that?"

"I have a back-up plan," Harry said, smiling slightly, "That's why you've been so worried, I think. The only thing this plan was missing is a plan B, to make sure that even if something goes wrong, we're still okay."

Archie nodded thoughtfully, "Security would be nice. So what's the back-up plan?"

"It's horribly complicated," Harry said cheerfully, "Feel free to be impressed. There are several phases to the plan. In the first phase, I enroll now in an owl-correspondence school. Wait, don't interrupt," she said to Archie's skeptical looks, "Just listen, it will all make sense. Mom and Dad think I'm enrolling in summer classes, but they've given me leave to pull the money for the classes out of my school account, which draws directly from their main vault, meaning they won't know or care how much money goes toward tuition as

long as the goblins are sending it to the correspondence school they've approved of."

"So you're not just taking summer classes?" Archie guessed.

"I'm enrolling as a full-time student," Harry said proudly.

"You're sort of already a full-time student," Archie pointed out.

"Exactly. I'm not going to actually learn anything from the owl-correspondence school," Harry explained, "I can learn way more at a real school like Hogwarts. I'm just going to receive the materials in the mail, pretend to learn them, and send the assignments and tests back to get credit for the work. Since I'm already learning everything at Hogwarts, doing the assignments will be cake, but I'll have records saying that Harry Potter has been home schooling herself since she was eleven, get it?"

"Sort of," Archie said slowly, "So if someone finds out I'm at AIM taking your place and wonder where you are, you can say you're home schooled."

"Yes, but that's not enough," Harry went on, "Because our parents and anyone who knows our parents will know that I am not, in fact, home during the school year. That's why I'm going to answer this."

Harry reached into her pocket and pulled out the worn advertisement from the Daily Prophet she'd been carrying around for a few days. She smoothed the creases and handed it to Archie, who read over it with mild bewilderment.

"It's an ad for an apothecary," he noted, "They need a basic potion brewer."

"Yes," Harry said, taking the ad back and stowing it in her robes once more, "I'm going to apply for the position tomorrow, and if I get it I'm going to use the money to buy an apartment."

"An apartment?" Archie stared at her.

"Well, rent one anyway," Harry said, "I'll take a really cheap place out in my name, pay the rent on it during the school year, and if Harry Potter has an apartment and a home-school record while Rigel Black is at Hogwarts how can they be the same person? Especially if no one finds out that Rigel Black is a girl, and if the potion works then the minute we're caught I change back to my real appearance and Rigel Black disappears!"

Archie was silent for a whole minute, "Disappears? Will people buy that?"

"I actually got the inspiration from Marcus Flint," Harry said, grinning, "When he realized I wasn't you I thought we were done for, but he didn't immediately think-oh that must be Harry Potter. Of course he didn't. He thought I was just some random halfblood who you got to take your place so you could go to AIM. Why does Rigel Black have to be you or me? He doesn't. He'll just vanish if anyone figures out the truth, and Harry Potter will have been there all along, home-schooling herself in a little apartment so that her cousin Archie could take her place at AIM and fulfill his dreams of becoming a Healer."

"That's... really brilliant," Archie breathed, "If we're found out, I get a slap on the wrist for pretending to be you-it's not a serious crime to pretend to be a halfblood, and I'll just pay a fine and have all my records as Harry Potter transferred over into my name. Rigel Black, the real criminal, can't be punished because he doesn't exist."

"And we have complete plausible deniability. Better yet, our family has plausible deniability," Harry said earnestly, "You say that you did ask someone to take your place at Hogwarts-a pureblood from somewhere on the continent who was too poor to afford the tuition himself. You offered to pay his way if he pretended to be you at Hogwarts so you could go to AIM without your dad knowing. He wasn't on the list for Hogwarts because he isn't from Great Britain, and you don't know who he really is. You definitely thought he was a pureblood though, so you can't be blamed as an accomplice to

blood-identity theft. Our parents can honestly say they had no idea you were in America and I was being home schooled, and that they don't know who Rigel Black is either."

"It's practically air-tight," Archie admitted, letting out his breath with a whoosh of air, "But you know it's going to be nearly impossible to pull off. You can't take money for the apartment from your account because it's clearly not an educational expense, so you'll have to come up with the money solely through working. But if you're going to be completing home-school assignments and experimenting with an entirely new potion... I don't see how you'll have time for all of this in one summer."

Harry just smiled, "You'd be surprised how many things I can juggle at once. This past year has been excellent practice. Brewing is easy and I can set my own hours. I'm not actually learning anything, just completing busy work for the owl-school, which leaves me plenty of time for experimentation."

"Well, you sound pretty sure," Archie said, relaxing back into the grass at last, "If you need any help, you know you only have to ask. In the mean time I'm going to try and find a way to make money too, so I can help pay for the apartment that neither of us will actually be living in." He smirked, "At least our utility bill will be cheap."

"So we're agreed on this cover story?" Harry asked, "When we get the plan in place, as soon as one of us is found out, the other has to be ready to implement the back-up plan. As long as both Harry Potter and Archie Black are accounted for when the game is up and Rigel disappears, it'll be next to impossible for anyone to prove anything for sure."

Archie agreed and they shook on it. Archie then went to read up on Occlumency, since all of their work would mean nothing if someone just plucked the secret out of their heads, and Harry went to enroll herself in owl-school.

The next day Harry told her parents she was going to Diagon Alley to pick up a new order of potions ingredients. This was a common occurrence for Harry, who went through potions ingredients like nobody's business when the mood struck her, so her parents just reminded her to use her school account to pay for them (if it was an educational expense they could write the galleons off in their taxes), and asked her to pick up a new pot of floo powder while she was out.

Harry flooded into the Leaky Cauldron and set off down the familiar street to the apothecary she usually frequented on Diagon Alley. It wasn't the apothecary that had advertised for a brewer, but she really did need to pick up an order of ingredients that had come in, so she stopped there first.

The man behind the counter perked up as she walked in. He was large and burly, with curly brown hair pulled back into a messy ponytail. He wore an apron that bulged at the pockets from being stuffed with various things he picked up around the store throughout the day and never bothered to put back down again. She had never seen him when he was anything less than jovial, and sure enough he smiled broadly as his warm brown eyes caught sight of her and called out in a cheerful manner, "There she is; I knew I'd be seeing my favorite little customer today!"

Harry smiled back and closed the door politely behind her so that she sunlight didn't get into the shop too much. Certain ingredients could be rather sensitive to sunlight, and though those ingredients were always kept away from the doors and windows, it never hurt to be careful.

"Hello, Mr. Tate," Harry said, approaching the counter, "It's good to see you too."

"Always too polite, Miss Potter," Mr. Tate wagged a finger at her good naturedly, "I have your order though. Got it just this morning and I just knew you'd be here to claim it before the day was done."

"You know me too well, Mr. Tate," Harry said, smiling slightly, "I despair of ever surprising you."

"That's one of the things I like about you, Miss Potter," Tate chuckled, "Surprises are only interesting for the young."

"Were there any troubles with the order?" Harry asked.

"No, no," he reached under the counter to pull out a well-packaged box, "Everything came in just fine. I double checked on the soil for the flutterbloom like you asked, and the greenhouse we order it from was very helpful. They gave me a list of the components, which I included with the rest of the order for you to look over when you get home. They did tell me to tell you that the formula for their soil has a magical patent, so don't try and reproduce, blah blah you get it."

"Yes, thank you," Harry grinned, "I'm not going to be entering the soil market at this time."

"Is this all you're picking up today?" Tate asked as he rang up her order.

"You sell floo powder here, don't you?" Harry asked, looking around.

"We have the generic brand," Tate shrugged.

"That'll work," Harry said, "Can you ring it up separately? I'll pay for the floo in coin, but I have to pay for the ingredients-"

"With your school account, I know, Miss Potter," Tate smiled kindly, "Sure thing."

He rang her up and Harry paid, putting the floo powder into the box of ingredients to make it easier to carry.

"Anything else I can help you with today, Miss Potter?"

"Actually, could you give me directions to the Serpent's Storeroom?" Harry asked.

Mr. Tate frowned cautiously, "Is there an ingredient you're having trouble finding, Miss Potter? You know I'd order anything you want, no need to go all the way over there."

"Oh, no, Mr. Tate," Harry smiled, "I'm not taking my business there, I assure you. Everyone knows the best ingredients come through Mulpepper Apothecary. I found this in the paper, though." She pulled out the notice from the paper and showed it to Mr. Tate.

"Oh, looking for a summer job, are you?" Mr. Tate said, looking a bit more relaxed, "Well, I guess I can see how this would appeal to you. The Serpent's Storeroom, though... it's not exactly a place I'd like to be sending you, Miss Potter. The shop's okay of course, but the location..."

"I understand, Mr. Tate," Harry said, "I just really need the money for a personal project I'm working on. I'll be very careful, I promise."

"Alright," Tate huffed, "I suppose it's not really *that* far into Knockturn alley. You go straight there and straight back to Diagon Alley, okay, Miss Potter?"

"I will," Harry promised.

"Good," Tate said, "You know where Knockturn alley branches off from Diagon Alley?" Harry nodded. "Well, when you turn down the alley, go past Borgin and Burkes to the first alley that intersects Knockturn's main alley. Turn left and the Serpent's Storeroom is the first shop on your left. It has a dark red sign with black letters and the Staff of Asclepius on the window."

Harry smiled gratefully, "Thanks, Mr. Tate. I'd hate to wander around looking for it."

"No kidding," Tate sighed, "Well, best of luck Miss Potter. In fact," he reached over and plucked a business card from its holder on the side of the desk, "Take this and tell that sourpuss Edgar Krait that Caleb Tate recommends you."

"Really, Mr. Tate?" Harry blinked in surprise as she took the card automatically, "Thank you very much. I promise I'm a good brewer, so you won't be wasting your recommendation."

Tate laughed jovially once more, "Oh, Miss Potter, nothing spent on you is wasted, be it time or ingredients, that much I know."

"Thanks again, Mr. Tate," Harry picked up her package, "I'll be by sometime next week to make another order I expect."

"Looking forward to it, Miss Potter. Good luck on your job application."

Harry smiled once more and put the box of ingredients under her left arm so that her right would be free to open the door-and more importantly free to draw her wand should it become necessary. If nothing else, she had learned a pretty mean shield charm that year, no thanks to Professor Quirrell.

Knockturn Alley was everything she'd ever heard it was. Dirty, creepy, smelly, and dark, shadows lurked everywhere, though it was the middle of the day. Harry walked calmly but purposefully down the alley, staying to the middle of the road where there was at least a semblance of afternoon light. She passed Borgin and Burke's and turned left like Mr. Tate had told her, and sure enough there on her left was the gloomy Serpent's Storeroom Apothecary.

Harry didn't linger in the little side alley long. She entered the shop and paused for a moment to adjust her eyes to the incredibly dim lighting. There was a counter to the left, raised up on a platform that would give anyone standing behind it a very good view of the narrow aisles of stock to her right. There were also mirrors positioned all over the shop, and Harry thought a shoplifter would be hard put to get away with anything in here. The aisles closest to the door held what looked at a casual glance to be the cheapest of ingredients, with more expensive, more rare ingredients sold in the middle aisles. The aisles at the back held competed potions in decorative bottles.

Harry turned toward the counter and took in the man sitting behind it, counting armadillo scales into a jar. He was tall even sitting down and had thick blonde hair slicked back from his face. His frame was thin, but hard, like a habitual fighter's would be, and he had a scar along his jaw line that disappeared into the collar of his plain lab robes.

"Are you Mr. Krait?" she asked as she reached the counter. Because it was elevated, she felt at a distinct disadvantage looking up at the man behind it.

"Who asks?" he drummed his free hand on the counter as he spoke.

"I do," Harry said, thinking it would be best to get straight to the point with this man, "I'm here about the brewing job. Has the position been filled?"

"No it has not," the man, who she assumed was Mr. Krait, said without even looking up from his scale counting, "But I don't see what my staff shortage has to do with a brat like you."

"I am a potions brewer," she said.

"Says who?" Krait grumbled absently.

"Says Mr. Tate," Harry said shortly. Krait finally looked up at her with eyes that were an earthy green. "He recommends me," she added, pulling out the card Tate had given her and passing it over. Mr. Krait took the card and threw it into the trashcan behind the counter without ever taking his eyes away from her face.

"What can you brew?" Krait asked, leaning over the counter as if he could inspect her brewing ability by staring down at her intently enough.

"If I have a recipe?" she shrugged, "Probably about anything you'd need me to. I assume you brew all the top-level potions yourself."

"Hn," Krait grunted, "Sure you can. Look, this ain't grade-school cooking lessons, got it? You can't just add the ingredients together and stir if you want to-"

"With respect, Mr. Krait, I know how to brew," Harry said evenly.

Krait raised an eyebrow, "Can you consciously imbue? And if you say 'what?' to me I swear I'm gonna kick Tate's ass into next week for sending you over here."

"I can," Harry said.

"What's the highest level potion you've ever brewed?" he asked, looking only a little less dismissive.

"Snowhit Draught," Harry said, it was definitely the hardest thing she'd brewed, requiring both the most concentration and the most magic.

"Not bad," Krait rubbed his chin, "If you're not *lying*, that is."

Harry opened her mouth to speak but he waved her silent.

"Tell you what, kid. I'll give you a list of potions and a crate of my bottles. You buy the ingredients, brew and bottle the potions, and bring whatever you finish back here. I don't care which potions you make. I need them all done sooner or later, so just brew whichever you think you can," he drew out a remarkably thick tube of rolled up parchment from a drawer behind the counter and handed it over, "I'll pay you by the bottle, thirty percent laboring fee guaranteed for you. If it takes you ten sickles to make one dose, you'll get thirteen sickles from me, with a bonus if it's magically grueling. I'll sell them at two galleons to cover the bottle and make a profit, and if your potions sell good enough you get an additional bonus. Any questions?"

Harry unrolled the stack of parchment he'd given her and saw that the first sheet was a list of potions and the rest of the sheets were recipes. "How much of each potion do you want?"

"Don't care," he said, "If you can only brew one of those potions, bring me back a crate of that."

Harry nodded and said, "Give me two crates of bottles."

Krait fixed her with a stern eye, "You run off with those bottles and I'll hunt you down, kid."

"Understood," Harry said, though she wasn't sure how he expected to do that without ever having asked her name.

Krait glanced around the store to make sure there were no customers before ducking quickly into the back to fetch the crates of potion bottles. Harry stacked the crates and added her box of ingredients to the top. Next time she thought she ought to bring Archie with her, as walking down Knockturn Alley with her hands full was probably not a good idea, but for now she just walked as quickly as she could back to the relative safety of Diagon Alley.

Harry didn't relax fully until she was back in the Leaky Cauldron. She set the crates briefly on the ground while she tossed some floo powder into the grate, and soon enough she was back at the Godric's Hollow house, storing the crates and ingredients in the potions lab that she had unashamedly claimed as her own despite it technically belonging to her mother. Lily didn't use the lab nearly as much as Harry did, and most of the actual ingredients in the lab were Harry's, though her mother had bought the cauldrons and equipment.

She went to replenish the floo powder supply with what she'd bought and stopped by the kitchen to pick up her mail on the way back to the lab. Her parents usually left owl post on the kitchen counter, and Harry smiled as she spied a thick letter from Sphinx Correspondence School of Magic with her name on it. She took the letter down to the lab with her and slit it open with her finger as she claimed a metal stool.

She skimmed the contents. It was a basic introductory letter, followed by the first year learning curriculum and a syllabus spread out over the next ten months. Harry would be cutting that down to two months. Her goal was to finish the first year's curriculum by the end of the summer, so that she wouldn't be distracted by it during school, when she would be completing Flint's assignments as well as her own, and also so that no one at school would catch her doing the work. The whole point of doing this was that the correspondence school was something Harry Potter did that Rigel Black did not.

She would finish the assignments for the first units that weekend. For now, Harry was ready to brew. She unrolled the list of potions Mr. Krait had given her with an expression that was nearly gleeful. Thankful that no one was around to see her childish excitement, she read over the list carefully.

Agnes' Ageless Agent

Befuddlement Draught

Blood-Replenishing Potion

Calming Draught

Deflating Draught

Dreamless Sleep Potion

Forgetfulness Potion

Gasnik's Gastric Solution

Hair-Growth Potion

Invigoration Draught

Mind-Sharpening Potion

Numbing Potion

Pepper-up Potion

Shrinking Solution

Telbert's Tincture

Westfield's Wart Remover

Harry raised her eyebrows at the list. Most of it looked like what you might find in any witch or wizard's medicine cabinet. She smiled a bit at her foolishness. What had she been expecting, deadly poisons? Of course he wouldn't give recipes for poisons to a kid, even if he did sell them in the open where anyone from the ministry could pop in and see.

She glanced over the crates. There were two dozen bottles in each crate, meaning she could make three bottles of each of the sixteen potions if she wanted to fill the crates. Unfortunately, one cauldron usually made about 5-6 doses of a potion, so she didn't have enough bottles to make a cauldron of each potion on the list. Instead she would pick eight potions to start with and make a cauldron of each. She would try the second half of the list once she got more bottles.

She started with Blood-Replenishing Potion, something she knew a lot about but had never actually tried brewing. After treating her cauldron with the necessary oil, she got to work hand-filtering the raw dragon's bile she kept in a tightly sealed container to prevent leakage.

Blood-Replenishing Potion turned out to be easier than she was expecting it to be. In fact, she found herself almost bored as she waited between steps, probably because she was so conditioned from the last semester to be making as many potions as possible at one time. She finished stirring the last turn and checked the final result against the recipe's description. It was a rusty red the consistency of water just like it was supposed to be, but Harry felt a vague feeling of unease about the potion still. Thinking it was probably that she hadn't imbued enough magic after all, she reached

out with her senses to re-forged the connection between her core and the potion once more to double-check. Through the connection, however, she knew immediately that the potion was magically speaking complete. In actuality she thought she'd put a bit too much magic in the potion, though of course that wouldn't hurt a blood-replenisher.

Still, something wasn't right. She reached out with her senses to look over it again, and this time she noticed something that surprised her considerably. The current connecting her core to the potion was telling her that the Blood-Replenishing Potion was complete magically, but incomplete *physically*. That had never happened before-not after she'd finished the recipe at any rate. What did it mean? Had she skipped a step? She sharpened her connection to the potion, trying to figure out what the magic was telling her. It was like the potion knew what was wrong, if only she could understand. She checked the recipe. She'd completed every step perfectly, that much she was certain of, and yet there was a problem. Though the potion looked to her eyes to be all right, to her magic it felt as though it were a puzzle that had come with a piece already missing, so even though she'd used all the pieces, the picture wasn't quite right.

It was the *recipe*, she realized with dawning incredulity. The recipe itself was wrong... or, maybe not wrong, but incomplete ever so slightly. Not enough to change the appearance of the potion, but enough that it irked her magical senses. Harry shook her head agitatedly. Honestly, what fool of a Potions Master had come up with this recipe? Bonagage? Professor Snape had never given her a recipe that was less than perfect. Harry supposed she could write to Snape and ask for *his* recipe for Blood-Replenishing Potion, but something was telling her she could figure it out herself. She just needed to think.

It felt like it needed more of something, Harry mused, concentrating her senses on the different layers of the potion. Everything mixed just fine, but if there was just a bit more of... something, it would mesh completely. Harry frowned, reaching with her senses further

into the potion and sort of magically poking around. It almost felt like it needed more bloodroot, but that couldn't possibly be right. The bloodroot was in perfect proportion to the vervain, which had to stay at a constant 3:1 ratio with the hypericum flowers. She couldn't change the number of hypericum flowers because it had to be a prime number, and the next prime number after 13 was 17. If she added 4 more hypericum flowers she could need 12 more vervain leaves, which would make the amount of bloodroot needed way too much. She needed a tiny bit more bloodroot, not a whole additional bushel.

So it couldn't be the bloodroot. And yet it was. The potion felt like it needed more antiseptic, and also something that would bond the dissolving St. Stewart's Bane with the Hypericum flowers more closely. Bloodroot did both of those things, but it was too potent. Adding even the tiniest bit more would upset the whole potion. Harry blinked suddenly. It was so obvious. Hadn't she thought all those months ago when she was helping Percy with his Potion Fusion homework that *feverfew* was pretty perfect for a Blood-Replenishing Potion? Harry smiled victoriously, she didn't need to substitute feverfew for bloodroot though, she needed to *add* feverfew to the bloodroot. Both would play pretty much the same role in the potion, but feverfew was three times weaker than bloodroot, and adding it wouldn't mess with the ratios of the other ingredients. In addition, feverfew kept platelets from clumping. The only reason it hadn't been in the Blood-Replenishing Potion already was probably because bloodroot was so much stronger and easier to cultivate.

Harry hurried to her A-F storage cupboard and dug out the jar of ground feverfew from the bottom shelf. A pinch was all it took, and after a few stirs the potion felt... satisfied, for lack of a better word, to her magical senses. Harry grinned and broke off her connection to the potion gently, then ladled it carefully into six of Krait's stasis bottles. She labeled each one, and after cleaning her cauldron and preparation materials she put a check mark beside Blood-Replenishing Potion on her list, feeling more self-satisfied than she had in weeks.

Harry spent the rest of the night brewing. Out of the eight recipes she tried, five of them were ever so slightly off, needing more of one thing or less of another, and one of the recipes was so blatantly wrong she was sure it had been copied incorrectly. Honestly who would put ginger leaves in a Mind-Sharpening Potion? While ginger was a mental stimulant and energizer in the right mixtures, its properties came from the root and stem, not the leaves. In addition, besides the fact that the recipe called for the Chinese variety, which was much less potent than the African variety, the juice in the ginger leaves would have interacted with the rosemary seed oil and caused severe and likely permanent long-term memory loss. Harry immediately guessed they'd meant to write thirteen ginkgo leaves, which came from the Chinese Maidenhair tree and were known to improve memory functions.

She noted each change she made to the potions diligently, in case Krait should ask, and by midnight she had filled and labeled every bottle in the two crates she'd been given. Harry felt better than she had in weeks, despite the late hour. She had forgotten the joy of brewing just for the sake of making a potion. Too often in the past year it had been about making the grade, impressing Professor Snape, or saving students' lives. Sure, she was technically brewing for money, but she wasn't worried that if she messed up she wouldn't get the money. She was confident in her ability to produce enough potions to satisfy Krait, and she could try as many times as she needed to on the off-chance that she couldn't brew a potion right the first time, which hadn't happened often since she'd gotten the hang of imbuing. Harry could brew at her own pace, her own impetus. She could choose how long to brew, what order to brew the potions in, what changes to make until she was satisfied with the potions, and no one would say anything about it. It was freeing, relaxing, and thoroughly enjoyable.

Before going to bed. Harry drew up a schedule that would allow her to finish the first year's worth of owl-correspondence schoolwork in the nine weeks she had left of the summer. The program was self-paced, though the recommended timeframe was ten months on and

two months off for each school year. She was given a list of books to read, most of which overlapped with the textbooks she already had for Hogwarts, and each of the six core subjects (Charms, Transfiguration, History, Defense, Potions, and Astronomy) had five units per semester. She would in theory learn the first five units for each class, take her midterms, then learn the next five units for each class and take her finals. In actuality, Harry would complete the mandatory work for the first five units, take the midterms, then do the mandatory work for the second five units and take the finals. There wasn't much she'd really need to learn.

When she started each unit, they would mail her a series of worksheets and suggested activities for each class to help her learn and understand the material. These worksheets and activities were entirely for her own benefit. Harry wouldn't be completing any of them. Instead, all Harry would be doing was writing the required research essay for each unit in each class. It was open-topic, as long as it pertained to the course, and the quality of her research essays would determine one third of her course grade for each class. The midterm and final made up the other two-thirds of each grade. That meant for Harry to pass her first year of owl-school, she had to complete six research essays per unit, or 60 essays in total, and take twelve exams. Her goal was to write six essays each week, taking a week off each for the midterm and finals, and finishing the first-year curriculum in eight weeks. That gave her an extra week to relax and prepare for her second year at Hogwarts.

While she was writing about an essay a day, a feat she had no trouble imagining possible considering the essay requirement for a first-year in the owl-school consisted of a mere 10-inches and two outside sources, she would also be brewing every day. Looking over the list of potions she was given, she averaged the cost of brewing a cauldron of them to be about three or four galleons each, meaning that each dose averaged about eleven sickles each. That meant she'd be getting about fifteen sickles per dose from Krait. That was a 96-sickle profit per crate, about five and a half galleons.

She figured she could rent an apt for about 60 galleons a month, so she would need 570 galleons to cover the whole school year. That meant she needed to brew about 103 crates of potions that summer, or roughly 12 crates a week. That was doable if she brewed two crates a day.

However, that was only true if Harry was truly eating the cost of the potions she'd be making herself. Simply put, she was not. When her parents had set up an educational-expense account for her at Gringotts, it was with the understanding that she would charge all her potions expenses to that account. Her parents were incredibly wealthy, something she tried not to take for granted, but something that meant that they would not even notice the increase in her expenditures as long as they continued to come from apothecary orders and the like. So because she was buying the ingredients with her parent's money (she mentally argued that she was technically learning a lot by brewing all the new potions) and putting all of the 20-galleon reward per crate toward her private housing fund, Harry actually only needed to brew enough for thirty or so crates all summer.

So she was not, to be honest, overly concerned with the amount of work she'd taken on over the summer. Harry planned on having plenty of time for her experimental brewing, not to mention hanging out with Archie and her family and completing her Hogwarts summer work as well. By the time her mother came down to yawningly tell Harry to get her butt in bed, Harry had everything about her summer plans figured out. All she had to do was put them into motion, and really, what could go wrong?

The next day Harry went back to the Serpent's Storeroom with her crates of potions. Archie had left early that morning with Sirius and James to go to Zonko's and check on the Marauder joke line sales, so Harry went to Diagon Alley alone again, though she kept a careful eye out for any suspicious characters on her way from the Leaky Cauldron to the dingy little shop.

Mr. Krait was busy with a customer when Harry entered the shop, so she stacked the crates behind the counter and waited patiently for him to finish showing a stooped old witch with a hacking cough where the antimony was stored. Mr. Krait came back to the counter and saw Harry standing there. He stopped in front of her, crossing his arms and setting his feet apart as he looked her over. He was so tall she had to lean her head back a bit to look at his face.

"Well, I won't pretend I'm not surprised to see you here," he grunted, the scar along his jaw line flexing as he worked his mouth, "I half-expected to never see you again. What are you doing back so quick? Lost my bottles, have you?"

Harry shook her head, "No, sir. They're behind the counter. I'm here to pick up more bottles, and to collect my payment for these, unless you pay at the end of the month."

Krait's eyebrows shot upwards toward his slicked back blonde hairline. He strode around the counter and hefted the crates easily up onto its surface. Krait scanned the labels in the crates and shot her a look, "You made eight potions yesterday? Eight *different* potions?"

Harry refrained from saying 'Obviously.' Barely.

"Yes, sir," Harry said instead, keeping her tone on the respectful side of stating something readily apparent, "I thought it would be a waste to do all sixteen when I didn't have enough bottles to hold all the doses."

Krait shot her a look that clearly said he caught the implied lip and didn't appreciate it. The Potioneer sighed and said, "I don't know what to think of this, kid." He gestured to the crates of potions on the counter. "If I didn't know Potions Masters were a bunch of stuck up swobs with the collective sense of humor of a rotting toadstool I'd think someone was playing a practical joke on me."

Harry thought at that moment that it was probably best that Krait didn't know who her father and godfather were.

"I mean," Krait rolled his shoulders as if he was working out a kink, "I just gave you these recipes yesterday, and somehow you have viable examples of eight? Ignoring the fact that it usually takes a brewer at least a week to work the kinks out of a recipe they aren't familiar with, most of these potions require upper-medium levels of magical energy to be imbued in them, and Dreamless Sleep is enough to knock the average wizard on their ass for a good four hours alone with the level of magic required to fuse the ingredients. You're what, ten? No way you have the magical core necessary to make all these potions in 24 hours."

Harry thought that was a bit unfair to assume, but Krait wasn't finished.

"Plus," he said with an incredulous snort, "Making Pepper-Up and an Invigoration Draught would use about a pound of Piper betel. Who the heck has that much betel just lying around? Your parents own a greenhouse or something?"

"No," Harry said honestly, "I just brew a lot of potions. Our cupboard is well stocked."

Krait narrowed his eyes, "Well-stocked my ass." He sighed deeply, "In spite of the fact that I think this is an elaborate set up, it remains that the potions are here and you didn't steal my bottles. I'll test these later on, and you can come back when I do my books at the end of the week for your payment."

"Can I take more of your bottles with me today?" Harry asked, choosing not to comment on the rest of the man's ridiculous theories.

Krait grimaced, "Sure, why not."

Harry took that as an invitation into Krait's back room and quickly grabbed three crates of empty bottles. She was almost to the door

when Krait called her back.

"Wait, kid," he snapped his fingers at her imperiously and she paused, lifting an eyebrow inquiringly. He pulled out a sheet of parchment from a drawer and brandished it at her, "You'll have to re-do the Mind-Sharpening Potion. I discovered a clerical error in the recipe this morning that would have rendered anything you produced with it useless. It was my fault, so I can cover the costs of the ingredients if you want."

Harry shook her head, not moving to set the crates down and take the parchment, "No need. You're talking about how it read ginger leaves instead of ginkgo leaves, right?" Krait blinked, but nodded, "I corrected for it when I made the potion."

Mr. Krait put the recipe back in the drawer, shaking his head, "Alright, kid, just do whatever you're going to do then. I'll pay you at the end of each week for whatever you've brought in."

"Thanks, Mr. Krait," Harry smiled sympathetically at the man, "See you tomorrow."

Krait sighed, and waved her from the shop.

Harry shook her head, grinning a bit at the silliness of adults. No imagination. You present them with something even mildly unordinary and they immediately seek complicated explanations or assume they're being tricked rather than accept that they didn't know everything after all.

Harry made her way slowly down Knockturn alley with her three crates balanced steadily before her. The extra crate made it a little hard for her to see ahead of her, but by walking slowly in the middle of the alley she was visible enough that the other witches and wizards saw her coming and skirted around her. She was almost past Borgin and Burke's when trouble came, from not before her, but behind.

A dirty hand grasped her right bicep harshly and yanked her sideways into the shadow of a building's overhang. Harry gasped and hauled her weight against the movement, tilting the weight of the crates to the left as well to help counter-balance her accoster's pulling. The man who'd stopped her just pulled harder and brought another hand up to fist in her robe collar and keep her from twisting away. The potion crates were dislodged and fell to the alley with a dull thud that didn't stop anyone else in Knockturn from ignoring the situation that Harry was rapidly finding herself in. With her hands now free, she struck out at the man and tried to push him away from her. She could see him clearly now. His hair was as long as any pureblood's, but ratty and crusted with something that flaked. He was broad-shouldered and slightly overweight, with hands like meat hammers and eyes half-lidded with a violent disorientation, making her think he'd been drinking. When his grip on her collar and arm proved too strong, Harry lashed out with her feet, using the guy's hold on her to keep her upright as she pushed off the ground and kicked him with both feet as hard as she could. Her right leg was a little high from being turned more toward her attacker, but her left foot got him square in the groin.

The man doubled over clutching himself, his mangy hair falling into his face and his grip slackening instantly. Harry thrust herself away from him and backed quickly toward where the crates had fallen. She reached for them up hurriedly, thanking Merlin for the foam packaging that encased each bottle in the crates and would have, she hoped, prevented any breakage from occurring. She had the crates stacked, but before she could pick them up a hand clawed at her nape, jerking her off of her knees and up, until she was dangling with her toes just scraping the earth in front of her very pissed off attacker. His dark hair swung forward into her face and she could see every rip in his tattered black robes. His breath was foul with something sickly sweet and his teeth winked at her like yellow stars from behind the heavy, graying beard around his mouth.

"You'll pay for that one, brat," he wheezed into her face, "I'm gonna-"

But whatever he was going to do, Harry never found out. At that moment a fist came from over Harry's shoulder and struck the man in the face before either of them could blink. Her attacker went reeling backwards from the blow, his hand falling away from Harry's neck, and Harry dropped toward the ground like a stringless puppet. Just as she should have landed hard on the ground, an arm caught her firmly around the middle and towed her backwards into a muscled chest. She blinked, her equilibrium thrown off by the events of the last several seconds, and craned her head back against her captor's robes to look up into his face. With the way things were going it would be some other shady, smelly guy who was only fighting off the first man so that he could sell her organs on the black market himself.

And yet, she thought as she caught sight of the guy she was being held against, no face that handsome would ever need to sell a spleen to make a living. Bright hazel eyes glanced down at her above a straight nose and a strong jaw. His teeth were even, she noted as he grinned briefly at her before turning his attention back to the man sprawled out on the alley dirt, and his face was lightly tanned, as though he occasionally worked in the sun but didn't bask in it. He was young, too, she realized when he spoke. His voice had an easy, pleasing quality to it that set her nerves instinctively at ease.

"I need you to stand behind me," the guy said softly into the top of her head, "That won't keep him down for long, and when he gets up I need you to be standing somewhere you won't get caught up in the fight, okay?"

Harry found herself nodding automatically, though she personally thought the better option would be to leave before the man picked himself up off the ground. Her defender's arm around her waist loosened and he nudged her gently until she moved behind and away from him. She backed up until she stood over where the crates still sat on the floor of the alley and watched, a bit transfixed, as the

guy who was helping her settled into a relaxed fighting stance and the man who'd tried to grab her stumbled to his feet.

Her protector looked about sixteen or seventeen. He was taller than she'd realized, though not quite as tall as Mr. Krait was. Probably he was about 6 foot. He was certainly taller than his opponent, who stooped awkwardly and growled before launching himself at the younger man. The young man simply turned around the other man's attack, using one foot to trip the man up and slamming an elbow down into the small of his opponent's back. The older man crumpled again to the ground, but instead of trying to stand he fumbled with his robes until he brought out a thin but sharp-looking dagger and swiped it toward the hazel-eyed guy's ankles. The young man jumped over the knife and aimed his landing to be directly on the knife-wielder's wrist. A cracking sound Harry was all too familiar with told her the man's wrist was broken. The knife fell from an unresponsive hand and the younger man, who was standing with his hands in his pockets as if he'd done nothing more arduous than kick an errant soda can to the side, nudged the knife out of his opponent's reach.

He needn't have bothered, Harry thought, as the man who'd originally attacked her was now curled up around his wrist, rocking and cursing sloppily at them. Her savior turned around and walked over to her, his face so relaxed Harry thought perhaps he often strolled down notoriously dangerous alleys and beat slovenly characters into the dirt. He tilted his head curiously at her while she looked him over just as curiously through lowered lids. His hair was a dark brown that would have been unremarkable if he wasn't so generally good looking. He was built like a dancer and moved like a street fighter, all wiry muscles and agile grace. The lines of his face weren't rugged, but neither did he have the delicate look most of the pureblooded families favored.

He leaned a bit closer to Harry, as if he were about to impart a secret, and said, "All right there, lad? I'm not complaining or

anything, but usually this is the part where you thank a body for helping you out."

Harry flushed slightly, both because she had been rude to stand there staring after he'd saved her, and because he, like many others, had mistaken her for a boy. She supposed it was the short hair. Of course the plain black robes she favored for their resilience against visible stains didn't help gender her to the casual eye either.

Deciding to let it go, she said, "Thanks for your help."

The guy laughed lightly and ruffled her hair, "Plain-spoken little thing, aren't you?" Harry finally looked up to glare reproachfully at him and he did a double take, murmuring, "Would you look at those eyes?" Harry blinked, taken aback at the blatant observation, and resisted the urge to reach up and pull her bangs into her eyes nervously. He turned and lifted the stack of crates she'd been neglecting and held them easily with one arm, "Where were you headed, then?"

Harry frowned slightly, "There's no need to escort me or carry my things. You've done enough already."

He smiled easily down at her, "Headed to Diagon Alley, I bet," he said, putting his free hand on her shoulder and propelling her slowly toward the mouth of Knockturn alley, "I'll walk with you. I think it only fair I know the name of the person I just yanked from the jaws of death."

Harry had no choice but to walk along next to the older boy, who was seeming stranger to her by the minute. "You don't know he was going to kill me," she pointed out, "He might have only wanted a kidney."

The boy laughed, "Very true, I suppose you really don't owe me anything in that case."

Harry grimaced, "Sorry. I meant to say thank you again, and my name is Harry."

"I'm Lionel Hurst, but everyone calls me Leo," he told her.

Harry glanced up at him out of the corner of her eye, "So you make a habit of patrolling Knockturn alley, Mr. Hurst?"

He favored her with a look of his own, "First of all, don't ever call me Mr. Hurst again. It's Leo. And I could ask what a sprout like you was doing in that alley as well, but it looks to me like you were coming from the same place I was going." He gestured to the crates, "Krait take you on as a messenger boy or something?"

"Something like that," Harry said, "So you were headed to the Serpents Storeroom? Why are you escorting me in the other direction?"

"Truth?" Leo turned to look her in the eye, "I'm not sure. There's something about you, though, and when I passed your little predicament my magic was suddenly screaming at me to sit up and pay attention. Never felt anything like it. I figure there's got to be a reason, so maybe if I stick by you long enough I'll figure it out."

Harry shrugged uncomfortably, "Well you've got until the Leaky Cauldron, but how do you know you weren't supposed to help out the other guy?"

Leo laughed again, "My magic hasn't turned on me yet."

"You talk about magic like it's sentient," Harry said cautiously.

"It is," Leo said without pause, "Don't let anyone tell you otherwise."

Harry smiled to herself. Leo was strange, but she liked the way he thought. "What were you going to the Serpent's Storeroom for?" Harry asked curiously, "A potion?"

"The Apothecary doesn't sell any potions I couldn't make myself. I was actually picking up an order for my father," Leo said, "He's too busy with his research to pick them up personally."

Harry turned surprised eyes to her companion, "Is your father Malcolm Hurst? The-"

"The Aldermaster of the Potions Guild, yeah," Leo said, a bit embarrassed.

"Oh," Harry said, blinking, "I was going to say the man who wrote the introduction to the most recent edition of *Moste Potente Potions*, but he made Aldermaster? That's great." Harry really should follow the politics of the Guild more closely, but it didn't interest her as much as the potions work did.

Leo looked down at her with surprise, "That's right, he did write that a few years ago."

"Yes, I got a copy of it for my eighth birthday," Harry said, smiling a bit, "The introduction was the best part of the whole book. Mostly it was poisons with incredibly unlikely ingredients and one decent recipe for Polyjuice Potion."

"I think I remember my father saying something similar," Leo said with a grin, "You're a rather unexpected person, Harry No-last-name."

"Thanks, I guess," Harry said, "So do you go to Hogwarts?" It would be a disaster if he did, though she didn't remember seeing him around the castle.

"I'm home schooled," Leo said. "My father tutors me in Potions, and everything else I pick up where I can. I'll be taking the NEWTs next May, so I guess I'm what you'd call a seventh-year."

Harry let out her breath slowly in relief, "Interesting. Are you going to pursue a Potions career?"

"Probably," Leo said, though he didn't look at her while he said it, "I learn the other stuff because my mother insists, but there is nothing more interesting than potions that I've found so far. Who knows?"

Maybe I'll end up the greatest Potions Master of all time." Leo winked at her cheerfully.

"If you say so," Harry said politely. They'd reached the Leaky Cauldron and Harry held her hands out for the crates, "Thanks for your help, Leo. Sorry to take you away from your errands."

"Not at all," Leo said, "Although... I fear I've failed in my original objective. You've learned much more about me than I have about you. Still, something tells me we'll meet again soon." He handed the crates to her carefully, "In fact, I intend to see to it."

Harry looked up with surprised wariness while taking the crates in hand, "And how could you possibly ensure such a thing?"

"Why, by following you home, of course," Leo said mildly. At her look of utter alarm he broke into a laugh and shook his head, "Kidding, of course, my young friend. Instead, I shall insist upon accompanying you the next time you attempt to traverse the streets of Knockturn alone."

"Won't that get a little inconvenient?" Harry asked dryly.

"Nothing in the name of friendship is inconvenient," Leo declared, "Besides, I'm at the Serpent's Storeroom a lot picking up and dropping off for my father. It won't be any trouble to schedule my next trip with yours."

Harry wasn't convinced, "Unless your next trip was going to be tomorrow-"

"Tomorrow it is," Leo smiled winningly, "Shall we say the Leaky Cauldron at noon?"

Harry blinked, "Really, Leo, there's no need. I can bring someone else next time to-"

"I would be grievously insulted if you did, Harry," Leo said solemnly, his bright hazel eyes shining with mirth beneath his short brown hair, "See you tomorrow."

He walked off down the alley before Harry could accept or decline. She sighed, shifting the crates of bottles awkwardly. *What a strange man*, she thought, then frowned, *Or is it that I've been around subtleties and intrigue so much that I don't appreciate straightforwardness anymore?*

Either way, she was determined not to pay any heed to Lionel Hurst's declaration, yet somehow the next day she found herself ready to go to the Serpent's Storeroom at almost exactly noon. Leo met her as she flooded into The Leaky Cauldron and took her now-full crates from her immediately.

Harry just gave up trying to talk him out of it, instead thanking Leo for the help. He laughed as if she'd said something delightfully funny and they'd kept up a casual conversation-mostly about Leo, since Harry didn't really want to talk about her complicated life-all the way to the apothecary. No one bothered them in Knockturn, though Harry, without the crates to distract her, noticed they were getting several curious glances from other people in the alley. This wouldn't be unusual in Diagon alley, since shoppers were often curious about other people as they went about their business, but in Knockturn people generally made it a point not to be too interested in one another. Harry supposed Leo did sort of stand out. His personality, the way he moved and gestured, was like a bright ball of light in the gloomy street, but she had the strangest feeling that they were staring at *her* because she was with *him* .

They reached the Serpent's Storeroom and Harry held the door so Leo could maneuver the crates into the shop. Krait looked up from his accounting books and his eyebrows shot upwards when he saw them there.

"What's this then, Leo?" Krait grinned with an incredulous sort of humor, "Slummin' as hired muscle today?"

Leo set the crates down carefully, and spoke slowly in response to Krait's joking question, "I'm sure I don't know what you mean, Edgar. You know I'm always happy to help out my friends. It seems young Harry here ran into some trouble on the alley yesterday with a drunk. I couldn't have that, could I?"

Harry glanced at Leo in surprise. His voice was as light and pleasing as ever, but there was a deadly serious quality to it that she hadn't heard even when he was fighting off that thug the other day. More surprising was Krait's response.

"Of course, of course, your-ah, Leo," Krait looked a bit flustered and glanced at Harry awkwardly as he spoke, "So, Harry's a good friend of yours, is he? Good, good. I'm sure he won't run into any trouble with you by his side."

Leo flashed even, white teeth in a playful grin, "Your faith in me is heart-warming, Master Krait."

"Yes, well, so you've got the potions then, Harry?" Krait turned to the crates and began checking the labels.

"Yes, sir," Harry said, not knowing what was going unsaid between them, but letting it go for the time being, "The other eight potions plus extra Calming Potion, Dreamless Sleep, Blood-Replenishing, and Pepper-Up, since those are the four you sell most often."

Krait looked at her with mild surprise, perhaps wondering when she'd taken the time to notice that his shelves were always a bit low on those four in particular, "Good, good. Is this the pace I can expect all summer?"

Harry nodded, "I don't see any reason for it to fall off."

"In that case, wait just a moment," Krait grabbed a sheet of parchment from under the counter and began scribbling.

While he wrote, Leo captured Harry's attention with a curious, "So you run bottles for one of Krait's potion brewers, Harry?"

Harry hid her amusement with a polite smile, "Indeed, Mr. Krait hired a new brewer just a few days ago, and I've been in and out of this shop every day since."

Krait made a badly disguised choking noise, but didn't look up from his scribbling.

Leo glanced at him curiously, but turned back to Harry almost immediately, "This new brewer sounds like a lucky find if he brews twelve potions in one day."

More like one morning, Harry thought wryly. She'd settled into an easy routine in the past couple of days. In the morning she brewed, making three or four cauldrons an hour by brewing simultaneously at several stations. In the afternoons she did her owl-school essays, and in the evenings she experimented until her eyes started crossing. She took meals with her family and so far none of them besides Archie even knew she'd landed a summer job. They just thought she was brewing for fun like she always did, and her parents were at work too much to notice her frequent comings and goings.

"I'll tell him you said so," Harry said.

Krait snorted, but simply thrust the parchment he'd been writing on at her. It was a list of potions. "If I'm going to be getting this many potions a day, I may as well diversify my stock a bit. Tell *my brewer*," he rolled his eyes a bit at this, "To find recipes for these twelve potions and alternate between these and the original sixteen I gave him, alright, kid?"

"That won't be a problem," Harry assured him. In truth she was glad she'd have a more interesting selection to brew from. Maybe if she made enough of these she could convince Krait to take on even more potions. Of course, she supposed it would depend on if people showed any interest in buying the potions.

"Good," Krait grunted, "You know where the empty bottles are."

Harry nodded and rounded the counter to duck into the storeroom, but Leo beat her there.

"How many do you want?" he asked with a friendly grin.

Harry hesitated. If Leo was carrying them, she could probably take four. The problem was that if he wasn't there the next day, there was no way she could carry four crates of full bottles back to the Serpent's Storeroom on her own. She didn't know how to ask him without being presumptuous though. When he raised an eyebrow at her dithering, Harry blurted, "Four." If he wasn't there the next day she would just make sure Archie came with her to help her carry.

"Four it is," Leo hefted the requested number of crates without batting a lash. They bid good day to Krait and headed, once more, toward Diagon alley.

Over the next few weeks, Harry brought potions to the Storeroom every weekday, deciding to skip weekends and concentrate solely on her experimental brewing and spending time with her parents. And every day Leo was there at noon to meet her, taking the crates and walking her to the Apothecary and back. Harry might have been more uncomfortable with it had Leo known she was a girl, but as it was she accepted that the older guy just had a strange and rather proprietary interest in her friendship. She was still mostly silent about herself when they conversed, not because she didn't trust Leo-it was almost impossible to distrust such a person-but because she wasn't sure which details of her complicated life she could reveal.

Should she be Harry Potter around Leo, and tell him she went to AIM and wanted to be a Healer? She couldn't tell him she was home schooled, too, because when she disappeared in the fall it would be a little obvious she was lying. And she certainly couldn't be Rigel-Rigel had grey eyes, not the green Leo often told her he admired. So Harry just kept her personal history to herself, and Leo respected

that and never pried beyond jokingly remarking that he didn't even know her last name every now and then.

On July 14th, Harry told Leo not to expect her the next day, the first break in their unspoken arrangement.

"Is your brewer taking a day off?" Leo asked with surprise, "The way you run these potions back and forth I'd have thought he never takes a break."

Harry smiled a bit sheepishly, feeling rather guilty that she'd been lying to Leo about who was really brewing the potions she delivered every day. Still, he probably wouldn't believe her if she told him, so she let him keep his assumptions, "Actually, I have to go visit a friend of mine tomorrow, so I can't deliver the potions. I'll probably have twice as many the day after tomorrow to make up for it."

"Ah," Leo said sadly, "I was afraid you might have other friends."

Harry scowled up at him good-naturedly. She'd relaxed quite a bit after seeing the older boy every day for weeks.

"I'm just messing with you," Leo looked as though he wanted to ruffle her hair, but had his hands too full of crate to do so, "See you the day after tomorrow, then."

"Yeah, see you."

On the day of the Malfoy Garden Party, Harry and Archie Polyjuiced as one another before the sun even hit the horizon. Harry would be wearing Archie's best summer dress robes, which were just a bit too small for him now that he'd grown over the summer. Lily had wanted to get Archie new robes for the party, but Archie said firmly that the robes he had would do just fine. Though the robes were snug while she was Polyjuiced, as soon as it wore off they would fit her just right. Archie was Polyjuiced as her, and dressed in a pair of muggle basketball shorts and a baggy T-shirt, so that he would look normal

going to Hermione's when he changed back to himself. They'd both told their parents that they wanted to go to Diagon alley that morning, Archie to pick up Draco's present and Harry to get a hospitality gift for Hermione's parents. They assured their parents that they would simply floo to their respective friends' houses after they completed their purchases.

In reality, they were going to floo to Diagon alley, collect their packages from behind the bar where Harry had asked old Tom to keep them the day before, wait in an alley in muggle London for the Polyjuice to wear off, go back to the Leaky Cauldron, and floo to the Malfoy's and the Granger's-who had connected their house to the floo just a week before-from there.

All in all, it was terribly complicated. Still, Harry and Archie were very good at complications by that point, so the plan went off without a hitch, unless one counted Sirius pulling Archie aside and telling him to use the emergency portkey if someone so much as looked at him funny.

Harry took a few minutes to duck into the bathroom and put in her grey contacts before flooing to Malfoy Manor, and when she emerged she was Rigel Black, ready to socialize with the dark pureblood elite. Or at least ready to hand Draco his gift and hide in a shadowy corner for the rest of the party if it came to that.

She waved goodbye and good luck to Archie, and stepped into green flames and roiling soot.

She came out sprawling at the other end of the floo connection. Rigel mused that she really shouldn't have expected the floo to be any more forgiving to her just because she was going to the Malfoy's party in her cousin's best summer robes. Luckily, the only one to witness her most ungraceful exit onto the dark green hearth rugs was the house elf waiting by the fireplace, clearly stationed there to direct people flooing in to the gardens.

The house elf approached her and snapped its little fingers at the soot covering most of her robes. It vanished, and Rigel sent a grateful smile at the elf, "Thank you."

The house elf's eyes grew wide and frantic, and Rigel looked at it with mounting concern. The house elves at Hogwarts hadn't been nearly so taken aback by politeness.

"Good wizard is being too kind to Dobby!" the elf near-wailed, wringing its hands and hopping from foot to foot agitatedly, "Dobby is not to be thanked. Dobby is not knowing what to say."

Rigel nodded in understanding, "That's alright, Dobby. Do you know where I'm to put my birthday gift to Draco?"

Dobby nodded so violently his bat-like ears flopped to and fro, "Dobby is knowing. You is to bring it to the gardens, and you is to place it on the gift table as you leave the house. Dobby is showing you."

The elf bowed deeply and motioned for Rigel to follow him. Dobby took her through the corridor from the reception room to a drawing room with large glass patio doors that stood open to let in the fresh air and sunlight. Dobby motioned her through the doors and onto a beautiful white stone patio. At the bottom of the patio steps was a large table piled with gifts, and beyond that the gardens began. Walking down the steps, taking in the view, Rigel could honestly say that she had never seen anything more magnificent in her life. The Gardens, and indeed she would need to capitalize them in her head from now on, sprawled out like a despoiled emperor before her eyes. They began simplistically, short hedges and flower beds interspersed with tables and chairs, open expanses of lush green lawn, and the occasional stone statues. This was where the main party would be, Rigel guessed. There was already a multitude of guests milling about in their summer best. The hats on the ladies alone were works of art, looking right at home among the lovingly tended flowers and trees.

Beyond the party grounds, however, the hedges grew taller and more intimidating. Trees went from elegant miniature bonsais to silent branching giants, strewing their delicate petals wherever the wind pleased. The flowerbeds became the path boundaries, and Rigel imagined it wouldn't take much to be lost in the great natural maze.

She had just barely set her gift, a small square box wrapped in dark green paper, on the table when she was grabbed by the shoulder and turned around abruptly. It was Draco. He looked resplendent in silver-trimmed white robes, and not even his royally annoyed expression could detract from how radiantly he shone even among the gardens and the throngs of beautiful people.

"I can't believe you!" he fumed, thumping her in the arm with her other hand to show just how put out he was, "You disappear on the train without saying goodbye, no letters all summer, and then you just show up at my birthday party like-like-well, how could you?"

Rigel extracted herself carefully, "I did say goodbye."

Draco batted her words away, "Barely."

"And it's not like the invitation had an RSVP on it," Rigel pointed out.

"Still, you're supposed to send an acceptance," Draco sighed, "Honestly, don't you know anything?"

"Apparently not," Rigel said, a bit sheepish, "So is it alright that I'm here anyway?"

"What? Of course! You're my best friend," Draco said, "Speaking of, Pansy's going to kill you. Come on."

So saying, he pulled her off to the left side of the party lawn, where Rigel could see most of their year mates lounging in the shade of an elaborate gazebo. There were many exclamations and admonitions at her approach.

"Rigel!"

"We haven't heard from you all summer."

"I'm surprised you showed your face after that stunt on the train."

The last was from Blaise, who winked at her as he said it to soften the censure a bit. Rigel looked toward Pansy, who was sitting in a seat next to the middle seat, which must have been Draco's. She hadn't said a word, and was pointedly looking anywhere except at Rigel. Thinking back to when they'd first become friends, back when Pansy used the silent treatment to correct Rigel whenever she did something wrong, Rigel approached her friend slowly, sinking down to her knee beside Pansy's seat. When Rigel put her hand on the arm of Pansy's chair, Pansy couldn't ignore her anymore and looked down at Rigel with reluctant amusement.

"I do like my boys on bended knee," Pansy said, her lips smiling ever so slightly.

"How about begging for forgiveness?" Rigel said teasingly, "I've behaved rather dismally."

"Abominably," Pansy agreed.

"And I feel terrible about it. I was so busy with my summer work I somehow forgot to pay homage to the very lady who makes the summer sun so warm and the days so beautiful," Rigel said, gazing with pitiful regret at Pansy, "My only shred of hope is that surely a lady so kind and grand as she who makes the moon grow round could find it in her bountiful mercy to forgive one so lowly and sorry as I."

"She who makes the moon go round?" Millicent snorted, "That's class-A stuff right there."

"I'm making this up as I go," Rigel said.

"It shows," Theo told her plainly.

Rigel stood up with deliberate dignity, "Well, I can see when true poetry is not appreciated. Pansy, am I forgiven?"

Pansy sighed and shook her head sadly, "I fear we've a long way to go with you, Rigel. But yes, you are forgiven for your unconscionable rudeness."

"Thank you," Rigel said, looking around them, "Is there somewhere I can pull a chair from?"

"Don't bother," Draco said, "Now that everyone is here we'll be expected to mingle." In silent agreement, Millicent, Theo, and Blaise rose to find their parents. Crabbe and Goyle ambled over to the food table, and Rigel just blinked at how quickly everyone had dispersed. "Don't worry," Draco said, looping his arm through Pansy's and gesturing for Rigel to walk on his other side, "We'll see them when we get around to their parents. For now, there are about a million people I'm supposed to introduce you to."

"Me?" Rigel said, taken aback, "I'm not sure I really should-"

"Of course *you*," Draco said firmly, "This is your first social appearance as an honorary Malfoy. Everyone will have heard by now, and if we don't introduce you around it's like we're ashamed of you."

"Besides," Pansy said, leaning forward a bit to speak past Draco's shoulders, "This will be an excellent opportunity to spread your political wings."

"I'm not sure I have a set of those yet," Rigel said, but her protests fell on selectively deaf ears.

A half hour later Rigel was sure she'd met everyone at the party. She'd met Blaise's beautiful mother, Theo's flirtatious father (who wouldn't stop hitting on Blaise's mother long enough to do more than

smile politely at Rigel), and Millicent's impressively upright parents as well. She'd met people she'd only read about in the newspaper, and people she'd never so much as heard of before. She'd been introduced to so many people that there couldn't possibly be any strangers left in wizarding Britain. And yet there were. Just as she was being guided over to yet another person just dying to meet 'that darling boy who'd cured the sleeping sickness,' she was saved by the sound of an echoing violin, which was the signal, Draco told her excitedly, for him to start opening his gifts.

Draco's parents beckoned him with generous smiles and Draco walked quickly over to the gift table where they were waiting.

Pansy laughed at their friend's enthusiasm, "I got him a specialty servicing kit for competitive broomsticks. What did you get him?"

Rigel shrugged, "Just something I thought he'd enjoy. Nothing too serious. I'm going to get some water, do you want anything?"

Pansy shook her head, not looking away from where Draco was smiling and unwrapping a large, oblong present with snitches printed on the paper. Rigel left Pansy to her viewing, but she didn't go to the refreshment table, instead, after making sure no one was watching her, she slipped behind a tall row of hedges and set off to explore the gardens.

Rigel wanted a moment of peace and quiet in between the endless rounds of introductions to people she couldn't care less about. She had yet to meet a single Potions Master, after all. Mostly the guests were Draco's friends' parents and Ministry officials. She also didn't want to wait around on tenterhooks for Draco to open her present. She didn't like watching other people open gifts she gotten them. Either they'd hate it and would awkwardly pretend not to for her sake or they'd like it and she'd feel uncomfortable with their gratitude. It was best to occupy herself with something else, and she had been itching to explore the gardens since she'd laid eyes on them.

The hedges were even more imposing up close, when she was surrounded by them. Rigel wandered for a bit, aimless in where she was going but paying close attention to where she'd come from, so that she could find her way back out again when she thought it had been long enough. She was about to round a neatly groomed corner when she heard voices and stopped, suddenly realizing that the gardens may not have been as secluded as she assumed. Clearly, others had skipped out on the present opening as well.

Harry asked her magic to muffle the sounds of her footsteps and promised herself she'd look up a real spell that dampened sound when she got home. She began walking carefully back the way she came, not sure the magic would hold up if she actually snapped a twig or something, but stopped again when she heard the word 'Hogwarts.' She knew she really shouldn't, but she was curious, so she crept just the tiniest bit forward to catch the rest of what the speakers were saying.

"-sure you'll find Hogwarts to be anything but dull in the coming year," the first voice said smoothly. There was something about that voice that Harry recognized but couldn't place, like something from a commercial she'd heard over the Wizarding Wireless.

"A pity. With all the excitement of last year I had hoped for a year of peace-relatively speaking, of course." *That* voice Harry knew instantly. It was Professor Snape.

She found her feet moving forward without her really thinking about it, and soon enough she was able to shift ever-so-slightly around the edge of the corner hedge. She didn't though. Rigel was not one to stick her neck out into unfamiliar situations so foolishly. Instead, she reached down and quietly pulled out the timepiece Archie kept in his robes. He'd insisted Rigel take it with her, and the gold backing was reflective enough to serve her purposes. She angled the side of the watch around the corner and used it as a rudimentary spying glass, squinting against the glare to try and make out who Snape was talking to.

"Oh, Severus, I'm afraid you aren't nearly old enough to bemoan the folly of today's excitable youth," the first voice said. Rigel could almost make the speaker out in the shiny metal mirror. He was tall and had thick dark hair, but he was standing with his back to her, facing Snape.

"I'm sure you would know, sir," Severus said dryly, prompting the other man into an appreciative chuckle.

"Why ever do I let you stay in that dreary old school all year, Severus? I forget how entertaining you are when you're away so long, you know," the first man leaned toward Snape conspiratorially, "I think the others are too afraid of me to make jokes."

"I can't imagine why," Snape drawled.

The first man laughed again, "Yes, exactly, Severus, exactly. So, tell me of this boy of yours. Lucius has been most disappointingly unforthcoming."

"He's not my boy, I assure you, sir," Snape said in a neutral tone.

"Come now, Severus, I know how little you think of the most recent generation. If you've taken an interest in one it can't be without reason," the man said, and though his words were still teasing there was now a harder edge to them.

"Oh, the boy is talented," Snape said, "There's no doubt about that. He is one of a kind, if I may be so trite. I was merely clarifying that the relationship between the boy and I is not the surrogate father bond you might have been hoping for. He is my student, and I know of him only what any teacher knows of their students."

"I am not interested in his favorite color," the first man said dismissively, "It is precisely the sort of talents a professor would be aware of that I seek to discover. Already the boy has done what no one else could do, and yet I am told he has no magical presence to speak of. How can this be, Severus?"

Rigel was feeling more uncomfortable the longer she listened. She just knew the first voice was familiar, and it was seeming more and more as though the student they were talking about was her, as vain as that thought undoubtedly made her. If it was her they were talking about, she didn't know if she should be offended that Snape spoke so distantly of her or grateful that he wasn't as eager to divulge information about her as he could have been.

Snape took a careful breath before saying, "Perhaps you should discover that for yourself, sir."

Before Rigel could blink, Snape's wand was out and pointed at the other man-no, not the other man: her! Snape had sensed her presence somehow and was about to reveal her to his companion. Rigel went to snatch her hand back from around the corner, but before she could do so the spell Snape had sent from his wand wrapped around her wrist like a lasso and dragged the rest of her abruptly out from around the hedge. The spell-rope tugged at her again to jerk her toward Snape and she stumbled forward a half step. She yanked futilely at the spell for a moment, but soon realized the folly of resisting, especially considering she was already well and truly caught out. She sighed and walked the rest of the way to Snape's side of her own volition, tucking the pocket watch away as she did so.

Rigel opened her mouth to apologize to Snape but snapped it shut again when she finally got a good look at his companion. It was Riddle. Leader of the Sow Party, notorious muggle hater, the genius politician himself, and here she was caught red-handed eavesdropping on his conversation with her professor. Rigel groaned internally. *Way to keep a low profile.*

Snape set a heavy hand on her shoulder, squeezed hard enough to let her know she'd probably be getting one heck of a lecture from him later on, and said, "Mr. Riddle, this young man is my student, Rigel Black. Mr. Black, allow me to introduce you to Mr. Riddle."

Rigel bowed as deep as she dared with Snape's hand still digging into her shoulder, "One thousand apologies, Mr. Riddle. In truth I recognized my Professor's voice from a distance and was curious to know just whom he was talking to. I had not realized it was you until this moment."

Riddle took his time looking her over. There was something all-too knowing in his gaze, as if he knew a great secret about the world but was too polite to mock you for your ignorance. When she had fully straightened once more, he said, "Curiosity is a wonderful thing in one's youth. I hope yours was satisfactorily appeased."

Rigel blinked with surprise into Riddle's handsome face, "I'm afraid that as the offended party to my wrongdoing you are too kind, Mr. Riddle. Please, let me know what it is I can do to atone for such impertinence."

"So polite," Riddle murmured, "I can see why Severus likes you. Don't be so quick to owe me a debt, though, Mr. Black. I tend to collect them rather abruptly."

"A possibility that should have crossed my mind before I stuck my ears where they weren't invited," Rigel said evenly, "As it is, I can only hope you allow me the chance to redress this mistake as soon as I am able."

"Well, how about right now?" Riddle said, deceptively amiable. At Rigel's cautious nod, he went on, "Since what you were trying to steal from us was truths we were perhaps not prepared to tell you, that is what I shall ask for in return, sound fair?"

"Many things sound like what they are not," Rigel said vaguely, "Would you clarify your request, Mr. Riddle?"

"Very well, Mr. Black," Riddle said plainly, "How long were you listening to us?"

Rigel thought, "Perhaps two and a half minutes."

"Then I will ask you questions for two and one half minutes, and you will answer them as if you were having an unguarded conversation with someone you trust," Riddle said, smiling a bit at her, "Does that seem to be a fair trade to you?"

Rigel said, "It is for you to decide, of course, but yes, I do think that is a fair compensation, sir."

"Then let's begin," Riddle said, "And believe me when I tell you that I will know if you are lying to me." Rigel nodded, and Riddle asked, "Was it you who cured the sleeping sickness?"

"It was."

"How?"

Rigel frowned, "Nothing that seems to me to be so impressive, though I am told that others are unable to recreate my methods. The sickness was impenetrable from the outside, but from the inside it merely needed to be disrupted. I entered the other children's minds by means of their magical cores, and proceeded to direct their magic to destabilizing the barrier until a Legilimens like Professor Snape could enter the mind and clear the sickness out for good."

Riddle tilted his head thoughtfully, "And this ability to pass through others' magical cores does not interest you at all?"

"Not really," Rigel shrugged, "My only interest is in potion making."

Riddle looked unconvinced, but changed topics, "Why is it, Mr. Black, that you have no magical presence? I was not able to sense you around that corner at all, though it seems Severus was."

"I recognized his Occlumency shields at the periphery of my senses, not his magic," Snape offered tonelessly.

"I'm not sure what you mean by magical presence, Mr. Riddle," Rigel said honestly.

"Most wizards, children especially, have an aura of magic that leaks from their cores and tints the air around them with a taste of their magic. If one is adept at reading these auras one can tell a lot about a wizard by the way his magic feels around him," Riddle explained curtly, "You, however, have no aura to speak of, Mr. Black, and since you are not a squib I would like to know how that is."

Rigel thought for a moment, "Can one suppress the magic they leak, stop it from leaking, I mean?"

"If one is purposely dampening or controlling their magic, yes," Riddle said.

"Then my guess is that I am unconsciously suppressing any magic that would normally leak out. I have a very tight hold on my magic," Rigel explained, "One of the reasons I learned to imbue potions consciously so quickly was because I was incapable of imbuing them unconsciously. My magic simply does not emit itself unconsciously."

"Interesting," Riddle commented, seemingly to himself, "Tell me, Mr. Black, what are your political leanings?"

Rigel fumbled at the non sequitor, "I haven't any, sir. I'm afraid politics don't interest me much."

Riddle laughed, "You're lying, Mr. Black, but I suppose as my minutes are up it is within your rights to do so."

"You are too kind, Mr. Riddle," Rigel murmured.

"Kind is one thing I am certainly not, Mr. Black, though you should pray you never have to verify that statement firsthand," Riddle said, "Now, I think young Draco will be quite put out with me if I keep his friend from his party any longer. Let's adjourn to the front lawn, shall we gentlemen?"

So saying he began walking at a brisk yet refined pace through the hedge maze, Snape and Rigel at his heels. Rigel risked a glance up

at her Professor's face, but his features were too blank to give anything away. When they reached the party grounds Rigel saw a couple of house elves clearing away wrapping paper and Draco looking around the throngs of guests with a slight frown on his face. His eyes lit upon their group coming out of the taller hedges and his eyes grew wide and a tad bit concerned. Feeling guilty, Rigel waved discreetly to him, smiling to show that everything was all right. Her friend came toward them slowly, as though approaching a muzzled bear.

When he reached them, Draco bowed deeply to Riddle and nodded respectfully to his godfather. "Good day, Mr. Riddle. Hello, Uncle Severus. Do you mind if I steal Rigel away for a while?"

"I wouldn't dream of denying you a request at your own party, Mr. Malfoy," Riddle said, smiling in a way that Rigel supposed would be considered charming, "It was interesting to meet you, Mr. Black."

"I'm sure I was the least interesting participant in our conversation, Mr. Riddle," Rigel bowed politely once more, "Thank you for the company, and for keeping me from getting lost in Draco's intimidating hedge maze."

"The pleasure of the company is mine, Mr. Black," Riddle said, nodding to her, "I trust we'll meet again soon."

"It will be as you say," Rigel said, "Good day, Professor Snape."

Snape inclined his head, "Mr. Black."

Draco bowed once more to Riddle and then practically dragged Rigel away from the older two men.

"You really can't be trusted for even five minutes, can you?" Draco muttered as he towed her to where his parents were standing, "Honestly, I turn around and you're strolling through the Gardens with Riddle like you don't know what the man does for a living."

Rigel chose to ignore that comment, thinking she hadn't really had a lot of choices besides give Riddle whatever he wants so he doesn't get angry and run for the hills.

"Get any good presents, Draco?" Rigel said, changing the subject.

"Yeah," Draco said, rolling his eyes, "Yours. I love it, which you would have seen first hand if you'd stuck around to watch me open it."

"Oh," Rigel said, "Good."

She'd gotten Draco a potion for his birthday. It was a variation on the Weightless Draft, and she'd made it because sometime in early February, Draco, Rigel, and Pansy had had a long conversation about what wandless superpower they'd want if they could pick one. Pansy had wanted telekinesis and Rigel said she would like to be invisible, but Draco declared he wanted to be able to fly without a broom. So Rigel had set about creating a potion that would let him do that.

The Weightless Draft did pretty much what its name implied, making the drinker weigh very little. Unfortunately, gravity still acted on the drinker perfunctorily so you couldn't fly with the Draft unless someone on a broom was holding your weightless form in the air. Rigel had wanted to make the potion into a sort of self-regulated Wingardium Leviosa, so that one could not only float with it, but control their movements as well. The potion had turned out to be surprisingly easy to tweak. Instead of changing the ingredients in the potion, she had changed the kind of magic she imbued into the potion.

Usually when Rigel imbued a potion she asked for magic straight from her core to flow into the potion through the connection. This time, Rigel shaped the magic before it left her core, working from what Remus had told her about wild vs. shaped magic and theorizing that if one could imbue formless wild magic into a potion to mesh ingredients together then one should be able to imbue shaped magic into a potion, not to help stabilize the ingredients, but to add

properties to a potion that the original ingredients didn't have. So when making the Weightless Draft, Rigel asked her magic to shape itself like it would when performing the Levitation Charm, then imbue that shaped magic through the connection into the potion on top of the unshaped magic that the potion itself needed to mesh. In this way, the final potion would when drunk act like a combination of weightless and levitation magic. Since the shaped magic had melded with the neutral potions magic, it would no longer be Rigel's spell, instead acting as if Draco had cast the spell on himself, making him the one in control of the magic. Also, being imbued in the potion would make the magic last longer than the intent of the spell, so Draco would in theory have about two hours of flying time with the potion. To be safe, she'd written that he not use it longer than one hour.

Draco just shook his head, "Come on, you have to thank my parents for having you, okay?"

Rigel nodded, "I can do that."

They waited until the Malfoy's had moved away from the guest they were talking to, then approached them.

"Draco, darling, you've found our wayward Mr. Black," Narcissa said, smiling down at Rigel genially, "Are you finding the party to be diverting?"

"Only by virtue of your attendance, my lady," Rigel said, bowing over Narcissa's hand gallantly, "I must beg your pardon for not notifying you of my intention to attend today's gathering, and thank you and your husband for putting up with me all afternoon."

Narcissa laughed and waved her words away with an airy hand. Rigel noted that Narcissa was probably where Draco had picked up that habit.

"Not at all, Mr. Black," she said graciously, "We were relieved to see you'd decided to come. Draco particularly enjoyed your thoughtful

present if the look on his face was indication enough, didn't you Draco?"

Draco flushed a bit at his mother's teasing, "I already told him, Mother."

"I own you have my curiosity piqued, Mr. Black," Mr. Malfoy spoke up, "Where did you acquire such a potion?"

"He made it himself," Draco said immediately, "I recognized his handwriting on the label."

"Indeed, I should have clarified," Malfoy inclined his head toward his son in acknowledgment, "Where did you come across the recipe for the potion you gifted my son? I have never before heard of such a potion."

Rigel tilted her head, "I guess I invented it. Though really I just made a few changes to the Weightless Draft."

Malfoy frowned, "Is it safe for my son to ingest?"

"Yes, sir," Rigel said, "I tested it myself several times, with no complications or side effects other than a slight disorientation not unlike when one returns to dry land after gaining sea legs."

"If you say it is safe, then we trust you, Mr. Black," Narcissa said, "After all, you are as good as family now."

"My wife is right," Malfoy said, smiling a bit in apology, "And in that vein I don't believe you've met everyone here, Mr. Black. Allow us to rectify that."

Rigel summoned a smile with difficulty and followed Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy to a nearby group of people whom, she was shocked to discover, she had not in fact yet been introduced to. Joy.

The Malfoy's knew everyone, as one might expect given that they were the hosts, but it wasn't just that the Malfoy's knew their guests'

names. Every time the Malfoy's approached someone new, they would give Rigel a little tidbit of information about the person. So-and-so owns this Quidditch team and sometimes cheats on his taxes. Such-and-such a person works for their father but sells his secrets to his father's competitors to cover his gambling debts. By the time they'd gotten around to the Parkinson's again, Rigel knew more things than she'd ever wanted to know about complete strangers. Thankfully, the Malfoy's and the Parkinson's appeared to be good friends, so Rigel wasn't privy to any uncomfortable secrets about Pansy's family. Instead, they chatted amiably about what one another had been doing over the summer and what their plans for the fall were.

All too soon they were interrupted by a couple of Ministry officials on the Wizengamot. Rigel wasn't paying much attention to the elderly witch and wizard, instead choosing to stare out over the expansive gardens, wondering what it must be like to live with so much *space* .

Something glittered at the corner of her eye and Rigel twitched, turning to look for the source. She couldn't see anything, so she turned back to the view she'd been taking it, but there it was again. A shimmering at the edges of her vision that sent shards of discomfort into her brain. She rubbed her forehead and looked toward where she'd caught the glare but once again the subtle light disappeared the moment she looked for it. The next time Rigel caught sight of it in the corner of her eye, she didn't move. Instead she focused on her peripheral vision to try and see where it was coming from. When she pinpointed it, she swiveled her head around in alarm.

It was coming from the glass of punch in the elderly wizard's hand. Rigel stared at it for a moment, but couldn't see anything immediately wrong with the drink. She turned her head slowly until she could see the glass only in the corner of her eye, and sure enough it took on a very distinctive mother-of-pearl sheen.

Rigel turned to the wizard and interrupted his conversation with Mr. Parkinson rather rudely, "Sir, is your drink alcoholic?"

The wizard drew himself up abruptly, peering down at her forbiddingly, "I beg your pardon, young man?"

"Excuse me, sir, but it's very important," Rigel said quickly, "Is that drink you're holding meant to be an uninhibitor?" She asked because sometimes Nimue's Breath, which she suspected was in the elder man's punch, was added to a drink as a relaxant, and she didn't want to jump to conclusions.

"Certainly not, you impertinent child," he said, disgruntled, "I do not partake of alcohol or anything of the like."

"There is no alcohol being served at this party, Mr. Black," Narcissa added tentatively, looked confused and a bit worried.

"Then, I would strongly suggest you don't drink that, sir," Rigel said firmly, ignoring the disdainful looks she was receiving from the guests who could overhear their conversation.

"And who are you to suggest such a thing?" the man said dismissively, "I don't see anything wrong with this drink." So saying he leant close to sniff experimentally at the liquid in his glass.

"No, don't-" Rigel started, but it was too late. He'd inhaled.

A pleased, dreamy look overtook the old man's face, "You see? Nothing wrong with this drink. It's my favorite, you know. He brought the cup to his lips to take a sip, but Rigel darted forward and clapped a hand over his mouth, trying to wrest the cup away from him. The older wizard was strong despite his age, however, and fought back, struggling away from Rigel and toward the drink in his hand, panting and gasping as he attempted to get at the liquid that Rigel knew was calling him so urgently.

The guests around them gasped in shocked disapproval, some demanding that such an impertinent child be removed from the party at once. Rigel ignored them.

"Someone help me," she gasped out, still struggling to keep one hand over the drugged wizard's lips and the other over the top of the cup, all the while keeping her face turned away from the drink, lest she inhale the fumes herself, "Get the cup away from him."

Just when she was certain no one was going to help her, Draco was there, using both hands to pry the cup out of the old man's grip, and then Pansy was taking control of the cup, holding it far away from her own nose while Draco and Rigel together managed to hold the elderly Wizengamot member back from diving after it. It was at this point that Mr. Malfoy stepped in.

"Clearly something has affected Mr. Ogden," he said, loudly and clearly enough that his voice carried over the noise of the excitable guests, "We will deal with it presently. In the mean time could I invite the rest of you to view our newest addition to the hedge maze? Narcissa?"

Narcissa immediately took charge of the curious guests, herding them easily to a different part of the gardens to give Mr. Ogden a little privacy while her husband sorted everything out. Most of the guests left agreeably, content to gossip about what they'd already witnessed, and those that stayed behind were understandable: Mr. Malfoy, Pansy's parents, and the elderly witch who had been accompanying Mr. Ogden.

"Mr. Black, allow Mr. Parkinson to take charge of Mr. Ogden for the moment," Mr. Malfoy said curtly, "I would like an explanation."

"As would we all," a smooth voice interjected. Rigel looked over to see Mr. Riddle, closely followed by Snape, making their way toward their group from the direction of the back patio.

"Mr. Riddle," Malfoy nodded respectfully, "There seems to be a little trouble with Mr. Ogden's drink. Mr. Black was just helping us sort it out."

"Were you, Mr. Black?" Snape did not look terribly surprised, "Why is it that you are always in the thick of things?"

"I've no idea," Rigel said blandly. She handed Mr. Ogden off to Mr. Parkinson, who was looked at her very intensely, and crouched down to retrieve the small knife she carried in her boot for harvesting potions ingredients. Moving slowly and non-threateningly-she really didn't want to startle any of them into cursing her-Rigel ran the blade of the boot knife along her left wrist, just deep enough to draw a line of blood. She sheathed the knife just as quickly and strode over to Pansy with her wrist outstretched. To Pansy's credit, she didn't flinch away or make a face in disgust at the bloody appendage coming her way. Instead Pansy looked at her with concerned determination, and held the goblet out for Rigel to drip her blood into the drink.

Almost immediately, Ogden shook himself and slumped back into Mr. Parkinson's grip.

"What?" he gazed around him in a lost sort of way, "What happened?" He spotted Rigel accepting Pansy's handkerchief to staunch the shallow wound on her wrist and spluttered, "You-you-what did you do?"

"From the looks of things, saved whatever was left of your life," Snape said sardonically. He took the cup of ruined punch from Pansy and brought it to his nose, inhaling deeply. Snape immediately moved the glass away from his face and said, "Nightshade. Without the masking agent to cover to smell it is quite apparent. Not even a bezor would have saved you had you been unfortunate enough to ingest even a drop of this mixture."

Rose Parkinson put a trembling hand to her mouth and reached out to clasp Pansy with the other, "Masking agent?" she repeated questioningly.

"Nimue's Breath," Draco said quietly. Everyone turned to look at him and he flushed a bit under the scrutiny. His father in particular looked mildly surprised that he had identified it, "It was nullified by having

blood spilled over it, but when active the flower causes logical thinking processes to shut down, encouraging the victim to happily drink whatever poison the flower's scent is covering. Is that correct?"

Rigel smiled slightly, remembering that she had dictated one of her essays on the flower out loud in front of Draco once.

"It is, Draco," Snape said, "Well spotted. And quick thinking of you as well, Mr. Black, for spilling blood over the glass before Mr. Ogden could be further affected by the Nimue's Breath."

Rigel nodded and turned to Ogden, who was leaning heavily on Mr. Parkinson still, taking in everything said with a kind of dazed wonder, "Forgive me, Mr. Ogden for behaving so rudely before. When you told me the drink was not meant to be a stimulant I was afraid poison might be involved. I did not mean to alarm you, nor accost you, sir."

Riddle seemed almost sardonically amused, "Too polite," he muttered to himself.

Ogden shook his head at Rigel slowly, "No, young man, it is I who must apologize for not taking you seriously from the start. I might have saved myself a good deal of embarrassment if I hadn't sought to smell the drink and ascertain the truth of the matter myself. It was foolish of me. I know the dangers of Nimue's Breath, and it should not have been left to a child to appraise me of the threat."

"Yet he did," Riddle commented. Rigel turned to see him contemplating her over the rim of his own glass, "How interesting that a boy your age is so attuned to assassination attempts."

Rigel glanced at Draco and Pansy, who were looking at her with sympathetic understanding.

Pansy spoke up tentatively, "Rigel has been especially sensitive to the possibility of goblet poisoning since the events of last Halloween, Mr. Riddle."

"Pray, enlighten those of us who were not present for the events you refer to, Miss Parkinson," Riddle requested.

Pansy looked troubled, and glanced at Rigel questioningly. Rigel smiled in encouragement, so she said, "The pumpkin juice in Rigel's goblet at the Halloween feast was replaced with corrosive acid. Rigel very nearly drank it, and ever since he checks everything he drinks for tampering. I'm not surprised that Rigel out of all of us noticed the poisoning first."

Rigel blinked. She hadn't known that Pansy watched her so closely. She *did* check everything she drank, but she did so discretely-or so she'd thought.

"But who would want to kill you, Tiberius?" the elderly witch asked in a shaken tone of voice.

Ogden shook his head, "I don't know, Griselda, but I do know that I owe this young man a great personal debt." He turned to Rigel, "I am Tiberius Ogden, child, elder of the Wizengamot. Thank you for the service you have rendered me today-I shall not forget it. A life debt is owed to you and such a debt is yours to claim."

"It's an honor to meet you properly, Mr. Ogden," Rigel said, bowing slightly, "I am Rigel Black, and the service you speak of was merely my duty, one wizard to another."

"Well, I disagree," the older witch replayed, setting a hand on Ogden's arm, "I am Griselda Marchbanks, also an elder of the Wizengamot and Governor of the Wizarding Examinations Authority, and you have saved the life of my oldest friend. I now formally consider myself to be an equal party in the life debt just incurred. If you do not claim it from Tiberius, you must claim it from me."

Rigel bowed once more, "A pleasure to meet you, Madam Marchbanks, but truly I require no payment for such an act."

"Nonetheless you shall one day receive it," Marchbanks said firmly. She looped Ogden's arm through her own carefully, "Now, I think it wise if Tiberius and I retire from this lovely party. Mr. Malfoy, we will not blame you of course for this unfortunate incident, but we will have your word as a gentleman to investigate the matter thoroughly."

"Of course, Madam Marchbanks," Malfoy bowed to the elder, "Everything that can be done to discover the perpetrator of such a crime against one of my guests will be. I will send you a copy of the report."

"Please do," Marchbanks said, "Come, Tiberius, let's get you home."

The elders left and there was a moment of silence in which Rigel thought to herself that she was really racking up life debts a little too quickly. She hadn't the faintest idea what she would do with them all.

"Well," Mr. Parkinson said, moving to put his hands comfortingly on his wife's shoulders, "That was a bit more excitement than I had counted on for the afternoon, but I suppose one must learn to expect the unexpected at your parties, Lucius."

Mr. Malfoy frowned the slightest bit, "We can only be grateful to Mr. Black that the excitement did not turn tragic. As my wife would say, an attempted murder is good gossip; a successful murder is poor security. It seems our debt to you is compounded, Mr. Black."

Rigel winced, "Please don't, sir. I acted instinctively, not for any perceived gain. Can't we pretend this didn't happen?"

There were many raised eyebrows in the group.

"A life was saved here today, Mr. Black," Rose Parkinson said softly, "Why would you want to pretend otherwise?"

"I just meant I would appreciate it if my involvement were kept as quiet as possible," Rigel said, swallowing against her dry mouth.

"We can say Uncle Severus saved Mr. Ogden, can't we?" Draco said suddenly, "After all, Father, if Rigel's dad hears about how close Rigel was to what happened today he might not allow Rigel to come back."

Well, thought Rigel, that much was certainly true.

"While I do not seek to deny young Mr. Black the credit, perhaps it would be best if his name was kept out of the official report," Snape said shrewdly, "Whoever was responsible for poisoning Ogden's drink may seek retaliation for the foiled plan, and as a target I am better suited to handle any attempts at revenge."

Rigel did not like Snape putting himself on the line for her sake, but accepted that it was his right to do so. "Thank you, sir," Rigel said, "Also, would you mind if I took the poisoned drink with me when I leave today?"

Snape raised an eyebrow and Mr. Parkinson frowned openly, but it was Pansy who asked, "Why?"

"I'm sure Professor Snape could neutralize the poison and dispose of it easily," Rigel said, "But I have spilled my blood into this mixture willingly. I would not like it to fall into unfriendly hands accidentally."

Riddle quirked an amused grin, "What would you know of blood magic, Mr. Black?"

"Just enough that I would prefer to dispose of the mixture myself, Mr. Riddle, if no one has any objections," Rigel said evenly.

Snape nodded and pulled a flask from the holster he wore beneath his outer robes. He tipped the liquid in and corked it firmly before handing it over to Rigel without ceremony. Rigel nodded her thanks, tucking the flask away carefully.

The adults went off to gather the rest of the guests back from the hedge maze and Draco, Pansy, and Rigel went back to the now

empty gazebo to say their farewells. The party was nearly over in any case, and Rigel had to meet Archie in Diagon alley to take the Polyjuice once more before going home and switching back.

Pansy hugged Rigel and said, "You'd better not go the rest of the summer without writing."

Rigel smiled, "I promise you'll hear from me before the train at least. I don't know if I can see you guys in person again though, I'm really busy this summer."

"Just don't get into too much trouble before the fall, okay?" Draco hugged her briefly, "You're entirely too apt to find yourself in the middle of every problem that comes your way."

"No promises for that one," Rigel said, "But trouble or no trouble, I'll see you two in September."

"Yeah," Draco said, "Thanks for coming, Rigel, even though you didn't answer the invitation properly."

"Thanks for being my friend, Draco, even though I'm so socially inept," Rigel said.

Pansy laughed, "We'll make you into a gentleman someday, Rigel Black, though I really must talk with you about how one properly advises another about an attempt on their life."

"I must have skipped that chapter in *Etiquette for all Occasions*," Rigel rolled her eyes.

"I'll send you an updated copy for your birthday," Pansy sniffed.

They laughed, and bade farewell.

When Rigel went over the day's events that night as she waited for sleep to claim her, she couldn't help but shake her head with bemusement. The summer was only half-over and already she was looking forward to the break she'd get in the fall. Compared to the

last few weeks, an uneventful school year would make a nice vacation.

Provided it *was* uneventful, of course.

[end of chapter one].

A/N: About the currency, one galleon is supposed to be about 5 pounds or about 7.35 US dollars. So if an apartment in America is about 500 dollars a month, I figured that would make a cheap apt in the wizarding world about 60 galleons, or about \$441, about 300 pounds. Make sense? Thanks for reading!

Chapter 2

A/N: The feedback from the first chapter was amazing-over 60 reviews on one chapter. So much so that I'm publishing this little chapter to keep you going until the next chapter, which in outline is going to be exciting I think. So I hope everyone enjoys it; from now on chapters will hopefully be shorter but faster. A note I would like to make is that Frecklefreak pointed out I accidentally made contradictory references to Leo's eye color: it's hazel, like George (kudos to all who guessed his resemblance to our favorite thief), and I've gone back to fix the mix up, so thank you to my oh-so-observant reviewers for keeping me on my toes ^^.

A/N2: So there's a lot of Leo in this one. A lot. Actually it's all Leo, so sorry about that, but it's the only part of the rest of the summer I thought might stand alone so I could get it to you guys faster. The story is very AU in this one, though any Lioness fans will feel right at home. Don't worry if it seems really foreign to the HP universe-I'm going to mesh it as the story continues. The usual disclaimer, don't own other people's characters or plot. Thanks for reading!

The Serpentine Subterfuge:

Chapter Two:

Harry's head was spinning. Again. She was bent over her notes on the Polyjuice Potion in the Potter Library, trying as she had been for weeks to crack the input variable restrictions. She had to get around them somehow, if her idea was going to work.

There were different types of shaped magic, as Harry had been learning in her studies. There was the kind of magic that did relatively the same thing every time to the nearest thing it encountered-like a warming charm or the Expelliarmus spell, just point and shoot. Then there was magic that relied on parameters, variables, which were supplied in the case of a spell by the wizard's

intent and in the case of potions by ingredients added after completion. In the case of Polyjuice, the basic pattern of the shaped magic was inlaid in the recipe, but the exact effect of the potion depended on the input variable-the hair of the wizard one wanted to turn into, which was added after the potion was complete. At first Harry thought the potion simply 'read' the DNA encoded in the strand of hair and produced a copy in the wizard who drank it. But then, Harry did a little more research.

If DNA was the only thing the magic was 'reading' when a wizard took Polyjuice, then it wouldn't account for things in the appearance that DNA had nothing to do with. For instance, if Polyjuice only read DNA and you took a hair from someone who dyed their hair you'd wind up with their original color. If someone was malnourished as a child and had grown up shorter than they were 'supposed' to be given genetics alone, you'd end up taller than they were under the influence of Polyjuice. If your target had lost their leg in battle, you'd end up as them with the leg, because nothing in the DNA accounted for environmental influences throughout a person's life.

So Harry had reasoned that the potion wasn't analyzing the DNA, or at least not the DNA alone. It was as if the strand of hair somehow represented the person it belonged to as they were *at the moment the hair was plucked*. She wasn't sure how that could be, so she had done more research on biomagic, the magic that affected the body. Archie had helped her a lot in that area; Healing was pretty much all biomagic, and even though she was technically on-par with Archie's level as an AIM first-year, Archie had been reading medical journals and checking out books on Medi-magic for years. His stores of knowledge in the field far outclassed hers, and the information he came up with was very helpful.

It turned out that hair didn't just contain DNA. Archie explained that even muggles were aware of this. They used hair to test if a person had been taking illegal substances, because hair absorbs chemicals like arsenic and smoke from the environment. Also, even the DNA that was in hair was not actually nuclear DNA unless the hair was

plucked from the root. Regular, shed hairs only contained mDNA, or mitochondrial DNA, which wouldn't have the full genetic code needed to copy the exact physical characteristics even barring any environmental influences. So in other words the potion wasn't actually taking DNA from the hair put into it. It was taking something else.

That something else turned out to be magic. As Archie explained, hair not only absorbed physical chemicals and toxins from the environment, but in the case of a wizard, hair absorbed magic as well. In retrospect, this piece of information explained a lot. Most adult wizards and witches wore their hair long. Harry had always chalked it up to pureblooded custom, but what if it was more than that? As Draco and Pansy were always telling her, purebloods did nothing without a reason. Archie said that a wizard's hair was constantly absorbing magic, and the closest and most frequently absorbed magic was the wizard's own magical signature. When the hair was added to the potion, the strongest magic in it would be its owner's magical signature, meaning that what the hair likely added to the potion was the magical signature.

From there, Harry researched what sort of information could be gleaned from a magical signature. She knew that magical signatures were highly specific, and as such were used for identification purposes in the Ministry, much like a fingerprint, hence the 'signature' part. They were also nearly impossible to falsify, which is why high-level wards were keyed to magical signatures rather than to a pass code as lower-level security wards were. Harry knew that Polyjuice changed only a person's physical appearance, meaning that the taker's mind and soul remained his own, but she discovered that not even Polyjuice could copy another wizard's magical signature. Otherwise anyone could get through top-clearance wards with the potion, which was simply not the case.

So the potion wasn't copying the entire signature, but some part the signature was what gave the potion the input it needed to copy. Therefore, Harry thought, there must be physical data stored in a

magical signature about the person it belonged to. Yet, she couldn't imagine why that would be, or what part of the signature the physical data would be found in.

This was important for her to understand, because she was trying to change the input parameters slightly to modify the potion. The recipe was too delicate to be meddled with-and honestly, she wasn't skilled enough to even try. What she planned on doing wasn't changing the potion itself so much as it was changing what went into it. Harry wanted to make a variant of the Polyjuice that wouldn't copy one form or another exactly, but instead allow for a blending of two forms. She wanted to blend she and Archie's looks and create a middle ground that they could both Polyjuice into, thereby looking exactly the same, or at least exact enough to fool everyone. In truth, Harry was not, repeat not, changing either of their sex. She really didn't want to actually become a boy for six years, and she was pretty sure Archie would just plain refuse.

Instead, she wanted to create a form that would appear to be a slightly delicate male. In Archie's case it would actually be male, and in hers it would only look male, with her girl features vastly understated. Narrower hips, broader shoulders, pretty flat chest, and taller than she would probably grow to be naturally. To do this, she needed to somehow isolate the components of a magical signature that revealed the physical characteristics of the wizard it belonged to, so that she could blend she and Archie's signature in a way that selected for the characteristics she wanted. Then she had to find a way to get the Polyjuice to accept the blended signature instead of a natural signature.

Of course, this was not the only thing about the potion she'd have to change. She also needed the potion to last longer. Harry knew she was probably not the first to wish Polyjuice lasted longer than an hour, and indeed she had read a lot of research on the possibility of the subject-some credible and some not so credible. One article had actually suggested that one should eat live dung beetles once every new moon to make the transformation last longer. Utter rubbish, in

Harry's opinion. Yes, there had been much speculation done on the possibility, but all of the articles she'd read had proposed changes to the recipe. Harry had brewed the Polyjuice recipe three times in the nearly two months she'd been home, and each time her mind and magic were telling her the same thing. The recipe was perfect.

Harry saw, and more importantly felt, nothing wrong with the recipe as it was. It sort of... clicked, magically speaking. Everything fit together in a way that was delicate yet elegant, and Harry was sure the key to adapting the potion was not in changing the actual recipe. It was in the variables.

The input variable of the hair was obvious, because the outcome of the potion changed depending on whose hair you put in it, but Harry thought the time-sensitive portion of the potion was just as variable. As far as she could tell, nothing in the ingredients that caused the change in the drinker were subject to time. That is, the things in the potion that turned you into someone else weren't the ones that made it only last an hour. It was the ingredients that made it temporary that were time-sensitive, so the reason it only lasted an hour was because of the ingredients that changed you back to yourself. Those were designed in the recipe to become effective in an hour.

Harry supposed the idea was that it was better to have a shorter working time than to be stuck in a different form forever.

Or was it?

Harry had a tentative plan to get around the annoying need to take Polyjuice every hour. It revolved around the fact that the Polyjuice recipe was so air-tight. Every ingredient had a purpose and was carefully measured against all the other ingredients. In this way, the finished potion was entirely neutral. It wouldn't react with anything until drunk, which meant anyone's hair could be added safely, but that also meant that anything else could be added safely as well. Harry was at this point playing with the idea of adding an ingredient to make the change permanent. Not irreversible, of course, but permanent in that the transformation would not reverse itself

naturally. It wouldn't be practical for anyone who wanted to become someone else for a day, but for six years? Harry thought it was a rather good idea. She would simply add the ingredient that would ensure permanence at the same time she added the modified magical signature. Of course, that meant that she had to figure out how to blend the signatures correctly first.

Harry found that it helped to think in terms of colors. Right now she was red and Archie was yellow. They wanted to both end up as a sort of yellow-orange. It would be all too obvious, however, if they were both to become yellow-orange over night. Instead, the plan would actually involve a series of permanent Polyjuice Potions, individualized for both Harry and Archie and spread out over at least half a year. In the first dose, she would change slightly, and with each dose after that she would be more orange-red, then more orange, and eventually she would reach the yellow-orange at the same time Archie would. She hadn't yet decided how many doses it would take to change them slowly enough that those who saw them every day didn't notice anything, but that was the general plan.

Or it would be, if Harry could just figure out how to differentiate the parts of a magical signature.

Harry sighed and closed the book she was reading. It hadn't told her anything the other twenty books hadn't already said. She needed to start brewing for Krait anyway if she wanted to have the crates filled before noon like usual. Harry checked the clock-face on the Library wall. It was already eight in the morning.

She shelved the books carefully before going down to the lab. There wasn't a crazy librarian to give her the evil eye if she left them out, but she didn't want one of the adults to see what she was reading up on. Better that they thought she was in the library studying for her owl-school classes. Harry felt marginally better by the time she'd gotten the cauldron off of the drying rack and set it up. She was starting a new potion today, after all, and there was no way to be morose while doing that. She read over the recipe for the love potion Krait had given her the day before carefully.

She had never brewed a love potion before, and Krait had never stocked them before either, but his sales had been up since she started, a combination of having a wider stock available and the fact that Leo was apparently quite popular with the residents of the alley. Harry guessed Leo had been frequenting the alley for a long time, fetching potion ingredients for his father and whatnot, and had made a lot of friends. Now that Leo was accompanying her to the Serpent's Storeroom, it seemed many people were curious to know what the fuss was about. More interest meant more customers, meant more demand for potions, and more for Harry to do.

So she was trying her hand at a love potion this morning and praying Archie never heard about it. He would tease her into the next century, especially after she swore up and down after reading a critique Professor Snape wrote about another Master's work with love potions when she was nine that she would never go near the silly things.

Harry got out the ingredients the recipe called for and began preparing them. Once the base was simmering, she connected her core to the potion and began imbuing. She was getting better at telling ahead of time how much magic a potion would need, and she raised her eyebrows as her senses expanded. Apparently the amount of magic needed to brew a love potion was more than two Snowhit Draught's combined. Harry wondered if all love potions needed so much magic to be stable, and theorized that maybe it was that way because potions that worked on the compulsion of the mind needed greater magical input than potions that merely affected the body. She then wondered how much magic a potion like Amortentia or Veritaserum would take to make. Perhaps she wouldn't attempt those for a few more years.

Everything was going fine, until she got to stage three. The moment she dropped the dried chimera eyes she knew something was wrong. The potion looked fine to her eyes, but through the connection she was pouring magic into, it frothed and boiled. She could feel it, at first just a little bit off to her magical senses, but

growing more unstable by the moment. It felt wrong, and unbalanced, and-and *dangerous* . Harry backed away from the potion rapidly. It was just barely starting to bubble ominously on the outside as Harry spat out the emergency sequence as loudly and clearly as she could.

"Code Omega! Station three! Pass code: Sunset Bravo!"

At her words, the built-in safety precautions Lily had insisted on when she agreed to let Harry brew alone sprang into action. Thick, magic-re-enforced shields rose from the ground and formed a secure dome over the unstable potion. A few seconds later, the potion erupted, taking chunks of the cauldron with it. It splattered with a violent shake against the clear glass of the domed container and Harry shakily sat on one of the thin metal stools to give her heart rate a chance to settle.

Five seconds later, James and Remus both tore down the stairs of the lab. They skidded to a halt when they saw Harry sitting, unharmed, well protected from the explosion, and both panted heavily.

"You... okay... Harry?" James puffed out between breaths, "We heard... the alarm."

"I'm okay, Dad," Harry said, smiling a little crookedly, "Just surprised, that's all."

"You got the shield up, though," Remus said, looking relieved, "Good job."

James reached out and tugged Harry off the stool into a strong embrace, "Scared the life out of me, Fawn. What happened?"

Harry hugged him back tightly, "It was the chimera eyes."

"That means nothing to me," James laughed out, with just the slightest hint of hysteria to it.

"Sorry," Harry muffled a laugh in her dad's arm, "Bad recipe, I think. I didn't know enough about the potion I was making to spot the error. I'll be more careful from now on."

"Well, you're all right, and that's what matters," Remus said, eyeing the mess behind the cauldron barrier uneasily, "I'll help you clean it up tomorrow, okay? Lily will want to see it when she gets home. Why don't you take it easy for the rest of the day."

Harry nodded, detangling herself from her dad to hug Remus as well, "Thanks for coming so quickly to my rescue you guys. My very own knights in shining armor."

James smiled awkwardly, "Yeah, someday I'll figure out you don't need saving."

Harry shook her head, "Someday I really will need saving, and I'll be glad I have you there."

At her father and Remus's insistence, Harry took the rest of the morning off. They were convinced it was her tendency to over work, not the faulty recipe, that was responsible for such an unprecedented occurrence in her lab. It was true that Harry had never actually blown up a cauldron before, but at least they knew the safety precautions worked.

At noon, Harry flooed to the Leaky Cauldron, for once empty-handed. Leo stood from where he'd been lounging against a wall and smiled incredulously at her.

"Aren't you forgetting something today, sprout?" He eyed her empty hands meaningfully.

Harry smiled ruefully, "I'm afraid not. No potions today. I just came to tell you I didn't need an escort. Not that I ever need one, mind you, but whenever I suggest you stop inconveniencing yourself to ferry my potions about-

"I tell you that nothing in the name of friendship is inconvenient," Leo finished, walking over to ruffle her hair.

"As you say," Harry sighed, patting the unruly curls back into place, "Though I don't think I'll agree that this is okay until you request something similarly inconvenient from me."

Leo shook his head at her, "You're too honest for your own good, Harry. It's like you're inviting people to do whatever they please to you."

"I'm not," Harry frowned uncomfortably, not sure which part of that statement she was protesting. She wasn't honest at all, but she couldn't tell Leo that, "I said you should request something of me if it's to be an equal friendship, not that I would let you run over me if you asked."

Leo just looked humorously down at her and changed the subject, "So why no potions today? Your brewer finally taking a much-needed day off?"

"Not exactly," Harry said, "One of the recipes Krait gave me last time was bad. A cauldron blew up, making a huge mess in the lab, so no potions."

Leo looked troubled, "Were you in the lab when the explosion happened?"

Harry shrugged, "Yes, but the lab is very well equipped in terms of safety. The shields contained the explosion, it's just a pain to clean up."

"Even so," Leo said, "It wouldn't have happened with a better recipe."

"I suppose that's true," Harry said, not really paying attention as she moved out of the way to let a large group of witches in magenta robes pass, "But a Potioneer takes that risk when trying out an

unknown potion recipe. There is no committee that releases standard recipes for potions, you know. Potion Masters just publish books with the recipes they use in them. Those recipes might have been passed down to them from their mentors, or they might be changed and improved upon by the Master himself. There's no way of knowing how good a recipe is until you try it, unless there is significant research already published about a particular recipe."

Leo ran a hand through his brown hair distractedly, "Yeah, I guess. Still..."

Harry took a step toward the door, saying, "Sorry you coming here was even more unnecessary than usual today, Leo. I'll see you tomorrow I expect."

Leo raised an eyebrow, "Where are you going, then?"

"I'm going to see about getting a better recipe from the boss," Harry said.

"Alright, let's go," Leo said, his laid back grin back in place, "I've got to have a few words with Mr. Krait myself."

Harry sighed, "I really don't need any protection today, Leo. My hands are free."

"You don't believe me? I'm crushed. All right, young Harry. No protection, then. How about a friend?" Leo said, holding the back door of the pub open expectantly.

"I suppose one always needs friends," Harry said, smiling slightly. She glanced up at Leo as she walked out onto the alley, "Friends help *each other*, though, so start thinking of ways I can repay you."

Leo just smiled, and they walked the familiar route to Knockturn alley companionably. When they got to the Serpent's Storeroom, Mr. Krait greeted them with the same nonplussed resignation he always did.

"Back again, Harry? Oh, look, Leo's here too. What a surprise," Krait yawned theatrically, waving them to the back, "Just set the crates over-hang on. No potions today?" He lifted his chin from his other hand and looked between the two of them expectantly, "Didn't run into trouble on the alley again, did you?"

"No, Mr. Krait," Harry said, "I'm afraid the recipe you gave me for the love potion was faulty. It blew up the cauldron, unfortunately, so I was wondering if you had a different version somewhere."

Krait sat straight up, frowning, "Faulty recipe? I'm sorry, kid, are you okay?"

Harry nodded.

Leo scowled, "Harry was in the lab when it happened."

"Well of course he was-ahem," Krait coughed amusedly as he caught himself. He seemed to enjoy pulling one over on Leo, and had yet to correct him about who was brewing the potions, "I suppose as the, ah, assistant you got the brunt of it?"

Harry shook her head, "I'm fine. The lab has shields that we can activate when a cauldron is unstable."

"Well, I do feel bad about it, though," Krait scratched his chin, "It wasn't my recipe. I don't deal much with love potions and the like. With all the new customers coming in I thought to expand a bit, so I got the recipe off an old friend. Perhaps he wasn't as friendly as I thought. Blew up the cauldron, you say? That's not an easy feat, though of course they don't make cauldrons like they used to. Bottoms are all thin and weak."

Harry shrugged, "I understand how it is with unfamiliar recipes. Usually I'd catch something so out of place, but I'm not familiar with love potions either. Now I know not to add chimera eyes at least."

" *Dried chimera eyes?*" At Harry's nod, Krait's eyes grew wide and he paled abruptly, "I should have looked at that recipe. I'm really sorry, kid, I could have caught that if I'd looked. Dried chimera eyes," he shook his head, a bit shaky, "Those should only be used in the most basic and least reactive potions. Violent ingredient, they are, one of the few that react with large amounts of magic. With the magic involved in a love potion, I'm very surprised you got out of the blast zone in time, kid. That kind of reaction would have had almost no visible warning signs."

Harry shifted uncomfortably, "Just luck I guess."

At her words, Leo blew out a breath harshly. She turned to glance at him and nearly stepped back in surprise. Leo's face was dark with suppressed emotion. He was glaring at Krait so fiercely Krait actually winced.

"Who gave you that recipe?" Leo asked in a voice that was dangerous and low, "Tell me it wasn't one of ours." Harry couldn't believe such a sound was coming from Leo. Even when he had moments of seriousness, her friend's voice only acquired a firm edge. This was different. Leo sounded like a general whose subordinate had directly disobeyed him. He was angry.

Krait swallowed heavily, "It was Claw, your-Leo. Claw gave the recipe to me. He was supposed to deliver it from Solom, who got it off a traveling potion brewer at the Dancing Dragon, but I'm thinking Claw might have changed a few things in the delivering."

Leo let out a breath slowly, still visibly upset, "Couldn't have been Solom, you're right. Claw though... I don't know as much about him as I'd like. I'll look into it, Edgar."

"As you like, Leo," Krait said, "Now, Harry, you'll send me the bill for the new cauldron?"

"It's not exactly your fault, though, is it?" Harry said dubiously, "Why don't I send the bill to this Claw person?"

"Because Claw eats little kids like you for breakfast," Krait snorted, "I'll take care of it, brat. I should have looked at the recipe before handing it over in any case. That'll teach me to let my guard down, won't it?"

"Do you think this guy was trying to kill you, Mr. Krait?" Harry asked, eyes wide. Why was Krait not more alarmed at the idea?

"Who knows?" Krait said gruffly, "Could be me, or if he knows I contract out it could be one of my brewers who was the target. No way of knowing, since I don't advertise who makes what potions unless a customer specifically asks."

"I see," Harry said, "Well, let me know if you get a better copy of that potion you wanted, Mr. Krait."

"Will do, kid. Just keep making the old ones for now," Krait said.

Harry bade Krait good day. Leo left the shop with her. He was still frowning, brooding about Claw or the phony recipe or something. Harry kept glancing at him as they walked back toward Diagon alley. She felt like she should say something, anything to make Leo snap out of his black mood. It wasn't like him to be upset for so long, at least as far as she knew. Come to think of it, Harry didn't know too much about Leo, besides that his dad was Malcolm Hurst and his mother was some kind of Healer who worked at a wizarding clinic. Probably she should learn a little more about Leo, if they were to be friends. Then again, that would be a little hypocritical of her. She hadn't exactly been very honest or forthcoming with Leo.

Perhaps it was time to change that.

When they reached the main alley, Leo turned toward the Leaky Cauldron, but Harry snagged his elbow and turned him the other direction, toward Gringotts. Leo allowed her to tow him forward a few steps, a bemused eyebrow rising as he looked down at her.

"Are we not going to the Leaky Cauldron today?" he asked.

"We are not," Harry said, "I am taking the day off while the lab gets cleaned up and you are taking the day off from... whatever you do with your days because you are not fit company for anyone at the moment."

"Permit me to point out a couple of flaws in that plan," Leo said, though he didn't stop her from steering them down the alley, "If you are the assistant, shouldn't *you* be the one cleaning the lab? Also, it is strange of you to volunteer to accompany me this afternoon if I am not fit company."

"It's true that normally such an act would be bothersome," Harry said loftily, "But I have found that nothing in the name of friendship is truly inconvenient. I shall bear with your towering temper if only so that no one else shall have to."

"Towering temper?" Leo said incredulously, "I'm not *that* upset."

"Well you won't be upset at all after this," Harry said.

"After what?" Leo frowned, "Where are we going?"

"You mean, 'where have we arrived?'" Harry corrected, stopping and turning Leo to look at the brightly colored shop front before them.

"Fortescue's?" Leo glanced sideways at her.

"Ice cream makes everything better," Harry said, adding, "Except potions," as an after thought.

"How old are you?" Leo asked, amusedly.

Harry frowned inwardly at the jab at her age, but at least Leo wasn't scowling darkly any more.

"Old enough to appreciate the good things in life," she said, pushing the older boy by the small of his back into the ice cream parlor, "Besides, it's not just ice cream I'm giving you today."

"Oh?" Leo laughed at her insistent maneuvering and held his hands up to show that he'd go quietly to the counter.

"Yes," Harry said seriously, "Today you get information."

"About you?" Leo glanced at her sharply, "A rare thing indeed. What's the occasion?"

"Your grumpiness," Harry said teasingly, "Also, I think we've reached the point where it's clear you're not going to just go away. If I don't tell you now, it'll be ugly when you find out later, and I guess I don't have a real reason to keep it from you." Besides habit, she added silently.

Leo looked down at her smugly, "Finally. All right, I want two scoops of strawberry and one of chocolate."

Harry spluttered, "Wha-? You're the almost-grown-up! You're supposed to pay."

Leo shook his finger at her, "A-ah, Harry. You invited me, and you're the one with the job. You should pay."

"But-but I'm saving my money for-"

"For?" Leo pressed, interested.

Harry blew air at her bangs in annoyance, "Okay, fine, I'll pay. But you're only getting two scoops."

"Stingy," Leo sniffed, then grinned at her. Harry grinned back. Ice cream was definitely a good idea.

She ordered their ice cream and handed over the sickles with good grace. She really wasn't worried about having enough money for the apartment come August. She was making plenty with all the potions she was brewing for Krait. They sat outside so they could people-watch while they ate. After a while Leo began pointing out people who passed by and telling Harry about them. It was rather like

listening to the Malfoy's tell her about their guests at the Garden Party, and yet, it was nothing like that. The people milling about Diagon were completely different from the sharp and sparkling purebloods who frequented Malfoy Manor.

Also, Leo didn't tell her about people's dirty secrets. Instead, she learned that the woman who worked at the bakery across the street was dating the blacksmith's brother, who was planning on proposing to her on their four-year anniversary. She learned that the boy who swept the feathers up at Eeylop's Owl Emporium was the son of the chef who cooked for the kitchens at the Dancing Dragon. She learned that the boy's name was Jason, and that he wanted to be a toy-maker when he grew up. Apparently Jason's woodcarvings were already very well known about the alley.

Harry listened and watched as Leo's face came alive. He talked about these people like they were all a part of his family. His hazel eyes shone with sincere fondness when he told her about the man who'd sold a priceless ruby for a dragon's egg, which had turned out to be a dud. The man had then sold that very dragon's egg to some rich bloke from the continent and used the money to set up shop as an apothecary. That man, it turned out, was none other than Mr. Mulpepper-Mr. Tate's boss! Harry had quite a laugh over that one.

Eventually, though, Leo turned his eyes from the street to her face, "So, now that I'm all cheered up again, weren't you going to give me something?"

Harry pushed her empty dish away from her with resignation, "Three questions. No promises, though-I'll pass on a question I don't want to answer."

Leo smiled, "More than enough. Okay, first: I know you and Krait are keeping something from me. What is it?"

Harry winced, "Maybe this wasn't a good idea. I don't want to de-cheerify you already."

"I promise not to get upset by anything you tell me," Leo said, "I'm too happy you're telling me to care that you lied to me for so long."

Harry smiled a little, maybe if she was lucky everyone would react that way in the end, "Your interest in me cannot possibly be healthy."

Leo looked a little bit ill, "Well, when you say it like that..." he grimaced, rolling his shoulders as if to banish an uncomfortable feeling, "Just answer the question."

"You're right," Harry admitted, "Krait does sort of know something you don't. It's not that we were lying to you, though. You just assumed, and we never really corrected you."

"About...?"

"Well, the reason I won't get in trouble for taking the day off while the lab is such a mess is because I'm not actually a lab assistant," Harry said, "I'm a Potioneer. I'm the one who makes the potions I bring to Krait every day, so the boring old potion maker who you're always saying needs a day off is actually... me. Surprise," she finished weakly.

Leo leaned back into his chair, blinking slowly. He cleared his throat, "I'm feeling a bit... sheepish. You really made all those potions?"

Harry nodded.

"I guess I can see why you didn't tell me," Leo said, laughing a bit, "I'm not sure how many people would believe a sprout like you was working as a potion maker. On the other hand, that sounds exactly like Krait to hire the first person who answered his ad, regardless of age or experience. Besides," Leo considered her with careful eyes, "I don't think you're lying. Something about you seems trustworthy today."

"Just today?" Harry asked.

"No one is trustworthy all the time," Leo said.

"Isn't that what trustworthy means?" Harry shook her head, "If someone isn't trustworthy all the time, then they aren't trustworthy."

"But then no one would be trustworthy," Leo said blankly.

"Maybe no one is," Harry muttered.

Leo frowned, "What a negative way of looking at things. Where's your youthful sense of naïve optimism?"

"Hidden behind my sense of reality," Harry said, "We're off topic though. Ask your next question."

Leo pursed his lips, thinking hard, "Now that I know you're the potion brewer, I have more questions, not less. Hmm, what to ask? I know! What's your last name?"

Harry winced, "Should have seen that one coming."

"Yes, you should," Leo said unrepentantly, "Come on, tell me. I won't spread it around."

"Promise?" Harry looked imploringly at him, "You can't tell anyone. My parents don't know I have a summer job, much less one on Knockturn alley."

Leo frowned, "So no one knows where you go every day? What if something were to happen to you? That's not safe, Harry."

"My cousin knows where I am," Harry said.

"So you have cousins now, too?" Leo teased.

"One cousin," Harry said, "Only he's not really my cousin. We just grew up together, and his dad is like my uncle, so we call each other cousins, that's all. Because our fathers were practically brothers when they were young. Though... I guess technically we're related

because my grandmother was his great aunt or something. It's too distant to really count."

"Interesting, but you haven't answered my question," Leo said, leaning forward, "I'm afraid if you pass on this one it will be most suspicious, Harry."

Harry swallowed, but really, what harm could it do? He already knew she was called Harry, and she didn't really have to pretend to be Rigel over the summer. Harry the girl liked potions too, after all. She'd just give him the usual cover story; she was Harry Potter, halfblood who attended AIM during the year, interested in Healing and Potions. Nothing complicated about it, except it felt complicated, because in reality she was Harry-Rigel-Potter-Black who dressed as a boy during the school year to masquerade as her pureblooded cousin at Hogwarts. Still, Leo didn't have to know anything about that. For Leo, she could be uncomplicated.

"My name is Harry Potter," she said, "Krait didn't ask for my full name when he hired me, so I didn't tell him. I was afraid he wouldn't hire me if he knew..." Harry shrugged uncomfortably.

"Knew..." Leo leaned back suddenly, his face slack with surprise, "Holy Merlin, you're a girl!"

Harry flushed as several patrons turned in their seats to look curiously at their table, "Leo! Quiet, will you?"

"I can't believe-you-" Leo blew out a breath and ran both hands roughly through his hair, "Harry Potter, *of course* . The only daughter of James and Lily Potter, Heir to the House of Potter. Black hair, green eyes. Your Uncle is Sirius Black, childhood best friend of James Potter, and your mother works for the private company that the patent office at the Ministry contracts out to, testing experimental magical inventions, including *potions* . No wonder you have access to a state-of-the-art potions lab."

Harry was taken aback, "You, um, know an awful lot about people you've never met."

"I know a lot about everyone," Leo said absently, staring at her without blinking, "I can see it now, kind of. I did think you were a little scrawny for a twelve-year-old boy. The short hair though... it threw me off, I admit. Usually I see clearer than most, but I guess that's what happens when you let your expectations run away with your common sense."

"Don't feel bad," Harry said comfortingly, "Nearly everyone assumes I'm a boy, unless they've known me forever, like Mr. Tate. I didn't want to tell Krait because he hired me thinking I was a boy. You probably already know, since your dad is the Aldermaster of the Guild, but the potions community can be a trifle... sexist at times."

"No kidding," Leo snorted, "Bunch of bigoted twits, barring a select few."

"Yeah," Harry said, "So, are you going to give me away?"

"Not even Krait knows you're a..." he lowered his voice, "Girl?"

Harry shook her head warily.

Leo laughed, "Good. Not that I think he'd fire you at this point, but now *we're* the ones keeping a secret from *him* . Serves him right. I won't tell anyone."

"Thanks, Leo" Harry said, "So has the shock set in yet?"

"Any minute now," Leo rubbed his chest theatrically, "Lucky I'm a young man or my heart would have stopped from all the surprises I'm getting in one sitting."

"You should probably forget about the last question, then," Harry said seriously, "It's not worth endangering your health, after all."

"Not a chance," Leo flashed even teeth at her, "I'm even more curious about you now, Harry."

"Don't be," Harry laughed weakly, "After all, you've already found out my best secrets, so everything else will be rather anti-climactic, I bet."

"Only one way to find out," Leo said cheerfully, "Last question: you said you were working for Krait to save money for something. What were you saving your money for?"

Harry tensed, "Pass."

Leo lost his grin and raised his brows incredulously, "What, seriously? You tell me all of that and you're passing on this?"

"Yes," Harry said firmly, "Sorry, Leo."

Leo nodded slowly, "It's your right to keep your lips zipped. Just strange, that's all. It is something illegal?"

"Is that your third question?" Harry asked evenly. She couldn't tell him she was going to buy an apartment for the school year because she wouldn't actually be in the apartment during the school year. Talk about suspicious.

Leo narrowed his eyes, "Yes. I want to know if what you're doing with your money is going to be dangerous or get you into trouble."

Harry thought about it, "What I'm doing with the money won't get me into trouble. It's perfectly legal. The reasons for it, though... maybe. I hope not, but I can't say it won't be bad if I get caught." She winced, "That's really all I can tell you, Leo. Sorry."

Leo waved her off, his face lightening though she noticed his eyes still looked a bit concerned, "It's enough, lass. Now, you should know that everything you've told me has only strengthened my reasoning for escorting you through Knockturn alley."

Harry groaned, "Leo-"

"Let's see," Leo said, ticking his fingers as he listed reasons, "Young, female, practically nobility, rich (on account of the nobility), weak (physically speaking of course, no offense), innocent, gullible-"

"I'm not gullible!" Harry protested.

"But you admit you're all those other things," Leo said quickly, "It's settled, then."

"Says who?" Harry muttered half-heartedly. She should have known that if Leo wasn't offended and horrified to discover the truth he would use it as an excuse to treat her like-like some sort of glass that couldn't be repaired with a repairing charm.

"Say's me," Leo said. He stood and collected their empty ice cream dishes and set them on the return tray, "Come on, Harry. It's about time I showed you something of my world."

Harry stood, following Leo to the door hesitantly, "Your world?"

"Just you wait, lass," Leo winked at her.

He led her back to Knockturn alley, one hand on her shoulder to guide her steps. They walked past the alley the Serpent's Storeroom was on, past a woman giving out fingernail samples, down to the far end of Knockturn alley, where it intersected with a street called Kyprioth Court, which was a long street with many branching alleys. The street dead-ended in a semi-circle, and that was where Leo seemed to be moving her toward.

Harry had never been so far into the heart of the Lower Alleys. She knew the streets behind Knockturn were the underbelly of Wizarding London-everybody knew that, and only the most confident or the most careless wandered the Lower Alleys without leave. Harry wondered idly which described she and Leo better, and stuck close to her taller friend as they wove their way along the street to the

large inn that stood at the curved dead end of the street, a story higher than all the other buildings on Kyprioth Court.

Music played from inside the inn, and the lights from the windows beckoned cheerfully to them, for though it was mid-afternoon, the alley was shadowed beneath overhanging roofs that seemed to have been engineered for the very purpose of keeping out light. The sign above the door depicted a dragon rearing onto its hind legs, its claws extended and its mouth open.

"A dragon rampant?" Harry asked curiously, wrinkling her nose a bit. How odd.

"Why not?" Leo shrugged. He stepped lightly onto the front stoop of the inn and knocked thrice. The door swung open on its own and Leo swept Harry a formal bow, "Welcome, young Harry, to the Dancing Dragon."

Harry raised an eyebrow at the introduction, but entered the inn anyway. It was a warm, inviting sort of place. The first floor was large and open, littered with big wooden tables that told Harry the inn was probably a tavern as well. A lone mop made its way slowly across the floor with lazy flourishes. A narrow wooden staircase led upstairs, and behind the bar a big door to what must be the kitchens was propped open, letting warm, fragrant air blow out into the main room. At the moment there weren't many people there, just a group of three men and one woman who were sitting around the table closest to the unlit fireplace, but Harry could easily imagine the place filled with lively customers, all shouting and singing and carrying on. It didn't seem like the sort of place she'd always envisioned a bar down Knockturn would be-dark and dim and filled with shady half-vampire things. From the obvious age of the well-kept inn and its place of prominence on what looked like the main court of the Lower Alleys, Harry guessed that it was a place steeped in tradition, a staple to the community, much like Gringotts Bank was on Diagon Alley.

Leo closed the door behind them and called out a hearty greeting to the four people across the room, who had stopped their conversation and looked up when they noticed Harry and Leo's entrance. The group made to stand, but aborted the gesture halfway and instead sat down again. Harry thought she saw Leo make a hand-motion of some kind out of the corner of her eye, but couldn't be sure.

"Solom! Just the man I was looking for," Leo said, putting a hand between Harry's shoulder blades and guiding her toward the group.

The oldest man, who looked to be in his late forties (though you never could tell with wizards), bowed his head to Leo respectfully as he flicked his wand a final time at the mop across the room and stowed the short wand up his sleeve, "What can I be doing for you today, Highness?"

Harry turned disbelieving eyes on Leo, who ignored her look with the grace of one who had been ignoring other people's disbelief for years.

Leo pressed Harry into a seat next to the woman, who was dressed in tight red robes that accentuated her every curve. She was very pretty, and smiled kindly, if a bit curiously, at Harry when she sat. Leo took the seat opposite her, next to a stocky man with an impressive goatee, and addressed the older man, who was sitting on the other side of the woman in the red dress, once again.

"Did you send a potion recipe to Edgar the other day?" Leo asked casually.

"Sure did," Solom said, shrugging.

"Who passed it along for you?" Leo asked.

"It were Claw, Highness," Solom said, scratching his head, "Did the blighter not give it to Ed after all?"

"No he gave it," Leo said, "Only we reckon he gave Edgar a copy of the recipe, and took a little creative license in the copying, if you catch my meaning."

Solom furrowed his brows angrily, "What a measly little bastard."

The woman next to Harry clicked her tongue and put her hands over Harry's ears, frowning disapprovingly at Solom.

The older man just grunted, "Come off it, Rispah. If His Majesty sees fit to bring the lad here, he best be expecting his ears to burn a bit."

Leo grinned, "The *lad* doesn't mind, does he?"

Harry rolled her eyes at Leo, who clearly thought her boyish looks were a great joke now that he was in on it, and said, "Thank you, my lady, but I fear I am used to such language by now." That wasn't precisely true, but Harry didn't want to spend the afternoon with hands on her ears.

Rispah removed her hands, but not before ruffling Harry's hair playfully, "Hear that? I'm a *lady* ." Her voice was husky and low. She shook her long red hair back and smiled widely.

The man across from Solom snorted. He was tall and broad shouldered, with thick brown hair and an easy smile, "If you're a lady, then I'm the Queen of Egypt."

"I think the lad said you were *his* lady," the man with the goatee teased, "Isn't that what you heard, Marek?"

"Come to think of it, that is what he said, Aled," Marek said thoughtfully, "What bold young friends our Highness has today."

"Though of course it is heartening to see that the youth of today are as confident and bold as ever," Aled chuckled, winking at Harry with amusement.

Harry blushed, but otherwise didn't react to the ribbing. She supposed she deserved it. Pureblood manners were certainly out of place in this crowd-they just made her look uppity and rather foolish. Still, if she was going to pretend to be a boy, then she'd be a boy who respected women. It was the least she could do for female kind.

Rispah caught sight of her flushed face and laughed lowly, "Now don't go teasing the boy for having something the lot of you could do with from time to time. Good manners ain't nothing to sneeze at."

"Well said, Rispah," Leo inclined his head to her, "But we are getting a bit off track."

"Well what do you expect when you bring such a lovely distraction?" Rispah chuckled, running her hands through Harry's hair once more. Harry was starting to feel like someone's prize pet. "Oh, go on then, Leo," Rispah waved a hand at him, "What's the problem then? Ed's no slouch at what he does. He surely caught the mistake right off if it was as significant as you're implying, so we add another minus to Claw's character report and be done with it."

Leo shook his head, "It's nothing so simple, I'm afraid. Edgar doesn't brew most of the potions he sells anymore. He contracts them out to three different potion brewers."

"Three?" Marek, the broad-shouldered man, spoke up, "Thought it was two."

"Naw, he's got a new one now-goes on and on about him," Aled said absently.

"Yes, he recently hired a third," Leo said, "And the point is that the recipe went straight to the new brewer, who didn't catch the mistake before the cauldron blew sky high."

Solom looked disturbed, "What on earth did Claw do to that recipe? That sounds like an assassination attempt-a pretty poor one, but there you are."

"He added chimera eyes," Leo said, "But we don't know who it was intended for-it could be Edgar himself or it could have been any one of the three brewers."

"Either way, Claw's over-stepped himself," Aled grunted, fiddling with his goatee agitatedly.

"It were only a matter of time," Marek said, leaning over the table to make his point, "We all know Claw's trouble. No one knows where he came from, but everyone knows what he's after."

The four of them shared a significant look that went completely over Harry's head. She wondered if it would be rude to say something, but realized that she'd never know if she didn't ask.

"Sorry, but who's Claw? And what does he want?" Harry asked, looking from face to face apologetically.

"Why should we tell you?" Aled raised an eyebrow challengingly at her.

Harry bristled unintentionally, "Seeing as it was *my* cauldron that man destroyed, either intentionally or not, I now have a rather invested interest in his purposes."

Aled chuckled heartily and the others joined in, smiling at Harry as though she were quite amusing to them.

"He's just teasing you, lad," Rispah said conspiratorially, "Aled likes to tease the new folk, he does."

"But surely you're not the new brewer Ed's been going on about?" Solom leaned past Rispah to stare incredulously at Harry, "He's been chortling to all his customers how he's got the best brewer in all the alleys working for him. Fast and reliable, he says, and the whole time it were a mite no bigger than an anthill? What a laugh." The older man grinned widely at her and pounded a fist on the table to

express how funny he found this and Harry tried not to look put out at what a great joke she was to these people.

"Careful now, Solom," Leo said, smiling at Harry's disgruntled expression, "You don't want to hurt the boy's feelings. Harry here takes his potions very seriously."

"Not as seriously as Leo takes himself," Harry shot back. Before she could wince and apologize for snapping, the men at the table broke into loud guffaws and Rispah slapped her knee smartly.

"He's got you pegged, Leo," the lady said, shaking her head of long hair back, "Well done, little one. I daresay Leo deserved that."

Leo grinned, "There, doesn't he fit right in? I'd say the least we owe him is an explanation, since he's dragged into this mess already."

"Fair enough," Aled said, "Well as to your questions, Claw is a man who showed up in the Lower Alleys not ten months ago. He's meaner than a wild boar and trickier than a barrel of hinkypunks. He petitioned to join the Rogue, and of course we don't turn folk away without a good reason, but it's been clear from the start he don't really have an interest in bettering the Court."

"He don't follow the Code," Marek growled, "The scum keeps for himself what he should pay to the Rogue. He don't look out for the alley folk, and you mark my words he's sold out a man or two to the tracking dogs at the Ministry."

"And if that weren't enough," Rispah put in, "Claw's got his eye on Leo's job. Nothing wrong with that, of course-Marek alone has challenged Leo a fair few times, but Claw don't do nothing by the book. He hides in the shadows, waiting for a chance to stab us all in the back."

Harry blinked, "Okay, but honestly... I'm more confused than I was. Code? Court?"

Everyone turned to look exasperatedly at Leo, who shrugged a bit sheepishly, "I, ah, hadn't gotten the chance to tell him yet?"

Rispah rolled her eyes, "So of course you brought the lad here anyway. Poor thing, no wonder you're confused."

"And no wonder he calls you 'Leo,' Highness," Aled said.

"Would you all stop confusing him further?" Solom broke in, sighing, "Look, lad, it's like this. You know what the Lower Alleys are?"

"The alleys in Wizarding London located beyond Knockturn," Harry said, "A mix of business and residential properties, I think."

"The poor alleys," Rispah said tartly, "You can say it like it is. The Lower alleys are the wizarding underground. Home to the seedy parts of life no one likes to talk about. Everyone says it's naught but criminals and tramps, and everyone's silently grateful the disgraceful community is content to remain separate from the Wizarding whole for the most part. Aye, there's beggin and thievin and the like, make no mistake, but there's so much *more* ." Rispah's face was alight with passion, and in it Harry could see a thousand stories she would probably never understand. "There's *life* in these alleys, lad. There's folk who spend their lives without two galleons to rub together and are *happy* despite it. This world, our world, is a place beyond blood and money, though there's plenty of the former spilt for the latter at times. It's about community, and family, and working and singing next to anyone who's got a ready smile and an open mind."

Harry stared up at the lady, this scarlet bird with such a lovely song, and thought that she would never understand life half as well as Rispah did.

Solom put a hand gently on Rispah's shoulder, "That was lovely, lass, but it don't really explain much about the way we work." Rispah smiled and gestured for Solom to get on with it then. "The truth of the matter is, the Lower Alleys and most folk in it don't really answer to any authority you've heard of. The Ministry and the Wizengamot

have nothing to do with us-ashamed and in denial, they are-and we have as little as possible to do with them. Back before the Ministry and all that political nonsense we have nowadays, Wizarding Britain, like the rest of the civilized world, was ruled by a King. There was wizarding nobility, of course, who eventually became watered down into the most ancient and noble family houses you'd hear of today-the Malfoy's and the Bones', the Black's and the Goldentower's. With me so far?"

Harry nodded. She had known that the most wealthy and well-known houses were descendent from ancient nobility, and also that the practice of a Wizarding King had been abandoned after too many tyrants and subsequent uprisings had made the magical community unstable.

"Well, just as the nobles and middling classes had their King, we of the Lower Alleys had our King," Solom said, "Our King wasn't decided by birth and blood. He earned his crown by besting the other hopefuls in open combat."

"You mean free dueling?" Harry asked interestedly. Free dueling was mixed dueling. The fighters could rely on not just magic but potions, swords, knives, and hand-to-hand fighting as well, "I've heard of it, but never seen it done. It was banned from most official tournaments, wasn't it?"

Aled grinned, "Stick around long enough, lad, and you'll see it done. They can ban it all they want in their trumped up tourneys. It's tradition that the title of King is passed on by the outcome of open, or free, dueling combat. This is because part of the King's job is to defend his people. It's not so literal nowadays, of course, but so it stands."

"So what you're saying is that Leo is your... King?" Harry wasn't sure whether to laugh or frown, "I've seen him fight, so I guess I can see how it happened, but... aren't you a little young to be King?"

Leo grinned, "No rules about age, blood, race, or even sex-though I don't think we've ever had a woman King. Just Queens like Rispah here, who take care of the familial matters of Court."

"You're Queen?" Harry blinked up at Rispah, "Did you have to fight as well?"

Rispah laughed, "No, lad, the Queen is appointed by the King, though of course it must be someone who's been with the ladies of the Court a long time."

"Is that why you call him 'Leo' instead of 'Highness?'" Harry asked.

Rispah shook her head, "Nothing so formal. Leo's my younger cousin. I couldn't call him Highness with a straight face, considering I still remember changing his-"

"Yes, yes, Rispah," Leo broke in hastily, "I'm sure Harry doesn't want to hear about that."

"Oh, I don't know-" Harry grinned.

"Wouldn't you rather hear about Claw?" Leo suggested, his face flushing a bit at the laughter of his friends.

"I'd rather hear about this Code thing," Harry said, "It sounds important."

"It is," Marek said earnestly, "It's what holds all of us together."

"Us?" Harry clarified, "You mean everyone in the Lower Alleys?"

"The Court of the Rogue is all of us who make our living by our wits," Leo said [1], grinning, "The Rogue, you see, is just another name for the King down here. To keep him separate from the old Wizarding King, they called our King the Rogue or the King of Thieves. Of course, not everyone in the Court is a thief, and certainly not all those in the Lower Alleys work outside of the Ministry's Law, but

those that make their lives here and pledge themselves to the Court must obey the thief's Code."

"So what does that entail?" Harry asked.

"Lot's of things," Marek said, "Part of the Code says that no one can be King without beating the previous King in open, single, combat, which means that a person can't take the Rogue's throne by intrigue or secrecy. It keeps the Court from splitting into factions and taking sides. The Court always sides with the King, so long as the King upholds the Rogue's Code."

"The Code also says none of us can betray another to the Ministry's Law. We have our own justice, which can't be satisfied by the Aurors coming in and hauling our people off," Aled explained, "It's also against the Code to go after someone's family to try and harm them indirectly. If you have a problem with someone, you must take it up directly with them."

Harry nodded slowly. A lot of what they said seemed sensible for the kind of life they led.

"The King is bound by the Code as well," Leo said seriously, "He has to keep track of and look after his people, good times or bad. When the Aurors raid the Lower Alleys, the King makes sure his people are protected, and when the Ministry taxes basic goods to raise money for one thing or another, the King has to make sure those goods are still available to the poorest of his folk... one way or another."

Harry thought for a moment. She still didn't really understand everything-like why Claw had changed the recipe in the first place, but she summed up what she did understand slowly, "So this Claw is breaking the Code, because he wants to be King, but doesn't want to challenge Leo directly?"

"Exactly," Rispah said, "The man's a leech, but without proof... well, it just won't do for the Court to turn away one of its own without solid enough reason. Claw can easily say that the recipe was already

written like that when he got it, or that someone must have changed it after he'd handed it over. The plausible deniability is too high, you see?"

"But we'll watch him," Aled said, "We'll not trust him with Rogue's business after this, and he'll not get away with that stunt a second time. Slowly he'll dig himself into a pit he can't get out of. Then we'll banish him for good."

Leo stretched and sighed, "Well now that we've got that out of the way, let's talk about something else."

"How about your new friend, Highness?" Marek looked over Harry appraisingly, "I'd heard rumors that you'd offered Rogue protection to a new kid, but I didn't imagine him so young." Marek grinned at Harry mischievously, "How'd you end up in such bad company, lad?"

Harry grinned back, "Ask Leo. He stalked me for about a month before I got tired of trying to get rid of him."

Leo sputtered and clutched at his chest in mock anguish, and Harry thought with amusement that he was not like any King she'd ever imagined meeting. It was surreal, in a way, to be sitting in the Dancing Dragon as if she was not all of those things that Leo's friends dismissed so readily-rich, descendent from nobility, educated, and upright. And yet, Harry suspected they all knew exactly what she was, and didn't care a lick. Like Rispah said, as long as she had an open mind they were content to take her as she was.

"Stalking is a little harsh," Leo said.

"That's true," Rispah said, "I hear it was more like Leo following the lad around like a lost puppy."

"Puppy?" Leo scoffed, "I saved the kid's life, you know."

"And to repay you the lad let you be his manservant, is that it?" Rispah laughed, "If he was a girl, I'd call you whipped, Leo."

"To be fair," Harry said, fighting a blush, "It was actually very kind of Leo to help me out like that. I wasn't very familiar with Knockturn when I started working for Mr. Krait, so it was lucky Leo was in the alley when he was, or I might be kidney-less."

"Kidney-less?" Aled raised an eyebrow.

Leo shook his head wryly, "He wasn't after your kidney, Harry. He was going to-actually, I'll tell you when you're older."

Harry scowled, "Either way, I still owe you quite a debt, Leo."

"Our Highness doesn't often collect his debts," Aled said, shooting Leo a look that made Harry think it was an old disagreement between the two of them.

"In that case, I'll have to decide the price and pay it by myself," Harry said, grinning, "Maybe I'll repay your kindness by following *you* around for a couple of months."

Leo laughed, "I'd like to see you try, Harry. I'm not an easy person to follow. Though, I might make an exception for you."

Harry opened her mouth to reply, but couldn't think of anything to say to that, and shut it again instead.

"Well, that explains a lot," Rispah said, smirking.

Leo stopped smiling and backtracked quickly, "Not what I meant, cuz."

"Even so," Rispah said in her husky voice, batting her brown eyes at Leo teasingly, "It makes sense if I consider things from that direction."

"What makes sense?" Marek asked innocently.

"Our King's infamously picky pallet," Rispah said airily, "Turns out I've been offering him the wrong sort of dish."

"You certainly have not!" Leo exclaimed, "Merlin save me from nosy subjects. I'll not have you accusing me of preying on young Harry's virtue."

Solom choked and Harry flushed a bright scarlet that would have done Ron Weasley proud.

"Is that what you're going on about?" Aled scrubbed a hand over his goatee and narrowed his eyes at Rispah, "You keep your claws to yourself, you meddling matchmaker. His Majesty can find a lass in his own good time."

"Thank you, Aled," Leo said, "I knew there was a reason you were my favorite."

"Now I know the reason, too," Rispah said saucily, waggling her eyebrows.

"Are you now going to make disparaging remarks about myself in connection with every male of my acquaintance?" Leo asked forlornly.

"I think old Solom is safe from your designs," Rispah grinned.

"You keep me out of this," Solom mumbled.

Leo slumped disheartenedly in his seat, "Traitors."

"So the whole King thing is pretty much a formality, huh?" Harry observed.

"Pretty much, yeah," Marek grinned.

"Doesn't stop you challenging him for it every three months, Swift," Solom pointed out.

"Swift?" Harry raised an eyebrow.

"Oh, that's nice," Rispah frowned, "We never even introduced ourselves. I'm Rispah Cooper, cousin to Leo here on his mother's side, and Queen of the ladies of the Rogue."

Harry smiled, "Pleased to meet you, my lady. I'm Harry."

"Just Harry?" Marek snorted, "You don't have to hide your last name- we all know you're one of those rich nobbs' kids. It don't matter to us, though. I'm Marek Swiftknife-hence the Swift."

Harry nodded, "Hello. And yes, it's just Harry. My parents don't know I have a job this summer, and it can't get back to them if no one knows who they are."

"Fair enough," Aled said, "I'm Aled Flint, the Armorer for this bunch of ninnies."

"Any relation to Marcus Flint?" Harry asked curiously.

Aled shrugged, "Sure, he's my cousin Herbert's son. You know him?"

Harry shook her head, "My cousin goes to school with him."

Aled nodded, "Not surprised. Good school, Hogwarts."

"So I hear," Harry said neutrally.

"Well I'm Solom," Solom said, "Just Solom. I run this inn. You ever get into trouble on the alleys and Leo ain't with you, run straight here, right?"

Harry smiled, "Thank you, sir, I will."

Solom waved a hand at her, grimacing, "Just Solom, lad, please."

"Don't worry," Marek grinned, "We'll scrub you of those cumbersome manners before long."

Taking a chance, Harry said, "If it's anything like the sort of scrubbing you do regularly, I think I'd be better off without it." She eyed Marek's dirty shirt and breeches meaningfully and the others laughed appreciatively.

"Well now that he's insulted Marek, it's official," Rispah laughed, slinging an arm around Harry companionably, "This lad's one of us."

"Why do you think I brought him here?" Leo asked smugly, "I knew he belonged the first time I met him."

Harry raised a skeptical brow, "Whatever you say, *Majesty* ."

Leo frowned, "Now, now, none of that. These jokers can call me that if it makes them feel like they're posh or something, but I won't hear it from you."

"You don't make them call you that?" Harry asked curiously,

Leo scowled, "Of course not. Most of my other subjects do, out of respect, but I've specifically told my *friends* not to bother with it. They do it just to annoy me, I think."

"Not our fault it works so well, though, is it?" Aled chuckled.

Harry spent the rest of the afternoon and early evening in the Dancing Dragon. Other members of the Court came and went from the inn, most of them open and friendly, interested to meet the kid their King had been squiring about Knockturn. Harry still couldn't believe her friend Leo, the laid back son of the Potions Guild Aldermaster, was unofficial royalty of the Lower Alleys. How did she manage to find the most conspicuous people to become acquainted with? It certainly explained why Krait always treated Leo so strangely. Harry wondered if Leo was a thief, too. She didn't approve of thieving, but then again she could always afford to pay for things, so was her opinion really valid? She also wondered if Leo's parents knew what their son did during the day. She supposed being home

schooled allowed for a flexible schedule, but surely Leo didn't have time to both run the Rogue and take full-time lessons.

Then again, Harry herself had two separate lives, didn't she? Perhaps it wasn't so fantastic a thought after all.

Leo walked her back to the Leaky Cauldron once the dinner rush started at the Dancing Dragon. Harry's brain was spinning with everything that had happened since she woke up that morning.

"What are you thinking about, Harry?" Leo asked as they passed the well-lit bookshop.

"Just how much we've learned about each other today," Harry said, "It's a bit overwhelming."

Leo grinned down at her, "We are a perfect pair, aren't we?"

Harry laughed, something she'd been doing a lot that day, "I don't know about that."

"No, really," Leo said, "We both have so many secrets, and yet are completely surprised when we find out the other has secrets of their own."

Harry flattened her hair absent-mindedly, "That's certainly true. I can't believe you're the Rogue. I didn't even know what the Rogue was!"

"Oh, yeah? Well how do you think I felt when I found out you were a girl?" Leo shook his head, "Kyprioth was playing me for a fool."

Kyprioth, Harry suddenly remembered, was an ancient god of trickery. She smiled, the Dancing Dragon being on Kyprioth Court made a lot of sense.

"Thanks for not telling your friends who I was," Harry said, "I really prefer to keep a low profile."

Leo shrugged, "Yeah, good luck with that."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Harry asked, "I'm a very low-key sort of person, you know."

"Impossible," Leo said simply, "Sorry Harry, but you're too interesting. Too... I don't know, something, to remain anonymous. People notice you, Harry, and the world seems to change suddenly when you're around, as if Magic herself was altering it to an unseen purpose. I bet you often find yourself in the middle of things without realizing how you got there, am I right?"

Harry looked away from Leo's knowing gaze, "Well, I'm trying to be low-key, okay?"

"Try all you like," Leo said, "I just don't think it's going to do much good. I have a feeling about it, and my gut's usually right."

Harry ignored her friend's words. Sure she had bad luck in the past when it came to getting caught up in messes not her own making, but this year was going to be different. Harry made a promise to herself then and there that this year she wasn't going to get involved in anything complicated or mysterious. She was going to spend time with her friends, write to Sirius, and generally just do what she came to Hogwarts to do-learn Potions.

When they reached the Leaky Cauldron, Harry said good night, but Leo hesitated. He looked very seriously into her eyes and said, "Why do I get the feeling I'm still missing something about you?"

Harry looked steadily back, "I don't pretend to know all of your secrets yet, Leo. Don't assume you know all of mine."

"But you'll tell me one day, won't you?" Leo asked. He looked frustrated, like he was halfway through with an important task but had been stopped in his tracks for a reason he couldn't understand.

"Maybe," Harry said, looking away from those bright eyes uneasily, "I'm still deciding if meeting you was a good thing."

Leo grinned slowly, "Liar. You're just scared because you know that it was."

Harry didn't say anything, but Leo didn't seem to need her to.

"That's okay, lass, you be scared all you want. But one day you will tell me everything."

Leo ruffled her hair once more and turned back down the alley. Harry watched him go, throat stuck closed with something that she assured herself was not the fear Leo spoke of. What did she have to be afraid of? Leo might be confident that he could pry her secrets from her some day, but Harry knew better. She could be friends with Leo, like him as a person, even, but she couldn't trust anyone besides Archie, and that would never change.

[end of chapter two].

A/N: So there you have it, hopefully this will tide you all over until the next big chapter comes out. I'm devoting one day this week to answering each and every review I've gotten since I last replied-promise, though I can't remember exactly who I've replied to, so if I do your review twice-sorry ^^ . Thanks for reading, next time the school year starts.

Chapter 3

A/N: Hello all. I've been on vacation for a few weeks, but I'm back now (with a new record for longest chapter ever) and ready to write more adventures for my poor heroine. So first off-yes, we are still in summer. This is because summer is three months long-1/4 of the year, so it was inconceivable to me that nothing exciting would happen since so much happened during the year. Don't worry though, they also get back to school in this chapter, which is both incredibly long and incredibly varied in content. Hopefully this makes up for the time it took to get it to you some small bit. Also, to reassure those who need it, I am not, nor will I be, abandoning this story. Even if it takes longer between posts (and I am sorry about that) it will still get finished.

A/N2: Also-For all my lovely anonymous reviewers, it's totally fine with me if you keep your anonymity, but could you come up with a name of some kind to distinguish your review from all the others called 'Guest' ? It's just gonna be harder to answer your reviews if they're all signed the same way ^^ Thanks. And... I guess that assumes that I'll continue answering reviews, which I do plan on doing!... Sometime. I sort of suck right now. Sorry.

A/N3: Finally-for anyone wondering at Harriett's true appearance, though with shorter hair, of course, I drew inspiration from the following art found on tumblr at: [narglesstealmystuff](#). / [post/21486843521](#) so delete the spaces and go see this lovely pic on Catrine's page. Full credit is denied by me for this art-definitely not mine! (And neither is HP or SotL)

The Serpentine Subterfuge:

Chapter 3:

Harry stepped out of the fireplace in her house's floo room and was immediately confronted with the business end of her father's wand.

She inhaled sharply and froze; the dim illumination from James' Lumos Spell cast just enough light for Harry to see that her dad wasn't fooling around.

"Who goes there?" the elder Potter demanded, wand arm as steady as Harry knew his aim to be, "How did you get past the wards?"

Harry swallowed, realizing the remnant of the floo fire at her back was keeping her face in the shadows, "It's me, Dad. Harry."

"Harry?" James squinted against the darkness but didn't move forward or change the angle of his wand, both of which would have allowed him to see her better. He was too good an Auror to give up his advantage at the word of a potential intruder, "My daughter is in her bed-or she should be."

Harry winced. That was a fair point. She was out much later than usual for a Thursday night. Originally she had planned to be back from her errands well before her parents got home from work. They didn't exactly know what she did most of the day-though she was pretty sure they assumed studying took up a lot of it-and Harry wasn't one to explain things to her parents that she didn't have to. It was just easier that way. Today, though, Harry had been sidetracked from her agenda by an unexpected stroke of bad luck-followed, it turned out, by a bit of rather good luck, which was in turn followed by a spectacular heaping of *really* bad luck that spiraled into a situation that could only have been drawn from a nightmare. She felt her soul shiver with weakness and fear just thinking about it...

[Earlier That Day]

Harry finished unloading the last crate of potions in Mr. Krait's storerooms with a small sigh. Leo was busy doing something with the Rogue that day, though he had been rather vague about exactly what it was, so Harry had been on her own hauling the crates of potions from the Leaky Cauldron to the Serpent's Storeroom. She wasn't worried about the danger of walking down Knockturn alone anymore. Harry had been up and down the alley so many times that

she recognized all of the usual faces that traversed the street and thought that most of them probably knew who she was as well. Or maybe not *who* she was, but *what* she was, at least. She was Leo's friend, and as much as being seen as the King of the Rogue's shiny new toy irked her at times, at least nobody bothered her as she went about her business. No, it wasn't the risk that had Harry sighing with relief once she was free of the last crate. She'd just forgotten how heavy they were.

Serves me right for relying on Leo to carry them for so many weeks, Harry thought with a fair bit of self-disgust, Not that I asked him to help, but now I've gotten all weak-armed.

She hadn't really had time for things like exercise lately. Archie asked her to play Quidditch about once a week, and Sirius still hadn't gotten rid of that pool in his basement, so it wasn't that she lacked the opportunity. There just always seemed to be more important things to do. Still, that would have to change. Every year she survived the delicate artifice she was enacting was another year the boys in her year grew taller, broader, and generally started looking less like effeminate boys and more like men. If she wanted to pass for one, she'd have to start keeping up physically.

"Oi, kid!" Krait's voice called through the open door to the storeroom, "Bring out a couple of those Blood-Replenishers while you're back there!"

"Yes, Mr. Krait!" Harry called back, stepping on one of the now-empty crates to reach the top shelf, where the Blood-Replenishing Potions were kept.

She carried the bottles out into the main room and glanced around for Krait. He was standing by one of the potion isles, talking to a customer who had his back to her. Krait waved her over and she approached them.

"Thanks, kid," Krait said gruffly, taking the bottles and presenting them to the customer, "Take a look at these, then. What do you

think?"

The other man took one of the potion bottles and held it up to the light coming through the dirty shop windows. He studied the bottle from all angles, and uncorked it to sniff at the contents with a considering frown on his face, "Good color... hmm, yes, just the right consistency. The smell is... different, though, isn't it? You've changed the recipe, my friend. Go on, then, what did you put in it, Edgar?"

Krait smirked, "You tell me."

The other man raised an eyebrow and wafted a bit of the scent toward his nose once more. Harry looked between the two men, confused as to what exactly they were doing with her potion. The man handling the sample looked familiar to her, too. He was big and somewhat beefy, with a thin mustache under his nose and very little hair left on the top of his head.

When it came to her, Harry had to suppress the urge to whirl around and hide her face. It would only draw attention to her, so instead Harry remained very still and very calm. The man holding her Blood-Replenisher was the wizard Professor Snape had been talking to that night just before he left to find ginseng on the continent. He was the one who she'd overheard telling Snape via floo-call about the ginseng shortage in England during the peak outbreak of the Sleeping Sickness. She recognized the tone of voice he used when speaking, like the kind you'd expect a savvy businessman to use: confident and gently cajoling, persuasive in a frankly experienced kind of a way.

"Well, it's definitely something new," the man, whose first name Harry thought was Horace, said thoughtfully, "It's faint, but there's a hint of citrus to it, am I right?"

"I wouldn't know," Krait said with a lazy grin, "Didn't make it."

"Didn't-" Horace-what's-his-name scowled at Krait, "What the blazes am I inspecting it for, then? I thought you'd finally gotten me a B-R

potion I can sell, and it's not even yours." The man shook his head and gave the potion back, "Shame, too, cause you know I hate buying from that Rotridge bloke. Let me know when you've got a potion like this in stock, Edgar."

"Now, now, Horace," Edgar said quickly, "I am looking to sell it. I just haven't made it myself, that's all."

"Ah," Horace gazed consideringly at the Blood-Replenishing Potion in Krait's hand once more, "Contracted out, have you? I don't usually buy through middlemen, you know. Messy business, working out cuts and all."

"Nothing like that," Krait said, glancing over Horace's shoulder to where Harry had retreated and was now watching, with no small amount of trepidation, the situation unfold, "You'd only have to pay me for the potions, as I pay the brewer separately."

"I see," Horace said, "Well, in that case I may just have to cancel my contract with Rotridge. Provided that the potions I can expect are all as good as this sample, of course."

"Of course, Horace," Krait said, "My brewer never delivers anything but the best."

Horace nodded his head seriously, "Good, good. Expect my owl in the morning with the paperwork. I'll pick up the first order in two weeks." He clapped a large hand on Krait's slighter frame jovially, "Great to be doing business with you, Edgar, as usual. Oh, and I'd very much like to meet this new brewer of yours when it's convenient. Sounds like a rare find if he has *you* changing your recipes after such a long time."

Krait blinked and shot Harry another look over Horace's shoulder, "Well in fact he's-

Harry shook her head discretely, eyes wide and pleading.

"-ah, well, he's accustomed to his anonymity," Krait finished weakly, looking confused, "I'm sure you understand. I'll talk to him about it, of course, but I can't guarantee anything."

Harry smiled slightly in gratitude, and busied herself re-organizing jars of bat brains a few isles away until Horace took his leave of the shop.

"What was that about, kid?" Krait frowned at Harry when she came over to the front desk again, "Don't you know who that is?"

"Not really," Harry said, "Thanks for not telling him who I was."

Krait shook his head, "That was Horace Burke. He's an extremely influential businessman in Wizarding Britain."

"Burke, as in Borgin and Burke's?" Harry asked curiously.

"That Burke is Horace's cousin," Krait said, "Horace Burke is... well, I guess you'd call him a profiteer. He prides himself on being able to provide anything to anyone. Owns a bunch of warehouses in the Lower Alleys, and runs an owl-order company through them. You can order anything from Burke, and its quality and timeliness is always guaranteed. If he can't get it for you, it doesn't exist-at least not in Britain."

"I can see how he'd make money on things that are hard to find," Harry said slowly, "But who would buy things like Blood-Replenishing potions from Mr. Burke when they sell them in shops like these? Doesn't he raise the price to make a profit?"

"He does," Krait said, "But on the other hand I sell the potions to him cheaper than I sell them to customers, because his order is certain, while I don't always know if potions I put in the shop will sell. Also, you'd be surprised how many people are too lazy to go shopping around themselves. Then there are those who don't trust the quality in self-run shops like mine, and would rather pay more to have a product they know will work."

Harry nodded, "I guess that makes sense. So he's buying Blood-Replenishers through you now?"

"Looks like it," Krait said, looking smug, "He gets a few others from me, but always said my Blood-Replenishers were off a bit. Guess he likes your variation better."

"About that," Harry said, "Sorry for changing things without telling you."

Krait shrugged, "Can't argue with what works. A few of your potions have been selling significantly better than the old ones did-not with my average customers, but with the folks who come in with a distinguishing eye. I figured you must be doing something different, so I had Horace take a look and see if he liked the new version any better than the old versions."

"Well, I'm glad your sales are up," Harry said, "But could you keep my identity as the brewer a secret?"

Krait fixed her with a frank look, "That shouldn't be a problem, seeing as I don't actually know your identity, Harry No-last-name."

Harry shifted uncomfortably, "Yeah, thanks for not being overly concerned about that, too."

Krait shrugged, "I'm used to strange types in these alleys, but I gotta ask this: are you in some kind of trouble? Running from someone, or something? I'm not gonna fire you, kid, but if I don't know, then I can't help you, and I might give something away to the wrong person."

Harry shook her head, "It's nothing like that, Mr. Krait. I'm not caught up in anything funny, and I'm not going to bring trouble to your shop. I just prefer to keep a low profile. So if anyone asks about the potions, could you just tell them you have a brewer who doesn't like to be associated with his work? Heck, you can take credit for the potions yourself if you like. That might even be easier. I don't care, as long as I get paid for them."

Krait grunted, "You're something else, kid. No pride in your work, that's for sure."

Harry privately disagreed. Pride was not about the world knowing what she could do. As long as *she* knew, there was pride and satisfaction in doing the work alone. After all, she took pride in the secret homework she did for Flint, didn't she? It was so much harder than the first-year work, and she did it all with competence, while no one but Flint knew. She also was proud of getting into-and staying at-Hogwarts, despite being ineligible due to her blood status. Just because she didn't tell anyone, didn't mean she wasn't proud of it.

Harry suddenly had a strange thought, and glanced up at Krait with a frown, "In all these weeks, you really never went and asked Mr. Tate about me, even though you know he recommended me? Weren't you curious?"

Krait stared down at her blankly, "If I want to know something, I ask the person I'm curious about. I don't waste my time rooting around behind people's backs. None of my business, anyway, I suspect."

"Thanks," Harry said, and picked up a couple of empty crates for the next day, "See you tomorrow, Mr. Krait."

"Sure, kid."

Harry left the shop and made her way slowly up Knockturn alley. She had a couple more stops to make on Diagon before she could go back home, and she was debating dropping off the crates at the Leaky Cauldron first when she accidentally knocked into a passing pedestrian. She was about to apologize for not seeing them when she felt it-a slight release of pressure from the left inside pocket of her robes.

The pocket she kept her money pouch in.

Cursing, Harry fumbled with the crates in her hands and tried in vain to hold them steady in one hand while reaching out for the person

she'd bumped into with the other. It was fruitless. The person was agile and twisted away from her with the ease of skill and experience in evasion. She caught a glimpse of wide blue eyes and a taunting grin below a dark brown cap before the person-no, boy-raced off on light feet, her money bag no doubt securely tucked away in his fist.

Harry set her jaw and moved as fast as she dared back along the alley. She paused for barely a moment to set the empty crates down none-too-gently in a shadowed nook before picking up the pace and racing in the direction she'd seen the boy take off in. The crates might be gone by the time she got back, but the money in that pouch was worth five times what the crates and all the bottles were. One of the stops she'd been planning on making in Diagon was an antique bookstore, where she'd reserved a copy of a manuscript on blending magic. The shopkeeper requested payment in gold, so she was carrying much more money than she would usually risk.

Most of her savings, including the money she would need for she and Archie's little project, was tucked away safe in her room, but Harry was not going to let the amount of gold in that pouch get away without a fight. It was the principle of the thing, after all.

She ran swiftly to where Knockturn met Kyprioth Court and skidded on the cobblestones around the corner. Kyprioth Court wasn't as crowded as Knockturn, and by craning her head a bit Harry caught sight of a slight figure in a dark brown cap jogging casually toward the far end of the alley. The boy, who she could now see was dressed in shorts and an oversized t-shirt, had slowed down considerably, apparently confident that his target wouldn't be fool enough to pursue him through the Lower Alleys.

Shows what he knows, Harry thought grimly. She would have been smirking as she closed in on the boy if she wasn't so out of breath. Seriously, she needed to work out more.

She was only a few feet behind the boy when by some terrible chance he glanced behind him. His eyes widened at the sight of her bearing down on him and he let out a startled yelp before taking off

once more. The boy in the cap darted left, down an alley Harry had never taken, and swerved in and out of foot traffic to try and put some distance between them. Harry doggedly kept after the kid. He was fast-faster than she was, and he obviously knew the alleys better as well. He led her through twists and turns, over fences and under clothes lines, and Harry was thoroughly winded after just a few minutes of the brutally quick pace the boy set. Not to mention thoroughly lost.

She did have the advantage of being the follower, though. The boy had to look out for obstacles and waste precious seconds deciding on what paths to take, while she just had to mindlessly pursue him. Also, what Harry lacked in agility and speed she made up for in sheer determination.

Still, the kid was quick. He scampered and clambered over any and all obstacles in his way, jumping around barrels and litterbins with barely a pause in his stride. Harry could see him pulling further and further ahead of her, and knew that soon he would be out of her reach.

If only she could use magic over the summer holidays. Harry could feel her magic building inside of her, eager to come to her aid as her emotions surged forward, but she tamped down on the urge. She would get in trouble-though with Hogwarts or AIM she wasn't entirely sure-if anyone saw her, and in any event she had no idea what kind of a spell she could use. She didn't want to hurt the kid, as she might if she levitated something in his way or tried stunning him. She just wanted her money back.

Just as she was cursing her own shortsightedness at not having exercised her body while she was training up her mind all last year, Harry caught sight of a huge cart of cauldrons backing slowly into the alley ahead of them. It was too high to jump over and hung too close to the ground to try sliding beneath. Harry felt a rush of elation at the sight of it-here was her chance! The boy would have to stop.

Yet he didn't. Harry frowned. He wasn't even slowing down. Harry realized with an ugly dread that the boy didn't see the cart he was speeding toward. He was staring at the ground-no, at his shoe-trying to shake loose a piece of rope that had gotten tangled around one of his feet while he ran.

Harry called out a warning, but it only made the boy look back at her with confusion, and he was running so fast that even if he turned back around and realized the danger there would be no time for him to stop.

Her magic welled up inside of her again, and this time, Harry didn't push it back down. She reached out with a hand-no time for her wand-and released it toward the boy ahead, whose wide blue eyes widened further at the sight of her reaching for him so intently. Her magic caught up to him faster than she ever could have. Mere seconds before he would have-should have-careened headlong into the cart of heavy cauldrons, he froze, suddenly suspended in mid-air as his momentum was arrested by raw magic. Harry ran the last few feet to where the boy was hanging, looking like some kind of strangely realistic statue hovering about a foot off the ground.

Harry grinned at the boy, whose face was now almost at her eye-level, and clamped a hand down gently but firmly on the boy's arm while at the same time asking her magic to let the boy go.

"Got you," she said breathlessly, "Good run, though."

The boy, who couldn't have been older than nine, scowled up at her after a few frustrated tugs got him no further away from her hold, "Lemme go."

"Sure thing," Harry said, "Just give me my money pouch back."

"I don't know what you're talking about," the boy said, wrinkling his nose up and averting his gaze.

"Then why were you running from me?" Harry asked, "Come on, just give it back and you can go."

The boy opened his mouth to reply but was cut off as a middle-aged wizard came jogging around the cauldron cart, a look of concern on his face.

"You two all right there?" He asked, glancing between Harry and the boy anxiously, "I thought for sure the lad was gonna hit my cart. Sorry about that, but I really didn't see anyone coming when I started backing into the street."

Harry smiled at him, "It's all right, neither of us got hit."

"Make him lemme go!" the boy piped up, looking pleadingly at the older man.

The cauldron merchant frowned and tugged at what little hair he had on his head unsurely, "Here now, what's this? Are you detaining this boy for something?"

Harry nodded, a bit apologetically, "Only for a moment. He was just about to return something of mine."

"He's a liar," the boy scowled, "I haven't got nothing of his."

The man looked a bit at a loss for what to do, "Well, ah, that is-are you sure he has something of yours? You couldn't be mistaken perhaps?"

He looked quite hopeful, but Harry shook her head slowly, "I don't think so. I'm missing a moneybag. It's dark red, and there are exactly seventeen galleons and four knuts inside. My initials are embroidered on the outside-HP. Here," Harry dug in her pocket with her free hand and pulled out a letter, "This is a notice from one of the shops in Diagon Alley. See? It has my name on it, Harry Potter, which matches the initials that are on the money bag if this boy has it."

The cart owner glanced over the piece of parchment, a pale, uneasy look on his face, "I see. Well, I suppose it's simple enough to resolve. Do you have such a moneybag, young one?"

The boy glared defiantly up at them, "So what if I did? Maybe I found it."

Harry pulled the boy around and used her other hand to dip into his shirt pockets. She pulled out the moneybag within, which was clearly red and inscribed just as she had said, and raised an eyebrow wryly, "Lucky we ran into each other then, so you can see it safely where it belongs."

She released the boy, and he quickly backed away from her. Unfortunately, the cauldron cart was still behind him, blocking his escape that direction, and he seemed hesitant to try and dart past her and the merchant to the other end of the alley.

The cauldron man turned a face filled with trepidation toward her, "Well, that's all settled then, don't you think, young sir? No need to involve the Aurors really, since everything worked out."

The boy blanched at the mention of the Aurors. Harry blinked, taken aback, "The Aurors? Why would I-oh." She nearly rolled her eyes. Sure, *technically* the boy had committed a crime, but who called the dark wizard catchers for a case of petty theft? Besides, her dad was an Auror, and bully if she was going to try explaining what she'd been doing in Knockturn alley with that much money in the first place. "No, I don't care about that. I just wanted my bag back. Sorry to trouble you, sir," she told the cauldron merchant, "And next time steal from someone who looks too fat to run after you," she suggested sarcastically to the boy.

The kid, realizing he wasn't going to get into any real trouble, tipped his cap at her cheekily and scampered around her with a spry sort of grace, running off into the early evening without a glance back.

The cauldron merchant smiled with obvious relief at her, "That's a merciful thing you did, young man."

Harry blinked up at him, "You would have done the same, wouldn't you?"

The man looked taken aback, "I would have, yes, but you're not-"

He broke off and coughed in an embarrassed kind of a way. Harry wondered what he'd been going to say, but politely continued the conversation as if he hadn't aborted his sentence, "Well, it was nice to meet you. Good evening."

"Oh, good day," the man returned, lifting a hand in a vague kind of wave, then glancing down at his hand as if wondering why he'd done such a thing.

"Thanks," Harry waved back bemusedly as she walked away, then paused and turned around, "Um, do you by chance know how to get back to Knockturn alley? Or at least to Kyprioth Court?"

The man smiled indulgently, "Yes, of course."

He gave her directions, which were so complicated that Harry had him repeat them twice to make sure she would remember them all. Apparently she'd run further into the Lower Alleys than she'd thought.

She thanked him once again and set off back toward Kyprioth Court. She was already going to be home much later than she'd anticipated, but maybe if she hurried she would make it back for dinner. Not that her parents checked up on her or anything. While she usually attended meals, if she missed one they'd probably assume she was working on a potion that couldn't be interrupted.

Harry was just a couple of streets from Kyprioth Court when she passed a window with a bright red sign that caught her attention. She slowed, hardly daring to believe her luck.

FOR RENT

One Bedroom Apartment

9 Galleons / Week

Utilities and Floo Connection Included

Inquire at Number 5

She grinned. It was perfect. In the wizarding sector, so no worries about being asked for muggle identification, cheap, not too big or too flashy. The street it was on was called Dogwood Lane. It was narrow, but well-kept, with small flower boxes on every windowsill and sturdy shutters in the color of the corresponding door. The apartment that was for rent looked to be on the second story, and there were pale pink curtains hanging in the window behind the for rent sign. The number next to the window was 8, and the apt below it on the ground floor was number 7. Number 5 was on the first floor across the street, so Harry crossed and knocked gently on the door that went to apartments 5 and 6 and waited.

The curtains in the window closest to the door fluttered and parted, revealing the face of a thin woman with soft brown hair. The woman waved at her before leaving the window. A few moments later the yellow door opened and the woman from the window smiled down at her.

"Hello, dear, what can I do for you? Or were you knocking for number 6?" the woman asked kindly.

"Actually, I was hoping to inquire about the apartment across the street," Harry said, "Number 8. Is it still for rent?"

"It is," the woman said, surprised, "Come in, child."

Harry stepped through the yellow door into an entryway that had a staircase going up and a door on the right hand side. The woman led

her through the door and invited her to sit while she fetched the apartment owner.

"I'm Mrs. Botting, by the way," she said over her shoulder.

Harry waited for a few minute and then a white-haired old lady came slowly tottering into the room, leaning heavily on a wooden cane. Harry jumped up and helped her sit.

"Thank you very much young man," the woman said, her voice squeaking with age, "Now, I hear from the dear Mrs. Botting that you've come to ask about Number 8, is that right?"

"Yes, ma'am," Harry said, "Are you still looking to rent it out?"

"Oh, yes," the old woman sighed, "I just couldn't bear to let the old place go completely, you see. So many memories. But I had a nasty fall last month, and if Mr. Botting hadn't stopped by to check on me that afternoon... well, I'm just too old to be living alone anymore I guess."

"Are you all right now?" Harry asked.

"Fine, just fine," she said, "Maywell saw to that."

Not knowing what she was talking about, Harry just nodded in what she hoped was an understanding way.

"The Botting's are being so kind to me," the old woman said, "Just so kind. Letting me stay here, they are, though they've no extra room to speak of as it is. Are your parents looking for an apartment to rent? It will be so lovely to have a way to repay the Botting's for their kindness. I've no mind to be a burden to anyone, and every little bit helps around here."

Harry nodded, "Yes, ma'am. It's not my parents though. I was actually looking to rent an apartment myself, if that's all right with you."

"Oh, well," the woman frowned, "Are you living alone? Dangerous business, I should know. Can't you find a place at a shelter? The Rogue would take you in, you know, no matter who your parents were."

"I'll be all right, ma'am," Harry said, "Can I rent the apartment right away?"

"Yes, yes," the woman said, "If you're sure about it you can move in as soon as you like."

"Thank you," Harry said, "I promise I won't be a troublesome neighbor. You'll probably never even see me, since I plan on using the Floo connection to get in and out when I can."

"I'm sure you'll be a lovely neighbor," the elder said, patting nodding her head judiciously as she did so, "Now then, as you probably read I'm hoping for 9 Galleons a week, but you can pay by the month or bi-weekly or whatever works for your situation."

Harry smiled, "If it's all the same, I'd rather pay the first year up front in cash, so that I don't have to worry about getting the payments on time."

The old lady's brows rose, but she didn't ask how Harry was going to get the money. Harry had the impression she was used to seeing self-reliant young people around the alleys, if the way she barely protested at a kid renting an apartment on their own was any indication.

"That's fine as well, of course," she said after a moment.

"Great," Harry smiled, "I'll bring payment the day after tomorrow, if I can. Also, could I ask a neighborly favor of you?"

The old woman blinked her wrinkled eyelids, but nodded slowly, "Yes, what is it?"

"I had originally budgeted more than 9 Galleons a week for an apartment," Harry said, "So I was wondering if I paid 11 Galleons a week, could you possibly keep my personal habits to yourself, should anyone ask?"

"Personal habits?" the woman repeated, nonplussed.

"Yes, you know, comings and goings, anything peculiar you might hear-or not hear-from the house, things like that," Harry explained innocently, "You can tell them Harry Potter rented the apartment if someone like from the Ministry or anything should ever ask of course, but I'd appreciate it if you kept any other kind of information to yourself."

The woman raised both her brows skeptically, "For 11 Galleons a week I'll tell the Ministry whatever you want-not that the likes of them ever come down here. You're a right strange little thing, aren't you?"

"So I've heard," Harry said, "Thank you so much, ma'am."

"Not at all, young Mr. Potter," the woman said, "And please, just call me Mrs. Whitlock."

Harry smiled easily, "As you like, Mrs. Whitlock. It was lovely to meet you."

She stood to leave, but Mrs. Botting came in at that moment with a tea tray and set it down on the coffee table, smiling expectantly at her

"Won't you stay for dinner, my dear?" she asked, handing Harry, who had sat back down out of politeness, a cup of sweet smelling tea.

"Oh, I don't know," Harry said hesitantly, "I should probably go home and get something to eat there."

"Nonsense," Mrs. Whitlock pursed her lips dismissively, "What's the use going home to have dinner alone when you can stay right here

and get to know your new neighbors?"

Harry blinked, not sure what to say to that. It wasn't as if she could tell the women that her mother and father had a dinner of their own for her, because that would take credence from the idea that she was renting an apartment to live in on her own, despite only being almost-twelve. She prevaricated for a second, but couldn't think of a good excuse not to stay, and they had been very kind to invite her to their table in the first place. Her parents would probably assume she was working, so as long as she was home before dark she would probably be fine.

Harry accepted their invitation, and twenty minutes later was sitting around a small but abundantly laid table in the Botting's kitchen. She met Mr. Botting as well as the two children of the house, Jim and Clara Botting, who were seven and five respectively. The meal was pleasant, and the Botting's were all very welcoming to her as a prospective new neighbor, though Harry warned them several times that they likely wouldn't see very much of her.

When she finally left the Botting residence at Number 5 on Dogwood Lane, it was a good thirty minutes past dusk. Harry sighed. There was no way she was making it home before dinner. She also suddenly remembered that she'd left Krait's crates just sitting in a nook off of Knockturn alley when she started off on this prolonged detour of hers, and thought that it would be a miracle if they were still there. Great.

Harry walked quickly through the darkened alleys. This was not the shadowy dark caused by the buildings' overhangs, but rather the complete darkness of a summer night that was broken only by the rare shaft of moonlight. Luckily, the signposts on every street corner were charmed to be lit up, so she found her way with little trouble.

Approaching Kyprioth Court, Harry felt the first prickling of unease. She had never been in the Lower Alleys so late before, so at first nothing had felt strange or off about the deserted nature of the streets she walked. When she noticed that the street up ahead was

lit by something other than moonlight, however, something red and flickering, she started to think perhaps there was something ominous about how empty and silent the alleys were.

Except that they weren't silent. There were faint sounds on the wind, coming from up ahead of her. Part of her was thinking she should turn back, avoid the eerie red glow coming from ahead, but the other part reminded her that she didn't know any other way to Knockturn alley than through Kyprioth Court. So she continued forward, though at a slower and more cautious pace.

As she grew closer, sounds became clearer. There was shouting, and beneath the shouting small explosions, like rock imploding and gravel spraying. The orange-red glow flickered against her eyes, but offsetting that were sharp, erratic flashes of multicolored lights that refracted and cast quick-moving shadows across the alley wall. These flashes were easily recognizable to anyone who had ever seen serious magic used-they were the heralds of magical duels-several, judging by the frequency and variety of the flashes alone. The persistent red glow, though, was something Harry had never seen before. And yet, once Harry reached the mouth of the alley and caught sight of its source, the dark truth hit her with the gut wrenching force of something a deep, unacknowledged part of her had known instinctively all along. Like how an infant knew his mother's face or a dog knew the fear of thunder.

Fire. Something was on fire. No, she sagged against the rough alley wall with the realization, the *Dancing Dragon* was on fire. She opened her mouth to call for help, but snapped it shut again as the full extent of the scene before her impacted like a sledgehammer against her brain.

Kyprioth Court was littered with rubble, and between the rubble-bodies. Some standing, some fallen, most male, all covered in a gritty layer of dust and debris. Harry had seen fights before-schoolyard skirmishes and the occasional tavern brawl that she had sworn to Sirius not to tell her mother about-but this was nothing like that. It looked like what she might have imagined a muggle gang

fight to be like, had she given enough credence to the propaganda spread by the SOW Party about the violent nature of muggles to try imagining one. There seemed to be two distinct factions warring against one another, but the dueling was so fluid and *indistinct* that she couldn't be sure. It didn't look like a free-for-all, though. There were definitely groups of people fighting together, so there had to be some kind of organization and reason to the mad scene. Harry just didn't know what it was.

The fighting was centered in the half-circle of street before the Dancing Dragon. After squinting against the blaze, Harry was able to discern that it was the upper floor that was burning. The entire right side of the second story was up in flames, but in addition to the continuous fighting going on in the street outside of the inn, there were several witches and wizards with water much stronger than what a mere Aguamenti would produce gushing out of their wands. The fire didn't seem to be spreading, but the effect of the impromptu fire fighters was the production of great gusts of steam as the water met the burning building. It drifted down the court, hot and heavy, casting a hazy film over everything it touched.

The fight itself could only be described as barely restrained chaos. Fighters on both sides were dodging and weaving around one another in what might have been a beautifully choreographed dance, had there not been so many things going clearly wrong. Instead of the eye-catching spectacle of flashy moves and successive near-misses one might find in a staged fight, the exchanges between fighters were as fast as they were brutal. Light and sound battered the night. The twinkle of reflective steel and the sudden spurt of blood unaccompanied by a corresponding flash of magic told her that at least some of the participants were free dueling. Once she was aware of it, the occasional clashing of mixed weaponry could be picked out above the shouting and the dull thudding of missed spells against the surrounding buildings.

Her mind was cataloguing all of this rapidly, but her consciousness was frozen with abject horror. She hadn't been prepared when she'd

first heard the sounds of trouble, however uneasy she had instinctively felt, for who could ever be prepared for such a thing? Not twenty feet away from her people were fighting-and dying, she thought numbly, if the amount of blood now running into the gutters on the sides of the alley was any indication. She didn't know what she'd stumbled into, and as her presence of mind recovered from the original shock and reasserted itself she realized she didn't want to know. She stumbled back from the mouth of the side alley she'd been watching from with the intent of finding another way home. Any other way.

But her sudden movement must have been somehow noticeable against the still and silent backdrop that was the area immediately outside of the conflict zone, for no sooner had she staggered a few steps back from the grizzly scene than one of the fighters broke away from the battle and headed straight for her alley.

She would never know what the man in the blue vest had wanted with her. Did he think she was an enemy fighter, sneaking up on his flank? Did he realize that a third, oblivious party had inadvertently stumbled upon the field, and come over to warn her off? Had he even seen her in the first place? Or had he been trying to do something else, like send a message or run away from the battle completely? She would never know, for he had barely reached the mouth of the alley she was in, the same alley she had so recklessly followed a young pickpocket down just hours before, when he was struck in the back with a what she later learned was a large throwing knife. At the time all Harry knew was that one moment the man was running toward her and the next he was falling forward, and there was something protruding from beneath his shoulder blade, and his body was landing awkwardly in a shallow puddle of alley muck. The fall dislodged the knife in the man's back and his pretty blue vest was stained so red with what seemed to Harry to be impossible amounts of blood, impossibly fast.

He died, there in the alley, before her eyes. Far enough that the pool of seeping fluid couldn't quite reach her shoes, but close enough that

the look of surprised denial on his face would haunt her dreams for countless nights to come.

She shook her head back and forth slowly, too caught up in the horror she was witnessing to even scream. All she could think was, why was he so surprised? Didn't he know what was happening? Shouldn't he have expected-or at least suspected-that such a thing might happen on a night like this? In a fight like this?

Maybe death was always a surprise, Harry thought, but she didn't want to know that about the world either.

It was time to leave, Harry knew. Time to run and possibly to hide and definitely not the time to stand there gaping at something she couldn't change. And she couldn't change it. She could heal bruises, cuts and scrapes, sure, broken bones even, but stab wounds? Ones that, from the way the man in the blue vest had gurgled and choked before stilling, had pierced a lung? No, she couldn't fix that, and she had to stop thinking about it or the stinging in her nose and eyes would signify something more than the effect of breathing and squinting in smoky air. It would mean tears. Breakdown. Collapse.

No, no. Harry took a deep breath, ignoring the smell of burning wood that assaulted her senses as she did so, and swallowed hard. She would get away. She would get home. And then she would let the brittle façade crack.

Harry took another deep, calming breath-and promptly vomited against the alley wall. That time she had smelled more than smoky wood. *That* breath was an attack of sweet copper perfume and her stomach rebelled vehemently. All of Mrs. Botting's wonderful cooking came spilling onto the ground, wasted and smelling a lot worse than it had when she last experienced it. Harry gagged for a moment, but managed to haul herself away from both noxious odors by struggling backwards, further away from the fight, the dead man in the blue vest, and the blatant evidence of a weak stomach.

She didn't back away fast enough. She wasn't far enough when the second man came into the alley. He moved quickly to the fallen man and stooped down over him. His objective became clear when, with a slight grunt of effort, he pulled the knife the rest of the way free from the man's back and stood once more. He went to reach for his shirt-to clean the blade, she realized with a sick jolt, to clean *his* blade-but noticed her standing not-far-enough away and darted forward faster than she could convince her shell-shocked limbs to evade him.

There was an instant of confused movement as he grabbed her, and then she was freezing with fear at the touch of a wet blade against her neck. It was accompanied by the tip of a wand pressed to her lower ribs, and Harry could only think that she had never known terror until that moment. It was an ugly, consuming thing, which drove all thoughts from her head except those that might somehow help her to survive. Don't move. Don't cry out. Wait for the opportunity to run. Wait. Wait. Her magic swelled up inside of her and she felt it searching for an outlet, but she had no will to direct it with. Her mind was blank. No intention meant no form for her magic, so she just stood there, frozen in the arms of danger, waiting for something to shake her free.

The man chuckled low in her ear, "Nice try, little rat, but no one escapes tonight. Thought you could run, did you? Scared once you saw the true might of the rightful King, were you? Too bad, little rat, and too late."

"Please, I'm not-" Harry whimpered at her own inadequacy. Not what? A rat? She didn't even know what was going on, "I'm not whatever you think I am. I don't know what's going on, or who you are, or anything about a rightful King. I just want to get home."

The man spat carelessly on the ground beside them and scoffed, "Don't matter. If you aren't with Claw, you're against him."

His grip on the knife changed ever so slightly and Harry felt the air grow thin. This was it. She was going to die in a dirty alley, not even

worth a Killing Curse. She tensed automatically though she knew the muscles in her neck would be as butter before the knife. She felt the edge of the blade begin to dig in, and then there was a blinding flash of light and the pressure was gone. She fell to her knees as whatever had been supporting her was suddenly removed. Was that the end? Just a flash of light and then everything falls away?

No, that wasn't right. Harry blinked rapidly to regain her stolen vision. The spots caused by the flash cleared and she could see the alley once again, from the mucky ground she was sitting on to the prone form of her attacker. Her eyes widened at the sight. He was collapsed at the base of one side of the alley, bent double in a way that suggested he'd impacted heavily with the wall before falling to the dirt. Standing over him, face grim and eyes aglow in the dim red light, was Leo.

Harry shook her head to jump-start her brain once more. Leo was in the alley, just standing there in his usual sleeveless black shirt and slim-fitting trousers, as if anything about this night was usual. Leo had saved her from that man with the knife, the man who had killed Mr. Bluevest. Leo had shot the spell that made the world turn white for an instant, and Leo had blasted the man with the knife away from her while he was distracted. What was Leo doing there?

She didn't realize she'd voiced the question aloud until he answered.

"Me? Harry, what are *you* doing here?" Leo snapped, bending over to grasp her arm and haul her to her feet briskly, "Do you have any idea how dangerous it is to be wandering around tonight? Sweet Mother, I thought he'd got you the way you collapsed like that. What were you *thinking* ?"

Harry swallowed painfully-her throat was bleeding from a long but thankfully shallow cut where the knife had almost... she shook her head, "I was just trying to get home."

"Trying to- *now* ?" Leo wrapped both arms around her fiercely, his wand clenched in one hand and a long knife in the other. He

transferred sweat and blood from his hands and arms to her robes, but Harry didn't care, "Don't ever scare me like that again, Harry. Not ever."

He released her, and Harry nodded obediently, too shook up to really think or react the way she normally would to things.

"You've got to get out of here," Leo said quickly, "The fight isn't through, and there's the Dragon to deal with as well. I can't go with you, but you need to get somewhere safe. Go to-" he cursed softly, "No, that's no good, not at this time of night. Okay, Harry, listen carefully. Are you listening?"

Harry gazed up into Leo's face and nodded, though she still felt dazed and lost.

"Good. You're going to go to the end of this alley, away from the fighting. You're going to turn right. Then you run straight down that street until you get to the fountain with the statue of Arthur Pendragon standing in it, got that?"

Harry nodded again, "King Arthur statue. Run."

"Yes," Leo said, "At the statue, turn left and on the right hand side of the street you'll see a big lit up sign for Maywell Clinic. It's always open, so just go inside and tell the lady at the front desk you're there to see Mrs. Hurst."

"Your mother," Harry said, blinking slowly.

"Yes, you'll be safe there. Run there as fast as you can and don't leave until I come and get you," Leo said.

"Safe?" repeated Harry.

"Yes, Harry, safe," Leo said, "I have to go now. Run fast."

Before Harry could say, 'what about you?' Leo was gone again, moving like a shadow back toward Kyprioth Court. She steeled

herself against the new emotion battling for dominance in her confused psyche: worry for Leo. Harry turned determinately away from the flickering lights coming from the fight in the court and began moving. It was slow at first as her muscles seemed to be frozen and her joints clumsy, but soon she was jogging, running, sprinting away, right then straight then left at the fountain. She didn't slow at the sight of the brightly lit sign for Maywell Clinic, and instead burst straight through the front doors and staggered to a halt in the well-lit lobby. The woman at the desk half-stood at her entrance, eyes scanning over her sharply and zeroing in on the blood soaking her robe collar from where it ran down her throat.

"I need to see Mrs. Hurst," Harry said quickly, her voice raspy from the exertion, and possibly from the pain around her throat as well.

"Oh, child, what's happened to you?" the lady fussed as she rounded the front desk and started toward her, "Come, sit down and let's stop up that bleeding."

"Please," Harry said tiredly, "I just need to see Mrs. Hurst."

The woman shook her head disapprovingly, "You need to see a Healer, young man, before you pass out from blood loss."

"Isn't Mrs. Hurst a Healer?" Harry asked, "Please, ma'am, couldn't you just take me to her?"

"Well, it isn't really procedure to just..." The desk woman trailed off, taking in the sight of Harry's muck-ridden clothes, bloody neck, and desperate expression, "Oh, very well then. Come with me, lad."

Harry followed her behind the counter to a long hallway dotted with numerous doors. The woman knocked on one perfunctorily and ushered Harry inside.

"Healer Hurst will be with you in a moment."

Harry sank down gratefully onto the padded wooden chair in the small patient room and closed her eyes. She had done it. She was safe. Harry felt very lightheaded now that she was sitting down, so she bent over to put her head between her legs, trying to stave off the vertigo. She heard the door open a few minutes later, but didn't look up until a woman's voice said, "Oh, dear, what has my Lionel sent me this time?"

Harry raised her head and the woman's eyes widened. She whisked out her wand and Harry couldn't help but flinch when it pointed at her. The woman, who had to be Mrs. Hurst, stepped toward her, though her eyes were soft, "No, child, I'll not be hurting you. I'm going to help."

Harry nodded, feeling foolish. She knew that, it was just an automatic reaction she had apparently picked up within the last hour. Harry kept very still as Mrs. Hurst went to work, though she tensed a few times when the kindly woman's wand gave an unexpected flick or twist. After a while, Harry was able to relax a bit, and her anxiety over the wand pointed at her was greatly lessened by the fact that her neck was healed and the blood siphoned away almost immediately. The woman healed several scrapes Harry hadn't known she'd picked up, either stumbling around in the alley or chasing the pickpocket earlier in the day. The woman also repaired her robes in the places they had ripped and cast a strong cleaning charm over the rest of her. When she was finished, Mrs. Hurst stepped back and met Harry's blank look with a very fixed one.

"Now, I don't pretend to believe my son when he tells me he never gets up to anything dangerous," she said, "And so I don't usually ask questions when Leo sends some poor soul along to be patched up in my clinic, but when I see a lass your age in here with a sloppy knife wound and hands too soft to belong to any Rogue rat I just can't keep my peace. What in the Great Mother's name are you doing here, child?"

Harry just stared at her, "You... you know I'm a girl?"

The woman looked taken aback, "Well of course I do. I'm a Healer, child. I also know you're not yet twelve years old, you've broken your wrist within the last year, and I've a strong suspicion you're a vegetarian, in which case I'd advise you to eat more protein because it's going to stunt your growth otherwise."

Harry's jaw dropped open a little bit. This woman was good. "I see," Harry managed eventually, "Well, you're the first one to recognize me as female on sight in a long while, ma'am, even as a Healer."

Mrs. Hurst smiled, "Perhaps you simply don't have very observant acquaintances."

Harry smiled wanly back, "Perhaps you're right. Either way, thank you for Healing me, ma'am, and to answer your earlier question... I'm not really sure what I'm doing here. This whole day has been so... fast. I just want to go home."

Mrs. Hurst gazed down at her sympathetically, "Well, you're as Healed in body as a body can be. You're free to go home whenever you like."

Harry shook her head, "Leo told me to stay here until he came and got me. He said I'd be safe here."

"Safe from what, child?" Mrs. Hurst took out her wand again and Harry barely flinched at all. She conjured a second chair and sat down across from Harry with a concerned expression, "Perhaps you'd better tell me everything. Start at the beginning."

So Harry did. She told Mrs. Hurst about her job working for Krait at the Serpent's Storeroom, and about being picked while she was walking back toward the Leaky Cauldron. She then had to explain quickly why she'd been so foolish as to carry that much gold around Knockturn. Mrs. Hurst smiled in veiled disbelief when Harry told her about chasing, and eventually catching, the young pickpocket because of the opportune timing of a cauldron cart. Harry told her about stopping to look at an apartment, though she glossed over the

reasons she was interested in it, and related how she'd been asked to stay for dinner by the neighbors. When Harry got to the part about coming across the fight on Kyprioth Court, she paused, overcome by the hugeness of it all.

"The Dancing Dragon... it was on fire," Harry said, frowning. Mrs. Hurst drew a sharp breath and clenched her wand without seeming to notice. "I think they had it contained, but it was so awful. The fire was making everything smoky and red, and there were people fighting everywhere in the court. I didn't know what was happening, and I was scared. I was going to leave, to run somewhere else, but then a man came and died right in front of me." Harry looked up at Mrs. Hurst imploringly, "I didn't mean to let him die, I swear. I just couldn't... all I know is cuts and bruises. I can't heal deep muscle tissue fast enough to be of use in an emergency yet, and I don't know how to fix a lung once it's punctured. Please, ma'am, you have to believe me, I couldn't-I didn't-

"Hush, child," Mrs. Hurst leaned forward and scooped Harry's whole body up into her arms. Harry clung to the older woman's Healer robes and started to cry. The tears leaked out everywhere, no matter how she tried to stem them, and Harry started mumbling apologies between her sobs. "No, child, don't fret about it. You just let it out, now, that's it," Mrs. Hurst stoked Harry's hair softly and Harry cried harder thinking that her own mom would be doing this if Harry hadn't been keeping so many secrets from her, "It's not your fault, child, so don't you take that darkness into your soul. His life was in the gods' hands, not yours. Not yours."

Harry sniffed loudly and slowed down her breathing to try and control the spasming of her diaphragm. She leaned back from Mrs. Hurst's hold and wiped her eyes on her newly cleaned robe sleeve. "Thank you," she said, sniffing one last time, "I didn't mean to fall apart on you like that."

"It seems to me you're over-due," Mrs. Hurst said kindly, "Are you all right, now? I can make you a cup of tea, if you like."

"No, thank you," Harry said, "I'd rather just tell you the rest of it, so you know."

She related the rest of the tale as quickly and accurately as she could. She hoped Leo wouldn't mind her spilling her guts to his mother about what had went on that night, but she figured he wouldn't have sent her to his mother's clinic if he didn't expect Mrs. Hurst to find out about the fight.

The fight she still wasn't sure how Leo had gotten mixed up in, now that she thought about it. Really, what were the odds that Leo had been in the exact right place to save her when she hadn't seen him all day?

Mrs. Hurst just sighed when she was done telling her story, "What a mess you've gotten yourself into, child."

"Do you know what the fight was about?" Harry asked curiously.

"Anyone who keeps up with the Court business could hazard a guess," Mrs. Hurst said, "Fights like this don't happen much-they aren't supposed to, as long as everyone follows the code and settles disputes directly in single combat. If the fight was as bad as you say, with the fire in the Dragon on top of it... well, there's only one person I know of in the Court who would dare such a thing right now."

"Claw," Harry breathed, suddenly recalling the words that man had spoken to her, "The mad with the knife, he mentioned Claw's name."

"That would be a good assumption," Mrs. Hurst said distastefully, "That man will never be worthy of my son's crown. A bad thief and a worse coward. Stupid, too. I wouldn't be surprised if he'd let his plans slip into some of Leo's ears. That would certainly explain what my son has been so busy doing all day. Not doubt preparing for it."

"Is that what the fight was over?" Harry asked, fearing for her friend's safety, "The position of the Rogue?"

"Nothing else is worth attacking the Dancing Dragon itself," Mrs. Hurst said darkly, "Though it's a fool's errand. Even if Claw somehow bested my boy, no thief would answer to him after he broke the code like that."

"Why would he even try, then?" Harry asked, frowning.

"He doesn't understand the Court of the Rogue," Mrs. Hurst said, "Claw's an outsider, come into the Rogue less than a year ago, and from the very start he was dripping poison in folk's ears, turning them over slowly but surely to his own circle. We all thought he was building a base of support for when he challenged Leo to a duel for the crown. It looks now like he was just building an army of thugs to take the Court like a barbarian tyrant would."

Harry bit her lip, thinking things over, "Is that why he sent that false recipe to Mr. Krait? To try and get rid of one of Leo's supporters before he attacked?"

"Too right, young lass," Mrs. Hurst said, brows raised, "That's a sharp mind you've got there. Eddy wasn't the only one to get targeted though. Aled's house was broken into last week and everything ransacked. He only wasn't home because he'd stayed over at the Dragon to help old Solom out that night. Some thugs got to Marek not two nights ago, pulled him into an alley and beat him something fierce. I patched him up myself, but he was to be on bed rest for the rest of the week. I imagine he'll be upset to have missed the fighting, the big idiot."

Harry considered this silently, "Is Rispah all right, at least?"

"Fine," Mrs. Hurst said, sounding a bit miffed, "Claw doesn't waste his time with women. Yet another reason I hope my Leo trounces him tonight."

"Aren't you worried about Leo?" Harry asked, trying not to sound critical, "He's not even of age yet, and there were so many people fighting..."

Mrs. Hurst patted Harry's hand gently, "My son has been giving me grey hair since he learned to run before I knew he could walk. Always the trickster, never where he should have been, Leo drove my husband and I to distraction trying to keep up with him, and that was before he ever started leaving the house. I learned long ago to just support him where I can and pray for him where I can't. Leo is a rare soul. He goes after what he wants and he'd rather good at getting it. He's also quite talented. No man like Claw is going to win out against Lionel Hurst."

Harry marveled at the woman's complete faith in her son. She didn't think she'd ever had that much faith in any one person. People were just so... fallible. Perhaps one had to be a mother to completely understand it.

Mrs. Hurst finally got around to making tea, and the two of them sat and talked about various things to pass the time. Harry's schooling came up at some point and she automatically fed Mrs. Hurst the line about her attending AIM and wanting to be a Healer. Mrs. Hurst just looked at her with frank disbelief.

"What?" Harry asked defensively.

"You're a pretty good liar," Mrs. Hurst said calmly, sipping at her tea, "Calm-faced and unhesitant. Either that or you've told that story of yours so many times that it's become routine. Still, that's all it is. A story."

Harry took a careful breath, not daring to look up from her teacup, "You think so? I suppose any stranger's life might sound like a story if you don't know them very well."

Mrs. Hurst laughed, "Oh, child, stop your pretending. I'm not asking for the truth, mind, but lies irritate my magic. I can always tell-and good thing, too, with that son of mine. The boy lies when the truth would sound better, sometimes just to see if I'm listening, I think. But apart from that, a few things don't match up very well. If you'd lived in America for nine months, your accent should have gotten a bit weak,

but you talk like someone who's never left the country. Also, you claim to want to be a Healer, but you've been talking here with me for a good forty minutes and not once have you asked me a single question about Healing."

Harry blinked, then winced internally. By Merlin, the woman was right. Now that she thought about it, Archie did talk a bit differently ever since he came back from school. His accent wasn't that noticeably different, but he used American slang every now and then, and annunciated better, probably because he was used to compensating for Americans who didn't have an ear for the British accent. Also, Archie would have jumped at the opportunity to question an actual Healer about his or her profession. He always, *a/ways* took the time to ask questions when they visited Sirius at the hospital.

Harry wasn't sure what to say, "I'm sorry," she tried, "Honestly, you're right. I am lying, but I'm not trying to trick you or anything. I lie to everyone, and I know *that* sounds horrible, but I just... it's important to me, and... I'm not explaining this very well. I can't tell you the truth about me, though I really am Harry Potter."

"Harry Potter?" Mrs. Hurst gave a little start of surprise and her eyes widened slightly.

"Oh, did I not introduce myself?" Harry smiled sheepishly, "How rude of me, yes, I'm Harry, ma'am-well, Harriet, but nobody calls me that."

"Goodness, that certainly explains a lot," Mrs. Hurst murmured distractedly, "I know who you are-perhaps more than you'd even guess. If you're Harry, my son has been talking about you almost non-stop for weeks. Everyday it's 'I'm going to meet Harry' or 'Sorry I'm late, mum, Harry and I went for ice cream.' I admit I'd thought you were a boy the way he talked about you, but now..." Mrs. Hurst looked over Harry with a new gleam in her eyes. Harry felt inexplicably nervous. "Well, this certainly changes things."

"Does it?" Harry asked nervously, "Really, my being a girl doesn't matter that much."

"Whatever you say, dear," Mrs. Hurst smiled knowingly, "Now then, what was I saying? Oh yes, did Leo tell you about what I do for a living?"

"He said you work here, at this clinic," Harry said, nonplussed.

"Indeed I do," Mrs. Hurst, "In fact, I own this clinic. I founded it a year after Leo was born. Malcolm had just gotten his Mastery, and the Guild pays a very generous stipend to its researchers. Also, the Hurst's left Malcolm with more money than either of us knew what to do with, so I decided to open a clinic here in the Lower Alleys, exactly where the little apartment I grew up in used to stand before a Ministry raid on the building caused it to become structurally unsound and it collapsed. This clinic is officially a charity outpost of St. Mungo's, though the Hospital actually only pays sixty percent of the clinic's expenses. The Rogue funds thirty percent of the expenses, and my husband and I take care of the last ten."

"How did you get St. Mungo's to agree to open a clinic in the Lower Alleys?" Harry asked curiously, "Even if they only pay sixty percent, that's still a pretty big venture to take on all of a sudden."

"Before I opened this clinic, I worked for St. Mungo's. I used to run the children's ward, as a matter of fact, and I still volunteer there twice a week. Interesting people, the volunteers in that ward. One in particular always gives me a laugh-a Mr. Sirius Black, perhaps you know him?" Mrs. Hurst laughed at the look of utter panic on Harry's face, "Oh, yes, your 'uncle' talks about you a lot, young lady."

"Is that so?" Harry asked weakly.

"Yes, indeed," Mrs. Hurst said, "Enough that it's apparent to me that you do 'lie to everyone,' as your uncle, too, seems to think you've been off at AIM for the last year. No, don't fret, I'm not going to say anything to him. I won't even tell him I've seen you, since I very

much doubt your family knows where you are right now. I imagine your life is very complicated, though, isn't it? Just know what if you ever need to confide in someone, I've an open ear and a closed mouth."

Harry nodded silently, though of course she would never take the kind woman up on her offer. It was too much of a risk, no matter how trustworthy Leo's mother seemed.

"Anyway, we were talking about how I got the clinic opened. It helped that I was influential among the staff, and of course it didn't hurt that I was married to one of their highest grossing researchers in experimental potions," Mrs. Hurst said fondly, "That's how we met, you know. He would provide new, better potions for the children in the ward and I would shout at him for using innocent children as test subjects, and then we decided to move in together."

Harry felt her mouth hitch into a slight grin at Mrs. Hurst's description of her relationship with Master Hurst, but didn't interrupt.

"The Hospital held both of us in such high esteem that when I proposed the idea they didn't immediately reject it," she went on, "I argued that a free clinic in the Lower Alleys was a good move logistically, because most folk from the Lower Alleys don't have easy access to a floo, and by the time they can get to St. Mungo's their injury is likely worsened considerably. Also, most of us in the Lower Alley don't hold much stock in the Ministry, and that can include the sort of identification requirements St. Mungo's has for all of its patients. I said they would be treating even more people more effectively with a clinic like this, and of course they told me I was a naïve fool who wanted to waste hospital resources on the undeserving."

Harry gasped, "They really said that? Of all the snobbish things to-" she broke off, too upset to even finish her sentence, but added bitterly, "Soon they'll only be serving purebloods, or only people who have passed their NEWT's."

Mrs. Hurst chuckled without much humor, "Yes, well it's lucky I had my Malcolm with me, because he speaks bigoted asshole rather well, having been sired by one. He told the board that opening a clinic was a good political move, since it would make them seem sympathetic to the 'plight of the unfortunate' and also that it made sense economically, because a new clinic meant plenty of excuses to hold elaborate fundraisers. They agreed almost immediately after that. Still, the point is that we got the clinic in the end."

Harry nodded seriously, "Sometimes the end justifies the means. Sometimes you have to play by their rules for a while, or at least pretend to, even though some might say you're being hypocritical or a coward by giving in to the system instead of trying to change everything right away. Sometimes the only way to get what you want, to help other people by getting someplace that can really make a difference, is to keep your head down and your mouth shut about things you don't agree with, just for a little while. Just until you have the power to really change things instead of just complain about them. Right?"

Mrs. Hurst fixed hazel eyes on Harry's earnest face, "I think, sometimes, you're right, Harry. In circumstances where going along with the crowd in order to accomplish a long-term goal that will undermine it doesn't hurt anyone, it's not a bad strategy, and in some cases it might be the only way."

"Yeah," Harry said softly, "The only way."

Not ten minutes later, the door to the patient room was flung open by the woman from the front desk.

"Healer Hurst, come quickly," the woman said urgently, "There are at least a dozen young people in the waiting room, bleeding and shouting and carrying on. Your son is out there, too," Harry breathed a silent sigh of relief for Leo's sake, "No doubt somehow responsible for whatever the blazes is going on in these alleys tonight."

The desk lady left once more, still muttering agitatedly, and Mrs. Hurst stood and set aside her teacup. "We'd better go see who needs patching up, don't you think?" she said to Harry.

"Um, Mrs. Hurst," she said cautiously, "Those things I told you-"

"Healer-patient confidentiality," Mrs. Hurst said, winking.

Harry smiled back gratefully and followed her out the door.

The waiting room was in chaos. Men and women with varying degrees of health stood, sat, or leaned on one another. They were all dirty and all smiling broadly. Leo stood in the midst of them all, a grin of equal brilliance on his own dirt-smeared face. He was shouting over everyone, directing them to one side of the room or the other. Harry got the feeling he was trying to get those with the worst injuries in one area so they could be treated faster, but everyone was too excited to pay attention, and instead shouted congratulations at Leo and slapped him on the back, cheerfully ignoring his suggestions.

Mrs. Hurst took one look at the mess, shook her head in amused disgust and whistled so sharply the closest people winced. "You lot, pay attention!" She shouted as everyone turned toward her in surprise, "Anyone bleeding see me immediately. Anyone who got hit on the head at any point tonight, see Janice. If you can't remember if you've been hit on the head or not, see Janice. If you've a broken bone, see Carol. If you're just here to wait and celebrate go sit in those chairs and the Mother help you if you disturb the actual patients. Go now!"

People scurried, scampered, and generally bent over backwards to appease the formidable Healer. Two other Healers, presumably Janice and Carol, stepped forward from the chaos and started collecting patients. Harry stood to the side and watched as the worst hurt were treated quickly and efficiently by the three Healers. Leo broke from his friends and came to stand by her with a relieved look on his face.

"Harry, thank the trickster you made it," Leo said, looking her over, "All in one piece?"

Harry nodded, looking him over in turn, "I'm fine, but you're bleeding."

Leo looked down at himself in surprise, as though he hadn't noticed the blood dripping down his wrist and hand from a puncture wound just below his elbow, "Huh. Guess I am. Still, there are others with worse, and my dear old mum has enough to work on. I'll get it Healed later."

Harry shook her head and reached out to pull Leo's left arm toward her. It was shining with sweat in the places it wasn't streaked with grime, so the first thing Harry did was pull out her wand and cast a basic cleansing charm that all first-year Healers learned over the area close to the wound. Leo looked on with bemusement as she closed her eyes and focused on what she wanted her magic to do. Archie had taught her all of the fancy theory behind it, but Harry still found it much easier to simply focus her magic into Healing the muscle and skin the way she wanted it to.

She forged the magical connection to the injured area easily enough, but when she sank into the connection with her consciousness and started to direct her magic toward the area, Leo's magic, which had already surrounded the wound protectively, rose up and gave what felt like a magical *hiss* at her. Harry paused, taken aback by the aggressiveness of Leo's magic. She pushed forward once more, slowly, and projected Healing intent toward the magic. She felt it hesitate, before moving back ever so slightly from the wound. Harry asked her magic to move in immediately and began the tedious process of re-directing blood flow until she could get her magic to knit the tissue back together seamlessly and rebuilding the lost and damaged skin cells. Her magic flowed out of her and into Leo's arm with a pointed impatience that very clearly communicated the idea that she should have been using it earlier. Harry ignored her magic, since she already felt three times the fool for freezing up in the middle of danger like she had.

When the wound was Healed, Harry pulled the connection back and wiped a hand up under her bangs to get rid of the few beads of perspiration that built up when she used her magic for Healing. It didn't tire her much, but Healing was very intense. It was satisfying in an odd sort of way, but Harry didn't think she'd ever enjoy it enough to do it for a living.

Leo flexed his arm for a moment, then smiled brightly down at her, "Full of surprises as ever, I see. Thanks, Harry." He reached out to ruffle Harry's hair, but she ducked away, scowling.

"Don't mention it," Harry said, then, feeling stupid, added, "So, you guys won, right?"

Leo laughed, hazel eyes dancing, "Yes, Harry, I guess we did."

"Oh," Harry said, "Good."

Leo laughed some more, "Harry, you-"

"MAREK SWIFT! WHAT. ARE. YOU. *DOING?!* "

Leo and Harry both turned to watch as Mrs. Hurst apparently caught sight of Marek in her line and railed into him.

"Umm," Marek looked like a child caught with a fist full of cookies, "Bleeding?"

Indeed he was, Harry thought. Marek had several shallow gashes on his arms and legs that were bleeding sluggishly.

"You are *supposed* to be on bed rest!" Mrs. Hurst scowled, "Not running around getting stabbed left and hexed right."

Marek smiled helplessly, "Well, Leo needed me, Mrs. Hurst. I had to, um, help him fight Claw."

Mrs. Hurst pointed her wand at Marek and Harry noticed with amusement that he cowered dramatically, "Don't you bring my Leo

into this. I told *you* not to do anything strenuous for at least a week."

Marek shrugged his big shoulders, grinning, "It weren't that strenuous, ma'am."

Several people laughed along with Marek and Mrs. Hurst just shook her head and started Healing Marek's wounds.

Harry felt that she was no longer needed there, and she had calmed down considerably since she came sprinting into the clinic a couple of hours earlier. So she went to Mrs. Hurst and asked if there was a floo connection in the clinic. Luckily, there was one, so Harry wouldn't have to brave the dark streets again that night. She promised herself she would look for the crates she'd abandoned tomorrow, when the sun was up again.

She went to tell Leo she was going, but he was surrounded by his closest confidants, including Marek, Aled, Solom, Rispah, and to Harry's surprise Mr. Krait. She didn't want to tear him away from his friends in the midst of what was very clearly a victory celebration, and she didn't feel that she could join in the celebration for several reasons. One was that she simply wasn't a part of the Rogue. This was their victory, not hers. Also, no matter how victorious they were, Harry was all too painfully aware that they, too, had lost people. She had watched one, the man in the blue vest, die in front of her, and she would be a fool if she assumed he was the only casualty of the battle. Harry understood the need to celebrate life before mourning death, but she had come too close to death herself to revel in it.

Instead, she called a quick goodbye to Leo over the crowd. He smiled and waved at her, shouting something indistinct over the noise of everyone packed together in the clinic waiting room. Harry wasn't sure he'd even really heard her, but she had to be getting home anyway. It was lucky she knew the password for her parents floo, or there was no way she'd be able to get in at this time of night, after the wards were up.

And so Harry had flooed home, using the password to bypass the night wards, and ended up... here.

Trying to convince her father she wasn't a burglar before he hexed her and called in his Auror buddies to arrest her.

Harry took in the distrustful expression on James' face and knew she had to talk fast. "Dad, I promise it's me. Remember on Uncle Sirius' birthday when we had a pool party in his basement? And Sirius brought all of his silly snakes onto his raft, and then tipped them into the pool when he and you tackled Uncle Remus off of his raft. It was lucky they could swim, really, or mother would have broken her promise about not disagreeing with Sirius on his birthday."

Harry watched her father frown and step backwards slowly, "Harry? Step forward until I can see your face. Slowly, and don't reach for anything."

Harry moved forward as slowly as she could, lifting her face up so that the light of the Lumos would catch it when she was close enough. She knew the moment James recognized her, because his face muscles slackened with relief, but he didn't lower his wand still.

"I'm sorry, Harry, but just to make sure-what did I tell you to never forget in the last letter your mother and I sent you before you came home from school?" James asked.

Harry froze. She had read through the letters Archie both received from and wrote to her parents when she got home that summer, but she had read them all at once, and she couldn't remember which one of them had said what, as she might if she had read them one at a time over the course of a year.

"I... I don't remember, Dad," Harry said shakily. James immediately looked on guard again and took an aggressive step forward, "I'm sorry, Dad, please ask me something else. I can't remember those letters right now, they all blend together. Please, ask something else."

James frowned into her face, but said, "Then tell me this. Who are we planning on marrying you to if the new marriage legislation gets pushed through?"

Harry blinked, well that was easy-wait. Too easy. It was a trick question.

"No one," she said, "Everyone will think I'm marrying Archie, because we'll get engaged to protect me, but in reality the engagement will have a clause of unsuitability which will allow us to dissolve it when we turn seventeen."

James nodded, "Yes, that's right." He lifted his wand so that the light encompassed both of them, "Harry, what are you doing out so late? We thought you were down in the lab, and assumed you'd go to bed when you were finished with whatever project you were working on." James frowned down at her, "Do you have any idea how terrifying it is to realize you have no idea where your only child has been all night?" Harry winced as James started toward her, but he only embraced her, exhaling tiredly into her hair, "Never did I imagine you would pull something like this. Your cousin Archie, maybe, your Uncle Sirius, definitely, but you? You're supposed to be the smart one. The level headed one who doesn't do stupid things like stay out till midnight without telling anyone. What if something had happened to you? We wouldn't even know where to look, and it would be much too late to help by the time we noticed you were even gone."

"I'm sorry," Harry said, "Believe me, I didn't mean to stay out so late. You know me, Dad, I would never be so unthinkingly foolish. I just... things came up and it wasn't really my fault."

That sounded weak even to her, and James gave her an unimpressed look, "I'm sorry too, Harry, because this kind of thing just isn't okay. I never, and I do mean seriously never, thought I'd say this, but... you're grounded."

Harry gaped and stared at her father, who was looking puzzled at the taste of his own words, "Grounded?"

"Yes," James nodded slowly, "Yes, Harry. You are grounded. You will not leave this house for a week. Not to Diagon alley. Not to your friends' homes. Not even to Grimmauld Place. You will stay here and every night at nine pm you will be responsible for setting the wards. With any luck that will help you remember when exactly your curfew is."

Harry blinked in utter incomprehension. Grounded? She had never, as far as she could remember, been formally disciplined in such a way. In any way. She couldn't recall the last time her parents had taken her to task for something. Every now and then they offered advice, cautionary suggestions, or intelligent input on her plans, and she respected their council and took it under consideration. They gave her chores, of course, and asked for her respect and obedience in minor matters that were of little consequence to her, but punishments? It was like James was speaking a foreign language.

"Harry?" James prompted.

"Oh, yes," Harry shook her head, "Okay, Dad. Um, so I'm really grounded?"

James grimaced a bit, "Yes. I'll tell your mother in the morning."

"Don't tell Uncle Sirius," Harry said, still a little dazed at the very idea of being grounded, "He'll think you're starting a dangerous precedent."

James' face softened and he even smiled a bit, "You'll have to come up with convincing excuses then, if he asks you to go somewhere."

Harry was about to respond when the dinging alarm on the floo went off as the fire turned green once more. James snapped his head around and barked out the acceptance password and a head appeared in their fireplace.

"Auror Potter?" a man with dark skin and a deep voice called.

"Yes, Auror Shacklebolt?" James bent down to answer the man, "What is it?"

"We're using your on-call shift tonight," Shacklebolt said quickly. Harry nodded to herself, understanding now why her father had been so quick to respond to her flooing in. He must have been awake already and felt the wards fluctuate. "There's been reports of a fire in the Lower Alleys, and we've already got both squads out dealing with a domestic dispute that turned violent and injured several muggles living in the apartment above the magical couple."

James fingered his bangs distractedly, "Okay, Shacklebolt, I'll be right through."

The Auror's head nodded, then disappeared.

James turned to Harry and said, "I've got to go, Harry, but please think about how dangerous it is for you to be out so late. You're only a child still, however grown-up you feel with a wand in your hand. Please don't let this happen again."

"Okay, Dad," Harry said, "I'm sorry. Be safe tonight."

"Will do," James said. He reached out to ruffle Harry's hair and she let him, though she really didn't appreciate when people did that. Yet another reason she mourned her long hair. No one ruffles long hair. "Night, little Fawn."

He left, and Harry walked wearily upstairs to her bedroom. At the sight of her bed she nearly groaned out loud. It was as if her body had been refusing to admit how tired it was, but gave way under the sudden temptation of four fluffy pillows and a heavenly down comforter. Her limbs carried her forward and onto the soft mattress in a trance, and she didn't even take off her shoes before allowing her head to hit the pillow. She could scarcely believe the day she had had. She closed her eyes with relief, not knowing that she would snap them open once more in just a few short hours after a paralyzing nightmare visited her dreams. A nightmare about fire and

death, blue vests and red ink. For now, however, she drifted eagerly into oblivion, and her last thought before sleep was a fervent wish that the rest of the summer went by as uneventfully as humanly possible.

Harry got her wish. Between being grounded and starting to prepare for the coming school year, the next few weeks passed in a blur of normality. Her twelfth birthday came and went with little ceremony, though she and Archie did have a cake that shouted rude insults every time you cut into it, courtesy of James and Sirius. She received a few presents, mostly academic in nature, including a new pureblood etiquette book from Pansy and a school planner that automatically color coded assignments from one Hermione Granger, which she stored with 'her' school supplies so that Archie could take it with him to AIM in September.

She had to owl-deliver her potions to Mr. Krait for the week she was grounded, which was a tedious and annoying process involving much smaller packages and numerous owl-induced wounds on her hands from dealing with unfamiliar birds, and she apologized profusely to Leo in case he had looked for her those days, but he waved it off. The Court of the Rogue was picking up the pieces after Claw's attack, and rebuilding the Dragon took up a lot of Leo's time in the weeks following the fire in any case.

Harry used the week she was grounded industriously, and soon she'd finished the first-year owl school curriculum and taken the final exam. It occurred to Harry that the people at Sphinx Correspondence School of Magic were inordinately trusting, if they let her take the exams at home without a sworn proctor or at least a parental signature, but perhaps the parchment was charmed not to allow cheating. It didn't make much difference to Harry, who had learned the material twice now, and she finished her first year as Harry Potter nearly a month ahead of schedule.

With all of her schoolwork out of the way, she had more time to devote to Polyjuice Potion research. Harry had found a very

interesting spell that was traditionally used by magical couples who were looking to have children and wanted to see how their genes mixed.

The spell was in the book on blending she'd gotten from the shop on Diagon Alley, and as such it essentially blended two people's physical characteristics. It required the same input that the Polyjuice Potion did, but instead of adding one hair, you added two.

Technically, one could add whatever part of a person they could get their hands on, but everyone in the potion community agreed hairs were the easiest and most ethical thing to take-if ethical was indeed a word that could be applied to the impersonation of another wizard. After all, a hair didn't generally cause pain in appropriation, unlike fingernails or blood, both of which also carried magical signatures in them. After scanning the magical signatures via hair, the spell required an input command to determine the sex of the 'child.' Then the spell took both hairs and transformed them into one. It blended the hairs together, and the idea was that the parents could then use the blended hair in a Polyjuice Potion and transform some random kid into their theoretical kid so they could get a good look at him or her. The book suggested using a muggle child and obliterating him afterwards, but the book had been written in the medieval period, so Harry ignored much of the author's opinionating.

The best part was that the discovery of this spell meant most of Harry's work was done for her. Clearly the spell didn't blend just the hairs, but the magical signatures attached to the hairs. This meant that Harry didn't have to worry about trying to figure out what characteristics a person who looked halfway between she and Archie would have. More importantly, however, it meant she didn't have to try and simulate the impossible task of creating a unique magical signature that coded for the physical characteristics she needed. The spell took care of that by blending the signatures instead of trying to create a whole new one, and it also consolidated the two signatures into a Polyjuice-friendly package. Once she got the hang of the spell, all Harry would have to do is find an ingredient to make the potion semi-permanent.

Smiling down at her extensive notes on the spell she was about to attempt, Harry ran through the instructions once more, then went to find Archie. He would definitely want to see this.

She bumped into her mother upon leaving the Lab, and the beautiful redhead smiled with pleased surprise at the sight of her.

"Harry, you're surfacing rather early today, aren't you?" Lily asked teasingly.

Harry smiled in acknowledgement-it was only four o'clock in the afternoon, and even on the weekends it was true that Harry was rarely seen before dinnertime at six. "I'm going to find Archie. Have you seen him?"

Lily pursed her lips delicately in consideration, "I think he and Sirius were going to the Hogsmade branch of Zonko's today to check on the Marauder sales. They had to run a few errands first, though, and they only left about an hour ago, so you could probably catch up with them if you flooed directly to the Three Broomsticks."

Harry hesitated, but really, what else did she have to do? It would be somewhat suspicious if she told Lily she couldn't talk to Archie about what she needed him for in public or around Sirius. Also, it wasn't likely that Madam Rosmerta would recognize her from the one time Snape had brought her through the Three Broomsticks' floo, so there was no reason she couldn't go to Zonko's to see her cousin and uncle. She really should take more of an interest in the Marauder line anyway. Archie loved pranks, after all, and it would help her credibility as him if she was at least up to date about her family's latest joke products. "Okay," Harry said decisively, "I'll go meet them there. Thanks, mom."

"Sure, darling," Lily said, adding, "Oh, could you pick me up something from Honeydukes while you're in Hogsmade?"

"Of course," Harry said, "More ice mice?"

Lily smiled a bit helplessly, "I don't know what's gotten into me lately, but the last couple of weeks I've just been craving the stuff. You don't mind? I just need a few more boxes and then I'm sure I won't want any more..."

Harry nodded agreeably, well aware that Lily had been saying that she only wanted a 'few more boxes' of ice mice for a good three weeks. Poor James was heading to Honeydukes every other day it seemed, so Harry would try to get a bunch of the squeaky little sweets this time to hold Lily over until she got through this strange craving of hers.

She grabbed her trusty red-velvet moneybag, and with a speed only magic could engineer, Harry stepped out of the fireplace and into Hogsmede barely five minutes later.

The street was packed with shoppers that Saturday afternoon, but Harry ducked and weaved through the crowd with ease. She'd been traipsing through the crowds on Diagon alley for so long now that the masses of people didn't even phase her. She reached Honeydukes in no time and began looking around for the ice mice. It seemed that the owners had re-arranged the shop since she'd last been in, so it took her a few minutes to find her mother's new favorite sweet. The ice mice were now by the window, and in between loading box after box of the sweet into her basket and ignoring the curious looks she was getting from the other customers-none of whom seemed to have ever encountered a person with a healthy taste for ice mice before-Harry happened to glance through the glass at the crowded street. Her eyes were immediately drawn to a wizard who seemed to be parting the crowds with sheer willpower, and Harry resisted the urge to shrink away from the window in sudden alarm.

It was Professor Snape. He was striding purposely down the street, in the direction of what Harry thought might be the apothecary. He stood at least a head over most of the other wizards on the street, but it was his aloof and unapproachable expression that set him apart from everyone else. She stared at him with no small amount of frustration. If she were really who she pretended to be, would she be

standing here, denied the right to cross the street and strike up a conversation with her mentor? Better yet, if Hogwarts still allowed Halfbloods and Harry could simply be herself, would she perhaps be striding alongside Snape at this very moment, helping him with his summer errands as she soaked up potions expertise and sought advice on her Polyjuice experimentations?

No, Harry shook her head, it was a silly thought. If Snape knew who she really was, he would likely be even less keen on accepting her as his student than he had been in the beginning. He loathed her father more than he did Sirius, after all, and though Harry was hazy on the details, she knew it had something to do with her mother, who had been childhood friends with Snape before going off to AIM. Harry didn't really want to know more than that, though she strongly suspected the hatred had begun when they were all eleven. James met Lily at Kings Cross station when she went to see Snape off to Hogwarts, and immediately declared his passionate love for the pretty red-haired child and proposed marriage, completely ignoring a young Severus Snape's possible prior claim to Lily's affections. Or something. Harry shuddered. It was quite simply too gross to contemplate.

In any case, being herself would probably never have helped in her goal of earning the Professor's academic esteem, and if she had been allowed into Hogwarts in the first place she probably wouldn't be studying Polyjuice Potion at all. Her thoughts were nothing but ungrounded fancy, so she turned from the window and purchased her basket full of ice mice without further consideration of might-have-beens. Harry did check to make sure Snape was still inside the Apothecary before she darted over to Zonko's, however. She really wasn't prepared to have all of her plans explode in her face because of one ill-fated sighting of her notorious green eyes in Rigel Black's familiar face by one of the few men probably shrewd enough to put it all together in an instant given the right information.

Harry entered Zonko's quickly, and immediately spotted her uncle Sirius near the Marauder display cases, surrounded by children of all

ages who were eager to meet one of the famed prank legends. Archie stood off to the side, watching with exasperated fondness as his dad played the crowds, hamming it up and sending all the children into delighted fits of laughter. Not that it wasn't completely condescending of her to refer to the kids gathered around her uncle as children, being herself only recently turned twelve, but obsessive public displays of adoration and those who either committed or basked in them had always seemed to Harry to be a bit childish. It wasn't just that she herself hated attention-or perhaps it was. Maybe her own dislike of the lime light had made her look just the tiniest bit down upon anyone who truly enjoyed fame or infamy, as Sirius and James often did for their pranking expertise.

Archie, at least, seemed to share her opinion, as he shook his head with an expression that revealed complete acceptance without any understanding and moved away to look about the shop while Sirius entertained his fans. Harry went over to intercept him.

She tapped him on the shoulder and Archie spun around with an expression that was impatient before he caught sight of her.

"Harry!" Archie blinked, then smiled broadly, "What are you doing in here? My birthday was last week, you know, so it's a little late to be shopping for me."

"Surprise," Harry said mildly, "I wanted to talk to you about something, but you weren't home, so Lily sent me to find you."

Archie lifted an unconvinced brow, "Aunt Lily was out of ice mice again, wasn't she?" His eyes flicked meaningfully toward the Honeydukes bag in her hand, and Harry shrugged helplessly.

"My mother is now a slave to her own strange cravings," Harry said, "Although I really did want to talk to you."

"What about?" Archie asked curiously.

"Our little project," Harry said as softly as she could to still be heard over the din, "I've had a major breakthrough. I think the next stage should be ready before we go back to school."

"Really?" Archie asked, sounding impressed, "You can finish everything in three weeks?"

"As long as what you and I are going to do when we get home works out," Harry said, "Yes."

Archie grinned, "Right on. So as long as you're here, we need to take care of an aspect of your education you've been seriously neglecting."

Harry sighed a bit, "I suppose we do. So tell me what the cutting edge of the pranking business is, Arch."

"I'll do you one better," Archie said, "I'm gong to buy all the basics while we're here and explain them, then when you get to school you'll know what to do-and you'll have to do something this year, Harry. The first year I can say I'm settling in, but this year you have to cause some mayhem in my name or my dad will think I'm abandoning the family traditions."

Harry winced. She still felt pretty bad for inadvertently messing up Archie and Sirius' relationship. "Okay," Harry said, "I know what most of this stuff is already-I might not participate, but I have been a member of this family for a decade or so. Just go over the new stuff with me and pick out the ones I'll need."

Archie happily agreed. Twenty minutes later Harry and Archie were laden with everything from all-purpose pranking tape to ever-changing fabric dye. They'd even picked up a few of the Marauders' newest product, which had been officially dubbed the Barrier Button. The only thing Harry firmly declined was dung bombs. She still couldn't stand the things.

"But all of this stuff is just the accessories that make pulling off a prank easier," Archie had cautioned her before they proceeded to the checkout stand, "A good prank isn't tossing a stink pellet at someone or turning their food blue. The best pranks are original, creative, and remarkable, and that comes from the prankster. It's about finding obscure spells that no one imagined could be used in comical situations, or about using mundane objects in a way that is so hilarious people tell their children about it. If you aren't going to really try, don't bother pranking anyone, okay? I mean it, Harry. I'd rather be known as a stick in the mud than a copycat prankster without class or finesse."

Harry scowled slightly, "Yeah, I'll try not to embarrass you with my inexpertise in this area, cousin."

"Much obliged," Archie grinned, "Now lets get this stuff paid for so we can drag Dad away from his adoring fans. I think his head is blown quite big enough for one day."

That evening, Harry asked her parents if she could sleepover at Archie's house and the two of them holed up in Archie's bedroom where Harry explained the finer points of the spell.

"So we have to do it twice, right?" Archie said, "Once for a boy and once for a girl, if we're sticking to the plan where neither of us actually change our gender."

Harry nodded firmly. Definitely they would be sticking to that plan. "Ready?" she asked, face alight with excitement. They were just so close.

Archie nodded, "Let's do it."

They each plucked a hair from their heads and placed them into the correct positions in the runic circle Harry had drawn in temporary chalk on Archie's bedroom floorboards. All she knew about runes was what she'd picked up from doing Flint's OWL-level Ancient Runes homework for a year, but the book on the blending spell had

very helpfully included a diagram of the required circle, so Harry had simply copied it out onto the floor. Her understanding of the runes was good enough to be able to tell that they at least weren't summoning demons or making blood sacrifices, so Harry wasn't terribly worried about using a runic configuration she didn't fully understand.

Once the hairs were in place, Harry sealed the circle and began the chain of wand movements she'd memorized that would channel the spell properly through her wand. More importantly, at least for Harry who wasn't exactly familiar with the theory behind the magic she was attempting, she concentrated her will very strongly on the desired outcome of the spell. She willed-read 'asked nicely'-her magic to act as the spell required and blend the magical signatures of the two hairs in the circle. When the long chain of wand movements was complete, Harry waved her wand in a pattern that mimicked the rune for 'man,' which would indicate a preference for a male result, and intoned the words of the spell carefully and clearly.

" *Miscetis Essentiae* ."

Harry stiffened as the spell began to work. She could feel the magic course through her, like no spell she'd ever attempted. Instead of a small stream of magic being drawn from her outer core, it was as if the spell had forced a floodgate to open at the very heart of her inner core. The magic came pouring out of her. It flooded the runic circle she was standing over until the chalk lines lit up with an eerie glow, as if the magic within its boundaries was so strong it had to be manifested in a physical outlet. And still the spell demanded more. Harry could actually *feel* her magical core draining steadily, and when the feeling did not stop after a moment or two, Harry became slightly alarmed. The spell had her in its grip at that point, however, so there was nothing she could do except grit her teeth and keep her will focused on the proper outcome, so that at least the magic would not be wasted.

The runes began changing before Harry's eyes as magic continued to fill the circle. They shifted and transformed, faster and faster until

they blurred, and Harry's limited knowledge of the art couldn't make heads or tails of the process. Was this supposed to happen? Harry had no idea, but it was both mesmerizing and terrifying, like watching a great majestic dragon being just barely contained by its keepers. It was awe-inspiring, but there was an element of danger always present, because if at any time the magic found a weakness in either the circle or Harry herself, she knew instinctively that it would break free of its constraints and roam free, wild and at the current levels devastating. Harry held firm, but in the back of her mind was the idea that runic magics were definitely not things to be messed with.

It was her good fortune that the runic circle she'd copied had been a good one and held the magic firmly in the desired form until the spell's processes were complete. The runes settled after a final burst of light, and where there had been two hairs in the circle there was now one hair, innocent and completely unextraordinary despite the sheer amount of magic that had gone into the spell. The final phase of the spell dissolved the runic sphere completely, as if it had never been there. Harry blinked, thinking that this must be why the book made no mention of what kinds of material to draw the circle with—clearly the medium didn't matter, as it was consumed by the spell in any case.

Archie reached forward to pick up the hair carefully, saying, "It's almost anti-climactic, looking at this tiny strand of hair after all that."

Harry smiled tiredly in response. Her limbs felt heavy and weak, while at the same time her head felt lighter than the air around her. Was this magical over-exertion? It was terribly disorienting, she thought idly. "I don't feel very well," Harry said out loud.

Archie peered at her with concern, "Did the spell do something strange to you?"

Harry shook her head, then stilled abruptly when the action made her dizzy, "No, it just took a lot of magic from me, I think."

Archie nodded, "I could feel it even from over where I was watching. Do you need a Pepper-up Potion? I think Dad has one in the downstairs bathroom."

Harry was going to decline, but a good look at her core with her magical senses had her reconsidering. What was once a ball of fire surrounded by writhing snake-like tendrils was now unrecognizable. There were a few stray coils of magic hanging like loose skin around her inner core. Usually her true core was a tightly-compressed ball of fire and superheated gas, not unlike a miniature sun, but now it looked like a weakly spinning sphere of magical glitter. Just the barest specks of magical power swirled around and around in a lazy way, and the snakes that were supposed to hide the true core from view were just resting, as if exhausted, in suspension above her pitifully drained core. Already, she could feel her core working quickly to replenish itself. She felt the generation of more magic like hot internal combustion in her chest, but even as fast as it was rejuvenating itself, it had never been quite so depleted.

"Yeah, I think I'd better take one," Harry said, a little uneasy at how low her magic levels had gotten without her control. Even in the midst of the Sleeping Sickness, Harry didn't remember ever being this pressed for magic. Still, it looked like the spell had worked.

Archie ran and grabbed the Pepper-up Potion for Harry, who felt immediately better, if not fully recovered, after taking it.

"So do you think it worked?" Archie asked.

Harry grinned a bit, "Only one way to find out. Want to test it now?"

Archie nodded eagerly and Harry hauled herself up to root around in the overnight bag she'd brought with her. She pulled out the small vial of Polyjuice potion she'd taken from one of the many control batches she'd been making over the summer and held it out to Archie. He put the hair in and watched with badly concealed impatience as the mixture turned a deep blue-grey. A mixture, she

presumed, of the electric-blue Archie's hair usually turned the potion and the deep charcoal grey her own hair normally effected.

"Bottoms up," Archie said, and he tipped the dose into his mouth as quickly as possible.

Harry watched carefully as Archie transformed, but he didn't seem to be in any more discomfort than what was usually experienced with Polyjuice. As usual, Archie's face began to slowly look more like Harry's did, but unlike in the past, it reached a certain point and then... stopped. Harry cocked her head consideringly.

Archie's hair hadn't changed at all, except for perhaps becoming messier. The color would stay the same and the theoretical magical signature didn't code for hairstyle, so Archie had kept his short-but-shaggy haircut. His eyes were also the same color, which gave Harry the hope that the girl version of their fused physical characteristics would have grey eyes as well. She was really getting tired of the contacts. His face had become just the tiniest bit more delicate than it already was. His chin was a tad bit more rounded, and his nose was a hair smaller, his eyes just a bit bigger. His eyebrows were a little thinner and his top lip curved just a tiny bit more than usual. Archie's eyelashes were perhaps noticeably thicker, but Harry hadn't ever paid enough attention to her cousin's eyelashes to be able to say for sure.

All in all, Archie looked like himself, only... different. It was hardly noticeable, Harry thought, though as she looked at him she was having trouble remembering just what exactly was so different about his old face. She started the smile slowly.

"This... is going to work," she said, taking the full effect in by stepping back a step, "Yes. Archie, you look like yourself."

"Isn't that... bad?" Archie asked, walking over to his bathroom to take a look in the mirror.

"No, it's good," Harry said, "Because this means that we look enough alike already that changing half-way into one another doesn't dramatically alter the way we appear. It means that after we take the potion, no one will be able to say with surety that we've somehow changed our appearances."

"Does this mean we can nix the whole 'potion regimen' idea?" Archie asked, "Because honestly the idea of slowly over the course of forever changing our appearance seems overly complicated. For one, it would be difficult to conceal all those different potions, not to mention hard to keep it all straight without you there to differentiate the doses. For another-what's the need? We haven't seen our friends since early July, and two months is probably enough time to dull their memories of us-or at least enough time that they will assign any lingering confusion about our appearances with the time we've been away. Also, if we take the potion before we see our friends but after we leave our parents, our family won't see us till winter break. They'll be more likely to notice the difference, but we can blame it on puberty. A lot can change in five months."

Harry stopped to consider this for a moment. "I suppose... that makes sense. I'll have to run the spell again for a girl to make sure the changes aren't too extreme for me either. Actually, I'll have to run the spell three more times once to test the girl version of our hybrid and then once more for each of us with the modified Polyjuice recipe." Harry frowned, "That might take a while, depending on how long it takes my magic to recover from the spell casting, but if everything goes smoothly... I guess it would work if we took the potions as you said, just before we see our friends but after we say goodbye to our parents."

Archie grinned, "This is going to be so cool. Like being in costume all the time, only no one else knows! Will we have to keep taking the potion as we get older?"

Harry nodded, "Yes, we will. Well, we don't have to, but it will look strange if we never change at all after this year. So each summer we'll re-do the test to reflect our aging, okay?"

"Sounds great," Archie said, "And you've got the modifications for the potion all worked out?"

"I think so," Harry said "Though of course it's only theory until I test it."

"That's just so comforting," Archie muttered half heartedly, "Still, I'm really impressed we've even gotten this far. The only bad part about this is that no one will ever know how awesome we are."

Harry smiled ruefully, "And that's the best case scenario."

Harry had one more thing to do before school started. It was this that found her several times a week in the Potter Library, researching something she'd never really paid much attention to before, despite training in the Healing arts.

Nutrition and Fitness.

If the night of the fire had taught Harry nothing else, it was of her fragility. Never in her life had she been so aware of her own physical weakness, helplessness, and mortality all at once. It had scared her, demoralized her, and then it had inspired her. She took it as a lesson well learned, and before the school year started she was determined to get started on a program that would help her slowly start overcoming the limitations of both her female form and her comfortable upbringing. Harry vowed to train until she was fit enough to chase and *catch* a pickpocket, and to learn to defend herself with and without a wand, so that she would never be put in a situation where she didn't know how to keep herself safe. What if Leo hadn't come? Worse, what if someone else had been depending on her that night, and freezing up under attack had put more than just her in immediate peril? Harry couldn't afford to let something like that happen again, and since disasters were notoriously hard to predict and therefore avoid, the only solution was to make herself into someone who could handle herself in the midst of danger.

So her new side project was to become capable in the most basic meaning of the word, and the start of her plans for getting into shape revolved around what Mrs. Hurst had said to her.

Apparently, she needed to eat more protein, because being a lazy vegetarian was stunting her growth. Harry would be the first to admit that she wasn't a very good vegetarian. She avoided meat more because she didn't really care for it than for any misplaced sympathies for her fellow barnyard animals. She also didn't exactly take great pains to make up for the lack of meat in her diet, as true vegetarians were supposed to, so Harry couldn't say she was terribly surprised her slight stature was due in part to her diet. Hadn't she thought when she started Hogwarts that keeping a vegetarian diet would be a great surface reasoning for anyone wondering down the road why she was smaller than the other boys in her class? Unfortunately, however, the 'excuse' turned out to be a little too close to the truth and she actually was going to make herself smaller than the others in her class-the other girls, that is.

Perhaps it was time for the truth to become a pretense, Harry thought wryly, that would be a nice change. And yet, it was probably the best plan. She would begin eating meat once more in secret, despite not having much taste for the stuff, but to everyone else she would remain a vegetarian, to explain her slight stature in case she ended up her mother's height, which was a rather modest 5 foot 6 inches.

In addition to the changes in her diet, Harry had been researching various exercise regimens. Mostly, this consisted of going through her mother's Witch Weekly magazines until she found the weekly workout and trying to find one that didn't sound ridiculous. She didn't exactly see herself jazzercising her abs into shape in the middle of the Slytherin common room. Even Pansy would be too embarrassed to speak to her. Eventually, Harry decided she needed to talk to a professional.

With this in mind, Harry flooed to her uncle Remus' two-bedroom condo in London one afternoon in mid-August to get some expert

advice.

"Uncle Remus?" she called quietly into the small house, "Are you home?"

A moment later a faint voice came up from the direction of the basement stairs. While none of the surrounding condos had basements, Remus' condition required him by law to keep a secure holding cell in his home. He didn't ever actually use the 'cell' in the basement, preferring to spend his full moons with Sirius and James at Grimmauld Place under the influence of the Wolfsbane Potion, so he had transformed his basement into a gym instead.

"Harry?" Remus called back, and though his tone was questioning, Harry knew he knew who she was. Very little confused a werewolf's senses, and their hearing was particularly keen, "Be right up!"

"Don't," Harry said, "I'm coming down."

She descended the stairs and passed through the barred gate that separated the stairs from the rest of the basement, creating the 'cell' when the gate was secured and warded. The basement was victim to a very obvious expansion charm, and was several times wider than the condo itself. It hosted various sets of weights and several different machines that must have been muggle in origin, as Harry had never seen their like outside of Remus' basement. Machines you ran on, machines with chords tied to weights that you pulled or pushed on in various positions, and a good third of the gym was dedicated to a mat-padded sparring floor. Harry knew most of the machines were gifts from Sirius, who as a pureblood wizard with naturally slim genetics found his friend's gym hobby to be terribly amusing, but they all looked well worn, so clearly Remus made good use of them no matter how ingenuine the intent behind them was.

Remus set down the weight he was squatting with and grinned a bit lopsidedly at her. "What's up, Harry?" he panted, wiping his face with a nearby towel, "It's a rare day for you to go out of your way to find someone."

Harry blinked, a bit taken aback by that statement. Was she really so distant from her family?

"I actually came here to ask you for a favor," Harry said, a bit apologetically, "I feel kind of bad about it now, though. Do I really never come to see you?"

Remus shrugged easily, "I didn't mean it like that. There's no need for us to seek one another out, since we see each other nearly every night for dinner at the very least. I wasn't rebuking, just commenting. What can I do for you, Harry?"

Harry glanced around the gym, "I've been thinking lately that I'm not very fit. Since you're the only person I know who exercises seriously, I figured you'd have some ideas of where to start."

Remus raised his eyebrows, "You want to get in shape? Isn't Quidditch enough? I know you enjoy it, and it would be easier to stick to sports than to try and plan a weight-regimen for someone your age. It's important not to damage the bones or muscles in the back by adding too much weight too soon at your age."

"Quidditch is good," Harry said, "And while I do want to be physically stronger, I was actually thinking something along the lines of self-defense training. That's good exercise, isn't it?"

"It is," Remus said slowly, "And good to know in general for a... well, girl." He smiled apologetically, but Harry nodded in understanding. "What brought this on, though?" her uncle asked, "Did something happen?"

Harry shook her head, hoping Remus wasn't paying enough attention to her heart rate to catch the lie, "I just read something about how girls were at an increased risk for predators of all kinds starting at around twelve or thirteen. So I thought it would be a good thing to learn now, rather than not learn it and wish I had later. Also, I really do need to start exercising."

Remus considered her quietly for a moment. He seemed to be sizing her up, weighing her request against his better judgment, and Harry felt herself grow unexpectedly uneasy at his contemplation. She had honestly never considered that he might refuse, for all that she had phrased the request politely. After all, why wouldn't he want to teach her self-defense? It was a good idea, and Remus liked spending time with her... didn't he? Now she was thinking perhaps she had gotten a little too used to her family's infinite generosity and care. Maybe she was taking more things for granted than she realized.

Finally, Remus said, "If I agree to teach you, Harry, I want you to understand what you'll be getting into. I'm not saying this to discourage you, but I've never been under the impression that you..." he trailed off, clearly uncertain of what he wanted to say, "What I mean is that you've always been very focused on some things and very apathetic about most other things. Learning a self-defense style takes a lot of dedicated effort, and I'm just wondering if you've got the... focus to commit the time and energy necessary."

Harry took a moment to respond, "I understand what you're saying, Uncle Remus, and I agree with a lot of it. I admit I have a tendency to devote my energy with extreme prejudice to the things that interest me most. What I would say, however, is that fitness and in particular self-defense has recently become something that interests me greatly. I honestly think that your teachings would not be wasted on me now, though they might have been if you'd tried teaching me as recently as a few weeks ago."

Remus had that concerned look again, but he didn't pry further. Instead, he said, "If that's what you think, then I will teach you. It's important to realize that this cannot be done in the little time we have before you go back to America, however. For now what I will do is design a regimen for you to follow once you are back at school, and when you come home in December we can evaluate your progress, okay?"

Harry nodded seriously. Remus was speaking to her as a student, not as a niece, and she instinctively reacted with respect, "Yes, sir."

Remus nodded in acceptance of the new dynamic, "We will begin immediately. I will start by teaching you a series of stretches and strengthening exercises. Learning to throw a punch won't help you if there's nothing behind it. I'll figure out what style, if any, I'll try to teach you tonight, so tomorrow morning report back here at six am and I'll let you know what I've decided while you join me on my morning run."

"Yes, sir," Harry said, feeling a bit overwhelmed. She had been right to come to Remus with this, she thought, but she was a little afraid of how quickly he was taking to his role as fitness coach.

"What are you waiting for, then?" Remus asked, "Go home and change into something you can sweat in."

Harry went.

She spent all afternoon under Remus' expert tutelage. Many would assume because of Remus' shabby and often-tired appearance that he did not take very good care of himself. Those that knew him, however, knew the truth. Remus had spent his life fighting the wolf within him, and that battle was waged on multiple plains. Remus was extremely well versed in multiple academic subjects, because studying hard in his youth helped him become mentally disciplined enough to hold the wolf at bay with his mind. His body, too, had to be conditioned to withstand the strain of both the monthly transformations and the wolf itself, which constantly sought control over the wizard's physical body as well as over his mind during the full moon. There was a reason werewolves often died young and tired. The wolf ate away at them one full moon at a time until there was nothing left. All the Wolfsbane potion in the world would not help if Remus did not have the will and the strength to fight the wolf at every turn. He was strong in mind, body, and spirit, but this was no accident-Remus had made it so.

He showed her how to limber and stretch both to reduce the chances of injury and to increase flexibility, of which Harry quickly discovered she had none. When he found she could barely press the weighted

bar on the dumbbells, Remus set her a series of arm and wrist strengthening exercises that she was to do every morning, noon, and night with a set of balls that looked like Medi-minis, only heavier. They seemed to grow heavier still as she went through her lifting, curling, and clenching exercises, but Remus assured Harry that it was merely an illusion of her own weakness. She was greatly reassured by this.

Remus made a rather good teacher, Harry found. He explained things before he expected her to do them, and he corrected her firmly but with boundless patience. He also didn't just stand there watching her work. He did all of the stretches and exercises himself, which Harry found helped her keep her pace and motivation up. When Harry's arms were shaking from the number of push-ups, pull-ups, and other various arm-torturing exercises she was instructed to perform, Remus let her go home for dinner with the promise that he would have some light leg weights for her to wear on their run the next day.

She groaned at the pain involved from merely lifting a hand to the floo pot in Remus' living room. Still, Harry could not regret her decision to do this. All she had to do was think back to the night she stood frozen and helpless in the arms of death, and her determination sparked violently anew. She would see this torture through, and she would never be a victim again.

The rest of the summer went by fast in a blur of activity. Before she knew it she had gotten school supplies, switched them in secret with Archie, said goodbye to her friends in the Rogue, Polyjuiced into her cousin for what would be (hopefully) the last time, and arrived at Kings Cross Station with Sirius for the start of her next year at Hogwarts.

She said goodbye to Sirius with as much good cheer as she knew Archie would have, if he were here and not back at the Potter residence, waiting to go to the airport for his flight to America.

"Be careful this year," Sirius said before she got onto the train, "No curing mysterious sicknesses or incurring life debts from dubious politicians. Just have fun, okay? And for Merlin's sake, go out for Quidditch."

Harry glanced awkwardly away, "It's just not the same without Harry there. We were always a team."

"The best chaser-beater team since the Prewitt twins, I'd say," Sirius winked at her, "But try out anyway. Who knows, maybe you'll find someone just as challenging to play with as Harry."

"Okay, Dad," Harry said, mustering up a big smile, "Love you."

"See you in December, sport," Sirius said, pulling her into a strong hug.

"See you," she smiled, stepping back. She waved and headed off toward the train, pausing to look one last time over her shoulder and smile reassuringly at Sirius before she shut the door behind her.

She ducked into a boy's bathroom and closed a cubical door behind her firmly. In her pocket, next to Archie's miniaturized trunk, was a vial of modified Polyjuice potion that Harry's fingers were itching to uncork.

It had taken her several days of straight research (in between breaks for Remus' merciless training exercises) to find an ingredient to add to the Polyjuice recipe that would make it permanent but also reversible. It turned out that the key wasn't in adding an ingredient to the actual recipe, but to the cauldron while the potion was being prepared. At first Harry didn't see the difference, because if you added something to the cauldron while you were making a potion, then surely you were adding it *to the potion*, but in the case of certain additives, you could add without adding, if that made sense.

Amber was the key. She had never used stones in potion making before, which was perhaps why it had taken her so long to come up

with the solution, but once she started looking into it, she found that amber was a stone of permanence. The ancient Egyptian wizards used to place amber stones inside caskets, because the magical energies the stone gave off preserved the body and ensured that it would forever remain whole. Gems, like many things in the world, were excellent magical lodestones. They absorbed natural magical energies from the earth, but because each type of stone had different properties, each stone shaped the wild magic a different way once it was absorbed.

It was similar to the way a witch or wizard's magical core shaped magic in different ways depending on the wizard's personality, physical condition, disposition, etc. Each type of stone imbued the wild magic it absorbed over time with different tendencies as it shaped the magic-passively, of course. Stones were not like wizards, who could overcome their natural tendencies toward shaping magic with simple intent and willpower. The magic in an amber stone would be similar to the magic in all other amber stones, because the nature of the stones were similar, and that was the entire determining factor in how the magic from the stone was shaped.

When a stone was added to the cauldron while a potion was brewing in it, the magic interacting in the cauldron drew out the magic stored in the stone. It was much like what she'd done with the modified Weightless Draft, in that it was a matter of adding shaped magic instead of imbuing the potion with only raw magic, only the shaped magic came from the stone, not from her. She couldn't have accomplished the same effect with her own magic because unlike with the imbued Wingardium Leviosa spell, she didn't know how to shape it into the sort of magic that would cause permanence on the scale she needed. The stone, which was dipped in a protective potion to protect its physical form, didn't interact with the potion in any way except to release its magic into it. The type of magic released depended on the stone. Amber was not actually made of minerals from the ground, as other gemstones were, but was in fact tree sap which had fossilized over millions of years. Its magic, when included in a ritual, could lend anything from power to protection to

the wizard invoking it, depending on the controlling runes involved. In a potion, however, it almost always increased the length of time the potion was effective-exponentially.

If her calculations were correct, the Polyjuice she had brewed on one pea-sized stone of amber should hold the ingredients which effected the reverse transformation in stasis for a little less than a year, thereby keeping the drinker in the transformed state for at least that long. Which was perfect, because she and Archie were going to re-do the blending spell every year and re-take the potion anyway. The only down side was that, because the potion could only be reversed by waiting for it to wear off, they would be unable to resume their original appearances immediately if the need arose. Not that she thought such a need was likely.

Probably the reason no one had done serious studies in the use of amber in Polyjuice was because so little increased the active time by so much that it was impractical for anyone who didn't want to remain transformed for months at a time. Really, who would want to be someone else for that long? The need was for a Polyjuice that worked for three, maybe four hours at a time, not three or four months.

Unless of course you were prepared to lie both explicitly and implicitly to everyone you knew for several years, in which case amber was the perfect solution to the Polyjuice problem.

She fingered the vial nervously. She had waited a good fifteen minutes for the Polyjuice she took to look like Archie for Sirius' benefit to wear off, and now she was ready to take the modified version. Once she drank it, there would be no going back for an entire year. With one last, deep breath as Harry Potter, she dropped in the blended hair she'd prepared and knocked the dose back in one gulp. Rigel Black, Hogwarts second-year, stepped out of the cubicle a few moments later, grimacing at the too-familiar taste in her mouth and moving toward the mirror to inspect her new image.

She really hadn't changed that much. Her face was perhaps a little sharper, less delicate in the minutest details. Her eyes were unequivocally grey now, the exact shade that Archie's were, though perhaps a shade lighter than the contacts she wore last year had been. They now had that indescribable sheen to them that always set the Black's apart, though they weren't quite the silver that the Malfoy's were known for. Her bottom lip was a bit thinner. Her hair, to her secret pleasure, looked significantly more manageable than she remembered it being, despite the fact that it was now grown out a bit from the close-cropped curls she'd had at the beginning of the previous year. She also felt slightly taller, but that was probably wishful thinking.

All in all, Rigel thought she looked noticeably different, but not unrecognizable. More importantly, she now looked exactly like Archie did, while still remaining a girl beneath her clothes. That meant she didn't have to worry about many of the things she'd worried about last year. She could try out for Quidditch and not worry that if she made it Sirius would want a picture of his son in his Slytherin robes. She could see people who knew her as Harry and still pretend to be Archie-as long as she didn't have to pretend for long. Most important of all, Rigel Black was now a distinctly different person, at least in appearance, from Harry Potter, and the differences would only increase as she grew older. In a couple of years it would be impossible for anyone to trace Rigel Black back to her without information that only she and Archie knew.

Rigel left the bathroom to find her friends. The train had long since started moving, so she was fairly sure she would find them all settled into the same compartment. She found them without much effort and slid open the compartment door after knocking politely.

She was met with various expressions of exasperated relief from Draco, Pansy, Millicent, and Theo, while Blaise just smirked superiorly and said, "See? I told you Rigel must be on the train. He was probably chatting with those Gryffindor cohorts of his."

Draco scowled in mild annoyance, "You went and saw those lion-hearted idiots before you came to see us?"

Rigel smiled uncomfortably, "Well, I'm here now. Good to see you all."

"And you as well, Rigel," Pansy said, "Come and sit. Tell us about your summer. You look different, did you do something new with your hair today?"

Rigel took the window seat beside Pansy and across from Draco, "If wetting it before combing counts as different, yes. As for my summer, nothing much to tell. Draco's birthday party was really the highlight of my break."

Draco grinned in a way that Rigel knew meant he'd forgiven her for being late and worrying him, "As it should be. So, excited for the new year?"

Rigel shrugged, "I suppose, though it won't really be much different from last year."

"Except for the part where we aren't the fresh meat anymore," Millicent said.

"And the part where everyone falls prey to a mysterious illness that our friend Rigel just as mysteriously cures," Theo added. He raised his brows at the mild glares and eye-rolls he got from the rest of the compartment, "I'm just saying."

"You're all forgetting the most important part of this year," Draco said grandly. The look on his face was the one he wore when he was about to say something outrageously self-important just to get a rise out of everyone else. Rigel was of the opinion that Draco thought being a Malfoy was in itself a sort of inside joke that he could play on the uninitiated. The Slytherins all knew better than to take him seriously by now, but anyone else became affronted and/or insulted

by Draco's over-the-top narcissism. Their offense only seemed to fuel him.

"What's that, Draco?" Pansy asked solemnly.

"Last year Terence Higgs graduated," Draco said brightly, "Which means that *this* year I'm going to be starting seeker. I expect you all to cheer with gusto."

"Don't you have to try out again?" Millicent pointed out.

"The tryouts are a formality," Draco said, "The only position that really needs filling this year is beater. Derrick is banned from extracurriculars because his grades fell below the cut off last semester."

"Peregrine Derrick?" Pansy asked, "I wasn't under the impression that he was particularly thick."

"He's not," Draco said, "A lot of the starters fell behind in their school work last semester, though. Flint was scheduling practices almost impossibly often, though somehow the captain still had the best grades on the team. He's inhuman."

"Beater?" Rigel said, "Will there be a lot of people trying for the position?"

Draco fixed her with hopeful eyes, "Interested? You should try out. It would be great to have you on the team, and you're an excellent flyer when you don't have a broken wrist to hide."

Rigel smiled slightly, "Maybe I will."

"All right, I'm going to stop you two before the Quidditch talk goes any further," Millicent said, "I am not about to sit here and talk sports for the next three hours."

"Seconded," Blaise said lazily, "Let's talk about something more interesting."

"Like what?" Theo said, "Politics?"

There were murmurs of interested agreement at the suggestion, and Harry smiled wryly to herself as even Draco gave an amiable assent to the change of subject. Only Slytherin produced twelve-year-olds who thought politics more interesting than Quidditch.

Then again, for the children of those witches and wizards who lived and breathed according to politics, it was a lot less like theoretical ethics and a lot more like gossip.

"Anyone else feel like there was something really big supposed to be going on this summer that... didn't?" Theo began tentatively.

The others exchanged looks of dark agreement.

"It was some sort of legislation," Millicent said, "I know that much from listening to my parents talk while they think I'm absorbed in my reading. It was supposed to be pushed through this summer, but instead it was taken off the agenda."

"Not completely, though," Pansy added, "It was tabled for revision, at least that's the official story. Unofficially I believe the party reconsidered the timing of the proposed legislation and opted to wait for fairer weather in which to introduce it."

"But what was the legislation?" Theo asked, concerned, "It must have been the SOW Party's if they decided to wait-it's no secret that Dumbledore's credibility and base of support swelled after the curing of the sickness, so I'm not surprised the Party would hesitate before making any major moves against Dumbledore's faction, but what was it going to be?"

"It's big," Millicent said, "Very big. And highly anti-muggle blood, I believe."

"Aldon said something last semester..." Pansy trailed off, looking hesitant, "I thought he was teasing me, but this summer I caught my

mother going through the books of Gold and Silver, making a list of names. Male names."

Draco frowned, but Theo just shrugged, "What's so shocking about that? I mean, all the society mothers make lists like that for their daughters at some point. I'd be more surprised if your mother didn't have one already."

Pansy bit her lip, "I would agree, except that I saw a few of the names before she folded the list away. They didn't belong to purebloods."

Blaise finally spoke up, "All of you are correct for the most part. There is very controversial legislation being cooked up by the SOW Party, and they were indeed planning to introduce it this summer. It also has a lot to do with why your mother was looking up half-blood lineages, Pansy. Part of the legislation is a Marriage Law that severely disadvantages those of muggle blood. There is more to it than that, of course, and there are revisions and additions being made to it even now, but that is the heart of the situation."

"How do you know this, Blaise?" Millicent demanded, "Even your mother wouldn't spill Party secrets to the uninitiated."

"One hears things," Blaise said vaguely, "But I'm not the only one. Rigel doesn't look surprised at all by this, does he? Grimly resigned, perhaps, but certainly not surprised."

The others turned to look at her, and Rigel winced internally at the slightly betrayed look Pansy in particular was giving her.

"You knew of this, Rigel? You knew there was going to be new marriage legislation and you didn't say anything?" the blonde girl asked, the hurt thinly masked by stiff effort.

Rigel nodded slowly, "I was aware of the possibility of such a law, yes, but I didn't tell you for several reasons. One is that I didn't expect the law to pass, particularly after the SOW Party's plans

concerning the sleeping sickness did not exactly pan out the way they expected. Another is that the law will mean only what you want it to, for purebloods like-us." She had almost said 'like you,' but luckily caught herself in time, "There is nothing for you to worry about, Pansy. Your mother was likely just exploring all options, but the law would not require purebloods to marry halfbloods by any stretch. It is quite the opposite."

Blaise raised his eyebrows consideringly, "You are even more informed than I'd realized. I was able to glean only the bare bones of the legislation, but you speak as though you've read through a copy of it at your leisure."

Rigel shrugged uncomfortably, "This legislation will have far worse consequences for my family than it will for any of yours. I'm not saying this to make you guys uncomfortable or anything, but it's the truth. Some of the people I hold closest to me have muggle blood. Because of this, my family had a more vested interest in the proposed legislation than perhaps yours did. I didn't want to bring it up when it might make you all feel sorry for me or resent me for complaining when you yourselves had nothing to do with it."

Draco finally spoke up, "I understand that, Rigel, and I don't think any of us blame you for not wanting to talk about it, especially when it was only a possibility, not a certainty, but there is something I don't understand. You said the SOW Party had plans concerning the sleeping sickness. What did you mean by that?"

Rigel gazed sadly at her friend, "You already know what I mean, don't you? I could see it in your eyes when people were falling ill. You had a vague idea that the sickness wasn't accidental, didn't you?"

Draco looked away, an uncomfortable frown on his face, "I can't believe that my father, all of our fathers and mothers, would knowingly endanger their Heirs for strategic gain. Even if that's what makes sense politically, I know that my parents would never do that to me."

Pansy spoke up tentatively, "But we never *were* in danger, Draco. I know, I know how close it was for you, but the only reason you became so ill was because they unexpectedly switched the ingredients in the sustenance potions to something you were allergic to. Your parents would never have foreseen that, if they did in fact know about the sickness." She looked a little disturbed, "Somehow it makes too much sense. Like I always knew but never wanted to admit it to myself. Rigel, I think you're right. The SOW Party did have something to do with the sickness."

"Of course," Millicent said slowly, "Yes, because if kids fall sick, Dumbledore loses credibility, and Dumbledore's faction is what stands in the way of anti-muggle legislation. If the sickness was as benign as it was intended to be, then no harm comes to us, but the sickness can't be logically traced back to the SOW Party, because all of our parents are big supporters of it and people will assume exactly what Draco did-that parents would never endanger their Heirs. It all fits."

"Except it wasn't as benign as it was supposed to be," Draco said angrily, "You're telling me that I almost *died* for a piece of legislation to be passed. A piece of legislation that sounds like it has nothing to even *do* with us. It's just some law about halfbloods getting married, and for that we lived in constant fear for months at Hogwarts. Just pawns in some political maneuver that obviously wasn't well-planned out if it went so horribly wrong that the Heir to the Party's biggest supporter nearly *died* ."

He was breathing heavily, scowling so hard none of them could meet his eyes.

Rigel spoke softly, "Someone made a mistake, Draco, but it wasn't any of us, and it wasn't really your parents, either. They weren't there, so I'm sure they didn't understand how it was when the sickness hit. I'm sure it made a lot of good sense to the Party leaders when it was proposed, if indeed any of them actually knew about it, which we're not sure they did."

"Don't act like it isn't obvious now that it's said," Draco scoffed, "You all read the interview my father gave the day I fell ill. He wasn't worried at all about me, just worried about putting the right spin on the situation."

Rigel bit her lip, wondering how long Draco had kept quiet in loyal denial about these thoughts.

"Exactly, Draco," Pansy said, "He wasn't worried because he knew the sickness wasn't going to harm you, not because he didn't care. When he realized the danger to you, didn't he and your mother come to Hogwarts immediately? Didn't they stay there for days under Quarantine?"

"They were really scared for you, Draco," Rigel added truthfully, "Your father nearly killed me when he realized who had been brewing the potions that caused your allergy. He didn't sleep, and he barely ate a thing. He moved mountains to get Snape home ahead of schedule just on the off chance that the Professor might be able to save you. Don't blame your father for this, Dray. It truly was an accident."

"And you didn't die," Theo put in, "Rigel saved you. I guess that means that you're the reason this legislation was tabled, doesn't it, Rigel? Since you cured the sickness and then turned around to give the credit to Dumbledore, thereby restoring his political clout."

Rigel fidgeted under the others' scrutiny, "I suppose in a round-about way that's true."

Pansy just shook her head, "So you've known at least since you cured the sickness that it was a political move. I did wonder why you made it sound like Snape and Dumbledore had done all the work when anyone asked." She considered Rigel seriously, "We might make a decent politician of you, yet."

"Except he's playing for the wrong side," Millicent pointed out, "I mean, shouldn't we be upset that Rigel foiled the Party's plans? He

basically made it so that we all fell sick for nothing."

Draco and Pansy glared at Millicent, but the dark-haired girl just shrugged, "I'm not saying I'm not grateful to Rigel for saving Draco, I'm just pointing out the political technicalities of the suggestion."

"Because the sickness went so wrong, not even the Party can truly blame Rigel for curing it and setting back their plans," Blaise said thoughtfully, "It would be far worse if the Malfoy scion had died, even if it did get the legislation passed. The Party would lose a lot of support if the reason for the sickness got out, as it surely would if the Malfoy's turned on the Party in their justified grief and anger."

"Well, as mercilessly as Blaise just phrased that, it sounds about right," Theo said, "And I for one can't blame Rigel for working against the Party's political agenda if the legislation means bad news for his family. I mean, even the biggest Party supporters understand that family comes before politics and even House loyalties."

The others agreed with various degrees of vehemence, and after that the conversation drifted to other things. All of them were aware of the tentative balance they had achieved, though. They had never brought it up, but Rigel knew her friends had always wondered just who she was loyal to, despite having said repeatedly that she had no interest in politics. As it was now abundantly clear that Rigel both understood and even actively influenced politics when it became necessary, it was much harder for them to act as though she was no different than the rest of them. Thankfully, they were too polite to voice any distain or disgruntlement concerning Rigel's conflicting loyalties. She wasn't sure, however, how long such a situation could last in the face of the ever-thickening political soup that was seeping into their lives as they grew older.

When their true loyalties were eventually called upon, could any of them really remain her friends?

That was a thought for the future, however, so she ignored it. She didn't want to worry about politics just then. Instead, Rigel made a

promise to herself that she would not get caught up in anything serious or complicated that year. She wanted to focus on enjoying the friendships she'd formed but neglected the previous year, and on furthering her studies and extracurriculars. This year she wouldn't distance herself from her housemates. She would get to know them in truth, rather than in passing. Rigel told herself she wasn't going to care about anything that happened outside of Hogwarts until June. She would concentrate on her studies and her friends, and actually enjoy herself.

After all, what was the point of risking her very soul for her dream if she didn't even stop to appreciate the fruits of her labor? She was at Hogwarts, for Merlin sake. She, a halfblood, was attending Hogwarts and studying under Professor Snape, the greatest Potion Master that ever lived. Politics could wait. She had good friends and a great opportunity to learn, and she was not going to waste either one.

Their group got off of the train and, instead of following Hagrid, set off toward the carriages for the first time. Rigel had caught glimpses of the carriages the previous year, as they were the same ones used to ferry the third years to Hogsmede, and so could be seen coming and going from the grounds every other month or so. There was something different about them, though, and Rigel couldn't put her finger on what it was until she realized with a horrified jolt that the last time she'd seen these carriages they had been pulling themselves.

Now, however, great black horses with soulless white eyes and wide, leathery wings stood restlessly before the carriages. The horses were thin to the point of unnaturalness, and their heads were shaped more like a small dragon's, long and pointy, than any horse she'd ever seen.

"What are those?" Rigel blurted, stunned into voicing her thoughts abruptly. She got a feeling of unease about the creatures, which only intensified when one of them turned its glittery, white eyes on her

and seemed to sniff the air in her direction with interest. She was pretty sure she caught a glimpse of fang, as well.

"What are what?" Pansy said absently, scanning the cue around them and smiling politely at people she knew.

"Those horses pulling the carriages," Rigel said, "They weren't there last year, were they?"

Pansy looked toward the carriages, then back toward Rigel, then back to the carriages, before shaking her head, "There's nothing pulling the carriages, Rigel."

Rigel blinked, then frowned, "You can't see them?"

"Of course she can't," Theo spoke up from behind Rigel, "None of them can, Rigel."

Rigel turned to Theo, who looked upon the skeletal horses with an expression of great distaste. "What do you mean?" she asked, "You can see them, can't you?"

"Yes," Theo said shortly, "I can."

"What are you two talking about?" Draco scowled, looking between them and the carriages with frustrated confusion, "They're horseless carriages."

"No, they aren't," a voice spoke from behind them. It was Aldon Rosier, and his expression was unusually serious, "Those beasts are called thestrals, Black. You aren't imagining them, most people just can't see them."

Edmund Rookwood, who was standing behind Rosier beside a blank-faced Alesana Selwyn, nodded his head in agreement, adding, "A fact they should be thankful for."

Rigel narrowed her eyes, "But why-"

"Come on, Aldon," Rookwood interrupted her, "Let's get inside."

The three of them went to climb into a carriage, and Rigel, suddenly possessed with a fierce curiosity, started after them.

"See you at the feast," she said quickly to her friends, before jogging over to jump into the carriage with Rosier, Rookwood, and Selwyn.

The upperclassmen looked at her with raised eyebrows and expectant expressions. Rigel flushed slightly at her own rudeness, but she had to know.

"Why can only Theo and I see the-the thestrals?" she asked.

Selwyn frowned and opened her mouth, but Rookwood put a hand on her shoulder repressively. "There's no use trying to protect the boy if he can already see them," Rookwood pointed out in his deep, mountain-voice.

"Then why didn't you just tell me?" Rigel asked, trying not to sound petulant.

"Pansy didn't need to hear," Rosier said, gazing at Rigel with an emotion that was hard to unravel. It was something like interest, but tempered with a solemn sort of pity, "She worries about her friends too much. It would only upset her."

Rigel was becoming more and more uneasy the longer they hinted and prevaricated, "Are you going to tell me why, or just make vague generalities until I look it up myself?"

"It's death, okay?" Selwyn snapped, her kohl-rimmed eyes roiling with suppressed emotion, "You can't see a thestral unless you've witnessed death."

"And accepted it," Rookwood said. His voice was sad, but his sharp, half-lidded gaze was directed at Selwyn, not at Rigel. The dark-haired beauty didn't seem to notice as she turned her face to the

window and stared, unseeing, across the dark grounds. Rigel felt that she had upset the older girl, but also felt that it would make things worse to try and apologize when she had no idea what Selwyn had gone through to make her sensitive to death.

Rigel herself was taken aback by the idea of a creature that one could only see after being basically traumatized in some way, but she was suddenly grateful that most of her friends couldn't see the thestrals as well. It made her sad for Theo, who was obviously bitter about whatever death he'd seen. She recalled that his mother had died when he was younger, and hoped fervently that that hadn't been the death he experienced. Rigel then remembered that while she had not been there for Aunt Diana's last moments, Archie had, and wondered if he would be able to see the thestrals, too.

"Black," Rosier's voice called her back to the present. She turned to look at him, and was surprised to see the fifth-year almost... hesitate, "Would it be correct to assume that you were unable to see the thestrals last year?"

Rigel nodded, suddenly reminded of her own brush with death over the summer. A man, running through an alley. Blue vest. Blood, so much blood, and a knife that gleamed in the light of a blazing-no. She shook her head slightly, banishing the images. Yes, she had seen a man die. She understood that, accepted it even, but she didn't have to relive it. She had moved past the terror and numb horror of that night. She was training with Remus, and even more on her own, growing faster and stronger so that nothing like that would happen before her eyes again. Never again would she be a witness to death without actively seeking to prevent it.

"Our condolences, Black," Rookwood said softly, finally looking away from Selwyn, who was ignoring the conversation.

"Thanks," Rigel said absently, "What? Oh, no, it wasn't anyone I knew personally. I mean, I just happened to... see it." Blood. Smoke. Fire. Wand. Knife. Rigel blinked hard to dismiss the images that for some reason just would not leave her mind. She obviously hadn't

tucked them away securely enough in her mindscape if they flashed across her eyes without her summoning them.

Rosier's gaze sharpened and the interest seemed to win out over what Rigel now recognized as sympathy-or perhaps it really was just pity. "You just happened to see the death of a complete stranger? Do you volunteer at St. Mungo's with your surrogate uncle?"

"No," Rigel said, "It was just an accident. I was out running errands and it just sort of... happened." She was quiet for a moment, then said, "So, can you all... sorry, that was insensitive."

"I cannot," Rosier said, "Though Edmund and Alice can."

Rigel wondered who Rosier was talking about until she realized that Alice was a nickname for Alesana. The tension in the carriage seemed to go up another notch and Rigel shifted uncomfortably.

"Let's talk about something else," Rookwood said firmly. Rosier shrugged, and Rigel nodded her agreement.

"Actually, I was going to speak with the two of you about something anyway," Rigel said.

"What about?" Rosier asked with polite interest.

"Pansy's birthday," Rigel said, "Last year we weren't good enough friends to celebrate it, but it's September sixth, isn't it?"

"It is," Rosier said, narrowing his eyes ever so slightly, "What are you planning?"

Rigel grinned slightly, "I'll tell you, but I need your help."

"Doing what?" Rookwood asked.

"Distracting Pansy," Rigel said.

"A surprise," Rosier said, his honey-gold eyes glinting, "Count us in, Black."

Soon the carriage came to a stop and she disembarked, keeping her eyes away from the grim, black thestrals as she went to join her friends, who were climbing out of the carriage behind hers.

They all filed into the Great Hall and took their seats. Last year's sixth years were now in the coveted seats at the end of the table closest to the doors. The seventh years traditionally got to sit furthest from the teacher's table with the sixth years next to them, then fifth, and so on. Rigel and her friends were in the lowest occupied portion of the table, but of course one-seventh of the table on the end closest to the Head Table was empty now, reserved for the new Slytherins that would be sorted before the night was out.

They waited quite a while for the first-years, and Rigel supposed it took much longer to take the boats across the lake than to ride in the carriages. Eventually, however, McGonagall went to fetch the new first-years and the Sorting hat was revealed.

Rigel could have sworn she saw the hat smirk before it began its song.

"Every year begins this way

With faces old and new

And first-years filing in the hall

And standing in a cue

Most of you look scared to death

As you await your turn

I promise it won't hurt much but

There's something you will learn

You see it is my job to tell you
Where you ought to be
And look inside your mind and judge
Your heart on what I see
Now here's the part where I explain
What different Houses mean
This knowledge gives you some idea
Toward which House you should lean
But sometimes hats get bored you know
And sometimes they get tired
Of singing self-same songs to you
And so I got inspired
To really shake things up a bit
And have a little fun
And tell you all a story of
A song that wasn't sung
For once there was a wizard kid
Who walked through that same door
He listened as I told him of
The mighty founding four

He got it in his head that one
House stood above the rest
And when he put me on his head
He thought that he knew best
And though I told him otherwise
He stubbornly resisted
And did not go where he belonged
Despite what I'd insisted
And though this boy obtained his wish
His needs were never met
He spent his school life looking back
On that day with regret
If only he had listened when
He heard his destiny
He spent his years in shackles when
He could have been set free
This year you won't find differences
Of Houses in my song
You'll come to me unbiased
And you'll go where you belong

So please forget the things you've heard

Or what your friends might do

The most important thing is finding

What is right for you."

There was a moment or two of incredulous silence before applause slowly started up from the students around the hall. Even a few of the professors looked entirely bemused by the hat's song, but the sorting proceeded nonetheless.

Rigel thought it was a bit optimistic for the hat to think that not going over the stereotypes just before the sorting began was going to help much, especially considering that all of the students were purebloods, and had no doubt been hearing of the four Hogwarts Houses for years. Still, she supposed a talking hat was entitled to its eccentricities, and it did have a good point. There was a lot of bias embodied in the House system-not just in what each House represented, but in who went to each House. Weasley's went to Gryffindors, Macmillan's went to Hufflepuff, Malfoy's went to Slytherin, and the Turpin's went to Ravenclaw. It was one of those universal truths that only changed when people like Sirius Black rocked the boat. Then again, Rigel thought, as a Slytherin who is also technically a Potter, it's not as though she had room to talk about upsetting natural orders.

The newest Slytherins sat stiffly to Rigel's left. She glanced over during Dumbledore's speech to take in the new faces and saw a couple of first-year boys with dark hair sending quick looks up the Slytherin table. The boys were remarkably similar looking, though Rigel didn't recall them having the same last name. They'd look over at the upperclassmen, then look quickly away again, heads bent together, whispering quietly, then look at a different section of upperclassmen. Rigel raised a brow at the two of them when they happened to look her way, but instead of flinching or blushing at being caught they both grinned at her with identical mischievous

winks. Rigel felt a shiver run down her spine and fervently began hoping those two never met the Weasley twins.

The feast itself was glorious. Rigel stuck to meatless dishes for posterity-she was planning on sneaking into the kitchens in the early mornings to get her major proteins in. Everything was moving along smoothly until Adrian Pucey cursed loudly from a little further up the table. It wasn't loud enough to carry to the other tables, and certainly not the Head table, but it was noticeable enough above the chatter that every Slytherin within ten seats of Pucey turned to stare at him. No one could accuse Slytherins of being overly concerned about other people's sensibilities, but rarely would one be so crass as to curse out loud over a dinner table for no apparent reason.

Pucey didn't even seem to notice the attention he was garnering. He had his neck bent looking at something in his lap, and he seemed from where Rigel was sitting to have both hands in his lap as well, as though he were struggling with something. Many of the girls gave disapproving murmurs and averted their eyes, but Rigel seriously doubted Pucey was doing whatever they thought he was in the Great Hall. Most seemed content to watch Pucey mutter and curse to himself, though Lucian Bole, who was sitting next to him, finally hauled Adrian's shoulder back so he could see just what exactly his friend was doing. A second later, Bole reared back, knocking against the person on his other side and nearly spilling his pumpkin juice everywhere. His eyes were wide and his lips were pressed tight together with muted shock.

"Shit, Lucian!" Pucey threw his friend a glare, "You startled it! Oh, crud."

A flash of panic flew across Pucey's face before he froze and looked up. His gaze moved from one Slytherin to the next and he swallowed heavily, "Um, nobody move, okay?"

The other Slytherins within hearing became instantly motionless.

"What have you done, Pucey?" a boy Rigel recognized as Miles Bletchley narrowed his eyes at Pucey from his seat across the table.

"It's a s *nake*," Bole snapped, glaring at Pucey, "Adrian's got a *snake* and he's *lost it* ."

"Adrian, what the hell?" A fourth-year girl with long, blonde hair said. Everyone was speaking as softly as they could and trying not to glance at the Head table. They might think Pucey was an idiot, but no one was going to get him in trouble on purpose.

"Just don't move, okay?" Pucey said, "Spread the word to everyone at the table to stay very still. It's under the table, and we don't want to startle it."

Surreptitiously, each Slytherin student turned to his or her neighbor and explained the situation. Rigel passed it along to Draco, though both of them had been paying attention from the start, and Draco explained it quietly to the first year on the other side of him. The eleven-year-old girl had a pair of long, dark pigtails that quivered slightly when she stilled.

"Is it poisonous?" The first year whispered back.

That, Rigel thought, was a very good question. Just then, Pansy, who was sitting on Rigel's right side, closer to Pucey, stiffened in her seat. She let out the barest hint of a squeak, then said, in a very calm and quiet voice, "It's on my foot."

Pucey looked over from where he was sitting, "You feel it, Pansy?"

Pansy nodded slowly, "It's moving across my shoe now, headed toward you, Rigel."

Rigel nodded her acceptance. She was used to snakes, thanks to Sirius' little collection of them at Archie's house, so she was prepared when she felt the first flicks of a questing tongue against

her ankle, which was bared by the way her robes rode up a bit when she sat.

"Yes, I can feel it now," Rigel said evenly. She kept her face blank and slowly slid her hand under the table.

"Don't, Rigel," Draco frowned, but didn't make any sudden moves, "You don't know if it will bite or not."

By the worried and uneasy look on Pucey's face, Rigel would say the odds of avoiding being bitten weren't good-at least for anyone else.

She felt the snake wrap itself around her ankle and then slide higher. Rigel put her palm beside her knee and waited. Sure enough, she soon felt a small tongue flicking against her palm, testing her scent. Rigel slid down in her seat slowly, very slowly, and bent sideways at the waist so that she could stick her head under the tablecloth. It was dark, but with the sounds of the feast muffled slightly she could now clearly hear the hissing coming from the snake, which was coiled quite firmly around her right leg now.

" *Too many ssoftlingss,*" the snake complained, " *Too many ssmellss... hungry... tired... sso cold...* "

" *Come here,*" Rigel hissed as quietly as she could, though of course Parseltongue was already a very quiet language.

The snake stilled, then shifted higher on her leg, " *Sspeaker?* "

" *Yess,*" Rigel said, " *Come here, please. I will feed you, and then you can ssleep .*"

" *Food ?*" the snake wound it's head around Rigel's hand and loosened its hold on her calf a bit, " *Promisse me, sspeaker. Promisse me food .*"

" *I sswear it,*" Rigel said, " *But you musst come now, and wind about my wrisst. If you bite me or the other humansss, you will get no micce.*

"

" *Agreed, sspeaker,*" the snake wound its way quickly from her leg to her wrist. Rigel used her other hand to cover the snake with her robe sleeve before re-emerging from the table slowly. She brought her right hand, with the small, black snake hidden around her wrist, into her lap, using her left hand to pick up her goblet and take a sip as though nothing had happened.

"Rigel, where's the snake?" Draco asked quietly.

Rigel glanced pointedly at her lap, and Draco inhaled sharply.

"You are such an idiot," her friend muttered, "What if it poisons you?"

"You're just upset because Black handled it while you were too scared to," Daphne Greengrass said snidely from diagonally across the table.

"I am not afraid of snakes," Draco said, "I just don't like surprises."

Rigel ignored them. "Tell Pucey I'll give it back in the common room," she told Pansy. Pansy nodded tightly and turned to relay the message down the table.

Rigel was the recipient of many apprehensive glances for the duration of the feast. Dumbledore introduced the new Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor, who was smiling awfully brightly considering the track record of his predecessors. She was trying to ignore the snake's disgruntled complaints about sitting still and staying hidden, as well as its demands for her to speak with it. Instead she ran a soothing hand down the snake's coils every now and then and when the feast was over she slipped away as quickly as she could and headed to the kitchens to beg a mouse from Binny.

The cheerful elf was very accommodating, even giving Rigel a bag of stunned mice for the road. Rigel promised to stop by and see the elf

before breakfast the next day, and then left to head back toward the common room.

She arrived just as the first-years were being led through the portrait hole by Selwyn, who was head girl that year. Rigel followed the new Slytherins into the common room and was momentarily surprised to see all the Slytherins still sitting or standing about the large, low-ceilinged space. Then she remembered that Snape would be coming in to give his start of term speech, and that the only reason he hadn't the previous year was because something had 'come up.'

Rigel spotted Pucey arguing quietly with a few other upperclassmen near one of the fireplaces and went over to them.

"-Can't believe you would be so idiotic, Adrian," Bole was saying quietly, "Bringing that to the table-what were you going to do with it?"

"Nothing," Adrian defended, "I just didn't want to leave him with the baggage. He was a gift from my uncle, and I'm supposed to take care of him."

"We're not even supposed to have snakes," Bletchley snapped.

"I didn't think anyone would find out," Adrian said, "I was just gonna keep him in the dorms, but as soon as we got into the Great Hall he started freaking out on me. Wouldn't stay in my pocket."

"You'd better hope Snape didn't see anything from the Head table," Bole said lowly, "If Black hadn't taken care of it-"

"Eh-hem," Rigel coughed pointedly and tilted her head to the side in a way that she knew made her look especially innocent.

"Black!" Pucey rubbed the back of his head awkwardly, "Listen, I'm really sorry about-"

"I have your snake," Rigel said, holding out her right wrist and peeling back her sleeve, "He's had a mouse just now, and he's

warmed up a bit, but I think he's very tired, so it would probably be a good idea to put him up in your room for now, and feed him one of these mice," Harry pulled out the bag and handed it to him, "When he wakes up."

"Uh, thanks," Pucey said, accepting the snake from Rigel's wrist gently, and tucking the mice away into his robes, "I'd best do it before Snape gets here, then."

Rigel nodded, and turned away to find the other second years. They asked her a lot of questions, but Rigel gave the standard answer that her father kept snakes as pets, so she had a lot of experience with them.

Ten minutes later, Snape made his entrance. Rigel was momentarily frozen as her mind raced back to that night just one year ago, when she had first laid eyes on the greatest Potion Master of their time. She had thought him the truest embodiment of genius and authority. Now... well, he was certainly a genius, and he still exuded the kind of authority that seasoned Aurors could only dream of, but Rigel felt as though she didn't look at him with nearly the same amount of starry-eyed idolization as she had last year.

She had worked with Snape now. Learned from him. She had seen him darkly amused whenever Ron Weasley answered a question incorrectly. She had seen the lines of tension in his forehead after brewing for hours on end to stock the Hospital Wing during the Sleeping Sickness. She had seen his triumphant smirk when Slytherin won a Quidditch game, and his stiff relief when Draco awoke from his coma. Snape was everything she'd ever imagined him to be-snarky, competent, brilliant and cold-but he was so much more human than she'd anticipated, as foolish as that sounded.

Snape gave his customary speech, and told Selwyn to show the first-years their dormitories. Then he turned to the rest of them and scowled darkly, adding, "I don't know what was going on at the dinner table during the feast tonight, and I don't want to know. Suffice

to say that none of you are as subtle as you think yourselves, and I trust it does not happen again."

The Slytherins all murmured various versions of, "Yes, sir." After that, they were free to go to their dorm rooms. Rigel followed the other second-years down their hallway, but was taken aback to see Blaise continue right past the dorm he'd lived in last year and turn into hers. She exchanged a bewildered look with Draco, but when they reached the door to their room it became rather obvious. Where once it had read: Arcturus Black, Draco Malfoy, and Theodore Nott, Blaise Zabini was now tacked on underneath.

When they entered the dorm room, several changes were immediately apparent. It was significantly bigger, for one thing, and on the left side of the dorm there was an extra bed between Rigel's and Theo's, with Zabini's trunk sitting at the foot. An extra wardrobe had appeared along the wardrobe wall, and an extra desk was sitting to the right side of the room as well.

Theo turned to smile incredulously at Blaise, "You're in here with us, now? Why didn't you say anything?"

"Surprise," Blaise said mildly, "Yes, I requested the switch at the end of last year. Sorry about the inconvenience, though I did argue that if Snape agreed to my request he should add a second bathroom to this dorm, since the girls and now Crabbe and Goyle only have to share in twos."

Sure enough, when Rigel looked over there were two doors where previously there had only been one bathroom door. Rigel shrugged and headed over to her trunk to find her toothbrush, "I don't mind."

"I definitely don't," Theo said, grinning, "It's so boring in here with just those two. Rigel's almost never here except to sleep, and Draco just studies or writes letters to his parents when he's in here."

Blaise glanced at Rigel with an expression she couldn't decipher, then turned to Draco and said, "And you? Are you all right with the

change?"

"I wouldn't wish Crabbe and Goyle on anyone," Draco said, "Welcome to our dorm."

"Thank you," Blaise's smile was very wolf-like, but perhaps he couldn't help it.

Rigel cleaned her teeth and kicked off her shoes before climbing into bed. She didn't bother with the hangings, as it would be better logistically if she had a clear view of the room in case something happened in the middle of the night. She had been thinking more and more in terms of strategic safety since the night of the fire, and was now in the habit of sleeping with her wand under her pillow, rather than on her bedside table or even in her trunk.

A few minutes later, Draco called irritably, "Aren't you going to douse that light, Blaise?"

Blaise answered back slowly, "I am, I was just waiting for Rigel to change so he doesn't have to in the dark."

"Oh, Rigel sleeps in his robes," Theo said from his bed, "You can just douse it."

"In his clothes?" Blaise's voice was clearly incredulous, "Why?"

"Well," Theo said slowly, "I guess I've never thought about it. He's always done that, since the first night last year."

"Still here," Rigel said mildly, mentally groaning. Of course Blaise would think it strange. When she first got here, Draco and Theo hadn't been well enough acquainted with her to comment on all the strange things she did, like sleep in her clothes or change in the bathroom after her shower, and once they'd become friends they were used to it. Blaise, however, now had the unfortunate position of being both new to her habits and good enough friends with her to question them. Joy.

"Well, why *do* you sleep in your clothes?" Draco asked suddenly, "I can't believe we never asked you this before."

"Nott asked me if I owned nightclothes once, I think," Rigel said thoughtfully, "But after that you just let it drop."

"Oh," Draco said, "No-wait, you *still* haven't answered the question!"

Rigel shifted uncomfortably, "It's in case there's an emergency in the middle of the night. I'd feel more prepared to deal with it if I had my robes on and wasn't hampered by bedclothes." Originally, that was even sort of true, though she had been expecting her dorm mates to prank her for being the son of a blood traitor. Now, she trusted her dorm mates, and was more concerned with intruders. Then, of course, there was the fact that she felt significantly more vulnerable as a female in her nightclothes than she did in her form-hiding robes.

"Wow, Rigel," Theo said, "You're really paranoid."

"As he should be," Draco said, "Considering how much trouble he attracts. He did have someone trying to attack him all of first semester last year."

"Yet he began sleeping in his clothes before all the trouble even started," Blaise said, "Interesting."

"Not really," Rigel said shortly, "Could you put out the light, now? We should get some sleep."

Blaise chuckled softly, but he put out the light nonetheless.

The next morning, Rigel woke much earlier than her roommates. She quietly grabbed the drawstring pouch she kept her workout clothes in from her trunk and crept out of the dark room and into the quiet common room. Part of the exercise regimen Remus had her on involved a long run every morning before breakfast, and Rigel fully intended to keep up with his prescriptions while at school.

She changed in a bathroom on the ground floor, near the Great Hall, and strapped on her leg weights. Her workout clothes were more comfortable than her robes, and lighter, too, but still baggy enough that her burgeoning figure-which was admittedly non-existent at this point, but might be of worry in a year or so-remained indiscernible. Rigel stowed her bag, which now held her school robes, in an alcove by the front entrance to grab when she finished, and slipped out of the castle doors.

The lake was choppy from the brisk morning wind, and the sound of the small waves beating against the shore helped to block out everything around her as she began her run. She decided to try running all the way around the lake once, and then see how tired she was. Running, Rigel found, was a lot like meditating. It cleared the mind and made your breathing sound much louder than normal. It was also good for thinking, and one of the things Remus had warned her of was that it was nearly impossible to defend yourself without knowing yourself. If you couldn't understand yourself, how could you understand your enemy? He made it very clear that her greatest flaw at the moment was her tendency to bury things.

If something bothered her on a conscious level, she didn't think about it. She pretended nothing upset her, and by doing this never came to terms with events in her life that should have changed her. Instead, she accepted things that happened to her, let them sink into her mind, then helped them sink further, until they lay so hidden beneath the surface of her consciousness that they didn't bother her.

Rigel accepted that Remus was right in this case, but didn't really see what was wrong with that. After all, once you acknowledge that something happened, you can forget about it and move on with-no. She was doing it again. Remus had warned her how hard it was to change yourself. He had predicted that her mental patterns would reassert themselves wherever possible. She was not supposed to give in to that. She was supposed to let her life experiences change her, instead of treating them like an interesting fact she'd read about, or a story she'd heard about someone else.

She ran faster, frustrated with her lack of progress mentally. Remus said he would teach her basic self-defense without a wand, but that he wouldn't teach her proper dueling until she had the correct mind frame to handle the instruction.

Rigel supposed it was a bit like what Professor Snape had pointed out when he diagnosed the problem with her magic last year. When she first performed accidental magic, she had either been frightened, or she had received negative feedback about it, and as a result Rigel had developed hyper-control of her unconscious magical output, to the point that later on she couldn't even use her magic consciously without great effort. Rigel had eventually come to a compromise with her magic. She asked it nicely to do what she wanted, and it didn't try to escape her control at inopportune times via the outlet of her phoenix wand, which seemed to side with her magic more often than it did with her prior to the unspoken agreement. Still, Rigel couldn't control her magic like her peers did. They demanded their magic obey them, and if their willpower was strong enough for the spell they were attempting, it worked. Rigel had to coax her magic to work with her, and while the system worked well, she was yet unable to relax her unconscious controls on her magic.

She didn't leak magic like most wizards did, according to Snape and Riddle. She also couldn't imbue potions unconsciously. Snape accepted it as simply a fact about her level of magical control, but deep down, in a part of her mind Rigel didn't like to focus on, she knew it for what it was. A symbol of her fear. She was afraid, on a subconscious level, to release her tight hold over her magic. On the surface, they were in synch, but underneath Rigel still couldn't trust her magic not to... what? Hurt anyone? As Archie had pointed out, her magic had never actually hurt anyone. It had blown things up, whirled them around in the air, even disintegrated things when she got really upset as a child, but through all that it had never injured someone she cared about.

Perhaps it was the fact that the potential for destruction was there that made her tamp down on her magic. It was the idea that one day

it *could* hurt someone that she didn't trust. No, Rigel shook her head as her feet pounded on the grass, that wasn't true. It wasn't her magic that Rigel didn't trust.

It was herself.

The magic only responded to Rigel's will, although sometimes that will hadn't reached the point of intent yet. What she feared was that the more she relaxed her control, the more sensitive that response would become. What if, once she freed it, the magic started responding to her vague inclinations? To her whims? What if one day it acted in response to a thought? All it would take is one unkind, frustrated thought, and someone around her would get hurt. And it would be her fault, not the magic's, for having that thought. She would never consciously will harm to another person-she didn't think-but what if for one instant she had a weak desire and her magic chose to act upon it? She couldn't take that risk. Not when the year before her magic had already shown itself to be capable of acting without her express intent. How many things had it blown up in Quirrell's classroom, just because his constant picking annoyed her?

So she acknowledged that she had too tight of a hold over her magic, but she wasn't going to do anything to change it.

Only, wasn't that the same thing Remus had warned her about? Mentally she was in a similar habit. She started ignoring things she didn't want to think about young. Like when her father had rolled his eyes at her potions magazines and bought her a broomstick. Then again when he presented her with the snitch and frowned when she pointed to the bludgers. Like when her mother uncomfortably changed the subject when Rigel asked her what she knew about Severus Snape. Little disappointments and uncomfortable truths all got stored away safely in a place where she didn't have to think about them. After all, she didn't *want* to be frustrated with her mother, or feel like a let down to her father. Since she didn't want to feel that way, why should she? Emotions were natural responses to environmental stimuli, and if she didn't want to feel a certain way,

she simply had to ignore the experiences that might prompt a certain emotional response.

It was easy, and it was familiar, but according to Remus it was going to hold her back. Because ignoring events, he said, didn't help you come to terms with them. You had to accept that the event happened, yes, but that wasn't enough. You then had to allow that event to change you to shape you into something new, though for better or for worse was up to you.

Rigel understood, sort of. The night of the fire, for instance, had been the kind of event that deeply affected a person. She had first broken down a bit, but then after crying on Mrs. Hurst she'd accepted it. Next, Rigel had used the event as fuel and impetus for changing herself for the better. She had started learning to protect herself and others around her. Then, once the experience's usefulness to her was past, she ignored it. Apparently, however, ignoring was not enough. And using it as a springboard for personal change was not enough. Rigel was missing something, some step in the process, but she couldn't figure out what it was.

She finished her lap and doubled over, panting, by the shore. She was dripping with sweat, and her legs were shaking quite a bit. She knew that Remus could have run around that lake four times without stopping, but she felt accomplished with her paltry one lap all the same. After a few more minutes rest, she began the strengthening and flexibility exercises that she was still convinced were some sort of torture regimen.

There were the usual push-ups and sit-ups, and then there were all sorts of convoluted stretches that she hoped no one ever saw her doing. After that she had to start on her weights. She removed the weighted balls from her pockets, where Remus-the-sadist had bade her to keep them while she ran, as if the leg weights weren't enough, and began lifting, curling, squeezing, and otherwise punishing her arm muscles for being weak and girly.

When she had practiced her basic punches and kicks until she thought Remus could not possibly fault her for stopping, Rigel jogged back up to the castle and retrieved her bag from the alcove before making a bee-line down to the kitchens.

When she entered, the house elves seemed to be just starting their preparations for breakfast, and Rigel realized she must have woken earlier than she thought. She really ought to get a watch or something. Archie's was fine and well for special occasions, but as a 'pureblood' Heir, she should have one all the time.

"Binny!" she called over the noise of plates and silverware being set out.

A house elf with a necklace of champagne corks and a pretty pink tea cozy separated herself from the throng.

"Young sir," Binny curtsied and then bounced happily on her toes, smiling up at Rigel, "You came!"

"I promised, didn't I?" Rigel smiled back, "So do you have time to talk?"

"Well, Binny is working..." Binny hesitated, "Is you needing something that Binny can be doing while we is chatting?"

"Um, sure," Rigel thought quickly, "Could you sit with me while cutting up some meat for me to eat?"

Binny's eyes widened, "You is eating meat now?"

"I'm going to try to eat more meat this year, but I don't want to eat it at the table," Rigel said carefully, "So I was wondering if you could keep sending vegetarian stuff upstairs, but if I could come down here in the mornings to get some meat as well?"

The house elf nodded seriously, "Binny can do that. What kind of meat is you liking?"

"I'm not sure," Harry wrinkled her nose, "Maybe chicken?"

Binny gave her a very unimpressed look, "I is making you lots of meat, and you is trying them all."

Rigel grimaced, but agreed. Binny bustled about picking up different pre-cooked meats and things, then perched herself with a cutting board and several bowls of seasoning.

"So how was your summer, Binny?" Rigel asked, "I mean, what do you guys do all summer?"

Binny glanced amusedly at Rigel over the large knife she was wielding, "I is working over the summer, of course."

"At Hogwarts?" Rigel asked curiously, "I'd have thought there wasn't much to do."

"There isn't being much," Binny agreed, "The oldest elves is staying at Hogwarts, but the rest of us is finding work elsewhere. Binny is working at the unicorn stables on Madame Touraine's estate."

"Really?" Rigel asked curiously, "Is that in France?"

"Yes," Binny nodded enthusiastically, "It is beautiful there. I is liking the unicorns very much. If we is finishing work quickly, Madame Touraine is letting the elves play with the baby unicorns until they is going to sleep." Binny gave a dreamy sigh, "I is liking work at the stables almost as much as I is liking Hogwarts."

"Do you speak French, then?" Rigel asked.

"Oh yes," Binny nodded quickly, "French is being very fun to speak."

Rigel smiled, "What other languages can you speak?"

"All kinds," Binny shrugged, "A house elf is never knowing who is needing them to work."

"That's so cool," Rigel said, a bit wistfully, "Was it hard to learn?"

"Not so very hard," Binny said earnestly, "It is being easier than flying."

"What?" Rigel said, smiling in amusement.

"It is being a house elf saying," Binny said, "When things is seeming hard, we is thinking they is not as hard as flying, and they is seeming better."

Rigel laughed, "If only everyone saw life that way."

"Maybe I is teaching you?" Binny suggested slyly.

"To be more optimistic?" Rigel blinked, "I guess it couldn't hurt."

Binny giggled and shook her head, "No, no. French. Maybe I is teaching you French, if you is so interested in languages."

Rigel was about to decline politely, figuring she had enough on her plate, but then she paused. It *would* lend credibility to the back-up story that she was a poor pureblood from the continent if she knew a European language or two.

"Won't it interfere with your free time?" Rigel said tentatively.

Binny beamed, "Yes, exactly."

Right. House elf. Rigel smiled a bit ruefully. She was definitely going to find Binny a selfish hobby one of these days. "Well, if you're sure you want to," Rigel said, "I would love to learn French. How about....hmm, no we won't have enough time in the mornings, and you have to work anyway... evening is no good, either. I've got too much work to do, and I might be brewing with Snape... say, Binny, do you work during lunch?"

"Binny is making lunch," Binny said.

"I mean, after it's made. Do you work during lunch?" Rigel asked.

"No, Binny is eating during lunch," Binny said with a smile, "And young sir is eating, too."

"Why don't we eat together?" Rigel asked, "I'll get a book on French from the library, and learn it in my free time. Then over lunch you and I can chat in French."

"And Binny can mercilessly correct young sir's pronunciation!" Binny squealed happily, then leaned forward and said, in a very serious tone of voice, "It is being the only way to really learn."

Rigel raised her eyebrows, "Whatever you say, Professor Binny."

Binny looked momentarily horrified by the address, before she collapsed into giggles once more, "Five points to Slytherin! Oh, this is being fun."

Rigel stayed for a while longer. She tried the various meats that Binny presented her with, finally deciding that chicken was the closest to fish, and therefore the one she liked best. She could stomach a little steak and pork, but she would definitely be sticking to birds and other white meats if she could. She said goodbye to Binny when it seemed that breakfast was almost ready and headed back to the common room to shower and change into a clean set of school robes.

When she entered her dorm room, it was to the sound of raised voices. Well, one raised voice.

"What do you mean you don't know?" That was definitely Draco, "You were awake first."

"And he was long gone by the time I was," Blaise's voice sounded bored and annoyed, "He's probably in the library."

"It's the first day of school! We have nothing to be in the library for," Draco said.

"Who are you looking for?" Rigel finally spoke up. Blaise and Draco turned to the door and while Draco brightened visibly, Blaise rolled his eyes.

"Who do you think?" Blaise muttered.

"Where were you this morning?" Draco asked.

"It still is morning," Rigel said mildly, going around Draco and fishing in her trunk for a clean robe and pair of boxer shorts, "I've got to shower, so you guys should go ahead."

"Why do you have to shower?" Draco called after her, "And what on earth are you wearing?"

Rigel smiled briefly over her shoulder, "See you at breakfast, Draco."

Her first day of classes went fairly smoothly, until they got to double Defense Against the Dark Arts with the Hufflepuffs.

It was pretty clear, to Rigel at least, that Dumbledore had fired Quirrell at the end of last year because of his involvement with the sleeping sickness. Rigel herself had overheard Snape confronting Quirrell about being the one to expose the population of the castle to the sickness, and if Snape was as loyal to Dumbledore as he seemed, then there was no doubt the Headmaster knew exactly who was responsible for that fiasco and had fired him posthaste. She supposed he didn't have enough proof to file criminal charges, but a Headmaster didn't need a specific reason to fire his teacher-there weren't exactly unions in the wizarding world. It was good that he'd taken what action he could to remove a threat to the school.

On the other hand... looking at Gilderoy Lockhart posturing at the front of their DADA classroom, Rigel was a little less convinced that

Dumbledore knew what he was doing.

"Welcome, welcome all of you," Lockhart said, beaming down at them all from the *raised platform* he'd installed in front of the blackboard, "When your Headmaster showed up personally at my mansion in the south of Wales and begged me to instruct you all in the ancient art of self defense against the dark forces, I was a little hesitant."

Draco and Pansy looked at each other, looked at Lockhart, and then looked back at one another and raised simultaneous eyebrows.

"I mean, it isn't really in my nature to hesitate," Lockhart went on grandly, "But was I ready to take on the immense responsibility associated with the molding of young, impressionable minds of innocents like yourselves? After a bit of soul-searching at my vacation home in Peru, however, I came to the conclusion that yes, yes I am. For the next year you will embark on a journey of knowledge, the likes of which I seriously doubt your past professors could even dream of. You will learn things you've never known, and do things you've never done, but don't be afraid. I will be with you every step of the way."

"Is he serious?" Draco muttered, "What a joke."

"Learn things we've never known?" Pansy scoffed quietly, "As if there was anything else possible *to* learn."

"Now I'm sure all of you have read my books by now, and think you know the real me," Lockhart went on, "But in this room you will see the truth behind the legend-the mountain beneath the mist, if you will. For in this room we shall face the things which test the mettle of even the bravest and most fiercest of men-even me. We will face them down together, however, and when I am through with you the world of the dark arts won't stand a chance. Who is ready to fight the forces of darkness?!"

He raised his fist dramatically and tossed his cloak behind him to strike a pose.

Several of the second-year girls, to the rest of the class' shame, answered back, "We are!"

Draco's face was so incredulous that if he hadn't been a Malfoy he would have face-palmed.

"Now let's see who is, in fact, here and ready to learn," Lockhart said jovially, pulling out a roll of parchment from the desk. He unrolled it and cleared his throat. "Hannah Abbott?"

Hannah raised her hand and said, quietly, "Here." Rigel noticed Blaise, who was sitting in front of her, Draco, and Pansy, cock his head to the side slightly, as though he were some kind of canine, responding to an octave of sound no one else could hear.

"Ah yes, young Hannah, such a pleasure to see you here today," Lockhart said. Hannah blinked, probably unsure how to respond to a professor using her first name, but Lockhart didn't appear to need a response. "Arcturus Black?"

Rigel raised her hand just high enough to be seen above her head, "Here. I prefer Rigel, however, if you're going to go by first names, Professor."

"Rigel Black, Rigel Black, now where have I heard that name before?" Lockhart said with a tone of mock concentration, "A-ha! Yes, I recall hearing something about you last spring. You did a small service for the school or some such thing, isn't that right? I think it even made the papers, though of course that was when I won my fifth Witch Weekly's Award for the Most Charming Smile, and in light of that everything else sort of fades into the background, doesn't it? In any case, I suppose you got a little taste of fame back then, did you? Well let me be the first to caution you about fame, Rigel. It is a fickle, fickle friend. Remember that, and come to me if you are ever in need of that sort of advice."

Rigel raised both eyebrows, but kept silent for fear of setting Lockhart off again. He really was quite a character.

"Now then, where is Susan Bones?"

The roll call went on. Lockhart seemed to have something to say to every. Single. Student. By the time he told them all to open their copies of 'Magical Me' so that they could 'begin a lively debate on which of my many accomplishments was the most daring and difficult,' the bell had rung.

"Is it really time to go already?" Lockhart said, glancing at the clock with exaggerated surprise, "I guess we were having too much fun to notice. Never fear, my precocious pupils, there will be plenty to learn on Wednesday. Toodles!"

He did a little finger wave, which too many of the girls in their class returned, then dismissed them. Rigel shook her head rather ruefully. It looked like DADA was going to be yet another thing she'd have to study in her ever-diminishing free time.

After DADA, Rigel went to Snape's office to see if he would open up her personal lab once more for the school year.

He wasn't in his office when she looked, so instead she went to check the Labs. The wards to Lab One were down, and light was coming through the door, so Rigel knocked quietly and peeked her head inside. The difference between now and the last time she had been to that Lab were extreme. Snape was brewing at only one station, instead of six or seven, and he looked like he'd gotten at least six hours of sleep the night before, which, as she had come to learn, was pretty good for Snape. His face was relaxed as he worked, and he didn't snap at her or sigh with exhaustion when she walked in. All in all, things were looking much better than last semester.

"Mr. Black, good," Snape said as he stirred the cauldron a final time and turned to address her, "We need to iron out the details of your

accelerated schedule for the year. You are still determined to complete the OWL curriculum and reach NEWT study by the end of this year?"

Rigel nodded. That would mean she finished NEWT Potion work by the end of her third year, meaning she had four additional years of tutelage under Snape before she graduated.

"In that case, I have a syllabus that should last you through December in my office. I will give it to you at dinner this evening. I will also be re-opening your lab for you tomorrow morning, but I expect you to clean it thoroughly and inventory your supplies before you brew anything." Snape fixed her with a stern look, "If at any time you feel that you cannot both get all of your work done and complete the accelerated syllabus, your regular school work comes first. I do not want to explain to my co-workers that you are failing out of school in an effort to learn everything there is to know about potions in seven years. There will be plenty of time, so take it at a pace you can handle."

Rigel nodded and agreed, but the look Snape gave her said clearly what they both understood. She would pretend to give her normal second-year classes her priority, but she would get the extra potions work done, or collapse trying. Not that she was terribly worried. Adults always seemed to think things took longer than they did. Each teacher assigned about an essay every two weeks, and each essay only took a couple of hours to complete. At most homework took five hours a week, and most days they got time at the end of class to work on their assignments quietly. Then there was a bit of time between classes, meal time, time before class if you woke up early enough, and at least six solid hours every evening of free time around dinner and before curfew. If anything, Rigel imagined everyone who didn't have her workload must be terribly bored all day. She had plenty of time for her homework, Flint's homework, extra brewing, studying Healing, Occlumency, and now French, her new exercise regimen, and hanging out with her friends.

Rigel liked being busy, at least when there wasn't an emergency at hand, and she honestly didn't think she'd have any trouble keeping up with everything that year.

The week went on and Rigel settled easily into the swing of things. Classes weren't all that difficult, unless one counted the difficulty Draco had holding his tongue during Lockhart's classes, or the difficulty Pansy had getting Rigel to pay attention during History of Magic, which she preferred to spend buried in a Healing textbook.

At breakfast on Friday morning, their section of the table was bombarded with owls. It was Pansy's birthday, and it seemed as though everyone she knew had sent her a card or token. She smiled delightedly as she collected them all, and accepted her Housemates' well-wishes with graceful aplomb. Pansy wasn't the only one getting mail that morning, however. Draco received a thick letter of his own, which he tucked away without opening at the table, and when the flock of owls surrounding Pansy had cleared, Rigel found both a letter from Sirius and a large, paper-covered package from the apothecary in Hogsmede.

She was still brewing for Krait, though most of what she made was Blood-Replenishers for Mr. Burke, only now she did everything by owls. It was a good thing school owls were both free and unmarked, as it meant she could send the potions, heavily padded of course, in as many bundles as she had to without letting Krait know where the owls were coming from. Rigel couldn't use the ingredients in the Hogwarts storerooms for her own personal gain, of course, so she had to order the ones she needed from Hogsmede and charge them to Archie's account. He had given her permission to take what she needed from his school account, and reimburse him later.

Pansy finished neatly stacking her birthday cards and turned to Draco and Rigel primly, "Well, it looks like I've gotten a present from everyone. Oh, wait, my two best friends haven't actually given me anything. How upsetting."

Draco sighed, and said, "Not as upsetting as learning that your best friend has no faith in you."

"And to think that the Parkinson's are known for their patience," Rigel said archly, "I guess I owe you a galleon, Draco. I was sure Pan would last until lunch."

Pansy huffed, "You two are impossible. I take it that means you'll give me my present later today?"

"I guess you'll find out if and when we give it to you," Draco said, grinning, "Until then, you live in the agony of ignorance."

"Well at least I'll be aware of being ignorant, which is after all a far better position than the unknowingly unknowing, as Socrates would say," Pansy said, "So, what news from home, Rigel?"

Rigel looked down at the letter from Sirius and scanned it, "Nothing much, just the usual. Sirius talks about his work in the children's ward. Uncle Remus says hello, too, as do Aunt Lily and Uncle James. Everyone's doing great, I guess, though my Aunt Lily is apparently still consuming ice mice in unnerving quantities."

"You know all that would mean more if we'd ever actually met your family," Draco pointed out, "As it is, you could be making all this up for all we know."

Rigel looked at Pansy, who nodded her agreement a bit apologetically. "Oh," Rigel said, "I didn't realize you felt that way. Well, why don't I introduce you over the Christmas break? I'll tell Dad to meet me at the platform this time, and everyone can meet each other. If it's all right, I'll invite Remus along, too."

"Of course it is," Pansy said quickly, "We'd love to meet them both, and the Potter's, too, some time."

"Great," Rigel said, smiling, "Owl your parents about it, will you? I think Sirius would be more comfortable with me going over to your

homes if he could actually talk to your parents civilly without school rivalries in the way."

"I'll ask my father about it immediately, though I already know my mother will agree," Pansy said.

"Same goes for my parents," Draco said, "We'll let you know for sure, though, before break."

They finished breakfast and the day continued normally. During lunch, Rigel and Draco slipped away. Rosier and Rookwood distracted Pansy during lunch so that she didn't notice their absence as much, and Rigel and Draco went to Hagrid's hut to see that everything was ready for Pansy's surprise.

All through Herbology, Draco kept shooting excited glances at Pansy and tapping his foot restlessly. Pansy shot him several questioning glances, to which Draco just beamed back with a knowing gleam in his eye. Rigel finally elbowed him pointedly in the side once Sprout dismissed them.

"Ow, what?" Draco whispered.

"Not exactly subtle, Draco," Rigel whispered back.

"So?" Draco sniffed, "No sense in being subtle when she already knows something's happening. As long as she doesn't know what, it will still be a surprise. Besides, subtleties are so easily ignored. I hate being ignored."

Rigel had to laugh at that, and when Pansy asked them what was so funny they just smiled innocently in her direction.

She narrowed her eyes, "Don't think I didn't notice you two missing from lunch. I know you're planning something."

"Then you won't mind playing along," Draco said brightly, "Come put this blindfold on."

"What?" Pansy backed away quickly, "No way."

"You actually don't have a choice," Rigel said sadly, "Hold her arms, Draco."

"Wait, stop!" Pansy tried to make a break for the door, but Draco caught her quickly.

Pansy let out a breathless laugh and shook her head as Rigel approached with a strip of dark green cloth in her hands, "Don't you dare, Rigel Black."

"Well I guess we don't have to give you your present," Rigel said, a look of ponder on her face, "What do you think, Draco, should we just take it back?"

"No!" Pansy seemed to struggle internally for a moment before sighing, "Okay, fine. But don't mess up my hair, and if you play a prank on me or let me trip, I will get even and then some."

Rigel and Draco exchanged amused glances. Pansy wouldn't know how to 'get even' any more than she'd know how to fly an airplane. More likely one of Pansy's many upperclassman friends would make their lives hell if they ever hurt her. Pansy inspired great loyalty in the people who knew her, seemingly effortlessly. Not that either Draco or Rigel ever would do anything to knowingly hurt her.

They led her from the greenhouses, across the grounds, past Hagrid's hut, and to the edge of the forbidden forest.

"I smell pine," Pansy said, "Are we in the forest?"

"No, Pans, just at the edge," Draco said reassuringly.

"Wait here," Rigel said. Draco held Pansy's elbow so she had something to ground her while Rigel set off at a quick walk a little ways into the forest.

Hagrid was waiting in a near-by clearing, "Hello there, Mr. Black. All set, then?"

"Yes," Rigel said, "Pansy is by the edge of the forest with Draco. I just wanted to make sure we were ready before bringing her in."

"All set," Hagrid said cheerfully, gesturing to his charges, "These fellas are ready when you are."

"Great," Rigel grinned at the animals pawing the ground around the clearing, "I really appreciate you helping us with this, sir. I'll have the potion for Fang's digestive system for you on Monday."

"Well that's right kind of you," Hagrid said, "But I woulda helped anyway, you know. They're sweet creatures, and they deserve to be appreciated."

"They will be," Rigel said, grinning, "I'll be right back."

"Hold on," Hagrid said, striding forward, "Take a few of these." He pressed a handful of sugar cubes into Rigel's palms, "Put them in Miss Parkinson's pockets."

Rigel nodded, "Okay. Thanks."

She hustled back to where Draco was entertaining Pansy by describing their surroundings in unconvincing details.

"And of course with the sky being green, the grass has gone into a jealous fit-Rigel! Ready?" Draco grinned, bouncing on his toes.

"Yes," Rigel said. She slipped the sugar cubes into Pansy's pockets quickly.

"What are-"

"Don't worry about it," Rigel said, taking Pansy's other elbow, "Step lightly."

They guided her slowly through the sparse trees and into the clearing where Hagrid was beaming nervously and giving she and Draco two big thumbs up. Draco grinned infectiously at Rigel, who smiled back.

"Ready for your surprise, Pans?" Draco asked with barely contained glee.

"Yes," Pansy said, nodding decisively, "Also, more than ready to take the blindfold off."

Rigel reached behind Pansy's head, saying, "Keep your eyes closed." She untied the green cloth and motioned Hagrid to move quietly forward with his smallest charge. She waited until it was right in front of Pansy, then said, "Okay, open!"

Pansy opened her eyes and froze, inhaling sharply. There before her, shining like gold in the afternoon light, was a baby unicorn. "It's....oh! He's *beautiful* ."

Rigel wondered how she knew the unicorn foal was a boy, but Hagrid simply nodded his head and patted the young unicorn's flanks fondly, "This one's about fourteen months. He won't get his horn for another few months, and they don't turn pure white until around two years old, though of course their hooves will always stay this golden color. His name is Calanon."

Pansy reached out a tentative hand and waited for the foal to sniff her. Calanon gazed up at her with a look that was two parts calm intelligence and one part childish inquisitiveness. The unicorn foal stepped forward, but instead of sniffing Pansy's hand, it ducked its head and nudged gently at Pansy's pocket. Pansy looked down, clearly bemused, and Calanon whickered softly, nudging her robe pocket again. She reached a hand down and into her pocket, then laughed as she pulled out several cubes of sugar.

"Is this what you were looking for?" Pansy held them out and offered them to the young foal. The unicorn tossed its head with excitement

and went to take the cubes, but a sharp whinny from one of the older unicorns made Calanon freeze. The baby unicorn looked almost sheepish. It stepped back and very distinctly bowed its head to Pansy carefully, as if thanking her for the cubes, before coming back and delicately nibbling them out of her hand. Pansy laughed delightedly, "You're welcome. Is that your mom back there?"

Hagrid positively beamed at Pansy, "Good eye, young miss. Have you had experience with unicorns before? Only you seem to really understand them. Anyway, that beauty is indeed Calanon's dam. Her name is Fainauriel."

Pansy threaded one hand through the golden unicorn's soft coat and stepped toward the other unicorns. There were six adults, all pure white with hooves of gold and eyes of softest silver. With the promise of another sugar cube, Pansy coaxed Calanon over to his mother and the rest of the herd, so she could admire them all at once.

Rigel and Draco watched from a distance as Pansy greeted each unicorn and spoke quietly to them, praising and crooning sweet words of esteem into their ears. The unicorns seemed to love Pansy, circling her and brushing against her as they passed. The little one seemed rather put out when Pansy informed him she was out of sugar, but Hagrid pressed another handful into her palms and Pansy happily treated all of them, giggling when Calanon nipped playfully at her fingers and butted her cheek with his nose in a parody of a chaste kiss.

Draco and Rigel had been warned by Hagrid when they were planning this that the adult unicorns wouldn't like being touched or even approached by male humans, thus the reason for them hanging back. Rigel supposed that as she was technically a maid she could approach the herd, but she felt no real desire to. This was Pansy's present, and besides, Rigel felt somehow tainted by her recent experience with the thestrals that pulled the school carriages. Surely someone who could see the heralds of death shouldn't also attempt to cavort with unicorns. She felt as though, maiden or not, she was no longer as innocent as Pansy was, if indeed she ever had

been. Innocence, she imagined, was a state of being, not necessarily a chronological precursor to adulthood. It involved a certain level of trust and faith in the world, something that Rigel had never had in abundance, even before learning that an accident of birth could and would prevent her from achieving her dreams unless drastic action was taken. Still, it was rather appealing from afar. Pansy looked so happy with the unicorns, utterly at peace with her place in the world. If Rigel reached out with her magical senses, she could actually feel Pansy's magic humming with contentedness.

It occurred to her suddenly that the pool of mercury she had seen in Pansy's mindscape during the sickness was the same exact shade of silver as a unicorn's eyes.

Draco took a moment to look over at Rigel and whisper, "We did well, didn't we?"

"Yeah," Rigel said softly, "I think we did."

[end of chapter three].

A/N: Soo nearly 40,000 words later... this chapter sort of got away from me. It's like I do an outline and say, okay I want to reach this event before I post. Then I'm like-but chronologically this has to happen first, and I really wanted to introduce this subplot before jumping into that, and then suddenly my cute little baby outline is a diabolical monster chapter with fangs. In any case, I hope anyone still reading this story liked the chapter. Thanks so much for whoever has stuck with it. Much love. -Violet

A/N2: FYI their class schedule is the same as last year except for Flying:

Monday: Charms, HoM, Lunch, DADA

Tuesday: Transfiguration, Herbology, Lunch, Free Period

Wednesday: Charms, HoM, Lunch, DADA, Astronomy

Thursday: (no 1st period b/c up late for Ast.), Potions (theory),
Lunch, Transfiguration

Friday: Double Potions (practical), Lunch, Herbology

Chapter 4

A/N: I remain... unsatisfied with this chapter. I kept trying to fix it, but I don't know precisely what is wrong. It seems episodic, I suppose, and I can't tell if it's well rounded, or just overly complicated and completely random. I guess I'll let you all decide. At any rate, at long last, here it is, with love. I don't own anything you recognize, etc. Thank you for anyone still reading, and to those of you who review still... I don't deserve you, but you've definitely kept me going on this story, so this is for you.

The Serpentine Subterfuge:

Chapter Four:

Every September Dumbledore dragged Severus Snape away from his immensely busy schedule in order to attend the annual Head of House meeting. It was long and tedious, largely due to the fact that each Head of House had a slightly different opinion on every single issue, and it was a rare third Friday in September when Severus Snape learned something from the Head of House meeting he either cared about or didn't already know. As such, it seemed to him to be a phenomenal waste of an evening. The only reason he went was to prevent Albus from exacting some form of petty revenge, the results of which would undoubtedly be tacky and/or headache inducing.

In 1986, when Severus last missed a staff meeting, the Headmaster cheerfully asked the house elves to paint the Potion Master's cauldrons pink. Without telling him. Even better was the Headmaster's idea to then construct a selective illusion of plain black pewter over the cauldrons, keyed to Severus' magical signature. Only Albus, Severus later reflected, would throw around such enormously difficult magics on a mere prank. Imagine his surprise when, upon entering his classroom on Monday morning and taking a cauldron out of his cupboard to demonstrate a new potion for his NEWT students, his entire class burst into laughter. The gleeful

noise was unprecedented in *his* classroom, and though Severus had quickly unraveled the illusion and spelled off the abhorrent color, the story had spread like wildfire by lunchtime, and Severus had never missed a staff meeting since.

Whatever else could be said for the Headmaster's sick sense of humor, his methods were certainly effective.

So here Severus sat, silent and unimpressed by his colleagues' inconsequential natterings, nursing a cup of strong tea and waiting for the Headmaster to arrive so that they could get this farce of a meeting started. He would never admit that he found his fellow Heads of House mildly less irritating than the rest of the Headmaster's merry men, though he had a sneaking suspicion that the other three considered themselves close personal friends. If he did not disabuse them of this notion, well, that was his business.

Albus arrived, finally, and they begun the meeting with the usual start of term announcements, followed by the opening of the floor. Minerva, as usual, seized it with a vigor belying her years.

"We really must decide what we're doing about Marcus Flint," the Head of Gryffindor said briskly, "He got away with obvious and flagrant plagiarism all last year, and I admit we got a little sidetracked by the sickness, but we've let it go on too long."

"I must say, it doesn't seem to have changed at all this year," Pomona put in, "So we can at least be sure whoever is doing Flint's assignments didn't graduate last year."

"But we still don't know who is doing them," Filius said, "And without either that or some other significant proof, we can't punish Mr. Flint."

"Exactly," Severus spoke up on Flint's behalf, "Additionally, I must question whether in this case Mr. Flint truly needs to be punished at all."

Minerva sighed loudly, "Here we go again. Pray, tell us, Severus, exactly why one of your snakes should yet again receive preferential treatment."

You're one to talk, Severus thought rather snidely, thinking of all those miserable lions got away with, but he merely said, "Tell me, Minerva, why do we assign children homework? Is it to punish them?"

"Certainly not," Filius piped up, "It's to help them learn, and also to gauge their rate of learning and understanding."

"So we are in agreement that homework is for the student's benefit, not our own?" Severus asked rhetorically, ignoring Minerva's scowl, "In that case, it seems to me that Mr. Flint has recognized the purpose of homework and made a rather sound judgment call concerning the use of his time. If he already knows the material, what is the purpose of forcing him to regurgitate it to his professors, when it is a waste of both his time and ours in having to grade one more essay?"

"It is not for the student to decide what he does or does not need to do-" Minerva started, but Severus broke across her.

"Then perhaps we should let the test results, impartial as even you will admit, decide for us," Severus pulled out a roll of parchment he brought for this very eventuality and passed it around, "Marcus Flint received straight O's on his OWL's this year, and I do not believe I exaggerate when I say he would have done just as well had he had the chance to take them last year."

"Oh, my," Pomona raised both eyebrows at the roll of parchment, "He did indeed. And in so many subjects, too. Arithmancy, Runes, *and* Care of Magical Creatures. I don't recall him being in that last one, though..."

"He wasn't," Severus said, smirking just a smidge, "He sat the exam without taking a single class. As I understand it, he studied for a few

months with Alesana Selwyn, a well-known creature enthusiast, before registering for the exam. Clearly, he finds classes here at Hogwarts both slow-paced and unnecessary to his studies."

Minerva pursed her lips, but even she could not fail to be impressed, "He is bright, there's no doubt about it, but the fact still remains that he is both flouting academic expectations placed on him by his professors and forcing another student to do his work. No matter how brilliant he may be, it is no excuse for laziness and bullying."

"Except we don't have proof of the laziness or bullying," Pomona frowned, "Because he turns in all his assignments, and we've yet to hear a whisper of complaint from another student. What can we do except watch and wait?"

"Have we really no inkling of who the other student might be?" Filius asked tentatively, "We know it wasn't one of last year's seventh years, because the work is the same voice this year, which makes it all the more likely that it's either a sixth or seventh year now. It might be a fifth year, but I don't see Flint getting a fourth year or younger to do his OWL-level homework last year."

Minerva coughed awkwardly, and spoke up, "I may have a name... it seems incredibly unlikely, but the similarities between the work are... notable."

Severus could tell from the look on her face that she was speaking of one of her little lions. It galled her something bitter to ever admit that one of her charges might be less than noble.

"Who, Minerva?" Filius asked, "I've not seen any similarities in the writing style among my other upper-years."

"It's not the style that is similar," Minerva said carefully, "It is the content. I'm speaking of Percy Weasley. His essays are written in an entirely different tone and voice than Flint's are, but he talks about very similar things. He has similar takes on the subjects and he approaches them from the same angle more often than not. Mr.

Weasley also often brings questions to class, which I've noticed tend to relate to things written in Mr. Flint's essays. All in all... it is a disturbing trend."

"Perhaps, but Percy Weasley?" Pomona repeated incredulously, "He would no more condone cheating than hand in his prefect badge. He would be the last person to do Marcus Flint any favors, excepting perhaps Oliver Wood, and the first person to report an attempt at bullying or blackmail, even on himself."

"I would have thought so, too, but..." Minerva shrugged helplessly, "Well, can the rest of you keep an eye on those two students' work? Perhaps I was mistaken, but if not..."

"Mr. Weasley would be punished as well, you realize?" Filius put in sadly, "He contributed to the cheating, whether under duress or not."

"I am aware," Minerva said stiffly, "Nonetheless, justice must be done."

Severus was tempted to roll his eyes at the sheer dramatization going on in the room. He was only thankful the Headmaster had not spoken up yet, as there was only so much sap and drivel he could handle in one conversation, "Personally, I still do not see any harm being done." The other Heads of Houses shot him exasperated looks, but Severus went on, "Mr. Weasley's grades have not slipped even a point over the last year. If he is the one doing extra work, it would appear to be only to his benefit. He studies twice as much, does well, Flint doesn't waste his time, still does well, and everyone wins. I have yet to see a downside to this situation, despite the technical rule infringement involved."

Not to mention the fact that Severus seriously doubted it was Weasley's work. Though there might be a connection to the Gryffindor prefect... it was as if his mind had all the pieces, but couldn't quite grasp their relation. Ah, well. It would come to him.

"That's rather rich coming from you, Severus," Pomona pointed out with good humor. It was true Severus was usually quite the stickler for the rules, but in this case it was in the best interest of one of his students if he expressed leniency, so he did. It was really as simple as that.

"Nevertheless, Severus does make an interesting point," Albus finally put in, "It seems to me that there is not yet any proof of wrongdoing, though there is smoke enough to start gathering fire hoses, as the muggles would say." Severus very much doubted the muggles ever said anything of the sort. "In any case, keep an eye on the situation and we shall see if something more definite comes of it. That is all we can do for now."

Minerva looked torn, but she willingly let the conversation flow to other matters. The rest of the items on everyone's agenda had little or nothing to do with Severus, and so he largely ignored the proceedings until the topic of Slytherin's number one trouble magnet, Rigel Black, was brought up by Albus himself.

"I'm sure I don't need to remind you all of the unfortunate events of last spring. As the four of you know, Quirrell was eventually identified as the party of immediate guilt concerning the introduction of the sickness to our school, and has forthwith been let go because of it," Albus said, "What is still of pressing concern, however, is not the instrument of the sickness, but that of its cure. Rigel Black. A surprising young man, as I'm sure we can all agree. Why, just this time last year we were discussing his apparent lack of magical ability to speak of, and now we find ourselves stunned by its depth and scope. Thoughts?"

"I suppose you are referring to his seemingly unique ability to enter into a person's mind by means of their magical core?" Minerva clarified, "Well, I don't know much about it, but I can say that after the first couple of months his academic performance turned around dramatically. You got him a new wand, did you not, Severus?"

Severus inclined his head, "Indeed, he was using an unmatched wand, and on top of that suppressing his magic to an unbelievable degree. Headmaster, I'm sure you've noticed the boy has no discernable magical aura."

Albus nodded thoughtfully, "I noticed in the Hospital Wing when young Mr. Black woke Mr. Malfoy from his coma. Very odd in a child, though not entirely unheard of."

"Indeed," Severus said, "But Mr. Black's magical suppression was not entirely the result of psychological trauma. In fact, it seems to be mostly conscious, though there is an unavoidable unconscious element which prevents him from using his full potential even now that he directs his magic consciously. He has extraordinarily good control over his magic, which is both what prevented him from using magic early on when he was not committed to exercising it, and what I believe affords him a unique creativity in the usage of his magic."

"Yes, well put, Severus," Albus said, "Young Mr. Black, simply speaking, has such control over his magic that he is able at times to work outside of the normal bounds of formed magic. By this I mean that it may be possible for him to exercise his magic in a way that he has not been taught a spell or form for, much like the accidental magic of childhood, except willfully harnessed. There have been cases of this in the past, the most notable of which in the last fifty years or so was Tom Riddle, and generally such control over magic is a sign of a powerful burgeoning wizard. It is hard to gauge Mr. Black's potential, however, as the majority of his magic is, indeed, suppressed. He has no aura to read, and even the levels of his magical core are hard to estimate due to its elemental nature."

"Fire?" Filius guessed, "It's always the hardest to tell with fire-types, because a lot of their magical energy is hidden in potential, waiting to combust and create energy at a moment's notice. Endurance is really the only way to judge a fire-core."

"Of which he has plenty," Severus said, not bothering to hide the pride in his voice, "Black's levels are well above normal, if the

amount of magic he can continuously imbue in high-level potions is any indication."

"Do you think he's going to be Lord-level?" Pomona asked thoughtfully, "Sirius Black was certainly nothing to sneeze at, though I don't remember Diana Black having an extraordinary level of talent. She was hardworking and driven, but not naturally gifted as it seems Rigel is."

"Unlikely," Minerva said, "There is one Lord-level born in a century, statistically speaking, though I'm sure he will be a credit to the school by the time he graduates."

Long before that, if Severus Snape had anything to say about it.

"Regardless, we must keep a close eye on Mr. Black as well," Albus said, "He has already shown himself to have hidden depths and talents, and there is nothing more dangerous than an untrained talent. If he shows any more unusual gifts, we will be sure to get him the training he needs to harness them beneficially."

The meeting concluded shortly afterwards, and Snape adjourned to his quarters. Though his body moved at a slow pace, his mind spun fast with deliberation. Flint, Weasley, Black, magic, power, knowledge. There was some sort of connection he was missing, but at the sight of the summer homework he had yet to grade stacked on his desk, Severus put those thoughts away and turned to more practical matters. The school year had only begun, after all. There would be time for unraveling puzzles later.

Lionel Hurst had never been called a gossip. Neither had he, to his not inconsiderate knowledge, been termed a busybody, a news monger, or even a rubberneck. It was true that his mother often accused him of dropping eaves, and occasionally he had been known to snoop if the situation warranted it, but a gossip? Certainly not. For gossiping implied a penchant for passing on what one knows, and Leo would certainly never be accused of that. His lips

were practically sewn together, in fact, but his ears... well, that was a different story. If Leo was the head of the most extensive network of informants and spies in country, including those numbskull Aurors with their fancy 'monitoring' spells, well, it was because Leo *listened* . His ears were everywhere; they missed nothing of import in any part of the wizarding community. If a fly dropped dead in Newport of mysterious causes, Leo heard a fourth-hand account of the incident two hours later.

The point was, Leo was always listening, and if someone else happened to be talking-well, *gossiping* -at the same time, well, that didn't really make *him* a gossip, did it? Just an opportunist. With his compunctions thus mollified, Leo settled more comfortably in his chair at Miss Betsy's Beauty Boutique and opened his ears a little wider. A couple of witches under the dryers across the room were having a very interesting conversation, and Leo did not want to miss a bit of it.

"-being very closed mouth about it," the witch with about eight pounds of curlers on her head was saying to her friend, "I mean, you'd think since we're the ones living just downstairs that we'd deserve to know just who they'd rented it out to. Could be some kind of hoodlum. Or worse, a Ministry spy!"

Leo peered over the top of the *Witch Weekly* magazine he was holding to remain inconspicuous. The witch-in-curlers' friend didn't look convinced, but she did look intrigued.

"A Ministry spy? Oh, Gale, what will you come up with next?" she said, flapping her hands with their still-wet Wonder Shine on the nails at her friend. The nail-polish changed color abruptly, becoming a bright sky blue. "Oh, no! Now look what I've done. Go back!" she flapped her hands again, and the polish turned a sunny yellow, "For Merlin's sake, I'll have to cycle through all the colors again." So saying she continued to flap her hands rapidly until the nail polish changed to green, purple, red, and finally to a pearly pink she was apparently satisfied with.

"You never know, Patricia," Gale insisted, eyes wide with more than that sticky Magic Mascara stuff, "It pays to be careful, especially in times like these. Why, he could be a dark wizard!"

Patricia pursed her lips and gave her friend a very exasperated look, "Didn't little Clara Botting say it was a *boy* living in number eight? How could a boy be a dark wizard or a Ministry spy? He's probably an orphan whelp, or his parents run off and left him. Nothing new around here."

Leo's ears twitched and he frowned at the article a few inches in front of his nose. The words 'Seven Spells to Charm your Prince Charming (Without Him Suspecting a Thing)' jumped across the page, but Leo wasn't really seeing them. An orphan kid living alone in the Lower Alley's? He'd better send someone to check on the lad. Maybe they could find him a place in the Court as a runner, or perhaps Solom could use an assistant. No child should have to fend for himself-not while he was the Rogue.

"Well, yes," Gale admitted, "Though that was near the only thing she did say. Her mother came over and scolded her something fierce for talking about 'that dear Harry boy' behind his back. I wish I knew what those Botting's have got to be so tight-lipped about. I mean, I've lived at number seven, Dogwood Lane for near on ten years now. I've a right to know when some strange lad moves into my own unit, and old Mrs. Whitlock should have told me she'd rented the place out anyhow."

"I tell you, Gale, nobody has basic manners anymore," Patricia said sadly, "Oi! Betsy! This dryer is much too hot!"

Miss Betsy came running over and waved her wand over the dryer in question a few times. The dryer itself didn't actually do anything, as far as Leo knew. It was just an aesthetic way to contain the warming and de-hydrating charms. Still, the old betties liked the ritual and pageantry of a muggle spa, so they kept the pretense. When Miss Betsy had left once more, the two middle-aged witches resumed their conversation.

"I just don't see why you can't go upstairs and see the new tenant for yourself," Patricia said, "I mean you've complained about it, you've asked the Botting's about it, so why don't you *do* something about it?"

"Don't you think I've tried?" Gale snapped. She rolled her eyes, "The boy never answers the door. He never goes in or out, though of course Mrs. Whitlock did have a floo connection, so who knows what hours he keeps. Still, you'd think he could take the time to introduce himself."

"Well, what sort of visitors does he get? You could ask one of them about the boy," Patricia suggested.

"He doesn't get any," Gale shook her head, "The boy must live like a ghost, whoever he is. Never has the lights on at night, either. Frank and I think perhaps he's a might strapped for cash, and doesn't want to use the utilities too much. It would certainly make sense. The lad's as quiet as a mouse. Never plays the wizarding wireless-and believe me, we'd know considering how thin the walls are. Probably doesn't even own shoes, since we never hear him walking about. That or he's a cat animagus."

The two witches twittered at one another for a good minute over the joke, and Leo only restrained himself from rolling his eyes because they were visible over the edge of the magazine.

"Surely you must know something about the boy," Patricia said slyly, "I know you, Gale, if there's a plump little tidbit within arms reach, you've got your teeth in it, sucking out the juice."

Leo privately reflected that that was a perfectly gross way to phrase things.

"Well, little Clara did say one other thing before her ma pulled her off by the ear," Gale said, drawing it out with relish.

"Don't make me beg," Patricia huffed, "Go on then, what was it?"

"She said," Gale leaned in close and Leo had to cast a quick sound amplification spell to catch the rest of it, "That the neighbor boy had the prettiest green eyes she ever did see."

Patricia groaned out loud, "You tiresome hag, you really had me going. Green eyes indeed, I thought you were gonna say he was a runaway prince or something. Why do you always get my blood nice and stirred and then leave me with something so ordinary?"

"Oh, you're just too much fun to tease, Trish," Gale chortled at her friend from behind her own neon tips.

Their conversation moved on to other things, but Leo was caught up in his own thoughts and couldn't be bothered to pay attention to them any longer. A green-eyed boy named Harry? It couldn't be the same Harry, of course, but on the other hand... what were the odds? Perhaps he'd have to pay Dogwood lane a little visit. Though why Harry would say she had gone to America if she was really staying in the Lower Alleys, Leo couldn't fathom. Not that he could ever fathom that lass. She was something else, his Harry.

His musings were interrupted when *Witch Weekly* was ripped from his grasp rather rudely. He looked up into familiar hazel eyes and couldn't keep the grimace of resignation off his face. He might have known. Who else could catch him unawares?

"Leo, my lad, what a surprise," Eleni Hurst smiled down at him in a way that Leo thought was notably a bit evil, "Finally come to get your hair cut? Wonderful."

Leo gulped, "Mum, what on earth are you doing here?"

His mother raised an eyebrow, and glanced about the salon, obviously unimpressed with his venue of choice for the afternoon.

Leo tried again, "You know this is a beautification parlor, don't you, Mum? What would you want in such a place when you're so naturally beautiful already?"

Eleni Hurst chuckled dryly, "Too forced, Leo, entirely too forced. You're not getting out of this one with that silver tongue of yours."

Two hours and one entirely overpriced haircut later, Leo ran-yes, he would admit it to himself, *ran* -from his mother's clutches and wandered down Dogwood Lane. He contemplated the front door for numbers seven and eight for a moment, but really, what kind of a Rogue would he be if he knocked?

Leo cut around to the backside of the buildings on Dogwood and counted the windows until he reached the one he was looking for.

I'll just take a quick peek, Leo thought as he performed the selective sticking spell he'd learned by the time he was eight on his fingertips and toes. *If no one is home, they won't be there to mind my peeking. If it's some other Harry who lives here, I'll offer him a place in the Rogue, and if it is my Harry, well, I'll be due for some explanations.*

Win-win-win, he thought happily as he pried open a window with the ease of long practice. He dropped silently to the dusty floor-whoever Harry is, he or she really needed to learn the Evanescio charm-and straightened up to look around at... nothing. There was nothing there. Leo frowned, and crept silently into the next room over. It, too, was entirely empty, except for a few counters built into the wall indicating the room was supposed to be a kitchen. He looked through the entire apartment, and didn't find a single trace of life. No furniture, no pictures on the wall, nothing. Just a jar of floo-powder on the fireplace mantle in the living room.

"Well, that's not suspicious," Leo said to himself, mildly amused. Either someone was playing an elaborate joke on the lady who lived in number seven, or there was something peculiar going on.

Leo ran a hand through his hair and blew out a quiet breath, thinking hard. Maybe his Harry had rented the place, and then... gone back to school in America. That made no sense. Who would bother to rent out a place they weren't going to live in? Maybe she'd lived there all along, and had really been flooing here all those times he walked her

to the Leaky Cauldron. Maybe she wasn't Harry Potter at all. Maybe she wasn't even a girl! After all, he'd only taken her word for it... no, no, his mother knew she was a girl right away, so that, at least, was true. Still, if she'd lived there before, she would have either left the furniture in anticipation of her next summer break, or she would have stopped renting the apartment if she'd moved out.

Plus, Gale from the beauty parlor had made it sound like this Harry was a relatively new neighbor, and she'd also said she'd never seen him before. That would only make sense if Harry had rented the apartment at the end of the summer, and gone back to school before moving in.

But *why* would Harry do that? Leo shook his head, his Harry had parents, and a place to live, and went to school in America. It just didn't add up. He realized he was jumping to conclusions. There might be other, *real* boys named Harry with green eyes about the Alleys, though why they would rent an apartment and not live in it he couldn't guess at either. On the other hand... Harry had been working at the Storeroom all summer, saving up for something big. Was this it? What if she hadn't been planning to live in it at all? What if the apartment was a fall back, some kind of safe house where she could go if something went wrong? Leo had always gotten the feeling that Harry was involved in something heavy, and Krait agreed. Was she anticipating some kind of trouble, and needed to have a place ready to hide?

He didn't know, but he did know that he would have to keep an eye on Dogwood lane. And probably he should keep an ear at that school in America, as well. If he got wind that Harry did a runner, at least he'd know where to find her, and maybe help, if she'd let him.

Leo left the apartment as silently as he'd come, all traces of footprints in the dust wiped clean with another handy spell he'd picked up when he was just a lad. He had an owl to send to one of his acquaintances in the 'states, and maybe then he'd stop by the Gobstones tables in the park. One could always find good gossip-err, *news* -around a Gobstones table.

Most of September passed before Rigel felt she had quite settled into things. When the third Saturday at Hogwarts had come around, Rigel couldn't believe so much time had gone by. Part of it was that Rigel had been so distracted trying to fit everything into her new routine that she hadn't noticed the passing of the days, and part of it was that in the three weeks they'd been back at school, Rigel had yet to learn much of anything. Their professors were mostly doing a comprehensive review of last year's classes, since so many of the students had fallen ill during the spring semester. Everyone had passed their finals, but it was immediately apparent that most of the students' knowledge was spotty at best, even those who were not actually sick, but merely distracted by their classmates' illness. So Rigel sat through endless lessons on things she already knew, so bored that she began taking her Healing textbooks to all of her classes, not just History of Magic, in an effort to learn something while her school mates caught up on what they'd failed to learn the previous year.

Her friends couldn't understand why she had such an easy time of it. Most of them had only been sick for a few days, or perhaps a couple of weeks, but there were obvious gaps in their knowledge. The tense and confusing atmosphere last spring just hadn't been conducive to really paying attention to their studies. Rigel, on the other hand, had spent all summer going over the first year material for her owl-correspondence course, and was nearly bored to tears waiting for the day her professors finally began introducing new material once more.

Then, of course, there was Defense Against the Dark Arts. Although Lockhart certainly did present them with new material, it wasn't exactly the sort of information Rigel could see coming up on their OWL's.

"I swear to Salazar, if that moron gives us one more pop-quiz on his favorite color..." Draco glared mutinously at the Head Table, where Lockhart appeared to be either regaling a reluctant Professor Sprout

with his slaying of the Bandon Banshee or showing off an incredibly bad singing voice.

Pansy patted Draco's arm consolingly and passed him the strawberry tarts, "It's only for a year. Maybe less."

"Even that's too long," Draco said, though his annoyed tone was a little undermined by the way he was piling strawberry tarts onto his plate, "Think of all the damage he could do to our minds in a year. Not to mention our psychological stability. I've never felt like braining myself, but fifty minutes in his presence and... ugh. Where did Dumbledore even find this guy?"

Pansy pretended to think, "He was probably flipping through his copy of Witch Weekly and thought, well, there's a handsome fellow. With a smile like that he's sure to inspire the students! Let's give him a call."

"Really?" Crabbe gazed at Pansy in a blank sort of way.

"No, Vince, not really," Pansy said with a sigh, "Probably he was the only one to apply. My father tells me it's exceedingly difficult to convince anyone to take the post at this point, what with the curse and all."

"Why is it cursed, anyway?" Theo asked, frowning.

"I heard Slytherin cursed it when he left the school," Tracey Davis commented from across the table.

Millicent shook her head, "It's only been cursed the last forty or fifty years. It was something Dumbledore did, I think. He ticked off someone with a lot of power, and they cursed the position."

"Why that position, though?" Theo pressed.

"I would guess that whoever cursed it first applied for it," Pansy said thoughtfully, "The Headmaster probably denied their application, or greatly offended them some other way."

"Why would he turn away a wizard powerful enough to cast such a long-lasting curse?" Draco asked, "He already sounds exponentially better than Lockhart, who we've yet to see actually *do* magic."

"He must have been Dark," Blaise said knowingly, pushing a lone pea around his plate, "That would have been reason enough for Dumbledore to deny his application."

"Snape's Dark," Theo pointed out.

"Sssh!" Davis glared at Theo, shooting Rigel a pointed look.

"Oh, yes, because no one would ever have guessed that without Theo pointing it out," Draco rolled his eyes, "Don't be daft, Davis. Rigel knows Snape's Dark."

Rigel nodded easily. It was pretty apparent to Rigel, who had seen Snape's magical core and felt the characteristically aggressive edge to his magic personally. Then of course there was the fact that his affinity had been common knowledge since her father was at Hogwarts.

Dark and Light politics were a tricky thing in the wizarding world. It was the nature vs. nurture argument played out on a dangerous scale. To a certain extent, family had a lot to do with the way your magic leaned. Many people were born with a predisposition to Light or Dark magic, either passed down in their blood or just because of the way their soul was made up naturally. Then, of course, there was the fact that the environment a child spent the first few years of their life heavily influenced their tendencies by subtly conditioning the child to the feel of either Light or Dark magic. Unconsciously, a child began forming their magic in a similar way to what they were used to experiencing. In addition, raw magic itself had the tendency to take on the properties of that which it came into contact with for a long period of time, like it did when absorbed by a stone. A child's untrained power usually responded the same way, leaning Dark or Light depending on both its natural inclinations and its environment.

Then, of course, there was Neutral magic. As many people as there were that leaned either Dark or Light, there were an equal number whose magic didn't use magic one way or the other. A large number of the Neutral magic users were muggleborn, leading credence to the idea that Dark and Light leanings derive more from environment than from natural inclination, but there were Dark muggleborns and Light muggleborns, too, so the idea of an inherent tendency toward one or the other couldn't be discounted.

"Knowing isn't the same thing as *knowing*," Davis was saying angrily, "If you keep giving him definite names, he'll report us all to his Auror father."

Rigel raised an eyebrow, but it was Blaise who spoke up scathingly.

"First of all, you have just by your own words admitted to being a part of the 'us' you're so afraid Rigel is going to report," Blaise said, nailing the girl with a look of uncompromising disapproval, "Second, if we're going to talk about people reporting on other people to their fathers then we should include everyone guilty of such an action. Looking around at those of us with the wherewithal to even send letters-" here he glanced with amusement at Crabbe and Goyle, "-Rigel is probably the only one I would guess hasn't been actively informing on the rest of our year to his family." Rigel was slightly startled to see every single second-year Slytherin glance away at that. She'd known Draco reported on her-had tacitly approved, even, but *all* of them were sending information home about one another? Interesting. And Blaise was not finished yet, "Third, Rigel's father hasn't been an Auror for several years-he works at St. Mungo's now. Fourth, Rigel *moved through our magical cores* last spring when he was curing us of the sickness. If he doesn't know exactly which of us is Dark and which Light by now, he doesn't deserve to own a wand. And finally," Blaise said, looking rather satisfied by the way Davis' face turned an unbecoming puce in response to his words, "As Rigel is sitting here, and not at the Gryffindor or Hufflepuff tables, I very much doubt he cares at all what our personal leanings are, as even if he is somehow uneducated in the mechanics of the debate he at the

very least obviously lacks any prejudice of the sort you were so quick to go into fearful hysterics over."

Their section of the table lapsed into awed silence as Blaise concluded his impromptu speech. Davis was staring at the table and frowning rather petulantly, though she did not speak up to contradict Blaise's points.

Rigel cleared her throat a bit awkwardly, and said, "Although Blaise put that very nicely, I will say this now so that there is no confusion." The eyes of her classmates locked onto her with varying expressions of expectant concentration. Taking in their intensely interested faces, Rigel realized they must have been wondering about this very thing for a while. How long had they been holding back from questioning her about her position on Dark-Light politics? Since the train ride, when she had placed herself firmly in the anti-SOW camp? Earlier than that, even? "I am thoroughly educated on the matter of Light and Dark inclinations, and, as Blaise rightly indicated, could frankly not care any less which camp my friends fall into. As far as I am concerned, it is a personal decision that is both none of my business and beyond my jurisdiction as a fellow magical being to either influence or place an ideological value on. That said, just as it isn't my business, it isn't anyone else's either, so I won't share what I know about your leanings with anyone, just as I will not discuss others' leanings with you."

"You and Blaise talk like Professor Snape," Goyle said, blinking.

"We speak like academics," Blaise said, eyes flashing with veiled mirth, "Because we are both well read, are we not, Rigel?"

Rigel tilted her head in agreement. She knew she often sounded like one of the potions journals she liked to read, but it was better to sound too old than too young, in her opinion.

"Getting back to the point, though," Theo said tentatively, "You're really okay with us being Dark? I mean not that it would matter if you weren't okay with it. Um, but you really are?"

"Yes, Theo," Rigel said, "Magic is magic, as far as I'm concerned. It's where magic mixes with politics that things get murky."

"In that case, from now on magic will be magic and politics will be something else, yes?" Pansy looked around at them all, "I think it will be much more comfortable if we can separate the two, in any case."

"I agree," Draco said, surprising Rigel and most of the others as well, "What? It's a sad fact that in recent years the two have become too mixed. When magical leanings determine what politics you support, and your family's politics determine your magical leanings, well, then we've lost sight of the point, haven't we?"

Rigel thought that was a rather good way of putting things.

She had learned a lot about Light vs. Dark magic in her research into formed magic over the summer. Some of the texts she found were naturally biased, but between the extremes found in the Black Family Library and the other extremes littered about the Potter Library, she thought she had a balanced grasp of the conflict.

It was a common, though incorrect, belief that there were 'Light spells' and 'Dark spells' and that a wizard had *carte blanche* in deciding which spells to use. This led directly to the moral implication that if one was a 'good' wizard, one would choose not to use 'Dark' spells.

The truth was a little more complicated. In reality, Light and Dark referred not to the spells one used, but the way one's magic was shaped. It was not the wizard who chose the spells they used, but the way they shaped their magic that determined which spells they were *capable* of using.

All magic was not the same kind of magic. That much was clear to anyone who compared the magic of wizards to the magic of house elves, for example. But it went further than that. Wizard's magic wasn't all the same either, and just as there were things that elves could do that wizards could not, there were some kinds of magic that

Light wizards could do, which Dark wizards could not, and vice versa. The spells and rituals that only worked if you shaped your magic in the way referred to as 'Dark' were naturally called Dark spells and Dark rituals. The same was true of Light magic. It was simply magic that could only be done by shaping your magic in the form that Light wizards inherently used. The 'Light' and 'Dark' misnomers were derived from the simple fact that Dark wizards' formed magic had a more powerful edge to it. Dark magic typically was faster, stronger, and, yes, more dangerous in general than Light magic. It had an... aggressiveness to it that was necessary for performing curses like the Unforgivables. Because the most destructive curses could only be cast by those who wielded magic in the Dark way, Dark magic had a bad reputation.

In the same way, there were some spells that one could only perform by using magic in the Light way. Light magic was slower, but very precise. Light magic could create things of detail and delicacy. It wasn't that Dark magic was less complicated-some of the advanced Dark rituals were extremely complex, taking months to bring to fruition-but it was less straightforward. The way Dark wizards formed their magic left a wild quality to it that made it sometimes unpredictable, and not so suitable for Light spells, which required exact parameters and a strict form. With Light magic, a wizard could charm a toothpick to paint a mural of the Sistine Chapel on a butterfly's back. Many upper level Healing spells, which required an exact outcome to ensure patient safety, were also only usable for Light-oriented wizards. If a Dark wizard attempted the spell, at best it failed and at worst it seriously compromised patient safety.

Of course, Dark magic had its own, very strong and very fast, way of Healing, just as Light magic had very precise ways of maiming a person for life. In all honesty, it would be more accurate to refer to one kind of magic as blue and the other as red. Blue can't be used to make orange and Red can't be used to make green, but they both can be used to make purple.

In the end, magical leanings were about family tradition and personal preference, and morality had very little logically to do with it. Unfortunately, Dark magic's often violent-seeming nature caused wizards of Dark leaning to be treated with suspicion. The theory was something like this: Only someone who owns a gun can shoot a gun, and though it may be true that not all people with guns *would* shoot them, the best policy is to... register... the people with guns, so that if someone does get shot they know who to blame.

When politics joined the debate, of course, things became even more complicated. Nothing was inevitable. The Bones' were traditionally Neutral in their magic usage, but almost always chose to put their lot in with Light-sided politics. Sirius came from a long line of Dark wizards, grew up in a Dark environment, and even used his magic in the Dark way, yet he, too, chose Light politics, though it was more of a way to distance himself from his family and to benefit those he cared for than for an ideological principle concerning magical leanings. Sometimes a wizard from a Light family chose to vote Dark or simply ended up Dark magically speaking by chance, and vice versa, though such a thing was usually looked upon as a betrayal by the more traditional families.

In the end, Rigel firmly believed that good and evil existed, but she didn't think they were embodied in Light and Dark magic. It was people who shot people, not guns. It was evil wizards who caused destruction and violence, not Dark wizards or even Dark magic.

"So what are you, then?" Theo asked curiously.

"Light, obviously," Davis sneered, "Look at the people he grew up around. His father is Light, and those Potters are practically incandescent."

Rigel frowned, wondering where Davis had gotten the idea that Sirius was Light. His magic had developed in a Dark environment, and the tendency for Dark was deeply rooted in his blood in any case. That was exactly the kind of confusing of politics with actual magical affinity that people should be more careful about.

"It's none of our business," Pansy said primly, though she couldn't quite hide her own curiosity.

"I mean, it sort of is..." Theo said tentatively, "He knows all of ours, after all. Turnabout and all that."

Rigel considered this. It was true she knew of their affinities. As might be expected, considering their families, all of their year had a Dark affinity, except Pansy, who was Light, and perhaps Blaise, whose magic Rigel hadn't gotten a very good read on. Of course, Rigel could have guessed that after their first week in Transfiguration if she'd known what she knew now.

Basic Transfigurations, like most general magic, were classified as Neutral. The term 'neutral' was misleading, because what was meant was that anyone could do basic magic, those with a Light edge, a Dark edge, or those with no lean to their magic. In reality, there were high-level Neutral spells that were truly Neutral in that one had to have perfectly balanced magic to accomplish them-neither Dark nor Light magic would work with those types of spells. But in any case, Transfigurations were very distinct when performed by Light, Dark, or Neutral magic. When Draco transfigured a match into a needle, his match practically exploded into a needle. The change was forceful and instantaneous. Pansy's match, on the other hand, changed slowly but seamlessly into a needle with delicate precision.

Rigel's Transfigurations were just erratic, like everything else about her magic. It wasn't like before her magic had started working with her-the spells always worked nowadays, but sometimes they worked instantaneously, and other times the magic took its sweet time about it. Still other times it changed one part of something first and then the other part a moment or two later, and a couple of times Rigel could have sworn the magic had changed the object she was working on to something else entirely before Transfiguring it correctly. It happened so fast, however, that Rigel couldn't be sure.

"I suppose I'm Neutral," Rigel said after a long moment of contemplation. In truth, she didn't know what her magic was. It

seemed fickle, sometimes manifesting with a Dark edge, other times so refined it *had* to be Light, so Neutral was probably the safest guess since she didn't know for sure. At times she wondered what was wrong with her magic, but those thoughts weren't terribly constructive, so she tended not to worry about it.

"Really?" Draco looked a bit skeptical, but took another bite of strawberry tart without questioning her further.

As they headed back to the dorms, Draco spoke up hopefully, "So, Quidditch tryouts are tonight. Are you coming, Rigel?"

Rigel prevaricated automatically, "I don't know. I mean, you said Flint's really only looking for a beater, right? Usually I play chaser..."

As expected, Draco turned cajoling eyes on her, "Come on, Rigel, try something new! I bet you'd be a fair beater. You're pretty good with hitting those little practice snitches with me, and a bludger is a much bigger target."

"Heaver, too, though," Rigel commented, rather enjoying dragging it out a bit, "And to hit an independently moving target is probably harder than hitting a dead ball with a predictable trajectory."

"Oh, just do it, Rigel," Pansy said. Her expression was utterly resigned, "There's no harm in trying out, and Draco would never forgive you if you didn't. I guess this is what I get for befriending boys."

Rigel smiled slightly, "I suppose I could try out. Maybe you should, too, Pansy. If you can't beat them..."

"Run the other way?" Pansy suggested wryly, "Thanks but no thanks; the spectator's box is the closest I've ever wanted to be to a Quidditch game, and even that is a strain on my sensibilities."

Draco and Rigel exchanged looks of mock disappointment, before breaking into amused grins. Pansy shoved them both playfully and

they spent the rest of the trip to the common room trying not to laugh-they couldn't be seen chatting gaily in the dungeon halls, after all. What would the Gryffindors think?

That afternoon they headed out to the Quidditch pitch for tryouts, and if Rigel had thought last year's trial was intimidating, it was nothing on what Flint had cooked up for this year.

First, before ever trying out for individual positions, each contender had to complete a general flying test in the form of an obstacle course. Rigel didn't know which Master Spell-crafter Flint had blackmailed into setting up the field for the Slytherin Quidditch team, but more than half the applicants dropped out upon the mere sight of what awaited those determined enough to try the course.

The goal was to make it three laps around the pitch as quickly as possible, but Rigel felt that if seven players managed to make it around three times at all it would be a miracle of magic and sheer dumb luck. They were limited by means of a hyper-extended Ceiling Charm to a vertical span of about thirty feet above ground level around the whole track. No one knew this, of course, until the first unfortunate fourth year shot right into it while trying to fly over the first obstacle-a giant metal blade that swung like a pendulum across the track. The kid smacked against the invisible ceiling barrier with a sickening thud and spiraled weakly to the turf (which was luckily just thirty feet below him and reinforced with a Cushioning Charm for just such an eventuality), nursing a concussion.

Needless to say, the second kid in line experienced a sudden drop in gumption and graciously insisted someone else could go next.

After the razor-pendulum was a series of hoops that they had to fly through to get credit for the lap. Some of the hoops were placed awkwardly horizontal, so that one had to come at them from the top or bottom and risk plowing into the ground or the barrier if they attempted the maneuver too fast. After the hoops was a stretch of field that had been placed under what looked like a localized

Weather Charm, specifically a rather nasty Storm Spell. That entire section of the course was waterlogged, with aggressive winds and pelting rain to test the flyer's ability to handle extreme Quidditch conditions. Rigel caught a glimpse of lightning crackling in the heavy black clouds from where she stood next to Draco in the line up and quickly averted her eyes. That was going to be ugly.

Immediately after the rainy segment, they would be faced with three cannons. One of the cannons-and they wouldn't know which one until they got there-would fire a ball the size of a cantaloupe into the air in front of them. If the ball was yellow, they were to catch it like a quaffle. If it was blue, they were to bat it away with their fists, and if it was red they were to avoid getting hit by it at all. This was a test of both hand-eye coordination and split-second decision-making. Of course it went unsaid that at that point their fingers would be slick with water and probably freezing after flying through the rain, adding another layer of difficulty to the task.

Then there was a stretch of pitch that looked like one thirty-foot-tall chunk of transparent Swiss cheese. From what Rigel could tell, it was some kind of three-dimensional maze, requiring the flyers to make their way into tight cylindrical holes and find the path to the other side without doubling back too much. It would test maneuverability and also endurance under anxiety and pain, for, as Flint cheerfully informed them, the entire construct was lightly charged with a Static Spell. If they brushed up against the sides of the maze while maneuvering through it, they'd receive a sharp sting for the mistake.

Rigel supposed it would also test a candidate's short-term memory, if they managed to make it back around for a second go at the maze.

Once through that, it was a straight shot to the finish/start line. The catch? That section of the track was where the bludgers were. Flint had rounded up an even six of the mindless things for the occasion, and they bounced around like deranged pin balls between the edges of the course, the ground, and the Ceiling Charm. The goal in that segment was fairly simple-don't get pulverized.

After that they just had to do it all again. Twice.

"Well, if the Gryffindors aren't impressed by *this*, they mustn't have eyes in their heads," Pansy commented from where she was keeping them company in line, "It's not too late to come sit up in the stands with us sane folk," she added to Rigel, eyeing the swinging scythe with wary distaste.

"Thanks, Pan, but I'm afraid from now on you'll have to be sane enough for the three of us," Rigel said, clenching and unclenching her fingers around the smooth handle of Archie's Comet 260. It was almost identical to her own Comet, and she had worked out the kinks in a quick warm-up with Draco, so she wasn't too concerned about the difference.

Pansy took her leave of them with a last admonition to be careful and not get themselves killed, to which Draco cheerfully replied that some things were worth dying for. Their blonde friend just shook her head and wished them luck before sauntering off toward the stands.

Not long after the fifth contender had been disqualified for either skipping a hoop or being blown off their wind by the Storm Spell, Flint sidled up to them and raised an inquiring eyebrow.

"So?" the captain said, a smug tug playing at the corner of his lips, "What do you guys think?"

"Impressive," Rigel said easily.

"The spellwork, not the competition," Draco added without missing a beat.

Flint chuckled appreciatively, "Well, thanks."

Rigel blinked, "You did all this yourself?" Flint sent her a knowing look and Rigel flushed with embarrassment. For some reason she always forgot how utterly brilliant Flint was. Whether it was the way he comported himself or his general laid-back, gruff approach to life,

she was always tempted to underestimate him-and she was the one who should know better than anyone how smart he was. She was only doing his homework because he had no need to, after all.

"Right. It *is* really well done, Flint."

"Also, a bit vindictive," Draco commented as they watched a weedy-looking sixth year's broom catch fire from an unlucky graze with a bolt of lightning.

"Madam Pomphrey's been notified to expect patients. At least no one can say they didn't know what they were getting into," Flint said, not a shred of remorse on his face as yet another hopeful was disqualified, "Oh, he made it to the cannon volley. Too bad he can't tell red from yellow."

Sure enough, the little third year had made to catch the ball automatically before realizing it was red-but by then it was too late to avoid the projectile, and it smacked into his shoulder despite the third year's attempt at dodging.

"What happens if no one makes it through?" Rigel asked curiously.

"Don't speak too soon," Flint said, lifting his chin toward the next contender.

It was Adrian Pucey, she saw, and he was through the first obstacle so fast she nearly missed it. Pucey flew through the hoops nearly as quickly, rolling and twisting the broom around to get through the more awkward hoops as fast as possible. The Storm Charm didn't seem to faze him, except to make him bend lower onto his broom and swerve slightly to the side to avoid a strong upper-cutting wind that whipped up in front of him. When the cannon fired a blue ball, Pucey batted it away unerringly, and then he was making his way through the maze, much slower than he had been flying, but still at a remarkably steady pace. He was zapped a couple of times when he had to double back from a dead end, but soon he was out the other side and hurtling with heart-stopping recklessness through the final leg of the course. One of the six bludgers came awfully close to

breaking the nose of his broom off, but Pucey pulled up sharply at the last moment and darted across the finish line before the bludgers could make a return pass.

A cheer went up from the line of waiting Slytherins, and a smattering of applause from the sparsely populated stands was heard as well as Pucey headed into his second lap. This one caused him a bit more trouble, as he had hit the swinging blade with bad timing and had to put on the breaks to prevent being sliced in half before continuing. Well, probably the blade was blunted so that no one actually got cut to ribbons, but the effect was still terror inducing.

"Now *that* is a Quidditch player," Flint said with no small amount of pride. "Six minutes and sixteen seconds!" he called out to the rest of them, "That's the time to beat if you want a guaranteed spot on the team!"

The waiting hopefuls cheered eagerly, pressing forward to get closer to the front of the line.

Draco scoffed, "Like anyone will beat Pucey's time. He's the best flyer for sheer maneuverability on the team, next to you, Flint."

"I know," Flint said, "I just want to see if they'll psyche themselves out or not."

Rigel grimaced at the riled up competitors suddenly keen to take of the course as soon as possible. Flint's mind games were definitely in her top three scariest things ever witnessed, right up there with Walburga Black's horridly scowling portrait and Mr. Riddle's smile. A flash of blue, like a tailored vest, flashed across her mind's eye for a brief moment as the thought of fear churned the memories in her mind like a stick poking through muddy water, but she blinked it away. She had no time to get distracted by the past.

When it was Draco's turn, Rigel gave him a reassuring smile and watched him like a hawk as soon as his attention was on the course. She had faith in Draco, she truly did, but if it looked for even a

second like he really was going to be sliced into ribbons by the possibly blunted razor blade... well, she and her magic would not be standing by quietly.

In the end, her caution was unnecessary. Draco had been a member of the Slytherin team for an entire year, even if it was on reserve, and it definitely showed. He flew so smoothly that if you watched only him and not his surroundings you could almost forget the obstacles were even there. He brushed through the hoops with practiced precision, and though the thick rain made his bangs drip directly into his face, he still managed to catch the yellow ball launched at him with relative ease. The maze took him a moment or two to puzzle through, but the second and third laps went much faster once he had the rhythm of the course down.

Her friend finished in just under seven minutes, and he landed with a wide grin, cheeks flushed with exertion and pupils wide with excitement.

"That was great, Dray," Rigel said honestly, "You're definitely moving on."

Draco flicked a bit of water from his sleeves at her playfully, "You'd better be there with me, Rye, so don't mess up."

"Rye?" Rigel repeated with amusement.

Draco looked briefly away, then back defiantly, "Pansy and I have nicknames. Why not you?"

Since saying 'because Rigel isn't my name in the first place' wasn't an option, Rigel just shrugged and let it go.

"Then, here goes nothing," Rigel said. She mounted her broom and rose about five feet off the ground to hover, waiting for the signal. When the whistle blew, she shot off toward the giant swinging pendulum of death. It was a lot more ominous up close, but when compared to the speed of a broomstick, it also appeared to move a

lot slower than it did from a standstill. Rigel had no trouble maneuvering toward the side the blade wasn't, and immediately focused on not missing any of the hoops that were coming up next. She'd been watching people attempt the course for a good half hour, so she took the path that both Pucey and Draco had taken, as it seemed to be the most efficient overall. It was a little bit cheating, but mostly she thought it was just paying attention and being clever.

She had braced herself against the wind and rain, but was entirely unprepared for the cold. She and Archie had never played Quidditch in the middle of a storm before (Lily would have had their brooms snapped in half for even thinking about it, and really, why would they even want to?). The water was one thing, encumbering her as an extra ten pounds of weight absorbed into her robes, and a nightmare for visibility. Not for the first time, she thanked the Polyjuice potion that she wasn't still wearing contacts, which surely would have been washed away when the rain started getting pushed horizontally at her by the impossible winds. The cold, though, was something else entirely. It froze her muscles and made her want to seize up with discomfort for precious seconds after getting through the rain to the other side. In those seconds the blue ball seemed to come out of nowhere; though Rigel instinctively batted it away from her face when she finally registered it approaching, if it had been any other color she would have been disqualified.

Grimacing, she made a mental note to be more prepared coming out of the storm on the next lap. The maze she had watched several others make it through already, so she simply followed the path she'd memorized and tried not to touch the edges. One carelessly draped sleeve, however, demonstrated to Rigel exactly how painful a 'mild' shock could be when conducted through water-soaked robes and skin. Seriously disoriented by the shock, Rigel just managed to duck a bludger that came careening toward her before she'd even gotten the tail end of her broom out of the maze's exit.

Deciding she didn't want to spend any more time in that section than she had to, Rigel shot forward as quickly as she could while

maintaining an irregular flight pattern to through off the bludgers' Homing Charm, which acted like a navigational auto-lock on the closest moving non-bludger within the Charm's range.

She raced across the finish line, hurtled once more toward the menacing pendulum, and began the whole ridiculous process over again. It went better the second time around, and she was feeling pretty confident by the third time she encountered the obstacles. As she made her way through the course for the final lap, it occurred to her, not for the first time, that much of the things wizards got themselves involved in were sheer farce if looked at from a certain angle. Ah well, such was the influence of magic, she supposed, which was a force of farce if ever there was one.

Rigel finished with a respectable time of eight minutes and nine seconds. Not as good as anyone who had been on the team the year before, but definitely in the top twelve.

Flint then divided them into who was trying out for what positions and called out the top finishers for each position. Last year's keeper was called, as well as the potential keeper who had the fastest time. He kept Draco and a fifth year who had a time thirty seconds faster than Rigel's to try for seeker. The two chasers besides Flint from last year were kept on the pitch, as well as the three fastest finishers among the hopefuls. For beaters, since Derrick wasn't able to try out, Flint kept Bole, the other veteran beater, and three of the newbie's with the fastest times-including Rigel, who had placed right in the middle of her two competitors, all three of whom had placed a good minute below Bole.

The beaters and seekers stepped off the field to watch the chasers and keepers try out first. Their tryout was fairly straightforward, just a mock quaffle game, with one keeper at each goal set and the six chasers facing off against one another to see who scored the most goals.

"Great flying, Rigel!" Draco said when the chaser-keeper scrimmage had begun.

"Not as good as yours," Rigel said, grinning back a bit, "You flew like you didn't even notice the obstacles."

"What obstacles?" Draco laughed, "Oh, those old things? Flint has us train with obstacle spells all the time. Didn't you ever wonder why I'd come back from practice soaking wet, even though it was sunny outside?"

Rigel had honestly never even noticed the discrepancy. She didn't know if it was because she didn't pay enough attention to the weather, or, she winced inwardly, if she didn't pay enough attention to her friends. Out loud, she said, "I thought it best not to ask."

"Well, Flint likes to keep us on his toes," Draco shrugged, apparently not noticing how his words were seriously freaking out the kids standing nearest them, "One time he made us practice with deafening spells over our ears, so we had to hone our situational awareness with sight only, and once he cast Hampering Charms on our brooms to make them move slower, but then charmed the bludgers a little bit faster, so that we'd learn to react faster to make up for the lack of mobility. Most of us ended up in the Hospital Wing, but it was an enriching experience."

Rigel glanced bemusedly at Draco. Her friend had never once described an experience as 'enriching' if it caused him physical discomfort. Looking at the kid on Draco's other side, who was noticeably green in the face, Rigel understood that Draco was telling her this for the benefit of those around them. She thought it was a bit risky, since he might have psyched her out as well as their competition, but maybe Draco didn't care if he upset her as well, or maybe he had faith in the strength of her stomach.

Deciding to pitch in, Rigel affected an interested but nervously incredulous tone of voice and asked, "So Weather Charms are common, too?"

"Oh, yeah," Draco said with an innocent smile that should have sent alarm bells through the head of anyone who knew the blonde

aristocrat, "We've practiced in all sorts of conditions. You'd think the icy rain and snow would be the worst, but sometimes we practice in fog so thick you can't see the end of your broomstick, much less a bludger coming straight at you. Then there are the days Flint cranks up the localized heating charms in the stadium to desert levels, and won't let us rehydrate until we get to 100 points. The worst, though, was definitely the plague of locusts."

"P-plague of what?" The girl who was trying against Draco for seeker finally snapped and rounded on the blonde boy, "You can't be serious!"

Draco blinked, as if extremely taken aback that someone would doubt such a thing, "The plague of locusts. Once Flint transfigured all the dead leaves on the pitch into a swarm of locusts, which then attacked at random to see how good we were at ignoring annoying distractions. Let me tell you, those suckers bite like nobody's business."

Rigel was now hard pressed to keep an amused smile off her face, and from the corner of her eye she could see Bole smirking openly as the rest of the beater and seeker hopefuls gave up their pretense of not listening and gaped with horror.

"What kind of crazy sadist *is* Flint?"

"I saw Higgs with bites all over his neck last year!" a beady-eyed boy trying for beater exclaimed, "I thought they were from his girlfriend at the time, but now... that's sick."

Rigel coughed quickly into her hand to disguise the snort that escaped her. Honestly, how did people believe this stuff? Most of it was probably true to a certain extent, but locusts most certainly didn't bite-they didn't even have teeth. Just a hard outer shell that was mostly useful for thickening up Debilitating Draughts. At most one might be able to pinch with its mouth, but there's no way it would penetrate the skin, and Rigel doubted it would look anything like a teenager's hickey.

Still, the other three candidates who weren't already on the team seemed very in awe of this information.

"I thought this obstacle course thing was just intimidation tactics, to test the nerves, you know?" the other potential beater, a beefy boy in a silver scarf that in Rigel's opinion was highly impractical for flying in, said with a frown, "But if this is the kind of thing we can expect all the time... the prestige of playing on the House team just isn't worth it." Without another word, the boy walked off the pitch and didn't look back.

Rigel sent Draco a surreptitiously impressed look, and Draco just smirked at her. Now it was essentially she and the beady-eyed boy competing for the second beater's spot, since Bole was practically guaranteed a place back on the team.

Soon enough the chasers were decided, and the keeper position as well. Consistent with what Draco had surmised, the old members kept their spots, and the hopefuls were sent off with disappointed expressions. There was one exception-the girl who tried out for keeper against Bletchley was kept on as a reserve, since she did manage to stop all but one of the goals shot against her by the seasoned chasers.

Flint called out the beaters, of which he was obviously amused to note there were now only three, and explained to them what their tryout would consist of.

"Originally," Flint informed them, "I was going to give you each a bludger and then see how many times you could hit it accurately through one of the goal posts in ten minutes."

Rigel felt quite suddenly relieved that he had phrased it in such a way that it was clear such a feat was no longer expected of them. The quaffle goals were an extremely precise target to hit a bludger at. Usually with bludgers, you just had to hit it in the general direction of an opposing player-it didn't have to connect, it just had to pose enough of a threat that the opposing player stopped whatever they

were currently doing, like chasing the snitch or blocking the goalposts, in order to dodge it. This was good, because bludgers rarely stayed on the trajectory you hit them on. They were spelled to veer and swerve, and that was without the influence of the Homing Charms pulling them toward the nearest source of movement. To try and hit one through an inflexible, and just-barely-big-enough quaffle hoop would be nearly impossible.

"Then I thought, what's the point in that? In a real game, the targets aren't going to stay stationary," Flint went on blithely, "And there's no sense of risk when aiming at a dead hoop. So I came up with a way to *really* test your skills."

Rigel didn't think she was the only one who gulped.

"But before I explain, let me call the seekers over here," Flint whistled and gestured with two fingers at Draco and the girl he was trying against. They came trotting over immediately, and upon their arrival Flint presented each with a flimsy plastic hoop roughly the size of a single goal hoop. Rigel's stomach began to sink as she looked from the hoops, to Flint's gleaming eyes, to the innocently excited faces of the potential seekers.

"I can see by the rapid loss of color in your face that you've figured it out, Mr. Black," Flint chuckled darkly, "Well don't spoil the fun before I build up to it. So anyway, I thought moving targets were just essential to a proper beater tryout, and to make it more realistic, the targets would have to be in close proximity to something that was empathetically *not* a target. Like, say, a fellow teammate."

The beady-eyes boy stuttered and gaped inarticulately, while the girl trying for seeker looked like she was biting her tongue to prevent from protesting vehemently as she realized what was going on.

"Then of course there's this part of me that just hates wasted time," Flint said contemplatively, "And that's the part of me that came up with a brilliant idea to kill two seekers-er, I mean, *birds* -with one bludger and incorporate the seekers' tryouts into this situation as

well. For anyone who needs it spelled out, this is how it's going to go down. Malfoy and Caviet will each have one of these hoops affixed with a sticking charm to the bottom of their brooms. Just to prove to anyone who thinks otherwise that I never put my team through something I'm not willing to do myself, I, too, will have a hoop affixed to my broom for this tryout. As you may have noticed, that means there are three hoops, and three beaters trying out. Incidentally, good job thinning the herd, Malfoy. Now I won't have to choose a random spectator to make it an even four."

Draco preened a bit under the praise, thought he was still giving the plastic hoop in his hand apprehensive glances.

"Now, each of you will get one bludger-they'll be color coded, so don't try hitting someone else's unless it attacks you directly-and you'll have fifteen minutes to see how many times you can get it through your hoop. The hoops will also be color coded, and Pucey will be my eyes in the sky to keep score. The two beaters with the most 'goals' win, but be aware that hitting the person or broom of the one carrying your hoop will result in serious deductions," Flint said sternly.

"Um, Mr. Flint?" the beady-eyed boy spoke up nervously, "Why are the seekers carrying the hoops? I mean, it'll be harder for them to maneuver with them on, so how will they catch the snitch?"

"They won't," Flint shrugged, "No snitches in this game. I already know Malfoy can catch the snitch when he tries hard enough, and I've seen enough of Caviet's flying to assume she's got talent as well. This tryout's not about talent, though-I can beat that into you once you're on the team. It's about guts. The seekers will be judged on how well they hold up under the pressure of being a constant moving target. Their role in this requires gumption to stick it out, and also trust in their fellow players. One badly timed bludger and you could knock them out of the air, but that's no different from how a real match will be, so it's best to get used to it now."

Rigel thought that was a little bit not at all true. No beater would aim a bludger at a player who was *right next to his own player* . You went for the lone flyers. The seekers or keepers, the other beaters and occasionally the stray chaser. And that was when you aimed at anyone at all. Bludgers didn't need a beater's help in targeting other players-they did that on their own. Most of a beater's job was the keep the bludgers away from their own players. Catching the other team unawares was usually just a bonus.

Flint stuck the hoops onto the bottom of his, Draco's, and the Caviet girl's brooms. He then charmed the one on his broom red, Draco's blue, and Caviet's green.

"Bole, you're red. Black-blue. Tuiggins, you're green," Flint said. It did not escape Rigel's notice that Flint was paired with the most experienced beater, and was therefore the least likely to get hit. Caviet seemed to be a bit leery of the pairings, too, and she eyed Tuiggins' nervously tapping fingers with uneasy concern.

Pucey brought over three bludgers, one charmed red, one green, and one blue, and when Flint set them free the three beaters took to the skies after their bludgers as quickly as possible. The seekers and Flint took off carefully with their colored hoops. It was immediately apparent that they'd have to fly awkwardly with their legs tucked up and out of the way if they didn't want to get an ankle broken by any shots that actually went through the hoops. Still, they seemed to be managing all right, and Rigel had no more time to spare them as she tore through the air after the brutal blue comet streaking across the sky above her.

When she finally caught up to the bludger, she just followed it for a moment, flummoxed. What was she to do now? She couldn't catch it and wait for the perfect shot like it was a quaffle, but she couldn't hit it blindly toward Draco's hoop either, as it was both too far away and at a bad angle for a shot. She considered hitting it softly in Draco's direction until it was close enough to get a better shot, but without enough momentum the bludger was as likely to go where she hit it

as it was to go anywhere else. One did not simply nudge a bludger in the direction one wanted it to take, after all.

As she kept pace with the blue bludger for a few moments more, she saw Tuiggins get off a pretty solid hit on his green bludger towards Caviet. Unfortunately, it was too high, and Caviet was forced to duck and roll swiftly to avoid getting hit in the chest with the glowing green ball. Rigel shook her head at the foolishness. The only way that would have worked is if Caviet had pulled up enough to make the ball go through-

Oh. Rigel blinked at the realization. Well, exactly.

Hadn't Flint just said it wasn't about skill? It was about guts-for both the beaters *and* the seekers. Rigel turned her broom sideways so she could both follow the bludger on its random path and catch sight of Draco once more. He was watching her, seeming content to wait for her to make a move. Rigel whistled sharply just as Flint had done down on the pitch and swung an arm in a motion to indicate he should come closer. Draco seemed to get the idea quickly enough, and he zoomed toward her quickly.

If she couldn't get the bludger to the hoop, they'd bring the hoop to the bludger. Wasn't the whole point that the hoop was mobile? Admittedly, an opposing player would never cooperate during a game, but Flint hadn't said they couldn't work together, and in Slytherin House that was as good as saying you could.

Soon Draco pulled up beside her, though his movements were wide and exaggerated due to the hoop. "What are we doing?" he shouted over the wind.

"Winning!" Rigel yelled back, "If you give me a straight shot to the hoop at less than thirty feet, I can make it."

Draco grimaced, but nodded, "No problem. Fly ahead of it and give it a target. It will head right for you, and I'll keep the hoop directly behind its path."

Rigel nodded, and leaned forward on her broom. She shot forward, coming level with, then moving past, the blue bludger. She could tell when the Homing Charm on the 'front' of the bludger locked onto her. The bludger started shifting ever so slightly in response to tiny variations in her movements. She increased her speed enough to get a good distance ahead of the bludger, but not outstrip it completely, and when she felt she had enough room, she shouted, "Now, Draco!"

She pulled the broom up so sharply it flipped neatly in place and readied her bat in the split second it took her to turn on the spot. The bludger was closing in five seconds, and she had a clear line of sight to where Draco hovered just 25 feet behind it. It wasn't very far of a distance, and an inexperienced beater might be tempted to hit the bludger with less than full force, in case it missed, so as not to endanger their teammate more than necessary.

Rigel, however, was not so naïve. If she hit the bludger with less than 100%, it dramatically increased the likelihood of the bludger breaking the trajectory and aiming for Draco instead. The Homing Charm could be overcome by brute force, so the only way to make it fly true was to commit totally to the hit, but that also meant that if her aim was off, Draco wouldn't have time to move out of the way before it hit him.

All of that rushed through her head in five seconds, and before she could lose her nerve she set her sights on the blue hoop and let her bat swing forward with all her might. The crack of the bat against the metal bludger was always somewhat sickening at close range, but as a beater one got used to it quickly. The bludger changed direction with violent energy and careened back toward Draco with all the suddenness of a Bombardment Hex.

Rigel held her breath as she watched the bludger's path. It looked for all intents like it was headed straight for Draco's face. She knew, in the logical portion of her mind, that it wasn't going to hit Draco in the face. They were right above the part of the obstacle course where the Weather Charms had been cast, and because of this there was a

serious downward wind created by the vacuum of the spell as it sucked air currents into the charmed space to use in the storm. The wind would pull the bludger down a good three and a half feet at approximately ten feet away from Draco's position if Rigel had put the correct rotation on the bludger as she hit it, but a very alarmed part of her just realized that no one had told Draco that.

Just as she was cursing herself for not warning him about the illusory trajectory, she realized that her friend was not diving out of the way as any sane person would have done in that situation. Draco was still hovering there, in the exact same place he'd been when she took aim, and the expression on his face was expectant, not worried. Draco, who had no idea she'd ever even played beater before, and had only ever seen her hit tiny little practice snitches with the bat, was not a bit concerned that the bludger flying at his face was about to break his nose.

He trusted her.

The realization was like a blow to the solar plexus, and Rigel was grateful the bludger wasn't heading for her, because with the way she jerked with the sudden knowledge of Draco's completely unwarranted faith in her, it would have missed entirely. In the end, Draco was steadfast enough for the both of them, and the bludger did indeed drop at the last moment to swoop neatly through the plastic hoop and continue on its drunkenly careening way toward the other side of the pitch.

Draco whooped and cheered before flying toward her and wrapping one arm roughly around her shoulder in an awkward air-hug, "That was awesome! Let's do it again. I bet we can get three more in the next ten minutes or so if we're fast enough."

Rigel just stared at him, not daring to open her mouth for fear of what would come tumbling out. Seeing him stare down a bludger on nothing more than the faith he had in her abilities, Rigel just couldn't believe someone like him was friends with someone like her. Draco, with his wildly swept about hair and wide-eyed expression of intense

enjoyment, was freedom incarnate. That he could just give in completely and trust in someone like that-in her, of all people-rubbed something raw within her gut. She, who had lied to him since the moment they met, she who couldn't even tell him her real name, she, who was using this game as a way to subdue her family's suspicions and as a single, selfish pleasure in her life of sacrificed indulgences, while Draco flew with the freedom of someone who would never pretend to be something he wasn't, no matter how much easier things might be for him if he did. She could never be worthy of such a gift, and the worst part was that she couldn't even tell Draco how remarkable his trust in her was, because the comparison would only raise more questions that she would never be able to answer.

"Rigel? Rigel! Time limit? Hello!?"

Rigel snapped out of her thoughts and cursed herself. Her mind always spaced out at the worst possible moments.

"Okay, let's do this," she called, "Same pattern. When I call for you to freeze, do exactly what you did before."

"No problem," Draco said, grinning, "Let's show them what we're made of."

It seemed that the rest of the tryout was going to be a sweep. In the next five minutes, Rigel and Draco scored twice more with their bludger, and Tuiggins didn't seem to have gotten even one. He was chasing a nervous Caviet in circles as he tried to work up the nerve to aim at her again and she tried to stay still long enough to be sure the bludger was going to hit her before diving once again out of the way. Flint and Bole were...

Wait. What *were* they doing? Flint was hovering nonchalantly on the East side of the pitch, and Bole was on the complete opposite West side, corralling his bludger. Corraling was when the beater needed to control the bludger but wasn't yet ready to hit it. Instead, the beater teased the bludger by flying in front of it, as Rigel had done earlier, to make it follow the trajectory they chose without getting rid

of it yet. There was a famous game from the 1960's in which one team's beaters had decided to do nothing but corral the bludgers the whole match, taking them out of the equation completely and letting their chasers, who were world-renowned at the time, work uninterrupted and win the match.

Rigel wondered what Bole was doing with his bludger, though. He wasn't herding it back toward Flint-instead, he seemed to be flying toward where she and Draco were trying to line up another shot on the edges of the Northwest stands. In fact... oh, crud.

"Draco, look out!" she changed direction before their shot was lined up and absently batted the blue bludger away from them as she shot toward Draco's position. The blue bludger wasn't the one they had to worry about, because Bole had just whacked the red bludger right at them-or more specifically, right at Draco, who, with the unwieldy hoop attached to his broom, probably wouldn't be able to maneuver fast enough to avoid the barreling ball.

Draco's eyes flew to the ball, and when he realized how close it was a grimly resigned look overcame his features. No matter where he moved, the bludger was close enough to follow at this point. Unless-

"Fly toward me!" Rigel yelled, bent double over her broom to get there in time. She wouldn't have made it if Draco stayed where he was, but when he flew toward her as quickly as he could with that stupid hoop, it brought the bludger toward her as well. It was close-too close-but Rigel managed to bring the bat between the red bludger and Draco's left shoulder as he darted past her. It was barely a hit, and only moved the bludger back ten feet or so, but that was more than enough time for Rigel to bring her arm back and hit it more squarely when it came round again.

She hit it, not at Bole, but towards Flint, whose idea she was sure that had been. She could practically feel him smirking from across the field, and was almost disappointed the captain dodged the bludger so easily. Then again, he didn't have it shot at him practically point blank, like Draco had. Bole gave them an indifferent shrug as

they glared at him in annoyance, though he did send Draco a slightly apologetic smile on his way back toward Flint.

"That's time!" Flint roared, holding up his watch. He descended to land at the Eastern goal posts and the rest of them followed suit.

Tuiggins looked keenly disappointed, while Caviet seemed somewhat relieved to be on the ground once more.

"Well, overall I'd say it was pretty pathetic," Flint said, un-attaching the hoop from his broom and tossing it to the ground with casual disgust, "Tuiggins, you didn't score a single goal. Black, you scored three, but only because your partner aided you actively. In a real game, that's not going to cut it. Caviet, you have the nerves of a frightened rabbit, and the only reason I'm not banning you from tryouts in the future is because Tuiggins can't aim for shit, and frankly I'm not surprised you didn't trust him enough to sit still. The only one who showed any real guts was Draco."

"What about Bole?" Tuiggins spoke up, frowning.

"What about him?" Flint drawled, "He's been on the team for years, and doesn't have to prove anything to me. So, obviously Draco is going to be starting seeker, and Black will fill the beater position. Any questions? No? Good, get off my pitch then."

Draco grinned delightedly and punched Rigel in the arm, "You did it! Ha, and you didn't even want to try out."

Rigel smiled back bemusedly, "You did it too, Mr. Starting Seeker. Let's go tell Pansy."

They jogged over to the stands the spectators were sitting in, and Pansy hurried down to meet them.

"So?" she asked excitedly, "You must have made it, no one else even made any goals."

"We're both on the team," Draco said proudly, "Which means now you definitely have to come to all our games."

Pansy sighed, but they could see her pride for them behind the surface gesture, "This is what I get for being friends with you two hopeless boys. With Rigel on the team, too, it'll be nothing but Quidditch all day long."

"You'll learn to love it," Draco said reassuringly.

"And if you don't, you'll have manifold opportunities to practice exhibiting patience and false interest over the next six years," Rigel added thoughtfully.

"And at least you'll know what you're talking about when you finally get a boyfriend and he's interested in the sport," Draco said with a rather poor impression of a rakish grin.

"Win-win," Pansy said with extremely false enthusiasm, "And just what do you mean 'finally?' I'm barely thirteen, and I don't see you with a girlfriend hanging off your arm."

"Well, that's because I'm too young to be tied down," Draco said airily, using the put-upon snobbish voice he affected when he was joking around, "And anyway, for a girl it's more pathetic to be alone."

"That explains it," Rigel said, "I thought Draco was looking a bit pathetic lately."

Draco did a good impression of pouting while Pansy and Rigel laughed their way back to the castle.

"What should we do with the rest of the evening?" Draco asked once they'd stepped into the castle entrance hall.

"I think Pansy should decide," Rigel said, "We did make her sit through those tryouts for hours."

"And took a few years off my life, too," Pansy said primly, "Reckless boys. As it happens, Rookwood intimated that he wanted to speak with you at some point, Rigel, so I think we should go see what he's up to tonight."

Rigel glanced curiously at Pansy, "Me? Whatever for?"

"Who knows?" Draco said, "But it's bound to be interesting if Rookwood, and therefore Rosier, are involved."

Rigel thought 'interesting' was a good word for encounters of the Rosier-Rookwood kind, but couldn't say she was very much looking forward to it. Somehow, things always got more complicated with the upperclassmen around.

They met Rookwood in the Slytherin common room an hour or so before dinner, and, as expected, found Rosier there with him.

"Well, well, the up and coming 'silver three' made the time to see us after all," Rosier said, golden eyes glinting with amusement, "I guess that means we're still interesting, Rookwood."

"As if that was ever in question," Pansy said easily, "And whatever do you mean 'the silver three,' Aldon?"

"Didn't you know?" Rosier said, clearly enjoying dangling the knowledge over them, "People are starting to notice you three. The Malfoy scion, the only daughter of Rose Parkinson, and the heir to the ancient House of Black, three noticeably talented Slytherins with money and familial power to spare, all in the same year and best friends to boot. There's really no question that you three are going places-the only question is *how far*?"

"You forgot witty and good looking," Draco said loftily, a smile playing about his mouth.

"I didn't forget," Rosier said delightedly, "I just didn't want to bore you with things you already knew."

"In any case, please sit," Rookwood said, gesturing to the three empty chairs across from the couch he and Rosier shared, "Thank you for coming."

"What did you want to speak with me about?" Rigel asked, figuring it was best not to waste too much time.

"A mutual friend of ours has recently come into the keeping of a particularly moody *vipera berus*," Rookwood said, "He received it as a gift, and therefore has really no idea how to take care of the creature. He came to me for help, since I work with all kinds of animals on my family's wildlife preserve. I have an abundance of theoretical knowledge, but little practical experience with snakes, so I thought to inquire whether you had any tips for inexperienced handlers."

Rigel blinked. That was... unexpected. "Why didn't Pucey just buy a book on keeping snakes?"

Rookwood raised an eyebrow, "I gather he thought it would seem... suspicious, for a Slytherin student to be seen looking for information on keeping snakes. As you know, strictly speaking pets excluding owls, cats, rats, and toads are forbidden at Hogwarts."

"Father's tried to get them to change the rules, but the board insists that snakes are more dangerous than cats and toads and such," Draco said, shaking his head regretfully.

"Indeed," Rosier said, "So you see Adrian's plight? Luckily we have amongst our number someone with a snake-enthusiast for a father. So, Black, any tips?"

Rigel's brain stalled for a moment. What could she say? She didn't do much besides occasionally pet the snakes in Sirius' courtyard, and only knew what they ate because Archie complained about the

dead mice in the freezer all the time. "I'm really not sure," she said apologetically, "My dad takes care of them for the most part. I just spend time with them when they get bored."

"But that's just it," Rookwood said, leaning forward intently, "You seem to have a way with the creatures. How else would you know when they're bored? You told Adrian that his snake was tired and hungry, as though such a thing were obvious. Also, last semester you somehow obtained boomslang venom for Alice, and boomslang snakes are notoriously choosy about who they allow near them."

Rigel thought the boomslang she'd met in the forest didn't seem too choosy when confronted with the possibility of a free meal, and said, "I just bribe them, mostly. If you show them a mouse, they'll cooperate pretty easily. Snakes in general seem to be practical animals, too smart to turn down free food."

Rookwood looked half-disappointed, half-unsurprised, "You don't have to lie, Black. If you don't want to tell me how you do it, then don't, but there's no need to insult my intelligence. I let it go with the boomslang venom, because I was still half-convinced it was something Alice put you up to, but although Aldon enjoys his little games of deception, for me it gets a bit old being flat out lied to."

Rigel winced, but could not deny the claim.

"Hey, watch what you accuse our friend of," Draco growled, "Rigel's entitled to his secrets, same as any of us. Don't act like it's your business, and don't ask questions you know he can't give you a straight answer to."

"There's no crime in being curious," Rosier said in an airily waspish way, "And you can't deny Black's habit for prevaricating and misdirection annoys even you, his friends, at times."

Pansy looked between her old and new friends, completely unsure whose side to take, and said, "Let's all calm down for a moment. I'm sure this is a misunderstanding."

But it wasn't. Rigel closed her eyes briefly, thinking she should have anticipated things coming to a head like this eventually. Surely someone would notice all the lying and avoiding she did and call her on it. It just turned out they'd been noticing for a while and refrained from bringing it up out of politeness. What could she say? She didn't want to start spilling her secrets every time someone made her feel guilty about lying, but she also didn't realize it was becoming both so blatant and so insidious-were other people getting slowly fed up with it as well? If she could expect more confrontations in the future, perhaps she should give in just a little. After all, if she gave them enough truth to satisfy, then they wouldn't think to look deeper, right? The classic bend to keep from breaking approach with a little misdirection thrown in for good measure.

Rigel spoke slowly, as though incredibly unsure, though in truth she had already made her decision. Even though what she was about to reveal could be dangerous, it was also one of the more... innocent of her secrets. It wasn't illegal, after all, but it was looked down upon enough that her hiding it for that reason alone was plausible. It was, in short, the perfect secret to reveal to appease the upperclassmen.

"You're right," she said, looking around at them, "All of you are, in a way. I do keep secrets, and they also really aren't any of your business. Still... I guess I don't need to keep this one any longer, as long as you guys can be discrete about it." She saw that she had their full attention, so she affected a look of sheepish embarrassment, "My dad doesn't even know about it, because, well, it's not really something you bring up in casual conversation, and it's also a bit... Dark."

Draco raised an eyebrow, and the corners of Rosier's mouth drew down slightly. Pansy just blinked at her, and Rookwood looked completely impassive.

"Not that there's anything wrong with Dark," Rigel added, "I just figured it wasn't something my family would really understand. Anyway, in truth I don't really have any specialized knowledge of

snakes. I only understand them because I can... well... *understand* them."

There was a beat of silence, then Draco said, "What?"

Rigel took a careful breath, "I can talk to snakes, and understand them when they speak." Seeing that none of the other four knew quite what to say in response to that, she rambled on, "It's how I knew Pucey's snake was hungry-it told me. It's also how I got the venom-I just asked. So, I'm sorry I didn't tell you before, but traditionally it's seen as an unsavory sort of talent, and it's not that I'm ashamed of it, but you know how much I dislike attention, and a snake speaker tends to get a lot of attention once it's known."

Draco swallowed hard, "I can't believe... you... didn't tell us! Wow! Rigel, what in Salazar's name were you thinking, keeping a talent like that locked up? Do you know how popular that's going to make you in Slytherin once everyone-oh... Right, so, we can't tell anyone, can we?"

Rigel grimaced apologetically, "I'd prefer it if you didn't," she said faintly, "You're not mad at me?"

"Well I'm disappointed you felt like you had to hide that part of yourself from us," Draco said seriously, and Rigel saw Pansy nod in mute agreement, "But like you said, it was your secret to tell. What made you decide to tell us now?"

"I've been thinking lately I should trust my friends a little more," Rigel said, smiling, "And you've just proven to me why I should. Thank you."

"You don't have to thank us for keeping your secrets, Rigel," Pansy said softly, "We'd do it anyway. And you don't have to apologize for being yourself. We like you the way you are, whoever you turn out to be."

Rigel felt a warm feeling flush through her, starting in her gut and rushing up to her head, where it pooled and made her dizzy with happiness, "You guys are the best friends I could ever ask for. I don't deserve you."

"Of course you don't," Pansy said lightly, bumping Rigel with her shoulder, "But we're friends with you anyway, because that's how wonderful we are."

Draco nodded regally, and the three of them laughed in perfect understanding.

"Not that this isn't touching," Rosier said, voice laced with honeyed amusement. The three second years turned to look at their upperclassmen with identical expressions of chagrined surprise, having all forgotten the other two were still there in their moment of friendship affirmation. "But just to be clear, you're a *Parselmouth*, Black?"

Rigel nodded slowly.

"Well, that explains a lot," Rookwood said.

"I no longer wonder that you were placed in Slytherin," Rosier agreed, "But rather wonder how your father got out of it. Don't traits like that usually run in families?"

"It's very recessive in my family," Rigel said, "In fact, I think it came from a different family, one we married into at some point, and was passed down accidentally until it activated in me by chance."

"I suppose it's possible," Rookwood said, "Usually familial magic ensures talents and abilities are passed in the direct line only, but there are always exceptions. It could even have come from your mother's line."

"Well, however you got it, it's amazing. To think, I know a Parselmouth personally," Draco looked at her pleadingly, "Are you

sure I can't tell my father?"

Rigel shook her head, "I won't tell you what to do, and I did give you permission to write your father about me last year, so it's in your rights to do so, but I'd really appreciate it if you could keep this to yourself for a while at least. I want to have an uneventful school year, you know? And all the stir something like that would cause..."

Pansy nodded slowly, "Rigel's right. Parselmouths are rare, and powerful Parselmouths are even more so-most of Slytherin's line was inbred to the point of Squib-hood, after all, and the surviving descendents disappeared into obscurity dozens of decades ago. You must be descendent from one of the lines older even than Slytherin, where the line branched before Slytherin became known for the trait-after all, he wasn't the first Parselmouth, just the most well known, so you could have gotten it from anywhere, really. The point is, a Parselmouth appearing out of nowhere after all this time... it will be unsettling for a lot of people."

"Especially concerning the current politics," Draco said, looking serious once more, "Blood tension is at an all-time high, and a powerful Dark trait appearing now of all times in the Heir of a famously old pureblood family would definitely set some teeth on edge. You would be at best a poster boy for pureblood power, at worse a threat to the Light faction and their arguments that pureblooded inbreeding leads to talentless, magically impotent basket cases."

Everyone turned to stare at Draco for a moment.

"What? I read it in one of the pamphlets my father is always burning in the fireplace," Draco said defensively.

"So, anyway," Rigel said, "Now you four know why I'm 'good' with snakes. I'm afraid I can't help you with many practical tips for handling them, Rookwood, though I wasn't kidding when I said a bribe works wonders."

"That's all right," Rookwood waved her off, "I've learned something much more interesting."

"And since we can see how... delicate the current climate is, we, too, will keep this talent between ourselves for the time being-though Rookwood will probably tell dear Alice," Rosier said, smirking, "The only people those two can't keep a secret from is each other."

Rigel smiled, "Thank you. I'm sorry I lied to you all, though I probably will do so again in the future."

"We understand why you did, in this case," Pansy said, patting her arm gently.

"And it makes it more interesting to be your friend if you don't spill all your guts at once," Draco said teasingly, "Otherwise we might get bored."

"In that vein, I've been meaning to ask-could you guys lie to me a little more often?" Rigel asked sweetly, "Only I've been so uninterested by you guys lately-ow!"

Draco had thrown his chair pillow at her.

"I think that's our cue, Edmund," Rosier said, rising gracefully, "Thank you for your... enlightening conversation. See you around, little snakes."

The next afternoon Rigel was just finishing up a particularly grueling Arithmency essay for Flint when it occurred to her that she had spent hardly any time with her Gryffindor friends since the start of term. Since she needed to ask Percy something about linked transfigurations for the last of Flint's essays anyway, she stopped by a bathroom to get rid of her disguise (Madam Pince's ire had not lessened one iota with the new semester), and headed off in a beeline to the portrait guarding the lion's den.

Neville answered her knock on the portrait. The young Gryff looked a bit wane for some reason, but when he saw who was in the corridor, he grinned a bit. "You would show up now of all times, Rigel."

Rigel raised an eyebrow, "I can come back later, if you'd prefer."

"No, no," Neville said, "You may as well come in, just... ah... take off your tie, will you? And, um, you're not here to see Ron, are you?"

Rigel blinked down at her green and silver tie, but removed it obediently and stowed it in her bag, "I actually wanted to talk to Percy, but it would have been nice to hang out with you and Ron for a while. We haven't seen each other outside of classes much."

Neville sighed, "Well, Percy's with Ron, unfortunately, and Ron's in the Hospital Wing."

Rigel frowned, "Is Ron okay?"

"He's fine," Neville said, "It's his sister, Ginny. As best Madam Pomphrey can tell, she fainted sometime between breakfast and lunch. They found her in the Charm's corridor and brought her to the infirmary, but she still hasn't woken up."

Rigel frowned a little deeper, "Is it...?"

Neville knew exactly what she was asking, "Not the Sleeping Sickness, no. But Ron and his brothers are still really worried. She's the youngest of the family, you know, and their only sister."

"I'm sorry to hear about Ron's sister," Rigel said, "But why do I need to take my tie off?"

Neville bit his lip worriedly, "Don't be mad, but some of the other Gryffindors think it was a Slytherin who hexed Ginny. They said first years don't just faint for no reason, so she must have been either really shocked or frightened, or else someone put her under a sleeping spell."

"Even if someone did, it could have been anyone," Rigel said, "She was found in the Charms corridor, not the dungeons. Maybe a ghost surprised her, or she simply didn't eat enough for breakfast."

"I know," Neville said, shrugging, "But you know how House sentiment is. They see it as an attack on the House of lions, and the prime suspect is the House of snakes. So, like I said, you can come in but don't advertise your House too much, okay?"

Rigel shook her head, "That's all right, Neville. I think I'll go to the Hospital Wing to make sure the Weasley's are doing okay. Want to come?"

"I've just come from there ten minutes ago," Neville said, "It was getting a bit... well, you'll see, I suppose. Thanks though. See you around, Rigel."

Rigel retraced her steps down to the Hospital Wing, a place she was sure she never wanted to see again, and told herself she would just stop in to pay her respects quickly and then go struggle through the transfiguration essay on her own. After all, there was no reason for her to stay long-she didn't even know Ginny Weasley, and she didn't want to bother Percy with academia while he was worried over his sister. The same went for catching up with Ron; it could wait until his concerns over his family were assuaged.

She entered to find the ward much livelier than it had been the last time she was there, and traced the source of the atmosphere to Fred and George, who had somehow managed to conjure an entire bandstand without getting kicked out by Madam Pomphrey for it. In fact, Rigel didn't see the formidable nurse anywhere in the ward. Fred had his hands on a some sort of flute-a recorder, she thought it might be called, and George was plunking away on a miniature piano while every now and then banging on a kick drum with his feet. Ron was tentatively holding a pair of maracas, looking as though he had no idea what to do with them, and Percy was standing with his arms crossed, disapproval on his face and a tambourine that was clearly meant for him abandoned on the bedside table. On the bed

itself was a young girl with long red hair and an abundance of freckles that must have been their sister, Ginny.

"What are you doing?" Rigel asked when it became clear they hadn't noticed her come in.

Ron turned and dropped the maracas onto the foot of the bed hastily, as though he couldn't believe he'd been caught holding them. Percy sighed, and began to explain, but Fred cut across him after leaping up from where he'd been perched on the bed's bottom railing to ruffle Rigel's hair and sling a friendly arm around her shoulder.

"So good of you to ask, pup, but I should think it rather obvious," Fred said reprovingly.

At her blank look, George took pity on her and supplied, "We're waking up Ginny, of course."

Rigel nodded as though that made sense, "And is it working?"

"No, it is not," Percy said, scowling, "All they're doing is giving me a headache."

"You had a headache this morning," Fred said dismissively, "You don't need our help to give you one. Besides, if you've got a medical issue, tell the nurse."

"And how am I to do that when you two have run her off?" Percy asked exasperatedly.

"Run her off? We did no such thing, did we, George?" George said innocently.

Fred thought about it, "I'm afraid he might be referring to that little story we told her about a third year Hufflepuff falling down the West stairs, Fred."

"Well, that could have been true," George said reasonably, "Third years are notoriously clumsy."

Rigel had to suppress a smile at how true that was. George must have seen it, though, for he said, "Ah, it appears someone is recalling an incident that was perhaps less indicative of our own grace as third-years than we'd appreciate."

"Oi, show some respect!" Fred said, affronted, "Where do you get off laughing at us like that? This is a place of healing."

Percy sighed, "Like you two know anything about respect. Not to mention the fact that no one's getting any healing done with the nurse gone off on a wild goose chase to the West stairs."

"Well if you aren't going to mention it... don't," Fred suggested.

"You know, I hate to admit it... but Percy's got a point," Ron said, wincing a bit at the betrayed looks Fred and George proceeded to give him, "I'm just saying, Pomphrey might have had a better shot at waking Ginny up than all this would."

He gestured to the musical instruments, and Fred got out his wand with an affronted sniff, "Well if you're not going to be appreciative..." he flicked his wand at the recorder, which promptly vanished. Three seconds later, the other musical instruments vanished as well seemingly of their own accord.

"How did you do that?" Rigel blurted out, "That was a linked transfiguration! I've been trying to figure out the theory behind it since lunch."

Fred exchanged a look with George that had them both nodding to something no one else understood before turning back to her, "Theory? What theory? You just do it."

Rigel gaped at the redhead for a moment. Was this how other people felt when she 'just did' things? How annoying. "So you can't explain it to me?"

"George could," Fred said with a yawn, "He likes to figure things out. Once he does, I just have to tune my magical output to his and then copy it to get the same result."

Rigel just stared... there were no words for how unbelievably brilliant, not to mention useful, that ability must be...

"Yeah, yeah, twins are special, whatever," Ron said, rolling his eyes in the face of his brothers' genius, "What I want to know is why you care about linking transfigurations? That's sixth year material."

"Oh, is it?" Rigel said innocently.

"You should know it is," Percy said, frowning, "That's why you're learning it, right? Because it's the same thing I'm learning now?"

Rigel inwardly flinched. She'd forgotten Percy was there, and what she'd told him about why their transfiguration studies coincided so perfectly, "Heh, yeah, it's just embarrassing, you know? Working ahead... I guess I shouldn't be so ashamed to be studious."

She was met with four considering looks, and mentally reminded herself not to try and fool the Weasley children when she could help it. They were all extremely sharp in their individual ways, and she had a feeling their friendship didn't exempt her from their shrewd scrutiny.

"So, is your sister going to be okay, then?" Rigel asked, feeling like a coward for using their sick sister to deflect the conversation, but frankly intimidated by so many serious blue-eyed stares aimed her way.

Ron frowned, glancing back at the sleeping girl's face, "Pomphrey says it's not the sickness, but it's not a natural sleep either, or Fred and George's racket would have woken her by now."

Rigel looked more carefully at Ginny Weasley. She was paler than her brothers, and since she had the delicate muscle tone of a girl

who regularly exercised, Rigel assumed the pallor was a symptom, not a natural characteristic. Her breathing was even, but her eyelids fluttered rapidly, as though in the midst of some serious REM sleep. If it wasn't sleep, though...

"She seems to be exhibiting all the signs of intense mental activity," Rigel said, "Does she meditate often? She might have just gone too deep in a trance, which would mean she'd wake up on her own time when her body got too hungry or tired to maintain the meditative state."

"Pomphrey asked something similar," Ron said, "But as far as we know, Ginny's never expressed any interest in mental arts of any sort. She's not exactly a sitting still kind of a girl."

Rigel frowned, "Oh. Still, I'm sure she'll wake up soon, Ron. Don't worry."

That sounded weak even to her, but what else could she say?

"Yeah, or you could wake her up," Ron said slowly. Fred and George frowned identically at him, but he rushed on, "I'm just saying, Rigel can get inside people's heads, you know? Maybe he can get her out sooner, if it's really just a matter of time."

"I don't think that's a good idea," Percy said, "I'm sure Rigel would mean well, but it's a dangerous thing to be going into other people's minds."

Rigel nodded apologetically, "I wouldn't feel comfortable experimenting with mind diving on your sister. I only did it with the sickness because the alternative was so dire."

"What's so dire about Malfoy being sick?" Ron muttered darkly, "Pompous git."

Rigel bit her lip and said, carefully, "Draco is my friend, Ron, and he was dying."

"Ugh, I know, okay?" Ron blew out a breath fraught with annoyance, "He's still a Malfoy, though. You know, if he wasn't your friend I'd accuse him of making Ginny like this."

Rigel was taken aback. She hadn't realized Ron and Draco hated each other so much, "I was with Draco and Pansy most of the morning, Ron. I really don't think he did anything to Ginny."

"Yeah, probably not," Ron said reluctantly, "But nothing else makes sense."

Rigel privately didn't think that theory made sense either, but didn't say so.

"You know, Malfoy senior got in a row with our dad in Flourish and Blots just before end of break," Ron said suddenly, gazing down at Ginny again, "Dad broke the guy's nose. It was over something Lucius Malfoy said to Ginny, actually, so it's not so much of a stretch to think... well, *someone* had to do this to her, didn't they? She's never just fainted before, and she sure as magic didn't ever go into a coma for no reason at home."

"We'll know when she wakes up, Ron," Percy said gently, "Ginny will know what happened to her."

"I guess," Ron said morosely.

There were a few minutes of awkward silence after that, until Rigel couldn't really take it anymore, "If she doesn't wake up by tonight, why don't I ask Madam Pomphrey and Professor Snape to supervise me and try to wake her up?"

George smiled at her warmly and Fred ruffled her hair again.

"I suppose if the Professors were supervising... thank you, Rigel," Percy said, "Do you still need help with linking transfigurations tonight?"

"Oh, that's okay," Rigel said, "I'll learn about them some other time." Flint could deal with a grade lower than an 'O' on this one.

"Well in that case, come with us, pup," Fred said, rubbing his hands together in a thoroughly unreassuring way, "We've got a lot of work to do if Ginny's going to be waking up tonight."

"Work?" Rigel repeated uneasily.

"Well of course," George said, grinning, "We've got to welcome our sister back to the world of the waking with style, right brother?"

"Indeed, brother," Fred said, "I'd say it calls for something really grand to cheer poor Ginny up for missing a whole day of relaxing."

"Nothing worse than waking up to a Monday," George agreed solemnly.

"Oh, no, you two are going to prank someone again, aren't you?" Percy shook his finger at them, "I've half a mind to tell McGonagall *before* you do something to embarrass the rest of us unfortunate enough to share your last name."

"Ah, but a burgeoning barrister like yourself would never accuse someone before proof beyond a reasonable doubt was established," Fred said gravely.

"Innocent until proven guilty, Perce," George added, "Even you can't argue with that. Now come on, pup, and let's get out of here before he finds some way to argue with that."

Rigel barely had time to wave to Ron and Percy as she was ushered unceremoniously out of the Hospital Wing and whisked off into a seldom-used corridor with the twins. "I actually have a bit more studying I was going to do this afternoon..." she trailed off when they rounded on her with serious expressions.

"Oh, you're not getting out of this," George said with sharp cheerfulness, "We've not seen you all semester. Do you know how frustrating it is to put off pulling any really good pranks because our touchstone is too busy learning sixth year transfiguration material to come up to the tower and say 'hi' to us?"

"It's quite frustrating, in case you were wondering," Fred added idly. Rigel winced, and opened her mouth to apologize, but Fred went on blithely, "Don't apologize, pup-you do that too much anyway-and don't go acting like we kicked you. We're not angry, cause we know how you are."

Rigel wasn't sure exactly what that meant, but it didn't stop her feeling somehow guilty for it.

"But we are going to insist you help us out with this prank," George said, smiling down at her from his superior height, "And in return, I'll teach you linked transfigurations."

Rigel smiled back and gave in, "Okay, what are we doing?"

"Well, funny you should ask..."

They spent the next few hours planning out the prank they were going to pull the next day if Ginny woke up. As far as pranks went, it was surprisingly... nice. Rigel was actually looking forward to the end result.

They wandered back to the Hospital Wing after finishing a 'working' dinner in the kitchens, where Binny was happy to help convince the other elves not to clear away their hard work the next day. After assuring them the results would disappear on their own around lunch, the elves more or less happily agreed to leave the prank alone.

When they arrived in the white-washed room, Madam Pomphrey was back (and fixing the twins with a very displeased look that

communicated exactly how she felt about being sent off to the West stairs for an imaginary third-year Hufflepuff earlier), and Professor Snape was standing beside Ginny's bed, a look of concentration on his face that told Rigel he was probably attempting Legilimency. Rigel was impressed that he had mastered the mental arts to the extent that he could remain standing while essentially unconscious.

As they approached where Ron and Percy were standing off to the side, watching, Professor Snape's features were abruptly animated once more as his consciousness came back to reality.

"It is no use," Snape said to Pomphrey, shaking his head, "There is something clouding her mind from Legilimency. It is definitely not the sickness. That barrier was solid, but this is more like a dark mist, twisting mental probes away with alarming elasticity. I would say it was the work of an accomplished Occlumens, if you had not already insisted that Ginerva Weasley is undisciplined in the mental arts."

"Will it lift naturally, Severus?" Pomphrey asked with puckered brows.

Snape frowned as well, "Without more information, it is impossible to know."

Judging by the troubled expression lurking in the Potion Master's dark eyes, Rigel gathered he rather doubted it would.

"Please, sir," Rigel spoke up, "Could I be of any help to Ginny?"

Snape and Pomphrey turned measuring looks on her.

"I suppose it's possible that your particular talent may at the least provide insight to the situation," Snape said slowly, "However, the state of Miss Weasley's mind is currently unknown. This is not the sickness we are dealing with, and as such there may be something considerably less benign lurking about in the girl's mental landscape. I do not like the idea of your going into her mind alone and unprepared."

Rigel nodded, "I understand, sir, but if there's a good chance that she is endangered by what caused her collapse, it's important to figure out what it is so that Madam Pomphrey can try and treat it, or else contact some kind of curse breaker or something."

The nurse pursed her lips, "Mr. Black is correct, Severus. What I need is information, and there are very few things that can cause permanent damage to a person's consciousness without having direct access to their own mental plane. As such, there does not seem to be much danger to Mr. Black, who will only be projecting his consciousness into Miss Weasley's mindscape. If he feels himself in danger, he can, of course, simply let the connection snap; his consciousness should automatically retreat to his own mind."

Snape looked like he'd tasted a milkweed stalk to check its viability and found it soured. "Very well," he said eventually, "I will allow this, but I would like you to allow me to establish a connection to your core, Mr. Black. If I feel a sufficient amount of time has passed on the physical plane, I will send a pulse down the pathways to alert you that you are to return posthaste."

Rigel agreed, "Wait just a moment, then, sir."

She took a seat on the bed next to Ginny's, and sank easily into her mental landscape. The familiar mountain brought a nostalgic smile to her face as she hurried into the decoy lab and down through the trap door. She loved coming here. There was something freeing in the air, and she thought it had to do with being able to be completely herself while in the comfort of her own mind. Although... she stopped for a moment to concentrate on turning her avatar's eyes from green to grey. Even though her physical body was now semi-permanently polyjuiced to have Archie's eyes, her mental self still retained her green eyes and long black hair. She did feel a little taller, though, so at least her estimation of herself was aging properly-imagine, being mentally an eleven-year-old forever.

She whispered the password to her Space Room and took a moment to simply bask in the warmth of her magical core before

taking the now-familiar plunge into the sun. When she reached the other side of her magical core, where it manifested in the physical world as a ball of concentrated magic around her midriff, she used the part of her awareness that controlled her physical body to say, "Ready now."

A moment later, a rather agile thorn of magic came shooting toward her magical core from the direction she sensed her Professor's core to be. She moved out of the way and sent a coil of her own fiery magic to meet it and help establish the connection. She could feel a pulse of magic come questioningly down the connection, so she sent an affirmative pulse back. Then she stretched her senses toward the magical cores she didn't recognize by feel. She knew Ron's, and peripherally Madam Pomphrey's, and passed over the two almost-identical cores as well, assuming those to be the twins'. Of the other two, she stretched toward the smaller and denser of the two cores and established a connection to it.

It felt young and rather warm, so she knew before she sent her consciousness along the connection that Ginny Weasley must be a fire-type as well. Sure enough, at first glance Ginny's core looked like a ball of simmering gold. It bubbled and rippled as though an open flame was heating it constantly from beneath, and when she offered it her hand and asked for entrance, the molten, lava-like liquid fire reached out to encase her hand like a warm glove. It was a comforting sort of core, she decided, but also looked a bit... volatile.

She soon had her entire form encased in hot gold, and after wading blindly forward for a moment, she felt a searing heat wash over her, as though she had just stepped fully into a tempered flame. Then her head popped out the other side to see... nothing. Absolutely nothing. As far as her eyes could see, there was only air. The ball of fiery metal she was encased in floated in a seemingly endless landscape of sky-blue nothingness. She hesitated before stepping away from the core, not sure what a fall to her death would actually do in another person's mental landscape, but as soon as she let go of the core, gravity took a holiday.

She was floating, she noted with no small amount of interest. No, she was flying. At the barest thought, she was skimming through the air, up, down, and way she could imagine. It was the strangest thing she'd ever experienced in someone else's mind. There was that one boy who used clouds like hard surfaces in his mind, but just flying through the air? Most people maintained a basic adherence to the natural order of the universe, even in their heads, but Ginny Weasley didn't seem to care about physics. Or perhaps she just really liked flying.

It was fun getting the hang of movement via mental hovering, but after a moment she recalled herself. She was here to gather information, and the preferred information source seemed to be completely missing from the picture.

Where was Ginny?

There wasn't really a horizon to look out towards, because there was no ground for the sky to 'meet.' It was just blank, blue expanse in ever direction. Not sure what else to do, she called, "Anyone here?"

After waiting the requisite beat in case of an answer, she sighed. Plan B, then.

She set off in a random direction, deciding to treat the molten magical core at North and simply travel directly away from it. After floating for a while, all the time glancing over her shoulder to check that the only landmark was still in sight, she began to feel uneasy. Her shoulder blades were beginning to itch, as though someone were staring particularly hard at her back. She slowed down her flying, and glanced around again, but still nothing was in sight.

"Hello?" she tried again, "Ginny Weasley?"

Nothing, but the feeling of being watched increased sharply, and she gave up the pretense of floating along to address the unseen watcher, "I know you're there."

"You can see me?" a quiet voice said from just behind her, "He said you wouldn't be able to."

Harry whirled around to stare at the patch of air the voice had come from. She couldn't see anything, but at least she knew she wasn't alone, "Is that you, Ginny?"

"How do you know my name?" the voice asked again. It was definitely the voice of a young girl.

"Your brothers told me," Harry said, "They sent me to find you."

All of a sudden, a girl who looked very much like the Ginny Weasley she had recently seen in the Hospital Wing materialized in front of her. Her red hair was pulled back from her face in a ponytail, but a few tendrils escaped to frame the annoyed expression on her face.

"My brothers? So after ignoring me for the last month, *now* they acknowledge my existence?" the girl, who must have been Ginny's mental avatar, snorted, "Typical. So they sent you to 'find' me? Who are you? And how did you even get in here?"

Harry blinked at the aggressive tone, "I'm Rigel Black. I came in via your magical core, because your physical body fell unconscious in the Charms corridor. Do you know how it happened?"

"The Charms corridor?" Ginny muttered, frowning, "I haven't been anywhere near-hang on. Rigel Black? The one who cured the sleeping sickness? My brother Ron wrote about you in one of his letters. And Fred and George mentioned you this summer, too. I think even Percy likes you, actually, but..." Ginny looked her over with obvious confusion, "I thought you were a boy."

Harry tried to look as embarrassed as she was sure a real boy would have, "My mental avatar just has long hair, though if we meet in the physical world you'll see me with short hair."

"Oh," Ginny said, "Weird. Anyway, you've found me. Now what?"

"Um," Harry faltered. What indeed? "Well, I'm supposed to figure out what happened to you, so Madam Pomphrey or Professor Snape can wake you up."

Ginny shuddered, "Whatever you do, don't let Snape in here! He hates my family. Probably Fred and George's fault, though I don't remember him being too fond of Charlie, now that I think about it."

"He's not so bad..." Harry trailed off under Ginny's unimpressed look, "In any case, do you remember what happened to make you fall unconscious? Were you meditating, or did another student curse you with anything?"

Ginny's face suddenly became carefully blank, "Nothing happened. I mean, yeah, I guess I was meditating. I still am, actually, but I'll wake up soon if everyone's really so worried. I mean, sheesh, it's been like half an hour."

Harry shook her head, "It's been more like half a day, at the least." At the girl's shocked look, Harry smiled sympathetically, "It can be a bit difficult to judge time in the mental realm. It helps to set an alarm in the physical world to jar you out of it after a few hours just in case, though if you didn't even wake up when they moved you... you must have been very deep in meditation. Your brothers were making all kinds of noise to try and wake you."

"So in other words, Fred and George were making a ruckus, Ron was watching, and Percy, as usual, was completely ineffectual at trying to stop them," Ginny said flatly.

"Something like that," Harry said absently, "It's strange, though, that you'd be so difficult to wake up, especially if you're not very experienced at Occlumency yet. It is usually difficult to retain the meditative concentration at first."

"Who says I'm inexperienced?" Ginny said a bit defensively.

"Well, I just assumed, I suppose. For one thing, you seemed unfamiliar with the difference in how time is experienced on the mental plane, and for another..." Harry glanced around the air meaningfully, "Forgive me, but you don't seem to have spent time doing much with your mental landscape."

Ginny huffed, "This is only the first layer. It's, like, an illusion. That's why you couldn't see me until I let you. My consciousness was manifesting on the layer beneath this one, which lets me see into the first level without intruders seeing me back."

The way she said 'intruders' made Harry wince and hastily apologize, "I only broke in because your brothers were so concerned. None of us realized you had fallen unconscious on purpose, and with the sleeping sickness just last term... we didn't want to take any chances."

Ginny softened a bit, "Those idiots. They never pay me any attention, but as soon as I get so much as a scraped knee, it's like the world is ending. Still, I guess I should say thanks for going to so much trouble for a complete stranger, Black."

"Please call me Rigel," Harry said, "Seems silly to stand on ceremony in your own mind. Can you wake on your own, then? Silly question, I guess. If you have the shields to deflect Snape already, you must be more experienced than I assumed."

Ginny nodded carefully, "It will take me a couple minutes, though. I have some... things to tie up here before I leave."

Harry nodded, "Okay, I'll be going then. I look forward to meeting you officially, and don't be too hard on your brothers when you wake up, okay? Especially Ron. He was really worried someone had hexed you or something."

Ginny sighed, "Yeah, Ron's a total git, but he's way less crazy than the rest of my family. Oh, here." The red-haired girl concentrated for a moment, and at once all the space between where they were

hovering and where the floating mass of boiling gold was disappeared.

Harry smiled, chagrined, "So all the time I spent moving away from the core was an illusion, too? That's pretty impressive." Also, weird. How was Ginny at once so good with Occlumency and also so experienced with its basics? Maybe she was self-taught. Merlin knew Harry understood how difficult getting complete understanding without a teacher was. After all, she knew all sorts of things about fifth year transfigurations, but almost nothing about third year transfiguration.

Ginny smirked, "Thank you. Now get out of my mind."

Harry raised an eyebrow with amusement, but willingly plunged a hand back into Ginny's magical core. As she did so, Ginny stiffened, "What are you-get out! You're making him mad, get *out* ."

Startled, Harry was completely unprepared for the violent push Ginny gave her that sent her stumbling through the molten core much faster than she'd ever phased through a core before. She gasped ineffectually as she broke free of the sticky substance, unable to catch her breath because she was *mentally* winded, not physically.

What in Merlin's name was that all about? That was the second time Ginny had mentioned a 'he' while she'd been in her mind, and it was the first time anyone had reacted negatively to the feeling of Harry passing through their magical cores. In fact, she couldn't recall anyone even mentioning a sensation accompanying the action. Strange.

She pondered this as she retreated back along the connection to her core, sending a pulse down the link to Snape's core as she did so to tell him she was finished. Maybe 'he' was an alternate personality of Ginny's? She'd read about split-personality disorders, and theoretically it would make sense for a person whose consciousness was split to manifest separate avatars in the mental plane, didn't it?

Or maybe it was possible to create a separate consciousness within the mental sphere that had nothing to do with split personalities. If Harry's magic had its own personality, wouldn't it be possible to create a consciousness entirely of magic? Musing along these lines, Harry made her way back through her mind and eventually back out into reality.

Upon opening her eyes, she was immediately bombarded with questions from the Weasley's and Madam Pomphrey. Snape was silent, but the look in his eyes demanded answers just as plainly as speech.

Rigel started to explain, but was interrupted by an irritable, "Shut up, you lot! Oh, not you, Madam Pomphrey. Just these idiots. Honestly, what a way to wake up."

"Ginny!" Ron exclaimed, obviously relieved at the sight of his sister slowly sitting up. Well, attempting to sit up until Fred and George glomped her.

"Sister!" They cried, dramatically crushing her in a hug between them.

"Yes, yes, I'm perfectly fine, now get the heck off me," Ginny said, though her voice was a bit muffled.

Madam Pomphrey stepped forward and insisted on doing a full check up on the girl before pronouncing her as healthy as could be expected after not having eaten all day.

"I told you I was fine, ma'am," Ginny said, "I was practicing my meditation and went a little too deep, that's all."

"Since when do you meditate?" Ron asked, nose wrinkling skeptically.

"Do I tell you everything? No? Then don't act like you know my life," Ginny said sharply, "After you wrote home about the sleeping

sickness, what did you expect me to do? Wait around for my mind to get invaded by icky black tar? No thanks. I've been working hard to protect my mind. Besides, I could have taken up pole dancing for all you four would know, the way you've been avoiding me all semester."

Her brothers looked alternately embarrassed and sheepish.

"Sorry?" Fred offered, "But we'll make it up to you tomo-" he broke off at the suddenly suspicious look on Snape's face, "Some day."

After that, Ginny was forced to stay in the ward overnight 'just in case' and Rigel left to go prepare her part of the prank the twins were planning. It wasn't anything hard, but it was certainly time-consuming, and the odds of getting caught... well, it was a good thing she had her father's cloak, not to mention the Marauder's Map. If she managed to get caught with those two advantages, she probably deserved to, didn't she?

[end of chapter four].

A/N: So, there it is, after much too long. The next part will be up shortly (I divided what I've been working on into two chapters as per the request of some reviewers, so hopefully it's more manageable that way). I'm thinking some of my characters are getting more and more OOC, but, really, weren't they always? I hope it's still recognizable as HP fanfic, and if not, at least still enjoyable to anyone still reading after all this time. Much love, -Violet.

Chapter 5

A/N: As promised, part two of the long overdue update. Not very long, just an extra 10,000 words that felt sort of tacked on to chapter four in any case, but some important stuff happens. At least, important to me, lol. I don't own anything (and I always forget this part so please consider it applicable for everything I post) recognizable, but I do hope you enjoy.

The Serpentine Subterfuge:

Chapter 5:

Her alarm went off at exactly four am, vibrating gently under her pillow to let her know it was time to wake up.

At least, that's what it was supposed to do.

Instead, her wand wriggled its way out from the pillow and promptly jabbed her between her fifth and sixth ribs several times before attempting to bury itself into her ear. Luckily, it was too thick to do so. Unluckily, the uncomfortable feeling-was the tip of her wand *wet*? - made her yelp with surprise and roll straight onto the floor with a distinctive thump as a result of unconsciously trying to squirm away from it.

She froze, listening for sounds of her roommates stirring. Theo snorted into his pillow, but otherwise didn't move. Draco's hand, which was hanging off the bed, twitched a few times, but he, too, remained fast asleep. From the last bed... oh, no. Was that rustling?

"Rigel?" Blaise's voice whispered across the silent room.

She sighed, it would have to be Blaise who awoke.

"Sorry," she whispered back, "Just fell out of bed. You can go back to sleep."

"Are you not going back to sleep yourself?"

Rigel bit her lip to keep from sighing again, "I can never sleep after I've woken up already. I'll just go read in the common room. Night."

So saying, she crept out of the room in the slightly wrinkled robes she had slept in. She was about to slip out of the door when Blaise appeared beside her.

"Hard to read without a book," he commented.

"You're right," Rigel said, getting annoyed, "I'm not going to read. I'll probably go and have a clandestine meeting with my secret girlfriend from another House instead."

"Just as long as she's not blonde with pigtails," Blaise said lazily.

"Why would-never mind," Rigel muttered, "Goodnight, Blaise."

She opened the door to the hall as quietly as she could, but before she could close it behind her, Blaise stepped out behind her, clad in a forest green dressing gown that probably would have been semi-presentable if his bare feet hadn't been peeking out from underneath the hem.

"Where are you really going?" Blaise asked as they walked out into the common room.

"I'm probably going to keep lying to you if you keep asking," Rigel said, too tired to be delicate about it.

"So it's somewhere you're not supposed to be going," Blaise said, "Smart of you to wait until now, then, when even if you're caught you could feasibly just have woken up really early, and so wouldn't technically be breaking curfew."

In reality, Rigel had been planning on using the Map and cloak that were currently keeping warm in her robe pocket to avoid detection, but she supposed the early hour would be just as good. After all,

even Filch stopped patrolling after one am. That was, in fact, why the twins had decided on four am as a good time to set up the prank. Filch wouldn't resume his duties until almost lunch time, which was the only way he was able to afford staying up so late every night at his age.

Still, she couldn't tell Blaise this, so she just shrugged, "If I'm not supposed to be going somewhere, do you really think it's a good idea to tag along?"

Blaise thought about this for a moment, "You don't strike me as someone foolish enough to get caught, and in any case, I think it would be more interesting to follow you than to go back to sleep."

Rigel stopped at the false-wall entrance to the common room and said, "I'm going to help some friends of mine with a prank. That's it. It's going to take at least two hours, and it will be a very tedious and boring process, not to mention if you watch me set the whole thing up you won't get to enjoy it as much with everyone else. Still want to come?"

Blaise looked taken aback at her frank answer.

"What?" Rigel said with amusement, "Did you think I was going to go for a moonlit ride on the back of a thestral? Sorry to disappoint."

Blaise smiled slyly at her, "Ah, but one thing I never am around you is disappointed. Very well, Rigel. Let's go attend to this... prank."

Rigel considered him carefully, "First, please assure me you aren't coming along so that you can turn me or my accomplices, whose names I will not give you, in to Filch."

"If my word means anything to you, consider yourself assured," Blaise said, smiling, "Shall we?"

Rigel led the way out of the common room and through the dungeon corridors. She didn't really want to bring Blaise along, but... it's not

like she could actually stop him from coming. For one thing, he was physically stronger than her, and for another, though he might not turn her in, he could easily use the threat of reporting her as leverage to force her to let him come. Really, it was easier and less time-consuming to invite him along, and the odds of him reporting a fellow Slytherin, much less a roommate, were virtually zero.

They walked until they reached the second floor, where Rigel used the directions the twins had given her to find the storage closet they'd left their supplies in. It seemed the twins had already gotten started on their parts, because of the three metal wind chimes Fred was supposed to stash there, there was only one left. She took out the wind chime carefully after casting a silencing charm on it.

"What's that for?" Blaise asked bemusedly.

"You'll see," Rigel said, grinning. She closed the door and started back down toward the first floor. Fred and George hadn't gotten to the second floor yet, but she supposed they were starting from the top. They were responsible for the second through seventh floors, while Rigel would deal with the first floor, the basement, and the dungeons.

When they reached the first floor, Rigel approached the first sconce and held the wind chime up in front of her. She glanced between it and the torch-holder, concentrating hard. Along every corridor in Hogwarts, there were torches, held in place against the stone by sconces. On every sconce, there was a decorative rendition of the Hogwarts crest that dangled like a talisman. After another long look at the wind chime to make sure she'd gotten the correct form in her mind, she pointed her wand at the dangling crest and asked her magic to perform the transfiguration George had spent the better part of three hours teaching her to do.

The next moment, the sconce supported a small metal wind chime, no bigger than a water goblet, which was hastily silenced as soon as it began to flutter in the slight draft of the corridor.

Satisfied, Rigel turned down the hall and walked to the next scone, Blaise trailing behind her. After the third transfiguration, Blaise asked, incredulously, "Are you going to do this for ever torch bracket in the whole castle?"

Rigel shook her head, "Just the first floor, the basement, and the dungeons. My friends will do the other six levels."

"So you weren't kidding when you said it would be tedious," Blaise said, "Need any help? My transfigurations aren't bad."

"Can you link them?" Rigel asked.

"Can I what them?"

"You can do the silencing charms, if you want," Rigel said, "Not too strong, since they need to wear off before breakfast."

Blaise shook his head wryly, "And you think you're uninteresting? Hardly. All right, I'll silence the chimes as you transfigure them. I don't know if I can do over a hundred silencing charms in a row, though."

"You can stop if you get tired," Rigel said, thinking absently that it was a lot of chimes they were supposed to transfigure. She wondered how Fred and George would manage, but then realized they would probably be fine, being both fourth years and from what she could tell from the brief glance she'd had of their magical cores the night before, pretty powerful themselves.

She and Blaise worked their way from the first floor to the dungeons over the next couple of hours. Even Blaise had to admit the corridors looked pretty cool with all the wind chimes hanging from the torches.

"It'll be a pain to clean up, though," Blaise said, "Here's hoping we don't get caught."

"That's what the linking transfigurations are for," Rigel said, "When a transfiguration is linked to another, whether a regular transformation or a conjuration, then as soon as one of the linked objects is vanished or reverted, the rest follow suit."

"That's... useful," Blaise finally said, "When do we learn those?"

"In a couple of years, probably," Rigel said vaguely, "So as soon as I transfigure one of my chimes back, the rest will revert as well. Same for my accomplices'. It was the only way we could get the house elves to leave the chimes until lunch."

"I see," Blaise said thoughtfully, "And if it doesn't cause caretaker Filch extra work, he's less likely to devote an abnormal amount of effort to rooting out the perpetrators."

"I hadn't think of that," Rigel said, though Fred and George probably had. They seemed to think of everything.

She and Blaise didn't do the whole dungeons, obviously. Instead, they finished the most frequently traveled routes and hurried back to the Slytherin common room to get changed for the day. Rigel came out of the bathroom from showering and changing as Draco and Theo were finishing getting ready for the day as well. They headed to breakfast with the other second years just as the silencing charms on the chimes in the dungeons were beginning to wear off.

As they walked, one by one the chimes dangling from the torch brackets were set into motion by the displaced air. Soft, tinkling sound echoed through the corridors, bouncing off the walls and mingling beautifully with the sound of the next chime, and the next, and the next.

Pansy gasped and pressed her hands together, beaming, "Oh, what a clever idea! Putting chimes in the dungeons is sure to liven them up a little."

As they ascended the stairs to the Entrance Hall, however, it became apparent to the rest that the chimes went much further than the dungeons. Everyone was talking about it as they took their places at the tables.

"Joanna from Ravenclaw says they're even in the four main towers," one fifth year was telling his friend, "The only place they haven't been found is inside the classrooms themselves and in the Owlrey-good thing, too, as I don't expect the birds would appreciate the sound like we do."

"Imagine how much effort it must have been," Theo commented, "It can't have been one person who did all this overnight."

"They wouldn't have even had the night," Blaise said, an amused gleam in his eyes that Rigel hoped no one else caught on to, "After all, the prefects and teachers patrol until one or two am, not to mention Filch's rounds."

"It would have taken half a dozen people at least to transfigure them all before anyone woke up this morning," Pansy said thoughtfully, "I wonder who would do such a thing?"

"Someone with too much free time," Draco said dryly, "Still, it's made the morning much more interesting than it would have been otherwise."

"Do you think the teachers will take them down?" Theo asked, "They don't seem too upset about it."

Indeed, the teachers appeared to be animatedly discussing the prank (well, most of the teachers), but none of them looked particularly angry.

"The chimes aren't that loud," Millicent pointed out, "And as long as they aren't in the classrooms themselves, they can barely be considered disruptive. I bet they'll leave them for the house elves to put away."

"But if the house elves were going to get rid of them, wouldn't they have already done so?" Pansy said, "They're very efficient, usually."

"Maybe they were bribed," Blaise said innocently.

"Bribe a house elf?" Theo snorted, "With what, more work?"

"Do you think it was your friends the Weasley twins, Rigel?" Pansy asked.

Rigel was saved from having to answer by a letter being dropped onto her plate. It was from Archie. It wasn't coded as sensitive, so she slit it open at the table and began to read.

Dear Rigel,

How's term going so far? I hope you're not learning as much as I am, because I feel a bit overwhelmed by how quickly our professors here are pushing us into the deep end. Last week we learned how to repair shattered joints, and the method is a bit tricky, so I've enclosed a copy of my notes to help you, as the textbook is fair useless on this one.

Hermione was surprised by how different I looked after a summer away, but none of my other friends seemed to notice. Mione's always been very observant, though. Do you have any friends like that? Ones you just can't get anything by? They're great to have on your side, but don't ever try to pretend you did your homework if you didn't-it won't work!

I received some very interesting news about my mum this morning, so I thought I'd shoot you a letter right away. Be on the lookout for news from Sirius, because I think they were going to tell you next. I hope you're as surprised as I was, and to ensure that you are, I'm not giving you any hints.

Also, I think someone I met at work this summer misses me, because I heard there was someone asking about me around

school, and I'm told the man definitely had an English accent, though it was apparently quite uncouth. No one's approached me directly, though, so I guess my new friend is shy.

Anyway, I hope you're doing well. I heard from Uncle Sirius you tried out for the Quidditch team-do let me know how that works out. You'll also find my new syllabus for the year in the envelope, so send me yours right away so we can compare.

All the best,

Harry

Rigel picked up the envelope to look for the extra pages, but it was empty. Frowning, she glanced around to see if it had fallen out somewhere, and found Draco looking over the handwritten notes curiously while Pansy tried discretely to get him to put them back.

"Um, Draco?" Rigel looked at the notes in his hand pointedly, "Can I have those back?"

Draco looked up, not one iota of guilt on his face, "Yeah, in a second. This is interesting. Did your cousin send it?"

"Yes," Rigel said, "Those are her notes on one of the Healing lessons she found particularly difficult."

"Yes," Draco mused, "It looks like a process for repairing joints that have been severely traumatized. Why'd she send it to you?"

"I'm interested in Healing," Rigel said casually, "I learn what I can on my own, and Harry is kind enough to send me her syllabus and some of the more difficult notes so that I can keep up with her curriculum when I have time."

Draco stared at her and even Pansy seemed a bit surprised.

"Just how much school work do you do, Rye?" Draco shook his head sadly, "It's like you're allergic to free time, so you fill it with all these

things you don't have to do. Learning Healing. Studying Occlumency and extra Potions lessons and reading up on fifth and sixth year material-don't think I haven't noticed. Then there's the brewing you do for no apparent reason in the evenings, and you get up at the crack of dawn every morning for some reason I haven't been able to fathom yet, wearing absolutely hideous clothes, and-and-don't you ever just take a break?"

"That's why I joined the Quidditch team," Rigel said sweetly, "I'm sure that will be very relaxing."

Draco groaned, "I forgot you'll even have Quidditch practices to deal with now. You're going to run yourself into the ground!"

Rigel shook her head, "You make it sound like I'm doing everything separately. I can multi-task a lot of it. I do most of my regular schoolwork during class when everyone else is practicing the spells. I read up on material I'm interested in, like Healing, advanced Transfigurations, Occlumency and the like during my boring classes, like History, and during my breaks. That covers the middle part of my day, and in the evenings I brew, which is a good opportunity to study because of the down time required as a lot of potions simmer, and in the mornings I workout. I get my eight hours of sleep, and all my meals, and I'll be even more physically active when Quidditch starts. Over all, I'd say my lifestyle is pretty healthy."

Pansy pursed her lips, "That's just it, though, Rigel. You've been skipping lunch several days a week lately. And how can you be getting enough sleep if you both stay up late and get up early?"

"I'm not skipping lunch," Rigel said, thinking of pleasant hours spent learning French from Binny. She was really making good progress on her conversational understanding of the language, though she couldn't spell it to save her life, "I always grab lunch from the kitchens those days while I'm studying. I just don't have time to come to the Great Hall. And I don't stay up that late."

"That's where you go every morning?" Draco asked, frowning, "Running? Well, that explains the clothes... and the smell when you come back, actually."

"Excuse me for sweating," Rigel rolled her eyes, "I need the exercise."

"Not with Quidditch starting up," Draco said.

"It's not the same type of exercise," Rigel argued, "Quidditch is good cardio, but I'm working on strength training, too."

"We just don't want you to over work yourself," Pansy said softly, "You have to admit you have a tendency toward doing so, if the result seems to outweigh fatigue in your mind."

Rigel smiled, "I have such good friends. Tell you what, as soon as you think I'm excessively tired, sick, or in some other way overdoing it, let me know and I'll listen, okay? As long as I'm healthy, though, I'll just continue with what I'm doing."

They didn't look happy about it, but there wasn't really anything for them to say after that. Rigel was grateful for their silence. She didn't need to be watched over like she was self-destructive, and the closer they watched her the more likely it was that they would pick up on something she didn't want them to. Yes, her life was busy, but she was handling it just fine. Besides, most of the things she did were completely necessary in a way that Draco and Pansy, who didn't know she and Archie's situation, couldn't possibly understand. So, really, what did they know?

As September bled into October, nothing really changed, unless one counted the autumn leaves, but considering how many leaves there were on the Hogwarts grounds, Rigel couldn't imagine anyone wanting to actually count them.

She went through her classes like clockwork, completing assignments and learning magic at an almost abysmally slow pace. Luckily, Rigel had extracurricular studies to keep her mind occupied. As for her body, it was occupied as well-in Quidditch practices. Flint, it turned out, was not at all exaggerated by his reputation. In fact, he seemed to be quite a bit more harshly critical and ruthlessly ambitious in his expectations than the rumors had made him out to be. At least, that's how it seemed from Rigel's point of view, which was, admittedly, often clouded by fog, dirt, rain, muck produced by the combination of dirt and rain, and occasionally an actual blindfold when Flint was experiencing one of his particularly creative phases.

Still, getting to fly all the time, no matter how absurd and demeaning the conditions, certainly kept her happy, so with mind, body, and soul thus satiated, Rigel began October with a transcendent sort of peace.

It was at that point, of course, that something had to go wrong.

She had been conscripted into another of the Weasley twins' brilliant pranks, and although she did enjoy hanging out with the duo, and she did want to start establishing Rigel Black's reputation as a prankster, this particular prank was much more tedious than most.

It was based on a muggle Christmas tradition, and basically it was a prank that slowly but inexorably drew everyone in the castle into its game. At first, no one even knew it was a prank. The twins had transfigured a spool of thread into a wooden puppet with a pointed wizard hat and a wide grin on its blank wooden face. The puppet had then been placed quite randomly in an alcove just off the Great Hall, positioned so that the puppet's head, with its shock of red hair jutting out from under its hat, was just visible peeking out into the corridor. Only a couple of people noticed the poor, forgotten puppet that day, and the next day the puppet was moved to another innocuous location-perched on the railway to the Astronomy tower stairs.

It took nearly a full week for people to start noticing the puppet more. Each day the puppet was somewhere different, and as people

mentioned the peculiarity to their friends and compared notes they realized that someone was doing it on purpose.

After that, it became a game to see who could find the puppet first when it was moved the next morning. People began carrying around cameras and film-developing potion, so that if they came across the puppet they could capture evidence. The more serious competitors all included some sort of time stamp-a watch or the tempus spell visible in the picture-and someone, probably Fred or George, had started a bulletin board in the Great Hall where students could post their pictures each day and figure out who'd won.

The Headmaster seemed to delight in the game, and a couple of the photos showed a pajama-clad Dumbledore happily shaking the puppet's wooden hand at some absurdly early hour of the morning. Because of this, or perhaps because none of the teachers really cared that much, the bulletin board became a permanent fixture over the next few weeks, and impromptu prizes were arranged by the more indulgent school prefects for whoever found the puppet first each day.

What was for the rest of the school a mildly interesting entertainment or a fun and engaging diversion was for Rigel a complete drain on her time in the mornings. The twins had all but handed the prank over to her after giving her the initial model for the puppet, saying that it was a good chance for her to spread her prank-making wings.

She was not, of course, retrieving the puppet each day and moving it before anyone else woke up. That was a good way to get caught-after all, Filch, the professors, or even one of the more enthusiastic students would have only had to wait around at night where the puppet was for her to come get it. Instead, the original puppet was given to the house elves to hide away once Rigel had gotten its appearance memorized, and Woody-as he was affectionately, if rather unimaginatively, called by the student population-was now nothing more than a conditional transfiguration.

Conditional transfigurations were pretty much exactly what they sounded like. The transfiguration was dependent upon one or more conditions pre-determined by the caster at the time the spell was cast. A condition could be anything. It could be as simple as a time limit after which the transfiguration automatically reversed or as complicated as a series of very specific actions that must be completed before the transfiguration reversed. Percy had told Rigel that McGonagall had claimed one could perform a conditional transfiguration so complicated that transfigured objects behaved more like animated objects, responding to any number of external stimuli depending upon the conditions set.

Rigel wasn't doing anything like that, of course, but the prank wasn't exactly a boat ride across the Black Lake either. Woody was set every morning at 4:30 am, and 24 hours later the transfiguration was conditioned to wear off. Then, whatever mundane object had been used in the transfiguration would be abandoned where it fell. For this reason, Rigel had to be extremely careful not to let any of the objects used to base the transfiguration off of reveal anything about herself. She didn't choose anything lying around the Slytherin common room, and she also was very carefully to avoid shedding hairs around the scene of the 'crime' in case some wise guy picked one up and tested it with Polyjuice potion. She also had to make sure she was ready every morning at 4:30 to transfigure something else into Woody the minute the old transfiguration wore off.

Luckily, her roommates were used to her getting up early, and she could perform the transfiguration on her way outside to work out, so she had a semi-plausible alibi as long as she wasn't caught somewhere too outlandish.

On the second Thursday in October, Rigel had just about used up her ideas for places to put the puppet. She couldn't re-use old hiding places, obviously, and it had to be somewhere that wasn't obvious, but which could be found with a little effort. That morning she decided that since the day before she'd put Woody in the boy's locker room down at the Quidditch pitch, she should put it

somewhere girls frequented, to make it fair. Unfortunately, if she were caught sneaking in or out of a girl's bathroom as Rigel, there would be questions that no amount of prevarication could answer.

So that day Rigel had on the blonde wig that she had once rescued from the lost and found, as well as the glasses she often wore in her 'Gryffindor' disguise at the Library. She had changed into a Hufflepuff tie and kept her head down as she hurried down the third floor corridor toward the girls' lavatory. In truth, she didn't feel very guilty about sneaking into the girls' bathroom, mostly because she was, in fact, a girl, and therefore wasn't doing anything nefarious. She did, however, realize what it would look like if anyone recognized her, and it was this knowledge that added a slight pink tint to her cheeks as she slipped into the bathroom.

There was no one inside, of course, because it was so early in the day, so Rigel made quick work of transfiguring a spare roll of toilet paper into Woody. She positioned the puppet so that he was sitting cross-legged on one of the lowered toilet seats, with one hand up under his chin, as though the puppet were thinking very hard about something.

Smiling with soft amusement, she slipped out of the bathroom once more and nearly jumped out of her skin when a jovial voice said, "Why hello there!"

Rigel whirled around, one hand clutching at her heart with exaggerated surprise, and said, "Oh! Professor Lockhart. Good morning."

Lockhart beamed cheerfully down at her. He was already dressed for the day in a deep orange overcoat with silver pumpkins on the trimming and a hint of lace peeking out from the collar of the shirt beneath. "Fancy meeting a student up and about so early," he said grandly, "Of course, when I was a youth I was always among the first to start the day, but children nowadays... well... you can't blame them. They just don't know how serious a world it really is. But it is

so wonderful to see a young person like yourself already prepared to face the day."

"Thank you," Rigel said uncertainly.

"So where are you off to, young miss?" Lockhart asked curiously.

For a moment, her mind blanked completely. What could she say? She couldn't say she was going to work out, because that was something Rigel Black did every day, not some no-name Hufflepuff girl who didn't exist. As Lockhart began to frown, she realized she'd taken too long thinking about it and blurted out, "Using the bathroom."

Lockhart's eyebrows rose, "Yes, well, I assumed so considering..." he glanced delicately at the bathroom door behind her, "Awful long way to walk from the Hufflepuff dorms just to use the bathroom, though. In fact... it's a bit... strange. Isn't it?"

"Oh, um," Rigel fumbled, and cursed herself for being so stupid. If she got caught by Lockhart of all people she would never forgive herself. It was just so early, and although her body was used to working this early in the morning, her mind was still half asleep, "I didn't come up here just to use the lavatory, of course, I just meant... that was my immediate intention in being here..." she trailed off, having successfully made herself sound even more idiotic than before.

Even Lockhart seemed to notice. He peered at her shrewdly, then glanced back at the bathroom, then checked the time in his watch and gasped in an exaggerated manner that made Rigel a bit queasy about what it meant for her.

"A-ha! But of course, I suspected something like this," Lockhart smiled cheekily down at her with a twinkle to his eye, "A student wandering around at just a few minutes after 4:30 in the morning? Don't think I haven't heard Filch complaining about how the puppet disappears every day at this time," he wagged a finger at her

playfully and she internally groaned. Lockhart stepped behind her and made a show of knocking on the door to the girl's bathroom loudly, calling, "Anyone in there? No? Let's go check it out, then, shall we?" He clamped a hand on her shoulder and was about to steer her into the bathroom when a second voice made the both of them freeze. Lockhart with surprise, and Rigel with horror. Oh, no. Not *him* . And yet, it was.

"Pray tell, *Professor* Lockhart, just what you intend to do after manhandling that student into the female lavatory?" Professor Snape's voice was nearly a growl, low and dangerous, and Rigel was close enough to hear Lockhart gulp with trepidation before turning around to face the Potions Master.

"I say, Severus, this really isn't... that is, the situation isn't how it might appear..." Lockhart looked at quite a loss for words, the hand he still had on Rigel's shoulder starting to shake nervously.

Suddenly realizing what Snape must think to see Lockhart pushing a young girl into the girl's bathroom at 4:30 am with no one around, Rigel had the completely inappropriate impulse to laugh. It was just so absurd, not least because she was a girl pretending to be a boy pretending to be a girl, and she was sure that boy or girl Lockhart really hadn't meant anything like *that* . He was an idiot, but probably not a pedophile. She bit her tongue to keep from smiling, and concentrated on looking at the floor. With any luck, Lockhart and Snape would focus on each other and not on her.

Snape sneered at Lockhart, "Do explain, then, what business a teacher could have with a student in an out of the way lavatory at this hour of the morning."

Lockhart laughed weakly, "Well, you see, I was just... the puppet, I mean, going to check if... yes, well..."

Snape, somehow, made enough sense of Lockhart's mutterings to glean a basic understanding of the situation. He whipped out his wand and cast, "*Homenum revelio*," at the girls' restroom. When

nothing happened, he stowed his wand away and strode briskly into the bathroom, somehow not looking at all foolish doing so. A moment later, he had come back out, and he spared Rigel a quick glance before saying to Lockhart, "Congratulations, Gilderoy. It seems once again your gift for sniffing out mysteries has reared its head; you've caught the student responsible for the ongoing puppet prank."

In a flash, Lockhart was back to his usual self, "I did have a feeling, and like I always say, it pays to follow your gut. Still, it was rather clever to get so far without being caught, Miss... , forgive me, Miss, but I don't seem to recall your name. Still learning all the students, you know."

"Am I going to get into trouble, Professors?" Rigel asked softly, pitching her voice a little higher than normal and not looking up from the stones, "Only, I wasn't hurting anyone. It's just a bit of fun, and it's not really against school rules to practice transfiguration outside of the classroom, as long as one doesn't perform the magic in the corridors."

Lockhart chortled, "Oh-ho! She's got a point, Severus, you must admit. I suppose since no harm was done, there's no reason to-"

"Thank you, Gilderoy," Severus said sharply, "I will oversee the situation from here. You, come with me." Rigel did not have to look up to know that he was referring to her. Snape strode off toward the stairs and Lockhart gave her a commiserating pat on the back before she slowly set off after the Potions Master.

Snape continued to walk briskly until they reached his office in the dungeons, at which point he took out his wand to remove the wards and then gestured impatiently for her to proceed him. Rigel meekly slipped into the office. She kept her blonde head down, trying to project an appearance of timidity and contrition.

Snape shut the door with a firm click and stalked over to sit behind his desk. At the sight of her standing there, one toe fidgeting against

the flagstones, he scoffed impatiently, "Enough, Mr. Black. Take that ridiculous thing off and explain yourself this instant."

Rigel couldn't hide the shock on her face as she whipped her head up to stare at him. "How did you know?" she blurted, "You barely looked at me."

"I did not need to look at you," Snape said dismissively, "Have you forgotten Mr. Malfoy's birthday party already? You are the only student at this school with no discernable magical aura. Not to mention my familiarity with your Occlumency shields, and the fact that unlike *Professor* Lockhart I do know every student in this school and was able to recognize the duplicity by simple process of elimination."

Rigel winced. She hadn't thought of that, though she should have. She reached up and slid the wig off of her hair slowly, blatantly stalling for time as she put it away in her bag. Snape sent a very pointed look at the yellow and black striped tie around her neck, and Rigel quickly took the Hufflepuff tie off as well, trying not to feel amused at the put out expression of distaste on his face.

"I suppose you'd like an explanation now," Rigel said hesitantly.

"I would," Snape said flatly, "Starting with where you got that ridiculous disguise and ending with why you were about to willingly enter a female lavatory with a member of the male staff."

Rigel thought 'willingly' was a bit of a stretch, but decided to just get the explanation over with instead of commenting, "The disguise was originally for my use in the Library." At Snape's raised eyebrow, she clarified, "It would seem that Madam Pince harbors some ill will toward me because of my father's... colorful history with the Hogwarts Library. Something about catching an entire section of the place on fire."

For a moment, Snape almost looked amused, in a darkly satisfied sort of way, and Rigel got the uneasy feeling that he'd been involved

in the Library incident.

"Because of that, she banned me from the Library the first week I started here," Rigel went on, sighing, "It's really been a pain, considering how often I use the Library, but with my disguises I can at least go and read books there, though I still can't check any books out. Anyway, that's what the disguise is supposed to be for. This morning, I didn't go to the Library, though," Rigel examined the desk carefully as she admitted to the rest of it, "I was using the disguise so that my going into the girls' bathroom wouldn't seem so suspicious, although now that I've been caught it seems more suspicious that I wore a disguise, I suppose."

Snape gave a sardonic lift of the brow that Rigel thought was roughly equivalent to an unspoken, *You think?*

"I wasn't doing anything... nefarious," Rigel felt compelled to add, "I would never try anything so unsavory, Professor. I had to put the puppet somewhere girls went, though, since yesterday it was in the boys' locker room."

Professor Snape didn't say anything, merely looked at her with a shuttered expression.

"I'm sorry," Rigel offered, "I know I probably embarrassed Slytherin House, even if Professor Lockhart had no idea who I was. I am also sorry for going into the girls' bathroom, but I did check if anyone was in there first, and I didn't think it would be an issue so early in the morning."

"And the puppet?" Snape prompted, "What have you to say about that, Mr. Black?"

"Well, I know it's a bit silly," Rigel said carefully, "But it doesn't in itself break any rules, does it?"

Snape scowled at her, "Just a bit of fun, was it? You think you can become a Potions Master before you're thirty by wasting your time

with nonsense like this? You said you were focused, Mr. Black. You swore to me there was nothing you wanted more than this."

"There isn't! I am," Rigel said vehemently, "It's just a prank. It means nothing, and it hardly takes up any of my time. Are my studies lacking? Did you have any inkling that I might be distracted before you caught me with this?"

"That is not the point," Snape said, frowning, "This isn't the Rigel Black I know. Where is the boy that doesn't care for frivolities that distract him from his studies? I know you are not the mastermind behind this scheme, but why would you even agree to participate in it? Do not think that going along with others is enough to make them true friends-"

"It's nothing like that," Rigel said quickly, "I have too many friends as it is. I don't want any more."

"Then *why* did you get involved with this farce? What could you possibly gain from engaging in such a pointless, wasteful application of your talents for the sole purpose of cruel entertainment at others' expense? I thought you were better than that, Rigel Black."

"I *am*," Rigel said, frustrated with the way Snape was painting things, "I'd never do anything mean to anyone. The puppet is completely harmless-it's not even a prank, really. It's not a big deal."

"But you've just said yourself it doesn't mean anything to you," Snape said exasperatedly, "Why, then, would you do it? You have defended your actions but have yet to give a plausible motive for them. Am I to assume you perform random acts of tom foolery for no reason?"

Rigel shook her head, "It doesn't mean anything to me, sir, but it means something to... others."

Snape favored her with a pointed look, "While I do not question your character, Mr. Black, you have never struck me as a particularly

altruistic person-at least not one who would go out of his way for the sole purpose of cheering up his peers when they have no need for such a diversion."

"It's not them, exactly," Rigel said, internally squirming. How could she explain in a way that didn't sound pathetic? "Professor, you have to understand, I... my family is really big on pranks. I know I don't have to tell you that," she hurried on, seeing his face darken, "It's just that you're right, okay? I'm not all that interested in them, but... I sort of have to be. If I don't, my dad will worry about me. Well, not worry about me, exactly, but I've always been different than my family expected or maybe hoped. It's already a lot for my dad that I enjoy potions and book learning so much, and I don't want to..."

"Disappoint him," Snape finished, sounding as though he had finally obtained something that had long eluded him, only to find he didn't care for the feel of it in his grasp. Rigel snuck a look at him, but his face was blank and unreadable, "Tell me, Mr. Black, is your father aware of exactly how closely you are studying potions under my tutelage? Does he have any idea that I am training you, specifically, outside of the regular student curriculum?"

Rigel felt her stomach sink pitifully, "Not exactly, sir. No, actually, not at all."

Snape gazed at her wordlessly, which somehow felt worse than if he'd shouted. "Are you ashamed, perhaps, to be working with me? Are you somehow embarrassed to be given this opportunity that other young potioneers would go down on bended knee for?"

"No," Rigel protested, "I'm grateful, you have no idea-you can't imagine how-I just can't tell *them*. Not my family, they wouldn't understand. It would only cause problems and... and I cause them enough problems as it is."

"So what is your plan, exactly?" Snape asked coolly, "Do you intend to hide the extent of your studies from them forever?"

Yes, Rigel thought stubbornly, *I do* . She didn't say so, but Snape must have seen the answer shining below the surface of her expression.

"Foolish boy," Snape snapped, "You cannot pretend to idiocy all your life."

"I'm not," Rigel said, "I'm just not saying how I'm learning, exactly." She winced, realizing what that sounded like, "It's not that I don't want to give you credit-I do. I will, just not until I graduate and get my Mastery. If they knew what I was doing before then, even without your name throw into it, I wouldn't be able to realize my goals."

Snape scoffed, "Even I do not think your father so childish as to deny his own son happiness out of spite. Such a thing is beneath *Gryffindors*, after all."

Rigel shook her head slowly, "You don't have all the facts, and I cannot provide them to you, but believe me when I say that if my family found out the truth before I graduated, they would pull me out of Hogwarts so fast it would be as though Rigel Black never existed."

Snape sat back in his chair hard, a look of thinly veiled shock on his face at that pronouncement, "It is obvious that you believe this, so perhaps there is some amount of truth to what you say," he said slowly, "This development is disturbing, though it does explain certain things about you I had dismissed as idiosyncrasies. Nevertheless, I do not see how this double-sided game you are playing can continue for much longer. At the end of this year you will be expected to consider electives for your OWL classes, and as such to have some idea as to a future career path. What does your father expect you to do with your life if not potions?"

"I have intimated a desire to become a Healer," Rigel said carefully, trying to mesh her own and Archie's ambitions in a way that didn't leave too many holes in their story, "A lot of Healing has to do with potions, so skill with and interest in the subject lends itself easily to the field. In fact, at times I have considered actually becoming a

Healer after I get my Potions Mastery. It would be a way to do a great amount of good with my training, at least."

Snape considered this for a moment, "Even if you became a Healer after first becoming a Potions Master, you would still need to begin training in the subject now. It would mean extra work, but if your plans are truly as you say, perhaps it would be best if I were to arrange something with Madam Pomphrey after your regular lessons. She can begin teaching you the basics, if nothing else."

"My cousin Harry attends school in America," Rigel said, slightly surprised that Snape was willing to arrange extra lessons for her simply because she said she might want to become a Healer one day, "She is actually studying Healing there, precisely because she knows I need to learn it both to convince our family it is my primary area of focus, and in the event that I do decide on becoming a Healer."

Snape's eyebrows rose even higher, "You have already begun studying Healing? That is a dangerous discipline to attempt to self-learn. How far have you progressed?"

Rigel shrugged, "I'm about at the same level as Harry is. We keep pace with one another's curriculums pretty easily-"

"One another's?" Snape broke in, frowning.

Rigel clamped her mouth shut. She shouldn't have said that... or wait... maybe that would make the most sense in the end? When they switched back how better to explain how she had Archie's knowledge and he had hers than to simply say that they'd taught one another everything they learned? It was even true, only in reverse of what people would think. Still, how could she tell Snape that without making it seem as though she was sharing the knowledge he had entrusted to only her with someone he'd never met? Because of course she *wasn't*, but in the end Harriett Potter's knowledge would seem to come from nowhere unless Rigel Black had shared it with her. Her parents could believe she'd self studied all her knowledge,

but to other potioners it would be obvious she had been trained somehow-after all, some of the things she would know simply weren't written down. They were passed in trust from master to apprentice, and wasn't that the cincher? Trust. Snape had trusted her with his teachings, and she was metaphorically (and in his eyes literally) betraying his knowledge to another.

Perhaps it wasn't so dramatic. He hadn't really imparted any significant secrets yet, had he? Maybe he wouldn't be irate over the technicalities of the situation.

Realizing she'd once again been silent too long in contemplation, Rigel said, "Yes. It would have been natural for me to go to AIM to learn Healing, but luckily my father insisted I attend Hogwarts, so I was able to come here to study potions without it being obvious I'd chosen one over the other. My cousin, on the other hand, wanted to come to Hogwarts as well, as she had a very similar interest in potions, but couldn't, of course, so since she was going to AIM anyway, she started in the Healing tract to help me out. The potions tract at AIM isn't all that impressive, so since the Healing tract is quite good, she's learning something useful in any case."

Snape was rubbing his temples now, "You have once again managed to somehow completely complicate what should have been straightforward. Am I to understand that you are here to learn potions, but your family thinks you are here against your will because they think you'd rather be in America learning Healing, and that your cousin actually *is* in America against her will, and so decided to learn Healing for you by proxy to help your possibly-fake future career path along, and in return you... what? Tutor her in the things you learn at Hogwarts?"

"Ah, yes?" Rigel said, now a bit confused herself, "That sounds right. Only, I suppose I should ask if it would be okay with you if I taught her some... er, *a lot*, of what you teach me about potions? Only she's a big fan of yours, and will probably decide to take the Potions Mastery exam herself at some point."

This, it appeared, was too much for Snape's rational mind to comprehend. He positively gaped at her with bemusement, "Harriett Potter, child of James Potter, is a... *fan*... of my work?"

Rigel hid a smile, "Yes, sir. She was ever so disappointed to be going to AIM, which in her words has not seen the light of a potions periodical in nearly a decade."

Snape snorted seemingly involuntarily, but quickly pulled himself together, "You have given me a lot to process, as usual, Mr. Black. For now, you will be receiving a detention on Friday for entering the women's lavatory. I will speak to Madam Pince personally and ensure that you never have need of so ridiculous a disguise again. Then I will see Madam Pomphrey and attempt to work out a couple of days a week for her to at the very least supervise you so that you do not inadvertently kill yourself trying to learn Healing on your own."

"Thank you, sir," Rigel said, really meaning it for all that he'd done for her.

"Next, I want your word that whatever I teach you goes no further than Miss Potter," Snape said, his neutral tone belying the weight of the words he was speaking, "If you vouch for her skill, then I am sure she is not completely incompetent, though at some point you will arrange a meeting so that I may assess that for myself, and you and I will be having a much more in depth conversation about what exactly you and your cousin are doing with your lives. For now, however, we are overdue for breakfast. Do you have any immediate questions?"

"Who is my detention with on Friday?" Rigel asked.

Snape sighed, an annoyed but resigned sound, "Me. We might as well make use of the time, and I have a vague suspicion that you wouldn't respond to normal disciplinary actions even if I were to set you to clean cauldrons all night."

"I like cleaning cauldrons," Rigel said.

"And I have reached the point where nothing surprises me about you anymore," Snape said tiredly, "Go to breakfast, Mr. Black, and if I ever catch you entering a women's bathroom again, with or without a teacher, I will excommunicate you from Slytherin House faster than you can say Salazar."

After that, Rigel was more careful in any pranks she got involved in with the twins, and Professor Snape seemed to have decided to look the other way where her extra curricular antics were involved. He did convince Madam Pomphrey to meet with Rigel once every two weeks to assess her progress and correct any mistakes she was making, but for the most part her Healing studies continued under her own steam.

The best thing that came out of her conversation with Snape was the access she now had to the Library. Madam Pince hadn't said a word when Rigel went as herself the first time, and after a couple of weeks she didn't even give Rigel the evil eye when she checked out a book. It probably helped that she always returned them timely and with no visible signs of wear.

The day before Halloween, however, she was vastly disappointed in the Library. She had an essay to do for Flint's NEWT Runes class, and it was reaching the point where she could no longer get by with mere theory on the essays. It wasn't that the Library didn't have the information she needed to complete the essay, rather, it was that Rigel couldn't make any useful sense of the information. She didn't have enough of a foundation to go any further in the theoretical study of Runes without backtracking and learning everything from the beginning. Unfortunately, she also didn't have time to do that before the next essay was due.

Since books weren't helping her, she needed to find a person who could. Percy took Runes, but she doubted he'd be able to swallow her wanting to add sixth year Runes to their transfiguration studies. Flint would probably know everything she needed, but somehow she

didn't see him helping her complete his own homework assignment, even if it would make things easier.

Alesana Selwyn also knew Runes, or at least how to read them, which probably implied some knowledge of their application, but Rigel got the feeling Selwyn was still a bit touchy about the thestral thing from the beginning of the school year. She also wasn't eager to owe Selwyn any favors-who knew what she'd ask in return?

That left a total of zero people she knew who were taking Runes. Great.

Rigel shelved the useless books on Runic theory carefully and headed back toward the common room. Surely there was someone in Slytherin House who knew a thing or two about Runes... and didn't mind talking to younger students... and wasn't terribly suspicious. Rigel sighed. Anyone not smart enough to be suspicious wouldn't be smart enough to answer her questions. Still, it was more productive than staring blankly at a book of gibberish.

She had barely gotten through the common room wall when she was waylaid by a nervous looking Millicent.

"Hi, Rigel," she said, holding a notebook on one hand and tapping the fingers of her other hand against her leg.

"Hello, Millicent," Rigel said, "What are you up to?"

"Potions homework," Millicent said immediately, "And it's really hard."

"Oh," Rigel said, blinking, "I'm sorry to hear that."

Millicent hesitated, peering at Rigel as though searching for some clue. Rigel stared blankly back at her, not sure what she wanted, so Millicent just sighed and said, "Will you help me with my potions homework, Rigel?"

"Oh," Rigel said, smiling slightly, "Sure."

"Well-" the other girl paused, "Wait, just like that? You'll really help?"

Rigel raised an eyebrow, "Of course I will. Why wouldn't I? We're friends."

Millicent shrugged, "Well, yes, but you never have before."

Rigel frowned, "You never asked me before."

Millicent stared at her for a second, then said, slowly, "That's true, but the rest of us do almost all of our homework together. Since you never joined, I figured you weren't interested in peer tutoring, at least not giving it out."

"I didn't know," Rigel said, wondering how long that had been going on. Draco and Pansy almost never asked for her help with anything, so she'd assumed they were either too proud to ask or were too smart to need help. She didn't do her homework around her friends for obvious reasons-if they kept careful enough tabs on her homework load, it would be obvious she was either doing more than twice as much as the rest of them, half of which was on topics they wouldn't cover for years, or else lying when she said she had more homework to do after she'd finished all of her 'official' homework. Maybe she'd been missing out on more than just homework help, though.

"Well, you're always really busy, I guess," Millicent said uneasily, "Anyway, you can come now, right?"

Rigel mentally shrugged. She wasn't making any headway with Flint's essay anyway, so why not? "Sure, now is good for me."

"Great, thanks," Millicent led her over to a secluded corner of the common room where the second year Slytherins did indeed seem to be gathered around a table, comparing various homework notes. She never would have noticed them if she was just casually walking through the common room, but when Millicent pulled two empty

chairs for them the others looked up. When they saw Rigel, several of her year mates did a double take.

"Rigel!" Theo exclaimed, "What are you doing here?"

Pansy nudged him admonishingly with her shoulder, "Don't say it like that. Hello, Rigel. How's your afternoon coming along?"

"Well enough, Pansy, thank you," Rigel said, sitting down next to Millicent, "Good to see you, too, Theo."

"I guess I owe Millie a sickle," Theo said, ignoring her muttered 'don't call me that' in favor of grinning unrepentantly, "I bet her you'd be too busy to come over."

Rigel wasn't sure how to respond to that. Did she really come off so aloof to her classmates?

"And you owe me two sickles," Blaise added with a satisfied smile, "Because I bet you that as soon as someone actually made him aware of our little group, he'd be perfectly amiable to joining in."

"How could he not know?" Theo rolled his eyes, "We've only been sitting here practically every school night for the last month and a half."

"Rigel doesn't notice anything," Blaise said, as though it were common knowledge, "Do you, Rigel?"

Rigel shrugged, wanting to say, *I notice how often you stare at Hannah Abbott*, but knowing better than to be so rude. Instead she took a seat and pulled Millicent's homework assignment toward her.

"Swelling Solution?" Rigel guessed, glancing over the ingredient list.

"Just the theory," Millicent said, "We don't have to brew it until after Halloween, but one of the homework questions asks how many times you stir counter-clockwise after adding the bat spleen. One book says three and the other says four, but our textbook just says,

'stir counter-clockwise twice-proportionately to the solute.' What does that even mean?"

Rigel tilted her head to the side to consider the question, "Well, off the top of my head I'd say it's supposed to be four stirs counter-clockwise after the bat spleen for the textbook recipe, but Professor Snape will definitely want to know why, so I guess you'd better explain the reasoning behind the number of stirs if you want full marks."

"Okay, but why did the other book say three stirs?" Millicent asked.

"Well it could either have been written by an idiot, or the recipe just makes less of the potion. Not all potion recipes are standard. Does the recipe given in that book call for a different amount of solute?" Rigel asked.

Millicent scrunched up her nose, "What's a solute?"

"It's just a word for the stuff that dissolves into the liquid part of the potion," Rigel said, "You have to crush puffer-fish eyes and dried nettles into powder for this one, right? That's probably the solute they're talking about."

Millicent ran a finger down the ingredient list in one of the books, "Oh. Yes, it says one and a half measures of the powdered stuff, and our book calls for two measures. *Oh*, I see. So you stir twice as many times as the number of measures you put in. That's what it means by proportionate." She scowled a bit grumpily at the book as she wrote down the answer in the neat, flowing handwriting that all pureblooded heirs seemed to possess, "Why didn't they just say that?"

Rigel smiled, "Some would say it's a way to keep idiots from playing around with potions if they don't understand them, but they forget they're writing a textbook for school kids, and the ones who don't understand the text have to try and make the potions anyway, so really they're just causing more problems by being unclear."

Millicent shook her head, "You should write a translation of the textbook for normal, not obsessed with all things dried and pickled, people. You'd probably make a killing."

Rigel laughed softly, "If you say so. Was there anything else you needed help with?"

"Well, five minutes ago I would have said yes, but you actually just answered a lot my questions by explaining the proportionality thing," Millicent said, looking down at her sheet, "I think I can do the rest myself, now, but thanks for your help."

"Anytime," Rigel said easily.

"Do you really mean that?" Millicent asked bluntly, "Or are you just being polite?"

Rigel raised her eyebrows, "I mean it. Do I really seem like the kind of person who wouldn't help out his friends?"

Millicent shrugged, and Theo put in hesitantly from across the table, "It's just that you're so closed-mouthed about everything. It seems like you don't like sharing your knowledge very much."

Rigel shook her head, "It's not that. I just don't want to come off like I'm flaunting it, you know, showing off or something. I'd feel really rude going around spouting off things I know all the time, even if I was well-meaning."

Theo shook his head wryly, "And here we were thinking it would be rude to ask you to help."

"We're not trying to use you for your talent, of course," Millicent said hurriedly, "If there was something I could teach you in return, I would, but..."

"But you always know everything already," Draco cut in with a smirk from behind his Herbology textbook, "And anything you don't know,

you probably aren't interested in, or you *would* know it."

Rigel nearly laughed. "That's what you think? There are tons of things I wish I knew. Things that you guys take for granted, probably. My dad isn't big on pureblood traditions, so I don't know anything about wizarding history father back than the last couple of decades, for instance. I don't know etiquette, or how to play any musical instruments, while Pansy over here can play three. And look at my handwriting-it's pathetic compared to Millicent's."

"But that's all boring stuff," Theo said. "You never need help with the kind of things we need help with-school work and such."

"To you it's boring," Rigel shrugged, "Do you know what I'd give to have grown up learning Latin like you did, Theo? That's really useful."

"It's not that great," Theo shrugged modestly.

"In any case, I need help with my studies all the time," Rigel told them.

"Anything we can help with?" Pansy asked curiously, and perhaps a bit hopefully.

"Well," Rigel said slowly, "Do any of you study Runes? I got really interested in them over the summer, but the books in the Library are too advanced for me to start with, and I didn't think to buy the third year beginner's textbook."

One by one, everyone in the group turned to look at Blaise. The dark-skinned boy smiled slyly, as if to say, *Who, me?*

"You know Runes, Blaise?" Rigel asked curiously.

"Since I was very young," Blaise shrugged gracefully, "My mother is a Runes Mistress, and she taught me well before I started Hogwarts. It's not unlike your study of potions, in fact; because there is no

magic involved in just learning the theory and the more basic formulas, it was easy enough to learn before getting a wand."

"That's amazing," Rigel said honestly, "Do you mind if I ask you a few questions about them? I can wait until you're done with your homework, of course."

Blaise shrugged once more, "I was finished a while ago. I just hung around to see how the bet turned out. Sure, I'll help. In return you will teach me linked transfigurations, deal?"

Rigel nodded, "No problem. I'll teach it to you now, if you want, since I don't know how long my questions are going to take."

"I want to learn them, too," Draco decided suddenly, closing his Herbology book with a snap, "Sounds useful."

The second years passes the rest of the afternoon and early evening just like that, trading knowledge and the occasional joke comfortably in the Slytherin common room. They all went to bed early that day, knowing that the following evening they'd be up late celebrating Samhain at the Halloween feast with the rest of the school. As she fell asleep that night, Rigel sent up a tiny, half-hearted prayer that this year's feast would not be nearly so eventful as the previous year's. Just don't let anyone try to poison me this time, she asked. Anything but an assassination attempt she could probably handle.

Right?

[end of chapter five].

A/N: Well, that's all for now. Next up is Halloween-and we all know that's never good for Harry. So just FYI and to give credit where due, the first prank with the chimes was directly stolen by yours truly by a really awesome Naruto fanfic that I can't remember the name of, but in which Iruka was a pranking daredevil. So, I definitely do not claim that idea as mine. If you ever come across the story in your

readings, it's really quite good. The second prank is based off of the recent Christmas tradition that you might know if you have brothers and sisters young enough to have done it in the last few years. It's called Elf on the Shelf. So that's really all I have for now. Grad school is going well, in case anyone cares about my pathetic life lol, and hopefully now that I've settled into the pace I can get more writing done. In any case, much love.

-Violet

Chapter 6

A/N: Don't get too excited! This is not a full chapter.

So, a certain reviewer mentioned how great it would be if the Halloween chapter was out by Halloween. It's a little late, but... close enough?

The Serpentine Subterfuge:

Chapter 6:

[Draco POV]:

The Halloween feast was as glorious as last year's, even without the added excitement of fireworks exploding from the Hufflepuff pumpkins. The sweets were scrumptious, the decorations were brilliant, and everyone agreed it was the most fun they'd had all year. Everyone except, of course, for Rigel, who was exceedingly late....again.

Draco glanced at the doors to the Great Hall for the tenth time in the last half hour, and this time Pansy finally said something.

"I don't know why you're acting surprised and worried, Draco," his friend said from across the table, "He's always late to things like this."

He couldn't disagree with that. If it was a class or an event that Rigel had a responsibility to attend-like Quidditch practice-he was always perfectly punctual, but for everything else... it was as though Rigel forgot about them completely, and just showed up when he happened to be in the area anyway and remembered. Of course, Rigel always gave a perfectly reasonable explanation for why he wasn't somewhere earlier, but if anything the patient, reasonable way he explained himself only frustrated Draco more.

It would be one thing if Rigel was a complete scatterbrain, and genuinely apologetic or upset about showing up either late or not at all to events that everyone else attended as a matter of course—feasts, House meetings, Draco's birthday party, and lately even lunch. But Rigel wasn't flustered or sorry when he showed up. He just shrugged and gave some lame but supremely understandable explanation and then changed the subject. It was annoying how little he cared about things most twelve year olds cared about, and though his apathy was no longer intimidating or strange, it was still, if Draco was completely honest with himself, a little hurtful. Shouldn't friends want to spend all their time together?

Brushing that thought aside dismissively, Draco went back to picking at his pumpkin pie, determined not to look at the Great Hall doors for at least another ten minutes.

"Just because we've gotten used to it, doesn't make it okay," Draco muttered, "Why can't he be normal for once? Who's late to the Halloween feast two years in a row?"

"If he was normal, he wouldn't be Rigel," Pansy said, smiling, "And you wouldn't like him if he was boring like the rest of us."

"You're not boring," Draco said automatically, "And I don't want him to be *boring* normal, I just wish he cared about something besides potions."

Pansy sent him an admonishing look, which Draco supposed he deserved for making such an oversimplified generalization. He was working on articulating the complexities of a situation, like his father had been trying to teach him, but it was easier to generalize in an argument.

"As his friend, you know better than to believe that image he projects of himself," Pansy said while delicately spreading jam onto a roll, "He pretends not to care about anything but potions because he thinks that if he acts like his life is dull and boring it will keep people from getting too involved in his business. Underneath the manic

academia, Rigel cares about us very much, even if he does only show it in stressful or unexpected situations."

"He's still the strangest person I've ever met," Draco said stubbornly, "Did I ever tell you he sleeps in his clothes? Like he thinks he'll be attacked at any moment."

Pansy raised his eyebrows, "That is a little... eccentric. Still, his family is very interested in practical jokes, are they not? Perhaps he was pranked in his sleep a lot as a child, and doesn't like to feel too vulnerable while unconscious as a result."

Draco shrugged, "When we asked he said something vaguely similar, but the fact is we'll probably never know. He lies too often for me to tell the difference, and I'm not sure the truth even matters anymore, because so much of the life he leads seems to be either a lie or a half-lie. It's like the lies are an inseparable part of him now, and just as true as the truth because they might as well *be* the truth. Does that make sense?"

Pansy nodded her head slowly, "I often get the feeling he's not telling us something extremely important about his life, but the part of him that lives without acknowledging that part of his life is just as valid as the part of him that he keeps hidden. Is that what you mean?"

"Sort of," Draco said, "It would be like if he said his favorite food was turnips when really he hates turnips, but he wants us to think he likes turnips so much that he eats them all the time, and he'd want us to get him turnips for Christmas even if he doesn't actually like them, so what does it matter if he doesn't like them? For all intents and purposes, he's a turnip-eater." Draco grimaced, realizing how absurd that sounded, and sighed, "I don't know. Either way he's our friend, right? I just feel so... it's like there's nothing I can *do* . He lives in this separate little world and never asks for anything from us."

Pansy's eyes lit with perfect understanding, "Yes! I think I've felt the same, as though I were useless as a friend to him, because there's never anything I can really do for him. He just doesn't share his

troubles with us, or if he does it's after the fact or it's something we can't do for him, like studying. At the same time, though, he seems to do so much for us. He went to your birthday party despite the enmity between your families, and convinced Mr. Hagrid to help with you guys' present to me, but I'm not even sure when his birthday is. Sometime over the summer, isn't it?"

"I think so," Draco scrunched up his nose, trying to remember if Rigel had ever told them, "You're right, though. He always knows what to say when something bad happens to us, but he never gets excited or even brags about anything good that happens to him. Getting to know him is like trying to piece scraps of a photograph back together with spell-o-tape, only you're missing most of the pieces!"

Pansy laughed, "And then you realize you're actually putting them together upside down and backwards anyway, so you have to start all over."

Draco chuckled, "Yes, exactly. It's really annoying, but at the same time... I guess I don't mind too much. At least, I don't want to give up."

Pansy nodded seriously, "I agree. It'll probably take a few more years before even we can say we know Rigel Black, but I think he's a good person to know, and I don't just mean because he's from a well-known family, hugely talented with magic, and a you-know-what to boot. He's also a good friend, despite his quirks."

"Yeah," Draco said, glancing down at his goblet of pumpkin juice, "No matter what, it'll be worth the effort in the end."

"And even if it isn't, at least it will be interesting," Pansy said in a lighter tone of voice.

"What will?"

They both looked up to see the subject of their conversation slipping into the seat beside Pansy. Draco raked his eyes over his friend, and

suppressed a click of his tongue at the sight of Rigel's plain black school robes. Honestly, who didn't change clothes for a feast?

"Dumbledore's speech," Pansy said smoothly, "You missed it last time, but this time I think he's saving it for the end."

"Which should be any time now," Draco couldn't help but add, "Seeing as you're over an hour late."

Rigel, to no one's surprise, merely blinked, "Sorry. I was finishing up a Befuddlement Draught in my lab. I had to put it on stasis for a while, though, because the belladonna I needed wasn't where I thought."

"Snape's got you on the Befuddlement Draught? That's really advanced, isn't it?" Pansy asked, "I think Rookwood was working on an essay about it just last month."

Draco wasn't even surprised that Rigel was now working on fourth year potions, but he was surprised when Rigel said, "It wasn't for Snape. He doesn't usually have me learn potions I'll be learning as part of the regular curriculum anyway. He says it would be a waste of time unless I was planning on skipping a year or two."

"You aren't, are you?" Draco asked worriedly, though he noted in the back of his mind that Rigel hadn't said what he was brewing the Befuddlement Draught for if not Snape.

Rigel gazed at him with amusement that added a small light to his grey eyes, "No, I'm not planning on it. I'd like as much time to study under Professor Snape as possible. Once I graduate I would have to apply for a formal apprenticeship, and those have to be approved by a board of Adepts from the Potions Guild. Too much trouble when I can get the best tuition right here without it."

Draco noticed Rigel said nothing about wanting to enjoy his childhood or remain in the same age group as his friends, as most kids would have. Still, whatever the reason, Draco was glad Rigel

wasn't considering moving up a grade or two, though with his smarts he probably could with very little trouble.

"When did you learn the stasis charm?" Pansy asked curiously, "We don't learn it until OWL year, I think, but it sounds very useful to be able to put a potion on hold while you get something else done."

Rigel frowned slightly and Draco immediately knew they'd offended his potion-making sensibilities, "I learned it over the summer, but I almost never use it. You're really not supposed to, because a lot of potions don't like having their kinetic energy frozen like that. Some potions will even react extremely negatively to it-not while under the stasis charm, of course, but as soon as you lift it they go haywire. It's supposed to be an emergency-only kind of spell. It's just that Befuddlement Draughts take a couple of hours to brew, and I was wasting enough time tracking down my back up store of belladonna."

Pansy laughed, "All right, Rigel, I wasn't suggesting using the stasis charm every time my arm got tired of stirring. I just meant it would be useful to have, in situations like you described."

Rigel's face affected the slightly sheepish look that always came when he realized he'd rambled on about something he thought no one else would care about. Draco didn't bother to reassure him-after all this time, Rigel should know better than to think he bored them. How many times had Pansy and he reassured their friend that they were interested in whatever he wanted to tell them? It was like he'd been indoctrinated into thinking everything he enjoyed was dry and boring and no one wanted to listen when he spoke on a topic he actually cared about. What rubbish. Maybe Rigel's family was as big a bunch of dunderheads as Uncle Severus always intimidated.

"You should have stopped brewing before you started the Befuddlement Draught," Draco said eventually, "Then you might have been on time. Getting forgetful about your potions ingredients is probably a sign you've been at it too long. Learn to take a break, Rye."

Rigel just blinked at him like he was speaking another language, "I didn't need a break. I needed belladonna."

Pansy frowned a bit, "It is odd that you would misplace it. You've never been careless with your ingredients."

Rigel frowned as well, "I know. I guess I must have used it in something else, though I can't remember... I have been making a lot of potions in the last month, though. I'll just be sure to order extra next month."

"Isn't belladonna poisonous?" Draco asked slowly. Even he knew it was never a good thing when potentially dangerous ingredients went missing.

Rigel shrugged dismissively, "Only in huge quantities. More than I had, that's for sure. It's only really dangerous to small animals. Sometimes squirrels and birds die from eating the raw plant in the wild, but even then they'd have to eat several stalks, and they'd probably get sick after one or two and stop first." Rigel looked thoughtful for a moment, then added, "Maybe if the animal was starving, or had lost its sense of taste somehow. Maybe if it had recently eaten some sort of pepper, and therefore had a compromised sense of smell that-"

"Okay, I think we got it," Pansy said quickly, "Not that it isn't interesting, Rigel, but finish telling us about it after the meal, okay?"

Rigel gave Pansy an apologetic look, and changed the subject, "So, did I miss anything else?"

"Besides our fabulous company?" Draco drawled just to coax a half-smile from his friend, "Not really. Someone charmed the suits of armor on either side of the doors to shout 'boo' at every tenth person or so, and judging from the way Professor Sinistra jumped and shrieked when she came in, I don't think it was the staff's idea."

Rigel nodded and quirked an eyebrow as though that were a very interesting piece of information, rather than a random fact. Somehow Rigel could make him feel like he was both rivetingly important and singularly unnoticed within the space of minutes.

They were spared further inanities by the flickering of all the candles in the Hall, which Draco supposed was supposed to signal the Headmaster's speech. All it really did was make people pause long enough in their conversations for Dumbledore to clear his throat in the ensuing moment of silence and gain most people's attention.

Draco dutifully turned slightly in his seat to pay attention to the old wizard who had out-classed and out-conned every enemy, political or otherwise, who had come up against him in the last century. Albus Dumbledore had all the potential to be truly impressive, but the elderly wizard ruined the effect by dressing like a circus performer and pretending to be senile. It made people underestimate him, Draco supposed, but the people stupid enough to forget a lifetime of unimaginable magical and political feats in the face of a facsimile of nonsense weren't people worth trying to fool, because they were probably too stupid to spell politics, much less participate in them.

At least that's how Draco saw it. Better to never let your enemies- and followers, too, for that matter- forget how awe-inspiring you truly are. It only left room for questioning and doubts, which made it all too easy for someone to uproot a person indirectly through the spreading of rumors and lies. That, Draco thought, was Dumbledore's weakness. He manipulated people as a matter of course, but didn't seem to comprehend that those same people he so easily swayed could be swayed just as easily against him. One didn't have to challenge Albus Dumbledore directly- too many had tried and failed for that to be a sane option anyway. One only had to use the man's own carefully cultivated reputation against him.

People were all too poised to believe anything semi-plausible, simply because it didn't occur to them that someone else would take the time to purposely deceive them. It wouldn't take much to get the general public thinking Dumbledore was as stricken with dotage as

he seemed. Then one would just have to offer a younger, sharper version as an alternative, and people would jump at the opportunity for change, thinking it to be something refreshing and improving. Little would they know that the usurper is a farce, a clever plant by the enemy who would win their favor and votes and then use the power passed to him by Dumbledore's legacy to run the Light camp into the ground.

Draco pulled himself out of his thoughts with difficulty. He was learning how to think more like a politician, more like his father, and it was surprisingly easy for him, but it had the side effect of making him tune out some things in order to concentrate on others. He realized with an inner jolt that he'd missed most of the Headmaster's speech while occupied with his hypotheticals, but wasn't in truth overly concerned about it. Pansy would let him know if anything of import had been said, and in the best-case scenario he'd managed to retain a few extra brain cells, which he would surely have lost in the face of the Headmaster's usual driveling non sequiturs.

"And on a final note," the burnt-orange-clad (was he competing with Lockhart in a most obnoxious color contest?) wizard was saying, "Mr. Filch would like me to announce that Mrs. Norris has been missing since this morning. I know you will all help keep an eye out for our beloved caretaker's cat, and if you see her please inform one of the-

The Headmaster was cut off by the muffled sound of an explosion, like something unwieldy being dropped onto a heap of sand. A dull thudding noise reverberated distantly, like the ricochet of a swaddled piece of metal. They felt the tremor go through the Hall, rattling the dishes and setting the pumpkin juice in their goblets to trembling. There was a moment of complete silence in which the teachers all stood immediately and the students froze in confusion. Then the distant sound of falling rocks clambering against stone floors was heard and everyone scrambled into panicked motion.

"The castle is collapsing!"

Draco had enough time to roll his eyes at the first year behind that ridiculous comment, and then he was hurrying toward the nearest Slytherin prefect with the rest of their house, just trying not to get trampled in the chaos.

"SILENCE," Dumbledore's voice boomed over the melee, and all motion ceased once more. "Now, prefects will lead their houses in an orderly fashion to their common rooms, where the names of all students will be checked against the house master lists-prefects, you are in charge of this as well, as I will be needing your heads of house for a little while. The castle is perfectly safe, I assure you. One of our lovely house elves has just informed me that a portion of the corridor in the East side of the third floor has collapsed, however, the stabilizing wards and various other embedded structural spells installed by the founders themselves kicked in immediately, and so no other parts of the castle are under any architectural stress at this time."

The students seemed to digest this for a moment, and the prefects seized upon the momentary calm to begin subdividing their houses into more manageable groups and herding them more carefully out of the Great Hall, whose doors seemed to have been widened considerably by someone with a good deal of practical forethought. Probably Snape, Draco thought.

He felt a tug on his elbow and turned his head to see Pansy clinging gently but unmistakably to his right arm.

"All right there, Pans?"

She nodded, but her lips were clamped together in a tight line. Draco saw Blaise, Millicent, and Theo walking ahead of them, and turned his head to tell Rigel to take Pansy's other hand. The girl was obviously frightened, and Rigel seemed to have a soothing quality to his presence that often came in handy.

Except... Rigel wasn't behind them. Draco craned his head, but Rigel wasn't anywhere to be seen in the immediate vicinity. Draco

was tempted to sigh with resignation but he was too busy being worried about his idiotic friend. Now the question was, did he tell Pansy? It would worry her more to know, but it would be bad form as her friend to keep it from her. Besides, she would notice any moment now.

"Pans," Draco said, bending down to her ear so she could hear him, "Don't be alarmed, but I can't find Rigel. Can you see him?"

Pansy stiffened and began looking around immediately, but carefully, suppressing her panic like a true pureblooded lady ought.

"Nothing," Pansy said tightly, "He does not appear to be in the Great Hall."

"How did he get out ahead of us?" Draco asked aloud.

"More importantly, where is he going?" Pansy said, frowning, "If he was headed to the common room, he would have taken us with him. You know how protective he can be sometimes. The fact that he went without us..."

Draco nearly groaned as he caught on, "Means he's going somewhere more dangerous than where he thinks we'll be going. Idiot."

"*Thinks* we're going?" Pansy asked, unspoken question obvious from the way she tilted her eyes toward him.

"Well of course," Draco said with a faint smile that had absolutely no humor in it, "We're not going to let him run off alone, are we?"

Pansy smiled back just as faintly, "No, we aren't."

They had reached the doors by that point, so Draco pulled the edges of his robes over his silver and green tie, motioning for Pansy to do the same, and they slipped away from the Slytherins and into the crowd of Hufflepuffs. They would be going down to the basements,

but then they'd go east if Draco was right about where their common room was, and from there they'd just have to slip into one of the alcoves until everyone had passed. From there, they could take the East stairs and wind up exactly where Rigel was most likely to be right now.

Draco swore that this time when they found their wayward friend, he would have a lot of explaining to do before they were satisfied.

[Rigel's POV]:

Rigel had been quite enjoying the Headmaster's speech, intermingled as it was by the odd turn of phrase and delivered with Dumbledore's usual sense of airy aplomb. It was sort of graceful, the way none of his statements seemed to be apropos of anything else he talked about. He must practice very hard to be so perfectly random, or else his mind was governed by a very strict algorithm of chance, which made sure it only presented things in a random order.

Draco's eyes were glazed in a way that belied his apparent attention to the Headmaster's words, and Pansy had given up the pretense of listening after the first few minutes, seeming content to glance around at the other Slytherins, taking in their expressions and postures and probably drawing any number of political and social conclusions that would have gone right over Rigel's head.

All in all, it was a relaxing way to spend an evening, until, of course, *it* happened. Rigel hadn't known until that moment what *it* would be, but as soon as the explosion went off she knew. There was something about Halloween that had always made her uneasy. Perhaps because on her ninth Halloween, she had found her beloved copy of Snape's treatise on the treatment of undiluted venoms in antidote preparation stuffed beneath an uneven table leg in her father's study. Then there was the Halloween Archie and she had accidentally set fire to the curtains in Sirius' living room and had subsequently been sent to bed without candy by their parents. While those incidences weren't quite on the level of last year's Halloween-

few things in her admittedly complicated life measured up to that disaster-every year without fail something bad happened to or around Rigel on that date, so it wasn't even really a surprise to her that one of the school's corridors chose this day to get blown up.

She stood with the rest of their house and began shuffling toward the doors, making sure to keep Draco and Pansy in sight ahead of her. She had been sitting on the side of the table closest to the Gryffindors' table, and she happened to catch sight of the Weasley twins as she passed. They were walking slower than those around them, creating a sort of obstacle that people were swerving around. Their brother Ron was walking with them, and he looked quite upset about something.

Curious, Rigel altered her course a bit so that she would come up just behind them, then slowed her pace to listen in.

"-won't thank us for butting in again," George was saying.

"I know, but what if she's really-" Ron's voice was loud and agitated, but she still couldn't catch every word over the tumult around them, "-have to know."

Fred and George exchanged a look, but nodded in the end. "Better not tell Perce," Fred suggested.

"Not that he won't realize as soon as-gone," George put in.

"But he'll be too busy-" Fred's voice cut out as a couple of particularly loud Gryffindor girls walked quickly by them, "-by the time he realizes."

Rigel moved closer, until she could hear every word.

"Right," George said, "I'd say we need a distraction, but everyone's distracted enough."

"We'll break away when we get to the stairs," Fred said, "Hide behind that tapestry with the goats till they've gone."

"What if she's not there?" Ron asked worriedly.

"Then we hightail it back to the dorms before the teachers catch us," George shrugged, "I'm still not convinced this is a good idea. Either Ginny was near the explosion, and was in danger, which we can't do anything about now that it's passed, or else she wasn't, which means she's safe somewhere else, and we're only going to get caught by the teachers who are *all going to the third floor right now*."

"That's a fair point," Fred said carefully, "And whatever set off the explosion could be anything. Might be dangerous, which is probably why they're sending us back to the common room in the first place."

"I don't care," Ron said, "I can't just sit around in the common room wondering if she's okay. One way or another, I want to know now."

George sighed but nodded, and Fred just shrugged, apparently not caring enough to argue about it. The three brothers kept moving forward, but slowly, hanging back until most of their housemates had passed through the doors ahead of them. Standing behind them, Rigel couldn't see Pansy or Draco anymore, but she wasn't worried. They'd get to the common room safely.

Rigel put her hand in her pocket unobtrusively and pulled out the innocent square of folded parchment that held the Marauder's Map. She whispered the password under her breath and when the Map began to bleed onto the page, she quickly muttered Ginny Weasley's name to it. It zoomed in to show a tiny dot labeled 'Ginerva Weasley' walking along the seventh floor corridor toward the Fat Lady's portrait.

Satisfied that Ginny Weasley was safe, Rigel tucked the Map away and debated for a brief moment about whether to involve herself further. Then she thought that if she had a sister, she'd want to know all she could if said sister might possibly be in danger. Rigel caught

up to the Weasley brothers, tapping George on the shoulder to catch their attention.

"Rigel?" George gazed distractedly at her, "What's up?"

"Don't go to the third floor," Rigel said without preamble.

George grimaced, "Heard that, did you? Well, I can't let these two idiots go by themselves."

"Don't any of you go," Rigel said seriously, "Ginny's not there, so you'll only get into trouble at best and danger at worst."

"How do you know Ginny's not there?" Ron demanded.

"I can't tell you," Rigel said bluntly, "But I promise you she'll be in the common room when you get up there. I know that's not comforting, but it's the truth. Do you trust me?"

"With most things, yeah," Ron said, frowning, "With my little sister's safety? Not really. No offence."

"None taken," Rigel said, "But I really don't want you guys in danger for no reason. Look, how about I check it out instead? I promise if Ginny's there I'll come straight up to get you, but you guys should go back to the Gryffindor common room."

"That doesn't make a lot of sense," George objected, "Why should it be more okay for you to do it rather than us? She's our sister."

"But one person is less likely to get caught," Rigel said, "And it'll be easier for me to get there and then to the dungeons than it will be for you guys to make it all the way to Gryffindor tower before a prefect notices you're missing."

Fred opened his mouth to argue, but shut it again and instead started patting down his pockets, "Where is...? Must have left it. George, give me yours."

He reached into his brother's robe pockets and rummaged around until George rolled his eyes and fished something out of his back pants pocket, "Here, this is what you wanted, right? Good idea."

Fred snatched the small leather journal from George's hand and presented it to Rigel, "When you figure out if Ginny is there, use this to tell us. This journal has a match, which is upstairs in our dorm room. Just write something in it, and we'll get the message in the other one."

Rigel took the journal and tucked it away, "Okay. Now go, before Percy wonders why you guys are lagging behind."

The three redheads nodded and set off after the group of Gryffindors, who had just begun climbing the Main Stair. Rigel herself turned and followed the Slytherin contingent down toward the dungeons. She took out the Map again and checked it. Sure enough, Ginny Weasley was in the Gryffindor common room, her tiny dot seated on a miniscule couch in front of a little ink fireplace. Rigel would wait a few minutes, then check again to make sure she hadn't moved, before writing to assure the Weasley's that their sister wasn't near the collapsed corridor.

Curious about how the Map would reflect the damage done to the castle, Rigel zoomed back out and glanced over the third floor corridor. It looked just as it always did, which she guessed made sense if the Map was only spelled to update the locations of people in real time, not, but it was flooded with the names of teachers and staff members. At a glance, Rigel recognized Snape, Filch, Dumbledore, McGonagall, and various other professors' dots. More seemed to be coming, too, she noticed. A couple dots were even now moving toward the corridor up the East... stairs... oh, no. Rigel read the labels on the dots and nearly groaned aloud.

What in Merlin's name were Pansy and Draco doing heading for the collapsed portion of the third floor? She could think of no logical reason for them to be going there now. Neither were overly curious when it came to possible danger, and in fact both were rather big

sticklers for the rules most of the time. They'd been raised to respect authority, after all, at least when it didn't directly go against their personal goals.

Whatever they were doing, Rigel wasn't about to just pretend she hadn't noticed. She was already at the end of the group of Slytherin students, so it was no trouble to slip away as they passed the basement and double back to come up behind her friends. They had stopped moving and were instead poised on the stairs just below the landing that joined with the third floor, probably peaking around the corner to try and discern what was going on.

A few minutes later, Rigel had reached the East stairs. She took a moment to sweep the Map once more and write quickly in the little leather notebook to assure the Weasley's that Ginny wasn't in the vicinity of the explosion. It was curious to watch the ink disappear as soon as it dried, leaving a blank notebook once more, but Rigel would think about the spells behind such a thing later. She folded up the Map again and started up the winding stairs. Just as she started to notice a large amount of dust in the air-probably from broken pieces of stone-she heard a whisper echoing down the quiet stairwell.

"-don't see him."

"Are you sure he's-"

"Where else would he be?"

Rigel snuck up behind her two blonde friends, who were trying to use Pansy's compact mirror to peer around the corner to the third floor.

"It's just a bunch of rubble," Draco was whispering irritably, "Wait, is that? No, it's someone else. A Gryffindor? Why would one of them have been...?"

Rigel frowned. A Gryffindor? It couldn't be Ginny, but... she pulled out the Map and checked it one last time, more carefully. Ginny's

name wasn't anywhere in the corridor, but another name, one Rigel should have recognized immediately, was.

Neville Longbottom.

His dot was in the center of several other dots, notably Albus Dumbledore and Poppy Pomfrey. The other dots all wavered slightly on the parchment as their owners shifted naturally, but Neville's dot didn't move at all.

Rigel shoved the Map into her pocket and hurried forward. Draco and Pansy turned around at the sound of her soft footsteps hurrying up the stairs and the looks of surprised confusion on their faces would have been funny if Rigel wasn't so worried about Neville.

"Rigel, what-?"

"How did you get behind us?"

Rigel motioned for them to be quiet and inched around the corner of the wall separating the stairs from the rest of the corridor. The third floor was a complete mess. Normally, the third floor consisted of three parallel corridors connected by various smaller hallways and passages, and then connected on either end by the East and West staircases. The Main stair went up through the middle corridor, where the Charms classroom was located. The three of them were standing just behind where the South-most corridor met the East stairs, and from what Rigel could see, the wall that had once separated the South corridor from the middle corridor was now a lot less like a wall and a lot more like a window looking from one of the South corridor's storage rooms into the back of the middle corridor's Trophy Room.

Rocks, large and small, littered the floor. All the dust in the air made it hard to see anything, but the teachers seemed to be crowding around something. It was a person, small enough to be a student, who seemed to be passed out on the floor. Rigel could see a hand and a couple of trouser-clad legs from in between the professors'

feet, so it definitely wasn't a girl, and as she caught a glimpse of red and gold around the student's neck, she couldn't deny the truth. It was Neville-it had to be. The Map was, as she'd been told so many times, never wrong.

She backed away slowly, aware that there was nothing she could do for her friend that more qualified people weren't already doing. Still, it felt wrong to just leave him there, though she knew they should get back to the common room. The school had been breached by something malevolent, and it would be just plain stupid to avoid the safety of the common room any longer.

Rigel turned and tugged on Pansy and Draco's sleeves until they started following her quietly back down the stairs. When they were safely to the dungeons, her friends turned to her.

"What did you see, Rigel?"

She ignored Pansy's question, instead staring at the two blondes very seriously, "What were you two doing? You should have been safe in the common room, not-" Rigel sighed and rubbed her eyes, "You could have been in danger. Something destructive enough to blow a hole in a castle this fortified doesn't just disappear once it's had its fun."

"Us?" Draco scowled, "What were you doing? We only went to find you."

Rigel blinked, "I only went to find you two."

Pansy frowned, "Then... we all were just worried about one another? Oh. We thought..."

"We thought you'd run off into trouble again," Draco said bluntly.

Rigel sighed, "Of course I didn't. Why would I? The explosion had nothing to do with me. I just hung back to talk to the Weasley's about

something before heading back, until I realized you guys weren't heading to the common room with everyone else, that is."

"How did you know?" Pansy said, cocking her head to the side, "You got there just after we did, so you wouldn't have had time to go all the way to check the common room first. Even if you did, the prefects wouldn't have let you out again."

Rigel shrugged, "I just did."

"You can't just-" Draco started, but Rigel cut across him tiredly.

"Look, let's get back to the common room first, then argue about who knew what and how."

Pansy agreed, and Draco, outvoted, bit back his exasperation in favor of setting off toward the Slytherin common room at a brisk pace.

Soon enough, they were edging through the false wall. Their stealth was apparently unappreciated, as Theo almost immediately called out, "There they are! Thank Merlin. We were so worried!"

Selwyn, who was standing close to the common room door, scowled down at them before checking their names off of a long piece of parchment she held in her hands, "Finally. You're lucky I haven't sent the Baron after Snape yet. I only waited because I know Professor Snape is busy at the moment."

"Thank you, Alice," Pansy said, inclining her head graciously.

Selwyn rolled heavily kohl-rimmed eyes, "Sure, Pansy. Go see Rosier, would you? He's doing that pacing thing he does when he worries."

Pansy headed off to sooth her friend's concerns for her safety, and Draco and Rigel stepped over to where the other second years were huddled by one of the fireplaces.

"Where've you three been?" Millicent asked curiously.

"Long story," Draco said, "Bit of a mix up on all our parts, actually. So, what did you see, Rigel?"

Rigel shifted uncomfortably as several other sets of curious eyes turned toward her, "You were there, too. What did you see?"

"A load of dust," Draco said evenly, "And maybe... well, you apparently saw something that made you back out pretty quick."

"Yeah," Rigel said flatly, "Snape. I decided we should leave before he began testing for stray magical signatures and sensed up lurking nearby." Draco gave her an unimpressed look, so she reluctantly added, "There was a student on the ground. I know you saw him, too."

"A Gryffindor," Draco said, nodding.

"A Gryffindor blew up the corridor?" Theo blurted, "But the Weasley Twins were at the feast."

Draco shook his head grimly, "Looked more like the poor sod got caught in the blast. He wasn't moving."

The other second years exchanged solemn looks at that.

"Who do you think...?" Millicent trailed off, looking uncomfortable.

"Neville Longbottom," Rigel said quietly.

They absorbed this for a moment.

"Yeah, he definitely wouldn't have blown up part of the school," Theo said thoughtfully, "I wonder what did, though."

Speculation began, but none of the posited theories seemed very likely. Even Peeves wouldn't have gone so far as to destabilize the infrastructure, much less injure a student.

Some time later, as they were all still quietly milling about the common room, too wound up to turn in, Snape showed up. He came into the common room looking drawn and tense. Selwyn presented him with the list, which he glanced over briefly.

"All accounted for?"

"Yes, sir," Selwyn said evenly.

"Good," Snape said, his mouth pressing into a thin line, "Unfortunately not all the Houses were so lucky this night." He raised his voice so everyone could hear, although most of the Slytherins had already gone quiet with respect and anticipation when he arrived, "As you know, tonight a portion of the third floor corridor collapsed. At this point, it seems to be the work of a rather clumsy, and thoroughly overpowered, bombardment hex. The perpetrator has not yet been identified. A second-year Gryffindor was found injured in the corridor, but his wand was found clean of any destructive spells, so we believe him to be a victim of the crime."

He gazed around at them all and said, a bit more quietly, "I'm sure I do not have to tell any of you how serious a situation this is. Until the culprit for these actions is identified, all of you are to keep to the main corridors when possible. Don't wander alone. Don't turn a blind eye to anything remotely suspicious-contact a prefect, professor, ghost, or even house elf the moment you hear or see anything out of the ordinary. New wards will be erected around the common rooms at night, requiring an additional password. Your prefects will be around to appraise you of increased security measures shortly."

With that, Professor Snape left again, and after Selwyn and the other prefects had explained everything, the students slowly began trickling away to bed.

Rigel silently despaired as she lay atop her covers. Though Snape had said Neville was injured, not killed, she feared for her friend. Students being found unconscious in hallways sounded all too like the sleeping sickness. Snape had also said that he was found

injured *at* the scene of the explosion, not that the explosion had caused his injuries. She hadn't seen any blood on the floor, as she'd expect if he'd been hit hard enough by rubble to be knocked out. What, then, had made her friend so still? Tossing and turning, it was a long couple of hours until she finally slept.

Why can't Halloween ever be normal?

Hermione's POV:

Halloween, Hermione thought to herself as she gazed over the festively decorated Mess Hall where the Halloween feast was taking place, was a very nonsensical holiday. It was only made more so when it was witches and wizards who were celebrating it.

She could understand if they had a ceremony honoring Samhain, as the wizarding community apparently had a lot of pagan roots, but after finding out last year that all the things she'd ever dressed up as for Halloween-witches, vampires, werewolves, ghosts-were in fact very much real, celebrating Halloween seemed completely ridiculous.

Then again, she mused as she watched an upperclassman in the Charms tract walk by with a talking pumpkin tucked under his arm, chatting away at it, in her experience a bit of ridiculousness never phased the average witch or wizard.

Shaking her head, Hermione claimed her seat at the Healer's table and waited for her friend Harry to arrive. Harry was another sort of ridiculousness altogether. Hermione could still remember the first time they'd met.

She had just said goodbye to her parents and boarded the plane that would take her to the American Institute of Magic. She was feeling a little depressed, because originally she had wanted to attend the English school Hogwarts, until she found out that the school only accepted those of wizarding ancestry. Still, she was excited to be

going off to a new place, and to learn about magic, of all things, in an actual school with a magical curriculum and everything.

She was also extremely nervous. At primary school, she hadn't been at all popular, and most of her classmates had only been remotely nice to her when they wanted help with their homework-as if they thought she wouldn't notice. She wanted things to be different in America, but she wasn't sure how to make them different without either dumbing herself down to fit in or else sucking up to the other students until they liked her. Since she absolutely refused to sink so low as to entertain either option for long, she was quite at a loss as to how to go about making friends.

It was at that moment, after she had primly stored her carry-on bag with *A History of American Magic* inside of it under her seat, that a boy about her age swept into the seat next to her like a whirlwind and turned toward her with a smile that should have come with a high-voltage label, it was so bright.

"Hi! I'm Harry Potter! I guess we're seatmates, are you a first-year too? Isn't this the biggest plane you've ever seen? Well, it's the only plane I've ever seen, but I saw a picture of one once and it wasn't nearly so big!" the boy began babbling happily to her about all the cool things he'd apparently seen in the airport that morning, including a set of moving stairs, which she identified for him as an escalator, and something he described as 'a portrait that couldn't talk back but never looped like a photo' which she worked out to mean the television screens that played the news around the airport.

At some point he took a breath, and she politely interjected, "I'm Hermione Granger. Yes, I'm a first-year, and why haven't you ever seen a plane before?"

"Oh," the boy, Harry, said, cocking his head to the side like a puppy and blinking silvery-grey eyes at her, "My parents are wizards, so I don't see much of the muggle world."

Hermione frowned, "Then why are you going to AIM? Don't you want to go to Hogwarts?"

Harry waved a dismissive hand, "I'm half-blood technically, so I can't, but I wouldn't want to anyway. Hogwarts is where the stuffy old families send their kids, and the magic they learn there is as old and dusty as their way of thinking. They don't even have a Healer's program! Not to mention Alchemy or Druidry or any of the interesting specializations in magic. If I went there I'd have to go to extra schooling after I graduated just to be qualified for anything, and of course none of the universities in Britain are very accredited, so I'd have to get an apprenticeship to learn anything really advanced, and those take ages to finish and-"

Hermione just sat there and listened as Harry Potter went on and on about how much better AIM was than Hogwarts and the other European schools. At first she just couldn't believe how hyper and talkative the boy was, but as she listened she gradually relaxed and even started to feel a bit relieved that she was going to AIM after all. Imagine seven years of butting up against all those oppressive pureblood customs and stifled ways of learning and thinking. According to Harry, all the homework and tests were based around essays-the oldest form of learning in the book, and seriously outdated in Hermione's opinion. Imagine, seven years without a single creative project or experiment for an assignment!

Eventually, Harry began to wind down, and that was when Hermione started wishing he'd kept babbling a bit longer. Having exhausted everything he wanted to talk about, Harry began asking question after question about Hermione and where she was from and what her parents did and so on. He had no idea what a dentist was, and didn't seem terribly enthused by her description, but eventually equated it with a very specialized Healer and thought they must be 'wicked cool.'

"So what tract are you going to choose?" Harry asked, "I'm going to be in Healing, in case you couldn't guess, because I want to know

everything about Healing there is to know-oh, I might go into Potions eventually, though. I like them, too."

Hermione reflected that Harry Potter seemed like a very unfocused sort of person, though she would come to revise that opinion of him as she got to know him over the next year.

"I was thinking of going into Healing as well," Hermione said, "I thought about Alchemy, but I'm not sure my parents would really understand that, and Healing is both universally understandable and universally valued, so they can still be proud of me even if they don't relate completely."

"That's great!" Harry said, with more excitement than Hermione thought the response warranted, "That means we'll have all of our classes together, and be in the same dorms and everything. Want to study together? Want to be friends?"

She blinked in confusion for a second, then stared when her mind digested his strung-together way of talking. He wanted to be friends? That was... easy. Almost too easy.

"Why?" she asked, a bit suspiciously. Perhaps he had seen the book in her bag, assumed her to be a nerd, and was hoping for guaranteed help with his assignments in return for being nice to her.

Harry just blinked at her, still smiling that too-bright-to-be-natural smile, and said, "Why not?"

Having nothing to say to that, Hermione just smiled back, a bit shyly. Time to take a chance, she thought. Even if he turned out to have a hidden agenda, she wouldn't know unless she tried, "Okay, friends, then. So, you grew up in a wizarding home? What was it like?"

From there the conversation flowed quickly. They covered a huge range of topics, comparing the difference between the muggle and wizarding worlds across categories like music, entertainment, politics, family life, social engagements, education, work, and more.

Hermione learned more from Harry Potter about the wizarding world in that plane ride-which was somehow only six hours, though logically she knew that a flight across the Atlantic should take much longer-than she had from all the vague, generally worded books she'd bought after getting her letter.

By the time they reached AIM and separated into groups based on whether they had a tract in mind or were undecided, Harry's cheerful and excitable personality had really grown on her. Even when they got off the plane and Harry had a chance to meet their classmates, many of whom were obviously richer or cooler than she was, Harry didn't even seem to notice. All of his attention was on Hermione, and she couldn't help but like how things had turned out.

Two days later, when he made them both late for their first general charms lesson by somehow getting his left shoe stuck to the ceiling with industrial strength bubble-gum, Hermione had second thoughts about her burgeoning friendship with the quirky would-be Healer, but then he somehow weaseled an extra fruit tart from the service elves who manned the buffet-style dinner line, and he gave it to *her* . And afterwards he didn't ask for help on the extra worksheet they had to do for being late, and when she tentatively offered her help he just smiled and said he understood it fine, and had in fact finished it in class while she'd been taking notes.

Shortly after that, Harry Potter and Hermione Granger became nearly synonymous. They were always together, studying or enacting one of Harry's elaborate schemes, and by the time Christmas break rolled around, Harry was easily the best friend she'd ever had.

Now it was over a year since they'd met, and Hermione was so used to Harry's antics that she didn't even blink when he collapsed, sighing bonelessly, at the table next to her, and began picking bits of bat-shaped confetti out of his mashed potatoes.

"Happy Halloween," she said mildly.

Harry wrinkled his pert nose and rolled his eyes, "Awful holiday."

Hermione turned surprised eyes to her friend, "Free candy, crazy decorations and costumes, two extra desserts apiece... I sort of thought this would be right up your alley."

Harry poked at his mashed potatoes a bit sullenly, "Something bad always happens on Halloween. It's, like, a curse."

Hermione raised her eyebrows. It wasn't that she didn't believe in curses (she'd read about quite a few and even knew the theory behind a couple now), but her friend was prone to melodramatization, "You weren't depressed last year on Halloween, and I don't remember anything bad happening then."

Harry shrugged, "I thought I was well away from it here. It doesn't always happen to me, anyway. Most of the time, it's my cousin Archie that gets the brunt of the curse. Remember last year when I got that letter from home that said my cousin had been injured somehow at Hogwarts? His injury happened on Halloween night. Turns out someone tried to kill him by putting corrosive poison in his drink."

Hermione gasped, "That's awful! How can that sort of thing happen in a school? He was okay, right?"

Harry shrugged, "Yeah, someone stopped him drinking it at the last second. The point is that nothing bad has happened to me so far today, which means something awful is probably happening to Archie right now."

"Well," Hermione said tentatively, "There's no use worrying if you can't do anything, right?"

Harry sighed, "I guess. I'm just worried, because even if something bad does happen to him, he won't say anything and it will be weeks until the school informs his dad who tells my parents who write about it to me."

Hermione kept silent. She had heard a lot about Harry's cousin Archie, who went by Rigel some of the time, and from what Harry had said, Arcturus Black seemed to be a singularly strange individual, though apparently he was quite brilliant. Then again, Harry always said Hermione was brilliant, too, and she didn't consider herself a real genius or anything. She just worked hard and applied herself diligently.

"Distract me, Mione," Harry said morosely, "Please?"

"With what?" Hermione asked wryly.

"I don't know," Harry said with a sigh, "Perhaps your stunning good looks and natural charm? You could flirt with me."

Hermione rolled her eyes, "We're too young for flirting, Harry."

"Are we?" Harry didn't seem terribly concerned, "My uncle Sirius says you're never too young for flirting."

Hermione privately thought his uncle didn't seem like the sort of adult he should be taking advice from, but she knew better than to say anything against 'Uncle Sirius.' Harry practically worshiped the ground his uncle walked on, and seemed to be even closer to the man than he was to his own parents. He certainly mentioned him more often, though he hardly wrote to him at all, curiously enough.

"Maybe boys can start flirting at twelve, but I'm pretty sure respectable girls don't start until at least fourteen," Hermione said with amusement. At first all the vaguely flirtatious words and borderline propositions Harry said to her had flustered and disconcerted her. She wasn't at all used to such flowery and exaggerated banter, and had in the beginning taken it rather badly. Soon it became clear that he wasn't teasing her, and he certainly wasn't seriously coming on to her. Harry just talked that way sometimes, as though it was completely natural. She supposed it had something to do with his exuberant and open-hearted nature

combined with the influence of his uncle. It made him terrible ingénue, but in an artless sort of way.

"What's so great about being respectable?" Harry said, grinning a bit, "Walk on the wild side, Mione."

"Why don't you go ahead and let me know how it is?" Hermione said primly, "I like this side of sensibility well enough."

"Someday I'll corrupt you," Harry said teasingly, "And then-prankers of the world beware! I bet you'd out-prank me any day if you put that brilliant mind of yours to it."

"Not if I corrupt you first," Hermione said, "Have you finished your paper on Mind Healing yet?"

"It's not due for another week," Harry pointed out.

"Have you finished it?"

"Yes," Harry pouted, "I guess your evil plan is working better than mine is. Maybe it's time for another grand adventure."

"No theft this time," Hermione requested, knowing better than to try and refuse outright. He would only use his puppy-eyes on her and then she'd end up agreeing to anything.

"What about arson?" Harry asked cheerfully.

As much as she was glad he wasn't depressed anymore..."No."

"Larceny?"

"That *is* theft," Hermione rolled her eyes, "Nice try, though."

"So, no misappropriating of property and no blowing things up?" Harry shook his head with mock forlornness, which suited him much better than actual forlornness, "What's an adolescent boy to do?"

"You could cry," Hermione suggested blithely, "Just try to avoid getting it in my pumpkin juice."

Harry laughed at that, "This is why you're such a perfect friend for me, Mione. The only other person in the world who deals with my antics so well is my cousin, and he's had a decade of practice."

Hermione felt her ears grow warm beneath her hair. She knew exactly what high praise that was, having heard Harry spout positively poetic about how awesome his cousin was countless times in the last year. No matter how strange or outright suspicious Harry got sometimes, when he said things like that she couldn't help but want to ignore all the inconsistencies a little longer. His friendship, she was realizing, was more important than figuring out his secrets. She would wait patiently until her friendship meant more to Harry than his secrets did, too.

[AbAbAb]

[end of chapter six].

A/N: Sooo, there it is. Happy (belated) Halloween. Sorry it's not longer, and don't worry if some of the things in here seem random... they're not ^^ . Much love. -Violet.

Chapter 7

A/N: Finally a real new chapter! Sorry, really sorry, about the wait. I like a lot of things about this one, though some other things I'm not sure about. Finals are this week for me, but after that my goal is to post twice more before the 25th of December. Wish me luck! ^^ Anyway, thank you big time to anyone still reading this fic, and to anyone who gives it a chance and reads this far! I owe you guys a lot, especially the ones who spur my stagnant butt into getting these chapters out. A special thanks to all who review-I don't deserve you, but I am extremely grateful for the feedback. I hope you can see where I've tried to incorporate in suggestions and answer your questions in the story as I go, and if you can't see it yet then I hope it makes sense before the end. I also hope you all like this one, though of course only the parts not from HP or SOTL are mine.

The Serpentine Subterfuge:

Chapter 7:

"I want to grow my hair out," Pansy said.

It was November second, and the events of Halloween were still hanging like a specter over everything in the castle. The debris in the third floor had been cleared away quick enough, and the hallway now bore no signs of volatile activity, but the real horror of the night hadn't been realized until the following morning, when their Heads of House had informed the students that Neville Longbottom, found at the scene of the attack, had been petrified.

They were assured that he was not dead or dying, and that Professors Sprout and Snape were working together on a restorative, but the fact remained that the mousy Gryffindor would not be returning to classes any time soon.

It was like the sickness all over again, except this time it didn't take months for the castle to slowly fall into a state of despair. Only hours after Neville's fate was common knowledge, the inhabitants of Hogwarts were already knee-deep in the quagmire of fear and helplessness, whose weight they had become so accustomed to the previous spring.

To escape the all-too-familiar flavor of depression in the castle air, Draco, Pansy, and Rigel had headed out to the lake after classes. Now they were bundled against the cold November wind, gazing out over the still water and talking about as many inane things as possible to keep their minds off of Halloween.

"What for?" Draco asked mildly, flicking his eyes over Pansy's layered bob, "It looks fine like it is."

"Although it would be easier to tell the two of you apart if she did," Rigel commented teasingly.

"Take that back!" Draco said, scowling, "I do not look like a girl."

Rigel feigned surprise, "Who says that's what I meant?"

"It better have been what you meant," Pansy sniffed, "As the alternative is the implication that I look like a *boy*."

Rigel winced, "Sorry, Draco, I guess you're just effeminate."

Draco huffed, "Like you can talk. Your little vegetarian frame is so tiny a pixie could knock you over just by flapping its wings."

Rigel privately thought Draco had a rather annoying tendency toward hyperbole. Her morning exercises over the past few months had been slowly paying off, if she did say so herself. She could now run twice around the lake (though barely) each morning, and the number of sit-ups and push-ups she could do each day had increased twofold as well. She had also, as an extra challenge to herself and to give her something to do when she had a moment of down time,

taken to carrying the balled weights around in her pockets. It built up her stamina over time, while also giving her something to squeeze when she was bored or even frustrated with something.

All in all, she was above the average health and fitness level for a twelve-year-old boy, so she felt Draco's teasing to be groundless, and treated it as such.

"Just because I don't look like Crabbe and Goyle, doesn't mean I'm some pale, sickly academic who gets winded by a flight of stairs," Rigel said, rolling her neck lazily in a thoroughly unconcerned sort of way, "You don't see me keeling over during Quidditch practice, do you?"

Draco gave a mock shudder, "Wouldn't blame you if you did, Rye. Flint has been especially brutal this year. If we don't beat Gryffindor next week, I don't like to think what he might do."

Pansy shook her head, "You boys are so crazy. Why do you put yourselves through that for the sake of a game?"

"Since I can think of no answer that would satisfy you, let's change the subject," Draco said, "So why do you want to grow your hair out?"

Pansy only shrugged, "You two probably wouldn't understand, but long hair is a right of passage, you could say, for women."

"Always knew femininity was a cult," Draco drawled.

Pansy shook her head, smiling, "Long hair, if it is well-kept, is a sign of maturity. It shows that you have the patience and self-possession to take care of yourself."

Rigel raised an eyebrow, "Isn't there a spell to grow out long hair? How can it be a sign of patience for witches?"

Pansy chuckled, "Oh, Rigel, those spells are absolutely taboo to any girl who takes her appearance seriously. The enhanced growth rate strips the hair of nutrients and makes it lank and brittle. There are also studies suggesting that using growth spells too often causes hair to grey faster."

Rigel tilted her head to the side, "I didn't know."

"Or care," Draco yawned, "No offense."

"None taken," Pansy said sweetly, "As long as you aren't offended when I say I couldn't care less about Quidditch."

"So, moving on from both topics," Rigel began, but before she could finish the thought a pair of hands snuck around her head from behind and covered her eyes. She froze, assessed the situation, and said, "Hello?"

"Guess who."

Rigel paused as she attempted to identify the voice by cross-referencing the general sound of it against the list of people she knew who would do something like this. She came up blank.

"I don't know," she said, "Millicent?"

The person behind her, who she was pretty sure was a girl, laughed, and used their hands to move her head back and forth in the parody of a negative shake, "Not even close. Think Gryffindor."

Rigel could count on one hand the number of Gryffindor girls she'd ever talked to, and have a couple of fingers left over.

"It's Weasley's little sister," Draco supplied, tone a bit sharp.

The hands disappeared and Rigel opened her eyes to see Ginny Weasley pouting playfully at Draco, "Oh, go and ruin it then."

"It wasn't that funny anyway," Draco said dismissively, "What do you want?"

Rigel turned expectant eyes on the young Gryff, rather curious herself at Ginny's presence.

"Fred and George sent me," Ginny said, easily, not seeming the least bit affected by Draco's cool demeanor, "They want their notebook back, and when I asked 'what notebook?' they told me you'd know what they meant."

Rigel's eyes widened, "I forgot. Yes, I have it back in my dorm room. Do they need it right now?"

Ginny shook her head, sending red hair floating about her shoulders, "Tomorrow is fine, or later tonight if you aren't busy." Ginny then turned to Pansy, who had been noticeably silent until that point, and said, rather bluntly, "You can talk to me. I know we haven't been properly introduced, but don't feel like you have to uphold propriety in the face of my blatant disregard of it. Unless you just have nothing to say, in which case, forget I said anything."

Pansy blinked slowly, then smiled politely, "It is a pleasure to meet you, Ginerva Weasley."

"Ginny," the redhead said flatly, "Please, if you've a merciful soul, call me Ginny."

"Then you must call me Pansy," the blonde girl said, smiling a bit wider, "You have beautiful hair, by the way."

Ginny made a face that was a cross between a grimace and an ironic grin, "Thanks. I've always wanted short hair like yours, but my mum makes me keep it long. Something about being sick of shorn-haired children after six boys. It's a real pain, though."

"Okay, well, you've delivered your message," Draco said, trailing off deliberately with an implied, '*so you can go now*' tacked onto the

end.

Ginny smirked, "Thank goodness, too. Now with the business out of the way I can just hang out with you guys for a few hours." At the sour look Draco wasn't quick enough to suppress, she laughed, "Keep your cloak on, Malfoy, I was kidding. See you all around. Bye, Rigel."

Rigel murmured a polite goodbye in response. When Ginny was out of earshot Draco turned to her and scowled.

"Since when are you on such good terms with the Weaslette?" Draco asked.

"We're not on that good of terms," Rigel said, ignoring the slight for no other reason than that it would take more hours in the day than she could spare to curb Draco of his automatic disdain for the Weasley family, "I've only met her a couple of times."

"Well she was awfully grabby for someone you barely know," Draco said, eyes narrowing just a tad.

Rigel shrugged, "She probably did that to annoy you more than out of genuine playfulness. The only thing I know about Ginny Weasley is that she's blunt, independent, and probably tougher than all her brothers put together."

"Headstrong chit," Draco muttered, "Gets it from the Prewett's, no doubt."

"Nothing wrong with an independent woman, is there, Draco?"

Pansy poked his shoulder, "After all, among the headstrong women I know I'd have to say Narcissa ranks number one."

"Or maybe he just has a thing against red hair," Rigel added thoughtfully, "Which would be a shame, as my Aunt Lily has red hair, and I had so hoped to introduce you to her at some point."

Draco shook his head quickly in the face of their expectant expressions, "No, no, just making an observation about the girl. So we *are* going to meet your family then, Rye?"

Rigel hesitated, "I-yes. I just haven't worked out when exactly."

"Well, work it out" Pansy said, "My father especially wants to talk to your father, I believe."

Rigel raised an eyebrow, "Is he going to threaten my father's life and limb in the event that our friendship ever turns sour?"

Pansy smiled angelically, "Probably."

"Oh, good," Rigel said, "That will be pleasant."

Pansy laughed, "Don't worry so much. Our parents know how to at least pretend to be nice to people they don't much care for, so if worst comes to worst it will be an exceedingly polite meeting."

Rigel grinned, "Yes, except you're forgetting that my dad doesn't get *more* polite when he's faced with something he doesn't like. Quite the contrary."

Draco shook his head, "Too bad. You're not getting out of this, so stop worrying about it and arrange it."

"Okay, I'll write them a letter."

The next morning, Rigel received a letter from home in her scrambled eggs.

"That was fast," Draco said, grinning.

Rigel tilted a smile back, "Yes, didn't you hear? My family is psychic, so letters are actually just a formality."

It was from Sirius, so she opened it right there and started to read, curious as to why he was sending her a letter when she'd just gotten one the week before-despite Draco's teasing, there was no way he'd gotten her letter from the previous evening yet.

Dear Squirt,

I know I just wrote, but this is different, so don't go thinking I've gone all clingy and desperate for my kid's attention, because it's just not true at all, no matter what Moony mutters under his breath.

I have some news-well, it's not really my news, but Lily said I could tell you anyway. Don't be mad at me for not telling you sooner either-I just found out myself! Harry's known for a while, of course, but she never tells us anything, and Lily and James wanted to keep it 'among the Potter's' until it was certain.

I know you're glaring at the parchment right now and demanding I stop beating around the bludger, so here it is.

Aunt Lily is having a baby.

I know, right?! James said he suspected for a while, since she used to crave ice mice when she was with little Harry, but Lily didn't want to say anything until she was sure she could carry to term. She's been showing for a couple of months now, but I honestly thought she was just getting a bit fat. PLEASE don't tell her I said that. Maybe I should destroy this letter... naw, too much work.

Anyway, they told Harry as soon as they were sure, to give her time to get used to the idea of being a big sister before everyone else found out. Apparently she was very enthusiastic and supportive in her letter, which is a rare thing in itself for your cousin, so I gather she's thrilled to have a baby sibling on the way. So that's the 'big news' around the home front. How's Hogwarts? You aren't the top of your class are you? Because if you get to that point it means you're working far too hard for someone so young and carefree.

Can't wait to see you for the Holidays. Moony sends his love, as do James and a decidedly not-fat Lily. Your Aunt is due in early March, so you probably won't get to see the birth, unless you can get special permission to leave school, but you will get to see Aunt Lily waddle around the house like a giant creampuff on a pair of duck feet.

With that amusing picture, I leave you,

Your dad,

Sirius

Rigel stared at the letter. Read parts of it again. Put it down, took a sip of water from her goblet slowly, and picked it up again. The words hadn't changed.

Her mom was having a baby. A little tiny squealing thing with big eyes and little feet and the potential to become a real human being.

She was going to be a *sister* .

Harry began to smile, a small, but genuine, curve of her lips that softened her cheekbones and relaxed her eyes. She could feel some foreign bit of warmth take root inside of her, and knew, as surely as she knew that she was really a girl, that her little sibling was going to be born with a key to her heart. She liked the idea, she thought. She might be a terrible role model, but her little brother or sister would be loved, at least, and with luck they would never know anything about their big sister that would shame them. She would keep her life as Rigel locked tightly away from the new baby. Yes, she would be the best big sister there ever was for whoever the child ended up being.

"What is it?" Draco said, a funny note to his voice. Rigel glanced up to see him staring at her peculiarly, "You look so... I don't know. Weird. Different than usual."

"Almost fond," Pansy said thoughtfully, "But more like you're anticipating something fondly... if that's even possible."

Rigel's smile widened a bit further, "I going to be a..." she paused, hesitating, "A cousin again, I guess."

Draco raised an eyebrow, "What?"

Pansy gasped suddenly, "Oh! Who's having a baby? Regulus? No, of course not-stubborn bachelor. Bellatrix? No, that would make you a third cousin, I think... is it someone on your mother's side?"

Draco's eyes widened comically, "A baby?" He sounded a bit alarmed, "That's... wow."

Rigel laughed softly, "I know. It's my honorary aunt, actually, although I am related to the Potter's somehow."

Pansy's mouth made a little 'o' shape, "The Potter's are blessed with a child, then? Oh, you must be so excited. Does Lady Potter know when to expect the baby yet?"

"March," Rigel said, glancing over the letter yet again, "No mention of boy or girl, though."

"A lot of women like to keep it a surprise," Pansy said, "Oh, Rigel, that's so wonderful! I bet your cousin is excited to be a big sister, too."

Rigel smiled again, "Yes, I daresay she is."

For the rest of the meal, she was lost in thoughts of all the things she could teach to a baby brother or sister-once they'd learned to read, of course, though she supposed they wouldn't have to be able to read labels if she just taught them what the different ingredients looked and smelled like... Rigel caught herself smiling again when Draco gave her another strange look and quickly schooled her face into a more appropriately thoughtful one. She shouldn't look that excited; after all, *Rigel* wasn't the one getting a sibling.

After breakfast she headed off toward Gryffindor territory to finally give the twins their notebook back. She was just about to take the secret stairway from the third floor when she spotted Ron walking up the corridor from the other side. Judging by the frown on his face and the red-marked essays he held in his hands, he'd probably just come from Flitwick's office. She vaguely recalled Ron having trouble with Charms class as far back as their first week of the class. Then again, she couldn't talk, considering her own poor performance during that time.

"Hi, Ron," Rigel said, drawing the boy's attention from his parchment.

"Oh, hey, Rigel," Ron said, rolling the essays up and tucking them away, "What's up?"

Rigel fished the worn leather notebook from her pocket and held it out, "Would you mind returning this to your brothers for me?"

"Yeah, sure-wait." Ron peered at the notebook with a look of sudden apprehension, "Is that what I think it is?"

Rigel thought his phrasing was a bit dramatic, since he'd been there when his brothers had given it to her, "Yes, it's George's notebook. The one he leant to me on Halloween."

Ron shook his head quickly, "Sorry, Rigel, no can do."

Rigel frowned, "Are you not going back to the tower?"

"No, I am," Ron said, "I'll walk you up, even, but no way in Wizardom am I touching that thing."

Rigel looked from the innocuous notebook to Ron and back, "I haven't cursed it, you know."

Ron laughed a bit humorlessly, "I'm sure *you* haven't. You don't know how vindictive those two can get with their things. Especially those notebooks. Not even Mum will touch them after what one of them did

to Bill-and he's a curse breaker! We thought if anyone could handle the things..." Ron shuddered, "Sorry, but no thanks."

Rigel thought Ron must have a good reason to be afraid-no one could fake that kind of horror-but felt the need to point out, "Even if it was jinxed, they must have deactivated it before giving it to me-otherwise I couldn't handle it, could I?"

Ron shook his head determinedly, "For all I know it's specifically warded against family members. In fact, that would make sense, considering no one else would be dumb enough to try and steal from the twins. You keep it. George wouldn't want you trusting it to anyone else, anyway."

Rigel raised an eyebrow, "There seems to be a discrepancy between what you think this notebook is and what it actually is. Do you think it contains some twin-coded secret documents or the details of all their pranks? It's just a message-sending notebook, and as far as I can tell, the message disappears as soon as you write it. Besides, they handed it over to me without batting an eye on Halloween, so they must not be too worried about what's in it. I mean, how important is a notebook full of-"

"Don't tell me!"

"-empty pages..." Rigel raised an eyebrow as Ron cringed.

"No more, I don't want to hear what's in there, even if it looks like empty pages to you. Wouldn't put it past the twins to oblige me..."

Rigel wisely refrained from smiling with amusement. Either the twins were much crueler to their family than Rigel thought, or they had done an extremely thorough job of psychologically conditioning their younger brother to fear their ire like one might fear the wrath of a vengeful god. Either way, maybe she should return the notebook herself.

"Okay, I'll hold onto it until we get to the common room," Rigel said, "Shall we?"

They trekked up to the Griffin's Nest, making casual conversation about classes and whether Neville's condition had changed at all. On their way past the sixth landing, they saw Filch tacking up posters with a moving picture of his cat on them and the word MISSING in large letters across the bottom.

Ron snorted darkly once they were out of the caretaker's earshot, "As if we don't bloody well know what she looks like. Evil thing."

They reached the tower soon after, and Rigel politely hung back so that Ron could whisper the password.

"Fred! George! You in here?" Ron called as they entered.

Rigel glanced around but didn't see the twins anywhere. A girl Rigel thought she recognized from the Gryffindor Quidditch team stood from one of the armchairs by the fire and said, "Oi! Weasley! Over here."

Ron, apparently used to being shouted at by his last name, obediently trotted over toward the fireplace, Rigel trailing more slowly behind him.

"Hi, Angelina," Ron said, "Seen my brothers around?"

"Yeah, they're still upstairs," Angelina said, "Haven't left their dorm room all morning. If I were you, I'd leave well enough alone-no telling what they've been up to, but you sure as shoot don't want to be the first to find out."

Ron grimaced, "No kidding. Thanks for the warning."

"Anytime, kid," Angelina said, shrugging, "Merlin love those two, but they should come with a proper label."

"And a pair of cow bells for good measure," Ron muttered in agreement.

Rigel shifted somewhat awkwardly, "Well, could you give them this back for me?" she asked Angelina, holding out the notebook once more, "You're teammates with them, right?"

Angelina took one look at the innocent leather notebook and shivered before making an old folk-sign for warding off evil across her chest. Rigel couldn't tell if she was joking or not.

"No way, no how," the older girl said firmly, her dark hair whipping about as she shook her head quickly, "Sorry, kid. I don't do suicide missions."

Rigel wanted to sigh. Why were Gryffindors so dramatic? "Never mind, then. Which dorm room is theirs?"

"Listen, you really don't want to do this," Angelina said, looking concerned, "Really, it would be best to wait until another time."

"Their sister said they wanted it today," Rigel said, "And I don't know when I'll have another half-hour free to visit your common room."

Angelina looked ready to argue, but Ron just shook his head ruefully, "They're up the third staircase on the right of the fireplace, second landing. *Knock first*."

Rigel nodded even though she privately thought that Ron must not think much of her intelligence if he thought she was *that* stupid. She approached the correct staircase and momentarily hesitated. What if in the Gryffindor common room, the boys' dorms were spelled against girls in addition to the girls' being spelled against boys? She shook off her misgivings. Probably all the dorms were designed with the same kind of precautions in mind, and if they weren't, she'd play it off somehow.

After a few steps without something horrible happening to her, she proceeded more confidently to the second landing. The door looked... ordinary. There wasn't anything to suggest something dangerous or unstable was lurking behind it. No suspicious smells or wisps of smoke leaking through the hinges, so that was a good sign.

She knocked gently on the wooden surface. No answer. She knocked again, more sharply. As she waited, she glanced over her shoulder to see Ron and Angelina looking up at her with apprehensive expressions on their faces. She heard the door open behind her, but before she could turn back around two hands grasped her shoulders abruptly and jerked her into the room. She felt her neck protest as she swung it around despite the speed at which the hands were insisting she travel through the doorway. A moment later, the door slammed shut behind her and she stumbled forward a bit as the hands that had pulled her in let go.

Blinking, she looked up to see George smiling at her from over a large simmering cauldron and Fred moving back to where he'd apparently been chopping up ingredients on a rather nice fold out cutting board before he'd grabbed her from the landing.

Their dorm room was... interesting. They seemed to have the place all to themselves, as there were only two beds, and Rigel thought Jordan had probably roomed with them before... well, before. The beds were pushed next to each other on one side of the room, and on the other side they had quite a set up. Several cauldrons of various sizes, stacks of notebooks and scrolls of parchment, a stand-up black board that was covered with various scribbles that only vaguely resembled the rune configurations she was familiar with from her spotty Ancient Runes education, and even a large dustbin full of odds and ends with a large 'FAILED' sign hanging off of it.

Now that she was further in the room, she could detect the telltale smell of a heated cauldron, and guessed they had put up fumigating spells by the door to keep the scent from leaking out.

"Hiya, pup," Fred said conversationally as he chopped, as though they were doing nothing unusual, brewing a potion in their dorm room and pulling people randomly inside without notice.

"Hi, Fred," Rigel said slowly, "What are you two making?"

"Can't you tell?" George wagged his brows teasingly as he paused in his stirring to wipe at his forehead.

Rigel took that as a challenge, and stepped closer to the cauldron. After several minutes, she still couldn't place the bright orange concoction among any of the potions she'd studied. She looked at the ingredients lined up on Fred's cutting board and then at the labels on the empty packages already discarded. She frowned.

"It looks like something to quell a stomach ache," she said slowly, "But the sheer amount of suppressants you have... it would have to be one seriously upset stomach. I don't think I've ever seen this combination, though. Is the potion artificially colored to look that... orange?"

George grinned, "So you think it will work to stop vomiting? Good, that's what it's supposed to do."

"And you'd better not have seen it before," Fred said, also grinning, "Seeing as we invented it. Do you like the orange? It was my idea."

"Is it a children's potion?" Rigel asked, guessing that kids would be more willing to drink something orange than brown or grey.

"Sort of," George said, "It's actually for a joke product, but, yes, eventually we hope to market to children."

"Oh," Rigel said, nodding, "You guys are going into the joke business, then? Good choice-I'm sure you'll be successful."

"You don't mind?" Fred asked, eyebrows rising, "We are kind of muscling in on your family's area of expertise."

Rigel smiled, "Honestly? Dad and James could use the competition. You guys will definitely keep them on their toes."

"High praise indeed!" Fred said, beaming.

"Fred, the bombasweed," George said.

"Right," Fred grabbed a bowl with crushed leaves in it and sprinkled the contents into the cauldron, "So, you're not going to give away our secrets, are you?"

Rigel raised an eyebrow, "A bit late to be asking that now, don't you think?"

George grinned, "Naw, we know you wouldn't."

"And how do you know that?" Rigel asked curiously.

"Just do," George grinned. He grabbed a lid from a drying rack by the window and set it carefully over the cauldron before turning the flame down to a low flicker, "So, what brings you here?"

Rigel pulled out the notebook, "Your sister reminded me to give this back."

George wiped his hands on his brewing apron and stepped forward to take it from her, "Thanks. We're so used to having these that it was a weird couple of days without it."

Fred laughed, "Yeah, how long's it been since we actually had to pass notes in class?"

"Too long," George said ruefully, "McGonagall nearly caught us yesterday."

"Is that all you use them for?" Rigel asked.

George grinned, "You'd think that, since as soon as you write in it, it disappears, right? Well, these beauties are actually quite a bit more

useful."

Fred nodded, "They keep everything ever written on record unless we manually delete something, but no one except the notebook's owner can access it-well, that's not entirely true, I suppose. I can access Forge's, and he can do mine."

Rigel cocked her head, "Because you're twins? Does it recognize DNA?"

They shook their heads.

"Then anyone could get into one by just having our hair," George said, "No, it takes the correct magical signature. It's not really that we're twins, because even twins have slightly different magical signatures, but *because* they're so similar, Fred and I can tweak our own signatures to match one another."

Rigel considered this, "It's supposed to be impossible to imitate another's magical signature."

"It's supposed to be impossible to bypass Occlumency barriers via magical cores, too," George said pointedly, "A lot of things people say are impossible aren't. They're just difficult, or can't be done by everyone."

Rigel nodded, "Yes, I suppose you're right. I wonder if family members would be similar enough to do the same thing, or if it has to be twins. And is that the same skill Fred uses to learn a spell by mimicking exactly George's magical output, or is that different?"

Fred thought about it, "I'd say it was almost the same. When you cast a spell, your aura reflects the magic you're currently using. That's why people who are really good at aura-reading can always tell if someone is using a glamour or under the influence of protection spells and the like-you can read current magic usage straight from the person's aura. Since the aura is linked to the unique

magical signature of a person, to change one is almost like changing the other."

"They aren't the same thing?" Rigel clarified.

"Not really," George said, "It's like the difference between a person's fingerprints and what their fingers are doing. Like, if you had the ability to mimic a flute player's movements exactly, you could learn to match the finger-movements with the sound produced, and theoretically learn a piece of music without even learning to read music, or even without knowing what the notes were. You don't have to have the same exact fingers to mimic like that, but it would be harder to do if the fingers you were imitating were a different length than yours, or had different amounts of flexibility or dexterity, and when your fingers played the instrument, they would still have your own fingerprints."

"It sounds possible for people with completely different magical auras to do the mimicking thing, though," Rigel said, "As long as they had the magical ability."

"That's true," Fred said, "But an aura is much more complicated than a set of fingers. Most auras are so different that figuring out which areas to match up with to do what magic is a nightmare. Forge and I have nearly the same magical signature, so as long as other variables stay the same, our auras are almost always the same. If one of us is doing magic, the only thing different in his aura is what changes to produce the magic, so that's all I have to change in my own magic to match it. If it was someone else, so many things would be different that only an aura master would be able to tell which things to try and copy."

"And even then," George continued, "You may not be able to copy a lot of the aura. If you have a fire-core, for instance, your magic is going to form spells differently than a water-core would. And that's not even getting into Light and Dark and Neutral alignments. Honestly, it would be less work to just learn the spell."

Rigel nodded, "Still, it's an interesting kind of magic. I looked into magical signature study once for a potion I was working on, but I never got far into auras."

Fred left off the notes he was jotting down about the orange substance and went to rummage through a stack of books under one of the beds. He emerged with a thick but well-kept book, which he handed to her, "Here-everything you want to know, and a good deal of nonsense you'll never need to know, about auras."

"Does it talk about how to influence your own aura?" Rigel asked. She was very interested to see if there was a way to fool aura users by tweaking with one's aura, or, in her case, if it was possible to consciously project one so that she didn't give herself away every time someone like Snape sensed someone without an aura around.

"Only in a very vague and abstract kind of a way," George said, "When you get that far, come talk to us-we can at least get you started."

"Thanks," Rigel said absently, already skimming through the table of contents.

George laughed and put a hand on her shoulder to steer her toward the door, "Go on and read your new book then, pup. See you later."

Fred held open the door and Rigel glanced up briefly to say goodbye to the twins, and to thank them for the book. They waved her off, and she descended the stairs to the Gryffindor common room once more.

"So you're alive," Ron said, glancing over her, "And no extra limbs. That's a good sign."

"Or a very bad one," Angela said, "Maybe his injuries are internal."

They broke out into amused laughter and Rigel just shook her head, "Those two have really got you running scared."

"Better to run scared than to be caught unaware," Angela said pragmatically.

Smiling but not disagreeing, Rigel said goodbye and headed back to her own common room to get started on the first chapter of aura reading.

She went to visit Neville in the Hospital Wing briefly later that afternoon, but there was only so much she could stare at her friend's unanimated form before it became too depressing for her to bear. She knew, logically, that his current state was virtually harmless-in fact, petrification was about the safest form of suspended animation there was, magically speaking.

Still, there was some instinct, perhaps left over from some proto-human ancestor who didn't understand the theory behind magical comas, which gave her a feeling of extreme disquiet in her gut at the sight of Neville lying so motionless on the Hospital bed.

After deciding there was nothing she could do for her friend-for now-she went back to the Slytherin common room to get some studying done. It was becoming a regular thing for her to meet up with the other Slytherin second years and get some of her legitimate homework done, or at least read quietly in their company. She hadn't realized how distant she had been from her fellow classmates the previous year, but the more time she spent with them, the more things she realized she didn't know about them.

She wasn't just learning personal tidbits, though. As she spent more time with her classmates she realized that they all had different areas in which they were more or less proficient, and that most of them were always eager to trade knowledge for knowledge.

Earlier that week, Millicent had given them all a run-down on foreign policy in the Wizarding World. Her uncle was an important diplomat, apparently, and she knew the who's who of the International Wizarding Confederation quite intimately.

The week before that, Theo had demonstrated exactly what being fluent in Latin could do for a person's understanding of spellcraft. He could dissect a spell in under a minute and tell you exactly why a certain incantation was used and then give a list of all the possible mispronunciations and their consequences.

That night, they had all more or less settled into their various assignments when, seemingly out of the blue, Theo asked, "Why is your hair black, Rigel?"

Everyone paused momentarily to gaze incredulously at Theo.

"All the Black's have black hair," Millicent said slowly.

"Well, yes," Theo said, "But don't they usually marry other black-haired witches? But Rigel's mum was a blonde, wasn't she? Shouldn't Rigel be some mix of the two? And why does Draco's mum have blonde hair? I mean, it's been bugging me for a while, because, like you said, all the Blacks are black-haired."

Draco sighed, "If I tell you, will you never bring up my mother's looks in conversation ever again?"

Theo thought about it, "I can't think of why I would."

"Okay, then," Draco said, "It's really quite simple-pureblood genetics."

He went back to studying as if that explained everything, and to anyone who had studied pureblood genetics, as Rigel had, it actually did. Theo wasn't quite satisfied, however.

"What's that supposed to mean?" he asked.

Blaise took up the explanation with a gleam of interest in his eyes, "It means that in the very old pureblood families, genetics work quite a bit differently than in other families. All Black's have black hair for the same reason all Malfoy's have blonde hair, and all Weasley's have

red hair-with very few exceptions. It goes back to ancient times when our ancestors first harnessed the wild magic and gave it shape. They were just druids back then, but they gradually learned to tie the magic to their souls and create a core that they could tap into in lieu of tapping into the wild magic when they wanted to access their power swiftly and conveniently.

Once they managed to bind magic in general, they also began specializing-this is the origin of magical gifts like metamorphing and foresight. As different families unlocked the secrets to tying certain abilities to themselves, they also developed a method for passing that ability to their offspring. The knowledge is partly lost to us now, but it involved elaborate rituals for ensuring the transference of magic from one generation to the next, and a large part of it was focused on preventing the dilution of the magic."

"Dilution?" Theo asked.

"Yeah," Millicent chimed in, "Because the thing about the magic we use is that it wasn't always ours. Our ancestors shaped it and bound it to their lines, but the magic remembers being free. Shaped magic is always trying to get free again, which is why intent is so important in spells-given half a chance, the magic will dissipate once freed from our cores without doing anything. So if the ancients hadn't bound the magic into their very souls, it would have been freed upon their death."

"But magic *is* freed upon a wizard's death," Theo said, "It gets released into the earth."

"Yes, but when a witch has a child-or I suppose even when a muggle gets pregnant from a wizard-the magical parent essentially donates a portion of their magic. I mean, not the magic that they use regularly, but a piece from the very heart of their core. A piece from the part of the core that regenerates the magic we use," Millicent said, "So while the baby grows, that small bit of donated magic grows and develops until the baby has its own magical core. So the magic gets passed on."

"But, what does that have to do with the color of hair?" Theo asked.

"It's related to the measures the ancients took to make sure magic didn't get spread and muddled among the future generations," Blaise said, "They were afraid that if their traits and abilities mixed too much, they would mutate or get watered down. So they warped their own genetics a bit in order to make sure that only the undiluted magical talents would get passed on."

"How?" Theo asked, sounding both curious and slightly disturbed.

"It's basically an all-or-nothing deal," Millicent said, "They bound the magic in a way that forces it to select or deselect for traits completely-no half measures, and no strange hybrid traits. That's why there's never been a Metamorphmagus who could only change his hair color but not his eyes, and why you've never heard of a natural Occlumens whose shields were only so-so. The magic tied to the blood creates a this-or-that kind of genetic system. So you're either a Seer or you're not, and you're either a ghost-speaker or you aren't."

"It had an interesting side-effect, though," Blaise added, "Because it doesn't apply to just magical traits. It effects physical characteristics, too. So if you're part of the Black family you're either going to have completely Black hair, or you aren't. No mixing. Same with the Malfoy's and the Weasley's and countless other families. If it wasn't part of the magic's design, all the pureblooded families would look the same by now after so many centuries of interbreeding. On the contrary, however, each family is still quite distinctly unique. The process of inheritance is greatly skewed in favor of the dominant traits in each family, obviously, but there are recessive traits that run just as strongly in families, just not as often. So every few generations you get a Black like Narcissa Malfoy, who is completely blonde."

"The Malfoy's hardly have any recessive traits," Draco put in, a bit smugly.

"That's true," Pansy said, nodding, "If you go into the Malfoy portrait gallery, it's like looking at the same person painted a hundred times over."

They all laughed a bit.

"That makes sense now that you say it," Theo said, "Everyone I know looks almost exactly like one of their parents."

"Not me," Pansy sighed, "I got a couple of recessive Parkinson traits."

"How would there be any recessive traits, though?" Theo asked, "Shouldn't they have disappeared after the first generation of magical influence?"

"No," Blaise said, "Because all of the recessive traits some families have were once dominant traits in another family. When witches marry into other families, magic generally favors their husband's traits in their offspring, but the dominant traits from her family don't go away-they get 'saved up' over time until eventually they manifest completely in a random descendant. That's why most purebloods look so exotic. We all have extreme features, because they remain as undiluted as our magical gifts. That's also why we're called 'purebloods;' Because the traits in our blood are passed down in their entire, pure, form. Nowadays most people treat it like a moral title, but originally it just meant that, as long as we're careful about it, our magic and bloodlines are virtually incorruptible."

There was a lull as Theo chewed over the information he'd been given. Rigel pretended she was still reading her book on auras, but in reality she was silently contemplating. She hadn't heard anything new in Millicent and Blaise's explanations, but somehow hearing it spoken with raw conviction from a twelve-year-old's mouth was different from reading about it.

She couldn't dispute most of the points, not being well enough versed in magical theory, but that didn't mean she agreed

completely. There were just too many holes in the explanation.

For instance, if magical children got their magic from their parents, then how did muggleborns come about? She had read theories postulating that when families intermingled too much and diluted their magic, they wound up without enough to support a core in a child, so the child ended up a squib, with a tiny spark of magic, but not enough to be useful. Overtime that spark would grow and a few generations later there would be enough 'saved up' magic for it to reassert itself, just like a dominant pureblood trait that is hidden by another, more powerful, family's traits until it can be expressed fully again.

Still, there were too many squibs born into perfectly pureblooded families for that to make sense. Some said squibs were a result of a birth defect, which caused damage to the core in the womb, making it unusable. This damage, they said, would slowly fix itself over time and eventually spawn another magical child-who would only appear to be muggleborn because their line was lost in obscurity.

The other problem she had was with the idea that incorruptible genes were necessarily a good thing. It might be true that the wizards now had the exact same abilities and powers as their ancestors had, pure and not watered down, but it was also true that there were no new magical abilities in the wizarding community since the ancient times. All the abilities were exactly the same, and, as far as she knew, exclusively kept to the old pureblooded lines.

Still, the theory had its uses.

It explained how she had gotten Parseltongue, for one thing. Someone from the first family of parselmouths must have married into the Potter family. Since the Potter traits-unruly black hair, rather poor eyesight, and an affinity for flight being a few of the most notable-would be favored over an outside family's traits, the parseltongue would have become recessive, biding its time until magic decided to assert the trait fully in her.

From the way Draco was eyeing her, he was probably thinking along the same lines.

Sure enough, when it was just the two of them in their dorm later on, Blaise having gone to the Library and Theo having staying in the common room to play exploding snap with a few of the first years, Draco said, "So I guess that explains how you got your you-know-what. I didn't think the Black's had ever married into the Slytherin family, but maybe someone married in whose family had in turn been married into?" The blonde boy sighed, "It's so difficult tracing recessive magical abilities through families. I think we've both got a cousin who is a metamorph, and that definitely doesn't run in the Black family. Can't have been the father's line, either, because I hear he's a muggle."

"Oh, you mean Andromeda's daughter, Nymphadora?" Rigel asked, "I've met her a couple of times."

"Really? I never have," Draco said, "Didn't even know her name, actually. Anyway, I wanted to ask you..." he trailed off, and Rigel turned to look inquiringly at him when he didn't pick up his train of thought once more.

"What?" Rigel prompted, thinking it was rare for Draco to hesitate in something as simple as asking a question or favor. She could tell he was biting the inside of his cheek softly, like he did when he was deciding whether what he wanted to say or do would be overly rude or presumptuous. "You know," she added cajolingly, "Whatever it is, I'll probably agree." Unless it was a personal question, she amended silently, in which case she'd probably lie.

Draco seemed to decide something, and said, "Wherever you go in the mornings-"

"I go exercising," Rigel reminded him.

"Yes, that," Draco said, "May I go with you tomorrow morning?"

Rigel blinked, "You want to take up extra workouts as well? Are you sure?"

Draco shrugged, "I just thought I'd see... maybe I won't like it, but I won't know until I try, right?"

Rigel smiled slowly, "I guess that's true. All right, I'll wake you up, then. You might want to set out some of the clothes you wear to Quidditch practice tonight so you don't have to rummage around in the dark tomorrow morning."

"Okay, thanks, Rigel."

Don't thank me yet, she thought wryly.

Despite her reservations, Draco did admirably the next morning—far better, in fact, than she had done the first time Remus put her through her paces. He awoke with barely a grumble, which was positively sunny compared to his usual pre-breakfast demeanor. He followed her diligently out of the castle and around the lake, though he sat the second lap out to catch his breath. He kept up all through the weights training, though it took longer than usual as they had to split the weights between them. His flexibility was moderately good as well.

After they finished with sit-ups, push-ups, and a general cool down, Draco gulped gratefully at the container of water she'd brought out with them and said, "And you do this every morning?"

"Unless something else comes up," Rigel said, wiping a sheen of sweat from beneath her bangs.

"How often does that happen?" Draco asked.

"Well, it hasn't yet," Rigel said, conveniently forgetting about the time Blaise had helped her with the wind chime prank, which had taken too long to go running afterwards, "But you never know."

Draco just shook his head, "So, what next?"

"That's it," Rigel said, shrugging, "Now we can get cleaned up for breakfast."

As there were two bathrooms in their dorm room now, it didn't take them long at all to get showered and changed for the day.

They met Pansy in the common room, who said, "You're looking a bit flushed this morning, Draco. And your hair is wet-don't you usually shower in the evening?"

Draco grinned, "I tagged along with Rigel this morning. Did you know he runs around the lake twice every morning? And that's just to start!"

Pansy raised her eyebrows, "Really? Are we exercising now as well?"

"We?" Rigel and Draco echoed.

Pansy sighed, "Well, of course. Don't even think of saying it's a boy thing. If the only way to make sure I'm not left behind is to learn to keep up, then I will. What time did you leave?"

Bemused, Rigel told her.

"I'll be here tomorrow morning, then."

After making sure Pansy had appropriate running attire-"I'll borrow something of Aldon's,"-they headed to breakfast.

After breakfast, Draco silently accompanied her to the common room couch and joined her in reading quietly for twenty minutes or so before classes.

Later when she started to slip away during the lunch period, Draco was there at her elbow, "Where are we headed?"

Rigel glanced sidelong at her unusually present friend, "I was going to visit Binny in the kitchens, actually." When Draco said nothing but looked at her expectantly, she felt like sighing, but said, "Would you like to accompany me?"

"Love to," Draco said, falling into step beside her.

Binny was as solicitous as ever, and clapped her hands with glee when she saw Draco there with Rigel, "Oh! Young sir is bringing his friend Mister Draco! This is being lovely. Come, sit here, I is getting you your usual."

"Ah," Rigel said quickly, "Actually I thought I'd try something new today."

Binny turned big eyes on her solemnly, "You is not liking your usual?"

Rigel shifted a bit uncomfortably under the combined pressure of Binny's mournful gaze and Draco's curious one, "It's not that, I just thought I'd like a change..." she trailed off weakly. She hated upsetting the elf, but Draco wasn't to know she ate meat now.

"But you is always getting the veggie salad!" Binny said dramatically, "And I is cutting up strawberries for you already!"

Rigel blinked, waited a moment for her brain to catch up, and suppressed a smile. Binny really was the cleverest house elf she'd ever met. She must have remembered that Rigel had said her meat eating was a secret, and decided to put on a charade to fool Draco into thinking exactly what Rigel wanted him to—that her diet hadn't changed at all.

"Well, if you've already gone to the trouble," Rigel said ruefully, 'giving in' at last, "Of course I'd love my usual. I just wasn't sure Draco would enjoy the salad."

"Oh, I'll have whatever you're having," Draco said easily, and he proceeded to do just that. As they ate, Binny chatted to them about

castle gossip as she worked-thankfully in English, as Draco was also not supposed to know she was learning French until she could speak it passably. Toward the end of the meal Rigel saw Draco eyeing a blueberry tart longingly, so she asked Binny for a couple, inwardly wondering why Draco seemed determined to only eat what she ate. Maybe he didn't know which foods it was okay to eat, and thought the elves needed all the tarts to send up to the Great Hall?

After their afternoon classes, Draco walked all the way up to the Library with her when she needed a book for a homework assignment, but didn't check out anything for himself. He conversed with she and Pansy for a couple of hours in the early evening, which was nothing unusual, but when she got up intending to brew for a few hours before bed, he got up as well, trailed after her as she went to pick up her ingredient kit from her trunk, and then followed her all the way back out until they reached the common room entrance, at which point she couldn't ignore it any longer.

"Draco, don't take this the wrong way, but... what are you doing?" she asked.

"I don't know," Draco said, "Whatever you're doing now, I guess. Aren't you going to brew?"

"I meant to ask, why are you following me everywhere today?" Rigel clarified.

"Oh," Draco said, "Well, and I can't believe it's taken you this long to ask by the way, I decided to spend a day doing what you do. My mother always says you don't know a person until you've lived their life for a day, and I thought that since we're friends I should know what your daily schedule is like, at least."

Rigel quirked her lips with amusement, "Did you discover anything interesting?"

"A few things," Draco said vaguely, "But the day isn't over yet. After you."

Rigel inclined her head agreeably and led him to her personal lab. She hesitated at the door, "I'm actually not sure if Professor Snape will let me have you in here. It was sort of one of the conditions for getting a lab in the first place." So was only brewing the potions Snape had approved on his list, she added to herself silently, but Snape didn't really need to know about the work she did for Krait. "We should ask him first."

Since Snape's office wasn't too far away, they were soon knocking on the solid wood door.

"Enter," their Head of House's voice came briskly through the door.

Rigel and Draco both greeted their Head of House politely when he raised his eyes to see who had interrupted his marking.

"Mr. Malfoy, Mr. Black," Snape nodded to each of them, "Good evening."

"Evening, Professor," Rigel said, "I wanted to ask if you'd give Draco permission to observe my brewing tonight."

Snape looked between the two of them consideringly, "Only for this evening? And he won't assist or attempt to take part in any way? You will provide him with appropriate safety wear if necessary?"

Rigel nodded to each question in turn.

"Very well," Snape said, "No later than nine o'clock."

"Yes, sir," Rigel said, "Thank you."

They walked back to her makeshift laboratory, Draco grinning and Rigel glancing at Draco with concealed amusement whenever his excitement got the better of him and made him bounce on his toes.

"It's not going to be as exciting as you seem to think," Rigel warned him, "Especially since you can't help. You'll just be sitting there, for hours if you stay the whole time."

"Not just sitting," Draco said, still grinning, "Watching."

Rigel sighed, "Because that isn't psychologically intrusive."

Draco just laughed.

She let him into her lab and started setting up her cauldron. She rifled through her ingredient case, which unfolded a bit like a muggle tackle box, but when it unfolded it revealed a dozen or so tiny drawers, which corresponded to a dozen or so Undetectable Extension charms. All in all, she could fit about a third of the student supply cupboard in her little box, but at that point it would probably be difficult to find anything quickly.

As she started on her first potion, Draco took a seat on the wooden stool she used when a potion required upwards of a hundred stirs. He was silent all through the first potion she made, and only made a faintly interested noise when she set up a second cauldron and began brewing two batches of Befuddlement Draught at once.

Halfway through the third potion, she looked over and asked, "Aren't you bored yet?"

"No," he said, watching her hands deftly dice the ingredient she was working on.

Rigel thought she was doing an admirable job of pretending her friend's assessing gaze didn't make her at all uncomfortable. She comforted herself with the knowledge that he could watch all he liked and never find a single mistake in her movements. She had made this particular potion hundreds of times since the summer. It was one of Krait's best-sellers.

"I don't recognize this one," Draco said eventually.

"It's a Wit-Sharpening Potion," Rigel said, not glancing away from the fire she was adjusting.

She could hear the frown in his voice when he said, "That's not in your syllabus."

Rigel shrugged, "Snape gives me potions outside of the curriculum, since I'll brew the others in class, remember?"

Draco made a noise of protest, "No, I mean it's not on *your* syllabus. The list Snape gives you at the beginning of each month. I saw it last week when you set it on your trunk while you were rifling through your bag. Wit-Sharpening wasn't on it."

Rigel's stirring didn't pause, but she bit the inside of her cheek silently, wondering how to respond.

"Hang on," Draco said, his voice rising in a familiar sign of agitation, "Did you just try to lie to me by telling me an unrelated truth? My father told me about that trick, but I didn't think you would..." Rigel winced, and Draco caught it, "You did! How often do you do that?"

Rigel's rather guilty silence was probably answer enough, but she felt compelled to say, "I don't like to just lie straight out, at least, not to my friends."

Draco scoffed, his voice rising again in tandem with his temper, "I suppose that's suppose to make it better? Maybe you feel better about it, but I think it's *worse* knowing that you don't even have to lie to completely deny me the truth!"

There was another silence in which Rigel mechanically tipped another ingredient into her cauldron.

"When we became friends," she said slowly, "We agreed that you wouldn't expect truth from me. You said you wouldn't care when I lied, Draco."

He narrowed his eyes, "Yes, but not about *everything*..." he blew out a breath and calmed himself visibly, "Okay, at least tell me there's a good reason for this. Tell me you're brewing a Wit Sharpening Potion

as some vital element to your master plan or something. Tell me you aren't just lying to me for the sake of it."

Rigel shot Draco a reproving glance. She knew it probably wouldn't make him feel bad about calling her lie, but it made her feel better to let some small part of her own frustration show, "You think this amuses me, lying to you? That I'd do it if I didn't have to? I'm sorry, okay?"

"Sorry you lied?" Draco demanded.

"No," Rigel said shortly, "Sorry I wasn't thinking when I decided to make this potion in front of you. Sorry it didn't occur to me that you'd even notice I wasn't supposed to be making this. I'm sorry I threw my dishonesty in your face by doing something I should have known you'd ask about in front of you."

"That's what you're sorry about?" Draco scowled darkly, "That's all?"

"No," Rigel said, stirring the potion a bit harder than necessary, "I'm also sorry I've now put you in the position where you either lie by omission to your godfather about me brewing things I'm not supposed to or else betray my trust and tell him."

Draco gaped at her.

"For what it's worth," Rigel added, more quietly, "I wouldn't blame you for telling him, considering I'm the one at fault."

"You-I don't even know what to say to you," Draco huffed, "Of course I'm not going to tell on you, idiot. But I'm not happy about always being in the dark. I know-I *know* you warned me, and I should have listened better, but at the time you were so mysterious and interesting-of course I wanted to be your friend. I didn't really consider how it would feel, being lied to all the time."

"I'm not trying to hurt you, Draco," Rigel said, "I've been as honest as I can."

"I get it," Draco said, sighing, "Mostly I'm dealing with it. Sometimes it just... gets to me, I guess. Sorry I yelled at you."

"Forget it," Rigel said, smiling tentatively, "I deserved it."

They lapsed into silence again and Rigel finished up the Wit-Sharpening potion as quickly as she could. She labeled the flasks and then stored it into the drawer of her potions kit where she kept finished products. She would mail it to Krait next week with the others she'd finished.

She really regretted bickering with Draco, but she couldn't tell him what she was brewing for. If on the off chance he checked into it, or more likely told his father who then checked into it, Krait might admit that his supplier's name was Harry, not Rigel, and things could really only go downhill from there. Added to that was the fact that she really *wasn't* supposed to be brewing extra potions in the lab Snape had granted her, and all in all it was best if Draco didn't know too much.

Of course, Rigel had the feeling that Snape knew perfectly well she was brewing non-sanctioned potions on her own, but at least in their current arrangement of mutual denial, he had plausible deniability for any mistakes or accidents she got herself into.

They headed back to the common room after that. Rigel had planned on mailing Flint his latest batch of essays, but with Draco determined to follow her everywhere that day, she'd have to leave that until later.

Pansy was waiting up for them when they got back.

"So, how'd it go?" she asked Draco.

"You knew he was going to stalk me all day?" Rigel asked.

Pansy nudged Rigel playfully, "He wasn't stalking; he was getting to know you. I think it's sweet."

Draco made a distinctly unflattered face, "It's not sweet. It's practical. How can anyone get to know Rigel Black without stalking him?"

"I'm not that bad."

"Yes, you are," Draco and Pansy said together.

Rigel sighed, "Sure, gang up on me."

"It's the only way to get through to you," Pansy said.

When they went to bed that night, Rigel was thoroughly amused to see Draco lie down gingerly on top of his covers, fully dressed.

"You don't need to go that far, Draco," she said, laughing.

He grimaced, "Just once. I want to. Really. And maybe it's more comfortable than it looks."

"It isn't," Rigel said, still grinning, "But knock yourself out."

There was quite a bit more fidgeting than usual coming from Draco's bed that night, but eventually he fell asleep. Rigel waited until his breathing had completely evened out before slipping off of the bed once more and quietly sneaking out of the dorm with a thick roll of parchment in her pocket.

She really needed to mail those essays.

The next day, Pansy was so enamored of Draco's idea that she wanted to try her hand at it as well. Not following Rigel, though, but Draco. Naturally Rigel was nominated to join in as well, so after they all went for a run around the lake-Pansy wasn't nearly as in shape as they were, so they laid off the weights and extra training for the first day-she spent the entire day doing what Draco did.

It was the most frustrating days she'd spent in... possibly ever. There were whole portions of Draco's day in which he appeared not to do

anything at all. Once his homework was done, if there wasn't Quidditch practice, the boy literally had nothing else to occupy his time.

"Sometimes I study extra material," Draco shrugged when Pansy and Rigel asked what he was going to do for the three hours left before curfew, "And sometimes I join in one of the card games usually going on in the common room about this time."

Pansy frowned delicately.

"I know, you don't play cards," Draco said quickly, "I'm trying to think what else I could do that would still be within my normal routine... I guess we could go up to the Astronomy Tower. Sometimes I stargaze when I'm really bored."

Rigel was thinking longingly of the hours she could be spending in her lab, but she recognized that it was important for their friendship that she stick around and experience an evening a la Draco. She supposed the stars were pretty, in a distant and ultimately irrelevant kind of a way.

It was just so aimless, sitting around all evening without getting a thing accomplished.

She couldn't even look forward to the following morning, because Pansy had also decided it was her turn next, and that she would show her two best friends a day in her life as well.

That night Rigel snuck out again to try and get at least one or two of Flint's essays for the following week completed.

Rigel had to remind herself several times over the course of Pansy Day that she really enjoyed her friends and didn't want to alienate them in any way, because otherwise... well.

Apparently Pansy was a keen introspect when she was not the living embodiment of a social butterfly. She told them rather matter-of-

factly that she tried to divide her waking hours 70/30 between socializing and self-reflection. Rigel herself was no stranger to self study and even cultivation, but she'd never spent time just thinking. Thinking and running, sure, thinking and brewing-even better-but thinking and... sitting? Outside by the forest with all the birds and leaves chirping and rustling in her ears?

Pansy flicked a blade of grass her way, "Stop acting like you've never been outside before. You're twitching and we've only been out here five minutes."

Draco shifted from where he sat cross-legged on the soft green blanket Pansy had brought out with them, "How long do you do this usually?"

"Oh, no more than an hour or two most days," Pansy said.

Draco gave her a strange look, but all he said was, "And all this time I thought you just disappeared into your dorm room to do girly stuff when you weren't around."

Rigel glanced around her for the fifth or sixth time, but the peaceful scene hadn't changed. If anything it had become more unremarkably idyllic in the past five minutes. Sun shining, breeze blowing, and all the other stuff that *happened all the time* on planet Earth. Really, what was so interesting about nature?

Rigel held back a sigh, but Pansy sent her a look that said she caught the unexpressed sentiment anyway, "Come on, Rigel. Just relax for a bit. It probably won't kill you."

Rigel tapped her foot a bit restlessly, noticed what she was doing, and consciously stopped the motion immediately. "Can I at least work on my Occlumency?"

"No meditation," Pansy said, "That's cheating. The point of coming out here is to free your mind and let go of the world for a while, not send it into overdrive building sand castles in your head."

Rigel subsided and willed her body into stillness, but her mind was busy making a list of all the things she hadn't gotten done in the last two days. It wasn't that she regretted indulging her friends and getting to know them better, but she had a very tight schedule. The only way she could afford to let two whole days go was if she had a plan for getting back on track immediately.

Eventually her legs started cramping from being crossed so long, so she stretched them out gently, and from there it seemed only natural to recline onto her back and stare up at the sky while her mind turned over various make-up schedules for approval or revisal.

The grass on the Hogwarts lawn smelled sweet, almost too sweet to be natural if she really thought about it. She skimmed through the types of grass she was familiar with, but couldn't pinpoint which breed this springy green stuff was. Probably it was useless in a potion anyway.

Somewhere between listening to Pansy and Draco's deep, even breathing and wondering if she could brew three cauldrons of Strengthening Solution at once to make up for lost time, she must have lost track of the world.

The next thing she knew, a hand was shaking her gently by the shoulder and she could hear the sounds of Draco and Pansy stifling their giggles.

"Rye, wake up," Pansy said, "It's nearly time for dinner."

Rigel opened her eyes and slowly sat up, wincing a bit as her neck protested the lack of pillow with a sharp twinge, "Sorry, what time...?" she trailed off with a yawn, much to her embarrassment.

"Merlin, Rye, don't you get any sleep at night?" Draco asked, "We went to bed at the same time, got up at the same time, and yet you doze the moment someone forces you to pause in that insane quick-step you call a normal day's routine."

Rigel shrugged, not wanting to say that she'd actually gone to bed several hours later, between waiting for Draco to fall into a deep enough sleep, sneaking out to do homework with the Map and Cloak, and getting back to her bed without being detected.

They went to dinner, where Draco loaded Rigel's plate up with starch and protein before she could pull it away from him.

"You need the energy for tomorrow," he said sternly.

"What's tomorrow?" Pansy asked.

Draco sent her a look so betrayed that she sighed, "Oh, right. The Quidditch match, then?"

Draco narrowed his eyes in mock severity, "I'm going to pretend you were making an ironic joke. Yes, tomorrow's the day Rigel and I crush the Gryffindor team into the ground."

Draco nudged Rigel with his shoulder and she said hastily, "Yes, um, straight into the ground."

Pansy laughed lightly, "Oh, yes, I can feel your thirst for triumph from over here."

Rigel grinned, "Sorry, Pan, I'll try to tone that down for you."

Draco just shook his head sadly, "No respect."

Just then Fred and George sat down just behind them at the Gryffindor table and started talking loudly.

"I just feel so sorry for those poor Slytherins," Fred said dramatically, sighing with affected pity, "They really aren't going to know what hit them."

"Especially those ickle second years, George agreed blithely. Rigel could hear the smile in his voice as he went on, "What's that new

beater's name again? Scrawny little thing, isn't he? We'll have to show him how a real beater handles his bludger."

Rigel glanced over her shoulder nonchalantly, took in the twin faces grinning mischievously at her from over their own shoulders, and said gravely, "It probably isn't a good idea to offer to show impressionable young boys how to handle their balls. People might get the wrong idea."

She turned back around and politely ignored the twins' spluttering guffawing. Pansy was looking mildly disapproving, but amused nonetheless.

Draco nudged Rigel's arm again, "Good one, if a little crude for the table."

Rigel shrugged. It was the exact joke Uncle Sirius had made once when James and he were teaching Archie and she how to play the sport. The joke was a bit beyond her usual tastes, but just shocking enough to disarm any further attempts the twins might make to goad she and Draco into getting offended. Draco frankly didn't need the nettling the night before his first big game.

The next day, Draco spent his lunch cheerfully consuming a large amount of what he called 'energy foods' and Rigel was mentally psyching herself up for her first real Quidditch match. It would begin in an hour, just as the day reached its warmest, and she was a bit nervous. She'd played on casual teams as a kid with Archie in the Flying Tykes league, but never in front of so large an audience or with so much pressure riding on victory.

If there was one thing that nearly everyone in Hogwarts agreed upon, it was that House pride mattered. A lot.

Just as they were about to head down to the locker rooms, Snape stopped by their table on his way out of the Hall.

He greeted the three of them, then said, "Mr. Black, are you fit to compete today?"

Rigel blinked, "Sir?"

"You are certain you are not ill this morning?" Snape prompted, a tad impatiently.

Rigel nodded slowly, "Yes, sir. I haven't been sick all semester."

Snape frowned, "You did not frequent your lab either of the past two nights."

"How did-" Draco began, but Snape cut him off.

"I have a ward installed across the threshold that clocks the hours Mr. Black spends in his lab. It is to prevent him from overworking himself," the Potions Master explained, "And every night without fail Mr. Black spends at least a couple of hours brewing, but for two night in a row he didn't step a foot over the doorway. I presumed he had been ill."

"As if that would have stopped him," Draco said, "No, Rigel was with Pansy and I the last two nights. We didn't let him brew."

"Ah," Snape raised an eyebrow, but made no further comment, "See that you aren't late to the match, then, Mr. Black. Good luck, Draco."

"Thank you, Un-Professor Snape," Draco said, practically glowing.

Snape swept away and Pansy said thoughtfully, "He's awfully protective of you."

"He's my godfather," Draco shrugged, then paused, "Oh, you meant Rigel, didn't you?"

"He's invested a lot of time and knowledge already in me," Rigel said, shrugging, "If I die because I stubbornly insisted on playing a dangerous sport while ill, he'll have wasted it all."

Pansy sighed and Draco snorted, but neither had time to contradict her.

"We've got to go," Draco said, "Tell my parents I'll see them after the match, ok?"

Pansy nodded dutifully. She would once again be keeping The Malfoy's company in the Staff Box for the first game of the year.

Rigel and Draco got to locker room A just as Flint began counting heads. When he saw them, he nodded, and jerked his thumb toward the changing rooms.

There were two locker rooms at Hogwarts, A and B. During flying classes, Madam Hooch split the students by sex and had girls in one and boys in another. Before Quidditch matches, however, it was too much of a risk to mix the teams, so one team was assigned to A and the other to B. Each locker room had a large space by the door where teams could meet and collaborate, a changing area where the lockers were located for keeping a player's street clothes until the game was over, and a bathroom. Because the locker rooms were co-ed sometimes, the toilets and showers all had stalls with locks on the inside.

Traditionally, the girls on the team changed in the stalls and the boys changed wherever they felt like it. As such, girls who joined Quidditch teams got used to seeing boys in boxers pretty fast.

Draco claimed a locker and started pulling his robes over his head, while Rigel took her own bag and made a beeline for the stalls.

Draco called over his shoulder, "No time for that, Rigel, we're going to be late."

Rigel just kept walking, "The Gryffindor team is always late to the pitch. Their captain gives epic pre-match speeches or something, right?"

Draco made a noise of indifferent agreement, and Rigel quickly bolted a stall closed behind her before changing into her team robes.

Once she was attired, she joined Draco and the others in the meeting area, grabbed her broom from Draco's hand, and accepted her usual bat from Bole with a nod of thanks.

"All right, snakes, listen up," Flint said, "We're going to win today, because if we don't I'll have you practicing in sandstorms for a week straight, complete with blistering heat and swarms of sand fleas. And questions?"

They all shook their heads mutely. Any questions they had at that point would be useless. Flint had already drilled them in every strategy they were going to use against Gryffindor, and rehashing them now would only bore them and take the edge off of their competitive spirit.

"Good. Move out, then."

Flint led them out onto the pitch, and, sure enough, the Gryffindors weren't yet present. Madam Hooch shook her head exasperatedly and headed off to harry Wood into getting his team onto the field.

A few minutes later, Madam Hooch blew the whistle and the game began.

Draco shot off immediately towards the sky, looking to get a bird's eye view and scan for the snitch as soon as possible.

The chasers were crowding around where the Quaffle had been released by Madam Hooch. The first few minutes of possession were very important, and the two teams' chasers were squabbling over it like chickens fighting in a coop for a piece of corn. The quaffle was batted between them like a punctured balloon, shooting every which way as each team tried to deflect it from the other.

It was getting harder to tell who was who in the blur of green and red. Bole, it seemed, finally got fed up with it. He gave a sharp whistle that echoed a bit eerily across the field.

The Slytherin chasers immediately scattered, and not a moment too soon. A bludger, hit by Bole, came careening through where the Gryffindor chasers were looking momentarily surprised, then panicked. All three of the Gryffindor chasers darted out of the bludger's way at the last second, but the blonde one, Spinnet, if this year's new commentator was correct, lost her hold on the Quaffle when a Slytherin chaser surprised her immediately after she escape the bludger. He knocked it from her hands and into the arms of yet another Slytherin chaser. Honestly, Rigel couldn't tell who from where she was hovering.

Another whistle sounded across the pitch, this one two-toned, and coming from Flint. That was his whistle that meant 'get your head in the game' and Rigel could only assume it was aimed at her, since she had yet to actually do anything. Right.

The whistle system, she thought as she streaked off to find her own bludger to wrangle, was a bit annoying, if admittedly rather clever. Everyone on the team was required to learn a selective Sonorus Charm that only responded to whistles. It's wasn't illegal to use little spells like this during a match-far from it. Seekers used spells to keep rain from their eyes all the time, especially if they wore glasses. It was allowed as long as the spells didn't enhance your senses beyond normal capacity, improve your own reaction time, or hinder your opponent in any way.

Flint had decided on whistle signals, so that everyone could respond to them without looking. Rigel rather thought it was a direct response to the hand signals Wood had devised for his own team the previous year.

Rigel had just corralled her bludger when a pair of twin red blurs swooped behind her, just between her back and the bludger's 'front.' Rigel frowned, as unavoidably the bludger's homing charm kicked in

and it swerved away from her and toward the Weasley twins, who immediately led it off in a direction they could hit from without interference.

Ruefully, she recognized that it was her fault for not letting the bludger follow her closely enough to avoid having it stolen. Intending to make up for her mistake, Rigel surveyed the field and leaned forward on her broom to shoot toward the other side of the pitch, where the twins would be most likely to target. That was where the Slytherin chasers were currently dodging and weaving around the Gryffindor goalposts, trying to get a chance to score without Wood blocking every attempt.

A glance over her shoulder told her the twins were still corralling the bludger, which would give her a few seconds' head start. Good, otherwise she wouldn't be able to out-run the bludger to its destination.

When she heard the crack of a bat, she whipped her head around to see that Bole, who had gotten hold of the other bludger, had smacked it toward the twins. Rigel saw one of the Weasley's break off to defend against the bludger Bole sent at them, but the other one had lined up his shot and proceeded to whack his own bludger directly at Flint, who was holding the Quaffle under one arm and flying in tight circles around Wood, probably trying to dizzy the other boy into disorientation and also keep the Gryffindor chasers from getting too close, lest they block their own keeper's ability to defend. Keepers functioned best with room, after all.

She sent out her own tentative whistle, one that meant 'caution, difficult maneuver.' It wouldn't make Flint stop what he was doing, but it would let him know that someone else was going to be involved in the play shortly.

She heard the crack of a bat and turned to face the shot. She knew she had only seconds to calculate the trajectory and intercept it. A bludger moving on its own was fast, and a bludger propelled by a beater's bat was even faster.

Wood had seen the bludger and was ducking out of the way, but Flint, who was facing the other way, either didn't notice Wood's retreat, cared more about scoring the goal than avoiding the bludger, or assumed one of his beaters was going to deal with it. Probably a combination of the latter two.

He stayed right where he was and used the room Wood's retreat had granted him to line up his shot carefully. Rigel estimated the bludger would hit him about half a second before he released the Quaffle, but she was already moving, placing herself between her captain and the bludger and swinging her own bat with a resounding CRACK.

The bludger sped toward Bole, who nodded to her from across the pitch and took control of it with a series of light taps from his own bat.

The game went on, the Gryffindor chasers proving once again why the Gryffindor team did so well despite having a general bad luck streak with seekers. The twins had the audacity to grin at her cheerfully whenever their paths crossed, usually right before they stole her bludger or beater-blocked her (a maneuver in which one beater prevents the other team's beater from hitting a bludger so that his own team's other beater can close in on it). She sent them long-suffering looks in return, which only made them grin harder.

She gave Draco an encouraging look the one time she was close enough to be sure he could make out her facial expression. Fred had hit a bludger half-heartedly toward Draco, simply because there were no other advantageous shots open, and Rigel had to chase after the bludger and distract it so Draco could continue his search for the snitch uninterrupted.

Her friend was looking rather stressed as he circled the pitch. She knew he was nervous about his first game, and it probably didn't help that his father and mother were up in the stands watching.

Bole was by far the more aggressive between the two of them, so Rigel mostly concentrated on defensive beatering, while Bole took

care of the shots against the other team. It wasn't that she didn't have the stomach to hit another player-honestly, it was part of the game, and the odds favored the other player dodging rather than taking the hit anyway-it was just difficult to attack and defend at the same time, so they split the work comfortably between them.

A half-hour later, Gryffindor was up 70-40, but Rigel still felt a bit proud of herself that no Slytherin had even come close to being hit by a bludger all game, despite the Weasley twins' best efforts. They could keep her from controlling the bludgers, but they couldn't stop her from stopping their shots unless one of them seriously detained her while the other went for her team.

They did try it once, with George attempting to keep her on one side of the pitch while Fred hit a bludger toward the Slytherin chasers, but there was too much space in the air to corral a player with only one person successfully, and besides that Bole simply picked the bludger out of its trajectory and sent it straight toward she and George, forcing George to break off from her and smack the bludger away with his bat or else let them both get hit.

Gryffindor had just scored yet another goal, bringing the score to 80-40, when Rigel caught sight of Draco plummeting to the earth out of the corner of her eye. Her brain told her he was diving, probably having spotted the snitch, but her eyes snapped around just to be sure.

It was funny how the stadium seemed to hold its breath once the snitch was spotted. The Gryffindor seeker quickly closed in on Draco's position, joining the dive, only to swerve just as quickly when the snitch did a random direction change. Draco and the other seeker both streaked off toward the goalposts after the tiny thing, and Rigel tore her eyes away to scan the pitch for the bludgers. One of them Bole had under control, and the other one was flying aimlessly not too far from where she was, so Rigel headed over to corral that one as well.

It was always a good idea to have control of a bludger, even if you didn't have a use for one yet, if only to prevent it from homing in on one of your players of its own accord.

A few minutes later, as there had been no outcry of either jubilation or disappointment from the stands, Rigel assumed the seekers were still chasing the snitch. She had her bludger following along behind her docilely (well, as docilely as a steel wrapped ball of pain could follow behind anything), so she continued to fly randomly while casting her eyes over the pitch once more.

Bole was heading across the field rather quickly, bludger in tow... wait. Rigel squinted, but couldn't see the bludger anywhere around Bole. She hadn't heard a crack, which meant he hadn't hit it away, so it must have been...

Sure enough, it was now in the possession of one of the Weasley twins. Rigel flew closer to assess the situation, though she wasn't sure what she could do about it. Even if she figured out what the Weasley was going to do with the bludger, she wouldn't be able to fly over and defend against it while she had her own bludger in tow-she would only lead her bludger straight into the play.

She followed the redheaded beater's line of sight and her heart began to pound a bit harder as she realized he was clearly sighting the seekers.

It seemed obvious that that's where he'd hit it, but she hadn't thought he would risk injuring his own player to get the Slytherin seeker. That kind of calculated risk was usually favored by Ravenclaws.

But, she realized as she looked at the seekers, he wouldn't have to worry about hitting his own player. Draco was clearly the better seeker, and he was steadily pulling ahead of his Gryffindor competition. In a few seconds there would be enough space between them to easily send Draco off course without threatening the Gryffindor seeker.

No doubt either Fred or George assumed Draco would swerve out of the way when he heard the crack and realized where it was heading, but Rigel knew Draco better, and knew that if there was one person besides Flint on the field stubborn enough not to dodge a bludger, it was Draco.

Also, Draco trusted her. He wouldn't worry about bludgers on the pitch with Rigel as a beater. So she couldn't let him be hit, but she was both too far away to intercept it and too encumbered with her own bludger to even get close enough to-oh.

That was it.

Draco was on the North side of the pitch, whichever twin had the bludger was hitting from the South West, Bole was flying across the pitch from the South toward Draco, but he clearly wouldn't make it in time either. And Rigel... Rigel was on the East side of the pitch, and flying quickly toward the center... with her own bludger.

She whistled sharply, three short notes that meant something like 'this one's mine' or 'got it under control' depending on the situation. Bole looked to her, narrowed his eyes, but slowed down and veered away from the situation nonetheless. Rigel waited until the Weasley twin set the bludger up with a short tap and then swung his arm back for the real hit. Then she rolled sharply to the side and let the bludger pass in front of her before turning to line her own shot up. Several things happened in quick succession.

First, the Gryffindor beater began to swing his bat. Then, an instant later, the crowd erupted. She vaguely realized that Draco had caught the snitch-was holding it up-and the Slytherins' cheers were astonishingly loud. But, more importantly for Rigel, the redheaded twin couldn't check his release in time. His momentum was already set, and even though the game had ended a split-second earlier, his bat cracked against the bludger and sent it careening toward Draco, who was hovering triumphantly with his fist held high.

No one heard the crack of the bat over the sound of the crowd.

All this Rigel took in and processed in the space between second, and then she was sighting the other bludger's trajectory and letting her own arm swing forward and connect the bat to ball with a resounding thud that sent vibrations up her arm.

Her bludger shot forward violently, so much force behind it that its trajectory was perfectly straight. For two seconds, three seconds, she could see nothing except the two bludgers growing steadily closer to both Draco and one another. Then, with a CRACK that was heard even over the roars of the fans, the two bludgers collided and Rigel's bludger, having been hit significantly harder due to the Gryffindor beater trying to check his swing at the last minute, sent the other bludger spinning off course. Both spiraled away harmlessly into open air, and Rigel relaxed, breathing a long sigh of released energy.

She saw Draco look around at the phenomenally loud sound of two bludgers connecting. He looked back at the Weasley twin who had hit the first bludger, frowned, then looked toward Rigel. He seemed puzzled for a moment, then his eyes grew wide as he realized generally what had happened. Rigel sent him a thumbs up sign from across the air, because even though it was the most cliché hand sign ever, it was the only one that expressed, 'it's all good' across a distance. Draco grinned then, and raised his hand in a mock salute to her.

The next moment, the chasers, who had been hung up trying to score on the other side of the pitch, descended on Draco with exuberance, and he was lost to her sight in a sea of green and silver.

They all descended, more than ready to get out of the air and stretch their stiff legs. Slytherin fans were flooding the pitch, offering congratulations and admirations for the team. Draco was glowing under the approval, and Rigel almost didn't have the heart to remind him he was supposed to meet up with his parents after the game. Then she thought of Pansy's face if she let him forget, and decided Draco could be fawned over back in the common room later.

She waded through the mass of people and pulled Draco out by the sleeve.

"Ow! Hey-oh, hi, Rigel," Draco said when he caught sight of the person pulling at him, "Great game."

"You too," Rigel said, "Really amazing catch."

"It was," Draco agreed grinning, "Though it was almost the last thing I ever did. Thanks, by the way. I can't believe you actually hit a bludger with another bludger. Only you."

Rigel smiled slightly, "I figured you wouldn't want to get blood all over you before you meet your mother."

"Mother? Oh! Mother! Yes, parents, right," Draco hurriedly smoothed his windswept hair and dusted his hands down his robes, "Almost forgot."

Rigel thought it would be rude to point out that he *did* forget, and just walked calmly in his wake as her friend hurried off the pitch and up the stairs to the Staff Box.

They entered the box to see that most of the staff had already vacated it. McGonagall sent a rather sour look at Snape on her way out, muttering to herself about unfair bets as she stepped around Rigel and Draco to get to the stairs. Snape just smirked and exuded a general air of supreme satisfaction.

Pansy was still there, smiling widely and flushed from the cold. "Draco! Rigel! Well done, both of you."

"Thanks, Pans," Draco said, smiling back just as broadly, "Hello Mother, Father. Thank you for coming."

Mrs. Malfoy stepped forward to embrace her son lightly, "Draco, darling, that was splendid. We're so proud of you."

Draco's face couldn't have possibly gotten any happier in that moment, "It was nothing, Mother. Just a bit of fun."

Mr. Malfoy chuckled lightly, "Are you sure this is our son, Dear? I remember the blonde hair, but I don't think we put any humble bones in the mix when we decided to have an Heir."

"It must be a recent development," Mrs. Malfoy said, smiling, "Perhaps a result of environmental stimulus." She glanced subtly toward Rigel, who pretended not to notice.

Draco sighed, "When I was a child and I threw a tantrum, they gave me a toy, but now that I'm winning Quidditch matches, this is how they show their love and support. Oh, the pain of growing old."

Pansy laughed and even Rigel had to crack a real smile at that one.

Snape merely shook his head and drawled, "When your joints revolt against your nervous system and your hair begins falling out, then you may speak of the pains of growing old."

This drew a smile from the elder Malfoy's and caused Draco to look even more jokingly put out.

"Hello, Professor," Rigel said, adding her greetings to Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy as well.

"Mr. Black," Snape looked her over briefly, "You appear to be in good health after all."

"Were you ill, Rigel?" Mrs. Malfoy asked.

Rigel felt her cheeks color ever so slightly as Pansy and Draco burst into amused laughter. She shook her head, but Draco had to explain.

"Rigel was off his potion-brewing," he said between laughs, "He doesn't brew for two nights in a row, and Uncle Snape can only assume he's been severely ill. Almost didn't let him play this afternoon, he was so worried."

Snape's, "I was merely concerned for the health of one of my students," went unheeded. The Malfoy's shot both Rigel and Snape amused looks, though for differing reasons.

"That was an excellent shot," Mr. Malfoy eventually commented, "For a moment it seemed as though Draco would not walk away from his first match unscathed after all."

"Indeed," Mrs. Malfoy added, "I feel better about letting Draco play, now that it is clear he is well looked after."

Rigel shook their thanks off uncomfortably, "Just doing my job as a beater."

The conversation moved to other things, and shortly after that the Malfoy's said goodbye.

As Draco and Rigel were walking back towards the locker rooms to gather their things and change out of their uniforms, they were waylaid at the door by a very anxious looking Weasley twin.

"There you two are!" Fred said, scrambling up from the grass he'd been sitting on, "I thought you were inside-wondered what was taking so long, frankly."

"You were waiting for us?' Draco asked, "Why?"

"Wanted to apologize," Fred said earnestly, "You know, for the bludger at the end there."

Draco pursed his lips, "It was you that sent it at me?"

"No," Fred said, "It was George. He's really sorry about it, and he says if you want to take it to Madam Hooch and have him written up for continuing play after the game was over, he won't contest it. He really didn't mean to," Fred added, "He just couldn't stop his swing once he'd realized you already caught the snitch."

"Where's he then?" Draco asked, raising his chin.

"Hospital Wing," Fred said, scuffing his foot against the earth agitatedly, "He sprained his wrist pretty badly trying to curb his momentum at the last second. He wanted me to tell you, though, that he really wasn't trying to be an ass or anything, taking a pot-shot."

Draco shifted uncomfortably, "Tell your brother to forget the incident. Our families are at odds, but as far as I'm concerned this was nothing but a misunderstanding. It wouldn't be very sporting of me to blame your brother for doing his best to win, since I was doing the same. Besides," he glanced at Rigel, who blinked at him questioningly, "Rigel is friends with the two of you, and he doesn't seem to be upset. Generally I've found that Rigel is a good judge of what things to be upset about, at least as long as it doesn't concern himself."

Rigel sighed, "You had to qualify that last bit, did you?"

"Never let it be said that Draco Malfoy makes sweeping generalizations without particularizing," Draco said, turning his nose up in a facsimile of self-importance.

Fred cracked a grin, "You know, I always thought Malfoy's had no sense of humor, but I guess it's just too pretentious to be readily approachable."

Draco narrowed his eyes, "Who, exactly, is apologizing to whom again?"

Fred just laughed, "I've already forgotten, just like you said."

"Weasley's," Draco huffed.

"You know, I think that's the nicest thing you've ever said to me, Draco," Fred said cheerfully.

"Who said you could use my given name?"

"In fact, I think you're starting to grow on me," Fred said thoughtfully, "I just might keep you."

"Keep me?" Draco spluttered.

"I wonder what Mum would say if I brought home a Malfoy for Christmas."

"Rigel, why are you friends with this outrageous cretin again?"

Rigel just shrugged, "For the same reason I'm friends with you."

Before Draco could decide whether that was insulting or not, Rigel dragged him back up to the castle, said goodbye to Fred in the Entrance Hall, and distracted Draco with re-living the more interesting parts of the game on the way back to the Slytherin common room.

They only stayed there an hour before they had to go to dinner. Draco lingered over his strawberry tarts so they were a bit late getting back to the common room after they'd eaten.

The party was in full swing when they arrived. Someone had connected a radio to the Wizarding Wireless and cranked up the volume something fierce. Rigel almost wanted to step back out into the hallway, it was so loud.

Draco immediately dove into the crowd, searching among the heads of their housemates for the rest of the Quidditch team. Rigel spared a moment to look for Pansy, saw her being entertained by Rosier and Rookwood near one of the fireplaces, and then made a beeline for her dorm room. She wouldn't say no to a little peace, if not necessarily quiet since she suspected the Weird Sisters would probably bleed through the door. She wanted to go over her own performance in the game, decide how to improve it, and then move on to one of her other projects.

It was probably too loud for Occlumency, but maybe she could-

"Oi! Black!"

Rigel glanced around to try and identify the one calling her among all the other people shouting and celebrating.

"Over here!"

It was Adrian Pucey. Assuming he wanted to say something inane and/or perfunctory about the game, she politely veered toward the couch he was lounging on with Bole and Bletchley.

"What is it, Pucey?"

"Hear that?" Adrian glanced at the other two with amused incredulity, "We've just won the biggest game of the year, against our rivals the odious lions no less, and he says, 'what is it, Pucey?' Cool character, this one, eh boys?"

Bole just grunted, saying, "Nice shot at the end there, Black. Had no idea where you were going with it when you whistled. Honestly, I thought you'd aim for Weasley-it's what I'd have done, if I had a bludger."

Rigel just nodded her thanks, not sure what to say besides, "Good game yourself."

"Man, did you see Wood's face when he figured out the whistling thing on that opening chaser play?" Bletchley chuckled, "That ought to keep Flint in visual ammunition for at least a month."

"Not that any of us wants to picture our illustrious captain in the sort of situation he'd require said visual stimulus," Adrian grimaced, "Thanks for that, Miles."

Rigel must have looked a bit confused, because Bole nudged Adrian and glanced toward her pointedly.

"Right," Adrian grimaced, looking embarrassed, "You'll understand when you're older, Black."

"Or not," Bletchley shrugged, "Depending on whether you swing your bat as freely as your father apparently did."

Rigel was, if nothing else, even more confused at that point. She recognized the general superior tone of someone making an innuendo, and guessed they were talking about something depraved from the half-hearted attempt to shield her from it. Though what it had to do with Flint, Wood, herself, or Sirius, who hadn't even been a beater in school, she wasn't sure. Taking a stab at following the conversation, she said, "I'm sure my father's adolescent antics are none of my business."

"I suppose he did settle down right quick with a witch in the end," Adrian said, shrugging.

Ah. Rigel mentally nodded as she understood. Something about homosexuality, then. She did have a vague idea that Uncle Sirius hadn't been terribly picky in the sex of his partners before he married Diana. Still, now that she had the gist of it, she rather thought she'd been given too much information about her captain.

She attempted to bow politely out of the conversation and head to bed, but Adrian waylaid her once more.

"Hang on, Black, I forgot what I called you over for in the first place," he said waving her closer so that he could lower his voice a bit, "The thing is, I'm in a bit of a spot, and I was hoping you'd be able to help me out."

Rigel tilted her head to indicate open curiosity.

"I'd compensate you, of course," Adrian said quickly, his cajoling tone causing Rigel to brace herself mentally for the request. If he was offering compensation upfront, it must be pretty onerous. "See, you know Eve?"

"Who?" Rigel frowned.

"You know," Adrian leant forward to say quietly, "My snake."

Rigel raised an eyebrow, "Your snake is male."

Adrian waved her aside, "I know, I named him Evan but I call him Eve because it's funny." When Rigel didn't say anything to that, he added, "You know, because it's ironic. Like, the muggle creation story with the garden, and the fruit of evil or whatever-"

"He's got it, Adrian, he just thinks Evan is a stupid name for a snake regardless," Bletchley rolled his eyes.

Rigel said nothing, though it was a ridiculous name for a snake.

"Anyway, see, the problem is about Eve," Adrian went on.

"Is he sick?" Rigel asked.

"No, he's... loose. Again."

Rigel blinked and Adrian smiled a bit sheepishly, "I know I shut the lid to his cage thing, but somehow the clever little thing got out during the game, and I need someone good with snakes to find him."

"You want me to look for your snake," Rigel said, gazing around the common room, "Now?"

Adrian sighed, "We already checked our dorm room and the common room fully before the party got into full swing. I think the loud music's scared it off somewhere else, but it can't get into the other dorms because of the wards up-nothing can get into a dorm room unless one of the legitimate tenants carried or pulls it through."

"You think it got out of the common room somehow?" Rigel guessed.

"Well," Adrian hesitated, "It sounds far-fetched, but it could have slipped out as someone was coming back in. The wall was open for pretty long stretches when the Quidditch crowd came back."

Rigel nodded as though that made sense-even excited, Slytherins weren't exactly an unobservant lot. Surely someone would have noticed a snake moving about.

"So will you go find it?" Adrian asked, "I know there's the party going on, but it looked like you were headed to bed, right? You don't really seem the partying type anyway, and being so familiar with snakes, you'd probably know just where to look for one. I'd go to Rookwood, but he's busy trying to get Alice to loosen her-"

"Adrian, you're rambling," Bole said with another pointed look at Rigel.

"Right, sorry," Adrian said, "There was some Firewhisky going around before you got here, and I think... I know I had a few sips more than I should have. Sorry we didn't save any for you and Malfoy, but, well..."

"Snape would have our heads if we got his precious godson drunk," Bletchley said bluntly, "And that goes double for his favorite pupil."

Rigel wasn't sure what to say to that, though she was grateful no one would be offering Draco intoxicants.

"So? How 'bout it?" Adrian pressed.

Rigel weighed her options. Sit in her dorm room, trying to drown out the noise until about four in the morning when the commotion died down. Stay out in the common room and... she grimaced lightly... mingle. Or leave the common room all together and go on a goose chase... or a snake chase, she supposed. She imagined how dark and quiet and still the dungeons would be right about then, and that decided her.

"Sure, I'll try to find... Evan," she said, "You owe me, though."

"Sure, whatever you want," Adrian said. "Wait, no, I didn't mean that. Damn booze. Okay, I'll come up with something tomorrow, deal?"

"Good enough," Rigel said.

She slipped through the crowd once more and left the common room unnoticed by the jubilant Slytherins.

The dungeons were as eerily cold and silent as she'd guessed they'd be, and she took a moment to just breathe in the solitude before getting out the Marauder's Map. It wouldn't show snakes on it, of course, but it would ensure that no one was in the dungeons besides her.

Seeing that the coast was clear until at least the Great Hall, Rigel walked as far as she dared into the catacombs of the deep dungeons, where only every other torch was kept lit by the house elves, and then started back toward the common room. She figured she'd do an organized sweep of the deepest levels to the common room, then do another sweep from the Great Hall to the common room. Hopefully the snake was somewhere in between, because if it had gotten further than the first floor in search of food or warmth, it would be much harder to find.

It took her a good fifteen minutes or so to reach the furthest point she was willing to brave alone, and another twenty minutes to come back, slowed as she was by stopping every so often to see if anything was responding to the hisses she sent out constantly.

" *Any sssnakesss down here?* " she called, " *I'm looking for a familiar named... Evan.*" She grimaced. It sounded twice as ridiculous in Parseltongue. "*Can you hear thisss?* "

By the time she reached the common room corridor once more, her throat felt a bit raspy from all the hissing, so she started calling less frequently, just once every few corridors she checked, making her way up towards the Great Hall.

As she reached the stair to the first floor, she heard it. The subtle, monotonous speech patterns she had come to associate with the snake tongue.

" Coming, Massster... not long now... rip... yesss... sssso hungry after sssso long... "

At first, Rigel thought she had found Evan. Then she realized that the voice she was hearing was almost... crazed. There was a disturbing edge to it, and it sounded deeper than any snake she'd ever met before.

The voice faded away, and Rigel slowly began moving after it. If there was a hungry snake on the loose, she should make sure it got back to its 'Master' so it could be fed. Snakes were all well and good, but they could be vicious if denied food for too long.

She couldn't hear the mystery snake clearly after that, but she caught the faintest sounds of hissing every now and then, which kept her going in what she thought was the right direction. She followed it up the stairs and across the Entrance Hall, up more stairs and finally down a corridor on the fifth floor. She was sure the voice had stopped somewhere around there, but she couldn't figure out which direction to head in.

Just then, the sound of smooth scales across a stone floor sounded behind her and she turned, only to come face to quivering tongue with Adrian's snake, Evan.

" It was you ?" she asked, surprised. She could have sworn she heard a different snake.

" I am alwayssss me," Evan said, seemingly unruffled, " But what are you doing here, sssspeaker? Wasss it you who called the great one? You ssshould be more careful... that one iss not what ssshe once wasss. "

Rigel bent down to gaze seriously at the snake, *" I don't undersstand. I wasss looking for you, and have called no one else. Who iss thiss 'great one? '"*

The snake reared back to sway uncertainly, " *You do not know? Then perhapsss I ssshould not tell you. Bessst not to get involved in ssspeaker affairsss... yesss... do you have a mousse?* "

Rigel shook her head bemusedly, " *Sssorry, I didn't think to obtain one before* -"

BOOM.

The floor beneath Rigel's feet shook violently and she went tumbling down to meet it, completely taken off guard.

" *What wasss that?* " she asked, not even realizing for a moment that she was still speaking in Parseltongue.

" *Too clossse,*" Evan said, coiling and uncoiling agitatedly, " *We mussst go, go now .*"

Rigel shook her head, " *There could have been sssomeone hurt by the explosssion. You go back to where you sssleep, okay? Do you remember the way?* "

" *Of coursse,*" the snake hissed, slowly moving toward the nearest set of stairs, " *Sssure you don't want to flee ?*"

Rigel shook her head again, and the snake slithered off quickly. Rigel could see a cloud of dust coming from around the corner ahead of her, so she knew the explosion had to have been nearby. She was met with nothing but smoke in the corridor next to hers, but in the one after that, she found the origin of all the upset.

There was a large hole in the floor. The stone had crumbled down into the fourth floor corridor underneath, and Rigel could see exposed pipes and ventilation shafts sticking out of the edges of the hole. One of the pipes destroyed had clearly been for heating something, as great gusts of steam were still pouring out of it into the corridor.

And there, on the other side of that gaping chasm and barely visible through the mist of steam and dust, was a body. Rigel's heart stuttered for a moment and she scrambled quickly around the edge of the corridor, where there was just enough room for her to press herself to the wall and skirt the empty space where the floor used to be. The steam made the air hot and sticky, but she ignored the discomfort. She carefully picked her way around the hole and then dropped to her knees beside the prone form of a very still young girl.

She took in the Ravenclaw tie and dark, plaited hair. It was a girl in her grade, she realized, one of the Patil sisters. The girl was slightly dusty from the debris in the air, but she wasn't bloody or broken anywhere. She also wasn't breathing.

Shakily, she put her fingers to the girl's throat and waited... and waited.

No pulse.

In less than a second, she wasn't in the corridor anymore. She was in an alley. It was dark, but flashes of light lit up the scene. Nothing looked like Hogwarts, but there was a body in front of her still. A blue vest stained red. Eyes going wide, jaw going slack-

She shook herself out of it. Not slack, no, *her* face wasn't slack. It was rigid. In fact... Patil's entire body was rigid. The explosion had just gone off. She wasn't visibly injured, and even if she had succumbed to internal trauma, rigor mortis didn't set in for a few hours-it was why you had to harvest animal organs so soon after death if you wanted them to be usable in a potion, because the chemicals that caused the stiffening of limbs messed up their magical potency.

"Petrified," she whispered. It was the only logical explanation, especially given what had happened to Neville under eerily similar circumstances. She inhaled shakily, then glanced around the corridor to see if there were any portraits hanging nearby that she could ask

to fetch a teacher. It didn't seem right to just leave the Patil girl lying there.

The sound of rapid footsteps echoed on stone and Rigel shouted, "Here! Help!" She coughed as dust from the air made a quick migration into her lungs, rasping as loud as she could, "West side corridor."

The footsteps sounded quicker and faster, and soon someone—an adult judging by height alone, appeared on the other side of the hole through the mist, before skidding to a halt at its edge.

"What on earth—Mr. Black! Is that you?" It was Professor McGonagall, wand before her, hair unbound, and wrapped up in what was clearly sleeping attire.

"There's room on the edges to go around the hole, Professor," Rigel said, more calm now that there was someone else to take charge, "Miss Patil—the one in Ravenclaw—is here. I think... I think she's been petrified."

McGonagall let out a little gasp, then immediately waved her wand and cast a wordless spell at the missing floor. It seemed to create an invisible barrier over the hole, because she ran straight across the empty air without wasting time picking her way around the outskirts of the corridor like Rigel had.

"Move aside, Mr. Black, let me see," she said briskly, bending down to put her fingers to Patil's neck herself. Rigel scooted back and took a moment to pull the collar of her robes up over her mouth and breathe deeply without fear of dust.

"Too stiff," McGonagall muttered to herself, "Not again."

"She *is* petrified?" Rigel asked, her voice muffled through her robes, "She'll be okay with a restorative, won't she?"

McGonagall's face was scarily blank, "Eventually, yes." Glancing over at Rigel, McGonagall waved her wand again and all the dust and dirt in the air was Vanished abruptly. After sending another quick spell at the pipe still gushing steam, that stopped as well. Rigel had a moment of awe in which she marveled at McGonagall's ability to send such tiny particles of dust into non-being so easily, and then they both turned toward the other side of the hole as more footsteps came running their way.

"Here, Albus!" McGonagall called.

Rigel didn't know how McGonagall had known it was Professor Dumbledore, but that was who came around the corner, which was clearly visible thanks to McGonagall's spell. The aged wizard took one look at the hole and then stepped deliberately into thin air, as if he could see the barrier charm McGonagall had erected as easily as other people would see a bridge.

"Is it the same?" he asked McGonagall.

She nodded tightly, "Miss Patil, of Ravenclaw. The students will need to be notified, and someone will have to see to Miss Patil's sister. The debris will have to be cleared away by tomorrow morning, and then there's the poor girl's parents to floo-"

"Minerva," Dumbledore said calmly, "Please go fetch Miss Pavarti Patil and bring her to the Hospital Wing. I will notify the students and the parents. The others will be along shortly to mend the castle, though I daresay the castle herself will not allow this rupture in her infrastructure to remain for long."

McGonagall nodded again, and stood quickly before crossing the invisible floor-barrier once more and hurrying away.

Dumbledore turned to Rigel and gazed at her over his half-moon spectacles, "Mr. Black, did you see what caused the explosion?"

Rigel shook her head, "I was close, though, sir. I was just two corridors over when I heard it go off, and I got here as quick as I could, but I had to go around the hole, and with all the dust in the air... well, I didn't see anyone, but if they'd left from this side of the corridor, they could have gotten far enough for me to miss them before I arrived."

Dumbledore nodded gravely, and Rigel thought for a moment, before adding, "There weren't any footprints." When the headmaster turned sharp blue eyes on her, she explained, "In the dust, I mean, before McGonagall vanished it so I could breathe. So either it was someone or something with a way to avoid leaving tracks, or..."

"Or they left before the explosion occurred," Dumbledore said, an approving note to his voice. He stood from where he'd been crouched over Patil's petrified form, and waved his wand in the same wordless, seemingly perfunctory manner that McGonagall had, as though it was no more than a prop he indulged himself with when casting. His eyes traced patterns in the air that only he could see, and he said, "Yes... delayed bombardment spell... but dangerously overpowered, by the look of it. Someone with a lot of raw power, but little control."

Rigel said nothing as Dumbledore continued to cast spells and mutter to himself. Maybe it was a Gryffindor thing, she thought, remembering McGonagall doing the same, but then again Draco muttered to himself sometimes, too, so perhaps it was a stress-related thing.

Eventually, Dumbledore stopped staring into the space around them and pointed his wand at his throat before beginning to speak in a calm, even tone, "Students are asked to kindly remain in their common rooms until further notice." Rigel gave a little start when his voice echoed around them in the hallway, and more distantly as well. She realized it was some kind of voice projecting spell, and guessed the headmaster's words would be heard in every part of the school while he held it, "Your Heads of House will be with you shortly, and until that time please listen to your prefects and remain calm. The

castle is perfectly safe. The wards and foundations are steady. Please, don't be alarmed, and don't leave your common rooms for any reason."

He stopped, moved the wand away from his throat, and the great echoing voice died away.

A moment later, several more teachers arrived on the scene. Professors Flitwick and Sprout arrived, followed soon after by Professor Snape, who had no doubt been the farthest from the fifth floor when the explosion went off.

"Mr. Black," Snape scowled when he saw Rigel sitting on the stone floor beside Patil's body. His tone of voice seemed to say, *In the middle of things again? Really?*

Rigel tilted her lips ruefully, "Hello Professor."

Flitwick let out a sound of dismay and rushed across the barrier, which none of the other Heads of House had any trouble recognizing either, Rigel noted. "Miss Patil! Oh... no... Albus?"

"Petrified, I'm afraid, Filius," Dumbledore set a hand on Flitwick's tiny shoulder, "She will be all right, in time, but for now we need to get her to the Hospital Wing. Her sister awaits her there with Minerva."

Flitwick's eyes were a bit watery, but he nodded firmly. He conjured a stretched quickly and levitated Patil carefully onto it before levitating the whole thing away towards the nearest staircase.

Sprout lifted McGonagall's barrier spell once she'd crossed, and immediately dropped down to the corridor below to begin clearing away fallen debris with her wand.

Snape gestured for Rigel to stand and looked her over impatiently, "Injured?"

"No, sir."

"What are you doing here?" he asked, dark eyes boring into her.

Rigel winced, "I was... well, I happened to be nearby when the explosion went off, so I came to see if anyone needed help."

Snape growled and narrowed his eyes at her, "You just happened to be on the fifth floor, half an hour past curfew, on a night when every single other member of your house is in the common room, celebrating the Quidditch victory you played an integral part in securing?"

"Oh, is it past curfew already?" Seeing Snape's thunderous look, Rigel gulped and looked at the floor, "That is to say, yes, sir."

"Look at me, and tell me again," Snape said with false patience, "What. Were. You. Doing. Here?"

When Rigel paused too long in answering, Snape took hold of her shoulders and shook her ever so slightly. Not enough to really even move her, but enough to make his point-Snape never laid his hands on his students, so that he did so only emphasized how deadly serious he was being.

"Don't you realize what it looks like, boy?" he said, lowering his voice so that Sprout and Dumbledore couldn't hear his every word so clearly, "A Slytherin found alone at the scene of a grisly crime? I suppose Minerva found you first, seeing as she's already come and gone. Professor McGonagall is the most level headed of her kind, yet even she cannot always quell the impulse to look to Slytherin when things go wrong."

"I didn't do anything wrong," Rigel protested, "Except for being out past curfew, and I really didn't realize it was that late."

"*It doesn't matter*," Snape stressed, "All that matters is that you were found at the scene, without a good reason for being here. You are lucky only the faculty are a witness to this. If so much as one painting, one ghost, were to have seen you here with Patil's petrified

form, the whole school would know, and you would be villainized, guilty or not."

Rigel swallowed thickly, "They'll know by now I'm not in the common room, if the prefects did a roster check. What should I say?"

Snape inhaled deeply, "You will tell them-rather, I will inform them that you were consulting me on a discrepancy in one of the recipes I'd given you in my office when we heard the explosion. You remained in my office until I collected you when the commotion had died down. You didn't see anything, you don't know anything."

"Yes, sir," Rigel said, "I'll tell them it was Spurrier's Solution, in case anyone asks or you have to mention it."

"Very well," Snape nodded sharply, "I will escort you back to the common room momentarily."

Rigel waited while Snape assisted Dumbledore in some kind of tracery magic that was beyond her understanding. They didn't seem to find anything conclusive, which only increased the Potion Master's ire.

On the way back to the common room, Snape asked her once more, "What were you doing out of the common room for so long that you missed curfew?"

"I was looking for something," Rigel said, deliberately vague, "And I wanted to get away from the party. It was loud, and rowdy. I just wanted to go somewhere quiet for a bit, and lost track of time."

Snape shot her a disbelieving look, but merely said, "Don't go wandering around on your own anymore, Mr. Black. Whatever the headmaster says, Hogwarts is clearly not safe at this time."

Rigel couldn't help but agree.

When they reached the dungeons, Snape said, "You should be fine from here. Don't dawdle. Go straight to the common room and knock. The wall will be sealed shut, but the prefect will let you in if you give the emergency password. It is 'asphodel.'"

Rigel nodded, and continued the journey through the dungeons alone.

At the common room entrance, she found Evan the snake coiled miserably on the cold stone floor. When he flicked his tongue out and caught her scent, he immediately lifted his head, " *Ssspeaker! Help me, ssspeaker. Thisss ssstupid wall won't open. OPEN. Sssee? Nothing...* "

Rigel raised an eyebrow, " *You can't jussst open it by sssaying 'open' you know. You have to have the passssword .*"

If a snake could frown, Evan would be scowling, " *Can ssso. That isss how I got out, but it isssn't letting me back in .*"

Rigel paused. She supposed it would make a kind of sense for Salazar Slytherin-the most famous of Parselmouths-to have installed a simple, easy to remember, yet accessible only to him, back-up password to his own common room. Still... open?

" *It'sss under lockdown,*" she explained, " *Becaussse of the explossion. None of the regular passssswords work now .*"

" *Then we ssshall freeze to death,*" Evan said morosely.

Rigel shook her head, " *Come here .*" She held out an arm, which Evan eagerly curled himself around, and tucked him under her sleeve. Then she knocked firmly on the wall and waited.

There was a short buzzing noise from the wall, like a swarm of mosquitoes, and then she recognized the voice of the head girl, Alesana Selwyn, coming through the wall through some sort of communication spell she'd never heard of.

"Who is it?"

"Rigel Black," Rigel said clearly.

She heard someone say, "Rigel!" in the background of the buzzing noise, before they were shushed.

"Password?" Selwyn said, a bit suspiciously.

"Asphodel," Rigel said.

The wall opened and Rigel was unceremoniously pulled inside by her collar.

"Why is it always you, Black?" Selwyn growled with annoyance as she pulled Rigel toward the other second years and deposited her a bit roughly onto the couch, "Do you know how worried you make people? Merlin, but you're a lot of trouble."

Rigel straightened her robes and ran a hand over the sleeve in which Evan was twisting restlessly in a calming manner, "Sorry, Selwyn. Snape detained me in his office while he went to investigate the noise, or I would have been back here as soon as it happened."

"You were with Professor Snape?" Pansy asked, moving to sit beside Rigel and take her hand between her own, "You weren't involved at all in all this commotion, then?"

Rigel felt a stab of guilt, but said, "I was safe in his office the whole time, Pan. Nothing to worry about."

Selwyn went to mark Rigel's name off the roster and Draco frowned at Rigel from where he stood leaning against the arm of the couch she and Pansy sat on.

"Why'd you leave the party like that? No one even knew you'd left, so when we heard the sounds of another piece of the castle being blown up and realized you weren't here, what were we supposed to think?" Draco demanded, looking highly unhappy with her.

"I didn't like all the noise, so I went for a walk," Rigel said.

"Okay, so that's what you told Snape when he found you in the corridors and took you to his office," Draco guessed, voice flat, "Now tell us what you were really doing by yourself in the dungeons while everyone else was having fun."

Rigel sighed, "I was looking for Adrian's snake, if you really want to know. I couldn't tell Snape that, of course, because as far as he's supposed to know, Adrian doesn't have a snake. So if anyone asks, I just needed a bit of air. It wasn't a waste, though. I ended up being able to ask Snape about this recipe for Spurrier's Solution, which I think was miscopied when it was translated from German to Dutch-

Draco interrupted her before she could really get started, "Did you at least find the snake?"

"Oh, yes," Rigel gestured to her arm, which looked a little lumpy under the large robe sleeves.

Draco looked around and then leaned in, whispering, "Did you use... you know... to find it?"

Rigel nodded carefully, "Poor thing was just scared of all the noise."

Pansy made a sympathetic sound almost automatically, then seemed to realize what she'd done on behalf of a snake of all things, and giggled a bit, "I'll go get Adrian," she said, standing, "Discreetly, of course."

A few minutes later, Adrian came wandering over to their group nonchalantly, "Hey, second-years. So, I've been told you found that thing I was looking for earlier, Black."

Rigel nodded, "Do you want it now?"

Adrian glanced around the crowded room full of bored Slytherins and shook his head. Rigel supposed he didn't want to remind everyone

that he was keeping an illegal snake in his dorm room, in case they'd forgotten, "Uh, can you give it to me tomorrow morning?"

Rigel raised an eyebrow, "I guess I can hang onto it tonight."

"Thanks," Adrian said, "I owe you one."

"Two, now," Rigel said, the slightest smile twisting her lips.

The older boy grimaced, "Right, true. Well, thanks again, Black."

Snape came in a while later, explained the situation to the assembled students, then sent them all to bed. There were many different theories and speculations tossed around the dorm that night as to how and why two students had been petrified, and what the explosions meant, but Rigel just sat in bed quietly and kept her thoughts to herself.

After all, what was there to say when a girl was lying still and cold as death in the Hospital Wing, while her sister probably stood over her and cried? What was there to say in the face of such senseless violence and obviously manufactured suffering?

Nothing, Rigel thought as she rolled to her side, careful not to crush Evan the snake, who had curled up in a pile of coils beside her, *there's nothing to be said at all* .

It was dark. Everything was still and silent, like a deserted corridor, and yet there was sound, faint but undeniable, shouts and screams. She could feel stone beneath her feet, and smell dust in the air, and then the stone under her feet was soft, pliant like dirt, and she could smell something burning, burning up ahead. There was smoke and dust all around her, she couldn't see, and then she stumbled, looked down, and froze. She had tripped over a cold, pale arm, attached to a cold, pale hand that was reaching, reaching for something it would never obtain.

The arm belonged to a dead girl, long dark hair spilled out over the alley-corridor-alley. Her blue vest was stained red, but she had no visible wounds. Just wide, staring eyes.

Rigel backed away swiftly, allowing the smoke and dust to take away her sight until she couldn't see the dead girl anymore. Then, her foot encountered something unexpected, and she fell backwards with a small cry of alarm. She landed on hard stone, but felt sewer muck splash into her hair. Dazed, she turned her head to the side and let out a short scream when she saw Neville's lifeless face just inches from her own. She scrambled away, shaking her head back and forth as his blue vest slowly faded and became deep purple, then started to drip red blood onto the floor around him. She turned away, couldn't bear to look, but was only confronted with another body in a blue vest.

It was Draco, his silver-grey eyes staring sightlessly at her from where he lay petrified on the ground. Rigel let out a small sob, her breathing accelerating dangerously. Next to him was Pansy, blue vest made of finest silk, and stained irredeemably with a rusty red. Archie, Lily, James, Remus, Sirius, Snape, Theo, Millicent, Mrs. Malfoy, Blaise, Krait, Leo, everyone she knew, petrified and laid out like statues, blue vests all slowly turning red as she watched.

"No," she whispered, eyes full of tears she held back with desperation, "No, please."

She shut her eyes tightly and covered her ears with her hands, but she could still smell the smoke and dust. She shuddered, sinking to the floor and shaking her head over and over, "Not real, not real, please don't be real. I won't let it, I won't let them, I promise, please, please."

"Rigel."

She shook her head, clamping her hands over her ears tightly, "Not real."

"Rigel."

"All a lie, so many lies," she whispered, trembling with the effort not to cry, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to, don't punish them. My fault, all mine, please don't, not them."

"Rigel!"

Who?

"Rigel, wake up!"

Me? Not me?

"Rigel! Wake-that's *it* ."

She was catapulted back into reality when a bucket of water that her shocked brain could only insist was well below freezing temperatures, despite logically knowing that to be impossible, was upended over her bed.

She gasped in air and hugged her arms tightly around herself, shivering and shaking. Their dorm room was lit by the lamps, though it couldn't have been morning yet, and all three of her dorm mates were standing around her bed, various expressions of concern, fear, and tense worry on their faces.

"Rigel, are you okay?" Theo asked.

"Who threw the w-water on me?" she asked, teeth chattering slightly.

Draco, who hastily stashed the bucket in his hand under his bed, said, "You wouldn't wake up. We had to do something."

"Why did I have to wake up?" Rigel frowned. She had a headache and her eyes itched something terrible, "It's not breakfast yet, is it?"

They exchanged looks above her head.

"You were having a nightmare, Rigel," Blaise informed her bluntly, "It was rather disruptive to both your own sleeping pattern and ours, so we decided to wake you rather than wait it out."

Rigel blinked, then flushed slightly when she remembered. The cold water had sobered her brain up so fast it had blanked out the dream she'd been having for a few minutes. It was coming back, though, and this time when she shivered it had nothing to do with the cold. "Sorry," she said, "Didn't mean to wake you."

"We don't care about that," Draco said impatiently, "Are you really okay, Rigel? You sounded..." he looked away uncomfortably for a moment, "Just, I've never heard you sound like that. Like you were really upset or-or-"

"Or scared out of your wits," Theo put in bluntly, "And you were crying."

Rigel immediately wiped her sleeve over her eyes, mentally groaning. *Way to sell the whole teenage boy thing, Rigel*, she told herself bitterly, *Crying over a bad dream. What nonsense.*

"What Theodore means to say," Blaise added tactfully, "Is that the dream appeared to be causing you undue stress. If you are recovered, however, we can all go back to sleep."

Rigel put her head in her hands and scrubbed at her scalp for a moment, "Yes, thank you all. Go back to bed. I'm going to... just sit up a little while."

Waving her dorm mates off, she slid out of bed, ignored Evan the snake's hissed protests, slipped on her shoes, and escaped to the relatively fresher air of the common room.

She sank down onto the couch and stared at the glowing embers of the fire. The nightmare had emotionally exhausted her, but she knew she wouldn't be able to sleep again now. Just as she was considering going into her mind via Occlumency and doing

something about that dream-she had read that it was inadvisable to try and manually suppress memories like that, but surely it couldn't hurt just once-she heard a door click open and then close down the second-year hallway. A moment later Draco walked out fully dressed, spotted her, and joined her on the couch.

"Do you want to talk about it?" he asked after a moment of staring into the fireplace together.

"No use giving you nightmares, too," Rigel said tiredly.

Draco just looked at her, "I wouldn't mind, if it meant yours weren't so bad."

Rigel winced, "Was it really that bad?"

Draco looked away again, into the fire, "We've been friends a year and a half, Rigel, and I've always seen you as the type of person who's... strong, I suppose. No matter what happens, you always seem to know what to do. Nothing surprises you, and nothing bothers you." Rigel started to interrupt, but Draco shook his head, "I mean, that's what I *thought* . Like when you broke your wrist, and didn't care enough to tell anyone, or when Jordon attacked you and we found you just sitting there on the floor, across from that guy's unconscious body, like you were waiting for us. Things like that made me think that there was something setting you apart from the normal people, the ones who got worked up over things and got angry and frustrated with the world."

"That's right," Rigel said wryly, "You've never been around when I've snapped, have you?"

"So you have snapped?" Draco joked weakly.

"Yeah," Rigel closed her eyes, "Snape's seen it a couple of times. That time with Jordon? If you'd gotten there a few minutes earlier, you wouldn't have even recognized me. That's the thing, though.

Jordon deserved it, and Snape can handle it, but I don't ever want to be like that around you or Pansy. I'm dangerous when I'm like that."

Draco looked skeptically at her, "You? Dangerous?"

Rigel nodded seriously, "There's a reason I seem so unaffected and even cold all the time, Draco. It isn't that I don't care about anything. I can't afford to let my emotions rule me, though. When they do, bad things happen. My magic isn't like yours, Draco. I don't have enough control over it."

Draco scoffed, "You have the best control of any of us. You can make your magic do anything."

"That's true," Rigel said, "But there's the kind of control that lets you make something happen, and then there's the kind of control that lets you stop something from happening. I can get my magic to do pretty much anything, I think, and that scares me, but not as much as knowing that if it wanted to hurt something, I might not be able to stop it."

"What do you mean, 'wanted to hurt something'? Magic can't want things," Draco said.

"It responds to my wants," Rigel said carefully, "So I guess I mean I'm afraid of what would happen if I wanted to hurt something, but didn't *really* want to hurt anything."

"That doesn't make sense," Draco said, "But we're getting off topic. I was trying to say that even though I used to think you were something separate from all the things that happen around you, I know better now. I wanted you to know that I don't... think less of you, or anything, just because something in your life affected you enough to give you a nightmare. I don't know if that's something you needed to hear or not, but I wanted to tell you."

Rigel looked over at Draco with surprise, "Thank you. I-Dray, you're a really great friend."

Draco smiled a bit shyly, "Thanks, Rye. You're a pretty awful friend most of the time-"

Rigel elbowed him ungraciously.

"-but when it counts I couldn't think of anyone better."

"Except maybe Pansy," Rigel said, smiling, "She's better than both of us put together."

"Ah, too true," Draco sighed, "But that's usually the way of it with girls."

They sat up and talked the rest of the night, not bringing up the nightmare or anything related to it, just joking and debating and keeping each other company until the dawn.

When the light filtering through the Black Lake turned the windows pale green and a couple of early risers stumbled out of the common room on their way to breakfast, Rigel and Draco returned to their dorm rooms to get ready for the day.

At breakfast, the school was subdued, most of the students quietly eating or whispering about the night before in tones of cautious worry.

Rigel had already finished her oatmeal and was waiting for Pansy to be done with her second cup of tea when an unfamiliar owl dropped a letter on her plate.

It was unaddressed on the envelope, which meant it was probably from Krait. He sent her 'letters' every now and then that were basically an update on what she'd need to brew for the next month or so. He never addressed them and never used the same owl twice. She didn't know if it said more about Krait that he communicated like that or more about her that she appreciated it, but she opened the letter anyway just to kill time. The last four letters had been a simple list of potions in alphabetical order. No greeting, not even signing his

name at the bottom, so she didn't think it would be an issue if she opened it at the table instead of waiting.

She was surprised, however, to see that it was an actual letter-or at least much closer to a letter than Krait had ever gotten before.

Kid,

Got another customer asking about the brewer for my new potions. I put him off, but this one's becoming increasingly insistent. Burke needs two dozen more than usual for next Friday. His Highness says hello, and asks if you'll be around for winter break.

And that was it. Smiling a bit at how short and unsociable Krait's correspondence was, she tucked the letter away into her pocket. She'd have to start making more Blood-Replenisher's for the following Friday, it seemed. She mentally adjusted her brewing schedule to compensate for the extra potions, then adjusted her mental schedule for completing Flint's assignments in turn.

"Anything interesting?" Pansy asked casually, nodding to Rigel's pocket where the letter had been stowed.

"Not really," Rigel shrugged, "Just someone I know from back home checking in on me."

"Hm," Pansy hummed around the rim of her teacup, "Anyone we know?"

"Probably not," Rigel said truthfully, "Halfblood, not from a well-known family. Keeps to himself, mostly."

"Then how do you know him?" Draco asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Met him in a potions shop," Rigel said, smiling slightly.

Draco narrowed his eyes at her, "You're doing it again, aren't you? That thing where you tell the truth but not really."

Rigel tilted her head innocently, "You think so?"

"Our friend is impossible," Draco told Pansy despondently, "And the worst part is I'm starting to not even care anymore."

"That's what I've been telling you from the beginning, Dear," Pansy said, patting Draco on the head lightly, "You could have saved yourself a lot of trouble if you'd listened to me from the start."

"I'm stuck with you two forever, aren't I?" Draco drawled.

"Only until you bore us," Rigel said blithely, "After that Pansy and I will find someone interesting."

"Or at least taller," Pansy mused.

"Like Rigel can talk."

"I wasn't the one talking."

"That's because you never say anything."

"Silence is a virtue."

"Silence is infuriating."

"You're both infuriating, so stop nettling one another and admit you're the best of friends." Pansy scolded them lightly.

They looked at one another, and simultaneously sighed in defeat.

"Yes Pansy."

[end of chapter seven].

A/N: Yes, Rigel gets a lot of clues in this one. Things will move along a slightly different trajectory than in the HP books, though everything

kind of plays out the same in the end... and at the same time really not the same way at all. You'll see.

Much Love,

Chapter 8

A/N: Okay, here's number one. I wanted *both* nine and ten done by the 25th, but... yeah. At least I tried ^^ . This one's kind of a little tiny bit dark in the middle, but hopefully it cheers up by the end. If you don't want any clouds on your Christmas Day, though, you might save it until tomorrow. Anyway, Happy Holidays, and for anyone who had finals, I hope they went well. I don't own anything, as usual, in *Harry Potter* or in *Song of the Lioness* .

Also, I just wanted to thank those of you who send me messages or leave reviews with suggestions in them. Even if I can't incorporate all of them-it would be hard to pair Harry with Draco, Leo, George, *and* Riddle, for instance, I still try to springboard off of them and see what can fit where. It's great inspiration, and just plain fun to try incorporating your ideas, so thank you everyone, again.

The Serpentine Subterfuge:

Chapter 8:

Later that afternoon, when classes were over and just as it seemed people had started to process and move past the shock of another attack, Rigel, Draco, and Pansy overheard Daphne Greengrass talking loudly to a number of their year mates in the common room. When they heard the name "Black" echo clearly over the low murmur of assorted conversations going on about the room, Rigel was all for ignoring it, but Draco scowled and Pansy drew in a slow breath before turning on her heel and marching right over to where Greengrass held court with Davis, Crabbe, and Goyle on a loveseat by one of the fireplaces.

Draco followed a moment later and Rigel, after giving into a tired sigh, followed after.

"Say that again, please," Pansy requested in voice whose softness did nothing to hide the steel underlying it.

"Why, Parkinson," Greengrass simpered, "Whatever are you talking about?"

"I speak only of that which you spoke of first, Greengrass," Pansy said, not budging an inch, "I would like you to say it again, to my face."

Greengrass sneered, "I was only saying what everyone else was thinking." Crabbe looked up from the cauldron cake he was eating with a frown on his face, but Greengrass silenced him with a look, "I mean, it's obvious, isn't it?"

"What's obvious?" Adrian Pucey had ambled up to their group and was looking between Pansy and Greengrass apprehensively. Maybe he'd hoped to diffuse the situation, but Rigel could already tell that Greengrass had been hoping for that exact question, and was only going to play up her pettiness even more now that her audience was growing.

"Just the fact that Black is clearly the one orchestrating all these attacks," Greengrass said, tossing her hair unconcernedly despite the sudden silence that had fallen in the vicinity at the sound of her accusation being repeated, loudly, for a second time.

"If by 'obvious' you mean 'vicious gossip you made up on the spot,' then yes, you air-headed twit, that would be considered *obvious*," Draco ground out, venom practically dancing off his tongue.

Greengrass snarled, but Pucey held up a hand as though he could physically stem the flow of enmity in the space between Draco and Greengrass.

"Well, insults aside, I really don't think that's obvious either," Pucey said calmly, "Rigel Black has, to my knowledge, never expressed any latent sociopathic tendencies, nor any remarkably aggressive

behavior at all, actually. In fact, I think if I had to pick the least confrontational Slytherin in your year, it would definitely be Rigel Black."

Everyone looked over to where she was uncomfortably standing a little way away from the argument, clearly trying to avoid getting involved, and Adrian snorted, "Case in point."

Greengrass scoffed, "Oh, please, Black's act is so obviously fake."

"You keep using that word," Pansy said sharply, "When in fact nothing of the sort is obvious to anyone but you. Why do you suppose that is?"

"*Obviously*," Greengrass stressed, "It's because he's got you all so fooled by his innocent 'I just don't want to be noticed in life' routine. What a joke. He's always showing off how smart and talented he thinks he is, and then it's all, 'I'm really not that great,' as if we can't see how much he loves the attention."

There was a beat of silence in which most people in hearing range stared at Greengrass with a mixture of incredulity and distaste.

"And, setting that rather transparently insecure statement aside as well," Pucey said, rolling his eyes briefly, "That still doesn't seem like a good enough reason to accuse Rigel of attacking those students."

"And you really ought to have proof before stating your suspicions out loud like that," Blaise had wandered over from his studying to join the conversation as well, "If nothing else, it's just good prudence."

Greengrass lifted her chin, "Of course I have proof. Where was Rigel Black during both attacks?" she looked around as if waiting for an answer, but spoke too quickly for anyone to interject, "We don't know, because *both* times he was the last person to return to the common room, significantly later than everyone else and with a half-baked alibi at that."

Draco narrowed his eyes at Greengrass, "Pansy and I were with him after Longbottom's attack, and we explained why we were late. Besides which, that was after the actual attack. Rigel was in the Great Hall with everyone else when the explosion went off."

"The explosion was caused by a time-delayed bombardment hex," Greengrass countered smugly, "I overheard Professor Flitwick talking about it with McGonagall. He had plenty of time after doing the deed to sneak down and join the rest of us. Weren't you late to the Great Hall on Halloween, too, Black? Who's late to the Halloween Feast unless they're up to no good?"

Rigel blinked at suddenly being addressed, despite the fact that the entire conversation was about her, "Yes, I was. A potion I was brewing took longer than I thought."

Greengrass smiled like a cat who'd just caught a mouse and was deciding how to eat it, "Oh, you were brewing a potion. How convenient. I suppose you were brewing it alone?"

"Rigel always brews alone," Pansy said crisply, "As you well know, Greengrass."

"I was," Rigel said calmly, "But Professor Snape has a ward up around my lab that clocks my entrance and exit every night. He can attest that between the time I left the lab and reached the Great Hall, I had no time to make a detour to the third floor."

Greengrass clearly hadn't expected that, but she got around it quickly, "Everyone knows you're Snape's favorite. I don't think his word is very reliable when it comes to you."

"And I don't think second years should cast insinuations on the integrity of our Head of House, Miss Greengrass," Alesana Selwyn had apparently decided to intervene, Head Girl badge gleaming on her robe front. "Are you quite finished with your baseless accusations?"

Greengrass, apparently, didn't know when to quit, "They aren't baseless! His friends can cover for him the first time, but no one knows where he was last night, and it doesn't make any sense for him to leave a celebration party for his own Quidditch team to go wandering around the castle. Come on, can't you see it? Underneath that vacant expression is a cunning bastard, and he's taking you in for all you're worth."

"That. Is. Enough." Selwyn snapped, "Ten points from Slytherin, Greengrass, and don't think I won't be explaining to Snape why the first person to make me take points off my own house all year is an uppity little second year with more cheek than brains."

Greengrass blanched, but stood slowly and walked with as much dignity as she could muster back to her dorm room. Davis hovered uncertainly for a moment before following her friend.

"I'm sure if the rest of you don't have enough to do, Professor Snape would be happy to assign more homework," Selwyn added.

The rest of the onlookers dispersed, but Rigel saw several of her housemates shooting veiled looks of speculation her way. Greengrass' words may have been openly disputed, but her goal had been accomplished by the way more than a few people looked away quickly whenever Rigel glanced toward them.

Draco observed this as well, and scowled, "Idiots. Don't pay them any mind, Rigel. It's obvious you couldn't attack someone if you tried."

"What about Lee Jordan?"

None of them were quick enough to pinpoint who had said it, but a small wave of questioning murmurs swept through the common room shortly afterwards.

"That's true-"

"-heard he was smashed up by the time they found him."

"Let's get out of here," Draco said, turning to head out of the common room.

Pansy put her arm through Rigel's comfortingly and towed her along after Draco.

Rigel wasn't exactly thrilled that people would suspect her of all people to be behind this-she was friends with Neville, after all-but she supposed she could see where Greengrass had come up with the idea based solely on her comings and goings.

Draco led them straight to the kitchens and plopped down onto one of the tables with an exhausted-sounding sigh.

"Strawberry tarts," he said to no one in particular, and a moment later a house elf came running over with a towering plate of them.

As Pansy and Rigel watched Draco polish away four tarts in quick succession, they shared a small smile and Rigel felt her mood gradually grow a little lighter.

"Save yourself some for dinner, tonight," Rigel suggested.

"This is dinner," Draco said, pulling his plate of tarts protectively closer, "I'm not sitting up there with all those numbskulls who think someone like Rigel could be attacking students. Don't they remember the Sleeping Sickness? Rigel healed half the kids in the school, just because he could, and now they think he's changed his mind and wants to kill them all?"

"Petrify," Rigel corrected wryly.

"Whatever," Draco scowled.

"We can't avoid our housemates," Pansy said reasonably, "It'll only make it seem like Rigel is guilty, and we're ashamed."

Draco nodded reluctantly, "Two more," he said, and proceeded to tuck away two additional pastries into the pocket of nether space Rigel thought he must keep behind his teeth specifically for the storage of tarts.

"What should we do tonight, then?" Pansy asked as they stood from the table and thanked the house elves. Binny was nowhere to be seen, so they supposed she was working in another part of the castle.

"I have homework to work on," Rigel said vaguely.

"No, you don't," Draco said flatly, "You finished it all this afternoon."

"It's self-study stuff," Rigel said, smiling innocently. It was kind of fun, vaguely lying to Draco, now that he knew she was doing it but didn't get really upset over it anymore.

"Okay," Draco said wearily, playing along, "What are you self-studying, then?"

"Runes," Rigel said.

Draco looked momentarily triumphant, "Then just come back to the common room with us and ask Blaise."

"I can't just ask Blaise every time I want to learn something about Runes," Rigel said, amused, "I'll save his help for the really tricky stuff."

"Sure you can," Draco said, shrugging, "Blaise loves it when people ask him stuff. I swear, he's going to be a professor when he grows up, the way he gets giddy over explaining things to people."

Rigel didn't think 'giddy' was a word she'd ever associated with Blaise Zabini, but she bowed to Draco's superior understanding of the boy, "All right. Let's go see Blaise."

They checked the common room briefly, and the dorm room too, but the half-curious, half-speculating glances from their housemates were too oppressive to stay for long, and they didn't find Blaise there in any case. Eventually they found him in the Library, but it was times like these that Rigel regretted not being able to share the Marauder's Map with her friends.

Blaise looked up from the book he was perusing and gestured to the empty seats at his table, "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Blaise, you saw us less than an hour ago," Draco said, raising an eyebrow, "Why must you be so dramatic all the time?"

Blaise shrugged artlessly, "Life's awfully dull without a bit of drama, isn't it?"

"Dull means predictable and therefore easily manipulated," Draco said, "I like life dull."

"What are you working on?" Pansy asked as she took a seat across from Blaise, next to Draco.

"Nothing of interest," Blaise said with a sigh, turning another page idly. Rigel couldn't tell if he was reading it or just amusing himself with the pictures. It seemed to be a book on mythology, but Blaise tucked it away as Rigel sat down next to her, "Didn't you three finish your school work this afternoon?"

"Rigel has *more* studying to do," Draco drawled, propping his chin up on his hand.

Pansy nudged Draco admonishingly, "And he came to ask if you could help him with his runes."

"And Pansy and Draco came to be my mouthpieces, because apparently I am unable to speak for myself today," Rigel added cheerfully.

Pansy sent her a frank look, "Would you have spoken up for yourself against Greengrass if we'd let you?"

Rigel pressed her mouth shut and glanced away.

"So, anyway," Draco said, smothering an amused smile at her expense rather badly, "Can you spare an hour?"

"I can spare a lifetime," Blaise sighed wistfully, "Sure. Do you have what you need here?"

Rigel pulled what she was working on from her bag, which she'd picked up from her dorm when they'd gone through. "I'm trying to figure out what the required polarity for these two runes would be," she said, pulling out the parchment of the diagram she was working on to show Blaise. "I know one has to be positive and the other negative, but I don't know which is which."

Blaise bent over the parchment with a frown, "You're right... and this is more advanced than I thought you were, Rigel. I think the rune on the East side should be the positive one, and the West side rune should be the negative one. Here though... the North rune... are you sure you need this one?"

Rigel glanced at the paper, "That or something similar to it. Why?"

"Because the North rune should always be a Light rune. Just like the South rune should always be a Dark rune, because South stands for energy and passion, while North signifies stability," Blaise explained slowly.

Rigel furrowed her brow, "That's only in Celtic systems, though, isn't it?" At Blaise's lifted eyebrow she said, "I'm sure I read somewhere that in the Chinese runic system, which follows their zodiac, the North represents changeability and adaptability while the South represents steadfastness in the form of loyalty. That's why I have the Light and Dark runes switched."

Blaise shook his head, "But the European astrological zodiac agrees with the Celtic runic system, because in astronomy the South represents fire while the North represents air. That's why the Celtic system is more accepted in European schools of thought, and why it's taught here at Hogwarts."

Rigel tilted her head, "I can see how fire could represent Dark, being naturally energetic and volatile, but how does air better represent Light? It isn't any more orderly than fire. In fact, I'd say all the elements leant toward Dark more than Light, simply because Dark magic is closer to magic's original nature."

Blaise shrugged, "That may be, but you still can't use the Chinese runic system if you're using Celtic runes. What books have you been reading, anyway? It's like you jumped right into the middle and started learning random facts about runes instead of building your way up."

Rigel smiled self-deprecatingly, "Yeah, I just picked up whichever books looked the most interesting when I decided to learn about runes."

Blaise sent her a disapproving look, "I'll lend you a few of the ones I started with. That should help."

"Thanks, Blaise," Rigel said, "I really..." she trailed off. A pair of hands were covering her eyes, and she stiffened in her seat as her magic stirred uneasily in her core. "Hello?"

"Go on then, guess," Ginny-for indeed, who else could it be?-said from over his shoulder.

"Oh, get off him, Weasley," Draco said, voice tight. When the hands pulled away Rigel could see Draco clench and unclench his jaw, which meant he was fighting strong feelings of annoyance.

Ginny sighed, "Again? Don't the Malfoy's know how to do anything besides ruin the fun for others?"

"Don't the Weasley's know how to do anything besides annoy people?" Draco shot back.

"Ginny, how lovely to see you again," Pansy cut in, smiling graciously while simultaneously-if Draco's expression was anything to go by-stepping on her friend's foot, "Getting some studying done?"

"Something like that," Ginny said, glancing a bit ruefully toward her school bag, which rested heavily on her shoulder, as though weighed down by quite a few books. "Then I saw Rigel and thought I should tell him George is out of the Hospital Wing, and probably looking for you guys."

"Why?" Rigel asked, "Fred already apologized to Draco after the game yesterday."

Ginny shrugged, "He'll want to do it himself, of course. I guess that's it then. Bye, Slytherins."

She headed off, waving at them over her shoulder as she walked away toward the History stacks.

"That girl is so weird," Draco muttered.

"That girl is tired," Blaise commented idly, looking after Ginny with a mildly interested expression, "She has dark circles under her eyes, and her hair hasn't been washed since yesterday."

"Blaise!" Pansy pinned the dark boy with a glare, "You're not supposed to say such things about a lady's toilette."

"So you noticed, too?" Blaise said, seemingly unconcerned with Pansy's disapproval, "It's a bit early for her to be that stressed over winter exams. First year isn't all that difficult, and I gather she is not unskilled enough to warrant any real anxiety over academics. What could be the source of her disheveled appearance, then?"

"It's none of our business," Pansy said firmly.

With that, Blaise let the topic go with a shrug and turned back to studying Rigel's diagram, which was actually an assignment she was completing for Flint. Blaise helped her work out the rest of the kinks, which Rigel thanked him for profusely. Flint may not care what grade the assignments she turned in received, but Rigel figured she might as well use the opportunity to learn the material for real, if she was going to waste time completing it anyway.

Pansy and Draco amused themselves with discussing the various parties they had been invited to over the break, and cross-checking which ones the other's parents had sent RSVP's for.

By the time their stomachs lured them away from the Library, the incident with Greengrass had been forgotten, and an uneventful dinner only emphasized how trivial the whole thing had really been.

The next week found Rigel hurrying out of the locker room after Quidditch practice on Thursday evening, eager to get the rest of the Blood Replenisher's finished before she had to send them off to Krait that night.

"Rigel, wait!" Draco called as he exited the shower area, "Where are you going?"

"Lab!" Rigel called back, waving absentmindedly across the room as she grabbed her book bag, which also contained her potions kit, from her locker, "See you tomorrow!"

He said something like, "You're not supposed to-" before the door closed behind her and cut him off. Rigel shrugged, thinking he was probably going to admonish her for brewing late again, but really, she had at least an hour before curfew. Plenty of time for one last batch.

Normally she would have already finished the potions days before they were due at Krait's, but it seemed like lately it had been one thing after another keeping her from brewing. Still, she was close to

caught up, and only needed a few more bottles to complete Burke's order.

She passed through the tangle of the wards Snape put up to keep track of her movements and took out her key before pausing. The door was open. It was just open a crack, but Rigel's eyes narrowed.

She never left the door open.

Rigel briefly debated getting Snape, but what if it was nothing? It could have been Peeves, one of the prefects checking in on her, or even Snape himself who left the door open. She'd feel silly bothering him for no reason, so she figured she could at least see if the lab looked noticeably broken into before alerting the professor.

She pushed the door open slowly, peering into the darkened lab, looking for anything out of the ordinary. It was hard to see anything without a light, so Rigel made her way to the nearest torch bracket and pulled out her wand, intending to ask her magic to light it, but as she reached for the torch she heard a soft scrape of cloth against stone and whirled around.

It was too late. She was knocked to the ground with a hard push to her shoulders and a swift kick to her feet. Rigel stuck her own foot out, sweeping it toward where she thought her attacker's feet were, but her eyes weren't adjusted to the darkness of the lab, lit only in the area around the door by the hall torches, and she missed. As Rigel scrambled to her knees, she was kicked again, this time in the stomach. She grunted and gasped for air as she rolled away from the attacker.

Rigel heard a voice say, "Obscuro," and then the world went dark.

She wasn't unconscious, but her vision, dim though it was, vanished completely, and she could no longer see even the silhouette of her attacker-short, she thought, but that was about all she'd had time to deduce. Rigel hunched defensively in case the intruder decided to strike her while she was blinded, but no blows came.

Instead, she heard the swish of displaced air as the door to the lab was closed, though she didn't hear it latch, and a moment later her book bag was ripped over her head from its place across her shoulders.

"No!" Rigel scowled, groping at the air in front of her. The intruder must have moved away, though, because she felt nothing. Fed up with the darkness, Rigel felt instead for her wand, which she had dropped sometime after being shoved to the ground. If she could find it, maybe her magic could help lift the Obscuro spell from her eyes.

She could hear whoever it was struggling with her book bag, obviously unable to open it by the way they growled in annoyance. That would be thanks to Lily's security spells, Rigel presumed, which keyed the bag to her alone.

Two quick footsteps came her way and then a hand fisted itself in her hair and pulled her head up sharply. She couldn't see, but she could feel the intruder's breath across her face when they said, "Open it."

"No," Rigel said, striking out with her fists at the space beyond the blackness around her eyes,. She missed again, and suspected that her attacker was simply very good at dodging, but felt the drag of hair against her hand as they moved their head out of the way. Long hair.

"Open it!" the voice hissed darkly. They tugged on her roots to emphasize the demand while batting away her attempts to land a blow with disconcerting ease.

"Or what?" Rigel said, not about to open the bag, which held more than a few of her secrets-Flint's assignments, the potions she brewed for Krait, letters from Archie, and more. "Why do you want my bag?"

A hand slapped her across the face sharply and Rigel's head turned with the force of it before stopping as the other hand pulled her back

around by her hair. She could feel her cheek stinging, and a warm trickle of sensation told her that her attacker had nails sharp enough to have scratched her skin.

"Open it," the person growled, "Or I snap your wand."

Rigel froze in her struggles for a moment. They could be bluffing, but *she* didn't have her wand, so there was no way to be sure.

"Holly isn't it?" the voice said, cold and mocking. The more she heard it, the more she thought it sounded familiar to a voice she knew, but somehow... not. "Looks like ten, maybe eleven inches. What's the core? Dragon heart-string?"

Rigel made her face go blank, "Doesn't sound like mine. I must have picked up Draco's by mistake. Go ahead, break it. I don't care."

A cruelly amused scoff sounded next to her ear before the hand in her hair twisted. Rigel winced. "Nice try, boy, but all Malfoy's carry wands of Hawthorn until they inherit their family wand of Elm. This wand is yours, and if you attempt to out-bluff me again it will be a wand no longer. Open. The. Bag."

"Awful lot of trouble to get a look at my schoolwork," Rigel panted, gritting her teeth around the pain of having her scalp pulled at so fiercely. "If you wanted to copy my notes, all you had to do was-"

Her head whipped to the side as she was backhanded across the face once more. "You try my patience, brat. If you do not open this bag in the next ten seconds, I will *incinerate* it."

Rigel hesitated in indecision. Being stubborn meant losing days and days of work, in both potions and assignments, not to mention the enormous amount of ingredients in her potions kit, which would cost a pretty penny to replace. Could she afford to let it all burn?

On the other hand, she didn't know why the intruder wanted inside her bag so badly, but it couldn't be for anything good. She also knew

how many secrets were kept inside of it, and decided that if a little extra work and a large chunk of her savings was the price, she would pay it to keep her bag shut and away from this intruder's hands.

"Go ahead," she said, eyes narrowed against the blackness pressing against them.

"Enough of this," the person snapped, and Rigel was released abruptly. She put a hand to her scalp to rub at the sting and kept the other defensively in front of her face. Rigel was about to try moving toward where she thought the door was, when the voice said, "Crucio!"

Rigel flinched violently... but nothing happened. Shaking, she strained her ears for any hint of the attacker's movements.

"Damn it," she heard them curse softly, "Useless piece of... ah. Unicorn hair, no doubt. Pathetic. No matter..." the voice came closer, and Rigel cringed away from it instinctively, "I'll use yours, little snake."

The thought of this person-this intruder-coming into her lab and using her own wand against her was too much for Rigel to bear. She could feel her magic, coiled and wound tightly in her, writhing with restless energy and just waiting for an outlet. She couldn't direct it very well without her wand, but if she could get the magic to her wand somehow...

She reached out with her magical senses, the same ones she used when feeling for a nearby magical core, and searched for the familiar, burning presence of her holly wand. It was like a beacon to her magical awareness, so easily recognizable to her senses. Immediately she released her magic toward it, tossing out a rope of magic from her core as though she was running a line into a potion for imbuing.

At the very same moment, the intruder, whose magical core she could also now sense directly before her, snarled, " *Crucio!* " Her body tensed, but her mind was focused on her magical senses completely. Feeling magic was like seeing with another set of eyes, ones that only saw magic and nothing else. With her senses attuned, she could actually discern the motion in her attacker's core as it stirred to life and poured an ugly, roiling stream of magic toward her holly wand, which was several feet from the foreign core. The magic traveled in a rounded arch toward the wand, and Rigel realized at once that it was traveling through the intruder's arm to get to the wand-of course, she had time to think-and then the magic reached the wand.

It was as though someone had dropped kingswool into a cauldron full of mordrot root. To Rigel's magical sight it looked like an explosion occurred where the magic met the wand, but she could discern no physical signs of an actual explosion. There was no bang, no heat, and although she still couldn't see, Rigel would be willing to bet there was no flash of light either. Instead, a shockwave of pure magic erupted from the holly wand and Rigel couldn't help but flinch at the onslaught to her magical senses as the wave broke over her.

She heard her attacker cry out, the sound higher-pitched than she had expected considering the low register at which they had spoken before, and she felt the holly wand abruptly shooting through the air toward her. She held out her hand and the wand beamed toward it like metal to a magnet. Her hand closed around it and she felt her core thrum with satisfaction and no small amount of triumph.

Grant me sight again, please, Rigel thought to her core immediately. It purred in response and rose directly to the challenge, flooding through her wand and out toward her face. She felt her eyes tingle and then start stinging. They watered and she rubbed at them fiercely, blinking and trying to get her sight back into focus.

It was still too dark in the lab, though, and even as she rubbed again at her eyes she heard the intruder curse and stumble toward the door. Rigel groped in the darkness, squinting at the floor, and, with

much relief, located her book bag. She yanked it toward her just as the door to the lab swung open. She lifted her head to catch sight of the intruder leaving, but the light from the corridor torches was too much for her eyes, which were no doubt over-dilated from both fear and the prolonged stint in darkness. A stabbing pain shot through her eyes and they teared up again immediately. She could only make out a blurred figure, in what she thought was a black cloak, darting through the lab door before it was slammed shut again.

Rigel sagged against the stone floor for a moment, then hauled herself up, still rubbing at her eyes with one hand as she stumbled across the room in the dark and over to the door. She pulled it open, shielding her eyes against the low torchlight. The corridor was empty. She pulled out the Map and said, "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good," but there were several dots moving through the dungeons just then, probably because it was so close to curfew that everyone wanted to get back to the common room, and her eyesight was still too blurred to make out the tiny labels next to the even tinier dots. She cursed, but tucked the Map away and instead hurried down the corridor toward Snape's office, which had never seemed so far away.

She groped at the handle without knocking, and yelped when her hand received a nasty shock from the polished silver.

An amused voice sneered at her from through the wood, "I did warn you, Albus, that if you persisted in entering my chambers without knocking, there would be consequences." The door clicked open and Snape's annoyed expression quickly melted away into one of muted shock and impatient concern, "Black? What are you doing here at this time of-" he broke off at the sight of her, eyes streaming, blood dripping sluggishly down her cheek, cradling her recently-electrocuted hand in the other, "What happened?" he snapped.

"Break in," Rigel said shortly, in no mood to be civil, "In my lab. Just now. Short of stature, long hair, middle-range voice, sharp nails. I think it was probably a woman, but it was hard to tell. They were remarkably strong for their size. It could have been a young boy, but

they referred to me as though I were the young one, so I think it more likely to be someone older."

Snape stared at her for a second too long, and Rigel scowled, "Aren't you going to investigate?"

Snape stood and came around the desk. He lifted her chin and inspected her face, "Are you all right, Mr. Black?"

"Fine," Rigel said, annoyed with the way Snape was just standing there, "But my lab's been broken into, and the intruder got away. I don't think they've taken anything, unless it was small enough to fit into a pocket, and I don't keep anything in the lab anyway."

Snape took a moment longer to look at her cheek, before nodding and striding out the door, toward her lab. "They attempted to break in while you were brewing?"

"No, I think I interrupted them," Rigel said, "They were already within when I got there to brew tonight."

"What did they look like?" Snape asked.

"I don't know," Rigel said, rubbing irritably at her eyes again, "They blinded me before I got a look at them."

Snape frowned down at her, "What spell?"

"Obscuro."

"And it's already worn off?" Snape's face darkened, "That spell usually lasts an hour. How long were you-"

Rigel shook her head, "I performed the counter-curse once I got my wand back, but it was too late to see anything by the time my vision cleared up again. I still can't see much beyond blurs."

Snape's brow furrowed, "You say you interrupted the intruder while he was within, but it sounds as though you were the one taken by

surprise."

Rigel flinched as something clicked in her mind, "They were waiting for me. Why else would the light have been off when I got there?"

"So the intruder was after you, specifically, or something in your possession," Snape concluded, glancing at her sharply, "What did they demand?"

"My bag," Rigel said, gesturing to it, "It's got my potions kit inside. Maybe they broke in hoping to get ingredients, and when they realized there weren't any they stuck around to ambush me."

Even to her, that sounded a little farfetched. She didn't carry any really dangerous ingredients in her kit, at least none that couldn't be purchased in any potion apothecary in the country. It wasn't like she was dealing in black market stuff. If someone wanted ingredients so badly, they could just buy some. But no one should know of the other sensitive things in her bag. So why did they want it so badly?

Snape inspected the lab, but apart from an upturned stool, which Rigel vaguely remembered knocking into when she fell, there was nothing to see.

He led her back to his office, where he made her recount the entire event in as much detail as she possibly could. It was obvious he was frustrated by how little she had to go on. She tried to explain that the voice sounded familiar, but somehow not, as though it were a familiar voice being warped by something. She also tried to articulate how the intruder's core felt to her. It, too, felt somewhat familiar to her, but she had been through half the cores in the school, so that didn't narrow it down much, aside from indicating it might be someone between years two and four. There was also the possibility that the intruder's core was only similar to one she'd felt before. She was pretty sure it was a fire-type, but beyond that couldn't be sure. The intruder's magic had felt... off.

When Rigel recounted the way the stranger tried to use her wand after his or her own wand failed, Snape's face was blacker than a storm cloud.

"He tried to use *what* on you?" Snape snarled, though it was obvious his anger wasn't directed at her.

Rigel shivered in remembrance, "The torture curse. Seemed pretty confident it would work, though it didn't."

"That is *not* the point," Snape growled. He took out his wand in a swift, fluid motion and shattered one of the glass jars over Rigel's shoulder with barely a thought. Before the glass shard had hit the ground, a second spell from Snape's wand reversed the explosion and by the time Rigel whipped her head around to look, everything looked exactly as it had when she came in, except the air hummed a bit with the release of magic.

Snape took a deep breath and stowed his wand away, "My apologies, Mr. Black. Did he mention anything besides the core of the wand he attempted to use before your own?"

Rigel shook her head, "No he just complained about the unicorn hair-though I still think it might have been a girl."

"Plenty of boys wear their hair long," Snape said dismissively, "But very few girls can overpower a boy physically, and there are no women on the staff who fit the description."

Rigel didn't say anything, but inwardly she scowled. It wasn't exactly thrilling for her ego to admit that someone so small had gotten the better of her, especially when she'd been training to prevent exactly that sort of thing, but she wouldn't deny what she heard and felt to make herself feel better. Whoever attacked her had been strong, almost unnaturally so considering their height, but they'd also spoke-and more importantly yelled-in a voice too high to be male, unless it was a very young male. But the person hadn't acted young.

"They said something odd," Rigel remembered, "About Draco."

"Draco?" Snape's face went whiter than she'd ever seen it, "He threatened Draco?"

"No, not really," Rigel said, "He said something that made it sound like he knew the Malfoy's really well, though. I tried to pass off the holly wand as Draco's, so he wouldn't use it as leverage."

"You tried to bluff," Snape looked like he didn't know if he should be exasperated or incredulous.

"It didn't work," Rigel said, frowning, "They laughed and said Malfoy's always have wands of Hawthorn, until they inherit their family wand, which he said is Elm. Is that true?"

Snape's eyebrows flew up, "It is. However, not many people know that the wand used by the Malfoy patriarch is not his original wand. That narrows the list down... considerably."

Eventually, Rigel was escorted to the Hospital Wing, where she was given a Calming Potion and a pair of pajamas, with strict instructions to stay in the ward for the night, in case she went into shock. Rigel took the calming potion without much complaint, refused the pajamas adamantly, and tried, unsuccessfully, to explain that she didn't need to stay overnight. Madam Pomphrey was dead set against it, but Professor Snape, in a stroke of mercy that Rigel would be forever grateful for, overruled her.

He took her back to the Slytherin common room himself, with instructions not to expose her eyes to bright lights for the next 24 hours-in other words, no going outside the next day.

Rigel thanked Snape for his help, and slipped into her dorm room quietly. The other boys were asleep, so Rigel didn't have to bear more questions about her evening. Her emotions were muted by the Calming Potion, but she rubbed her newly-healed cheek absently as she drifted off to sleep. She barely remembered to ask her magic to

wake her up earlier than usual, since she still had to make those last few Blood-Replenisher's before sending an owl off to Krait.

As her eyes drifted shut, she felt strangely detached from the night's events. She knew the Calming Potion was skewing her perception a bit, but was grateful for it. The last thing she wanted to do was go to sleep directly after something like this with all the burning emotions of fear, anger, and anxiety fresh in her mind. Her nightmares were, frankly, bad enough without this new addition.

But then, when had things ever stopped at bad before proceeding to worse?

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Winter finals week was a strange mix of agonizing stress and comfortable familiarity for the castle. For all the anxiety the exams produced, they were a point of grounded reality amidst the chaotic, uneasy atmosphere caused by the shadows and fear and uncertainty lurking about Hogwarts in the wake of two obviously connected attacks.

Rigel had an unexpected break during exam week in terms of her free time. She had finished all of Flint's final projects for the semester and wouldn't have to complete his winter homework until over the break. Her own tests weren't terribly challenging, and in any case Draco and Pansy roped her into studying along with the other second years, so she was more than prepared. With no homework for once, no Quidditch practice (due to the entire team threatening not to show up), and no orders for Krait due until she got home, Rigel spent most of her time making sure she was fully caught up with Archie's AIM syllabus. She went over and over the material, especially the Healing, in case she was grilled by one of her family members.

They would board the train home on Friday morning, so Thursday evening Rigel collected all the library books she had checked out, intending to return them before leaving for break.

Madam Pince shot her a nasty look when she deposited her stack on the checkout counter, and made a show of checking each one for damage before sorting it in the designated return pile.

Rigel turned to go, but Pince called her back, "Black."

"Yes?" Rigel said politely, turning back around.

Pince held out a book with a sniff, "This is not a Library book."

Rigel looked at it. It was a book on auras, one of the many she had checked out over the past few weeks, "Are you sure? I checked out a lot on this subject."

Pince glared at her indignantly, "I know every book in this Library, Mr. Black. *That* is not one of them."

Rigel took the book back puzzledly, but after a moment remembered, "Ah, my mistake. Sorry, Madam Pince."

The librarian only sniffed again and resumed her book sorting work.

Rigel tucked the book into her bag, which she had taken to carrying everywhere in a recent bout of paranoia. She remembered now that she had borrowed that particular book from Fred.

She walked up to the Gryffindor common room and knocked gently on the Pink Lady's portrait-she knew the Gryffindors called her the Fat Lady, but that seemed a bit rude to Rigel.

It was Pavarti Patil who answered the door.

"Yes?" she said suspiciously, taking in Rigel's Slytherin tie.

"Are any of the Weasley's in the common room?" Rigel asked.

"Any of them?" Patil raised an eyebrow, "A few, yeah." She paused, looking Rigel over, "It's Rigel Black, isn't it?"

Rigel nodded, "Yes, we have Potions together, and a few other classes, I think."

Patil looked amused, "I know." Then her face grew solemn, "You're the one who found my sister, aren't you?" At Rigel's wary look, Patil glanced around the corridor and said, "McGonagall told me, when she brought me to the Hospital Wing. Did you see...?"

Rigel shook her head, "I don't know what did it, sorry. Are you... well, how are you holding up?"

Patil set her mouth into a firm line, "Fine. But when I find out what hurt Padma like that..." she tossed her braid over her shoulder agitatedly, "Well, it won't be hurting anyone else. Ever."

Rigel couldn't argue with that sentiment.

Patil shook her head as if to clear her head, "Let me see which Weasley's are free."

She disappeared back into the common room, and a few moments later Ginny Weasley stuck her head out of the portrait hole, "Rigel? Come to say goodbye to my brothers? You know they'll only accost you on the train anyway tomorrow."

Rigel smiled a bit fondly, "Yes, I imagine they will. I just came to return a book to the twins. Could you give it to them for me?"

Ginny shrugged her shoulders, and Rigel realized suddenly how stooped they were. She did look tired, now that Rigel was paying attention, "Come on in, and you can give it to them yourself. They always like seeing you, and Ron's in here as well. Percy... actually, I don't know where he is." She screwed up her face to think, "Oh, right, he's probably with his girlfriend. Uh, don't tell the twins he's got

a girlfriend, though, ok? They'd ruin Percy's holiday teasing him about it."

Rigel nodded agreeably, "Okay, one second." She took off her green and silver tie and stored it in her bag.

Ginny raised an eyebrow, "You know that's not really fooling anyone, right? Everyone knows you're a Slytherin."

Rigel nodded, "I know, but there's no sense in flaunting the fact that a Slytherin is semi-welcome in the lion's den."

"What's 'semi' supposed to mean?" Ginny shot her an admonishing look, "Course you're welcome. If the Weasley's like you, everyone likes you-in Gryffindor, at least. Our family is like the Malfoy's of Gryffindor." She giggled at her own comparison, "Though Ron at least would have my head for saying it like *that* ."

Rigel followed Ginny through the portrait hole and over to the fireplace. The Gryffindor common room was lively that night, since everyone was now done with exams and keen on spending a few more hours with their friends before break. Guiltily, Rigel thought that's what she should be doing, too, and promised herself to make this quick.

Ron greeted her absently when Ginny announced their presence, being completely engrossed in a game of wizard's chess against Oliver Wood. Wood, who appeared to be losing rather badly, was more eager to embrace the diversion.

"Black! Nice shot at the end there," Wood said enthusiastically, "Been meaning to tell you."

Rigel's brain took a moment to realize he was talking about the Gryffindor-Slytherin Quidditch game, and marveled that he could jump straight into a remark like that without reference or transition, as though everyone were always thinking about Quidditch all the time.

"Thanks, Wood. Your chasers are really something," Rigel said honestly.

"Aren't they?" Wood beamed with pride, before deflating a bit, "Now if only we could scrounge up a seeker like your Malfoy. Handy with a broom, that one."

"He'll thank you for saying so," Rigel said, amused, "I'm sure you'll find one next year."

"Too right he will," Ginny piped up, "As next year I'll be trying out."

Ron wasn't so engrossed in the chess game that he didn't have time to snort derisively, for which Ginny sent him a resentful look.

"Good, good," Wood said, nodding obliviously, "I always like a good Weasley on the team."

Fred and George came bounding up out of nowhere and both slung arms around their captain's shoulders.

"Talking about us again, *mon capitain*?" George said, grinning.

"I think we're starting to blush," Fred said, sighing like a swooning maid.

"Are we?" George made a show of examining Fred's face carefully.

Fred slapped George across the cheek and pointed to it excitedly, "We are!"

"That's enough out of you two," Wood said, pushing them away from him, "I wouldn't trade you as beaters for the world, but thank Merlin for the few weeks of peace I'll get without you boys popping up out of nowhere like bloody ghosts."

Fred gasped and clapped hands over Rigel's ears. He missed, and ended up just grabbing handfuls of her hair, so she could still hear him say, "Mind your words in front of the little one, Oliver."

Wood glanced at Rigel, then at Ginny, "Uh, shouldn't you be more worried about your impressionable little sister?"

All four Weasley's snorted with incredulity.

"Her?"

"Yeah, right."

"Have you met Ginny?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Ginny narrowed her eyes at Fred for his last comment.

"You curse more than Charlie does," George said bluntly, "And he works with dragons, dearie."

Ginny sighed, "Whatever."

The twins exchanged a troubled glance and even Ron looked up from his game, "A few months ago you wouldn't have hexed them for that. What's gotten into you, Gin?"

Ginny just shook her head, "I'm tired, ok? And those two aren't worth it."

"You've been studying too hard," Fred said admonishingly, "What for, anyway? You're smart enough to get by with just doing homework- don't even try to say magic doesn't come easy to you."

"Merlin knows you've stolen Mum's wand often enough to have considerable practice at the stuff," George added dryly.

Ginny shrugged uncomfortably, "You know how Mum and Dad are. I'm the youngest, and the only girl, so I have to get everything perfect. A little extra studying never hurt."

Ron shrugged and went back to his game, to Wood's obvious displeasure, "Just don't overdo it, sis."

Ginny tossed her hair over her shoulder, "Don't worry so much. I'm not some helpless child." With that, Ginny flounced off toward the portrait hole.

"Where are you going now, Gin?" Fred said, laughing.

"Owlrey!" Ginny called back, "I forgot to order Mum's present, and the catalogue's got to have the owl by tomorrow, or it might not get delivered before Christmas."

"Well then, what brings you here this fine Thursday evening?" George turned to Rigel smoothly and waggled his eyebrows. "A late night tryst with a pretty bird, perhaps?"

"Or maybe he's here on clandestine business, and is even now sending nigh undetectable signals to an equally mysterious partner in crime," Fred said, leaning closer to stare at Rigel as though waiting for her to tap out Morse code on the chair next to her.

"If only my life were so interesting," Rigel said, amused, "I just came to return this."

She held out the book, and Fred took it with a frown, "You've already finished it? Or you changed your mind about studying auras?"

"It's been almost a month," Rigel said, raising an eyebrow, "Of course I've finished it."

"Yeah, but this is dense stuff," Fred said, weighing the thick book in his hand to demonstrate, "And as I understand it you've got quite a bit on your plate as it is."

George clapped his brother on the shoulder, "Who are we to question the awesomeness that is Rigel Black? If pup say's he finished it, he's probably read it forward and backward." George peered at Rigel suspiciously, "You haven't got a time-turner, have you?"

Rigel grinned a bit, "Don't I wish. I just make good use of my time."

"So in other words, you treat your free time like bonus work time," Fred said flatly, "We've really got to sort out your priorities, pup."

"Well, you'll have to do it after the break," Rigel said, shrugging, "I'll see you guys on the train tomorrow, I expect."

"Count on it," George grinned.

"Happy Christmas, Rigel," Ron said vaguely, not looking away from the chessboard.

"And to you, Ron," Rigel said, adding, "Nice to meet you, Wood."

"Tell Flint to watch his back come spring," Wood said casually, "We'll be seeing you guys in the Cup Finals."

Rigel agreed to pass along the message, and took her leave of the lions' common room.

She was descending the stairs from the third floor to the second floor when she heard it.

" Coming... coming... please Master... this time... let me kill..."

Rigel froze, straining her ears for more, but it was growing faint too quickly. She followed the vague sound of hissing down a side corridor, but the corridor ended in a dead end and the voice kept going. Rigel gritted her teeth and retraced her steps to the stairwell, but she couldn't hear anything after that. She hesitated, debating what to do. Should she find a teacher and tell them... what? That she'd heard a voice in the walls, and she was pretty sure it spoke in a language no one else understood, and was going to kill someone? She might not be the best sort of people person, but she knew what people would think if she said she was hearing a disembodied voice no one else could hear, and it was threatening to kill people.

She was pretty sure they didn't give Potions Masteries to crazy people.

She searched the entire second floor, and the third floor, but found nothing. There was no explosion, even fifteen minutes later, so Rigel began to think that perhaps the voice was just a hungry snake, and had nothing to do with the attacks. It was really pretty late, and she still had some packing to do, so Rigel hurried back down to the first floor and cut across the Entrance Hall to the stairs that led down to the dungeons.

Outside the Great Hall, however, she stopped dead.

There, on the wall between the doors to the Great Hall and the front doors to the castle, hung a cat. The cat was nailed to the wall by its tail on an iron peg, and below the cat, also strung up on nails and arranged in a gruesome parody of a smiley face, were six kittens. They couldn't have been more than a few weeks old, and Rigel didn't have to get any closer to realize that the cat and kittens were all very much dead.

Not petrified. There was no stiffness in the way they hung there. The cats were utterly lifeless, and so limp that they must have died recently.

There was a metallic sweetness to the air that made Rigel put her sleeve to her mouth as she stepped closer. It was hard to make out in the dim torchlight, but there was something written on the wall above the macabre display. The message was written in blood, she realized with a cold shiver, and the words it held were even more sinister than the array of dead felines.

Do I Have Your Attention Yet?

I do so hate to be ignored.

By now you are wondering-why?

I'll make it simple:

For every month Albus Dumbledore remains Headmaster of Hogwarts

One more bloodtraitor will be petrified.

If the muggle-lover isn't deposed by the end of the year

The next child who strays across my path goes the same way as the squib's precious pet.

Rigel forced herself to look at the cat again and noted that it was, indeed, Mrs. Norris. With a pang, she realized that the cat had probably gone missing to go into labor and nurse her kittens. Caretaker Filch was going to be devastated.

She also realized that whoever had written this message intended it to be seen by hundreds of students as they made their way to the carriages the next morning. The train left before breakfast, after all, so the house elves had the morning off. Grimly, she decided she could prevent that, at least, from happening.

She moved quickly into the Great Hall, which housed portraits of all four of Hogwarts' Founders, and stopped before the closest one to the door.

"Lady Ravenclaw," she spoke hurriedly, "Please get Professor Dumbledore to the Entrance Hall immediately." Ravenclaw's haughty face became alarmed, but Rigel cut her off before she could ask questions, "There is no one in immediate danger, but the Headmaster needs to get to the Entrance Hall right away. Please, hurry."

Ravenclaw swiftly disappeared from her frame. Rigel saw Slytherin also sliding out of his frame, and knew he'd gone to get Professor Snape. She went back into the Entrance Hall and took up watch of

the stairs. If anyone came down before Professor Dumbledore, Rigel could at least spare them the same sight she'd been subjected to.

Barely minutes had passed before the Headmaster appeared from a concealed passageway beside the front doors that even the Marauder's Map didn't have marked.

"Mr. Black," Dumbledore said quickly, "What is- *no* ." He spotted Mrs. Norris and her kittens even before he'd finished his question and stepped forward to scan the message on the wall swiftly. Grim faced, the professor pointed his wand at the dead felines. The nails flew out of the wall to land in a heap on the stone floor, and the cats floated gently to the ground, the babies next to their mother in a sort of horrific parody of a family scene.

Rigel stood silently as Dumbledore read over the words twice more, seemingly committing them to memory, before raising his wand to, presumably, wipe the words from the wall. Before he could, however, Snape arrived at dangerous pace from the dungeon stairs. His eyes moved briefly over Rigel, flashing with some emotion Rigel couldn't name, before fixing on the bloody letters.

Snape froze, looked to Dumbledore with eyes that almost seemed worried, then took out his own wand and vanished the words as though they were never there.

Dumbledore sighed heavily, "Thank you, Mr. Black, for alerting me to this perversity. It pains me to think of the trauma which might have been inflicted on the students, were they to have come across it in the morning."

"Mr. Black is a student as well," Snape said sharply, "Or do you mean to imply that he did not come upon this scene unawares?"

Rigel blinked, taken aback by how quickly Snape defended her, even though she didn't think the Headmaster had meant it that way.

"Peace, Severus," Dumbledore said, holding up a hand, "I was less than careful with my phrasing, but I meant no such insinuation. As Mr. Black was the one who alerted Lady Ravenclaw, he is not currently under suspicion for this act. Not to mention this deed was done very recently," Dumbledore gestured to the blood, still wet on the walls, "And yet Mr. Black has not a speck of blood on him. No, I do not suspect your student, Severus."

Rigel breathed an inward sigh of relief, and Snape relaxed considerably before turning on Rigel with a face like iron, "And what, Mr. Black, were you doing here? Alone. Again. Have you learned nothing? How many times must you be told not to wander, not to paint a target on your back? Just like your father, too arrogant to listen to those who know better. Must you always do things with no concern for those around you, boy?"

Rigel frowned, but accepted that she had, in fact, been told several times not to wander alone-though in her defense 'wandering' implied her movements didn't have a purpose, which they did-but it always seemed to slip her mind whenever she had to get something done. She even accepted the negative criticism of her uncle Sirius, if only because she knew Snape was not in the mood to be argued with.

"I'm sorry, sir," Rigel said, "I was on my way back from Gryffindor Tower to the Slytherin common room, and, well, it was just there."

Snape sighed and rubbed at his forehead, "What are we to do, Albus?"

Dumbledore bowed his head in thought, "I suppose, Mr. Black, that you did not see the perpetrator this time, either?"

Rigel shook her head, "No, sir, but... I might know... I mean, I might have information that's-" she shook her head again, harder. "I don't know if it's connected."

"For Merlin's sake, boy, spit it out," Snape snapped.

Rigel drew a careful breath. She really had to tell them about the voice. She wasn't worried about being found out as a parselmouth-she'd already told her friends, and it wasn't impossible that a Black should be one. As long as her family didn't get wind of it, everything would be fine. The question was, would they believe her? Or would they think she was crazy? Or worse, making it up?

"I heard something just before I found Mrs. Norris," Rigel said slowly, ignoring the way both professors' eyes snapped to hers attentively, "I heard something similar the night Patil was attacked, too, but at the time I didn't think it was related. Now... it seems too great a coincidence to ignore."

"What did you hear, Mr. Black?" Dumbledore prodded gently, when it became clear she was uncomfortable revealing it, "Whatever it was, it will not go beyond Severus and I."

Rigel nodded her thanks and said, "It was a voice. I heard it in the walls, I think. The first time, I was following the voice, and that's why I was so close to the explosion when it went off. This time, I tried following it earlier, but I lost it on the second floor. Both times the voice seemed to be answering a call of some kind. It kept referring to someone as 'master' and it said it was hungry. It said... it wanted to kill something."

Snape was looking distinctly unsettled, and Dumbledore peered even harder at her as he asked, "What kind of a voice was it, Mr. Black? Deep? High? Cold?"

Rigel swallowed, "Deep, raspy, and... old, almost. As though it hadn't been used in a long while. It also sounded a bit... mad. It didn't speak in sentences, just words and disjointed phrases. Also... it wasn't speaking in English," Rigel grimaced as she admitted, "It was speaking in Parseltongue."

There was a moment of complete silence, in which both professors stared at her with equal parts shock and dismay.

"You are sure?" Snape barked out through gritted teeth.

"Yes," Rigel said firmly.

Snape whirled and began to pace, "Impossible," he spat, "How can he have-"

"We do not know it is he, Severus," Dumbledore said softly.

Snape scowled at Dumbledore, "Of course it is. Who else speaks the serpent tongue? Who else would make such threats, such demands?"

"Who indeed?" Dumbledore said, glancing meaningfully at Rigel, "The only thing clear is that we do not possess a full accounting of the Snake-speakers in this world."

Snape threw Dumbledore an impatient look, "Surely you do not think there could be another?"

"Would two unknown Parselmouths in the school be more unbelievable than one?" the Headmaster asked mildly.

"The odds of such a thing-no, Dumbledore, you and I both know who is behind this now. Don't deny that you suspected it from the beginning," Snape added sharply, "After the sickness, you knew that he would try again-"

"Severus," Dumbledore said sharply.

Snape glanced toward Rigel, scowled, and snapped his mouth closed with an audible click. Rigel forced her face to be expressionless, but inside her mind was whirling. What did all this mean? Both Dumbledore and Snape knew of another Parselmouth, one who was still alive, and who meant Dumbledore ill will. One who they also suspected to have a hand in the sleeping sickness. Unbidden, Riddle's smiling face flashed through Rigel's mind, and though her gut was telling her it had to be him, part of her rational

mind insisted there was not enough proof to point fingers so directly just yet.

"I think it is time for Mr. Black to get some sleep," Dumbledore said, turning to Rigel, "You have been most helpful tonight, Mr. Black, but you have a long train ride ahead of you tomorrow, and I hope you do not dwell on this matter over your holiday. Rest assured, action will be taken to prevent a recurrence of this tragedy before the year is out. For now, put it from your mind, yes?"

Rigel nodded obediently, though of course she had no intention of just forgetting what she'd seen. Snape might have erased the message on the wall, but the threat the words expressed wasn't gone along with it. A man's cat had been killed that night, along with half a dozen defenseless kittens, simply to make a deadly point. This person was willing to stoop to any low to achieve their goal.

Snape put a hand on her shoulder and pulled her down the stairs and into the dungeons.

"I trust you will not tell the other students of what you saw tonight?" Snape said, his quiet voice easily audible in the empty dungeon corridor.

Rigel looked up at him, "I will say nothing, but would it be too forward of me to ask the same of you, sir?"

Snape raised an eyebrow.

"It's not that I think you'll go blabbing to the other students, sir," Rigel said quickly, "Draco and Pansy already know, in fact, but my family..."

Snape stopped walking to look Rigel in the eye, "Your family is unaware of your gift?"

Gift, Rigel thought bemusedly. She'd never considered her ability a *gift* before.

"I only found out last winter," Rigel said, "I wasn't sure... I don't know if they would understand. It's widely considered to be a Dark gift, and while I personally have no prejudice against either Light or Dark magics, my father especially is..." Rigel hesitated, realizing belatedly that Sirius would probably not want her sharing his personal beliefs with Severus Snape, but she had already spilled too much, so she simply said, "He is greatly troubled by his own experiences with Dark family magic, and has always strove to shield me from the influence of the Black legacy."

Snape nodded slowly, "You believe that your father would see your ability as a sign of the Black Family magics, Dark magics, manifesting in you, and influencing you counter to the way he has raised you."

"Yes," Rigel said, "Also, as Parseltongue doesn't run in the Black family, there is a possibility I inherited it matrilinearly. I don't like to bring up things connected to my mother, much. It pains us both."

Snape said nothing to that, merely nodded his head abruptly and strode on toward the common room. After a time, he said, "I will keep your gift to myself, of course, Mr. Black. If you do require counsel on the matter, however," he cleared his throat awkwardly, "I have some experience in the matter, and a great accumulation of knowledge on the subject besides. Do not hesitate to come to me with queries or concerns regarding this talent, understood?"

Rigel nodded and gave Snape a small, grateful smile, "Thank you, sir. I'm sorry I was out after curfew again," she added.

Snape looked like he was seriously considering an eye-roll, "What am I to do with you, Mr. Black?"

"You could give me extra potions homework over the break," Rigel said blithely.

Snape shot her a distinctly amused glance, "I believe punishments are meant to be unpleasant, Mr. Black."

Rigel screwed up her face in mock contemplation, "You could give me an essay on... bubotuber puss."

Snape actually smirked at her, "You write so many essays, Mr. Black. Perhaps a practical lesson on that subject instead?"

Rigel wrinkled her nose, "Please don't. I shall never go wandering again."

"See that you don't, Mr. Black," Snape was completely serious once more, "The castle isn't safe, as I've told you before. I know this time you were merely passing through the wrong place, but if you hear the voice again, alert a teacher- *don't* chase it. And try to keep a low profile next semester."

Rigel sighed, but nodded dutifully, "I will try, sir. Have a good holiday."

"Three odd weeks without shrieking brats to ruin my morning coffee?" Snape snorted, "I shall, Mr. Black."

He gave the password and Rigel stepped into the common room with one last farewell.

The common room was empty, and when she slipped down the second-year corridor and into her dorm room, the lamp was already put out. She could hear Theo's snores and Draco's restless leg movements. Blaise slept unnaturally silently, but she could see the lump where he liked to burrow completely under the covers. In that moment, she was fiercely glad she had been the one to find the message that night. Glad that, as disturbing and frightening as it had been, she was the one to deal with it. Pansy would never see dead kittens hanging from rusty nails, and Blaise would never smell sickly sweet blood as it dripped from the wall. Theo wouldn't picture Riddle's smiling face over his shoulder as he tried to sleep, and Draco wouldn't lie awake wondering what it all meant, and if his friends were going to be safe, and what, if anything, he could do to protect them.

Rigel would take all of that and more, so long as it meant her friends were spared the same fate.

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The students made their way to the carriages the next morning with cheerful abandon, completely oblivious as they passed by the Great Hall, chatting and laughing with their friends.

Rigel, Draco, Pansy, Millicent, Theo, and Blaise snagged their usual compartment and went over their various plans for the winter break. Most of them had been invited to the same balls and soirées, so it was really a matter of seeing who was attending what.

"What about..." Theo glanced at Rigel with a sheepish little grin, "Well, you know, the SOW Party fundraiser."

Rigel did know, as did everyone else in the compartment. Every year, on New Year's Eve, the SOW Party held a gala at the home of one of its prominent members. It was officially a fundraiser, but unofficially it was the event of the winter season. Not everyone invited supported the party-in fact, as far as Rigel knew, Riddle made it a point to invite both Light and Dark representatives each year-but everyone who attended was 'of note' in the wizarding world. Rigel's parents always received invitations, simply by virtue of being the main (well, only) branch of the Potter family. They never went, but that didn't stop the invitations from coming.

The strangest part was that although they called it a fundraiser, no one who came was expected to give money. It was more like an awareness-raiser, and simply served to keep the SOW party at the top of everyone's 'who's-who?' list.

Theo looked around at the others uncertainly, "Our parents always attend, but this year my father said the invitation included me as well."

Is it the same for you guys?"

Millicent nodded and Blaise inclined his head.

"It is rather curious that we were all specifically included on the invitations this year," Pansy said thoughtfully, "I gather Mr. Riddle doesn't much care for children, and he rarely condones the presence of anyone underage at his fundraisers."

"Unless they're a fabulously wealthy orphan or something," Millicent said jokingly.

Draco frowned, "Very strange. What would our presence add to the fundraiser that our parents' would not?"

No one really had any idea, so the conversation moved to other things.

A little while before the train pulled into the station, the twins came and said their long, flowery goodbyes. Rigel's shoulder was a bit damp from all the fake tears the twins had somehow expelled from their identical eyes, so she went in search of a bathroom to change her shirt before they got to London. She would be seeing the Malfoy's and Parkinson's again, and it wouldn't do to embarrass herself by looking like a ragamuffin.

She paused for a moment to assess her appearance in the mirror. She looked a lot like Archie used to, more than she ever had thanks to the modified Polyjuice, but would it be enough to fool Sirius? How much change could be attributed to a few months? Well, it would have to do, she decided. Sirius' attention wouldn't really be on her, anyway. It would be on Pansy and Draco's parents.

She exited the bathroom and ran smack into Flint, who scowled down at her before drawing his expression back to a mere sneer when he recognized her.

"Watch it, Black," he said gruffly, shouldering past her.

"Sorry, Flint," she said softly, knowing from experience that he was in no mood for idle chit-chat that day. Rigel didn't know why he went home for break, if he hated it so much there, but it wasn't her place to ask.

She returned to their compartment to see Draco holding up a pair of ties and Pansy looking thoughtfully between them.

"The green might be too provoking," she said thoughtfully, but the crimson-striped silver is too pandering."

"What are you guys doing?" Rigel asked with amusement.

"Oh, good, Rigel," Pansy said seriously, "Which tie would offend your father less?"

Rigel blinked, "You probably shouldn't wear a tie."

"No tie?" Draco frowned, "But it is to be our first formal introduction to your father. I want to look presentable."

"If you wear a tie, my father will only assume you're either posturing or the victim of your family's expectations," Rigel explained, "If the former, he'll take an instinctive dislike to you, if the latter, he'll sympathize with your situation of trying to live up to an impossible standard of maturity set down by an overbearing family, and probably attempt to save you from your parents' good intentions, which will result in your father taking an immediate dislike to him."

"The victim of my family's-" Draco frowned, "I *like* wearing ties. They make me look taller."

Rigel smiled slightly, "He'll never believe that. Dad is of the opinion that any twelve-year-old who likes formal clothing has been brainwashed. You should have heard the lecture he gave my Aunt Lily a couple years ago when my cousin Harry showed up to Christmas dinner in formal dress robes."

"Miss Potter enjoys dressing up?" Pansy asked curiously.

"Not really," Rigel shrugged, "Everything else she owned had potion stains on it that day, but Sirius was offended nonetheless."

Draco sighed, "No tie then. Merlin but your family is complicated, Rye."

Rigel felt her lips curl into an irrepressible smirk, "You have no idea."

When the train rolled to a stop, they said goodbye to the other second-years and took a moment to fix one another's appearance before stepping off of the train. All three had their trunks miniaturized in their pockets, so Rigel set to scanning the platform for Sirius at once.

She summoned a bright grin to her face, in case Sirius saw her first, and a few moments later heard a familiar voice yelling, "Arch! Over here!"

She turned to see Sirius waving happily from a nearby pillar, and noted with surprise that he was sporting some rather dapper semi-formal robes, shoes that actually covered his toes, and was only waving with his elbow instead of his whole arm, like he usually would. It meant a lot that he'd so obviously taken care with appearances, something he regularly distained, in an effort not to embarrass her, so she beamed unrestrainedly back at him with a wave of her own.

She turned to Draco and Pansy and was met with dumbfounded looks of complete shock.

"What?" she said, blinking.

"We've... never seen you smile so widely," Pansy said.

"It's a bit blinding, actually," Draco muttered vaguely, still staring.

Rigel shook her head with amusement, "You two are ridiculous. Come on, let's collect our parents and get this over with."

There was no need, however, as the Parkinson's had met up with the Malfoy's already, and were spotted heading toward them by Pansy. Rigel motioned Sirius to come toward them as well, and all three families sort of met in the middle.

Pansy hugged her parents quickly, and Draco received a warm shoulder-squeeze from his mother, while Sirius ruffled Rigel's hair energetically, and she replied by discretely kicking him in the shin. Sirius only laughed, though the odd look Pansy sent her told Rigel she hadn't been discrete enough.

Rigel figured she should start, being the only one who knew everyone 'officially.'

"Hello Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy," she said, nodding politely to Draco's parents, "And to you are well, Mr. and Mrs. Parkinson."

"Wonderful to see you, as usual, Rigel," Narcissa said fondly.

"As most of you know, this is my father, Sirius Black," Rigel said, stepping a bit to the side so that Sirius could greet everyone properly, "Dad, these are my best friends, Pansy Parkinson and Draco Malfoy, and their parents."

Sirius smiled genially down at the other two second-years and said, "Pleased to finally meet the friends Archie talks so much about. You will have to come over to Grimmauld Place some time, so I can grill you properly about what my son's been up to at school. He's remarkably close-lipped about his Hogwarts adventures, considering what a chatterbox he usually is."

Rigel could feel herself flush slightly as a few of the Malfoy's and Parkinson's turned skeptical eyes her direction.

"How can they compare to your adventures, Dad?" she said lightly, "You'd only be bored over my dull antics."

Sirius tried to sheepishly disclaim any such adventures, but Narcissa smiled knowingly, "The infamous Sirius Black would surely never deny his own legend?"

Sirius just shrugged, then said, "And how are you, cousin Cissy? This one still treating you all right?" he asked, with a nod in Mr. Malfoy's direction. Draco's eyebrows drew together apprehensively, but Mr. Malfoy only looked amused, as if this were an old, nearly forgotten joke.

"You can see that he is," Narcissa said slyly, "If only because he retains full use of all his limbs."

Mr. Malfoy drew his wife's hand to his elbow with a look of fond exasperation on his face, "Threats again, my dear? You know I respond much better to flattery."

Rose Parkinson laughed gaily, Sirius joined in with a hearty chuckle, and just like that any awkwardness was dispersed.

"Rose, your laugh is ever a sound for sore ears," Sirius said, smiling genuinely at Mrs. Parkinson.

"If your ears are sore, you ought to have young Rigel make you a potion for them," Rose said, grinning.

Sirius glanced at Rigel with a bemused expression, "I suppose I could, though I've no doubt Harry would be rather offended by the snub."

"Miss Potter?" Narcissa's eyebrows rose slightly, "Why would that be?"

"Well, Harry's always been the family's unofficial potion supplier," Sirius said, shrugging. He seemed oblivious to the veiled confusion

his words were inspiring in the group, though Rigel certainly wasn't. She would have to explain that comment at some point, "Practically born in a cauldron, that one."

"Speaking of," Pansy spoke up, perhaps correctly guessing that the current line of conversation was somehow awkward, "It is my understanding that Mr. and Mrs. Potter are soon to be blessed with a child. Please, convey my congratulations to Mrs. Potter, won't you, Mr. Black?"

Sirius half grinned, half grimaced, "Just Sirius, if you don't mind, Miss Parkinson. But yes, Lily and James are expecting a second child this March."

Rose and Narcissa immediately bombarded Sirius for the details, both women's eyes having gone suspiciously bright in response to the news.

Rigel took the moment to send Pansy a grateful look, to which her friend raised an imperious eyebrow to indicate that she would be explaining the oddities of the conversation at a later date.

The talk turned from babies to business after that. Mr. Parkinson asked Sirius how his business with Zonko's was doing.

"The investment side of my portfolio has been looking a tad shabby of late," Mr. Parkinson said, glasses glinting as he adjusted them, "I've been considering expanding my interests beyond my usual purview."

Mr. Malfoy shook his head with amusement, "Only you, Cassius, would use a term so inapplicable as 'shabby' to describe *your* portfolio."

Sirius smiled easily, "The Marauder line is doing well, thank you, though to be honest Remus looks after most of the books. James and I work more on the research and development side of things."

"How is James Potter doing?" Narcissa asked curiously, "There was an article in the paper about his work as an Auror the other day, and I gather from it that he is expecting a promotion soon."

Sirius nodded, "Indeed, he's to take over for the current Head Auror at the start of the new year. It means a lot more desk work and a lot less field action, which he's less than pleased about, but with a baby on the way, it's really for the best."

Rigel stared up at Sirius with surprise. She hadn't heard anything about a promotion. She supposed, after a moment of thought, that her dad had probably written 'Harry' about it, and Archie had simply forgotten to tell her.

Mr. Parkinson lifted an inquisitive eyebrow, "Will Mr. Potter be taking old Armand's place at the annual SOW fundraiser, then? As I understand it, the Head Auror traditionally oversees the minister's security detail that night, yet it is also my understanding that Auror Potter chronically avoids social events of any kind."

Sirius grimaced, "He's still trying to get out of it, last I heard. Armand McCrery agreed to head up security that night before he decided to resign, and poor James didn't find out about the fundraiser until he'd already accepted the promotion."

"And you, cousin?" Narcissa asked, smiling in a way that had Sirius shifting apprehensively.

"Me?" Sirius said, eyes darting to Narcissa and away again, "What about me? You know I don't work."

Narcissa smiled predatorily, "I meant to inquire as to whether you would be attending the gala as well, of course. We look for you every year, you know."

"Well, with the Split and all..." Sirius grimaced, "Doesn't seem like the best of ideas."

Mrs. Parkinson shook her head of caramel curls, "You know the Split doesn't apply to a fundraiser. It's not a social event; it's a business event."

Rigel wondered wryly if that wasn't precisely why they called it a fundraiser, despite the fact that half the guests didn't contribute anything to the SOW party. It was a rather clever way of getting around the Split.

Sirius shrugged uncomfortably, "You know I'd like to catch up, Cissy, but... I just don't go to those things anymore. It's too..." Sirius tapped his foot against the floor in a way Rigel had often seen him do while uncomfortable, "It's not the same, without Diana, I mean."

Narcissa looked immediately regretful, "Forgive me, Sirius, I didn't mean to press."

Sirius waved her off, summoning up his usual grin after a few seconds, "No worries, Cousin. But you see why I wouldn't want to go alone, don't you?"

"Alone?" Mr. Malfoy raised an eyebrow, "Have you not read your invitation, Black?"

Sirius looked curious, "Haven't checked the mail in months," he joked, "Why, are we permitted to bring a pet this year? I have just the one in mind-rebellious little thing, but I'm sure he'll fit right in with Riddle's crowd."

Rigel knew immediately that Sirius was talking about the little snake he had taken a liking to, and shot him an unimpressed look, "Really, Dad? A Slytherin joke involving snakes? A bit uninspired, don't you think?"

Sirius laughed, "Always go for the classics, my son. More readily accessible, and half the work."

"Read your invitation this year, Sirius," Rose Parkinson pressed, dreamy hazel eyes looking amusedly up at him, "It's time you got out of that dreary house, and going to the only place in the world even more depressing than Walburga Black's haunt doesn't count."

"I volunteer at the *children's ward*," Sirius rolled his eyes, "It's not that depressing."

"Nevertheless, say you'll consider it," Narcissa said imploringly.

Sirius looked very conflicted. He glanced at Rigel for support, but she merely sent him a commiserating look and shrugged her shoulders, "Can't argue with pureblooded women, Dad," she said, "You know that."

Sirius sighed, "I'll think about it, cuz. It depends on whether James gets out of going, though. He won't want to leave Lily home alone in her condition, and Remus... well, he's busy that night, so he can't look after her."

Mentally counting the days, Rigel realized that, yes, the moon would be full on New Year's Eve.

Narcissa exchanged a veiled glance with her husband, who nodded to her almost imperceptibly. "We'll just have to wait and see, then," she said, and if anything Sirius looked even more nervous than he had before.

"Right," Sirius said, tapping his foot a few more times, "Well, it was good seeing you all again, Mr. Malfoy, Mr. Parkinson, Rose, Cissy. Wonderful to meet you as well, young Draco, Miss Parkinson. We must be going, though, as Harry's due back from America soon."

Rigel said a quick goodbye to everyone, and promised Draco and Pansy she'd write them at least once before Christmas. She and Sirius waved goodbye and set off toward the platform exit. Once they were through the barrier, Sirius promptly bent double and took several deep breaths.

"Whew! I'd forgotten how persistent my cousin could be," he said, grinning up at her, hands on his knees, "Did you see that look she gave her husband? If James doesn't find himself magically released from his duties on New Year's Eve, Cissy's lost her touch completely."

Rigel smiled warmly down at Sirius and gave into the impulse to ruffle her uncle's hair cheekily, "That was brilliant, Dad! If I grow up to be half as suave as you, they'll have to hold my fans back with a whole jar of Barrier Buttons."

Sirius laughed, and began leading the way toward the nearest apparition point, "James showed you that one, did he? Nifty little things, those buttons. Anyway, you think it went well? I never was able to read that Cassius Parkinson much, but his wife does most of the social thinking for the both of them, and she seemed to enjoy the meeting well enough."

"You were amazing, Dad," Rigel said honestly, "Just the right amount of disarming self-deprecation and easy-going charm, with just a dash of innocent middle-man to make you seem willing to transcend political lines yet not answerable to either side."

Sirius shot her a mischievous look, "You don't think I overdid it on the waffling? I was going for a sort of 'oh, I would be on your side, but you know how my friends are' kind of a thing."

He took Rigel's shoulder and apparated them smoothly.

"I think you hit it just right," Rigel grinned back once they had touched down, "Thanks for doing that. It just warms my heart to know that you pulled out your rusty social moves for me."

"Why you-" Sirius stuck out a foot to trip Rigel, which she promptly hopped over, "Rusty indeed. No respect from kids these days. Now, let's get a look at you." He stopped and put his hands on his hips, peering down at her, "You've changed, Arch. I mean, a lot."

"Really?" Rigel shrugged, "I haven't noticed."

"Well, you wouldn't" Sirius barked a laugh, "Man, boarding schools are a pain on the memory. I swear you're taller, and your hair keeps growing-"

"Hair does tend to do that," Rigel said flatly.

"And then there's the way you even walk a bit differently now," Sirius went on complaining, "By the summer, I might not even recognize you when you get off the train."

"Than I'll be in charge of recognizing you," Rigel said, smiling indulgently up at her uncle, "Don't worry about how different I seem, Dad. Just remember how much of me is the same."

Sirius ruffled her hair again, "When'd you get so wise, sport? Been corresponding with Moony again, have you?"

"Every day," Rigel said solemnly, "I'm actually moving in with him this summer, didn't I tell you? He's going to prepare me for law school, after which I plan to become a CPA and sell insurance in my free time."

"Just as long as you don't elope with the giant squid," Sirius said affably, then he nodded toward Grimmauld Place as it shuddered into view at their approach, "Home, sweet home."

"Yeah," Rigel said, though inside she knew she wasn't home yet. Home was a place you relaxed. It was a place to be yourself, and a place to let your guard down. Home was letting go of the masks, and home was something she wouldn't have for several years to come.

Then again, home was where people loved you, too, so she wasn't exactly home *less*, either.

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An hour later, her parents came over with Archie. Harry knew this, because her cousin came rushing into his bedroom and quickly closed the door behind him. He glared at her.

"Change clothes with me. Now."

Harry raised an eyebrow, but turned her back and began shucking off her sweater.

"I just don't know how you do it all day!" Archie said, struggling out of Harry's jeans.

"Do what?" Harry asked over her shoulder.

"Be you," Archie said, "It's soo exhausting."

Harry rolled her eyes, "It comes naturally to me."

"Well, it doesn't come naturally to me," Archie said, tossing her shirt at the back of her head, "If Uncle James asks me one more time how my independent potions studies are going... I swear, it's like he's trying to make up for eleven years of disinterest in your potion-making all at once-but he's making it up to *me* ."

Harry thought a bit sourly that having her father finally take an interest in her wasn't really something she'd complain about, but said nothing.

"I mean, I've picked up a lot about potions from the materials you've been sending, but I'll never be you at it," Archie said, sighing, "I just don't have your experience, for one, and I can't afford to devote all my time to it."

"Don't worry about it," Harry said, "I'm sure you did well enough to pass for me until I can cement the rouse by actually being me. After all, Dad doesn't know that much about potions either. I think he

crammed it all in his head before the Auror exam and then promptly forgot it afterward."

"Sounds about right," Archie laughed, "Finished?"

"Yes," Harry turned around. It seemed obvious to say that looking at Archie was like looking into a mirror, especially since that had been the point of the modified Polyjuice, but it really was surreal, especially since she'd been wearing those clothes just moments earlier.

Except...

"Your eyes are still green," Harry said, pointing.

Archie frowned, "Oh, yeah. Here, your set is in my bag. I'll take mine out and you get yours in. Don't forget the glasses."

Harry frowned, "I keep getting used to being without them. I don't really need them anymore, since with the Polyjuice my eyesight it much closer to yours."

"Still, we're going for familiarity," Archie said insistently, "I changed the prescription lenses out for plain ones anyway while I was in America."

The glasses felt strange resting on her nose after so long, but when she peered in the mirror after slipping her contacts in, she did feel more like herself. Imagine, she thought wryly, having to fake your own natural eye color. Life truly was strange.

They went quickly over what the other had done since being picked up by their respective parents. There wasn't enough time to go over everything right then, but as long as they didn't get separated they could cover for one another if a tricky question came their way.

"Oh," Archie said, "I almost forgot. Aunt Lily told me she knows the baby's sex. She and Uncle James haven't told Dad because they like

seeing him die of curiosity, but she told me. Do you want to know?"

"It would be strange if I didn't, since she's already 'told' me," Harry said.

"Right," Archie scratched his neck sheepishly, "Well, you're going to have a baby sister! Congratulations, cuz."

Harry smiled, "Thanks. Anything else?"

"I don't think so," Archie said, "Let's do this."

They headed downstairs together. When they reached the kitchen, Lily was at the counter, baking something by the look of things, and undeniably pregnant. James turned to gesture them over to the counter and then stopped, staring at them with wide, incredulous eyes.

"Hand me the flour, will you, Dear?" Lily asked distractedly, pushing hair out of her face with a blown-out breath while she whisked a bowl of egg whites, "Dear? I don't want to get flour all over my wand to summon it. James?"

She turned around to see what was keeping her husband preoccupied and her eyes widened as she looked between Harry and Archie. "Goodness," she said, blinking bright green eyes down at them.

"You seeing it too, Lil?" James asked, a grin slowly spreading onto his face, "I can't tell if it's a prank or... it's weird, though, right?"

"Yeah..." Lily trailed off.

Sirius came into the kitchen, one of his snakes twined around his neck, "What's everybody staring at?"

James pointed to Archie and Harry without speaking. Harry looked at Archie, who was glancing at her awkwardly as everyone just stared

at them. Sirius looked at them, blinked, narrowed his eyes and looked some more, than said, "Maybe Harry's my kid after all."

That broke the spell. Lily scowled and tossed a handful of flour at Sirius' head while James burst into incredulous laughter, "Practically twins now, aren't they?"

"I thought you looked a bit different, Harry, but I didn't realize you looked more like Archie until seeing you next to him," Lily said, shaking her head with bemusement.

"It's more that Archie looks like Harry, I think," Sirius said, cocking his head to the side to consider the two of them.

"Thanks, Dad," Archie rolled his eyes, "I was just thinking I wanted to look more like a *girl* ."

"You're welcome, Arch," Sirius said, irrepressively jovial, "We'll have to put different colored hats on them so we can tell the difference now, I suppose."

"Ooh, let's paint their nails different colors!" James said, grinning broadly.

"Or we could sew their names to the inside of their-"

"We're not infants," Archie cried, affronted, "Just ask us if you really can't tell us apart."

Sirius chuckled and ruffled Archie's hair on his way past him, "With a mouth like that, I don't think we'll have trouble for long. As if anyone could mistake Harry for you, chatter-box."

"I resent that," Archie said, "You'd be in quite a pickle if I didn't talk so much. I have to make up for the way Harry just stands there saying nothing all the time, otherwise all there would be is awkward silences."

Harry shrugged unconcernedly, "Better to have awkward silence than annoying sound."

"That's my girl," James tucked her under his arm as she attempted to squeeze past him, "Frank and unapologetic. Missed you, little fawn."

Harry smiled up at him and submitted to a quick hug, "Missed you, too, Dad. Congrats again on your promotion. You really deserve it."

Archie sent her a half-guilty, half-sheepish expression that told her he'd meant to say something about that, but had forgotten.

James looked down at her and said, "Why, thank you, Harry. Again."

They all sat down around the table while Lily put the cake in the oven.

"So, Archie, I hear you made the House team," James said, leaning forward with interest, "Are you enjoying it?"

"Definitely," Archie said, "It was easier than I thought it would be to make the transition to beater. We totally trounced... um... well, Gryffindor, in our first game this season. Heh, sorry."

James waved him aside, "No worries. If the current Gryffindor team can't take the heat, they deserve to be trounced."

"Though with my Archie on the team, it may not be entirely the lions' fault," Sirius said proudly, "He's a firecracker on a broom."

"So is Harry," James said, pinning Harry with a wounded look, "If only she would go out for the sport."

"AIM doesn't have teams like Hogwarts does," Harry said, "There's no competition among the different academic tracts. All the sports teams are free-formed, intramural style leagues. You have to have seven people already to form a team, and you know I don't have much time for socializing around my studies."

"What about that Hermione girl?" Lily asked, "Are we ever going to meet her?"

"Hermione doesn't play sports much," Harry said, entirely ignoring the other half of her mother's question.

"Well, at least stay in practice," James sighed.

Harry just smiled. At that moment, Remus' voice came calling from the entrance hall. "Sirius? James? Anyone home?"

"Only everyone, Moony!" Sirius called back with a barking laugh, "You're half an hour late."

Remus appeared in the kitchen doorway and smiled genially at them all, "Sorry, friends, I had to go to the apothecary to pick up my order."

Harry stood and relieved Remus of the bag he was carrying carefully. He sent her a resigned look as she rooted through the bag and pulled out a few vials of the potion within, inspecting them carefully.

James laughed at her, "I don't know why you don't just make it yourself, Harry. You inspect it whenever you see it anyway, and we'd all feel better if it was you making it."

"Haven't learned how to brew Wolfsbane yet," Harry murmured distractedly, holding the potion up to the light and searching for undissolved particles. Seeing that they were perfectly homogenous, she replaced the vials and took another few out to study the stasis charms on them. They'd need to be strong to keep the potion at its freshest for the full moon. Wolfsbane spoiled very quickly if left unattended.

"And you won't be learning how any time soon," Lily said firmly, "That potion is monstrously difficult, and the slightest mistake can be very dangerous."

Harry sent her mother an amused look, "I know. That's why I haven't tried it yet. These look good, Remus."

"They always do, Harry," Remus said, shaking his head, "As they ought to. For the price I'm paying, they assure me that Master Hurst himself brews every batch personally."

Harry just shrugged, "You can never be too careful."

"No, but you can be too boring," Sirius sighed, "Let's talk about something interesting. Guess who I met today?"

James raised an eyebrow curiously, "That's right, you were to meet with the Parkinson's and Malfoy's today, weren't you? How are those tight-shirts, anyway?"

Sirius smirked, "As freshly pressed as ever. Cousin Cissy was delightful, as always, and surprisingly enough her husband didn't summon a single sneer for my benefit."

"And you talked with him longer than five minutes?" James guffawed, "Didn't know that was possible."

Lily sent her husband an exasperated look, and Archie spoke up half-heartedly.

"Those are kind of my friends' parents," he said awkwardly, "So... yeah."

Sirius and James exchanged a look and burst into loud chuckles.

"So..." James said.

"Yeah..." Sirius finished, and both started laughing again.

"Oh, shut it," Archie scowled.

"Don't be so *serious*, son," Sirius said, grinning at the pained look Remus sent him, "I know you're my son, but it really doesn't suit

you."

Remus muttered something like, "Not another one of those stupid jokes," and buried his head in his hands.

"Besides," James said pragmatically, "It's not like they aren't talking about Sirius behind *his* back. Like as not they went home and dissected the entire conversation, start to finish."

Harry couldn't deny that that was probably true, but she still felt inexplicably annoyed when Archie shrugged and let it go without saying anything else.

"Malfoy mentioned something though..." Sirius jumped up and rifled around in the box on the kitchen counter he kept his mail in, "Here it is."

He held an eggshell-colored envelope that was slightly wrinkled from being shoved to the bottom of the stack of mail Sirius rarely bothered to go through. Archie would probably sort it all while he was home.

He slit the letter open and pulled out the silver embossed invitation card within. "Hm," he said, peering at it, "Looks the same as always. Lord Riddle and the cow party hereby invite Sirius Orion Black and Arcturus Rigel Black to attend their New Year's Eve gala. Eight o'clock, formal dress, blah blah blah. What's so interesting?"

Sirius tossed the invitation to the table with disinterest, and Remus picked it up, examining it.

"They've invited Archie as well?" he asked mildly, "He isn't of age yet."

Sirius' eyes narrowed, "Hey, you're right. Why would they invite Arch?"

Seeing Archie's blank expression, Harry spoke up, "You were saying your friends in Slytherin were invited this year, too, weren't you?"

Draco and Pansy and... Theo, was it?"

"Yeah," Archie nodded easily, "Theo Nott. I think Blaise and, um, Millicent were invited with their families as well."

Harry nodded subtly and Archie shrugged, "So I guess they're inviting all the Heirs this year."

"Why, though?" James asked, frowning, "Was Harry included on ours, Lils?"

Lily nodded slowly, "I think so. I didn't look at it very carefully, but now that you mention it... yes, I think she might have been."

Archie and Harry shared a brief moment of panic. Surely both their families wouldn't want to go. If the Potters went for some reason, Harry would just be herself, and if Sirius went, she would be Rigel, but if they both went... she could be Archie all evening, but she didn't think Archie could be her all evening, not to mention she somehow didn't think he'd be too keen on wearing a dress. Still, he could probably fake an illness if worst came to worst.

"Riddle never does anything without a reason," James said uneasily, "And I can't think of a single *good* reason he'd want all the children of the most prominent members of wizarding Britain in one place."

"Stop thinking like an Auror, Dear," Lily said, resting her head on James' shoulder, "I'm sure there's a perfectly innocuous reason for it."

"Like what?" James asked.

"Well," Lily said, "Perhaps he just wants to meet the children of his most prominent party members, now that most of them are old enough to be able to comport themselves with dignity in public."

"That explains why the Dark pureblood Heirs were invited," James said, "Not why Archie and Harry were."

"Fairness?" Lily said weakly.

"Yeah, because the cow party is so concerned with inclusion and equal treatment," James snorted.

"Not all of the SOW party supporters are Dark," Remus pointed out quietly.

"They all follow Dark ideals," James said dismissively.

"They aren't exactly *Dark* ideals," Sirius said, "Dark doesn't really represent one set of ideals anyway. The cows represent something like ultra-conservative pureblood ideals, with a dash of crazy thrown in just for the hell of it. It's just that most of the crazy conservative purebloods are Dark."

"Back to the subject," James said, ignoring Sirius' particularization, "Are you going? I won't lie, the evening would be significantly less odious if you came, but I wouldn't wish it on anyone."

Sirius looked torn. It occurred to Harry that the Split had meant more to Sirius than showing the anti-muggle camp the Light's disapproval. For him, it wasn't just a few less parties to attend a year. It was saying goodbye to everyone he'd grown up with since infancy. All the people his parents had made him associate with outside of school, and his own family as well. Harry couldn't remember the last time Sirius had even talked about his brother Regulus, much less seen him. Sure, Sirius hadn't ever really liked those people, but it was still everyone he knew apart from Remus, James, and Lily.

She wondered if Sirius *wanted* to go to the gala, wanted to catch up with Narcissa and the other Dark purebloods he hadn't minded quite so much, and then she wondered if she should help him or not. Did she want to go to the SOW 'fundraiser?' She would get to see Pansy and Draco over the break, but she would also have to play that awkward half-Rigel, half-Archie role that she affected in the presence of both her friends and her family.

"What about Lily?" Sirius said, clearly avoiding giving an answer just yet, "If you have to work the gala, you won't want to leave her home alone."

"I'll stay with Mom," Harry said.

James looked uncertain, "I'd feel better with a fully qualified wizard in the house, Harry."

"We'll put the wards up," Lily said reasonably, "And you can invite one of your Auror friends over if you really want to. Besides, it's not like I lost my magic when I gained a fetus. Don't you trust me to handle myself?"

James obviously knew there was no other answer to that question besides, "Yes, of course, Dear." He paused for a moment, then added, "Invite Alice over, though, okay? Frank will be working with me that night, and Augusta Longbottom always goes to the New Year's Eve gala. With their boy staying at Hogwarts this year... well, this way she won't be alone on New Year's either."

Harry wondered if James knew why Neville had 'stayed' at Hogwarts over the break, and decided to avoid mentioning the petrifications just in case.

Lily smiled brightly, "Great idea! I'll send over an owl this afternoon."

"So, you think I should go?" Sirius asked, drumming his fingers lightly across the table, "I mean, it's just that it's one thing to blow off some snooty little invitation card, and another thing to turn down a personal invitation made to you by the wife of the party's first chairman."

James snorted, "You're such a pureblood."

"So are you," Remus pointed out.

"So are *you*," James shot back.

"I'm not," Lily said cheerfully, causing all three men to scowl at her with mock annoyance.

"Moving on," Sirius said, rolling his eyes. He thought for another minute, "It *would* give Archie a chance to see his friends over the break if we went."

"I can see them at school," Archie said uncomfortably.

"And we could see first-hand what the cows are up to," Sirius said, warming to the idea.

"We could be total undercover spies," James said, grinning boyishly.

"Am I the only one who aged since graduating from school?" Remus asked the air.

"So you're really going?" Lily asked, eyebrows raised, "And Archie, too?"

"I... yes," Sirius said, shrugging, "Why not?"

Harry and Archie exchanged a look, plans already forming for how they were going to swing the night of the gala.

James groaned, "Oh, man, I have to wear dress robes, don't I?"

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[end of chapter eight].

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A/N: Next up, a dash of Krait, a little bit of Leo, and Riddle's gala. Sorry if this one ended kind of abruptly. I was just... done with the scene, I guess. My current goal is to get the next one out by New Year's, since I always overestimate my capabilities ^^.

Happy Holidays,

-Violet

Chapter 9

A/N: I know, barely! But I did it. Happy New Year, everyone. Enjoy.

The Serpentine Subterfuge:

Chapter 9:

The morning after Harry's return home for winter break, she set off to the Serpent's Storeroom with her crates for Krait in tow. Diagon alley was bustling with people doing their Christmas shopping, and Harry narrowly avoided collisions several times. As she passed Eeylop's Owl Emporium, the boy sweeping the feathers on the stoop glanced up at her and grinned. She waved, recognizing him from the rare times she had gone all the way to the Dancing Dragon before it burned down. He was the cook's son, and she was pretty sure he was called Jason.

Seeing Jason hurry off through the crowd after waving back to her, Harry wasn't much surprised when Leo ambled up beside her as she turned onto Knockturn Alley a few minutes later.

"What's a sprout like you doing in a place like this?" he asked, quirking an eyebrow at her above bright hazel eyes.

"Avoiding shady characters like you, if I have any sense," Harry said, shrugging as best she could with three crates of potions in her hands. They were the ordinary bottles she'd been using since she was unable to pick up Krait's decorative bottles while she was at school, and were a bit heavier than Krait's more delicate ones.

Leo chuckled and took the top crate from her arms without breaking stride, "So you've come to Knockturn Alley to avoid shady folk? I thought you were supposed to get smarter when you went away to school."

Harry shook her head solemnly as they turned down the side alley toward the Serpent's Storeroom, "School isn't for learning, Leo; it's for avoiding the friends you can only put up with for three months out of the year."

He laughed outright at that as they walked into Krait's apothecary, "I suppose I asked for that one."

"Leo?" Krait glanced over his shoulder from where he was stocking a row of Wit-Sharpening Potions, "I told you yesterday I haven't got your father's dragon liver in-is that Harry? Well met, kid. Wasn't expecting you until tomorrow."

Harry gave Krait a nod in greeting, "I thought I'd need a day to relax and re-adjust to full-time brewing, but I grew bored with nothing to do, so I'm here to pick up next week's potion list."

Krait sent her a knowing look, "One day off was really too much for you? That's just sad, kid."

"No one lives forever," Harry said, "Why not do all you can while you can?"

"Because there's such a thing as enjoying life to the fullest," Leo said, shaking his head.

"Brewing potions is enjoyable," Harry said.

Leo and Krait exchanged exasperated looks.

"Kid, I make potions for a living, and Leo's been brewing under his father's eye since he was old enough to hold a stirring rod," Krait said bluntly, "We appreciate potions more than most, but you take the whole thing too far. It's obsessive, and slightly worrying in a lad your age."

Harry ignored them in favor of switching out the full bottles she'd brought for some of Krait's empty ones.

"Well, it's your business, kid," Krait grunted when Harry came back from the back room with three stacks of crates and set them gently on the floor, "Just don't overdo it. Can't have my brewer making himself sick."

"Your brewer?"

All three of them turned at the sound of a voice interjecting into their conversation. A tall man with brown hair and familiar hazel eyes was standing in the doorway to the shop. Leo had left the door propped open, and the sun was behind the shop that day, so there had been neither sound nor shadow to give away the newcomer's presence.

"Is this him, then?" the man said, stepping into the shop and dusting off his dark grey overcoat, "Bit young, isn't he?"

"Father," Leo's voice had an odd quality to it, "What are you doing here?"

Harry's eyes widened and she looked between Leo and the newcomer assessingly. They had the same slender build, though Leo was a bit shorter and moved a tad more gracefully. The hair and eyes were the same as well, but the newcomer's face was more angular, and he held his mouth more tautly.

The man looked at Leo with amusement, "I came to check on the dragon liver, since you said Krait didn't have it yesterday. Had I known you'd be coming to check up on it again, though, I mightn't have bothered."

Krait snorted, "Don't think he was planning on coming over here at all until about ten minutes ago."

Leo shot Krait a displeased look, to which Krait responded with an innocent grin.

"I guess it's a good thing I did stop in, however," the other man said, peering down at Harry in undisguised interest, "As I've finally gotten

to meet Mr. Krait's elusive new brewer."

Harry glanced at Krait questioningly. He sighed and said, "I've told you at least half a dozen times, Master Hurst, that my new brewer prefers to remain anonymous."

"I can see why," Hurst said wryly, giving Harry a once-over "Are you sure he's the one brewing those Blood-Replenisher's? I guess that does explain it-I thought they seemed a bit amateurish."

Harry bristled silently, her eyes flaring a bit with suppressed indignation, and Potion Master Hurst grinned down at her like a shark.

"Oh- *ho* . Would you look at that offended pride? I suppose he must be your brewer after all," Hurst chuckled, "You can always tell which potioneer brewed something by seeing who gets the most offended when you insult it."

Harry let her indignation bleed out of her, and Leo covered his eyes with his hand dramatically, "Really, Father, mind games already? You've only just met the poor kid."

"Although 'met' seems to be putting too fine a point on it," Harry said, eyeing Leo's father a bit warily. She couldn't tell yet if he meant good or ill, but he had just moved himself firmly away from the 'harmless' label with that little trick.

"Quite," Mr. Hurst said, "I am Malcolm Hurst, Aldermaster of the Potions Guild, and Leo's father, dubious though that particular distinction might be."

Harry inclined her head politely, "I am Harry, Leo's friend, and as you've already surmised, one of Krait's brewers. And my Blood-Replenisher's are certainly not amateurish," she added, frowning.

Master Hurst just smiled innocently down at her. Harry could see where Leo had gotten a lot of his more infuriating demeanor.

"Okay, mystery solved," Leo said, clapping his hands together with an air of finality, "Unfortunately, Mr. Krait hasn't got your dragon liver today, so try checking back in tomorrow."

Master Hurst glanced at his son with wry amusement, "It's almost like you're trying to get rid of me, Son. Surely young Harry here doesn't need your protection so desperately. Besides, what do you imagine I'll do if I remain for the duration of a polite conversation?"

Leo scowled a bit, but didn't say anything.

Master Hurst turned back to Harry with a smile that caused a nervous increase in her blood pressure, "Well, Harry, is it? Have you a last name?"

"Yes, I do," Harry said.

Hurst waited for a couple beats, then said, "Ah. Well, Harry, a couple of months ago a good friend of mine, one Horace Burke, showed me a rather impressive sample of Blood-Replenisher, and informed me that there was a new brewer in London. As Aldermaster of the Potions Guild, it is one of my responsibilities to keep an eye on all of the independent potion brewers, both to keep abreast of the Guild's competition and to prevent any freelance brewers from causing... shall we say, *disruptions*, in the potions community with their commodities."

Harry frowned slightly, "Am I in some kind of trouble, Master Hurst? I use only commercial grade ingredients at the very least, and I have sold no patented potions that I am aware of."

Hurst shook his head, "No, no, you misunderstand. At first I was concerned when I learned that Krait was keeping a mysterious new brewer all to himself-new potioners don't just come out of nowhere, you know. After inspecting all of your work, however-at least, the work I could wheedle Krait into admitting was yours-I could find no serious flaws with it. It was then I realized we must be dealing with an unknown talent, and as part of the Aldermaster's responsibilities

include recruitment, I thought it best if I bent my will toward discovering just who Krait's mysterious brewer was."

"I see," Harry said slowly, still not sure where the man was going with all of this.

Master Hurst tilted his head at her consideringly, "It makes sense, in a bizarre sort of way. I thought you must be foreign, you see, because we keep a close eye on all of the magical schools in Britain, and when an NEWT student shows particular promise the resident Potion Master informs the Guild at once. You are so young, however, that I suppose your Potions Master simply hasn't notified us of your talent yet."

Harry shook her head, "I am a student at the American Institute of Magic."

Hurst narrowed his eyes a bit, "I see. Well, it is true that I am not on the best of terms with Master Tallum, but if you are of British nationality, he would still have sent me your name eventually, given the level you are already brewing at."

Harry tried not to panic. It would be bad if Master Tallum and Master Hurst ever compared notes on any talented kids named Harry. Hurst had said they weren't very good friends, so maybe it wouldn't ever come up, but it was looking more and more as though she wouldn't be able to get out of this conversation without a lot more truth than she generally proffered.

"I am not in the potions tract," Harry said, "So it might not occur to him to mention me."

Hurst looked rather incredulous, "Not in the potions tract? Why ever not?"

Harry shrugged a bit helplessly, "It's a long, very complicated story, but suffice to say that I am not. I study potions in my free time."

"So it is just a hobby, then?" Master Hurst looked inordinately disappointed.

"Not exactly," Harry said carefully. The conversation was getting trickier to navigate. Maybe she should stop being half-herself and just be completely Harry Potter for Master Hurst. In fact, that would probably be the wisest course, considering that her career as a potions maker in the future would likely depend greatly on this man's opinion of her. She really couldn't afford to be caught out lying to him. "It is my intention to seek a career in potion making, but for numerous reasons I chose not to use my time at AIM on the potions tract. AIM has a phenomenal Healing tract, which I thought it in my interest to take advantage of, particularly considering the fact that their potion tract is... forgive me, less than top-notch."

Master Hurst nearly choked on his laughter, "Oh, what I wouldn't give to see old Tallum's face if he heard that. I can't exactly argue with that assessment. On the other hand, though... studying potions on your own is quite difficult, not to mention dangerous."

"I take proper precautions," Harry said firmly.

"I didn't mean it as censure, but praise," Hurst said, "But I did wonder... well, the reason I sought to discover the identity of Krait's brewer was to offer him a place within the Guild."

"If I pass my Mastery, you mean?" Harry asked, interestedly. Usually one had to petition the Guild for membership after finishing their apprenticeship and taking their Mastery exam. The apprenticeship was optional, of course, but few ever passed the exam without one.

"Well, originally it was either that or offer to set the brewer up with an apprenticeship if he hadn't already taken his Mastery, but with you being so young..." Hurst trailed off, thinking, "What are you doing next summer?"

"Working here, I suppose," Harry said, "Why?"

"How would you feel about an internship at the Guild?" Hurst asked, eyes gleaming.

"Now wait just one second!" Krait broke in exasperatedly, "You said you weren't going to steal my brewer away."

Hurst turned amused eyes on Krait, "I said if you told me who he was I wouldn't steal him from you. You didn't tell me, and besides, I'm not stealing. I'm bribing."

Harry gazed up at Master Hurst with something like awe in her chest and disbelief in her expression, "The Guild only gives internships to three students a year."

"That's true," Hurst said, smiling.

"And those three are *always* at least at journeyman level."

"They are," Hurst said, "But then... so are you."

Harry couldn't suppress a wide grin at hearing that from the Aldermaster of the Potions Guild. Still, she said, "Not officially. I don't have my NEWT in potions, and I haven't declared formally my intention for Mastership."

"Details," Hurst said, brushing the words away unconcernedly, "Am I the Aldermaster or not? Do you want the apprenticeship?"

"Yes," Harry said fervently, "But... what about Leo?"

"My son?" Hurst turned surprised eyes toward Leo, who was listening to the conversation with an air of resigned acceptance, "What about him? You'll still have time to see one another, I dare say."

"I mean, won't Leo be graduating from his home-schooling program this spring?" Harry clarified, "He should get the internship, if there is one available."

Hurst snorted indelicately, "My son? Intern at the Guild? He'd sooner swallow bubotuber puss."

Harry was confused, "I thought you wanted to be a potioneer, Leo."

Leo shrugged, "Did I say that? I mean, I don't *hate* potions, so I guess I could."

Master Hurst sighed dejectedly, "You see what I put up with? No passion for potions at all in this one."

"You should take it," Leo said, grinning down at Harry, "It will be hard to make a living in Britain without having attended a British magical school. The Guild could help a lot."

"So, you really don't want it?" Harry asked, rather incredulous that someone could dismiss an internship at the Potions Guild so cavalierly. She supposed Leo had been being facetious when he'd said potions was the most interesting thing he'd found so far, or perhaps he'd just meant in relation to the other school work he did, and not to all things in general like she'd assumed.

"Nah, I've got enough on my plate," Leo said vaguely.

"Right, you wouldn't want to lose all the time you spend wandering around doing nothing," his father said, snorting.

Harry raised an eyebrow, but a quick headshake from Krait told her not to comment. She supposed Leo's father might not be fully apprised of what Leo did in the Lower Alley's, though his mother seemed to know quite a bit.

"I'd be honored," Harry said after another moment of thought, "If you're sure it's okay for me to take the Internship spot."

Harry beamed inwardly. Now she wouldn't waste three whole months of structured potion study just because she was away from Professor Snape.

"Great," Hurst said happily, clapping his hands together the same way Leo had done earlier, "One thing. If I'm to fill out your paperwork for the internship, I really will need a last name."

Harry took a careful breath. Moment of truth. Was she prepared to deal with the consequences of being herself?

Well, really, she didn't have a choice. Suppose she turned him down, turned the whole internship down-though she would have to be monumentally stupid to do so-and then later down the road he recognized her as the ungrateful brat he'd met in Krait's apothecary. How likely was he to think well of Harry Potter the potions brewer if that happened? And she needed people to like Harry Potter, since that's who she was going to be the rest of her life.

"Before I tell you," Harry said, trying not to look shady, "Could I ask you not to tell my parents that I have a job here at Krait's? It's the reason I've been keeping my last name a secret, you see. They don't much approve of Knockturn Alley, and I use the money I earn here for something I haven't told them about. It's not illegal, or dangerous, I just don't want them to know. Can you do that for me, Master Hurst? Please?"

Hurst looked a bit uncomfortable, "How old are you?"

Harry stood as tall as she could without looking obvious about it, "Twelve, sir."

"I really shouldn't," he muttered to himself, "But I guess it isn't technically any of my business."

"Just say I showed you the Blood-Replenisher," Leo chimed in helpfully, "Say I met Harry in the apothecary Tate looks after on Diagon Alley, we got talking about potions, Harry mentioned brewing some, showed me, and I showed you. You requested a meeting, and offered Harry the apprenticeship. Simple, and nobody's parents get unnecessarily upset."

Master Hurst grimaced, "Well, I suppose it does have a good amount of plausible deniability going for it. All right, I agree."

Harry smiled, "Thank you, sir. My full name is Harry Potter."

Master Hurst stared at her and Krait spluttered while Leo just smirked.

"The Potter's don't have a son," Hurst said, blinking.

"You've got to be kidding me!" Krait glared at Leo, "I suppose you knew this entire time, Your-you sneak. Harry. Harriett Potter. I suppose you thought it funny, Leo. James Potter, one of the most notorious Aurors of the last decade, and his kid working under my nose. I should have known. Like the way you treat the kid isn't completely obvious in retrospect. 'Course he's a bloody girl. Well, that's just peachy."

"Krait..."

"All this time, I've been letting a girl-a Potter girl, Merlin help me if she'd ever gotten hurt-traipse through Knockturn alley like she owns the damn street-"

"Krait."

"-And you letting me load the wee lass up with crates and crates of potions, not saying a thing-"

"Krait!" Leo rolled his eyes as Krait finally stopped cursing for a moment, "If you will recall, I escorted Miss Potter in Knockturn Alley every day, and carried the crates to boot."

"You did that before you found out I was a girl," Harry pointed out.

"I must have sensed it from the beginning," Leo sniffed.

"A girl," Hurst was still staring down at her, "Harriett Potter is Krait's mysterious brewer. This is certainly a day for surprises."

"You're telling me," Krait snorted grumpily, "I thought you were some kind of criminal, or orphan, and you're practically bleeding royalty."

Harry sighed internally at the dramatics her friends were prone to, "It's not a big deal."

"Yes, it is," Leo and Krait said bluntly.

Harry turned to Master Hurst, "Is it going to be a problem, my gender?"

"Problem?" Hurst frowned, "No, I shouldn't... ah, I see what you mean. There is a rather unfortunate lack of female Mastery students, isn't there?"

"They make up around fifteen percent of the Adepts, and only five percent of the Master level," Harry said frankly, "And most of the women who make it to Mastery level become independent brewers, and don't often get published in the major potions periodicals."

Hurst cleared his throat, "That is true. At present I believe we have only two Potions Mistresses in the country, and neither of them are with the Guild. Still, there isn't any rule against it, of course. Just... ah... well, in any case it should not pose an issue. I was merely surprised. The invitation is of course still yours."

"Then I would love to intern at the Potions Guild this summer," Harry said, barely suppressing the need to beam with giddy excitement.

"Excellent," Master Hurst clasped her shoulder briefly, before slapping his son on the back and inclining his head toward Krait respectfully, "Well, I must be getting back to my own work, then. Harriett Potter, a Potioneer. Marvelous, just wonderful. Grindel will be tickled pink."

Hurst left without a backward glance, and Leo groaned into his hands once he was gone, "Why is he always like that? Harry, I'm really sorry about that. I knew he was poking about for Krait's new

brewer, but I didn't think he'd just show up here like that. It's why I've been checking on his ingredients for him lately. Talk about nosy, that man."

"Your father seems nice," Harry said unconcernedly, "It's not a big deal."

"But he found out all your secrets," Leo said apologetically.

Harry was hard-pressed to smother an amused smirk. Really, though, *all* her secrets? "That's okay. They were secrets of convenience, not of any real necessity. I think at this point Krait is unlikely to fire me just because I'm a girl, which was one of the main reasons for keeping my identity a secret. That, and preventing my parents from hearing about what I do with my free time."

Krait just shook his head, "As long as your potion making doesn't slack off, I don't care if you're a dancing bear."

With that settled, Harry went to pick up the crates once more but Leo forestalled her.

"We'll come back for the crates later," he told Krait, putting a hand on Harry's arm and propelling her gently toward the door, "Harry wanted to talk to me about something first."

"Sure," Krait snorted, and went back to stocking Wit-Sharpening Potions.

Harry allowed Leo to lead her toward Kyprioth Court without complaint, though she did throw him several questioning looks, which he ignored. She caught sight of a new building at the end of the street, where the Dancing Dragon used to stand, and smiled.

"The new Dragon looks good," she offered.

"It does," Leo agreed amiably, "But it's called the Dancing Phoenix now."

She supposed that made sense, with the whole rising from the ashes thing.

When Leo took them down a side alley that was all too familiar to Harry, no matter that it looked different in the light of day, she grew uneasy. Her hands began to shake ever so slightly.

"Where are we going, Leo?"

Leo looked down at her from the corner of his eye, "Just taking you home, as usual."

"Home-" Harry's breath hitched. He couldn't be, there was no way he could know.

And yet, somehow, after a few twists and turns they arrived on Dogwood lane. Harry's feet carried her numbly after Leo, until he stopped in front of number seven and raised an eyebrow.

Harry stared back at him, considering whether it would cost her anything to try bluffing.

"Is this your home, Leo?" she asked, eyes showing nothing but innocent curiosity.

A faint smile tugged at Leo's mouth, and he shook his head.

Harry allowed her face to fall in slight disappointment and confusion, "Then, where are we?"

"Very good," Leo said, rocking back on his heels to study her face, "Believable, but as careful as your expression is now, you gave yourself away as soon as you suspected what I meant by 'home.' Your breathing sped up, and your eyes widened noticeably."

Harry maintained her innocent façade, "Well, I was excited. I thought I was finally going to get to see where you lived."

"I'd like to believe that," Leo said, gazing down at her, "But the look in your eyes wasn't hopeful, lass. It was scared."

Harry turned her gaze away from her friend, and didn't respond.

Leo pressed her, "What's got you scared, Harry? Me? You know I'd never-"

"Why have you brought me here, Leo?" Harry asked, turning back to him calmly, "To make a point? What do you want?"

"Want?" Leo looked confused, then insulted, before his features settled on wryness, "No, it's not blackmail I'll be dealing in today, Harry. The only thing I want from you is the truth."

"Just like that?" Harry couldn't help but scoff a bit internally, even as she stayed collected on the surface, "Who says the truth is yours to demand? Whatever you think you know, leave it here, Leo. Please."

Leo shot her a look, "Harry, it's my job to know what goes on in these alleys."

"Nothing's going on, Leo. Have you had any complaints, any disturbances that you think I'm somehow responsible for?" Harry asked.

"How could I, when you've been in America all semester?" Leo asked.

"How indeed?" Harry countered. Then she sighed, "This is pointless, Leo. I don't know what you were expecting me to admit, but can we forget this whole thing?"

"No," Leo said, "Not when I still don't understand."

"You don't need to understand everything," Harry said sharply.

"I need to understand *you*," Leo said just as sharply back, "This is what you spent your money from last summer on, isn't it?" He

gestured to number eight with a negligent hand, "Why? Why pay for a room you're never going to use?"

"Who says I'm not using it?" Harry asked stubbornly. This was all going downhill too fast. The apartment was supposed to be a failsafe, one that nobody knew about. Not that Leo was likely to talk to the Aurors about it, but still.

Leo raised a disbelieving eyebrow, "How can you be? Either you're at school in America or you aren't, and since you *are*, you can't possibly have a use for this place. Why doesn't anything about you make *sense* ?"

Harry was frowning openly now, "You don't know any of that for sure. You can't know anything for sure. All you have is guesses, and you can't prove anything."

"Prove? What are you-" Leo broke off with a harsh exhale, "You aren't making sense, Harry. What is there to prove or not prove? I know you spend all year in America or at your home in Godric's Hollow, because my people checked."

Harry's blood froze, "Checked?"

"Yes, checked," Leo said, sounding annoyed now, "Did you think I was someone who could afford not to check into the background of his friends? I am not in a position to take anyone's word for anything, Harry, so don't start getting offended just because I checked up on your story."

"What do you mean, checked?" Harry asked tightly.

Leo shrugged dismissively, "I just sent one of my men over to ask around, that's all. It wasn't anything intrusive."

"And what did they tell you?" Harry asked.

"Plenty," Leo said, eyes narrowed, "Like the fact that you play the boy even there. You know that's crazy, right? You can't just pretend to be someone else forever-

"Don't tell me what I can and can't do, Leo," Harry's temper flared, but that last remark had hit a little too close to home, "I am not one of your subjects."

Leo gazed challengingly down at her, "Oh, really? So you thought you could just buy a house in my jurisdiction and nothing would come of it, is that it?"

"You only control the Court of the Rogue, Leo, and stop changing the subject," Harry said tightly, "What else did you dig up on me?"

Leo took several deep breaths to calm himself, "I told you, it was nothing intrusive. My man simply ascertained the fact that one Harry Potter was attending school in America, in the Healer's tract, and that was all. What were you expecting me to find?"

"Nothing," Harry said flatly, "I was expecting you to find nothing, because I wasn't expecting you to go looking. Is this the kind of friendship we have?"

Leo scowled at her, "Don't talk to me about friendship as though it magically removes a person from suspicion in your eyes either. Tell me you've never lied to me, Harry, and then tell me I was wrong to try and find out what parts of you were the truth."

Harry's face felt pinched with everything she was holding back. All she could say was, "How did you know about this place? Have me followed?"

"It doesn't matter how I knew. What are you using it for?" Leo asked.

"What everyone uses a house for," Harry said.

Leo made a frustrated sound, "Even forgetting that you are in America half the year, *I know you don't actually use it*, Harry. I want to know why you have it."

"And how do you know that?" Harry said.

"The neighbors never see you. Never hear you. There's no furniture in the house and-" Leo cut himself off, grimacing, and Harry realized.

"You broke into my house?" Harry stared at him, mouth slightly agape. How did Leo think that was okay?

Leo backpedaled swiftly, "When I broke in, I wasn't sure it was your house."

"So you broke into some random person's house that might have been mine?" Harry's voice was growing more incredulous.

"No," Leo said patiently, "I broke into a house that may or may not have been the home of an orphan with no one to look after him. All I knew was that the one renting it was young, alone, and named Harry. I briefly entertained the possibility it was you, but only after discovering it to be abandoned did I seriously consider that you'd bought an empty house in the Lower Alley's for no apparent reason. Honestly? I still can't believe I was right."

"It's not abandoned," Harry said forcefully, "You mustn't ever say that again. Don't even think it. Just know that Harry Potter has a house in the Lower Alley's, and don't remember anything about when or why she used it."

Leo shook his head bewilderedly, "I don't understand."

"And I can't explain it to you," Harry said firmly, "Don't you think if I could explain it to you I would have? Do you think I like arguing with you in the middle of the street? Fighting with my friend over something so stupid? I'm not doing this for kicks, Leo. *I can't explain it to you*."

Leo blinked at her for a long moment, looking a bit lost, "What, ever?"

Harry ran a hand through her bangs distractedly as the wind swept them into her eyes, "Yes, ever. You will never know, Leo, and that's how it has to be. Can you live with that, or should I find someone else to watch my back in Knockturn Alley from now on?"

Leo scowled down at her, eyes tight, "I don't like ultimatums."

"Well I don't like sneaky busybodies who do more harm than good with their ignorant nosing around," Harry scowled back.

"I wouldn't be ignorant if you'd just-" Leo took a deep breath, then two more, and finally, after a long look into Harry's stubborn green eyes, he drew back enough to consider her more calmly, "Fine. You're not going to tell me, and my knowing is obviously going to mess up some grand plan of yours, so, fine. I'll stop asking."

Harry nearly sighed with relief, until Leo added, " *If* . I'll stop asking *if* you promise that the minute you get over your head-the very second whatever you're doing gets too big for you to handle-you will come to me and explain everything. No, don't protest. Harry, I don't care if what you're doing is dangerous, illegal, unethical, or just plain crazy. When you need help, you will come to me, and I will give it to you. Deal?"

Harry weighed the pros and cons quickly. She lost nothing by agreeing, and gained Leo's cooperation and silence. He had worded his request vaguely enough that she could interpret 'over her head' however she wanted, too, which meant she didn't *ever* have to ask him for help, and he would still agree not to push too hard into her secrets.

"Deal," Harry said, sticking her hand out toward Leo.

Leo clasped her hand in an easy movement, and pulled her forward into a brief hug just as easily, "Be careful, Harry," he said into her

short hair.

"Worry about yourself, Leo," She murmured back.

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That evening, the Blacks and Remus had come over to Godric's Hollow for dinner. They had just started in on the main course when James said, "Master Grindel told me something very interesting today." Grindel was the potioneer who kept the law enforcement offices equipped with Polyjuice, Veritaserum, Tissue-Repairing creams, and various other potions the Aurors had need for. "Do you have news to share with us, Harry?"

All eyes in her family turned expectantly to her, and Harry swallowed her bite of potatoes awkwardly before saying, "Yes. I was approached by a member of the Potions Guild today-"

"Not just a member, the Aldermaster," James broke in, grinning proudly.

"Yes," Harry said, smiling a bit, "Master Hurst, who offered me an internship at the Guild this summer."

Lily clapped her hands together excitedly and Sirius looked cheerfully impressed. Remus smiled fondly at her and said, "You should have told us you were applying, Harry. We could have helped you with recommendations or something."

Harry smiled her thanks, but said, "I didn't apply, actually. A friend of mine recommended my potions work to the Aldermaster, and he liked it enough to offer me the internship."

"You have other friends?" Archie said with mock horror, "I feel so betrayed."

"How did he contact you?" Lily asked curiously.

Harry sent Archie an amused look, and told her mother, "We happened to both be in the apothecary on Diagon Alley today, Mr. Tate introduced us, and it came out that I was the same Harry Master Hurst's son had mentioned to him."

"His son?" Lily tilted her head, "Where did you meet him?"

"Yes, Harry, where did you meet this... *boy*?" James clenched his butter knife with alarming focus.

"Through Mr. Tate as well," Harry shrugged, "He's in there a lot running errands for his father, and I'm in there a lot picking up ingredients. After the first few times we recognized each other, we got to talking about potions, and showed each other some of our work. He took one of my Blood-Replenisher's to show his father."

"How often do you see this boy, exactly?" James asked suspiciously.

Harry rolled her eyes, "It's not like that, Dad. Leo is too old for me."

"His name is Leo?" Sirius grinned, "I like him already."

"No, you don't," James growled at Sirius before turning back to stare Harry down again, "Just how old is he? You know you can't trust older men just because they remind you of your father, Harry. You have to always be on your guard."

Harry shook her head, "Not that old. He's still school-age."

"Does he go to Hogwarts?" Archie asked, and Harry hoped no one else caught the underlying nervousness in that question.

"No, he's home-schooled," Harry said. Seeing the dangerous look in her father's eyes, she added, "But he's not my type, so don't worry."

"What is this 'type' thing you keep talking about?" James was looking distinctly blue in the face, "You are too young to have a type!"

"Figure of speech," Harry murmured into her peas, "So anyway, I'm going to internship at the Potions Guild over the summer. Yay, me."

"Congratulations, Harry," Remus said warmly, "Those are very difficult internships to come by. If you make a good enough impression, you'll have your pick of Masters to apprentice under."

"We should celebrate," Lily said thoughtfully, "This is a big accomplishment, after all."

"Great idea, Aunt Lily," Archie said enthusiastically, "Let's have a party."

"We could get you that platinum cutting board you've had your eye on," Remus suggested.

"Or we could get a new snake!" Sirius said.

"How would that be celebrating?" Lily shook her head wearily.

"Besides, then you'd have thirteen," James pointed out logically.

"Oh, good point."

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That night she and Archie were allowed to have a sleepover, so they spent the evening in Harry's room, going over everything the other had done all semester. Twice. When they reached the end of it, Harry was frowning because one of Archie's teachers had changed the syllabus and he'd forgotten to tell her to change her extra curricular studies accordingly. She had ended up studying three extra chapters about medical ailments of the mind unnecessarily.

Archie was frowning for rather different reasons.

"Seriously? How can you be some nut job's target *again* this year?" Archie shook his head wonderingly, "And our parents think I'm the troublesome one? Why are people always attacking you, though, really?"

Harry shrugged, "No idea. It isn't just me, though. Neville, Patil, Mrs. Norris. Something really bad is happening at Hogwarts."

"I'm starting to think I dodged a major stunner by trading places with you," Archie said, "So who do you think is doing it?"

"I don't know," Harry said, "But it might not be a person. It could be a 'what.'"

Archie quirked his brow, "No, it's obviously a person."

Harry blinked, "What do you mean?"

"The message," Archie said, "Coupled with the fact that the voice you heard used the word 'master.' Obviously there are two parties involved. One is the voice you heard, the one able to move through walls and therefore likely not human. The other is the one who wrote the message, which sounds remarkably more coherent than the voice you heard, and who the first voice calls master. There is a master and a servant, both of whom speak parseltongue, so clearly the master is a parselmouth and the servant is a snake, unless you think snakes serve other snakes in line with political agendas?"

"No, your analysis makes more sense," Harry acceded, "So there is another speaker in Hogwarts, like Dumbledore and Snape implied, and whatever is attacking these kids is some kind of snake."

"What kind of a snake petrifies people?" Archie asked.

"I'm not sure," Harry said, "Let's look in the Potter Library. There's all sorts of compendiums on magical creatures, since one of my great-great-grandfathers was a creature enthusiast."

"Wouldn't the Black Library have more on creatures that speak parseltongue?" Archie asked.

"We'll check there tomorrow, unless you want to explain to my mom why we want to floo to Grimmauld Place in the middle of the night to check the library for something," Harry offered.

"Yeah, no," Archie laughed.

They browsed through the Potter Library for a few hours, and then the next day they looked through the Black Library, and eventually they had come up with a list of likely creatures. It was much easier looking through Libraries you were familiar with, Harry reflected, because she was sure the same research would have taken several days in the Hogwarts Library, whose organizational system she still hadn't fully mastered.

At the top of the list was the Gorgon. It was said to be a female monster with snakes for hair, and the snakes were apparently capable of turning people to stone. Unfortunately, there were very few half-credible accounts of a Gorgon sighting in the last two centuries. Archie liked that one, because it matched up with the female attacker Harry had encountered, but Harry thought it less likely. It explained the parseltongue, and the petrification, but not how or why the snakes, which according to their information were attached to the Gorgon's head, would be separate at any time from the actual Gorgon.

Next on the list was the Basilisk. It was a giant serpent, which made it hard to see how it would fit in the walls, considering all the other things that must be in the walls, pipes, and stones and such, but the basilisk had the ability to either petrify or kill with its gaze, which fit the patterns of the attacks better than the Gorgon, who as far as legend could tell, only killed with its gaze.

Unfortunately, no one had seen a basilisk for a lot longer than the last known Gorgon sighting. They were rare, and neither Archie nor

Harry could fathom where someone would have gotten hold of one in this day and age.

Third on the list was the Echidna. Half nymph-half snake, the echidna's natural prey was humans, and it was reported to have powers that wizards had yet to fathom, so it could very well be able to petrify people. But not only did it usually eat its victims once it killed them, the echidna was also said to be fiercely intelligent. The voice Harry had heard didn't sound intelligent, and there were no known reports of an echidna following a master other than itself.

"All of these creatures are very long-lived," Archie commented, "If it is one of these things, it wasn't born or made recently. Most of them take at least a decade to become fully grown, so if this is a plot of some kind, it's either a really long time in the making, or else whoever is behind it somehow found and persuaded one of these creatures for his purposes."

"Her purposes," Harry corrected absently, "And it makes sense that they're long-lived. The serpent is the symbol for immortality in many different cultures around the globe, and reptiles in general live pretty long lives. Look at tortoises."

"Yeah," Archie said, tapping his fingers on the table they were working at, "It's weird though, that you weren't able to follow the creature the second time."

Harry raised an eyebrow, "How so? It was moving through the walls, and I was limited to the hallways."

"True," Archie said, "But it was moving quickly. Like it knew its way around the school. I mean, how come it didn't get completely lost in the walls of that castle, especially if it was a new inhabitant?"

"Maybe it was somehow able to lock onto its master's location?" Harry guessed, "I'm not sure. It can't be a native of Hogwarts, though... can it? I mean, someone would have noticed it before now."

"It could have been in hiding."

"Hiding is possible, but never getting hungry or tempted by all the students roaming the halls until this year?" Harry shook her head, "If it was at Hogwarts before the 'master' came to control it, there should have been more attacks, more random petrifications or disappearances, before this master came to the school. The voice sounded like the master was holding it back, preventing it from killing when it wanted. Surely the thing gets hungry, but so far none of its victims have been eaten."

"Maybe it feeds from the forest," Archie suggested, "You should ask Hagrid if there are creatures going missing or migrating to parts of the forest away from the castle."

"Good idea," Harry said, making a mental note of it.

"Maybe it was hibernating," Archie added, "I mean, snakes do that, right?"

"That only makes sense if it was a basilisk," Harry said, "The other two are part-humanoid. They wouldn't have been hibernating. Besides, what would a hibernating basilisk be doing at Hogwarts? It's loud and cold there, not the best environment for centuries of sleep."

"I don't know," Archie said, grimacing, "This whole thing is such a mess. Are you going to tell Snape what we think it might be when you get back?"

Harry shook her head, "Snape is smart, and so is Dumbledore. They would have thought of these things already, so unless new evidence comes to light, there's no point telling them what they already know."

"So..." Archie leveled a frank look at her, "Riddle's gala, really?"

Harry shrugged defensively, "It was Sirius who really wanted to go."

"And who was able to talk himself into going because your friends would be there," Archie said pointedly, "I'm not sure this is a good idea."

"It's a public event," Harry said logically, "The SOW party isn't going to try anything. They're more the type to plot in secret, not in the open like that. The Minister is invited, for goodness sake, and my dad's going to be there-"

"Exactly," Archie said earnestly, "It's not the cow party I'm worried about, it's you. Can you hold up all night with Sirius, James, *and* your pureblood friends in the same room?"

Harry wanted to point out that James and Sirius were just as pureblooded as her friends, but she knew what Archie had meant. She also wanted to point out that calling the SOW party the cow party was both a bit juvenile and a bit silly just for the sake of rhyming, especially when you considered that a sow was, in fact, a female pig. If she said any of that, however, Archie would assume she was going over to the dark side-both literally and figuratively.

"I'll be fine," Harry said, "I won't be with all of those people at once but for a few times all night. Mostly I can switch between personas easily depending on who I'm talking to."

"You sound pretty confident," Archie said.

That was good, Harry reflected, as confidence had been what she was going for.

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A few days later, Harry received a letter from Draco. Well, Archie had received it and passed it along, but still.

Dear Rigel,

How is your winter break? I note that you have not yet written to either Pansy or myself, and I would like to take the time to tell you that enclosing a note along with our Christmas presents will not count for your one mandatory correspondence with us, just in case you were going to try that.

I won't ask about your winter assignments, since you probably had them finished before even boarding the train home, but I will ask if you are coming to the New Year's Eve gala. Are you? Please come. Your father didn't seem too keen, but you don't have to be limited by his social decisions anymore, you know. You're an honorary Malfoy now, which means that any invitation which includes all of our family automatically extends to you. And you can't be concerned about crashing the party because you were invited by name on your father's invitation as well. In conclusion, I know you haven't got anything better to do on New Years or you would have mentioned it, and father has personally charged me with persuading you to come, which means that he probably has a better reason for your attendance than you have for not attending. Also, if you agree after reading this letter, it means I gain both status and credibility as a negotiator in my father's eyes, so come to help out your best friend, if for no other reason.

Did you like that appeal to your better nature? I wasn't sure you had one, but mother told me to try anyway.

That was a joke, in case you didn't get that. I absolutely hate parchment communication, but father says I must get used to it unless I want to be running around in an undignified manner for the rest of my life.

Best Holiday Wishes

Draco Lucian Malfoy

Harry rolled up the letter with a wry grin on her face. Since Sirius had already decided to attend, she could only assume that he had neglected to RSVP, probably on purpose. She would write to Draco, asking him to RSVP for both Sirius and herself, and spinning it in a way that suggested both she and Sirius had been miraculously convinced to attend due to Draco's letter. That ought to please Lucius Malfoy to no end.

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Christmas morning was a festive affair as always at Godric's Hollow. Remus was looking rather pale as the full moon was fast approaching, but he was propped up in a warm chair by the fire, and looked on fondly as Archie bounced around from the pile of gifts to the family member they belonged to, distributing each with an air of barely-functional excitement.

"This one's from me!" Archie exclaimed as he dropped a bright purple package in her lap.

Harry opened it slowly, after reaching her magic toward it and trying to decide if there was a trap contained in the lid. She had already opened three gifts from Sirius, all of which had rubber snakes coiled to spring as soon as the lid on the box was opened. The floor about the living room was littered with the unlikely-colored snakes, and each present that exploded into rubber snakes made Sirius laugh even harder, and the rest of them scowl at him a little more fiercely.

Her magic felt no answering magic from within the package, so at least whatever was in there wouldn't do *too* much damage. She still pointed the package away from her before opening it, however.

Nestled in the tissue paper was a watch. It wasn't very big, but it was obviously very old. It was also a man's watch, but just elegant enough that it wasn't too unusual a gift for a girl. The watch and

chain were both of the brightest silver, and it looked like the face of the watch opened, but the clasp wouldn't budge to Harry's gentle pulling.

Archie sent her a mysterious smirk, so Harry decided to leave it for now, and thanked Archie warmly. He knew she'd been wanting a watch of her own, so that she wouldn't have to borrow his whenever she went somewhere she ought to have one. All of her male friends had similar watches of more or less age and value. They wouldn't get their Heir rings until they turned seventeen, but watches were usually given to the male heir of a pureblood family when he turned eleven.

"Interesting gift," Sirius said, glancing between them with mild amusement, "Isn't it cute, James?"

"I know," James said, "Only twelve and already having their own inside jokes."

"Open mine next, Dear," Lily said, passing James a package.

James took it with a look of wonder in his eyes, as though he couldn't believe his wife of thirteen years had gotten him a Christmas present. Sometimes, in the back part of her mind, Harry recognized that it was patently ridiculous how in love her parents were, but most of the time she was just fondly amused by it, and perhaps a tiny bit wistful, in a distant and not at all immediate sort of way.

"A tie!" James exclaimed, taking it out of the little box and holding it up, "Thank you, honey."

He put it on immediately, while Remus smiled and Sirius laughed outright, "James," he said, "You hate ties."

"Shut up, Sirius," James said, still beaming at his wife, "This is the best present ever."

Lily couldn't hold back her own laughter any longer. She reached beneath her chair and pulled out a bigger box, "Here, Darling, the tie was a joke."

James looked ready to tackle Lily with happiness, but eyed her swollen belly and settled for embracing her gently before taking the package with reverence, "Thanks for real this time, Lily."

"Just open the package, James," Lily rolled her eyes.

And so it went. Remus got Harry a new set of weights, slightly heavier than her old ones. James got her a voucher for her favorite used bookstore in Diagon Alley. James got Archie a new pair of beater's gloves, but Sirius got Harry a leather Healer's kit, so in the end everything worked out nicely. Harry got her mother a certificate for a pregnancy massage at her favorite beauty parlor. Lily bought Sirius an exotic dessert cookbook, and Harry got Archie a remembrall.

As soon as he grasped it, the cloudy mists inside turned dark red.

"Well... that's not good," Archie laughed sheepishly.

"Good thinking, Harry," Sirius said, laughing, "Though all it'll end up doing is telling Archie that he's always forgetting something."

A few days later, Harry was over at Grimmauld Place 'helping' Archie get ready for the gala. Archie was in the bathroom putting his green contacts in, and Harry was mentally settling herself into Rigel Black's reality. She was dressed in dress robes of deep dove grey, which were only saved from somberness by the bright silver embroidery up the sides. The silver stitches gave the impression of curling vines coming up from the hem, and the soft, light grey boots on her feet made her feel like every step she took was important. She had her new watch in her pocket, hidden from sight, but there nonetheless, and Archie's soft black cloak hung elegantly from her shoulders.

Archie came out of the bathroom with green eyes and wearing Harry's sweater.

"You look good," Archie said, eyeing her professionally, "No rings?"

"I don't like things on my fingers," Harry said, "Will Sirius be fooled?"

"Well, you look as uncomfortable as I would be in formal attire," Archie said, "And he won't be looking for deception. That's half the work of fooling people. It should be fine."

Harry looked one last time into the mirror, and Rigel Black looked back.

Sirius didn't bother with the floo, instead opting to apparate them both to the coordinates provided on the invitation.

"Now remember," he whispered as they stepped out of the arrival zone and into the line of people waiting to be announced to the general assembly, "Don't drink anything that smells like poison, and don't listen to anyone who says you aren't the most handsome and wonderful Black to ever be born."

Rigel grinned the way Archie would have at the sheer ridiculousness of Sirius' advice, "When my grandparents named you, they must not have realized they were tempting Fate."

"Oh, the Black's are above Fate, didn't you know?" Sirius raised surprised eyebrows, "Don't tell me you've been living your life without a sense of dramatic irony, just in case Fate takes it personally? Oh, dear, however have I gone wrong?"

"Let me count the ways," a voice drawled from behind them.

Sirius stiffened and Rigel caught the barest hint of unease before his features shifted into cheerful surprise. He turned and greeted the man behind them warmly.

"Regulus! I'd ask what you were doing here, but, well, I do so hate to be obvious," Sirius reached out to clasp the other man on the shoulder familiarly, and Rigel noted how the man twitched slightly, but didn't shirk away. The other man looked a lot like Sirius, but was decidedly more delicate. His skin was noticeably paler, his eyes a slightly darker shade of grey, his hair as black as crepe. And yet, for all that the man looked like a sligher, darker version of Sirius, there was something undeniably different about him, beyond his reserved expression and stilted posture. Something that made her eyes narrow, as though she could see him better if she but looked a little closer.

"I wish I could say the same, Sirius," the dark man said, his voice too weary to be completely cold, "What are you doing here?"

Sirius drew himself up and raised an eyebrow, "I was invited." Before the other man could do more than scowl, Sirius gestured toward Rigel and said, "I'm not sure you remember my son, Regulus. It's been... several years, and you only met briefly. This is Arcturus Rigel Black. Rigel, this is my younger brother, your uncle, Regulus Black."

"It is good to meet you again, Uncle," Rigel said without inflection, "I trust you've been well since we last had the chance to converse?"

"So polite," Regulus Black murmured, gazing at Rigel with an indiscernible expression, "Are you sure he's your son, Brother?"

Sirius bristled, but relaxed after a moment, "Always forget how... unidentifiable your humor is, Reggie."

Regulus Black winced ever so slightly at the nickname, and Sirius smirked openly.

"Unfortunately I can never forget how... unnecessary your social mannerisms are," Regulus sighed, "Are you here merely to provoke people, or did you really have nothing better to do tonight? Or maybe," Regulus stepped closer, peering into Sirius' face with a cunning that told Rigel to be very careful around this man, "You

finally had enough of playing the reformed sinner. Finally come home where you belong, Brother? Finally come back to be with people who understand you, even if only for one. Lonely. Night?"

Sirius's face was darkening, and Rigel thought now might be a good time for a diversion a la innocent-child-style.

"Is it okay?" she asked, looking deliberately up at Regulus with an air of apologetic concern, "I mean, I know the whole Split thing is still in effect, but it's technically a political event, isn't it?" Both Regulus and Sirius turned slowly toward her, Sirius with worried eyes and Regulus with a distantly incredulous expression. "I'm really sorry if our being here is going to cause any problems, Uncle," she went on, more disingenuous than she had ever been in her life, "It's just that I really wanted to see my friends over the break, and since I was on the invitation this year I begged Father to accept just once. If you want us to go, though, well, we could never say no to a family member's request."

Regulus Black looked from Sirius to Rigel, and back again, "Perhaps he is your son after all," the man said wryly.

At that moment, the announcer tapped his staff against the marble floor just firmly enough to avoid being either timid or obnoxious.

"Lord Sirius Black, Master Regulus Black, and Young Mr. Arcturus Black," he announced to the general assembly of guests. Too late the three of them realized that they had reached the front of the line, and that by standing so close they had been mistaken for a unit, as though they had come to the party together. Now with upwards of a few hundred people staring up at them, Regulus and Sirius could do nothing except pretend that this was not the first time they'd spoken since Diana's funeral.

They began a slow, dignified descent down an unnecessarily long and steep staircase into the ballroom proper. Heads turned, people whispered, and Rigel was starting to feel like a character in a very uncomfortably written scene. Luckily, she was not the target of the

room's speculation-that honor very clearly went to Sirius and Regulus, who were together as notoriously *unclose* as they were individually just plain notorious.

"Yet again, the universe lends itself to Sirius Black in a way so unbelievable that one can only assume you planned this entire thing," Regulus murmured out of the corner of his mouth as they descended.

"You must admit that this has a certain poetic lining to it," Sirius said, not seeming unnerved at all by all the people staring up at him, "Perhaps Fate is not done with the Black's after all."

"That's what you get for naming your children after *stars*," Rigel muttered, not at all pleased with being even close to the center of attention, "That's not even tempting Fate; it's lobbing the lodestone of your existence straight into its inner courtyard."

The corner of Regulus' mouth twitched and he sent her a sidelong glance of heavily veiled amusement. Sirius just grinned outright.

At the bottom of the stairs was the receiving line, where the guests met the hosts and exchanged the usual meaningless pleasantries. The hosts had to stand in the receiving line until all of the guests had arrived, and the three Black's must have been among the last few stragglers to make it in under the half-hour window between embarrassingly on-time and unforgivably late.

First in line were the people whose mansion they were standing in, Lord and Lady Rosier, and their son, Aldon Rosier, whose bored expression melted away at the sight of Rigel, to be replaced by a gleeful little smirk that caused Sirius to send a vaguely concerned look her direction. Rigel shrugged as subtly as she could toward Sirius, barely a twitch of her shoulders, and smiled politely at the Rosier's as they drew level with them.

"Lady Rosier," Sirius bowed affably toward his hosts, "Lord Rosier. Marvelous crowd you've assembled. I'd declare it a resounding

crush."

"Only here five minutes and already making unasked for declarations?" Lord Rosier swept Sirius with a look, before turned to glanced meaningfully at his wife, "Some things never change."

Lady Rosier inclined her head, a smile like a shadow playing about her mouth, "Truly, it has been too long, Lord Black."

Sirius didn't seem to find anything odd about the exchange, and simply raised a hand to encompass both Rigel and Regulus in a graceful gesture, "You know my brother, Regulus Black, and this is my Heir, Arcturus."

Regulus exchanged polite, if stilted, greetings with the Rosier's, and then it was Rigel's turn.

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lord and Lady Rosier," she said, bowing to the correct degree, "It is good to see you outside of school, Aldon."

Strictly speaking she and Aldon Rosier weren't on a first-name basis, but when faced with several people of the same last name, it was traditional to use the first name if the youngest ones in order to maintain formality with the elder ones.

"The elusive Heir of Black," Lord Rosier said, peering down at her with golden-colored eyes the exact shade that Aldon's were, "Aldon has mentioned you, of course. We are pleased to finally put a face to a name."

"Several of your year-mates are over by the refreshments," Aldon added, "Don't stray too far, Rigel. Rookwood and I will find you later."

Rigel nodded her acceptance, and they moved on to allow the people behind them to greet the Rosier's.

Next in line were the Malfoy's. Rigel supposed they were considered hosts of a sort as well, being senior members of the SOW party.

"Cissy," Sirius stepped forward and bowed low over Narcissa's hand, "And Lucius. Surprised to see me?"

"If it was your intention to surprise us, then neglecting to RSVP was a good way of doing it," Narcissa said, smiling, "We had to find out from our son that you had given any weight to our earlier invitation. Welcome. And welcome to you as well, Regulus. Oh, it is good to see the Black brothers standing together once again."

Regulus inclined his head with only slightly less stiffness than he had shown the Rosier's, "Cousin, Lucius. It is good to see you this night. How are you, young Draco?"

"Well, cousin Regulus," Draco said, grinning up at Regulus in a way that spoke more of Regulus Black's familiarity with the Malfoy's than anything Regulus himself had done, "Though I am doing better with my friend Rigel now arrived."

Rigel smiled warmly, "Good evening, Draco. I hope you didn't scan the cue for us long."

Draco sniffed with easy disdain, "Don't be absurd. A Malfoy, seek out a Black? Perish the thought."

Narcissa and Sirius laughed openly, and Lucius and Regulus exchanged a look of wry amusement. It was a long-standing social joke that the Malfoy's and Black's were always trying to out-do one another. Nowadays the rivalry was little more than a fond remnant of an unraveling past.

They moved on to the final host in the receiving line, and came face to face with Lord Riddle himself.

Gone was Sirius' easy-going charm, and instead in her uncle's place stood a man of caution and deliberation.

"Quite a gathering you've assembled, Lord Riddle," Sirius said evenly, his words so vague they bordered on meaningless.

"Thank you, Lord Black," Riddle said, looking at Sirius as one might look at the summary of a novel which turned out to be slightly more interesting than one had expected upon picking it up. He cast an eye about the ballroom as though considering it, then said, "I trust you will enjoy the night." Then his eyes turned to Regulus, and his voice softened just enough to be noticeable to Rigel's careful ear, "Regulus, how does this year's Eve find you?"

"A little better than last year's," Regulus answered, something almost like a fleeting smile flickering across his face, "As always, Lord Riddle."

"And young Rigel Black as well," Riddle said, and Rigel inwardly winced to think of the explaining she'd have to do to excuse the fact that Riddle recognized her by face and name-not as Arcturus, but as *Rigel*. "There are a few who will be very surprised to see *you* here." He glanced between the three of them, his gaze lingering on Sirius and Rigel, and he smiled in a slightly sinister way, "What could have lured the Black's to my little gathering, I wonder?"

In the space between heartbeats, Rigel had a single, dangerous thought. It was the way Riddle had worded his rhetorical question. He said 'lured' instead of saying 'brought' or 'caused' or something else. Why the word 'lure?' There being a lure implied *intent* to lure. It implied *bait*, and a carefully laid *trap*. It implied that they were the unsuspecting fish who had wandered unknowingly into a net. It made her think, made her wonder.

What had lured them there? Sirius had come to see his old acquaintances, and Rigel... Rigel had come to see her friends. Her friends, who were invited for the first time that year for no apparent reason. Oh. But no, she quickly opposed herself, surely Riddle had not invited the other Heirs to lure her into coming. That was just absurd. Perhaps he meant to imply that it was at his behest that Narcissa Malfoy invited them personally. Maybe he had used the

word unthinkingly, however unlikely it seemed to Rigel that Riddle ever did anything unthinkingly.

All of this ran through her head in quick and disordered succession, and by the time they bid Riddle adieu and moved to make room for the next in the receiving line, Rigel was already putting those thoughts away for another time.

"What interesting acquaintances your Heir has, Brother," Regulus was looking down at Rigel with nearly open interest now, "Perhaps being put into Slytherin has saved him from your influence after all."

With that, Regulus Black walked away from them without a parting glance.

Sirius' left eyelid jumped in the way it did when he was insulted but too proud to openly show it in his expression, and Rigel spoke up quickly, "Don't listen to him, Dad. If it weren't for your influence, I'd be a boring old stick in the mud like him. I mean, can you really see me ever pulling off a look like that?"

Rigel screwed up her face into an expression of mock reservedness, which came off as pinched and uncomfortable, and not at all intimidating or somber. Sirius broke into a chuckle and shook his head, "I know I shouldn't let him get to me, after all this time. We've always managed to push all the wrong buttons on each other, though."

"We didn't come to see him, though," Rigel said, "Come on, Dad. Let's find someone you actually want to talk to."

So they set off through the crowd of witches and wizards, all dressed in their winter finest, searching for people Sirius wanted to chat with.

As it turned out, there were quite a few of them, and after the twentieth person peered at her with casual interest before ignoring her existence to talk to Sirius, Rigel asked if she could be excused to go in search of her friends. Sirius waved her off cheerfully, and Rigel

made her way toward the refreshment table on the far side of the ballroom, hoping her friends would be around there somewhere.

A hand on her elbow snagged her as she was walking by, and turned her around.

She blinked, then smiled, "Oh, hello, Blaise."

Blaise was dressed smartly in deep blue dress robes. He smiled in his usual vague way and said, "Rigel. What a pleasant surprise. You should have told us on the train you were going to be attending the gala. Why are you?" He added bluntly. He still hadn't let go of her elbow, and towed her through the crowd while he spoke.

"My father decided to attend this year," Rigel said casually, "Have you seen the others yet?"

"Where did you think I was dragging you off to, Rigel?" Blaise shook his head with amusement, "Or do you simply allow yourself to be dragged hither and thither without any thought to the destination?"

"One never knows with you, Blaise," Rigel said.

"One never knows with *you*, Rigel," Blaise countered, "Everyone moved over to one of the corners so we could converse at a reasonable decibel. Except Draco. He and his family are still talking with the Minister, I believe."

Blaise nodded to their left, where Rigel could indeed see several heads of blonde hair speaking amiably to the Minister. She also caught sight of her father standing just behind the Minister's shoulder, scanning the ballroom with his eyes.

Blaise led her to where Pansy, Millicent, and Theo were standing with glasses of dark red punch, chatting away.

"Rigel!" Pansy smiled and handed her punch to Theo so that she could clasp both of Rigel's hands warmly, "You made it. Draco said

you'd be coming, but I admit I thought he was exaggerating the likelihood."

"And miss a chance to see you, Pansy? Perish the thought," Rigel said, taking Pansy's glass from Theo and holding it solicitously herself, "Has anything exciting happened yet?"

"If by exciting you mean has anyone royally embarrassed themselves in the forty minutes since the doors opened," Millicent said airily, "Then yes, there have been five scandalous events thus far, but unfortunately no one's life was ruined."

Theo laughed and nudged Millicent, "The night isn't over yet, and we do have an excellent vantage point just in case."

"Is that why we're standing in the corner?" Rigel asked curiously, "It doesn't seem that much quieter over here than anywhere else."

"We like our backs to the wall in a crush like this," Millicent said.

"And we don't want to be in the way when the dancing starts," Pansy added.

Rigel could feel the blood draining from her face. Dancing? Well, damn. And in retrospect, *obviously*. It was a gala, after all.

Pansy caught the look on Rigel's face and raised an eyebrow, "You will save me a dance, won't you, Rigel? Draco's already claimed my second, and of course one of my cousins will get my first, but I saved my third dance for you."

Rigel grimaced and injected as much regret into her voice as she could, "I don't really know how to dance, Pan. I'm sorry."

"My son, not know how to dance? Ridiculous," Sirius had appeared behind her and clapped a hand on her shoulder, "Of course Arch will take your third dance, Miss Parkinson, how kind of you to ask. He would never say no to a beautiful young lady, would he?"

Rigel winced, "Of course not, I meant... a clod like me is unworthy of dancing with so graceful a goddess. I could never hold a candle to Pansy's poise and talent, and to even attempt such a thing could only be the most grievous of slights."

"Nice try," Sirius said, and Rigel could hear the laughter in his voice, "But I didn't spend hours teaching you to dance for you to ignore my lessons."

"Technically it wasn't you who-"

"I didn't spend a fortune on hiring a dance instructor for you to ignore her lessons," Sirius interrupted unrepentantly.

Rigel sighed, "Yes, I would be honored to accept your third dance, Miss Parkinson."

"Good lad," Sirius said, "So, these are all your school friends? Hmm, not a bad bunch actually. Parkinson, Nott, Zabini-if I am not mistaken, and... Bulstrode? That last one was just a guess, but you've got the Bulstrode air of defensive stubbornness about you."

Millicent opened her mouth, a slight frown marring her face, but Sirius just laughed.

"Kidding, kidding, but you have exactly your father's eyes, Miss Bulstrode."

"Thank you... Lord Black," Millicent clearly did not know what to make of Sirius Black, and Theo's face was only slightly less confused than hers was.

Blaise just looked amused at the entire situation, which really didn't surprise Rigel at all.

"Have you said a hello to Uncle James yet?" Sirius asked Rigel.

She turned to look up at him properly, "Not yet. He is with the Minister, and somehow it seems rude even for us to just walk up to

the Minister's party and then address someone who is not the Minister."

"Hmm, when you put it like that..." Sirius shrugged, "Actually, that's probably exactly what I'll do."

"Try not to get us kicked out before the cake is served," Rigel suggested mildly.

Sirius laughed, "Good point, one really can't overstate the value of cake. Well, it was lovely meeting you all. Happy New Year."

With that, Sirius was off again, and Rigel's classmates turned rather dazed expression on her.

"Is he always...?" Theo trailed off, not sure how to phrase his question politely.

"You grow accustomed to it quickly," Rigel said.

"So Lord Potter ended up having to attend after all?" Pansy said, "I know Mrs. Potter probably stayed home, but did he bring your cousin Harriett?"

Rigel shook her head, "Harry doesn't like parties. She stayed at home with Aunt Lily."

"Oh," Pansy said, "Do you think-Draco! There you are."

They all turned to see Draco squeezing through the guests to get to their little circle, "Hello, everyone. Thank Merlin that's over with. One more tedious question about how my classes are going or how I am enjoying Slytherin House and I'm going to find a house elf and demand an entire legion of strawberry tarts."

"Are you free for the rest of the evening, then?" Theo asked.

"Mostly," Draco said, "Though I do have to dance the first dance with the Minister's daughter." He shuddered lightly, "Creepy little chit."

"I'm sure she isn't that bad," Pansy said kindly.

Draco leveled an unconvinced look at his friend, "She breathes through her mouth, so loudly you can hear it from five feet away, and her hands are clammy."

"Then I'm sure she had a sparkling personality," Pansy said archly.

"Not everyone has redeeming qualities," Draco muttered, "Sometimes I think you should have been a Hufflepuff."

They chatted for a while longer, and then the orchestra began to warm up. Rigel used the word orchestra to describe the ensemble in her head, for lack of a better term, but the musical entertainment for the night was like no orchestra she had ever seen. In one corner of the enormous ballroom there was a huge crystal tank, filled completely with pretty cerulean water. Inside the tank were about twenty merfolk, and each mermaid or merman held some kind of instrument. When they began to warm up, the sound was similar to what a dry orchestra would produce, and yet nothing like it at all. The music had an eerie quality to it, and was strangely muted, while also remaining coherent.

"The merpeople can only play their music underwater," Draco informed them, "They can breathe outside of the water, but their music sounds horrid in the air for some reason. It was a lot of trouble getting them in here, but worth it. Riddle hates it when the music is too loud for conversation, so the muted melodies the merpeople produce are actually perfect."

Their group broke up then, each going to find the person they were expected to open the dancing with, and Rigel... well, she wasn't running away, she told herself. And she really wasn't going to hide or anything.

She was, however, going to immediately step out onto one of the many balconies and get some fresh air. In fact, she had a feeling she'd find the air so fresh that she might have to stay out there

enjoying it until the orchestra took a break. Pansy would understand when Rigel didn't appear for the third dance. She felt bad for standing her friend up, but she would have felt worse about stepping on Pansy's toes and making a fool out of her in front of all her peers.

Just in case, she sidled up to Rookwood on her way out of the ballroom. The upperclassman was leaning on one of the columns, watching the dancers idly.

"Hello, Rookwood," she said.

He glanced down at her and said, in a deep, gravelly voice, "Rigel Black. Good evening."

"And to you," Rigel said, "I know this is abrupt, but do you have a partner for the third dance?"

Rookwood lifted an eyebrow at her, and said slowly, "I do not, however, before accepting I feel I should tell you that I am not as a general rule inclined toward other men."

"Oh," said Rigel, taken aback. Then, " *Oh*, uh, no, that's not what I meant." Rigel felt her face heat up with acute embarrassment, "I wasn't asking-I mean-" she sighed, "Allow me to start over. Hello, Rookwood. I promised Pansy I would dance the third dance with her, but I don't like dancing at all, and I actually plan on hiding until it's over. Will you please dance the third dance with *Pansy* for me so she isn't alone?"

Rookwood chuckled, the sound slow and deep like a shifting mountain, "Ah. That does make a bit more sense. Yes, I will dance with Pansy in your place, Black. Though you should not have accepted if you didn't intend to see it through."

"I did try declining politely," Rigel said, "But circumstances... my father forced me into it."

Rookwood was openly grinning now, "Your father is quite the character, Black. I've seen him charm the magic out of no less than twenty people who before this night staunchly disapproved of everything he represented, and every elderly witch in the room shall be quite in love with him by the end of the night."

"That sounds about right," Rigel said, "Thank you, Rookwood, and I'm sorry about the misunderstanding."

Rookwood shrugged, "It matters not. Go and hide now, little snake."

Rigel certainly didn't object to that plan.

She had technically learned to dance from Archie, who had indeed taken lessons until he was as good as Draco and Pansy probably were, but she was frankly terrible at it. That, and she wasn't sure she could get through a set without mixing up the girl's part with the boy's part, which would be painfully disgraceful. Sirius would probably never let his son come to a social event again if he saw her attempt at the waltz.

She picked the balcony she thought least likely to be occupied by trysting couples-the last thing she needed was to walk into something like *that* . There was a low-burning gas lamp in the corner of the balcony, intended to provide soft lighting for the romantically inclined, but the light kept reflecting off of the balcony doors' crystal doorknobs and sending sharp beams into her eyes, so Rigel blew it out impatiently. She'd light it again when she left, but she wanted a few minutes without light or sound to just breathe.

Toward that purpose, Rigel closed the balcony doors and sighed when only the barest hint of noise penetrated the thick, insulating wood.

She leaned her elbows on the balcony, ignoring the possibility of getting dust from the stone railing on her dress robes, and relaxed her head into her palms. She hadn't been lying to Pansy earlier. Parties were really not her thing.

Only the slight differences in the noise coming through the closed doors indicated the passage of time as the orchestra played fast songs, slow songs, and probably numerous other kinds of songs Rigel was unable to distinguish among. Rigel slowly unwound, taking in the sounds of the garden below her, the crickets and the gentle swishing of the leaves.

Then she heard a sound that had definitely not been made by a cricket or a leaf. It was the sound of voices, and it was coming closer. Rigel leaned away from the edge of the balcony quickly, and it seemed she moved not a moment too soon.

The balcony was solid stone all the way to the floor, so once Rigel crouched down instinctively behind it, there were no gaps through which the garden could be seen. She did see a soft white light grow steadily brighter over the top of the stone balcony, casting shadows of trees up onto the walls of the mansion and the doors to the ballroom.

She recognized the glow as a Lumos spell, and she recognized the voice, too. Both voices.

"-can you not know what is happening there? Your son writes his every thought to you, does he not?"

That was definitely Mr. Riddle. Rigel would never forget the deceptively calm and cultured tones of that voice. She had first heard it in a very similar situation-just a voice with no face to identify it-and that sort of memory stuck with a person.

"Less and less of late," said the second person. Rigel also recognized that voice easily-the slow, somewhat stilted, and often dismissive undertones of Lucius Malfoy were not easily mistakable, "To him it appears to be an act of randomness, however, two students struck down for no apparent purpose. Lord Riddle, I do not understand what you expect to hear."

"I expect to hear *nothing*, " Riddle said sharply. It sounded as though they had stopped just below Rigel's balcony, and the light on the wall held steady, "There should be no petrified students, no explosions, no 'acts of randomness'... / do not understand, Lucius."

Malfoy spoke hesitantly, "Then, the attacks are not according to your plan?"

"Of course not," Riddle hissed, "Do not be a fool, Lucius. What sort of plan is pointless destruction? He is going to get the school closed down at this rate."

"Forgive me, Lord Riddle, but who exactly is this agent?" Lucius spoke carefully, "Are you sure you trust-

"No one to concern yourself with, Lucius," Riddle said dismissively, "I have learned from my error with Quirrell. Too weak to control at a distance. This one... I trust him as I trust myself."

"Trustworthy, then," Malfoy murmured in assent, "But is he entirely wise? It seems almost as though..."

"What, Lucius?" Riddle sounded slightly amused, but mostly impatient, "Speak your mind to me."

"Petrified students, Lord Riddle," Malfoy said, voice hesitant, "It sounds like someone has opened the Chamber of Secrets once more. Of course such a thing is impossible, considering-

"Yes, one would think," Riddle said sharply, "I assure you he would not have... it cannot be."

"Indeed," Malfoy said, "Yet that is the impression I get from my son's report of the incident. It is just as it was fifty years ago, no suspect and no clues, just petrified students left lying around, and such mimicry cannot be an accident. Why would this agent want to make it seem as though the Chamber has been opened, Lord Riddle? It will only stir up fear and doubt concerning Slytherin House in

particular, and where the fortune of Slytherin House goes, the favor of the Party usually follows."

"You do not have to tell me this," Riddle said, "I know. *I* would not have... I assure you, *he* well understands the situation."

"Perhaps it is a coincidence," Malfoy offered in a transparently placating tone, "Maybe this one has a grander plan that is not yet clear. Things will no doubt begin to make sense with the new year."

"They had better," Riddle said quietly.

"What shall I tell Severus?" Malfoy asked suddenly, "He is asking probing questions."

"When does he not?" Riddle was definitely amused now. The light began to move, and Rigel assumed they were moving on to another part of the garden, "Tell him nothing, Lucius, except that everything is under control. Dear Severus needs to remain ignorant, in order to remain..." the voice trailed away, and the light vanished moments after it.

Rigel sat on the balcony floor, numb from both the coldness of the stone she was sitting on and the conversation she had just overheard.

So Riddle was behind whatever was happening at Hogwarts. And yet, he... wasn't? Rigel shook her head. She had too little information to figure the entire conversation out, but some things were readily apparent.

There was an agent of the SOW party at Hogwarts, one who was apparently male, despite Rigel's suspicions to the contrary, and who was working toward some unknown agenda. Although, Rigel reflected, that agenda wasn't really unknown to the three people who had seen the message left in the Entrance Hall. Unfortunately for Malfoy and Riddle, no one who knew the message seemed to have any interest in informing them about it.

She also knew one more thing for certain. When she returned home, she and Archie were going to scour both their family Libraries for any mention of this 'Chamber of Secrets.' Whatever had happened fifty years ago didn't sound good if even Mr. Malfoy was hesitant to speak of it, and Rigel was not about to let it happen again.

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[end of chapter nine].

A/N: So? Surprised? Bored? Well, Happy New Year to you anyway. Here's hoping 2013 is a good one. In the next chapter-the last leg of the gala, and then it's back to school, and clues, clues clues!

-Violet

P.S.-I just wanted to conclude this chapter by explaining something that a lot of people have been questioning in the reviews. I didn't intend Harry to be this uber-secretive person who never shares anything about herself with other people. Every secret she keeps from other people is born out of either necessity for keeping up her pretense, or simply because sometimes she just sees no need to share something about herself. When she reveals some of the second kind of 'secrets' I have a lot of reviewers questioning why she would give the game up so easily, but please understand that those kinds of secrets aren't the game to her. They don't matter, but they are interesting enough to be used as leverage in a situation when she is forced by circumstances to reveal something about herself, so we do see the secrets revealed in that way as well.

The point of this is that when Harry Potter tells people she's a girl, it's not a big deal, because Harry Potter is a girl. When Rigel Black tells the headmaster he can speak parseltongue, it's because Rigel Black, a Slytherin, and a Black, can speak parseltongue-and no one is incredulous of this fact. No one knows Harry Potter is a parseltongue, and as far as Harry is concerned, no one ever will. She told Dumbledore because she was in possession of a clue to the identity of someone attacking students, which could only have come to her possession because she spoke parseltongue. The consequences for not saying anything might have been too much for her to live with. So don't be surprised by Harry revealing 'secrets' in this chapter. She has to, both because to continue lying for no good reason is dangerous and unnecessarily complicated, and because she has to establish herself as Harry Potter the potions brewer in addition to Rigel Black the potions brewer, who isn't going to be around forever.

Thanks, and please don't take this to be at all repressive if you did leave a review about her giving up her secrets easily-you're right, I just wanted to explain why I did it, and explaining it helps me reason through it as well, so thank you. Still love you guys. -V.

Chapter 10

A/N: Here it is, a sparkling new chapter for a new year. For Draco fans, a fun treat for you today. As promised we have the rest of the gala, and also something many people have been wondering about in reviews for a while. Hope it doesn't disappoint! As always, all recognizable characters and plotlines belong to their respective authors.

The Serpentine Subterfuge:

Chapter 10:

Just as Rigel had gotten her wits together after overhearing that unsettling conversation, the peaceful solitude of the balcony was broken. One of the doors to her balcony opened, spilling eerie mer-music and two easily recognizable Slytherins out into the night.

"You see?" Aldon Rosier was saying to his companion, "I told you Mother opened *seven* of the ballroom balconies, not *six* ."

"As always, the world bows to your superior understanding of it," Rookwood drawled.

Rosier snorted a laugh, then seemed to pause. Their silhouettes were hard to see, being backlit by the ballroom light, but it looked like Rosier was peering intently at Rookwood from where she sat against the stone railing looking up at them. "Are you patronizing me?"

"Would I dare?" Rookwood asked mildly.

"I think you are," Rosier laughed a bit, "If you're already being sardonically patient with me, perhaps I should refrain from the refreshment table for a bit."

"That would be wise," Rookwood agreed. He turned to look at Rigel, still sitting on the ground, and Rosier followed suit.

"Ah-ha! There's our wayward charge," Rosier came forward, and Rigel noticed his steps seemed to be a tad unsteady, "Thought it was suspicious that one of the opened balconies was darkened and closed. I said to myself, 'who is the most suspicious person at the party? For that is bound to be the same person who closed up the balcony' and I answered myself-'Why, Rigel Black, of course!' And lo and behold, here you are. Am I not terribly clever?"

Meanwhile Rookwood had closed the doors to the ballroom again and moved to re-light the lamp. Rigel was still trying to process the fact that Aldon Rosier believed *her* to be the most suspicious person at Riddle's gala.

Rosier crouched down in front of her and wagged a finger admonishingly, "Didn't I tell you not to wander too far, little imp? I told you Rookwood and I would find you. Didn't you think we'd find you?"

Rigel looked questioningly from Rosier to Rookwood, who had an air of resignation about him. "Don't pay him any mind, Black. Aldon has had too much punch."

"Punch?" Rigel lifted a brow, "Has someone spiked it?" She dearly hoped it hadn't been Sirius.

Rookwood shook his head, "Impossible. If someone can slip alcohol into the refreshments, what's to stop them from slipping in poison? No, the punch was intended to be alcoholic."

Rigel blinked, "Pansy was drinking the punch."

"She was drinking from the children's bowl," Rookwood said, glancing at Rosier, who had given up crouching and was sitting cross-legged in front of Rigel, mostly just staring at her curiously, "Aldon was not."

"Is it true you propositioned Edmund tonight?" Aldon asked out of nowhere.

Rigel glanced awkwardly away from the two upperclassmen, "Just a misunderstanding, Rosier."

"Don't call me that," Rosier said absently, adding, "You should have come to me, you know. Edmund is such a tease, but I wouldn't have left you out here in the cold."

Rigel quite honestly couldn't think of anything to say to that.

"I think you've said enough, Aldon," Rookwood said, stepping forward to haul Rosier to his feet.

Rosier leaned against Rookwood tiredly, "Don't be cross with me, Edmund, you know I hate that. Didn't I tell you I was sorry about Alice? She only danced with me to make you jealous, old boy, even I could see-"

"That's enough, Aldon," Rookwood said, sighing, "What am I going to do with you?"

"I don't care," Rosier said morosely, "Only don't be cross with me, Ed."

He leaned up and gave Rookwood a smacking kiss to his cheek.

"There," Rosier said, "Now you can't be-"

Rosier suddenly slumped and Rookwood shifted his weight to balance the two of them easily. Rigel scrambled up, but Rookwood waved her off and set Rosier gently down on the balcony floor. "No need for alarm," he told her, "Just a mild sleeping charm. It will wear off in half an hour or so I expect."

Rigel noticed then that Rookwood's wand was in his hand as he used the other to pluck Aldon's handkerchief from his pocket. Rookwood first used the handkerchief to wipe off his cheek where Rosier had kissed him, then transfigured it into a pillow and placed it under his friend's head. She wondered briefly how he'd gotten

around the underage magic restriction, but supposed that the Rosier's, like the Black's, warded their home in a way that contained the Trace.

"Watch him, won't you?" he asked her, standing up and brushing his dress robes off.

Rigel looked from Rookwood to Rosier, "I'm not sure that's a good idea."

"You owe me for explaining to Pansy why she'd be dancing the third set with me, Black," Rookwood pointed out, "Just stay here until he wakes up, and don't let him back into the ballroom unless he's sober. His mother will be displeased to notice him missing, but even more displeased were he to embarrass himself."

"I do owe you a favor," Rigel acknowledged, "But I am somewhat concerned about what this will look like once you leave."

Rookwood gazed at her patiently, "I doubt anyone would think *that* about a boy your age."

Rigel frowned, "I don't think age has much to do with it, if you've got a wand."

"A *wand* -?" Rookwood broke off with an uncomfortable cough, "I fear we are once again on very different pages, Black."

Rigel frowned, "I just don't think people will find it terribly implausible that a Black attacked the son of his host on a secluded balcony. My family history doesn't lend itself well to... protestations of innocence."

Rookwood blinked, as though he hadn't considered that at all, "I'm sure they won't think you attacked Aldon," he said with amusement, "But if they do, I will set them straight. In any case, it is unlikely that anyone will venture out here before the dancing ends, and by then Aldon should be awake enough to explain."

"All right," Rigel said, reclaiming her semi-comfortable seat against the balcony railing. There were runes for heat carved into the stone every several feet, so it wasn't really any hardship to remain out on the balcony for a little while longer. At least she now had a real reason to miss more of the dancing.

The night was quiet, and it was easy to turn her mind to other things in the peace. After about twenty minutes, though, loud voices began to carry over from the next balcony over. There was a good fifteen feet between the balconies, and the ballroom was circular, so it wasn't a straight line of sight from one balcony to the other. Rigel's balcony was downwind of the balcony next to it, though, so the voices carried rather clearly to where she sat.

She didn't recognize either of the voices, but could tell that one of them was male and the other female.

"Unhand me this instant, Rodolphus," the woman's voice said, "I am going back inside."

"No, Bella," a man answered. His voice was deep, but not calm or rumbling like Rookwood's was. This man's voice was rough, and harsh. "I think you'd better cool your head right here for a while."

The woman scoffed loudly, "I do not have time for this. How dare you presume to-"

"Presume?" the man laughed, and it was a bitter sound, "Is it now presumptuous for a husband to prevent his wife from making a bloody fool of herself in front of all and sundry?"

"The only fool here is *you*, if you think you can tell me what to do!" the woman snapped back.

Rigel now had a pretty good idea of who the two were, and was feeling a bit uncomfortable about overhearing a domestic dispute between one of Archie's cousins and her husband. The only Rodolphus she knew of was Rodolphus Lestrangle, and she only

knew of him because he was married to Bellatrix Lestrange nee Black. Archie had made her at least attempt to memorize the last three branches of his family tree, and several of the most recent names had stuck by default.

"You will listen to me, woman, or so help me I will apparate us both home this instant," Rodolphus growled at his wife.

"What is your problem, Rodolphus?" Bellatrix hissed, "You pull me away from a conversation with Lord Riddle himself to what-complain that your wife isn't paying you enough attention?" There was a pause in which Rigel wondered idly if her magic would stop up her ears if she asked it to, even though she really shouldn't use magic outside of school, wards or no wards. "Is that it, Ruddy? Are you jealous tonight?"

"Hardly," Lestrange said shortly, "How could I be jealous of a man who doesn't even want you?"

"Don't be that way, darling," Bellatrix said lowly, her voice barely carrying now over the wind, "I'll make it up to you... you know I always do..."

There were a few moments of silence in which Rigel tried not to imagine what was happening just one balcony over. This night had really been a shock to the sensibilities, and she was starting to wonder if maybe Lily had had a point about not wanting Archie to attend.

"No, Bella, stop this now," Lestrange said, his voice even more rough than before, "You will not win your way so easily this time. I tell you, this must stop."

"You don't really want me to stop," Bellatrix's voice said seductively.

" *Bella*," Rodolphus said, breaking off with a low groan.

"That's it," Bellatrix said, coaxingly.

And then there were no more words, only vague and uncomfortable noises that caused Rigel to flush with embarrassment on their behalf. She sat in the dark and just prayed to Merlin that no one discovered her. The only thing more embarrassing than being stuck listening to other people trysting would have to be being *caught* listening to other people trysting.

Just then a low groan cut through the other, more distant groans coming from the next balcony. Rosier twitched on the ground next to her and let out another groan, slightly louder. Cursing silently, Rigel leaned over and covered his mouth with her hand.

"Mmh?" Rosier blearily opened his eyes and froze. He peered at her, his gaze sharpening rapidly as it adjusted to the lamplight.

"It's Rigel Black," Rigel whispered, leaning over, "You are on one of the balconies at your family's mansion. Rookwood left you out here to... sleep off your state of mind."

"Hmph?" Rosier grunted questioningly, pointedly looking down to where her hand covered his mouth.

Rigel smothered a smile at what a ridiculous night this was turning out to be, "In the next balcony over, my... cousin Bellatrix and her husband are... indisposed. I'd rather they not notice us here."

Rosier's eyes widened and he sat up, pushing away her hand with a grin, "Oh, mother will have a fit when she hears," he said cheerfully.

"Shh," Rigel said, frowning.

Rosier gave her an impatient look, "Oh, desist, Black. We are downwind... obviously." Indeed the moans coming from the balcony next to them were becoming more and more difficult to ignore.

"Besides," he produced his wand with a flourish. "We are wizards, in case you've forgotten."

"Underage wizards," Rigel pointed out. She was subsequently ignored.

Rosier cast an area-effect charm that caused a thin, silvery barrier not unlike a shimmering bubble to float into existence in a five-foot radius around them. The noises from the next balcony stopped immediately, as did all of the cricket sounds and rustling noises from the garden below them, and the faint, haunting melodies from the ballroom as well.

Rosier stretched out his legs and leaned against the stone railing next to her, "So, Rookwood dumped me into your jurisdiction, did he?" he laughed, "I can't believe he endured that kiss for a full two seconds before *Somnium* -ing me. That's a good half-second longer than last time."

"Last time?" Rigel asked before she could stop herself. Purebloods were even weirder than she thought.

Rosier just grinned cat-like at her, "It's something of a tradition at this point. I get sloshed after a ridiculously small amount of liquor, Rookwood puts up with me until I become overly friendly, and then I'm out like a light until my mind returns to itself. He's really getting quite good at the Sleeping Hex, you know-barely felt a thing that time."

Rigel made a non-commental noise to show she was listening but didn't really want to talk about it.

"Oh, I've made you uncomfortable, haven't I?" Rosier said, smiling unapologetically, "Was it when I asked you if you'd made a pass at Edmund, or when I made a veiled one at you shortly thereafter?"

Rigel grimaced, and glanced away from him.

"Ah, the second, then?" Rosier went on, voice laced with condescension, "My apologies for making designs on your virtue, Mr.

Black. Sometimes my facetiousness runs away with my good sense after a drop or two."

"If you know, then why do you keep drinking?" Rigel asked, turning back to look questioningly at him, "Especially at a party like this?"

"One day when you grow up and hate your family, too, *you* will drink at *their* parties and impertinent little whelps like you will ask you *why*," Rosier drawled, picking up the transfigured pillow from the floor and placing it behind his neck fastidiously.

"I could never hate my family," Rigel said, frowning.

"You say that now," Rosier said, snorting, "Just wait until your adolescent hormones inform you otherwise. There comes a day when you see your family for what they really are, and there isn't a person on Earth who wouldn't be in that moment... disappointed."

"I don't know..." Rigel said slowly, "If I don't hate them by now, I don't think I ever will. People don't grow worse over time, really, and I haven't been living with my eyes closed for twelve years. I've never been one to see people as better than they really are, even if I care for them. I know my family, Rosier, and I accept their shortcomings."

"You accept them, but you don't *like* them," Rosier said shrewdly, "Deep down you resent them, just a little. I'm not saying it's a bad thing. It's natural, and inevitable. You're lucky, if what you say is true, because you're the kind that became accustomed to your family's imperfections over time. For others, it hits all at once, in an instant of shattering clarity, and after that it's almost impossible to summon the kind of 'acceptance' you describe."

"They seem very nice," Rigel offered weakly.

"Don't they?" Rosier looked down and examined his fingernails, "Funny. When I first met you, I thought you seemed very ordinary. I guess we'd both be wrong, wouldn't we?"

"I wouldn't know if I was wrong," Rigel said, "But I don't think you were. I am ordinary."

"And I suppose *extra* ordinary things simply happen around you without your impetus," Rosier laughed quietly.

"Pretty much," Rigel sighed, "Don't hate your family, Rosier. I know it's presumptuous of me to say so, but... my father has spent his whole life hating his family. He met his own brother tonight for the first time since Mum's death, and they barely knew what to say to one another. It's satisfying, hate, but it doesn't really help anything."

"Neither does pretending to love when the feeling is gone," Rosier said, peering sideways at her, "Is that what you do, Rigel Black? Pretend?"

Rigel shrugged a bit helplessly, "I wouldn't know how, Rosier. Acting was never really my strong suit."

"Irony must be thick in the air tonight," was all he said in reply. "And don't call me that."

"It bothers you," Rigel said, raising an eyebrow, "That's the second time you've said that to me tonight."

"Yes," Rosier exhaled sharply, "It does. My friends call me Aldon."

"We're not really friends," Rigel said.

"Ouch," Rosier laughed, "How unflinchingly honest you are, Rigel."

"My last name doesn't really bother me," Rigel said, "Feel free to use it."

"You become awfully prickly once you think someone's getting too close," Rosier said mildly, "I wonder, did you make it this difficult for Pansy and Draco?"

Rigel vaguely recalled periods in which she flatly ignored her now-friends in the vain hope that they would just go away and lose interest in her, "I think I was worse, actually. Perhaps I should apologize."

"Don't," Rosier said dismissively, "That would belittle the prize they won in outlasting you. In any case, you should never apologize for the past. Only do things differently in the future."

They sat in silence, each thinking thoughts the other probably couldn't imagine.

"Do you think they're... you know, done?" She motioned toward the next balcony with her hand after a few minutes.

Rosier took his wand out again and cancelled the noise-canceling spell. They couldn't hear anything at all, and Rigel smiled a bit with relief.

"I think the music has stopped, too," Rigel said.

"So?" Rosier said.

"That means the dancing is done," Rigel said, standing up, "So it is safe to venture indoors once more."

Rosier laughed, "Am I to understand that the only reason you agreed to be my sitter was because you are afraid of being asked to dance?"

"You make me sound like a girl," Rigel said, playing the part of a scowling boy.

"You are acting like a girl, Rigel," Rosier informed her cheerfully, "How about this, though," he added, standing up as well, "I will protect you from the hordes of ravenous female hormones in exchange for you not leaving me in my moment of vulnerability."

Rigel felt compelled to point out, "I've already traded a favor with Rookwood for doing that."

Rosier shook his head with amused exasperation, "Then be grateful that I offered to help you at all."

"Thank you, Rosier," she said, somewhat sarcastically. At the look he shot her, she amended her words quickly, "Aldon, I mean."

Aldon Rosier smiled his strange little smile at her and swept open the balcony doors with a flourish, "You are most welcome, Rigel Black, most welcome indeed."

The lights in the ballroom were so much brighter than she remembered. People were once again making use of the full space to mill about it, having been standing in rather close quarters while the dancers took up a good third of the floor. Aldon made a beeline through the crowd, and Rigel simply followed him. She was operating under the assumption that since Rosier was a good head taller than she was, he would be better equipped to find people in a crowd, and that anyone he knew well enough to seek out she had at least a moderately good chance of recognizing as well.

That was how she ended up standing shoulder to shoulder with Rookwood, Selwyn, Pucey, and Bole. No one raised an eyebrow at her presence, so she could only assume that by now everyone knew of Sirius Black's unusual presence at the New Year Gala. They talked of Quidditch for a while before the conversation turned to OWL's and which tests required more studying for than others. Rigel absorbed the information without really being very interested in it, though she did note with a tad bit of self-satisfaction that the two most common practicals for the Potion OWL seemed to be the Strengthening Solution and the Invigoration Draught. The first was *almost* as difficult as Snowhit, and the second she had been brewing for Krait for months.

As talk moved to idle gossip, a young man with a beautifully angled face and a haughty expression joined their group with an elegant

nod to Rosier, whose answering nod was just a hair too stiff to be welcoming. The newcomer was pale, with jet-black hair and eyes an icy blue.

"Quite an affair, Rosier," he said, gesturing with his eyes alone at the rest of the room. He held a long-stemmed glass of champagne in one hand and kept the other at his side, hidden from view by his robe sleeve. Usually, it was considered impolite to allow your hands to be hidden within your sleeves at a social event, as your host might assume you were holding your wand out of sight, but the newcomer's expression made Rigel think he simply didn't care what anyone thought of him.

"How kind of you to say so, Lestrangle," Rosier said blandly, "You know Edmund, of course, and Alice. I believe you know Lucian as well."

"Rookwood," the haughty boy nodded shortly, "Selwyn, Bole."

"This is Adrian Pucey, a fourth-year in Slytherin House," Rosier went on, "And this is Rigel Black, second-year, also in Slytherin House. Adrian, Rigel, this is Caelum Lestrangle, sixth-year at Durmstrang."

"I've met your older brother, Pucey," Lestrangle inclined his head to the proper degree, "He's got a good head on his shoulders."

"He'll be pleased you've remembered him," Pucey demurred, not quite looking Lestrangle in the eye.

Then Lestrangle set his icy gaze on her, and she thought she could well understand why the Lestrangle Heir was already a name spoken very carefully in some circles. Sirius had once described him as a 'nasty piece of work,' though he'd also called him a 'pathetic little mama's boy' so Rigel hadn't taken his description too seriously at the time.

"Well met at last, *Cousin*," Lestrangle said, voice dripping with irony. Both he and Rigel knew very well that Sirius and Bellatrix hated each

other with a burning depth that most other people could only guess at. This was one of the many reasons he and Archie had never met before. "I greatly admire your uncle, Regulus, and your father... well, I suppose it really isn't your fault."

Rigel felt Rosier, who was standing next to her, tense slightly, but the only sign she gave that the barb hit home was a careful blanking of her features. "It says much of your generosity that you are able to let go the sins of the father in the case of the son, Lestrangle. I can only attempt to afford you the same courtesy."

Now Lestrangle's was the face to go blank with hidden ire. Rigel saw Bole frowning at her from the corner of her eye, and she faintly heard Pucey's quick intake of breath at her remark, but she was not about to apologize for defending her family's honor. She would never openly insult Lestrangle, of course, but veiled contempt she could give as well as she received. If he was going to slight her father without the slightest provocation, she could without guilt make the same insinuation about his own.

"A Slytherin, you say?" Lestrangle glanced at Rosier with exaggerated disbelief, "No, I think not. Nothing but brash lion meat under all that shiny snakeskin, is there, Black?"

Rigel tilted her head, as though considering the question, "Interesting hypothesis, Lestrangle. Do you mean to suggest that the Sorting Hat may be placing people in Slytherin who don't belong there, or did you mean to infer that I personally was able to dupe one of the oldest magical artifacts of our time? If the first, I would be interested to know who else you suspect of having been improperly sorted into Salazar's noble house. If the second, I'm afraid you flatter me beyond my worth, Cousin."

Lestrangle stared at her for a moment, in which she offered him her best innocent smile, "Well, Lestrangle? Do you think Rookwood belongs in Slytherin? He's awfully smart, though, so perhaps he should have been a Ravenclaw."

Rookwood shifted uncomfortably next to her, but said nothing. Rigel knew she should stop, but something about Lestrangle made her skin want to curl.

"What about Selwyn?" Rigel pressed, "Do you think she's a true Slytherin?"

"Watch it, Black," Selwyn said, kohl-rimmed eyes flashing in annoyance.

"Do you imagine you have trapped me by asking such questions?" Lestrangle sneered at her in a way that should have made him look ugly, but didn't, "You only prove my point. A boy like you has no place in the House of Snakes."

"I suppose you would know," Rigel said unconcernedly. A slightly ironic tilt to her mouth was all it took to give voice to the unspoken, *oh wait, no, you wouldn't. Because you don't even attend Hogwarts, much less know anything about the House of Slytherin*. She was being petty, admittedly, but her uncle Sirius had come there tonight in good faith, genuinely excited to catch up with old acquaintances, and it would only take one jerk like Lestrangle to ruin it for him.

"Oh, very good," Lestrangle said patronizingly, stepping forward so that he was now inside the loose circle their group had formed. Less distance meant he could look down on her more effectively, and speak more quietly, with a lesser chance of being overheard, "I suppose your daddy had time to teach you a few tricks after all, in between kissing up to that mudblood-loving fool Dumbledore and being a general disgrace to the name of his forefathers. What's wrong, Black? Nothing to say? Maybe even *you* realize that your father is beyond defense."

"Was I supposed to be insulted?" Rigel gazed up unflinchingly into Lestrangle's cold countenance, "If you knew anything at all about Sirius Black, you'd know that he couldn't give two knuts about Light and Dark politics, and he would only consider your second remark the highest of compliments. In fact, I shall be sure to pass it along."

"Well pass this along, too," Lestrangle hissed, stepping forward once again. He was now close enough that she could feel faint drops of spittle on her forehead when he spoke, "You tell the bloodtraitor that if he thinks he can make nice in our ballrooms and then go home and *fuck his filthy werewolf whore* and *laugh* with his *bloodtraitor boyfriend* and that *mudblood bitch*... well, some of us would savor the chance to correct his thinking."

Rigel didn't hear Rosier's quietly forceful admonishment or see Bole subtly restrain Pucey from stepping in. All she could hear were the words *werewolf whore* and *mudblood bitch* echoing like gunshots in her head, all she could see was Caelum Lestrangle's smug, conceited face, and all she could feel was that condescending jerk's *stupid, pureblooded spit* on her face.

Get him away from me , she screamed internally.

Her magic answered her call faster than she could comprehend, much less regret. It was coursing through her body once moment, and the next it was expelled forcefully from her chest. Lestrangle, who was at that point mere inches in front of her, caught the full brunt of it. The magic slammed into his torso and the only thing more satisfying than seeing him literally scoot backwards on his heels a good five feet was seeing the expression of complete shock on his face as it happened. The magic didn't knock him down, it didn't break a rib or cause tiny cuts to appear all over his body. He looked no worse for wear at all, and not even a single drop of champagne had spilled from his glass. The magic did no more or less than shoot him back to the exact same spot he had occupied when he first walked up to their circle, and that, more than anything, satisfied Rigel. It made exactly the right point, without leaving him anything to put up a fuss about and get she and Sirius thrown out for.

There was a moment of complete silence, as the other five stared between Rigel and Lestrangle, obviously at a loss for what to do. They couldn't defend Rigel's actions without seeming to sympathize with bloodtraitors, even though Lestrangle had definitely crossed an invisible line when he descended into open mudslinging and poorly

veiled threats. They also couldn't support Lestrangle without looking like just as much of an ass as he did, even if any of them had been inclined to support Lestrangle. Judging by the carefully controlled anger on more than one face, Rigel wouldn't bet that Lestrangle had made any lasting friendships that night by his words to her.

Rigel was the first to break the silence, or perhaps she was the only one who could, "Excuse me, friends, but I must go and seek out Draco before he accuses me of avoiding him. Good evening."

She turned and walked away without glancing back, weaving through the crowd quickly to escape the eyes that followed her departure wordlessly.

She was still extremely upset about what Lestrangle had said, but the further she moved away from the situation, the less she was inclined to dwell on it. It had been ugly and unnecessary, yes, but it was dealt with, so it was time to let it go as best she could. After all, if she did nothing but brood over all the petty, cruel people in the world she wouldn't have time to sleep.

Rigel left the ballroom and followed a house elf to what was being used as the gentleman's restroom that night. She wet Archie's handkerchief in the sink and began wiping her face as thoroughly as she could without rubbing it raw. She may have been in the process of forgetting Lestrangle's words, but she'd be damned if she was going to walk around with his slimy DNA on her skin all night.

There came a knock at the door, just two polite raps, and Rigel quickly patted her face dry before opening the door with a murmured apology.

"Hello again, Nephew."

Rigel looked up into the face of Regulus Black, and bowed slightly, "Uncle. I trust your evening has been pleasant?"

"Diverting, at least," Regulus said. He gazed at her for a moment, then said, "Were you crying, boy?"

Rigel blinked, startled, then realized what her red and freshly scrubbed face, coupled with the fact that she was locked in the bathroom, must look like to the other man. "No, Uncle," she said, mouth tilting wryly, "I was unfortunate enough to come into contact with a substance of questionable sanitary value, and merely sought to remove it before danger of infection set in."

"Pray tell, what sort of substance could you have possibly encountered at Rosier Mansion that would cause you hygienic apprehension?" Regulus asked with a lifted brow.

"Saliva," Rigel said sardonically, "From the mouth of an unwashed Lestranger. Not that there's anything wrong with Lestranger's," she added belatedly, having forgotten who she was talking to in light of her disgust at the entire situation, "I'm sure not all of them are... well."

She peered up at Regulus to see if he was offended by her less than complimentary words about a pureblooded family he probably mingled with often. She nearly flinched at the look of cold anger upon his visage. This was a man much more frightening than Caelum Lestranger.

"And how, exactly, did Lestranger spit end up on the *face* of the Black Heir?" Regulus demanded. His grey eyes looked like storm clouds, his face pinched with ire.

Rigel backtracked quickly, "It does not matter, Uncle. I have taken care of it."

" *You?* " Regulus sneered.

Rigel simply nodded, "Yes, me. We have settled our differences, and the only thing remaining was for me to prevent the onset of rabies.

As you can see, that has been accomplished as well, so the matter is concluded to my satisfaction."

"And to your father's?" Regulus countered coldly.

"Sirius does not need to know of this incident," Rigel said, just as coldly, "I do not like to trouble my father needlessly."

"When the Family Heir allows himself to be spat upon," Regulus hissed, "It is past time for the Family Head to be troubled."

"I can only assume you think so low of me because you do not know me, Uncle," Rigel said sharply, her mood still a little rough from the last half-hour of her evening, "But let me assure you that when I tell you I have handled something-it is handled."

Regulus drew himself up and looked down at her with detached calculation, "So you may claim," he said eventually, "But know that if I hear it whispered among my colleagues that the Black Heir is *weak*, I will not stand idly by. The House of Black cannot afford another weak Family Head, and if I think for a moment that you are... unfit for the responsibility, I will see to it that it is never yours to bear."

"I await your judgment then, Uncle," Rigel said, bowing once more, "Please excuse me."

She ventured back into the ballroom, weary beyond belief at the night that was somehow still not over. Perhaps it had been a mistake to come here. Perhaps she had been a fool.

She caught sight of platinum blonde hair through a gap in the crowd, and felt her spirits lift. The night was not finished yet, and she had to find her friends once more.

She pursued the flash of blonde hair through the crowd, until she came face-to-face with its owner. It was Mrs. Malfoy, and she smiled down at Rigel with serenity that was like a balm on her agitated nerves.

"Rigel! We've hardly seen you all night," Narcissa said. She touched Rigel's shoulder lightly and said, "Come this way. Lucius and Draco are with Mr. Riddle's party."

Rigel was not at all sure she wanted to see Riddle again that night, but it would be both churlish and revealing to break away from Mrs. Malfoy now. So she allowed the elegant lady to guide her through the crowd, until they came to the very center of the ballroom, where a large group of people stood conversing. The group was so large in fact that there seemed to be several conversations going on inside of it, with different people participating to varying degrees in each.

Mr. Riddle stood between Mr. Malfoy and Mr. Parkinson. Beside Mr. Parkinson was a woman Rigel recognized easily from the Black family tapestry as Bellatrix Lestrange. She was beautiful in a wild, untamed sort of way, but Rigel privately thought Narcissa to be the fairer of the two sisters. Next to Mrs. Lestrange stood two men who must have been brothers, both incredibly tall and muscular, with dark, watchful countenances. They would be Rodolphus and Rabastan Lestrange, Rigel presumed. Next to the Lestrange brothers stood Lord and Lady Rosier. There were many others in the group she didn't recognize, as well.

Mrs. Malfoy stepped into place between her husband and her son, who stood at Mr. Malfoy's right hand. Draco turned to make room for his mother and smiled when he spotted Rigel following behind her.

"There you are! Pansy is monstrously cross with you," Draco informed her slyly, motioning her to come and stand between him and a heavy-set wizard she could only vaguely remember meeting before. Either Crabbe or Goyle senior, she thought.

"I shall find a suitably degrading way to beg her forgiveness," Rigel said, smiling a bit, "Having a pleasant time, Draco?"

"I suppose," Draco said, "Nothing terribly exciting has happened, but now that you're here, I expect that will change rather abruptly."

Rigel put a hand to her heart in mock vexation, "It's as though you want strange things to happen around me, Draco. Haven't I told you they aren't my-"

"Mother," an unusually strident voice cut across all the lighthearted conversation in the immediate vicinity. Several heads turned watch as the Lestrangle Heir grasped at his mother's elbow insistently. Bellatrix Lestrangle turned her head slowly, having been in the middle of a conversation with Mr. Parkinson when her son interrupted. She gazed at the pale, haughty-faced boy for a good ten seconds in silence before saying, "Yes, Caelum? What is so important that you must discuss it with me *now* ?" Her eyes flicked sharply toward the other people in the group, several of whom were making no pretense of ignoring the interaction.

Caelum Lestrangle glanced around the circle dismissively, not appearing to even notice the dangerous looks he was being given for his impertinence, "The most monstrously unforgivable thing has-" the boy broke off and did a double-take, whirling his head to stare-straight at Rigel, " *You*. "

"Good evening, Lestrangle," Rigel said, a polite smile on her face.

The boy's eyes narrowed and his pale face flushed an unhealthy puce, and then he whirled away and disappeared into the crowd without any explanation whatsoever.

There was an awkward moment of silence as many of the adults turned questioning faces toward Rigel, and Draco muttered under his breath, "Not your fault? Yeah, right."

"Well, well, what have we here?" Bellatrix Lestrangle was eyeing Rigel like a venomous spider might eye an unfamiliar species of fruit fly it had caught in its web. "Little Sirius' whelp, aren't you?"

Rigel bowed deeply, "Good evening, Lady Lestrangle. I am indeed Rigel Black. It is a pleasure to meet you."

A twisted smile made its way onto Bellatrix's doll-like face,
"Charmed, I'm sure. Do tell me what you have done to my son, child.
I admit I have yet to devise such an efficient way of getting rid of
him."

Rigel thought that was a perfectly awful thing to say about your own
child, no matter how much of a jerk he was, but she simply blinked
once and said, "I'm afraid I don't know, my Lady. We have only met
briefly before this moment."

"Let me know when you figure it out, then," Bellatrix said, that creepy
smile still playing about her mouth.

Rigel inclined her head, and was grateful when Mrs. Lestrangle
dismissed her to resume her conversation with Mr. Parkinson.

Most of the others picked back up on their own conversations, and if
it weren't for Riddle's curious gaze and Draco's knowing smirk, she
could almost pretend the brief scene hadn't occurred.

Mr. Malfoy's face was unreadable as he said, "Draco, why don't you
and Rigel go and look for your friend, Miss Parkinson? I doubt you
shall truly enjoy your New Year's Eve at my side."

Draco nodded respectfully, "Yes, father. Let's go, Rigel."

Rigel was more than happy to escape, and gave Mr. Malfoy mental
thanks for enabling her retreat. They soon found Pansy talking to
Blaise and standing with her mother, who was engaged in a lively
discussion with Lady Zabini.

"Draco," Pansy smiled, welcoming him over with a fond pat on the
elbow, "We thought you'd be embroiled in politics with your father all
evening, didn't we, Blaise?"

"Indeed," Blaise said, smiling wryly, "Hello again, Rigel."

"Hello Blaise," Rigel said, "Hi Pansy."

Pansy sniffed and looked in another direction.

Right.

"Pansy, goddess of my heart, pearl of the morning," Rigel tried. Pansy still gazed resolutely away from her. Mrs. Parkinson paused in her conversation with Mrs. Zabini to listen with growing amusement. "Pansy, talk to me, please? I'm sorry to have left so pure a flower in the midst of her blossoming springtime to the protection of another, but you must understand I would never have abandoned you if the situation were not of the utmost necessity."

"Situation?" Pansy prompted, examining her silk gloves with an air of disinterest.

"Yes," Rigel said, casting about for ideas, "A quest was entrusted to me by one you hold in high esteem. I knew that to turn him down would be to let you down as well, and so I was caught in a most ignoble predicament, with shame on either side of my choice. That is why I sent friend Rookwood in my stead, that the un-chivalrous behavior on my part might at least be lessened to a tolerable degree."

"Edmund has mentioned this 'quest' to me," Pansy said, sniffing, "And in my understanding it was given to you *after* you already decided to stand me up. You promised me the third dance, Rigel. *Promised*."

"So I did, Pan," Rigel said, dropping pretense with a sigh, "But you must admit that promise was extracted from me under duress."

"I hardly consider your father's mere presence to be 'duress,'" Pansy said, pursing her lips but at least deigning to look at Rigel at last.

"You would if you knew him," Rigel assured her, "Can't you just allow me to make it up to you, Pan? Please?"

Pansy tilted her head consideringly, "I suppose you could grant me *two* dances at the next ball..." At Rigel's poorly suppressed look of unease Pansy burst into laughter, "I'm kidding, Rigel, do you believe me to be so unperceptive? Truly I wasn't even very cross. I rather expected you to duck out from how reluctant you were to agree to the dance, and sending Edmund in your place was very thoughtful."

Rigel blinked, and then smiled in relief, "I admit you had me going, Pansy."

Pansy smiled winsomely at her, "Of course I did, Rigel. I'm a woman."

At that, Mrs. Parkinson and Mrs. Zabini both could contain their amusement no longer. Rose Parkinson dissolved into her light, bell-like laughter and Mrs. Zabini chuckled softly in her smooth, naturally seductive voice.

The three pureblooded females in the group shared a conspiratorial look, and both Draco and Blaise looked like they were fighting the temptation to back away slowly.

"And how is your winter break, Rigel?" Rose Parkinson asked eventually.

Rigel smiled easily, "Quite productive, Lady Parkinson."

"So in Rigel-speak," Draco translated helpfully, "That means he's been brewing at least six potions a day."

"Six! How the youth today exaggerates," Mrs. Zabini said, smiling. Draco glanced at Rigel wryly, but didn't contradict the beautiful older lady. If Rigel had to describe Mrs. Zabini, she would have to say that she was every inch as beautiful as Bellatrix Lestrange, and gave off the same dangerous air with the way she held herself, but there was something sharp in Bellatrix Lestrange that was soft in Lady Zabini.

Rigel chatted with Blaise, Pansy, and Draco for a little while, but soon after Sirius found her.

"There you are, sport," Sirius clapped a hand on Rigel's shoulder and smiled around at the others, "Sorry to pull you away, but it's twenty-five till midnight."

Rigel nodded her understanding, "It was good seeing you all. Good evening, Lady Parkinson, Lady Zabini. Bye Draco, Pansy, Blaise. See you in school."

"You're leaving?" Draco said with slight dismay, "The party doesn't end until one."

"Yes," Rigel said. It was tradition for the Black's to be with the Potter's on the stroke of midnight, "I had a wonderful time, though. Good night."

Her friends said their farewells, and she and Sirius quickly made their way toward the ballroom doors. The exit apparition point was in a different room than the entering apparition point, just off the hallway where the guest restrooms were located, so they didn't have to climb the ridiculously long staircase again.

Sirius said he'd already made their excuses to Lord and Lady Rosier, thanked them for their hospitality, etc, so all that was left to do was go. Before they reached the apparition room, however, a voice from behind them in the hallway called them back.

"Wait, Lord Black," It was Aldon Rosier hurrying toward them, "My apologies, but may I speak to Rigel for a short moment before you leave."

Sirius turned questioning eyes on Rigel, who nodded slightly. Her uncle checked his watch, then said, "Five minutes." He went on ahead.

"What is it, Aldon?" Rigel asked.

Rosier smiled briefly, then his face grew serious, "Listen, Lestrangle is an ass. I'm sorry that happened in my family's ballroom."

"I've already forgotten it," Rigel said.

"Well, he hasn't," Rosier said, "Guys like Lestrangle are more than willing to hold a grudge for even the pettiest of perceived slights, and you showed him up proper, in a way he can't even prove since it was obvious you didn't even have your wand out."

Rigel opened her mouth, but Rosier shook his head, "I don't want to know how you did it, or if someone else did it for you. What matters is that Lestrangle looked like a fool, and he knows it. Just... be careful, all right? Try to avoid him from now on, and watch your back around any of his relatives."

Rigel nodded, "Thank you for the warning. I will be careful."

"Sure you will," Aldon smiled ruefully, something like worry clouding his eerie golden eyes, "Happy New Year, Rigel."

Rigel smiled back, no trace of concern revealed on her own face despite all that had happened since eight o'clock that evening. Truly, the night had seemed like a lifetime, "And to you, Aldon."

She gave one last nod, then turned and hurried after Sirius. They still had fifteen minutes, but she wanted to have a moment to switch back with Archie before the clock struck twelve.

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The rest of winter break passed too slowly for Harry. She had finished her homework ages ago, it seemed, and even all her extracurricular studies couldn't keep her occupied for long. It was therefore with relief that she stowed away her green contacts and

boarded the train as Rigel Black almost two weeks after the start of the New Year.

About an hour out from London, however, Rigel began feeling strange. She developed a mild headache, which was nothing unusual for her-except that she hadn't been reading in dim lighting that day. She thought perhaps she was dehydrated, and bought a water off the trolley, but the headache persisted.

A short time after that, she felt herself growing unaccountably fatigued. Rigel's eyelids began to droop, and before she knew it she had fallen asleep in her seat, head pillowed on the armrest between her chair and Draco's.

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Draco's POV:

Draco looked down at the head of short black curls resting innocently on his armrest and wondered if anyone else realized how completely incongruous Rigel Black's appearance was with his true nature.

Rigel Black was, to be blunt, fragile-looking. Elegant features ran in many pureblooded lines, but Rigel's face was just plain delicate. Before Rigel had joined the Quidditch team, Draco would have guessed that his pale skin was a result of the obnoxious amount of time Rigel spent cooped up in the dungeon brewing. Now, however, he knew that Rigel simply didn't tan. Ever. Somehow, he could spend hours in the sun flying and return indoors just as ghost-like as he'd left.

His almost sickly appearance when compared with the other boys in their year, however, didn't have anything to do with Rigel Black's ability, mental or physical. He kept up easily in Flint's training sessions and had his own exercise regimen on top of that (one which Draco *meant*

to attend more than a couple of times a week, but never seemed to wake up in time for). He was also, quite possibly, the smartest person Draco knew.

Well, that wasn't quite true, Draco corrected himself as he turned his gaze from the top of Rigel's head to the train window. It wasn't that Rigel was smarter than Draco was, exactly. In class Rigel learned at the same pace he and Pansy did, and while neither he nor Pansy were what you'd call mediocre in the intelligence department, they weren't geniuses either. Draco was pretty sure Rigel didn't only pretend to learn slowly to make himself more ordinary-seeming (though he *was* sure Rigel did other things to achieve that effect), so that meant Rigel wasn't inherently smarter than other people.

He just apparently lacked the ability to not do five things at once.

Draco didn't think he'd ever seen Rigel listen to a lecture without also reading a different book under his desk. The exception to this rule was McGonagall's class, because McGonagall wouldn't allow it, and Snape's, because Rigel loved Snape's classes. Still, he had taken a peek at Rigel's notes during Transfiguration once or twice, and always they looked more like an essay for another class than notes usually did.

If someone had told him how much Rigel could learn over the course of a month without telling him anything else about the boy, Draco would have probably assumed he had access to a time-turner. Once you actually paid attention to what Rigel did with his time, however, it became clear that if Rigel *had* access to a time-turner, he'd have graduated Hogwarts already and be halfway to solving Merlinian Arithmancy. He was just that alarmingly efficient.

So his short stature and delicate features were little indication of the strength of Rigel's character, and yet... Draco sometimes couldn't entirely look past them. Like now, with Rigel having fallen asleep without warning and seemingly without even realizing it. He looked the picture of vulnerability. Before meeting Rigel Black, Draco would

have said he was the type to be unmoved by displays of weakness, but somehow fragility wasn't a weakness in Rigel-it was a deception.

One Draco himself was not entirely above falling for, he admitted quietly to himself. How often had he and Pansy attempted to shield Rigel, to protect him and defend him from those who meant him harm, only to discover that while Rigel would *allow* them to help if he felt like it, he didn't *need* them to. He could apparently handle his enemies just as well without them.

And wasn't that odd? Rigel had more enemies than Draco did, and Draco was the son of *Lucius Malfoy*, one of the most feared-and therefore one of the most easily hated-men in Wizarding Britain. Like that night at Lord Riddle's gala. Draco had asked around discretely (via letter-writing, which he absolutely detested), but no one knew what would make Lestrangle react so peculiarly to Rigel's simply *greeting* the boy. Eventually Adrian Pucey had admitted to witnessing something that might explain the scene Draco described, but he wouldn't say what for fear of upsetting-not Lestrangle-but *Rigel* .

Draco could only shake his head in complete bemusement when his father had asked him later what Rigel's history with Lestrangle was. Lucius Malfoy had not been happy with his son's ignorance, but Draco wasn't exactly tickled with his father right then either, so he would put off reporting to him until he really felt like it.

Draco scowled at the sprawling English countryside as thoughts of his father slowly replaced thoughts of his friend. Lucius was doing that patently annoying thing again where he handed out vaguely cryptic and purposely maddening hints of *something he wouldn't explain*, and then expected Draco to do something with them.

The only thing Draco had figured out from his father's mostly-indecipherable advice thus far was that Lucius knew something vital about the strange attacks on Longbottom and that Ravenclaw girl. He hadn't said why, or even how, but when Draco brought up his concern, he *had* said that Draco had nothing to worry about.

The utter confidence with which his father had spoken sent chills up Draco's spine even now. No one could be sure about something like that unless they were the ones behind it, but if his father was behind it he wouldn't be asking Draco so many questions about what was going on. That meant that either A: Lucius was pretending to confidence for his son's sake, or B: someone in whom Lucius had complete confidence was behind the attacks.

If the former, Draco was worried. If a Malfoy had to fake confidence in something, things could not be at all going the way they were supposed to go. If the latter, Draco was, frankly, worried. That sounded a little too much like the Sleeping Sickness for Draco's comfort, considering he'd almost died because of that sickness. In fact, he had almost died *less than a week* after his father had sounded *supremely confident* in the interview he gave to the Prophet.

Draco scowled even harder at the countryside. All in all, the situation was not looking good.

"If you burn a hole through the glass by glaring at it, I hope you'll take responsibility for what the wind will do to my hair," Pansy said from her seat facing him. She was between Millicent, who was reading her Charms textbook, and Blaise, who was having a conversation with Theo about Latin-based vs. Rune-based magic.

Draco changed his expression to one of fond amusement as he turned his gaze from the window to his other best friend-and wasn't that a strange thought? Best friends with a girl. "I could easily take such responsibility," he said teasingly, "But I'm not sure how that would help your hair."

Pansy laughed, and the world suddenly didn't seem as ugly as it had from the disgruntled corner of his thoughts. "Fair point. I shall have to distract you from your unhappy thoughts, then, if my appearance is to be saved from certain ruin."

"Your presence alone is diversion enough," Draco said, quirking a smile at her. Pansy truly was a gem. Patient and kind, she was sure to be the social catch of their year when she matured. Draco knew his parents were already looking subtly for signs of a prospective match, and honestly... it wouldn't be bad, he thought. They were already friends, and even if some part of him felt that that was all they'd ever be, it was still more than a lot of people had in a marriage. She was smart, and bound to be pretty if the pictures he'd seen of her grandmother, whose coloring she took after, were anything to judge by. Pureblooded girls weren't exactly thick on the ground in their generation, and Draco sincerely believed he could do a *lot* worse than Pansy Parkinson as a wife.

"Draco? Are you quite done zoning out?" Pansy gazed at him with amusement, and Draco felt a bit sheepish for how far his thoughts had carried him. He didn't need to worry about stuff like that for several years at least.

Shaking himself out of the inane mental trench he seemed to have been digging, Draco concentrated on the present. The future could always wait.

"Diversion enough indeed," Pansy said, her eyes bright with secret laughter, "What a fibber you are, Drake."

"Drake?" Draco raised an eyebrow, "That one's new."

"Well," Pansy said, cheeks turning the slightest bit pink, "We all seem to have different nicknames for one another, but I didn't have a different one for you."

"Do we?" Draco said, surprised.

"You haven't noticed? Boys," Pansy said, as though that one word were explanation enough, "You call me 'Pans' sometimes, but Rigel just calls me 'Pan.' You call Rigel 'Rye' sometimes, and he occasionally calls you 'Dray.' So now I'm calling you 'Drake.'"

Draco smiled softly, "I like it. What will you call Rigel, though?"

"I'm not sure," Pansy frowned, "'Rye' is really the only good nickname for Rigel, and I don't want to do a variation on Arcturus, because he really doesn't seem to like his first name much."

"His father uses it," Draco pointed out, "Though sometimes Rigel refers to his father by his first name as well, so maybe it's an inside joke."

"Yes, isn't that odd?" Pansy remarked. "Actually there's something... odd about Rigel's entire relationship with his father, don't you think?"

Draco leaned over to get a look at Rigel's face, to make sure it was still relaxed with genuine sleep before answering, "I agree. Some of the things Black says don't really make sense. At least not in relation to the Rigel we know. It's like..."

"It's like he's trying to be an entire different person when he's with his father," Blaise interjected. His expression was that of someone explaining something obvious.

Draco frowned, a bit put out that Blaise thought he knew Rigel better than they did, "You weren't even there when we met his father at the station."

"I observed Rigel with his father at the gala," Blaise said easily, "What interaction I witnessed was brief, but rather obvious. Besides that, there's he and his father's correspondence. His father writes as though Rigel is a completely different person than he is, and Rigel responds as *if* he's the imaginary person his father thinks he is."

"You read his mail?" Draco scowled.

"Why would either of them do that?" Pansy asked, looking perplexed, "Is it some kind of code?"

"I suspected that at first, but after seeing them at the gala it became clear to me that it was a regular facet of their relationship," Blaise said. His voice was detached, almost clinical, but there was something concerned in his eyes as he spoke that made Draco think Blaise probably cared more about other people than he liked to let on.

Blaise seemed to visibly hesitate before going on to say, carefully, "It also seemed to me that... only one of them was aware that anything about the situation was odd."

Millicent, who had stopped reading her book some time ago to listen in, looked completely shocked, "You think... you think that Rigel's father believes him to be something he is not... and that Rigel completely supports and even actively encourages this mistaken belief? That is... beyond absurd. No one can pretend to be something they aren't for their entire life."

"Well, there's another alternative," Blaise said, looking grim, "But you aren't going to like it."

He was looking at Draco in particular as he said it, so Draco steeled himself not to react as he asked, "What is that?"

"The other alternative is that it isn't Sirius Black who Rigel is lying to about who he is," Blaise said, almost apologetically.

The notion was an obvious one, but that didn't stop it from hitting Draco like a punch to the gut (not that he'd ever been punched in the gut, but some things one can imagine without experiencing them). Still... "I don't believe that," Draco said firmly.

"Neither do I," Pansy said flatly.

Blaise inclined his head, "Nor I. Personally I think that Rigel's father *is* the one being lied to, but I felt compelled to list all the possibilities, for completeness' sake."

Sometimes Draco wished Blaise paid a little less homage to 'completeness' and more to general sensibilities, but many things, like Rigel's selective obliviousness and Blaise's exacting need for correctness, were beyond his ability to wish away.

"So... either way that leaves us with Rigel being an incredibly long-term liar for no apparent reason," Theo said, worrying his bottom lip with his teeth, "I mean, why would he do that to his own father? It's kind of... cold. I just never pictured Rigel like that."

"You think Rigel is lying to his father to manipulate or hurt him?" Blaise shook his head slowly, "No, it is entirely the other way around."

"What do you mean?" Pansy prompted, "Please explain if you are going to say things like that, Blaise."

"Yes, of course," Blaise inclined his head gracefully, "I was merely collecting my thoughts. We know that the person Rigel is with us is not the person he is with his father. Let us compare the two. We see Rigel as someone rather low-key in his day-to-day existence. He studies more than most people would consider reasonable, he enjoys potions more than any of us will probably ever understand, and he rarely expresses himself openly or without considerable prompting by others. Yes?"

They all nodded with more or less general agreement.

"Draco and Pansy have observed his interactions with his father more closely than I have," Blaise said, "But I admit to glancing over his letters when he opens them at the breakfast table, and to occasionally distracting him while he writes his replies so that I can skim over those as well."

"Blaise! That's a bit much even for us," Millicent protested with exasperation.

"-and I have discovered several things about the person Rigel pretends to be for his father's benefit," Blaise went on, ignoring the slightly censorious looks he was getting from the four of them, " *That* boy is cheerful, engaging, and impertinent. That boy enjoys playing pranks and openly teasing his friends and family. That boy is always upbeat and rarely complains about anything. He is more interested in discussing Quidditch than academics, and even when he is being serious, that boy is more earnest than he is careful."

The second-years exchanged looks that were worried, bewildered, and surprised.

"That boy sounds a lot like how my mother described Sirius Black as a child," Pansy said slowly.

Draco nodded as he came to the same conclusion, "James Potter, too. It sounds just like how Mother described the Marauders when they were in school."

Theo spoke up as well, "Actually, that made-up kid kind of sounds like what I expected the Black Heir to be like. Before I met him, I mean, and before he was sorted into Slytherin, obviously. I thought he would be a happy-go-lucky prankster, or else an amateur smooth-talker like his father."

"He *was* sort of like that, the very first night," Pansy said, eyes distant as she tried to remember their first feast together, "I remember thinking he was a lot like his father, only now I don't think that about Rigel at all."

"Maybe he was still so used to pretending that he hadn't relaxed yet," Millicent said. She paused, then added, "This is the strangest conversation I've ever had about someone behind their back."

Draco felt a tiny stab of guilt at those words, but he ignored them. Rigel wouldn't actually care that they were talking about him behind his back. Draco could almost picture the expression of amusement Rigel would wear as he listened to them all try to figure him out,

even, but it still felt a little tiny bit rude to be dissecting his life like this. Ah, well. Secrets were meant to be ferreted out, after all, and besides that they were *friends*. They just wanted to *know*, not blackmail him or anything.

"Back to what you said earlier, though," Pansy said, looking at Blaise, "You implied that Rigel is pretending for his father's sake, is that right? You think that we're not the only ones who expected Sirius Black's son to be happy and mischievous and all of that, don't you, Blaise? You think Sirius Black expected those things from his son, too, and Rigel goes through these elaborate motions so that he doesn't disappoint him."

Blaise inclined his head slowly, "That is one possible theory, yes."

"But parents don't want their children to lie to them," Millicent protested, "They want them to be happy."

"Black thinks his son *is* happy," Blaise said, shrugging.

"Who says Rigel isn't happy?" Draco demanded.

"Yes, who says I'm not happy?"

Draco's head jerked down to see Rigel slowly pushing up from the armrest. No one spoke as their friend rubbed one hand across his eyes and covered his mouth with the other as a small yawn escaped him. Rigel sat up in his seat and turned his head to look at them all. His cheeks were flushed from sleep, and his eyes were still a bit tired-looking, but his voice was calm and even as he said, "I am, you know. I'm very happy."

"Rigel," Pansy started, an apology clear in her voice and facial expression.

Rigel waved a hand negligently at her, "It's okay, Pan, I don't care. I only heard a little of it anyway, but you all should know that it's not a question of whether I'm happy or not, but rather a question of what

makes my dad happy. I'm happy either way, so pretending to be the son he wants doesn't hurt me at all and pleases him a great deal. Win-win."

Draco was not at all sure that was true. How could such a thing not hurt Rigel? If your father thought you were something you weren't, then he'd be proud of something that didn't exist. Every interaction, every gesture of approval and affection would be meaningless. Draco couldn't think of anything that would be more painful than willingly diverting his own father's love onto something else, something that wasn't even real. And yet, Rigel didn't even see anything wrong with it.

Most of the time, Rigel's inside didn't seem to mesh with his outside at all, but at moments like this, everything about Rigel seemed as fragile as fairy glass. His world just didn't make sense to Draco. Rigel's life was so completely unstable. His actions contradicted with his other actions, and adding in his words only made things even worse.

In summation, his own life had made significantly more sense before he met Rigel Black, but on the other hand...

He watched Rigel easily distract Millicent with a question about the Herbology assignment that Draco thought it highly unlikely Rigel hadn't already completed.

On the other hand, life had been significantly less interesting then, too.

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Regular POV:

By the time Rigel got off the train, she really wasn't feeling well. Her headache had disappeared for a while after her nap, but had come back with a vengeance during the last half-hour of the trip. Her muscles were aching in her back and thighs, and her stomach was cramping something fierce. She was worried she might have caught some kind of bug over break-she had been in contact with Merlin-knows-how-many people between her frequent trips through Diagon and Knockturn alley and the New Year's Eve party.

All she wanted to do was sleep, but she was pretty sure you couldn't skip the Welcoming Feast just because you wanted to.

So she sat at the Slytherin table with her year-mates, trying not to concentrate on how the noise was making her headache progress quickly toward migraine-status.

"Are you all right, Rigel?" Pansy said at one point, leaning in to speak quietly to her, "I'm really sorry you had to listen to us talking about you like that. It wasn't very discrete of us, with you being right there. Are you cross?"

Rigel summoned a smile for Pansy, "No, Pan, I'm not upset with you. I just have a bit of a headache."

Pansy's relief was instantly replaced by concern, "Do you want me to fetch a headache potion from Madam Pomphrey?"

Rigel gave her an amused look.

Pansy sent her an exasperated one back, "I know, I know, you're perfectly capable of brewing your own headache potion, but surely you don't want to have to brew one *while having a headache* ?"

Rigel smiled, "Thanks, Pansy, but I've got a few already made in my kit. I'll take one when we get back to the common room."

Pansy patted her arm gently, "Very well, then. If you need anything, though, please ask."

"It's really not that bad," Rigel said reassuringly. When Pansy turned to answer a question Theo asked her from her left side, Rigel rubbed at her temple agitatedly. She drank as much water as her cramping stomach would allow, then, when she felt that she had surely stayed long enough to be polite, she excused herself as discretely as possible.

Draco stood along with her.

"You don't have to, Draco," she said distractedly, "Enjoy the feast."

Draco took her elbow, as though he knew she was feeling worse than she acted, and walked with her slowly to the doors, "You're not supposed to go wandering alone, remember? None of us are. It's only the fifth time I've told you that. You never listen."

"I'm listening right now," Rigel said tiredly as they took the steps down to the dungeons.

"Then you never remember listening when the time comes to actually act on the information you were supposed to be hearing," Draco said, no small amount of annoyance coloring his voice, "I know you told Pansy you have a headache, but you've been flushed since you woke up on the train. And you were holding your stomach earlier under the table where you thought no one would see. What's wrong?"

Rigel had to laugh a bit at that, "You are too observant for your own good, Dray."

"I am exactly as observant as I need to be to stay ahead of your ridiculous pretenses," Draco said, "Many of which appear to be all too automatic for you at this point, if I may say so."

"I'd rather you just think it," Rigel said. She paused to yawn, "But I suppose it would be a feat beyond my meager capabilities to actively prevent Draco Malfoy from speaking his mind, so, sure. Go ahead and say so."

"Ha," Draco said, "That was so funny I almost forgot that you never answered my question. Oh, wait, no I didn't. What's wrong, Rigel?"

Rigel grimaced, "I'm not sure. My stomach hurts, my muscles ache, I have a headache, and I'm more tired than I should be considering I've done nothing but sit on a train all day on more than seven hours of sleep."

"So you're sick?" Draco made Rigel stop for a moment so he could put his hand on her forehead, "You're a bit warm, but it could just be because you're tired. We should go to the Hospital Wing."

"You know I hate Healers," Rigel said, starting toward the common room again.

"I don't think you hate anything," Draco said.

"You know I really dislike going to see Healers," Rigel corrected herself with a sigh.

"So you've said," Draco glanced at her sidelong, "But so far no reasoning that makes any sense has been offered to back that statement up."

"Hmm," Rigel said disinterestedly.

"If it gets worse, I'm getting Snape," Draco said firmly.

"Sure," Rigel said, smiling her thanks at her blonde friend, "It's probably nothing, though. I hardly ever get sick, and it doesn't last long when I do."

"So in other words your immune system is way overdue for a reality check," Draco drawled.

Rigel just shook her head.

They arrived at the common room entrance and stopped.

Draco looked at Rigel and Rigel looked at Draco.

"Do you-?"

"No."

"Well, damn," Draco said, "We really thought this one through."

Rigel laughed a bit. They really were idiots, walking all the way down there without knowing the new term's password.

Then again...

"Hey, Draco," Rigel said casually, "Do you want to know a secret?"

Draco stared at her for a beat, "I can't believe you just said that. We're Slytherins, Rigel. I suppose tomorrow you'll ask a Ravenclaw if he wants to read a book."

"Is that a yes?" Rigel said, smiling slyly.

"For Salazar's sake, you'd *better* tell me," Draco huffed, "Or I shall decry you to all and sundry as a complete tease."

Rigel laughed softly, "Okay, but don't tell anyone. Besides Pansy, I mean."

"Given," Draco agreed quickly.

Rigel turned to the common room wall and twisted her thoughts in the way she had grown accustomed to doing around her uncle's pets. " *Open*, " she hissed quietly.

The wall slid open at once, and Draco sucked in a surprised breath beside her. He hurried her into the common room and checked it for occupants before turning and saying softly, "There's a secondary password for the common room in Parseltongue? That's brilliant, Rigel! How did you figure it out? Wait," Draco made a face, "It's not something obvious, like 'Salazar,' is it?"

"Worse," Rigel said, chuckling softly, "It's 'open.'"

Draco snorted incredulously, "You're joking. I guess it wouldn't matter, since no one else would even understand but... really? That's so..."

"I know," Rigel said, still smiling, "I could barely believe it when Pucey's snake told me. Maybe Slytherin figured it was so obvious none of his descendants would think of it. A double-bluff, of a sort."

"Maybe," Draco tossed a glance at Salazar Slytherin's portrait, but he wasn't there at the moment, "Either way, that is seriously cool. How long have you been able to do that?"

Rigel shrugged, "Pucey's snake told me in November, but this is the first time I've used it."

Draco's face was alight with pleased satisfaction, "Thank you, Rigel. For telling me one of your secrets."

"It was either that or stand outside and wait for a prefect," Rigel joked. Her smile faded a bit and she added, "Most of the time I don't really mean to keep secrets from you, Draco. I just forget I have them, until something like this reminds me."

Draco looked resigned, "I'm not going to ask how you can forget about a secret that is *that* useful, because... it's you. So tonight I'm just glad you told me."

Rigel huffed once more with amusement, and then started toward their dormitory, "Well, I'm for bed."

"You napped on the train," Draco said, a frown creeping back onto his face.

"I'm just a little tired, Draco," Rigel said, opening the door and making a beeline for her bed, "It's nothing to worry about."

"Say what you want, Rigel," Draco said, sitting on his trunk to unlace his shoes, "I'm going to keep an eye on you anyway."

That, Rigel reflected as she kicked off her own shoes and curled up on top of her comforter, seemed to be a rather common theme in their friendship.

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Rigel woke several times that night, and each time she tried to drink as much water as she could stomach to get her stubborn migraine, which had persisted despite the headache potion, to go away. Finally, at about three in the morning, her bladder rebelled and Rigel had no choice but to give into its demands, prying her aching muscles from her soft bed and moving as quietly as she could to the bathroom she and Draco usually shared, Theo and Blaise having claimed the other for their own.

She locked the door automatically behind her, undid Archie's belt with practiced ease, and froze, staring in part-disbelief, part-horror at the rust-colored stain on her undergarments. Taking a deep breath, Rigel shucked the pants entirely off and sat down on the toilet to think while she relieved her bladder. She noted that it didn't hurt to do so, and felt considerably relieved. No pain removed most of the more terrible medical possibilities she'd read about in Archie's Healer textbooks.

Well, she couldn't say *no* pain, Rigel thought disgruntledly, after all her lower abdominals were still cramping something-

She gave into self-disgust and smacked herself smartly on the forehead. "I am such an idiot," she whispered to herself. Really, how silly could she be? She had *known* this would happen since she was nine. Lily believed in early instruction, and had given her daughter

several books on the subject of female adolescence. Menstruation was one of the things that had stood out the most under 'mandatory pubescent experiences,' but somehow Rigel hadn't thought it would be so... sudden. She knew what it felt like to bleed from a cut or scrape, so she'd somehow expected it to feel like that. But it hadn't. She now knew that the cramps had been the warning, but she hadn't felt the actual blood leaving her at all.

That was actually kind of scary, she thought uneasily. What if she bled to death in her sleep without noticing? Rigel sighed, shaking the ridiculous thought aside. Every girl in the world went through the exact same thing, and she rather doubted many of them bled to death in their sleep. Someone would have said something, surely.

Well, now that she knew what it was, she just had to... deal with it. Rigel wished she had been better prepared for this. She knew there was a potion witches took that stopped the cramps, but she didn't have any ready-made in her kit. She also didn't have the recipe, for that matter. There were also liners that girls could wear in their undergarments that acted like selective vanishing charms when they came into contact with... *that* sort of fluid. Obviously she didn't have any of those, either.

She started rolling up a wad of toilet paper with a sigh. It looked like she would be handling this the old fashioned way for the foreseeable future.

She crept back into bed several minutes later, having wrapped the ruined pair of boxers up in a ball and buried them deep in the waste bin. The house elves would be emptying it in a few hours, so she wasn't worried about any evidence being left over.

Just as she was settling in, Draco's voice came softly from the bed next to hers.

"Okay, Rye?"

"Yes," Rigel whispered back.

"Were you... you know, ill?"

Rigel frowned in confusion, then realized he was asking if she'd been throwing up in the toilet. Rigel supposed she *had* been in there a suspiciously long time.

"Yes," she said, "I think it was just something I ate, because I feel much better now."

"Oh," Draco said, yawning, "Good. Night."

"Night," Rigel returned. Her muscles still ached and she still felt more tired than she thought she ought to feel, but it was with relief that she fell asleep once more. Knowing what the problem was always brought you halfway to addressing it.

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The students didn't have classes the next day, a merciful chance for all the procrastinators to finish their break assignments and an opportunity for the rest of them to get back into the academic mindset before being thrown into classes once more. Not wanting to go to the Library when it was so crowded, Rigel decided to walk down to the gamekeeper's hut and ask Mr. Hagrid about the recent movements of the forest creatures. Archie would be proud of her, Rigel thought, for being proactive in finding out what was going on.

A small part of her brain reminded Rigel that she wasn't supposed to let herself get caught up in big, secretive events this year. She was supposed to spend time with her friends and leave all the grown-up stuff, like inexplicable pandemics or random petrifications, to the actual grown-ups.

She defended herself by pointing out that all she wanted to do was ask the gamekeeper a few questions. She wasn't going to go

gallivanting through the woods chasing crazy and possibly dangerous leads without supervision. Really, it wasn't a big deal.

The sun was high overhead when she knocked on the gamekeeper's door. She recognized the sound of a large dog barking-Fang, she remembered-and then the gamekeeper's ruddy face peeked out at her, "Why, Mr. Black! Hello, hello. *Back*, Fang. Sorry, he's just happy for company, that's all."

Rigel smiled in a friendly way, "That's all right, Mr. Hagrid."

"Just Hagrid," the gamekeeper said gruffly.

"Well, Hagrid," Rigel said, "I'm sorry to drop in unannounced like this, but I was wondering if you could answer a question for me?"

Hagrid's face was wary, but he came outside and sat down on his stoop anyway, "What, er, sort of a question?"

"It's about the creatures that live in the forest," Rigel said, sitting down next to him, "I figured you'd be the closest thing to an expert on the Forbidden Forest."

Hagrid seemed to perk a bit at the word 'expert' and cleared his throat, "Well, I suppose I do know a thing or two. What's yer question?"

"I was wondering if you'd noticed any of the forest's inhabitants doing anything odd lately?" Rigel said, "I mean, have animals usually found in certain parts moved to other parts, or disappeared completely? Or perhaps you've found some suspicious remains lying about-"

"Hold up, what's all this?" Hagrid peered down at her with a furrowed brow, "What're you so interested in the critters for?"

"I'm doing research on what's been petrifying students," Rigel admitted, seeing no harm in being honest. It wasn't against the school rules to look for clues, after all, and Hagrid didn't seem a

likely candidate for the person at Hogwarts supposedly reporting to Mr. Riddle. "I was thinking it might be some kind of animal, but anything with the power to petrify things must be a predator, and usually if one wants to figure out where the predator is, all one has to do is look at where the prey are moving away from."

Hagrid's face turned very white, and he shook his head quickly, "I don't know nothing about anything. Don't ask about-just don't ask."

Rigel looked up at the big man with concern, "Are you all right? I didn't mean to upset you, Mr. Hagrid."

Hagrid put a large hand to his head, "Just bad memories, young Mr. Black. Never mind, never you mind."

"Memories?" Rigel's interest was piqued, "What do you mean?"

Hagrid flushed purple, "Nothin, I didn't mean nothin."

Rigel gazed at the older man for a moment, slowly turning the word 'memories' over in her head, "Hagrid... has something like this happened before? Does it remind you of something similar, something you found in the forest, maybe? Because some of the things that might be petrifying students are very long lived, so if you can tell me where and when you remember something similar to the petrification, it might help identify it."

"It's not the same," Hagrid muttered, "It's nothing to do with the chamber. Merlin, please, not again."

Rigel inhaled sharply, "The Chamber of Secrets? Is that the chamber you mean?" Hagrid looked alarmed and Rigel shamelessly pulled out her best look-wide eyes brimming with hopeful expectation, "Please, Mr. Hagrid. I think you're right; that Chamber is definitely connected."

After Rigel had overheard the phrase at the gala, she had done some digging, but all she could find were vague myths about a

hidden chamber somewhere within Hogwarts itself, build by Slytherin. There was nothing about petrifying kids in the myths at all. Maybe Hagrid knew what the connection was.

Hagrid looked extremely uncomfortable, "You shouldn't be asking such questions, Mr. Black. Look, yer a good lad. Helped me with Fang's stomach aches and all, but you don't want ter get mixed up in this mess."

" *Please*, Mr. Hagrid," Rigel said, "I know it must be difficult for you, but it's important that we all do our best to figure out what's hurting those kids. We all have to be very brave, and put our information and skills together, or evil will triumph unchallenged." She thought that might have been laying it on a bit too thick, but Hagrid looked at her consideringly.

"I reckon... you might be right," the gamekeeper said slowly, looking over toward the forest. "It's just... you have to understand, it wasn't me."

Rigel blinked, "I... didn't imagine it was *you* hurting students, Hagrid. Really, I just thought you would know the most about the forest."

"I'm glad you think that," Hagrid said, his voice heavy with something old and weighty, "Only that wasn't what a lot of people thought, the last time a couple of kids turned up petrified."

Rigel barely suppressed a glint of triumph. Hagrid *did* know something important. She listened carefully, then with growing alarm as Hagrid told her the story of why he was expelled from Hogwarts, and all he knew of the circumstances regarding the opening of the Chamber of Secrets.

"All told there were eight students petrified before it stopped," Hagrid said.

"But they were all fine in the end, right?" Rigel said, "I mean, once the petrification was cured."

Hagrid shook his head slowly, "Seven were all right, after a bit of mandrake draught, but the last one... oh, kid, the last one wasn't just petrified. She was... she was..."

Rigel put a hand on Hagrid's elbow, "I understand. I'm sorry."

"Nice girl, she was," Hagrid said, pulling out a handkerchief and blowing his nose before continuing, "After they found poor Myrtle, they had to do something. When Riddle found my Aragog in that cupboard, well, I suppose it was only natural that they assumed I..." Hagrid broke off, blowing his nose again, "Only I didn't, you have to see, I wouldn't have. Never. I told 'em to ask her, ask Myrtle if she ever saw me when it happened... but she was too distraught, crying and carrying on. They couldn't get a coherent testimony, so they just..."

"That's awful, Hagrid," Rigel said, meaning it, "A giant spider couldn't have petrified... wait, did you say *Riddle* found Aragog? As in Lord Riddle the SOW party leader?" Rigel found that to be a rather difficult coincidence to swallow.

Something indecipherable crossed Hagrid's face, "Yeah. He was just a kid then, too. A prefect, an' all. He found Aragog on one of his patrols. I don't care fer the likes of that party much, but it weren't really Riddle's fault what they assumed. Bad timing, I guess."

He said this with the blank intonation of someone who had been telling themselves such a thing for many years, either using the statement to comfort themselves or else trying to convince themselves of it.

"So, then," she said carefully, trying not to be insensitive but needing to know, "Do *you* think it's the same thing that it was last time?"

Hagrid shrugged a bit, "Not sure. The petrifications look the same... but fifty years ago the ones attacked were all muggleborns. It was before they were banned from attending, you know. There weren't any explosions, neither. And... back then there were *messages* .

Terrible things, written up in blood on the wall. Another one every two or three attacks, always going on about mental pureblood stuff. Slytherin's old propaganda, mixed in with twisted threats and things. Ruddy awful, those were. This time... it's too different to say for sure."

Hagrid sounded a bit hopeful as he said it, but Rigel's stomach sank. There *had* been a message like that, twisted and puritanical, only it had never been seen by more than four people. So the two incidents, fifty years apart, were somehow directly related. And she also now knew that the threat included and underlined by the killings of Mrs. Norris and her kittens was not idle at all. Whoever had done this had killed before the same way.

It made Rigel *angry*, to think of some poor young girl named Myrtle being killed for no other reason than the blood she bore. What kind of a world did they live in that someone thought an accident of birth worth killing over? She had always thought it *unfair* that muggleborns and halfbloods like her didn't get the same opportunities as purebloods, and she had often considered it *annoying* that she had to go through so much extra effort just to reach the same heights, but never before had she been *outraged* on behalf of muggleborns and halfbloods.

How *dare* they think they could get away with this? Rigel would not, *could not*, let it happen again, even if this time it would be a pureblood with whom the same sick point was hammered home. Her face set into a determined scowl. She was going to figure out what was doing this, and she was going to make it *stop* and then she was going to make it regret ever starting.

Her magic stirred restlessly within her as her emotions roiled and churned, but with no outlet it could only burn in her gut like a torch, fueling her purpose with its heat and strength.

She said goodbye to Hagrid and thanked him profusely for his help. He gave her a few more half-hearted admonishments about getting involved in things she oughtn't, which Rigel solemnly ignored.

Rigel stopped at Snape's office on her way back to the common room, intending to pick up that month's list of potions approved for brewing. Before she could ask for it, though, Snape pinned her with a serious look and said, "Mr. Malfoy believes you are ill."

Rigel mentally rolled her eyes at her friend. He really was too dependent on authority sometimes.

"I felt a bit sour last night," Rigel said, "But luckily it passed. I am completely healthy today."

Snape studied her under lowered brows, "As you appear to be neither ill nor lying, I am inclined to ignore Mr. Malfoy's assessment- this time. Do not neglect your health."

"Yes, sir," Rigel said.

"Now, I imagine you are here for this," Snape pulled a piece of parchment from his desk.

"How embarrassingly predictable of me," Rigel said, grinning as she stepped forward to take the list eagerly. She looked at it, then blinked. There was only one thing written on it.

Polyjuice Potion .

Rigel felt herself smile irrepressibly. It was nothing she hadn't made before, but still, "This is an NEWT potion."

"It is only considered such because of the tedium involved in both time and preparation," Snape said dismissively, "In actuality it is less magically draining than many fourth-year potions, due to the preparation being drawn out over the course of a month."

"Thank you," Rigel said, still smiling without conscious effort.

"It is not a gift, but a test," Snape said firmly, though he looked thoroughly amused at her reaction, "Do not disappoint me."

"I won't," Rigel said, "How many batches can I-"

"One," Snape said.

"One?" Rigel blinked, deflating a bit. She wasn't worried about leaving room for error, but she hadn't brewed only one potion at a time since... actually, she couldn't remember when she had last brewed just one cauldron of something, let alone *one potion for an entire month*.

"Make it perfect," Snape suggested.

"Yes, sir," Rigel said, frowning a bit at how bored she was going to be until February.

Snape made an exasperated noise, "You impertinent child, stop pouting. You will only be working on one potion in your personal time this month because you will be assisting *me* in your free time as well."

"Assisting?" Rigel could feel her smile coming back and repressed it with effort, "What kind of work will I be assisting with, sir?"

Snape leveled a look at her that made it clear he could see the smile straining at the corner of her mouth and was not at all impressed by her attempts to dissuade it, "My work, Mr. Black. I am in the midst of several experimental and therefore delicate and dangerous projects, and if you do anything other than exactly what I tell you to do, you will wish you were allowed to make one potion a month when I am done locking up your laboratory. Is that clear?"

"Very," Rigel said, "Thank you, Professor Snape. I'm so honored that you'd include me in-"

"You will stop that this instant, Mr. Black," Snape snapped irritably, "I detest flattery of any kind. All I require from you is an extra pair of hands this month. If you perform adequately... I shall consider allowing you to assist with other projects in the future."

Rigel could only nod. She could scarcely believe she was going to see Potion Master Snape's personal projects first-hand. "What time?" she asked.

"Every afternoon between your last class and dinner," Snape said, "With an additional three hours after dinner on the evenings you do not have Quidditch practice. Too much?"

"Definitely not," Rigel said, grinning.

"Get out of my sight," Snape snorted, "Your happiness sickens me."

"I look forward to working with you as well, sir," Rigel said cheerfully as she made her way out.

"Cheeky brat," Snape tossed out after her.

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[end of chapter ten].

A/N: I tried to end on an up-note, since parts of this chapter were mildly not-happy. I think I overused the italics function in several places, but I had a lot of fun writing this one. ^^ I loved the last round of reviews-so many of you are thinking outside the box and forcing me to re-think and round-out my plot line. Thanks :). For those who think this second book is running annoyingly close to the original HP plot line... it totally is. There are some crucial differences, but from Harry's POV things look a lot the same until the last few chapters. In any case, I promise to try making the climax interesting and engaging for those readers who have read HPCS more times than they care to admit.

Best,

-Violet

Chapter 11

A/N: So... I have five hundred reviews. I mean, *my story* . Has. Five. Hundred. Reviews. Wow. I can't even... you know, I started writing this to see if there was anything defensible about a girl!Harry plotline, and I picked Alanna the Lioness to inspire me just because it's my favorite series. This story is so much bigger, more fulfilling, and more exciting than I ever thought it would be. Honestly, I can still remember dancing in circles around my room if a chapter was reviewed five times before I posted the next one, and I admit I still do a little dancing... for every single review I get. It's actually getting a bit ridiculous, as I spend more time dancing than writing, but I'm so, so grateful to every single person who's reviewed, even the ones who just stop in to tell me my premise is ridiculous-it makes me want to make the story better, so that one day everyone can read a gender-bender without feeling ashamed because all of them suck. So, now that I've rambled at you and melted at your feet in a puddle of gratitude, I'll shut up and let the story continue. But seriously, my heartfelt thanks.

(Now edited thanks to some very helpful reviews ^^ love you guys).

The Serpentine Subterfuge:

Chapter 11:

In classes the next day it was uncomfortably obvious that several students in their year hadn't returned from winter break. Two Ravenclaw boys and a Gryffindor girl called Lavender Brown had been pulled out of school by their parents. At lunch, Rigel looked around and realized that it must be the same in every year. The House tables were noticeably less full than they'd been before break, with the blatant exception of Slytherin House. Perhaps it was because of what she now knew about Riddle's-and by extension the SOW party's-connection to the petrifications, but Rigel thought it rather *telling* that apparently none of the Slytherin parents were at all

concerned about their children's well being. Judging by the suspicious looks coming from the other three Houses, Rigel was not the only one who thought so. She wondered if any of the parents knew what was really going on, but rather doubted it, considering how in-the-dark Lucius Malfoy, the second-in-command himself, had sounded when she'd overheard he and Riddle talking. Probably they had simply been told not to worry, and had taken Riddle at his word.

The professors seemed determined to pretend that nothing had changed. They skipped over the missing students' names as though they had never attended Hogwarts in the first place-Neville and Patil included. All of the professors did this, except one.

"Lavender? Where is Lavender?" Lockhart called out expectantly from his 'teaching platform' at the front of the classroom. "That's odd," he said, frowning cluelessly, "She always sits in the front row. Does anyone know if Lavender will be running late today?"

The Gryffindors exchanged rather uncomfortable looks, and Ron Weasley finally spoke up, "She's taken a leave of absence from school... Professor."

"Ooh," Lockhart smiled slyly and winked at them all conspiratorially, "A bit of personal time, eh? Well, I'm sure she'll be very beautiful when she comes back. Yes, very lovely indeed."

"She hasn't gone to a beauty retreat," Pavarti Patil said loudly, "She's hiding from the monster at home like a scared little girl."

"Lay off, Parvati," Ron said, "If she wants to stay home, well, maybe she's just being smart about it."

"She's being a coward, Ron," Patil hissed back, "My own sister got petrified and you don't see me running home with my tail between my legs. Some Gryffindor she turned out to-"

"Now, now, let's not have any confrontation," Lockhart said hastily, "What's all this, then? What monster? Don't tell me you all are afraid

of a few petrifications?" He waved a hand with an air of supreme unconcern while the class stared rather incredulously at him, "Your friends are going to be fine, children. Why, I am working closely with Professor Sprout to restore them even as we speak! So don't fret."

"As we speak? Who taught this numbskull English?" Draco muttered sourly.

"What was that?" Lockhart turned inquiring eyes toward their table, "Did someone have a question?"

"I have a question," Pansy said immediately.

"Yes, Pansy? What is your question?" Lockhart asked, clasping his hands together excitedly.

"What kind of a monster petrifies people?" Pansy said. Draco inhaled sharply and Theo glanced back from the table in front of them to give the blonde girl a surprised look.

"I'm sorry?" Lockhart said, chuckling a bit nervously.

"What sort of a monster petrifies people?" Pansy repeated her question slowly.

"Well, I'm not sure that's really under the purview of this class," Lockhart said, smiling widely at them, "More of a Care of Magical Creatures thing, don't you think?"

"Well, not really," Pansy said, a hint of steel in her prim voice, "Because a creature that petrifies students would be considered dangerous, and dangerous creatures are covered on the Defense Against the Dark Arts syllabus. If we'll eventually cover everything from redcaps to vampires, don't you think we should cover something that petrifies people as well?"

"Oh, I see what you mean now!" Lockhart clapped his hands, "Quite right, Pansy, but that's much more advanced than we are currently.

More of an NEWT subject, I'd say."

"So you're teaching your NEWT students about monsters that petrify people, then?" Pavarti said, raising her dark eyebrows expectantly.

"Well, we haven't gotten to them *quite* yet," Lockhart said uneasily.

"Couldn't you just give us an overview of the different possibilities?" Pansy suggested, "You could make it really *basic*, so that we can keep up."

"Bit sardonic," Draco murmured to Pansy under his breath.

She took a deep breath and smiled sweetly, "Please, Professor Lockhart? We're just so nervous with everything going on. It would ease our nerves considerably if you would indulge us."

Pavarti seemed to catch on, "Yes, please, Professor? We could go look it up in books, but there's no substitution for real experience like yours."

Lockhart seemed utterly at a loss, "Well, I understand that you're worried... not that there's any need, with me here to protect you... but I don't know if I can deviate from the syllabus..."

"What syllabus?" Draco grumbled.

"Oh! I've got it! Yes, a marvelous idea, don't know why I didn't think of it before," Lockhart was suddenly very animated once more, "Students, you're in for a treat. I have decided, in light of recent events, to sponsor... a dueling club!"

Lockhart's dramatic pose would have fit right in with adoring applause... had there been any.

"Is he just going to ignore your question?" Millicent asked, a bit too loudly in the silence for Lockhart to ignore.

"No, don't you see? I will teach you all to duel in an extracurricular club, and then you won't have to worry about what's petrifying students. You'll be able to handle it!" He looked around at them all with an air of great satisfaction, "Yes, that's just the thing. Sign-ups will begin tomorrow."

After that he returned to the scheduled lecture on how phone booths could be an unexpected venue of ambush, and the class returned to doing whatever they usually did in Defense when listening to Lockhart started to melt their brains. Rigel took out a Healing textbook and Draco began working on a Transfiguration Essay while Pansy frowned into space, thinking.

After class, Pansy said, "Why do we have such useless Defense professors? Even with the curse we can't be this far into the bottom of the barrel."

"Don't worry about it, Pans," Draco said, "Rigel and I will help you pass your OWL's."

Pansy sighed, "Thank you, Draco."

Draco huffed a laugh, "Can you believe he suggested a dueling club? I mean, first of all he's supposed to be teaching us dueling anyway as a part of our regular Defense curriculum-treating it like an extracurricular activity? What a joke. And he can't really think dueling will save us from petrification, can he? No one is that stupid."

"Maybe it's all an act," Pansy said wistfully, "Maybe he really is semi-capable, and he acts like a brainless oaf to lull his enemies into a false sense of security."

"Or maybe *he's* the one petrifying people with his stupefying incompetence, and one day soon he'll look in the mirror and petrify *himself*, and they'll have to give us a new professor early," Draco said, also rather wistfully.

"Or maybe it's all an act *and* he's the one petrifying people," Rigel suggested.

Draco blinked, "Actually, that's probably it exactly. I mean, why else would it start this year? The Defense Professor is the only variable."

"Him and twenty-five first-years," Pansy said lightly.

Draco groaned, "If I get petrified by a first-year, you two had better not tell my parents."

"What should we say happened to you instead?" Rigel asked, amused.

"*Anything* else," Draco said, "Say I was mauled by a hippogriff or eaten by the giant squid."

"Mauled by a what?" Pansy laughed, "Draco, where do you come up with these things?"

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That afternoon Rigel hurried to Lab One as soon as classes were finished. It was locked and warded when she got there, so she waited restlessly for about five minutes until Professor Snape arrived. He favored her with an amused look and took out his wand to begin undoing the protections.

"I didn't wait long," Rigel felt compelled to insist.

Snape snorted derisively and opened the door. The lab was as beautiful as Rigel remembered it being, all white countertops and glass cabinets. Unlike the last time she was here, there weren't several cauldrons set up around the horseshoe-like workstations. Instead, there was a single, gleaming cauldron in the center of the

semi-circle, and an array of stirring rods and prep materials spread out on the counter next to it.

Rigel followed Snape into the large, well-lit room. As the Potions Master began unlocking cabinets and pulling out sheaves of fire-retardant parchment from drawers, Rigel approached the shining cauldron with something like awe. It was larger than most cauldrons she'd ever worked with, and looked like it would hold at least a dozen bottles within it. More amazing than that, however, was its material.

"Silver," she breathed, examining the cauldron with irrepressible interest.

Snape set a stack of parchment on the counter before her and inclined his head shortly, "Indeed. You've never worked with the material." It came out as a simple statement of fact, rather than a question or a supposition, and Rigel knew then that Snape knew about Remus' condition, but neither of them mentioned it.

"The potion we brew today is so complex that in past times it required an additional license for a potioneer to sell it in most magical communities," Snape began, choosing several parchments from the pile and handing them to her as he spoke, "Its use has largely died out in the past couple of decades, but it still poses a sizable challenge for most brewers to attempt. The recipe, as you can see, is multi-faceted. This is because the potion will not be uniform until the very end of the brewing process."

Rigel nodded in understanding. Sometimes you had to treat different ingredients in the same potion in different ways before adding them all together in the final step. She asked, "Why do we only have one cauldron, then?"

"Read steps four through fifteen," Snape said.

Rigel did, and her eyebrows rose, "How is that possible?" It looked like the recipe wanted them to treat the potion as layered, with the

top half of the mixture an essentially different potion than the bottom half.

"The trick is in the linseed oil," Snape pointed with a long finger to the first three steps. There were two different bases used. The recipe said to pour the first base in, then add a layer of linseed oil carefully to the top of the mixture, before adding the second base on top of that. "The oil insulates both halves of the potion until the final stage, in which Amole is added to break down the linseed oil barrier and reunite the two halves. It cannot be done in separate cauldrons because the fusion must be instantaneous. Seconds lost in pouring one mixture into the other would ruin the potency of the entire potion."

"How will we add the ingredients it asks for to the bottom half of the mixture, then?" Rigel asked, "Won't everything we put in just end up as part of the top-mixture?"

Snape gestured toward a strange-looking apparatus on the counter-top next to the cauldron, "Do you know what this is?"

Rigel shook her head. It was just a clear, hollow tube about an inch wide that curved slightly at the bottom. There were runes engraved on the sides, but they were too specialized for Rigel to recognize most of them. She had seen them in apothecaries before, she thought, but had no idea what they were for.

"Observe," Snape said. He placed the tube vertically in the cauldron and Rigel saw that when it rested in the bottom of the cauldron the tube still came quite a few inches above the rim. Holding the tube flush against the edge of the silver metal, Snape murmured a phrase in Latin and Rigel watched as the tube seemed to flex and move slightly until the edges blurred and fused with the sides of the cauldron. After a moment Rigel could no longer tell where the tube ended and the cauldron began.

"And it doesn't damage the integrity of the cauldron?" Rigel asked.

"Not in the slightest," Snape said, deftly attaching a funnel to the top of the apparatus, "The spells embedded in the tube are extensive. Once activated, they ensure a one-way, pressurized passage through it, so that ingredients may be funneled into the bottom of the cauldron without letting the potion flow backwards up the tube."

"And with the Linseed oil acting as a barrier," Rigel said, "This lets us add ingredients to the two halves separately. Only... how will we stir the bottom half?"

Snape made a dismissive movement with his hand and said, "You will understand when we reach that stage, but rest assured that it will not be your responsibility."

"What will I be doing, then?" Rigel asked, "Some of the steps are a bit tight timing-wise, but it looks like you could easily brew this by yourself." Rigel was wondering if Snape actually needed her help assisting or if it was just a learning experience for her. Not that she'd be any less excited if it was just a learning experience.

"Normally I do," Snape said, "However..." He trailed off and gazed assessingly at her for a moment, as though wondering how much to say. "This potion is extremely draining on my magical reserves. Brewing one cauldron is taxing enough to reduce the secondary layer of my core by half. While this leaves me far from irresponsibly depleted, in these times I believe it... prudent to preserve the levels of my core when possible, in case there is an event in which they can be of significant use."

Rigel was taken aback, "You want me to imbue the potion, so you can keep your magic ready in case of an emergency?"

Snape said nothing, but inclined his head slightly.

"All right," Rigel said. It was really a good idea, and Rigel's respect for the Potions Master increased as she realized how much thought went into balancing his private projects with his responsibilities as a professor and Head of House. She glanced down at the recipe

again, but there was no heading or title of any kind. "Sir, what *is* this potion?"

"This," Snape said, "Is Aconite Alleviation. It is-"

"The precursor to the Wolfsbane Potion," Rigel breathed, not entirely aware that she had interrupted Professor Snape. "This is what they used for centuries, isn't it? Before Damocles came up with the Wolfsbane alternative, though of course even that had significant drawbacks in the level of sanity it granted its drinker before Master Snape improved-" Rigel snapped her mouth shut as she came back to herself and glanced sheepishly up at Snape, ears a bit pink with embarrassment, "But you already know all of that, of course."

"Of course," Snape repeated with dry amusement, "Yes, Aconite Alleviation has many drawbacks, not the least of which is that over time the amount of aconite present within it slowly poisons the drinker's body. This makes the transformations on the full moon more difficult the longer the drinker lives, but it also builds up an unfortunate immunity to aconite's medicinal effects long-term. The result was that the more full moons a werewolf drinking Aconite Alleviation went through, the more painful and traumatic the transformations would become even under the influence of the potion. At the same time, the drinker grew weaker in body with every dose of aconite, and eventually they would become too weak to keep the beast at bay any longer. The majority of werewolves taking the Aconite Alleviation potion succumbed to their inner beast and either went wild or perished within the first ten years of having been bitten."

Rigel nodded, looking at the table. Remus always answered their questions about his conditions, if he could, and Rigel had asked him when she had first come across one of Snape's articles on Wolfsbane if Remus had ever taken Aconite Alleviation. Remus had grimaced, and said that Dumbledore had chosen to remove Remus from the grounds every full moon rather than subject him to that potion, whose ill-effects were well-known by the time Remus was in school.

"Still, it is not without its ingenuity," Snape said after a moment's pause, "This potion is the building block upon which Wolfsbane was able to be built. It is impossible to do further research on the Wolfsbane potion without beginning with the Aconite Alleviation, and because this potion is significantly less magically draining than Wolfsbane is, it is always more expedient to attempt revisions on it, rather than on the actual Wolfsbane potion. Wolfsbane is extremely similar to this potion in terms of brewing process and the majority of its ingredients, but it is considerably more volatile. A mistake with Aconite Alleviation will cost you in ingredients and magical output, but a mistake with Wolfsbane can cost you a limb."

Rigel nodded, but Snape fixed her with a look so serious that she stopped and just gazed up at him. He said, "You will never attempt to brew Wolfsbane on your own."

"I won't-"

"Rigel Black," Snape said, staring her down in a way that was frankly starting to unnerve her, "You will never. Ever. Attempt to brew Wolfsbane potion without a Potions Master specifically licensed in its production. Do you understand?"

"I understand," Rigel said solemnly.

"Say it," Snape said, unimpressed by her comprehension, "Swear to me."

"I will never try and brew Wolfsbane without a licensed Master," Rigel said, then hesitated before adding reluctantly, "I swear ."

"Good," Snape said, turning back to the cauldron, "Then we can begin. Fetch all of the ingredients listed, but do not open the container of aconite until I tell you to."

Rigel went to the cabinets to collect the ingredients, and her evenings brewing with Master Snape began in a whirl of chopping and shedding, dicing and splicing.

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The next day Rigel spent the evening after Quidditch practice in the Library. Unlike her dormitory, the peace of the Library was fiercely preserved by its caretaker Madam Pince, so it was a perfect place for Rigel to practice her Occlumency without being distracted. Also, there were plenty of witnesses in the Library, so she didn't feel reckless in temporarily ignoring the physical world while she pruned her mental landscape.

The mountain was as cold as ever in her mind, and she shivered a bit in her mental avatar's lightweight potion robes, despite knowing that the chill she felt was, literally, all in her head.

Nothing had really changed much since Rigel had repaired her mental landscape in the wake of the Sleeping Sickness. There was still the decoy potions lab hidden in the mountain, which she was seriously considering modifying now that Snape knew it was a decoy-one could never be too careful. But that was not her task for today. Instead, she would be focusing on her outer barriers that night-the first layer of defense, and by far her weakest. She sighed at the thought of the lovely warm caverns just inside the fake mountain entrance, but turned resolutely toward the edges of her mental landscape.

All it looked like was grayish fog to Rigel's inexperienced eyes, but she had read book after book on the subject of mental defense and offense and all of them agreed that those mists were one of the most important tools at a wizard's mental disposal.

The mists were what kept other wizards from even entering the mind-theoretically, if your mists were strong enough, you wouldn't need any of the secondary protections Rigel had been relying on-illusions and labyrinths and other things meant to throw an intruder off balance. The mists did much more than even defense, though.

They were also what allowed a wizard to project his mind into another's through Legilimency, which Rigel had yet to even begin to fully understand.

She knew that theoretically one could cast their mental energies outward just as they did their magical energy when connecting one magical core to another's. While connecting cores, like imbuing a potion, required the wizard to first extend his magical senses and then throw his magic out like a rope to whatever he wished to latch onto, however, connecting minds was different. To start with, mental energy was entirely different from magical energy, and Rigel still hadn't figured out how to manipulate hers. The clue was somewhere within the mists, but to Rigel they just felt like mist, not some sort of energy she could manipulate.

Another difficulty was the way in which minds connected. You couldn't just project your mental energies in a spike away from you, like you could with magic. Instead, the mental energies, once harnessed, had to be cast more like a net than a single rope. The idea was to encompass the foreign mind with your own mental energies, get a mental hold on it, and then attempt to infiltrate it.

All in all, Legilimency sounded rather disturbing, and Rigel was perfectly content to concentrate on the defense side of the mental arts for the time being.

Unfortunately, she really did have to get a handle on the whole mists thing. That was where her mental energies gathered, just like her sun was where her magical energy was collected and stored. She needed the mental energies to really *defend* her mind, since the most she could do with magic was to change the metaphysical structure and appearance of the place.

Mental energies were also very closely tied with auras. A person's aura, as Rigel now understood it, was created when their ambient magical energy mixed with their ambient mental energy around their body. The two energies mixed and sort of solidified one another into patterns depending on a hugely diverse number of factors-everything

from what element a person's core sprang from to which magical gifts, if any, they were born with, and even how intelligent a person was could be told from the patterns their aura made when their mental and magical energies highlighted one another.

The tricky thing about auras was that they were multi-layered, ever-changing things. What you saw when you looked at someone would never be the same thing you saw when you looked again. Certain underlying features of a person's aura never changed, and those indicators-indicators of age, sex, strength of core, elemental affinity, health, etc-were the ones most often noted when a person 'read' someone's aura. Other elements, however, changed as often as a person took breath.

On the surface level, for instance, the aura always reflected the exact current state of a person's magic. Overall the depth and complexity of this pattern didn't change much once a wizard reached majority, but there were nuances within the pattern that could tell you what spell they were using-even before they'd uttered the words, if you could recognize it quick enough. The aura could reveal if a person was under the influence of a potion that affected either the mind or the magic in any way, and what's more, it could tell you if that potion was harming them or helping them.

At least, that's what Rigel had read. She had no idea if any of it was true, because she was unable to perceive auras. Completely. At all.

Apparently, in order to perceive auras one had to be able to understand and sense both magical *and* mental energies. Otherwise one would only get a headache trying to see auras. That last bit she hadn't read anywhere, but her personal experience on the matter was depressingly well developed.

Rigel stared bleakly into the fog. She supposed she should call herself Harry in her own head, but really, what was the point? She was as much Rigel as she was Harry anyway.

She paused, then shook her head.

No, that wasn't true. Why did she think that? The mists were making her depressed, she thought morosely, staring at them a bit harder.

Nope, still just swirly grey clouds.

She tried going *into* the mists, but that just made her cold, wet, and *blind*, and the closer she got to the edges of her mind the more her body tried to wake her from her meditative state, so she quickly backtracked and took to contemplating them fruitlessly for a while longer. Maybe if she sent her magic into it.

Rigel conjured up a ball of fire and flung it into the mists experimentally. She could feel it pass through them, with the weird not-awareness that had lingered at the back of her mind since she had first meditated her way onto her mental plane. She felt it ripple warmly through the mists before her and then... nothing. The energy was gone, absorbed by something she couldn't sense or understand.

She was about to try again with a bigger ball of fire when she was abruptly distracted by a ghost-like feeling from the physical world.

She turned her senses toward her physical awareness and felt someone's hand shaking her shoulder.

Giving up the Occlumency altogether as a bad job that night, Rigel obligingly returned to the real world, and opened her eyes.

Ginny Weasley was bending over her, one hand on Rigel's shoulder and the other holding her red hair out of her face as she peered into Rigel's.

"Oh, you're awake. Great!" Ginny smiled at her, and Rigel blinked uncertainly back at her.

"Yes?" she asked, subtly rolling her shoulders to both dislodge Ginny's hand and to stretch out muscles stiff from sitting in one attitude for so long.

"You were meditating, right?" Ginny set her bag down on the table with a heavy clunk and claimed the seat across from Rigel smoothly.

"Yes," Rigel said, wondering why Ginny had shaken her if she'd known what Rigel was doing.

"But you returned right away when I touched you," Ginny said, gazing at Rigel thoughtfully, "You could sense what was happening to you in the physical world?"

"Yes," Rigel said, feeling a bit repetitive. For variety's sake, she added, "It becomes second nature to discern between magical, mental, and physical after a while. Your senses sort of get used to the feeling of juggling."

Ginny's face was curiously blank, so Rigel couldn't tell if her words meant anything at all to the other girl until she said, "Huh. So I just concentrate on my physical senses and I should be able to tell what's going on while I'm out?"

Rigel thought that was an interesting choice of words-it wasn't actually like going unconscious, more like going to a slightly separated plan of consciousness, after all, but merely said, "To an extent, yes. It might take a little practice, but you seem to be a natural at the mental arts, so I'm sure you won't have much trouble once you focus on it."

"Yeah," Ginny said vaguely, "Hey, will you do me a favor?"

Rigel tilted her head inquiringly.

"I want to try what you said-to try being aware of my body while I'm meditating. Will you watch it for me while I go under for a sec?" Ginny asked.

Rigel was surprised at the request, but couldn't see a reason to refuse, "Of course."

"Thanks," Ginny said, settling back into her chair and closing her eyes, "Just make sure nothing weird happens."

Rigel wasn't sure what Ginny meant by that, but perhaps she was only concerned for her virtue. She could understand how it would be worrying for a young female to leave her body unattended in a co-ed school. At least, it was probably worrying if people knew your body was that of a young female. Rigel had almost forgotten she was a girl at times, until the bleeding thing *that had yet to stop* came up.

Ginny's form relaxed as she slowly slipped into the reaches of deep, easy meditation. Rigel noticed that it took Ginny about three times as long as it did for Rigel to completely sink into the trance-like state, and even then she would twitch every now and again, as though her body was still trying half-heartedly to wake her up.

Rigel sat bored for a few minutes while Ginny did absolutely nothing of interest. After Rigel had taken in the dark shadows under Ginny's eyes and the faint lines of tension about her mouth a few times she decided it would be rude to stare any longer and instead cast her gaze about for something else to interest her.

Ginny's book bag caught her eye, slightly open from where she had dropped it with little concern on the table, and Rigel leaned forward a bit to peek at the book titles packed within the small, worn bag. Maybe there was something she'd read before, or better yet, something she *hadn't* read before.

The first two titles she could make out were the usual first-year textbooks. The third book was a small, leather-bound journal she recognized as one of the twins'-her esteem for Ginny rose ever so slightly at the evidence that she was at least not so afraid of Fred and George as her brother Ron was-but the fourth book... Rigel squinted at it. It looked like a book on magical maladies of the mind. She was sure she'd seen the same one in Archie's collection, but she hadn't known that Ginny was interested in Healing as well.

A small sound drew her attention from the spines of Ginny's books and Rigel turned to look at Ginny, assuming she was waking up.

Ginny's right arm was twitching back and forth in her lap, her wrist raising just enough to smack against the table every now and again with a distinctive slap of skin on wood. Rigel reached across to quell the movement, but as soon as Rigel's hand touched Ginny's arm Ginny jerked her body backwards in a stiff, clumsy movement to lean out of Rigel's reach.

Ginny's eyes snapped open, wide and dark, glaring at her with such venom that Rigel faltered, "Sorry, I just... I didn't want you to hurt yourself."

Ginny didn't answer. Her left hand jerked sideways and back toward her robe pocket, but the next moment she was gasping for air and her eyes had squeezed tight once more.

"Ginny, are you all right?" Rigel asked, concerned. She didn't think she'd ever done something like that while meditating. Surely someone would have mentioned it.

"Fine," Ginny said, breathing deeply in a way that people only did when they were not fine, but trying admirably to appear so, "Just having trouble controlling my physical movements from the mental realm. Trickier than I thought."

Rigel slowly relaxed back into her seat, "It is easier to start with just trying to perceive the physical world, rather than jumping straight to affecting it."

Ginny shrugged, "Couldn't feel it that well, but I'm pretty sure I moved my arm, right?"

"Yes," Rigel offered hesitantly, "You moved your right arm quite a bit, and your left one just slightly at the end there."

"My left..." Ginny frowned a bit, "I see. Thank you."

Rigel nodded, and was considering making an excuse to leave when Ginny spoke again, "Hey, can I ask you something?"

"Of course," Rigel said, wondering what could make the youngest Weasley sound so unsure of herself.

"How do you keep your mind safe when you aren't meditating?" Ginny asked, a slight frown on her face, "I mean, if you aren't there to watch over it, how do you keep your defenses up?"

Rigel had been grappling with that very question herself, "To be honest, I don't have a good enough handle on my mental energies to do what you're describing. You might ask Professor Snape-" Ginny recoiled with a grimace, "-or not, but I think he can do what you mean, keeping your Occlumency shields fully raised at all times. I've developed mine so that I have a very sensitive awareness at all times, but I can't actually defend them at the level of shields just yet, because I can't manipulate my mental energies."

Ginny looked at him, seeming slightly horrified, "Then how do you keep your mind safe? How can you walk around all vulnerable to mental attacks and not..." Ginny took a deep, shuddering breath, "My brothers all wrote to me about the Sleeping Sickness, you know, how they didn't even notice it creeping into their heads, and it just... why aren't you more scared?"

Rigel's face softened, "I am scared, I suppose. I wouldn't mind the extra security of having constant shields like Professor Snape probably does, but there's nothing I can do about it right away. All I can do is study harder and try to understand more, so that I can progress. In the meantime, I'm not exactly defenseless, though."

"What do you mean?" Ginny asked, looking at Rigel with hopeful eyes.

"Well, the secondary defenses," Rigel said, "Like how you have that illusion in your mind. I have illusions too, and mazes, and other defenses that are made of my magical energy, not my mental

energy. Those will keep your secrets safe while you get stronger, Ginny. Your mind is very well defended, especially for a beginner. Just keep doing what you're doing."

Ginny frowned, "I don't... that was sort of a fluke, you know. I don't really know how I did it. I'm not sure I could do it again."

Rigel was confused, but she could see that that was going to be the norm around Ginny Weasley, "I could lend you a book or two on magical-mental constructs. Or if you want, I can just come in and show you how to build things in your mind. It might be faster than trying to learn through the book."

Ginny flinched and said, "No! That would be... not good. You shouldn't even suggest such a thing. My... mind doesn't like even the *idea* of you doing that again."

Once again Rigel noted the peculiar phrasing, but then she thought of how she frequently thought of her magic in terms of sentience, so Ginny using personification to describe her mind wasn't that unusual, really.

"Sorry," Rigel said, "I'll just lend you the book, then."

Ginny nodded, then said, seemingly out of the blue, "If you could have total mental defense, right now, no questions asked, would you take it?"

Rigel was beginning to get over the randomness of Ginny's conversational patterns, so she took the question in stride, "Do you mean automatic full shields or something? Sounds a bit too good to be true."

"Not exactly," Ginny said slowly, peering at Rigel with an intensity Rigel didn't entirely understand, "What if you had like... a guardian for your mind? Someone to watch over it while you weren't meditating. Asleep, awake, distracted, the guardian would make sure

your mind was safe no matter what. Would you like something like that in your head, if it meant that your mind would be secure?"

"That depends," Rigel said, thinking about it, "If it was a spell or potion designed to do that... maybe. If I had to trust someone else to be in my head in order to protect it, though... well, it would sort of defeat the purpose, you see? But maybe if I was in greater danger of mental attacks, if the probability was higher that my mind would be breached... I guess I wouldn't dismiss it out of hand. Interesting idea, at least."

Ginny nodded to herself, "Yes... though we're all in danger after the Sleeping Sickness, aren't we? I mean, if something like that can happen once, what's to stop it from happening again?"

"The sickness was bad," Rigel said gently, "But it wasn't undefeatable. I think the reason I'm not scared enough to trust someone else with my mind's safety is because, for now at least, my sensitivity to Legilimency attacks is enough to keep me calm. As long as I can sense it happening, I feel like I can fight it, at least."

Ginny's eyes flashed, "But what if you couldn't sense it? Or what if you were up against something too strong to fight, even if you knew how?"

Rigel shrugged helplessly, "I guess I just have to hope that I don't meet anything like that before I'm ready to face it."

Ginny's face was blank once more as she said, "That's an awful lot of uncertainty to be wandering through life with." She stood, shouldered her bag, and gave Rigel a curt nod before striding off out of the Library doors.

Rigel leaned back in her chair and let her eyes become unfocused as her brain whirled into motion. Ginny Weasley was confusing, but she had given Rigel a lot to think about.

Over the weekend sign-ups for a 'dueling club' were posted in every common room, and it was with great amusement that most students completely ignored the sheets. Then Lockhart announced that the first meeting was mandatory for all Defense students fourth year and under. A collective groan went up, but the second-year Slytherins signed their names to the sheets anyway, since no one wanted to be the one explaining to their parents why they failed Defense Against the Dark Arts, even if the only spells Lockhart had taught them seemed to be completely made-up. 'Pesky Pixy Petronomi?' Please.

On the evening of the first dueling club meeting, they all filed into the Great Hall, resigned to wasting an hour of their lives. At least, Rigel thought to herself, it would be mildly entertaining to watch Lockhart try and explain how they were to duel a monster that petrified people without telling them what kind of monster petrified people in the first place.

There was a raised platform in the center of the Hall, the tables all having been pushed to the sides for the evening. Lockhart paced the platform's considerable length, going on about the great and noble tradition of dueling. There were a couple of other professors who had clearly been roped somehow into chaperoning the event standing unhappily at the fringes, including Flitwick and Snape, who stood at either side of the doors.

"And if you possess great enough drive and ability, one day you can enter tournaments of dueling, and perhaps one of you will even make it to the national championship if you're lucky," Lockhart said, raising his eyebrows and nodding at them all importantly, "Why, I've been asked to give an exhibition duel at the national competitions for the last five years running, but of course I'm much too busy to spend my time on something so frivolous. So count yourselves very lucky, children, for today you will see something long denied to the public's viewing pleasure. Dueling is a spectacle like no other. It is a noble,

oft-forgotten art in which only the most daring and brave come out on top."

"Boldness and bravery?" Blaise raised an eyebrow, "And what about cunning? Cleverness? Talent? Hard work, even?"

"Didn't you know, Blaise?" Draco drawled, "Only Gryffindors can be good duelers."

"Who said that?"

For once, Draco had not been quiet enough in his disparaging comments about Lockhart to avoid direct detection.

"Draco, was that you?" Lockhart smiled indulgently down at Draco, not noticing the way his eye twitched from being addressed by his first name, "Now, that wasn't what I meant at all! Oh, my, but I can see you're not convinced." In reality, the skeptical look on Draco's face had more to do with the fact that he couldn't believe Lockhart had completely missed the sarcasm in his earlier statement, but once again Lockhart proved his talent for misinterpretation. "Really, Draco, we can't let you continue thinking that only Gryffindors have what it takes to be dueling champions."

Draco's face tightened as students turned to look at him. Most of them had heard his remark, but those who hadn't took Lockhart's words as truth, and a few of the Ravenclaws on the other side of the room glared at Draco. Draco glared back. "That isn't what I said," he said flatly.

"Yes, but I am exceptionally skilled at reading underneath the underneath, young Draco," Lockhart said with a chuckle, "I'm afraid your insecurity is as clear to me as your hair color."

"Inse-" Draco clamped his mouth shut and scowled fiercely.

"Fear not, Draco, fear not," Lockhart said, "For today I will prove that you Slytherins can do just as good as the Gryffindors with the proper

tutelage."

"Oh, Merlin, what have you done, Draco?" Millicent sighed quietly from behind them.

"In fact, if you'll step up to the stage, Draco, we can begin immediately!" Lockhart said, waving his hand with a flourish to the stage stairs.

"What?" Draco's face slackened from his scowl with surprise, "No."

"Come now, don't be afraid," Lockhart laughed, glancing around the room as though inviting others to laugh with him. Thankfully, no one seemed inclined to laugh openly at the Malfoy Heir.

"I'll give you 'afraid,' you overgrown peacock," Draco muttered darkly as he strode to the stairs with all the dignity he could manage, however forced. Rigel sent him a sympathetic look, and thanked Merlin it hadn't been her.

Draco lifted his chin proudly as he ascended the stairs, and Lockhart smiled approvingly, "Yes, that's it, Draco, that's it. Well done. How about a round of applause for our brave little volunteer?"

There was a bit of scattered, very uncertain applause, and then Lockhart began to give them all, by virtue of giving Draco, a series of opening tips and pointers on dueling basics.

This would have been very helpful, Rigel thought, if any of the suggestions had actually made sense.

"-always remember to ignore your surroundings," Lockhart was saying, "Don't get too caught up in the cheering and applause-focus entirely on your opponent, and don't worry about anything else around you."

"Ignore your surroundings?" Pansy scoffed quietly, "Even I know better than to forget there might be multiple enemies around. Not to

mention the lack of attention that gives to *terrain* ."

"-and my final advice is to try not to move around too much," Lockhart said wisely, "It tires you out, and in any case you might fall off the platform!" He chuckled winsomely again, "That would definitely not be good. So, I think that's enough pointers. Shall we begin?"

"I'm dueling you?" Draco glanced a bit insolently over Lockhart's magenta robes, and several people smothered snorts of laughter.

Lockhart smiled genially, "Yes, I know, but don't think about how intimidating I am. Just focus on the duel."

Draco smiled back tightly, "I'll try, Professor."

"Right, then," Lockhart spread his feet apart and squatted down into a rather awkward-looking plié. He spread his arms wide and bent his neck in a kind of curtsy, holding that position until Draco bowed slowly back at him. "Wands at the ready, Draco. On the count of three, we begin. One. Two. Three! Stupefy!"

A jet of red light sped toward Draco, but Draco had taken a large step to the side the moment Lockhart said 'three,' so the spell missed. Unfortunately, Lockhart had neglected to put any barriers up around the platform, and the stunning spell shot inches over the heads of several students, who hastily ducked out of the way, before impacting the wall with a dull fizzle.

Draco aimed at stunning spell back at Lockhart, who waved his wand in a complicated-looking pattern that was two seconds too slow to fully erect a shield charm before the stunning spell hit him. Lockhart wasn't cast unconscious, because it looked like only half the spell got through the shield, but he was knocked on his rear abruptly and he dropped his wand on impact clumsily. Draco lowered his own wand slowly when it became clear Lockhart wasn't going to pull some wandless magic out of his sleeves.

"Whoopsie," Lockhart chuckled, getting to his feet and accepting his wand back from some helpful girl in the crowd, "Very good, Draco, you see what a few pointers can do? Even a Slytherin can be good at this, didn't I tell you? It's all about the teaching method. Now, I think we ought to change things up a bit. You and me dueling-well, it's not really very fair, now is it? I mean, with me holding back I can hardly pose a real threat, but if I were to duel seriously with you-well, that would just be cruel of me, you see? What you need is an opponent your own size," Lockhart decided, smoothing his hair back into its rather ridiculous shape, "Yes, why don't we get another Slytherin up here, so you can see that it isn't a fluke that young Draco here caught on so quickly."

"Perhaps a girl..." Lockhart said, peering out at the crowd of students, "Where's Pansy? I remember she was rather concerned about this whole petrification business... Pansy?"

"Merlin, no," Pansy moaned, shifting behind Rigel's form immediately.

Draco's eyes went to Pansy, saw her hiding conspicuously behind Rigel, and spoke up immediately, "Professor, I wouldn't feel right fighting a lady. No offense," he added hastily, seeing several girls' eyes flash dangerously at him from the crowd.

Lockhart paused, then smiled knowingly, "Ah, so that's how it is? Never fear, Draco, I wouldn't want to come between blossoming young love."

Draco spluttered, and Pansy squeaked from behind Rigel's shoulders, but Lockhart went on blithely, "Who would you prefer to duel against, then, Draco? Since you've done so well, I'll let you pick."

Draco hesitated for only a moment, then said, "Rigel Black."

Rigel narrowed her eyes up at Draco, who only smirked down at her before offering her a hand up to the platform. Rigel took it, saying

quietly as she let Draco help her up onto the stage, "Only for Pansy's sake."

Draco grinned back at her, "Don't you want to prove Slytherins can be duelers too?"

"Not particularly," Rigel said, searching her pockets for her wand. She was sure she'd put it in there... oh, there it was. She pulled it from the back pocket of her trousers and took her place opposite from Draco.

Lockhart stood in the middle, gazing between them with excitement, "Now don't be too hard on each other, boys. Don't get carried away."

Rigel didn't think that would be a problem, since she was planning on letting Draco stupefy her immediately, so she could ditch the rest of the club meeting by pretending to have hit her head too hard upon falling unconscious, and escape to the 'Hospital Wing' to get some studying done.

All in all it was a great plan, until Draco called from across the stage, "If you let me win, I'll tell Flint to give you extra practice for a month."

Rigel frowned slightly. Normally she wouldn't care about extra practice, since she quite enjoyed flying, but that month Snape was letting her assist him personally-on the nights she didn't have Quidditch practice. Inwardly cursing herself for letting Draco get to know her so well, she raised her wand in front of her determinedly. She would fire two spells, she decided, then lose. That way he couldn't prove she hadn't tried.

Lockhart stepped to the very edge of the platform, and raised his arms dramatically. "One. Twooooo." Rigel called on her magic, letting her core 'heat up' and ready itself for her use. "Three!"

She drew a line of raw magic from her core and shaped it into a tickling charm instantaneously, firing it half-heartedly at Draco's form. He had already moved from its path by the time it reached him, and

he grinned at her before shooting a stunning spell her way. Rather than dive to the side, Rigel asked her magic to form a shield charm, one of the very first Quirrell had taught them the previous year, and let it absorb Draco's spell harmlessly. No sense in making the people behind her duck, after all.

She leisurely shot another spell at her friend, a trip-jinx this time, but Draco just raised an eyebrow as it flew over his shoulder, missing by several inches.

"You're supposed to shoot that one at my feet, Rigel," Draco said with amusement.

"Why, what does that one do?" She asked with a blank look on her face. She heard Millicent and Theo snicker from the sidelines and Draco just shook his head.

"You aren't even trying, are you?"

"You aren't either," Rigel pointed out. Draco had been waiting indulgently for her to cast a spell before returning, as though they were hitting a bludger back and forth, instead of trying to hit her as fast as he could.

"Now, boys, you must take this seriously!" Lockhart shouted at them in exasperation, "If you aren't going to try, what's the point?"

Draco shrugged and shot another stunning spell at Rigel, who was forced to shield again.

She watched as the red light fizzled and went out mere inches from her heart. "Good aim," she said.

Draco thanked her graciously.

"Well, now, this won't do!" Lockhart said, clearly put out that they were not going to try battling to the death, "If you won't fight each other, perhaps you'll fight this! Sneaky Snaky Serpensortia!"

Rigel was pretty sure the first two words had been completely unnecessary, but the third word had apparently been a real spell, as a long, black serpent shot from Lockhart's wand and coiled defensively in the center of the platform, hissing angrily.

" *What issss thissss?* " the snake lashed its tail agitatedly as it flicked its tongue out and took in all the confusing smells in the Hall, " *Who callsss ?*"

Lockhart let out a little chuckle, "Isn't this clever? Slytherins dueling a snake! How appropriate!"

Rigel thought the truth of the matter somewhere closer to animal cruelty, and the look on Draco's face said clearly that he did not find it appropriate at all, but the blonde kept his wand pointed toward the snake warily.

The snake turned its head and caught sight of Draco's outstretched wand, " *Threat,*" it hissed, " *Thissss isss the threat?* " It began to sway slightly, rearing its head up toward Draco aggressively. It hissed in warning, and Draco's face tightened, his eyes darting from the snake, to Rigel, and back again.

"Draco," Rigel said, carefully not looking at the snake as she said it, "Lower your wand."

"Lower my-Rigel, it's *poisonous*," Draco snapped.

"And it thinks you're the enemy, Draco," Rigel said, keeping her voice calm and even-and more importantly, human. "Lower your wand slowly, and it will ignore you."

"And then what, it goes after you?" Draco shook his head, "I'll keep its attention, you do something about it."

"I don't know any snake-vanishing spells," Rigel said, a hint of exasperation creeping into her tone, "Draco, please lower your wand, before it strikes."

Draco looked torn, but Snape's voice rang out as the Potion Master cut through the crowd of students, "This has gone far enough. Malfoy, Black, do not move. I will take care of-"

Before he could finish speaking, much less reach the platform, the snake decided it had had enough. It lunged forward, quicker than anyone anticipated, almost as fast as a stunning spell itself, and bared its fangs at Draco's ankle. Draco started the wand motion for a spell-a shield or a stunner, Rigel never found out-but he was going to be too slow, and Rigel's mind was moving too slow to do anything except blurt-

" *Stop!* "

The snake froze, as did everyone else in the hall. Rigel could feel the eyes of many-too many-students on her as she quietly hissed, "*Come here, pleassse. There iss no threat.* "

The snake, visibly mollified, slid across the platform and curled up docilely at her feet. Draco was grimacing as the whispers started, and Snape had a very sour look on his face as he finally ascended the platform, vanished the snake, and took control of the situation.

"I think there has been quite enough spectacle here for one evening," he said, sneering at Lockhart in unmistakable contempt, "Return to your dormitories, and for your own sakes stop gaping like a bunch of freshly caught flobberworms."

The students slowly dispersed, though they did not, Rigel noticed, stop gaping at her like they'd never heard of inheritable magical abilities before.

Snape turned to Rigel and said, lowly, "That was an unfortunate decision you just made, Mr. Black, but as it would do little good to berate you for it now, I suggest your return to the common room and spend the rest of the evening-nay, the month-making yourself look as ordinary and *harmless* as possible."

Rigel nodded her head without meeting the professor's eyes. She wouldn't take back her slip-not if it meant Draco would be bitten by a snake of unknown toxicity-but she knew that there would be consequences for it. Not the least of which would be Sirius finding out that his son apparently spoke to snakes. Rigel had no idea how they were going to overcome that problem, but at least she had several months to figure it out before she went home. More pressing were the immediate consequences of the news getting out, like the strange and frankly alarmed looks she was receiving from most of the students around them.

"Let's go," Draco said, sparing a moment to shoot Lockhart a scowl before pulling a non-resisting Rigel off of the platform.

"Come, Rigel," Pansy said, her voice so serene she must have been forcing it, "Let's get you boys back to the common room. It's been far too exciting a night, and I was thinking of joining you tomorrow for your little run, if I'm not too tired after all this."

"We'd be glad to have you," Rigel said calmly, her face as blank as a puppet's as she allowed Draco and Pansy to guide her toward the doors. Theo, Blaise, and Millicent fell into step around them. Their faces were obviously brimming with questions-Blaise in particular could not seem to stop staring at Rigel-but they held their silence as they helped them navigate through the crowd and into the dungeons.

As they got away from the other Houses, Rigel noticed that alarmed and wary looks were not the only kind of looks she was receiving. Her fellow Slytherin underclassmen traveling with them back to the common room had an entirely different range of expressions to offer her. Confused, speculative, intrigued, and even excited. She received several admiring glances from people she'd never spoken to before, and Adrian Pucey smiled widely at her as he sidled up to their group in passing.

"So that's how you were so good with Evan," Pucey said cheerfully, "Brilliant, Rigel. Do you do translating?"

"Not for free he doesn't," Draco said at once.

Rigel looked at Pucey bemusedly, "Sure, why not?"

"Great," Pucey said, grinning, "Congratulations, by the way."

Immediately most of their Housemates within earshot murmured similar words of congratulations, and Rigel remembered that this was the traditional response to someone unlocking an innate magical talent in the old families. Actually, ancient tradition dictated something about a feast, and for the very rare magical abilities gifts were usually given, but in current times the tradition had been watered down to a general congratulations.

"Thanks," Rigel said automatically, feeling that the whole thing was rather silly.

She could talk to snakes. So what? As far as magical abilities went, it wasn't terribly useful. It had come up, what, five or six times in the last year? She thought a Metamorphmagus or a Natural Occlumens had much more interesting and versatile gifts. Snakes weren't especially interesting, once you got to know them. Mostly they just wanted food and warmth and quiet. Not exactly slipping her the secrets of the universe, were they?

They made it back to the common room with little fuss, but already she could see younger students sidling up to upperclassmen they knew to quietly tell them everything that had happened at Lockhart's dueling club. They were discrete, of course, but word still spread unbelievably quickly as Rigel made her way toward her dorm room.

"Don't," Blaise said quietly, a hand on her elbow to gently re-direct her momentum toward an unused group of chairs, "If you disappear now, it will only foster speculation. Come and sit with us, talk about inane things until people are too bored to eavesdrop, and then play a game of cards or two. It will be better this way."

Rigel wanted nothing more than to curl up in her bed and try to pretend her life wasn't spinning much too quickly around her, but she conceded to Blaise's superior understanding of social situations-Pansy's concurring look didn't hurt in persuading her either-and participated on autopilot in a discussion about their History quiz coming up. Pansy thought it would be on the Wizarding Charter drafted after the royal house fell, while Theo thought it would be on goblin rebellions-like it always was. Rigel thought she couldn't take much more of sitting and pretending she didn't notice everyone staring at her when Rosier and Rookwood joined their group without warning and ended the debate with their mere presence.

"So, you've finally come out and told everyone!" Rosier said, his voice a bit louder than it usually was, "That's good news, Rigel. Now we don't have to be so hush-hush about it, do we?"

Pucey stood from the next fireplace over, completely abandoning subtlety at that point, and called, "You knew about this already, Rosier? How?"

"Oh, Rigel told us ages ago," Rosier said airily, smiling coyly across the room, "He told all of his friends. It wasn't really a secret, after all. I'm surprised you didn't know, Adrian."

Pucey scowled a bit, but shrugged good-naturedly, "I suspected, of course. He was always a bit too good with snakes, you know? It's nice to have it confirmed, though, that's all."

Rigel was pretty sure Pucey had not suspected any such thing, but she was glad he and Rosier were trying to make it seem relatively unimportant. As though it were an incidental fact coming to light, not a secret she had been shamefully trying to hide.

"Yes, it's pretty obvious in retrospect, isn't it?" Rosier said, "I mean, the Black's had a Parselmouth marry into the family a few generations ago, didn't they? It makes sense."

Rigel's eyebrows rose at that. She knew that there had been a Black married to a Parseltongue-she had Archie had read his ancestor's diary in the Black Library while they were first doing research on the subject, but she didn't know how Rosier had found that out.

Pucey nodded agreeably and sat back down without questioning the situation further. Rigel felt the weight of gazes on her lesson significantly after Rosier and Pucey's exchange, and made a mental note to thank both of them quietly later.

"Well, I'm for bed," Rosier said, yawning for good measure, "The common room's awfully crowded tonight, isn't it? Good evening, second-years. Congratulations, Rigel." He added with a smirk.

Rigel inclined her head, "Thank you, Aldon," she said, hoping he understood what she was thanking him for, "Good evening to you as well."

After he left, conversation was a bit less forced, though Rigel couldn't help but feel guilty at Theo and Millicent's slightly hurt expressions. She hadn't meant to slight them by not telling them, but now it seemed as though she didn't trust them enough to confide in them. Which was true, Rigel admitted sadly, but not a nice thing to think about your friends. Blaise's face was inscrutable, but Rigel could only assume he was offended to be out of the loop as well. She made a mental note to try and make it up to them at some point, though she wasn't sure how to go about doing so.

After an hour of pretending to be normal-which really only made Rigel feel less normal-the second-years deemed it safe to go to bed. The number of eyes that followed their group to the second-year hallway felt significantly fewer than it had upon entering the common room, so it was with hope that Rigel relaxed into bed that night. Hope that tomorrow morning everyone would be pretty much over the surprise of having a Parselmouth in the school, and that life would continue with minimal interruption over the incident.

Hope, as she discovered the next morning at the breakfast table under the psychological weight of a hundred stares, was not a reliable emotion in the slightest. The universe, apparently, did not care if you had Hope for something, and so Rigel turned back to her familiar emotional acquaintance Feigned Indifference to make it through the day. Her only consolation was that she wouldn't get a letter from Archie ranting at her carelessness for at least a week or two, provided it took Sirius a few days to find out.

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By the time they headed to Transfiguration, Rigel was exhausted. There was something extremely draining about being at the center of attention-it made her want to fidget or flinch or something, and the energy she spent suppressing the urge to squirm under the students' collective gazes seemed to take a disproportionate toll on her energy levels. Then there were the whispers. The-

"Black?"

"You know, the second-year who woke all those kids up from comas last year."

"He's a Parselmouth? I thought he was the good Slytherin."

"Just goes to show you there *are* no good-"

Rigel blocked out yet another mildly insulting conversation and hurried through the door of the Transfiguration classroom to escape the crowded corridor quickly.

"What a ridiculous load of tripe," Pansy said huffily, claiming her seat at their usual table with less no less aplomb than usual, despite her annoyance, "Don't people have anything better to talk about?"

"Frankly? No." Millicent leaned on their table as she spoke, "It might not seem like a big deal to your three, since you've apparently known all along, but an unknown Parselmouth appearing under everyone's nose is kind of a big deal."

Rigel saw Pansy wince slightly at Millicent's words, and felt compelled to say, "I asked them not to tell anyone, Millicent. You guys should be angry at me, not them."

"We aren't angry," Millicent sighed, "Just feeling a bit out of the loop."

"Rigel can override the password on the common room entrance," Draco blurted out.

Rigel turned to raise an eyebrow at him, and he shrugged, "What? You can. And now they're in the loop on that, too."

Millicent couldn't help but laugh, "Yeah, I do feel much better now. Tell me, Draco, what other secrets has Rigel told you?"

Draco grinned unrepentantly at Rigel's mildly alarmed look, "Oh lots. Did you know he knows where the kitchens are?"

Millicent grinned back, "You don't say?"

"Oh, yeah," Draco said, "Rigel spends his lunch period there sometimes."

Millicent blinked, "Oh. I had wondered why he didn't eat some days."

"And did you know Rigel hates Healers, but is studying to be one when he grows up?" Draco said breezily.

Pansy was looked concernedly between Rigel and Draco, but Rigel smiled slightly and Pansy relaxed. It was clear that Draco was only telling Millicent inconsequential things to make her feel better, and Rigel trusted Draco enough to let him decide which things to tell Millicent. Really, Draco didn't know anything too dangerous about her anyway.

"I thought he wanted to be a Potions Master," Millicent said, intrigued.

"That too," Draco shrugged, "Honestly, I'm not sure he's made up his mind yet."

Right here, Rigel thought to herself. Pansy seemed to be thinking the same thing, but she only laughed as she glanced at Rigel.

"Tell me something next!" Theo said from his seat at the table in front of theirs.

Draco put a finger to his chin and thought about it, "Well, did you know that Rigel has an inexplicable knowledge of all the secret passages in the school?"

"Not all of them," Rigel said.

"He hangs with the Weasley Twins," Theo said, "That's easy enough to explain."

"Rigel had that knowledge his first day here," Draco said, smirking.

"That *is* interesting," Blaise said, joining them, "Did you know people are talking about you in the corridors, Rigel?"

Rigel scowled lightly at Blaise, who was blinking at her innocently, "You don't say."

"And now we're talking about you as well, it seems," Blaise said, dropping his bag on Theo and Millicent's table with an elegant shrug, "How special you must feel."

Rigel placed her head in her hands, "I wish they would all just stop."

"Then you shouldn't have spoken the serpent language in front of them," Blaise said.

"It was going to *bite Draco*," Rigel said, "If it was you, would you have wanted me to let it strike when I could stop it?"

Blaise tilted his head, "The venom most likely wouldn't have killed him, considering we have a Potions Master on hand."

Rigel raised a skeptical brow, "So in the future I should only use my abilities to help people who would *definitely* die without my help."

"You should if you're going to complain when people talk about it afterwards," Blaise said with equanimity.

Rigel was going to say something to the effect of her saving her friends from snake bites not being anybody else's business when McGonagall strode into the classroom and everyone quickly claimed their seats.

The Professor wrote the day's topic on the board and then walked around the room to collect their essays.

Rigel pulled hers out and set it on the table, but she was confused. She could have sworn their essay wasn't due until next week.

"Rigel, what's that?" Draco said, frowning at her essay.

Rigel looked down at it, but couldn't see what had made him frown, "It's my essay."

"It's on Non-Stationary Transfiguration," Draco said, reading the title.

"Yes," Rigel said. Both of them frowned at one another.

"Rigel, that one isn't due until next Thursday," Pansy said quietly, "You need the one for today."

"Today?" Rigel opened her bag to root carefully inside.

"It's on reversing accidental inanimate Transfigurations," Pansy said, glancing at McGonagall, who was almost to their table, "Professor

McGonagall assigned it on the first day back from break."

Rigel could vaguely remember an essay on that, now that Pansy mentioned it, but she didn't remember completing it, and she couldn't find it in her bag. She subtly checked through what little of Flint's assignments she had tucked in her bag as well, but it wasn't there.

"Your essay, Mr. Black," McGonagall said impatiently, hand held out.

Rigel swallowed, feeling her ears grow hot, "I... don't have it."

McGonagall looked down at her with concern, "You've lost it?"

Rigel shook her head, "I think I forgot about it."

McGonagall's mouth pursed, "Were you ill, Mr. Black?"

Rigel shook her head again, this time apologetically, "No, Professor. I'm sorry, but I just didn't complete the assignment."

Professor McGonagall frowned, "Five points from Slytherin, Mr. Black. You can turn the assignment in next class for half credit. See that it doesn't happen again."

"Yes, Professor."

McGonagall walked away and Draco and Pansy both turned to stare at her. Rigel grimaced, but was feeling just as incredulous as they. She *never* forgot an assignment.

Draco echoed her thought exactly, "You never forget your homework, Rigel. What happened?"

Rigel could only shake her head, "I don't know."

"Don't you have somewhere you write all your assignments down in?" Pansy asked, "Did you forget to check it?"

"No," Rigel said. It would be monumentally stupid of her to leave a list of everything she had to get done in a week, with little check boxes for when she completed it. Anyone who caught a glimpse of it would know too much about her daily schedule, even if she only wrote down the legitimate things she had to do. "I usually just... remember."

"I'll get you a planner for your birthday," Pansy said, before turning back to the front of the classroom to take notes on McGonagall's lecture.

Draco looked at her with poorly veiled concern a moment longer, but eventually turned away to do the same.

Rigel took notes automatically, but inside she was panicking. If she could forget one of her own homework assignments, what's to say she wouldn't forget one of Flint's assignments next? If she missed even one essay, Flint would be able to slip the vow of silence he'd taken and tell anyone he liked that she wasn't Arcturus Black. And if she had already forgotten something, what was to say she hadn't forgotten something else already as well? Maybe she should have gotten *herself* a rememberall for Christmas, too.

Calm down, she told herself sternly, taking a stabilizing breath or two, *I just have to be more careful. I can do this. It's just one mistake, not the end of the world* .

Feeling a bit better, Rigel concentrated on the lesson, determined to pay more attention to *everything* from then on.

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As she walked into Lab One that afternoon, Snape's words stopped her in her tracks.

"Detention, Mr. Black," he said without looking up from his notes.

Rigel froze, flicked her eyes to the clock, frowned in confusion upon realizing she was early, not late, then looked back to Snape with a wary expression.

"Detention, sir?" she repeated.

"Yes, Mr. Black, *detention*," Snape said, glancing up to glower at her irritably, "The Head of Gryffindor House has just informed me that I have been placing an inordinate amount of responsibility on a twelve-year-old head. She then proceeded to inform me that my assistant, Mr. Black, was neglecting his studies in order to accommodate the additional, unreasonable work load pressed upon him by his Potions Professor."

Rigel cringed internally at the acerbic tone, but outwardly attempted to remain calm.

"Is assisting me this month an unreasonable amount of work, Mr. Black?" Snape asked with deceptive silkiness.

"No, sir."

"And do you feel detrimentally encumbered with responsibility disproportionate to your age?" Snape asked.

"No, sir," Rigel said unhappily.

"And are you neglecting your studies, Mr. Black?" Snape asked quietly, his gaze piercing her with its perception.

Rigel's eyes tightened with denial, but she said, "A Transfiguration essay slipped my mind this week. It was a simple oversight, but Professor McGonagall appears to have taken it to be indicative of an underlying problem with my time-management skills."

"Then detention it remains, Mr. Black," Snape said turning back to his notes, "I warned you not to let your studies slip-"

"They haven't," Rigel protested, "It was one essay. It's not that I didn't have time, or was too tired or something. I just forget."

"You just forgot?" Snape sneered at her, "And what happens when you just forget to take the cauldron off the fire before adding porcupine quills? What happens when you just forget that powdered erumpent horn can never be mixed with dragon bile?" They both knew exactly what happened when those things occurred, so Rigel said nothing. "See to it that you don't *just forget* again."

Rigel wanted to argue, to say that that was different, she would never forget a potions recipe, much less the most important and dangerous step in a potion recipe, but she pressed her lips together and bowed her head in acceptance instead.

"Get out," Snape said quietly.

"What?" Rigel looked up, shocked. Surely he wasn't dismissing her just for that. "Please, it won't happen again. I promise."

"Get out," Snape said again, "Go write your Transfiguration essay and come back tomorrow ready to handle your responsibilities more carefully in the future."

"Yes, sir," Rigel said, both relieved that he wasn't getting rid of her altogether and disappointed that she would miss a day of assisting the Potions Master. She knew better than to argue at that point, though, so she bowed stiffly to Professor Snape and retreated from the Lab quickly and quietly.

In the hallway she slid to the floor and cradled her knees to her chest. How could things go so wrong so quickly? First the Parseltongue thing, then the essay, and now Snape was disappointed in her, too. She had to do better. Rigel clenched her fists and allowed her eyes to flash with hard determination. She wouldn't slip up again. She would show them all that Rigel Black didn't bend under pressure. She would prove that she could do anything the pureblooded kids could do-better.

She stood slowly. She thought about going back to the common room to do the essay like Snape had suggested, but she could finish it tomorrow before Quidditch practice. Instead, she walked slowly up toward the kitchens, thinking she could surprise Binny with a visit if the house elf wasn't terribly busy with dinner preparations.

Something about Binny always cheered her up.

She had just reached the basement corridor that intersected with the kitchen corridor when something in the hall ahead of her made her slow down, narrowing her eyes in the torchlight to discern what she was seeing.

In the middle of the hallway, lying stiff as a board on the cold, stone floor, was a boy in Hufflepuff robes. Rigel hurried forward, dread growing in her stomach. The boy had sandy hair and lots of freckles. There was a prefect badge on his robe and his wand was frozen in his hand, half-raised but utterly useless in its petrified state.

On the wall behind him were large, red letters, so wet that they glistened as she read them.

You Can't Silence Me Forever

Four more months

Four more victims

And when the fifth one won't wake up

You Know Who To Blame

Rigel took out her wand after memorizing the message and asked her magic for a water charm, so that she could wash away the words before anyone else saw them. Instead of water, her magic decided to conjure fire from her wand instead, and Rigel yelped, before sighing. The flame at the end of her wand wasn't very big, but it did seem hot enough to make the blood on the wall melt and run, so she moved

her wand along the words slowly until the red ran together and made the message indistinguishable. She was almost finished when a voice came unexpectedly from behind her.

"What are you doing?"

Rigel jumped and ended the flame abruptly. As she turned she let her left hand trail behind her to smear the remaining few words surreptitiously so that they couldn't be made out. A Hufflepuff boy who looked to be a year or two older than her was walking toward her from the end of the corridor that branched off toward the Hufflepuff common room.

Rigel stowed her wand away, kept her left hand slightly behind her back, and opened her mouth to explain when the boy caught sight of the prefect on the ground.

"Benjamin!" the boy rushed forward, dropping to his knees, "What's wrong with-oh... no. He's-he's-"

"He's petrified," Rigel said quietly, "Will you stay with him while I go get help?"

The boy looked up at her, confusion written on his face, "Why didn't you get help earlier? What were you doing with the wall... is that blood?"

Rigel knelt down and looked the older boy in the eye, "Yes, it's blood. I was checking to see if there was a purpose or pattern, but it looks like whoever did this just painted the walls with it." The boy looked green, so she said, "Just stay here with him, okay? I'm going to grab a house-elf from the kitchens."

The boy's faced firmed and he nodded once, putting a hand on the petrified prefect's shoulder comfortingly. Rigel stood and hurried around the corner down the kitchen corridor. She tickled the pear impatiently and stuck her head in long enough to shout, "Binny!" into the din before ducking back out again.

Binny appeared in the hallway with a small pop, and curtsayed, "How can Binny be helping you?"

"Binny, go get Dumbledore," Rigel said without preamble, "There's been another attack."

Binny's eyes welled up with water, but she disappeared with another pop and two seconds later reappeared in the same place, a disoriented Headmaster attached by his robes to her little hands.

"Binny, what is the-Mr. Black, did you ask Binny to retrieve me?" Dumbledore turned serious blue eyes on her, and Rigel nodded.

"There's been another one," Rigel said tightly, "This way."

She set off back up the corridor, Dumbledore sending Binny gently back to the kitchens before hurrying after.

They rounded the corner to see another boy kneeling next to the petrified prefect, in addition to the first Hufflepuff Rigel had left there. The two boys were arguing in low voices, but in the empty corridor they could be heard easily as she and Dumbledore approached.

"-but who was it, Cedric?" the younger of the two asked.

"That Black kid, you know, the one everyone's talking about," the first Hufflepuff said.

"He was here when you got here?"

"Yeah, just looking at the walls-"

Dumbledore shot her a look, and she nodded in response-she would tell him later.

"And you just let him *go* ?"

"Well, what was I supposed to do? I couldn't leave Benjamin! He said he was getting help."

"Yeah right, he's not coming back to the scene of the-"

"Mr. Macmillan, Mr. Diggory," Dumbledore interrupted, striding to a stop behind them. Rigel had slowed down as they reached the boys, and ended up standing behind Dumbledore as the Headmaster took in the scene.

Both young Hufflepuffs whirled, looking up at Dumbledore with surprise.

"Professor-"

"Headmaster! Benjamin, he's-"

"I know, Mr. Diggory," Dumbledore assured the older, more worried-looking Hufflepuff calmly, "It's all right. He's been petrified, but Mr. Wates will be just fine once Professor Sprout's mandrakes are ready. Everything will be fine, Mr. Diggory."

"That Black boy was here," the other boy, Macmillan, who Rigel recognized from some of her classes, spoke up with a tone of importance, "He ran off before-"

"Mr. Black came to get me, yes, thank you, Mr. Macmillan," Dumbledore said. Rigel stepped out from behind Dumbledore awkwardly and inclined her head politely at Macmillan, who narrowed his own eyes back with easily read suspicion.

"What should we do now?" Diggory asked.

"I'd like to ask one of you to-"

Before Dumbledore could finish his sentence, he whirled toward the wall-not the wall with the blood on it, the *other* one. Rigel barely had time to notice, with something like horror, that there were runes inscribed on the stone before it exploded with a deafening bang. Rigel could feel her magic responding without her conscious

direction, and as frightening as that was it was nothing to the frozen moments of panic as the wall rushed out toward her.

Then time sped up again and Rigel flinched backwards, putting her arms up in a cross to cover most of the vital parts on her head and upper torso out of sheer instinct. Magic was hot in her veins and when the sound of falling rubble stopped all she could think was that she didn't feel pain anywhere. She lowered her arms slowly, shaking slightly, and looked around. Sometime in the confusion, Dumbledore had flung himself between the wall and the three of them, arms outstretched. A shimmering dome of gold magic pulsed before him, shielding them all from the blast. Not a spec of dust crept through the shield, and Dumbledore turned without dispelling it to ask, "Is everyone all right?"

He paused, staring, because behind him, spread in front of Rigel and the two Hufflepuffs, was a thin, shaky blanket of red-colored magic. Rigel could still feel the magic draining rapidly from her core to fuel it, but couldn't concentrate long enough to make it stop. It was nothing as impressive as Dumbledore's shield, but the Headmaster smiled at her anyway, and nodded his head in thanks, "Quick thinking, Mr. Black. Five points to Slytherin for protecting your fellow students."

Rigel glanced at the Hufflepuffs, who she suspected had merely been lucky enough to be behind her when her magic decided to shield her, and smiled weakly. They stared at her like she had just spoken Mermish.

Dumbledore released his shield with a wave of his hand, and after taking a deep breath to calm herself, Rigel asked her magic to stop... whatever it was doing. She was pretty sure she hadn't learned that shield charm yet.

The red shimmer of magic faded away, and Rigel slumped a bit with exhaustion. Whatever it was, that had certainly taken it out of her. She probed at her magical core with her senses and judged the secondary layer to be almost three-quarters empty. Her few remaining coils were twisting on the surface agitatedly, and the

center still burned as though ready to release more raw magic at a moment's notice. Rigel made a mental note to look up the effects of adrenaline on magical cores.

Things moved fast after the explosion. Dumbledore sent Diggory to the Hospital Wing to collect Madam Pomphrey, but he wasn't quick enough to make an announcement sending all the students to their common rooms before the Hufflepuffs, who were closest to the explosion, began spilling into the corridor in confused disarray. Macmillan spotted his friends and ran over to tell them what was going on. Rigel shifted awkwardly under the looks she was receiving, being the only one besides the Headmaster standing in the middle of the destroyed corridor, and shifted a bit closer to Dumbledore's reassuring form.

Snape arrived on the scene soon after, taking in everything with a glance and positively glowering when he caught sight of her. Rigel winced to think of how much trouble she was going to be in *this* time. Madam Pomphrey arrived with Sprout on her heels, and they carefully levitated the petrified prefect-Wakes, Rigel thought Dumbledore had called him-down the corridor and toward the nearest stairs.

A group of Slytherins turned up as Pomphrey and her charge left, and to Rigel's misfortune Daphne Greengrass was among them.

"Black!" She let out a laugh that was not at all humorous, "Caught red-handed this time, were you? Let's see you talk your way out of this one."

Rigel looked down at her left hand, which was, incidentally, still red with blood from where she had wiped away the last part of the message on the wall, and admitted that things definitely didn't look too good when you put them like that.

Apparently she wasn't the only one who thought so, as Macmillan shot his friends knowing glances and they in turn glared at Rigel from the Hufflepuff ranks.

"I stumbled and used this hand to steady myself against the wall," Rigel said, grateful that Diggory wasn't there to contradict her, if he would have even thought to.

"Give it up, Black," Daphne sneered, "It's just pathetic now."

"You're pathetic."

Rigel turned gratefully as Draco pushed his way through the growing crowd.

"Are you all right, Rigel?" he said.

Rigel shrugged one shoulder uncomfortably, "Don't I look all right?"

Draco shrugged as well, "Pansy told me to ask if I found you before she did. I sent her to check the common room because... well, it seemed safer. Sort of knew I'd find you here, though."

Rigel couldn't even fault her friend for assuming that. Fate, it seemed, hadn't been able to resist once Rigel took the name of a star.

"Desist and disperse at once," Snape said, raising his voice to be heard over the pandemonium, "Go to dinner or go back to your common rooms, but unless you'd like to stick around and confess, get out of this corridor."

The corridor slowly emptied, much to the disappointment of several Gryffindors, who arrived looking as though they'd run all the way from the seventh floor to seek out the commotion.

Rigel hesitated. She still had to tell Dumbledore about the message, but if she stuck around it would look like she *did* have something to confess.

Snape solved her dilemma by saying, "Black, wait in my office while the Headmaster and I repair the wall. I have an extra potions assignment to go over with you before tomorrow."

Rigel nodded, understanding that this way she'd be out of the way but still around for them to question, and, after reassuring Draco she was fine, Rigel left swiftly for the Potions Master's office.

She sat there for some time, wishing there was a sink in the office so that she could wash her hands. As it was, she stood gingerly in the middle of the room, careful not to touch anything.

The door to the small office opened and Snape stalked in, followed closely by Dumbledore and, to Rigel's surprise, Professor Sprout. Rigel didn't entirely like the look Sprout was giving her-it was slightly suspicious and more than slightly insulting, considering it was coming from a Professor that Rigel actually respected.

"Mr. Black, thank you for waiting," Dumbledore said, fixing her with a serious look, "I can only assume by your unfortunately colored fingers and the smeared blood on the wall that there was another message. You destroyed it?"

Rigel nodded, "It seemed best if the perpetrator's intentions were thwarted where possible."

"Did you memorize it?" Snape asked. At Rigel's affirmation he produced a sheet of parchment and a quill, "Write it down."

Rigel carefully copied the message word for word onto the parchment, using her left elbow to hold the page while she wrote, to avoid covering it with bloody fingerprints.

"*Another* message, Albus?" Sprout's round face with pinched tight with anger and frustration, "I'll not have you keeping secrets while my children are in danger. Explain. Now."

Dumbledore inclined his head after he'd lifted it from the parchment Rigel handed him, "Very well, Pomona, I will explain." He related the killing of Mrs. Norris in all its horrifying detail.

Sprout looked near tears by the end of it, all the anger drained out of her, "So that's why Argus took a leave of absence. I was so happy for him, thinking he'd finally gotten around to a much-needed vacation. Oh, who would *do* such a thing?"

"The same person who did it last time," Dumbledore said sadly.

Rigel fought to keep her face blank and uncomprehending as Snape shot her a look and cleared his throat meaningfully at the Headmaster. Dumbledore would have been there, she realized, when Hagrid had been expelled. He had made the same connection she had.

They asked her a few more questions, but Rigel hadn't heard the voice that time-presumably it had come and gone from the opposite direction. Snape looked slightly mollified that she hadn't gone chasing mysterious voices after he'd told her not to, but he still seemed annoyed with her when he excused her at last and asked Sprout to escort her to the Slytherin common room while he and Dumbledore returned to the area of attack to run a few more diagnostic charms. From what Rigel gathered, Dumbledore had recognized several of the runes on the wall before it exploded, and wanted to investigate his theories.

They walked in silence for a bit, Sprout's face tight and unapproachable. Rigel felt like she ought to say something, since it had been a Hufflepuff who was attacked.

"Professor?" she glanced up at Sprout from the corner of her eye carefully, "I didn't do it, you know. I would never just... attack someone like that."

Sprout blinked down at her, as though she had been thinking hard about something and forgotten Rigel was walking next to her. The older woman's eyes softened, "Oh, Mr. Black, I know that."

Rigel must have looked uncertain and skeptical, because Sprout stopped and placed a hand on Rigel's shoulder, saying, "You're no

killer, Rigel Black. You think I can't see that? Your presence at the scene-again-merely startled me out of my common sense for a moment. Don't go listening to what the other students might say, now. We'll catch the true culprit and everything will go back to normal, you'll see."

She took Rigel's left wrist and used her wand to carefully siphon the drying blood off her hand. Then Sprout conjured a stream of cold water from her wand to rinse the grimy feeling from Rigel's hand completely.

"There now, you go on to your common room," Sprout said, smiling kindly down at her.

Rigel smiled back tiredly, "Thank you, Professor. See you on Friday."

Sprout watched her walk to the other end of the corridor where the false wall was and waited until Rigel had murmured the password and slipped into the opening to walk away.

Rigel didn't even want to think about what the eyes of the common room thought of her that time, so she avoided looking at anyone as she strode briskly across the big, low-ceilinged room and into the safety of her dorm room. Millicent, Theo, Blaise, Pansy, and Draco were all already inside when she reached the room, and none of them looked at her with anything other than concern and sympathy as she mechanically pulled a clean over-robe from her trunk and changed into it. Her school shirt and pants were relatively clean, so she didn't bother changing them as well, instead just shucking her shoes and sinking onto her mattress bonelessly.

Pansy moved from Draco's bed to Rigel's and began combing the dust out of Rigel's dark hair with her fingers. The other four sat silently, not pestering her or asking her any questions, just sitting there with her until she sighed, sat up, and began to tell them what she felt she could. She told them who had been attacked, how she'd come across them, what she, Diggory, and Macmillan did

respectively in response to the situation, and how Dumbledore handled it from there.

She didn't tell them why Snape kept her behind beyond just general questioning. She didn't tell them why there was blood on the wall or the real reason her hand had been covered with it. She didn't tell them about the connection she and Dumbledore had made independently between their petrifications and a similar string of events that had happened fifty years ago, and she certainly didn't tell them that sometimes right before an attack she could hear the Serpent Tongue bleeding from the walls.

The other five second-years took her words for what they were-all she could give them-and by unspoken consensus moved on to talk about other things. None of them felt like going to dinner, so they ate some of the cookies Pansy's grandmother routinely sent her and sat in the little dorm room instead, just passing the time in a seamless semblance of calm.

Rigel could only conclude that friends were an incredible thing. How strange to have people who so understood and respected what she needed. How valuable to have people who made her feel so at ease and unthreatened, despite the difficult, dangerous deception she wove her life within. Surely there was nothing in the world so *necessary* as a friend on nights such as these.

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[end of chapter eleven].

A/N: Starting school up again on Tuesday, but with any luck my writing won't drop off nearly as much as it did last semester. Hope you guys liked this one, and I hope the parts that were really similar to canon, like the dueling club, were at least different enough that they were entertaining. Also, I know I basically hit you over the head

with clues in this one, but I'm thinking that since everyone's read HPCS the quasi-culprit wasn't going to be much of a surprise anyway. At least this way it's *interesting* . ^^ . And yes, I am indeed a big fan of Naruto, to those reviewers keen enough to recognize the influence of Gai and Kakashi in the last couple of chapters. Much love, readers.

-Violet

Chapter 12

A/N: So, some of you thought it was great that Rigel finally messed up in some minor capacity, and some thought it was unnecessary, but as always gentle readers, you'll find that I rarely throw things in just for characterization purposes (For instance I know some of you are still wondering about the baby thing, but you'll just have to be patient ^^). All will come full circle, readers. Really, how else was she supposed to get detention?

And with those ominous words, we begin.

The Serpentine Subterfuge:

Chapter 12:

If Rigel thought the one day she endured with the school whispering about her Parseltongue behind her back was annoying, it was nothing compared to what greeted her the morning after she had been found at the scene of the Hufflepuff prefect's petrification.

There were no whispers in the halls when she walked by now. No one pointed or speculated behind their hands. Instead, everywhere Rigel walked, there was complete silence, only punctuated by cold or frightened stares. The Hufflepuffs, much to Rigel's dismay, were particularly venomous as far as giving her the stink-eye went, but they, like the rest of the school, were silent.

At least, it was silent until Fred and George showed up.

"There's our fledgling Dark Lord!"

Rigel only had a moment to brace herself before Fred flung his arms around her in an exuberant hug from behind.

"Hello, Fred," Rigel said, thinking that at least now the stares were more incredulous than hostile.

"I'm actually Gred today," Fred said, patting her cheek as one would a small, precocious child, "But I'll forgive you since you didn't know."

"Magnanimous of you," Rigel said, turning to nod at George, who had ambled up behind his brother, "Hello... Forge?"

George flashed a grin at her as he leant forward to ruffle her hair in a gesture that was practically automatic at this point, "How is your morning, your Utmost? Sacrifice any minions today?"

"I'm, ah, fresh out of minion," Rigel said, patting her hair back into place uncomfortably and glancing up the corridor, "I've also got to get to Defense."

Fred clutched his heart, "What's this? Going to Defense? But you've gone over to the Dark Side, puppy! We thought you'd at least be cutting class and punting canines for daring to share your moniker. Don't tell me all those petrifications were just for kicks! Ha, get it? Kicks? As in, what you do to puppies now that you're evil?" Fred cracked up into hearty chuckles and Rigel could only shake her head.

"I didn't petrify anyone," she felt compelled to say. She knew that they knew that she hadn't, or else they wouldn't be joking about it, but she didn't want any of the bystanders to be able to say 'he never denied it.'

George laughed just a tad too loudly, "Well, *obviously* . It's just so *obvious* to anyone who isn't oblivious, after all. I mean, how *obvious* is it that you'd never do anything like that to anyone, since you're *obviously* a kind person who's never even entertained the idea of harming others? *Obviously* ."

Rigel grimaced, "Overheard Greengrass this morning at the Slytherin table, did you?"

Fred looked sympathetic, "I think even the kids over at the *Hufflepuff* table heard her."

"Not that all the Hufflepuffs weren't saying the same thing," George added cheerfully, "But seriously, Rigel, don't worry about it. It really is a bit obvious to anyone who knows you that it's just a weird coincidence. Besides," he said, raising his voice again pointedly as several people tried to pretend they weren't listening in as they walked past, "Anyone who's really that evil doesn't get *caught at the scene* . That's just Evildoers 101."

Rigel wasn't sure if Fred and George were convincing anyone by being so sarcastic that surely people would realize how ridiculous it was, but Rigel did feel a little bit better about the eerie silent treatment she was getting from $\frac{3}{4}$ of the school, so she didn't complain.

In Defense class Lockhart requested that Rigel make the sound effects for his reenactment of the moment he cornered the Moorsville Monster. The monster, Lockhart quite earnestly insisted, had sounded exactly like an angry, cornered snake.

Rigel was a bit incredulous, but didn't want to outright refuse a professor. She awkwardly cleared her throat when Lockhart motioned to her in the midst of his air-dueling.

"Hssssss," Rigel said unconvincingly.

"Louder, Rigel," Lockhart cried, sweeping back his cape dramatically as he parried another pretend thrust with his own, equally pretend, sword.

"HSSSS," Rigel tried. Draco snorted next to her, so she shot him an annoyed look as she took a breath, "HSSSS."

Out of the corner of her eye she could see several people shudder and learn away from her table.

"That's not even Parseltongue," Millicent said scathingly, "Honestly, you lot are supposed to be Gryffindors."

"Well if he was roaring like a lion, we'd be fine with it too," Ron said, grimacing, "It's just creepy, okay?"

"Children, no talking! The best part is coming up!" Lockhart said, before launching into a long-winded monologue about why the monster should see the error of its ways.

"It's not *creepy*," Draco said, sounding like a snake himself as he hissed across the room, "It's an honor to be able to speak Salazar's tongue."

Rigel hadn't ever thought about it like that, either.

"Honor or not, it's... inhuman," Dean Thomas said, wrinkling his nose a bit.

"And what's wrong with that?" Blaise asked coolly from his seat beside Theo. He didn't take his eyes off of Lockhart's performance, so Rigel couldn't see his expression, but he sounded unusually annoyed.

"Nothing," Thomas said hastily, "I'm no creature-hater. I mean, it's fine for a snake to sound that way, because it's a snake. But for a person to sound like that is just... wrong."

"What's wrong," said Pansy, "Is accusing someone of a horrid crime just because he was gifted with an ability at birth."

"An ability that notoriously crops up in evil Dark wizards," Parvati said. She held up her hands when several people glared at her, "Hey, I'm not saying that all Dark wizards are evil. I'm just saying that some are, and Dark wizards with Parseltongue don't exactly have a great track record. I mean, Slytherin's great-grandfather was a Dark Lord, and then Slytherin himself walked out on the school. Then there was Morgul Farkson, the wizard who invented about half the Torture Curses known today. Not to mention Roger Sikes, who killed his whole family-"

"Sikes was Imperioed to do that," Millicent said sharply.

"Was his grandson, also a Parselmouth, Imperioed when he sacrificed an entire herd of thestrals in a Dark ritual to make himself immortal?" Dean Thomas asked.

Millicent scowled, " *Allegedly* sacrificed. No one who witnessed the ritual could actually see thestrals, so-

"Children!" Lockhart called, "Watch this next part very closely, here's where I-

"The point is," Pansy said, "Rigel is not any of those people. There have been plenty of wizards who had Parseltongue and lived perfectly normal lives. You just don't hear about them *precisely because* they live normal lives. Rigel is not an agent of pure evil just because he talks to snakes."

"Hang on, we never said he was," Ron said, scratching his nose nervously, "Listen, Rigel, I know you didn't petrify anyone. I'm not *stupid*, for Merlin's sake. It's mostly the older kids who think that, or the first years. Anyone who experienced the sleeping sickness knows you're all right. I just think the snake-talk is a little disturbing."

Rigel wasn't so sure of Ron's assessment. She'd seen quite a few people whose minds she'd traversed giving her edgy, wide-eyed looks in the hall. "The Hufflepuffs-" she began.

"Are fiercely loyal to themselves," Ron interrupted, waving a hand unconcernedly, "After their prefect was attacked, they had no choice but to turn on the only possible suspect like rabid badgers, even if that suspect isn't terribly probable once you stop and think about it. It's their herd mentality or something."

A couple of people snorted. Although it wasn't very politic to make fun of Hufflepuffs, somehow the jokes ended up being too easy to ignore most of the time.

"Getting back to the point," Blaise said dryly, "If the only problem is the Parseltongue, Rigel will just have to make you acclimated to it."

Rigel blinked, and several people's faces screwed up in confusion. It was an interesting idea... though completely foreign to everything Parselmouths had ever stood for. Typically a wizard was merely *known* to be a Parselmouth-very rarely did anyone *witness* them speaking to snakes after the first reveal. It just wasn't something a Parselmouth did in the open. This reluctance had something to do with the fear that if others heard the language enough they could imitate it, and gain the same sort of power through hard work that Parselmouths had from birth.

It was one thing to translate what a snake said-Parselmouths were known to do that from time to time for a fee. To speak the tongue of serpents for another's benefit, however, just wasn't done.

At least, Rigel shrugged, it hadn't been until now.

She conjured the image of a snake in her head and said, "*Sssun berriesss are usssed in place of glow wormsss in cccertain fluoressscent potionsss becaussse their tassste is more palatable to the tongue.*"

There was dead silence in the classroom for a moment, and then Lockhart exclaimed, "Now that's a Monster! Keep it up, Rigel, I think we're really getting a feel for the fight now."

Ron looked like he wanted to move to a farther table, and most of the Gryffindors had similar expressions of distaste on their faces.

"What did you say?" Draco asked interestedly.

Rigel repeated what she'd said, in English, though she used different wording in case anyone was actually going to attempt to learn Parseltongue from listening to her speak it. She didn't care if they did, of course, but other Parselmouths might, and who knew how many of them there were in the world? They were a secretive bunch

(and she firmly denied seeing any irony in that), and the last thing she needed was mysterious, unknown enemies in the world.

Parvati blinked, her face relaxing, " *That's* what you said? It sounded like a prophesy of doom."

Millicent said, "Say something else."

So Rigel did. She hissed, spurred on by Lockhart's eager encouragement, for the rest of the lesson. Most of what she said was about potions ingredients. Harmless sentences that no one would want to learn to say anyway, though she was still careful not to translate exactly if anyone asked.

By the end of the lesson, even Ron had relaxed a bit, though every now and then he'd grimace when she said a word with a significant number of S's in it.

Rigel was feeling a lot better about the whole Parseltongue-revealing thing as she went to lunch, though the whole caught-at-the-scene-of-the-crime thing was still rather awkward. So at lunch she was only mildly alarmed when George walked too close behind her seat to be natural and said lowly, "Heads up."

Rigel had no idea what that meant, though she did look up just in case, so she went back to eating her lunch quietly and mentally braced herself for whatever the twins had planned.

Ten minutes later, it could not have been more clear.

From the big, black colored vases that sat at increments on the Hufflepuff House table, animals erupted. Yellow badgers, the size of teacups, spilled onto the Hufflepuff table and began thrashing in confusion. Food was flung everywhere as upwards of fifty tiny badgers scurried about, rolling into people's laps and lunches.

People screamed. Nearly every Hufflepuff leapt back from the table with surprise and dismay, abandoning lunch in favor of getting away

from the unexpected guests. Before anyone could properly react, dozens of little blue birds shot out of the bronze vases at the Ravenclaw table. Students dived out of the way as the birds circled down and flew low over the table, chattering and swiping bits of food as they made mayhem of the meal.

The Slytherins, and indeed everyone else at that point, could see where this was going. In a manner that would have been slightly more dignified if it hadn't been so hurried, they stood and moved away from their benches not a moment too soon. Neon-green snakes, no longer than a forearm, oozed over the tops of the silver vases and onto the table. Draco snatched up his strawberry tart a second before a snake landed on his plate, and looked mournfully at the tarts on the serving plate, which were unceremoniously squashed as several more snakes spilled out onto them.

The Gryffindor girls squealed loudly and Rigel turned to look. Kittens. The Gryffindor table was drowning under a sea of kittens. The girls were squealing in delight, not fear, and several already clutched little scarlet-haired felines to their chests.

Rigel looked toward the twins, who were each holding a ginger kitten and grinning. Fred caught her eye, and said, in a very loud and squeaky voice, "Help! Save us, oh great and powerful overlord!"

Rigel frowned in confusion, but then George spoke up.

"Those snakes look hungry!" he shouted, eyeing the little green snakes still sliding over the Slytherin table with comical apprehension, "Don't let them get the kittens, Rigel! Tell them to stop!"

Ah. Rigel shook her head at the ridiculousness of the twins' plan.

Fred leapt forward and dragged Rigel over so that she was standing between the Gryffindor and Slytherin tables-between the snakes and the kittens. "You have to do something, quick!" he said, swooning, "You're the only one who can help!"

"They aren't real snakes," she said, "They aren't even speaking Parseltongue, just gibberish."

George shot her an admonishing look, "You really ought to *try*, Rigel," he spread his arms wide and spoke loudly, "Thank Merlin we've got a Parselmouth here! Rigel will save the kittens!"

To Rigel's disbelief, heads were starting to turn, and she realized suddenly that people were *actually waiting* for her to save the kittens.

Hogwarts is ridiculous, she thought, *but here goes nothing* .

" *Don't eat the kittens!* " she said in Parseltongue, wondering vaguely if any Parselmouth had ever uttered that combination of words before.

To her utter surprise, the green snakes all swung their heads to look at Rigel, then vanished. People stared. Rigel stared back. George and Fred threw arms around her and said, "Three cheers for the Heir of Slytherin! He's saved the kittens!"

Scattered applause broke out, but mostly people were too nonplussed to react.

Fred frowned at the other tables, eyeing the way the blue birds kept trying to land on people's heads and nest in their hair, much to the Ravens' dismay, "What we need now are the Heirs of Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff. Heir Ravenclaw, can you do something about this?" he called.

A tiny blonde girl who must have been a first year stood up on her chair at the Ravenclaw table and said clearly, "Caw. Caw."

The birds disappeared.

"Three cheers for the Heir of Ravenclaw!" George cried, pumping a fist into the air.

The applause was louder this time, and there was laughter mixed in. The blonde girl blinked solemnly at them all before curtsying and reclaiming her seat. Rigel couldn't help but clap along, wondering how they'd gotten the dreamy-eyed girl to play along-and how they'd gotten the animals to disappear so fortuitously, though since George had his left hand in his pocket Rigel could only assume he was vanishing them at the correct moment.

The professors were all still seated up at the head table, Rigel noticed with amusement, and seemed unusually content to let the joke play out before attempting to intervene. Perhaps Fred and George had tipped off the Headmaster again.

"Heir of Hufflepuff!" Fred cried. He waited a moment, but no one spoke, "No? What? Hufflepuff has forsaken her own House? Well, I suppose they do deserve it."

He and George turned their backs on the Hufflepuff table, amidst murmurs and whispers, and turned instead to the Gryffindors, "Well, Heir Gryffindor, shall we?"

Percy Weasley scowled at his brothers, "I'm not doing it."

George and Fred exchanged sad looks.

"I'm disappointed, Percy, really I am."

"Here we thought you were taking your duties seriously."

"And yet when mischief is afoot-"

"-and you alone hold the key-"

"-to making order out of chaos-"

"-you do naught to deter it!"

"Fine," Percy huffed. He cleared his throat and seemed to steel himself for something awful before saying, "Me-ow."

The kittens vanished as well, much to many of the Gryffindors' dismay.

"Percy Weasley, Cat Whisperer," Fred said, chuckling to himself.

"And Rigel Black, Defender of Kittens," drawled Draco as he and Pansy walked over to where Rigel stood with the twins, "Well done, Weasley's."

"It was rather amazing, wasn't it?" Fred grinned at George, who grinned back.

Pansy nodded her head, "I think people will be less afraid of Rigel now that they know he cares about kittens. Have the two of you considered a career in public relations?"

The twins both smirked evilly.

"How about it, Rigel?" George said, "Want us to be your publicists?"

"Well, I'm not sure how you could top 'defender of kittens' as far as epithets go," Rigel prevaricated.

"What's this? Rigel, you're hiring an agent?"

Rigel could actually feel the repressed groans going around as they turned to greet Professor Lockhart, who seemed to have been discontent to watch from the sidelines any longer.

"No, Professor," Rigel said, "It was only a joke."

"Ah, I see!" Lockhart clapped his hands together, "Like this little joke, hey? Oh, what a treat it is to see you young folk so lively. Of course, in my day pranks were quite a bit more involved than this one. Yes, I was quite devious in my youth, you know-but mums the word, mind you! Good call on the publicist, though, Rigel. Bit premature, that's all. Don't want people thinking all this Parseltongue stuff has gone to your head."

Lockhart left again, leaving them to exchange exasperated looks with one another.

"Anyway," Draco said awkwardly, glancing around. His gaze lit upon the Hufflepuff table, which was still crawling with miniature badgers, "Are you going to do something about that?"

George shrugged and Fred snickered.

"They were mean to our puppy," George said, "Surely they didn't think they could just get away with it."

Draco frowned slightly for some reason or another, but didn't say anything.

Most of the students had given up on lunch after it had been rolled around in by animals-magical constructs or not-and were milling about talking about the prank or else helping the Hufflepuffs try and round up the badgers. Almost no one, Rigel was happy to note, was staring at her with thinly veiled hostility.

"Thanks, you two," Rigel said, smiling genuinely at Fred and George.

"Aw, shucks," Fred said, thumbing his nose in a falsely embarrassed way.

"Anything for you, pup," George said fondly.

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That evening after Quidditch practice, Flint pulled Rigel aside with the pretense of going over a technical move he wanted her to practice in her free time. They sat on the lower stands while the rest of the team headed to the locker room to change.

"So," he said, leaning against the bench behind him and stretching out his legs, "I hear your schoolwork is slipping."

Rigel scowled defensively, "One essay. I forgot *one* essay. Other people forget things all the time and nobody remarks upon it."

"When the world thinks you're perfect, it waits for you to fail," Flint said, snorting, "A piece of advice for you-give yourself flaws intentionally so that the universe doesn't decide to fuck with you just because you're too good to be true."

Rigel raised an eyebrow, "Is that what you do? Pretend to be lazy and mean so that no one expects anything of you?"

Flint pinned her with a look, "You think I'm pretending?"

"... no," Rigel decided with a sigh.

Flint shook his head, laughing in that eerie way of his, "I never know if I should be insulted by you or not, Rigel."

"We're on first names now?" Rigel wrinkled her nose, not sure how she felt about that.

"It's not your name anyway," Flint said. At Rigel's glare he added, sardonically, "It's just your *middle* name, after all."

Rigel rolled her eyes, but let it go. There wasn't anyone around to hear them anyway. "So did you just keep me here to make fun of my memory?"

"What are you gonna do about it if I did?" Flint said, barking out another laugh, "No, I kept you to ask if you need a break."

"A what?" Rigel stared.

"A what, he says," Flint rolled his eyes, "Salazar you're a thick one. Do you need a *break*, Rigel? Less schoolwork, less Quidditch practice?"

Rigel blinked, "The guys ask you for fewer practices all the time."

"That's because they're lazy bastards," Flint said, "Not because they need a break."

"I don't need a break," Rigel said, a tad defensively, "It was *one* essay."

Flint held up his hands, "Just asking."

Rigel looked away, "Well don't worry about me. I've got everything under control."

"Whatever you say," Flint said shrugging, "No polish off my broom. Just don't let the next essay be one of mine."

Rigel nodded, "Speaking of, any of the teachers still suspicious of you?"

Flint snorted, "All of them. But what can they do? My assignments are turned in, in my own handwriting no less, my tests are perfect, my practical work impeccable. They know, I know they know, and they know I know they know, but there's nothing they can do without proof. And Rigel?"

"Yes, Flint?"

"Don't give them proof."

Rigel smiled a bit, "Who'd believe it anyway? Some things are too strange to be credible, no matter how true they are."

Flint smirked at her, "You'd know all about that."

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

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February was upon them without warning. The professors were relentless in pressing assignments into their hands, determined to get the students to buckle down and start reviewing for the final exams in late May. All of Rigel's classmates complained about how heavy the workload was, but Rigel knew with uncomfortable clarity that they had it easy compared to the NEWT students. She found herself going to Percy for Transfiguration help and Blaise for Runes assistance at least twice a week as the days bled on and Flint's assignments became progressively harder. Percy was more than happy to help, seeing it as an excellent opportunity to go over his own schoolwork with a ready listener, but Blaise, in the undecipherable way he often had, was beginning to look at her sidelong every time she made a rookie mistake on a complex rune diagram.

She was catching up quickly, but there were still things she missed, obvious things that, according to Blaise, she ought to have known considering the level of work she was attempting. He told her to take her studies slower, brush up on the basics. Rigel smiled politely, but otherwise ignored the advice.

On Valentine's Day, Blaise was explaining about how to balance powerful, contradictory runes in diagrams that weren't symmetrical over breakfast, while both of them tried to stoically ignore the disgruntled atmosphere around them.

Professor Lockhart had, in his infinite capacity for making awkward situations so much worse than they had to be, decided that he'd been so inspired by Fred and George's 'little joke' that he wanted to help spread the good cheer as well. Probably well-meaning, definitely misguided, Lockhart had decorated the Great Hall before anyone else awoke that morning.

There were tiny, heart-shaped confetti pieces raining from the enchanted ceiling like snow. Everything from the pancakes to the grapefruits was heart-shaped, in fact, and tiny, winged creatures that

looked a bit like gnomes were dressed in white robes, carrying heart-shaped harps, and attempting to serenade anyone who made eye-contact with them in squeaky, wobbly voices.

None of that would have been all that dreadful, and certainly none of it would have caused most of the students to glare with ill-concealed enmity at the oblivious Lockhart, but their Defense professor made a crucial, ever-so-important mistake in his decorating scheme.

He had changed the colors on the House tables. There was no blue, no green, no yellow or red to be seen. Only pink. Lurid pink tablecloths, vases, banners, and napkins. All four House tables were indistinguishable from one another, and for students whose entire social existence was bound up in House pride, it was an insult of the highest caliber.

Draco was glowering at his heart-shaped omelet next to her, and even Pansy looked a bit put off and she covered her tea with a pink napkin to stop confetti from raining into it.

"How'd that blowhard even manage all this?" Draco asked, causing Blaise to pause in his explanation of nature-affinity runes to answer, as though Blaise were simply incapable of leaving a question unaddressed.

"Observe the dark rings under Professor Flitwick's eyes," Blaise said.

They turned to look up at the Head table, and Flitwick did indeed seem to be nodding off into a very large cup of coffee.

"Oh," Draco said, turning back to his breakfast, "Figures he'd get a professor with real talent to do the work for him."

Rigel turned back to the diagram she was working on. It wasn't *exactly* the same as the assignment she had to do for Flint. She had changed several of the runes to similar equivalents before asking Blaise for his help, just in case Blaise somehow knew what

assignments the sixth year Rune students were working on currently-you never knew with Blaise.

"I don't understand why you have to use the Thunder rune instead of the Lightning rune," Rigel said, "They both have the nature affinity of storms."

"But Thunder is a warning rune, while Lightning is an action rune," Blaise explained patiently, "You want Thunder here because when the runes are activated it will make the spell audibly perceptible. If you put Lightning here, it would still give you the storm rune you need, and even speed up the process, but you'd have no *warning* when the spell succeeded."

Rigel tilted her head, "And since the wards the spell is supposed to erect are invisible, you won't know if it has worked without the Thunder rune. I see."

"Additionally," Blaise said, "The Thunder rune gives a warning sound to anyone approaching the wards after they're set. If we put Lightning, someone might run right into the wards and get cooked, but this way the Thunder rune warns them if they get close, so it's overall a better choice unless the wards you're building are stealth wards or unnecessarily antagonistic."

"What do you need to build wards for?" Draco asked.

Rigel turned to shrug at him, "I don't. I'm just trying to understand how to do it."

Draco shook his head, and went back to cutting up his potatoes so that they no longer resembled cupid's arrows.

Rigel caught sight of Snape approaching their table over Blaise's shoulder and quickly but calmly-not as though she had something to hide-rolled up the diagram and tucked it away into her bag, "Thanks, Blaise, I think I've got it now."

Blaise raised an eyebrow, and was about to say something when Snape reached their table and said, "Mr. Black, my office before your first class."

"Yes, Professor," Rigel said, pretending not to notice the way Blaise's eyes flicked from her to Snape and then to her school bag where she'd stored the diagram. The boy was really too observant for her peace of mind.

"More assignments?" Draco guessed once Snape had gone.

Rigel shrugged, "Perhaps." In truth she didn't know what Snape wanted. The Polyjuice was almost done, and besides that she didn't have any other assignments pending. She'd waited about a week before starting on the Polyjuice, in case it seemed suspicious that she jumped right into a tricky, time-sensitive potion without researching and preparing first, so the batch wasn't quite finished.

She finished up her heart-shaped biscuit and thanked Blaise again for his help before heading to Snape's office, curious about what he had in store for her.

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Severus Snape was not by any stretch of the imagination a patient man. Patience implied a certain passivity toward the world, a willingness to allow things to progress as they would, and a sickening sense of temporal security that spawned such ridiculous sentiments as 'good things come to those who wait.' Severus Snape knew better than most that things did *not* happen simply because one waited for them, and so it was a rare day that found him in a position of repose, doing nothing but waiting on another member of the imminently unreliable human race.

Yet it seemed that Rigel Black had some sort of innate ability to make the world unrecognizable to itself, and so it was with little surprise that Severus found his fingers drumming on the desk before him, empty of either quill or essay, *idle* as he waited for Rigel-and Merlin only knew when he'd begun to refer to the brat by his chosen name inside his own head-to appear in his doorway.

Severus had yet to fathom what, exactly, made Rigel different from his peers. He knew there was something *off* about the boy, but hadn't deduced its exact origins. It could be simply that Rigel defied Severus' every expectation of Sirius Black's son, but Severus had, infrequently, been mistaken in his anticipations before, and once his opinion of something was updated, his confusion usually dissipated without a struggle in the face of facts.

It was something to do with the fact that Rigel did not act like any other twelve-year-old boy Severus had ever known-and considering his regrettable position in a school of adolescents, he had known an unenviable amount. Rigel did not run in the halls. He did not space out in class, groan when homework was assigned, or sigh with boredom every ten minutes or so, as the other boys did. Severus' brain offered the counter-argument that his godson Draco did none of these things, either, and that Rigel's attention in Potions might only be a result of his appreciation for the subject.

Severus dismissed these objections. Draco had been raised from birth to have the mannerisms of a grown aristocrat, and Severus still caught him yawning sleepily over the breakfast table from time to time or lounging in his seat like a lazy cat. Draco, for all the pureblood socialization he'd gone through, was a normal child. He snuck extra dessert when Miss Parkinson wasn't looking. The last few inches of his homework were often sloppier than the rest, as he hurried to get it over with. He became angry at short notice, he lashed out at people who offended or hurt him, and he visibly preened under positive attention. Draco did all of those things, as normal twelve-year-old boys did, but Rigel... Rigel did not.

Rigel was too *contained*, Severus had realized over time. Rigel sat almost rigidly and stood with unnatural stillness. Severus knew this to be the case even outside of the Potions classroom, for others among the staff had commented on the boy's unusual attention to posture, and meal times were no different. Severus did not think, as the other professors did, that Rigel's blank expression, soft-spoken words, and properly deferential body language stemmed from the boy's politeness or respectfulness, however. Rigel simply never relaxed. He was motionless and expressionless, be it in the classroom or in the common room, and that was *not normal* .

Even when the boy did show some emotion, Rigel's every response seemed contrived, a tad too *clear* to be believable. If he wanted to show he was confused, he always frowned in the same way, tilting his head just enough to convey a question. If he wanted you to know he was not upset about something, he smiled ever-so-slightly and ever-so-politely. Only when it came to potions did Rigel seem to emote with genuine feeling, and that level of obsession in a child not yet thirteen was also worryingly unusual. Severus should know.

If he had been anyone else's son, Severus thought darkly, he would have put him on the list of potentially abused children almost immediately. Rigel was unnaturally repressed, excepting those rare moments when his emotions escaped him completely and violently, and that pattern of emotional suppression and expulsion, coupled with his defensive nature and incredible talent at twisting away from unwanted questions, usually added up to a very unsatisfactory home life.

Severus scowled at his fingers, still drumming away on the desk. It simply did not add up. Lucius had confided in him the boy's interaction with his father, and while it had apparently been suspicious in a number of ways, it was by no means *unhappy* . Severus himself had seen Rigel talk about his father, and while his emotions were many and conflicted, fear had not been among them.

The only explanation, after a poor home life was ruled out, was that Rigel Black was hiding something so immense that he could not

afford to relax his guard for even a second. Severus had known people who lived their entire lives with a secret so large that the shadow of it consumed their every movement. That Rigel was so adept and consistent in his routine of mysterious diffidence suggested that he carried such a secret. That he was equally cagey around his friends and family, as Lucius had noted, suggested that he carried this secret alone. That he had continued to harbor such a secret for at least the time period Severus had been observing him without either breaking down or confiding in someone suggested that Rigel's will was greater than Severus had given him credit for. Yet another thing that set him apart from his peers.

Severus had no idea what Rigel was hiding, but he did know that he would figure it out before the boy graduated. Seven years was simply too long to keep a secret in a place like Hogwarts, where secrets had a way of uncovering themselves.

Three knocks sounded softly on his door, and Severus gestured to it with his wand hand. The door swung open and Rigel stepped through with his usual air of impeccable calm.

"Good morning, Professor," Rigel said, closing the door quietly behind him.

"Sit down, Mr. Black," Severus said, gesturing to the chair he had conjured earlier in expectation of Rigel's presence. "How is your Polyjuice progressing?"

"Well, Sir," Rigel said politely, blinking at Severus slowly as though he couldn't imagine why his professor would worry about such a thing.

Severus raised an eyebrow, but did not press further. Time would tell if Rigel's confidence in his Polyjuice was sound. Though, Severus thought wryly to himself, he would not be significantly surprised if Rigel managed a perfect specimen on his first attempt. In that, at least, Severus had no complaints about the boy; he was exceedingly

gifted at potion-brewing, with an innate ability to hold complex, interweaving instructions in his mind without effort.

"Estimated completion time?" he asked.

"Two days," Rigel said, his tone utterly sure.

"Very well," Severus said, making a note of the date in his head, "Do you know why I've called you here today?"

"No, Sir," Rigel said.

Severus gazed assessingly at the boy, "Your detention, Mr. Black. Did you hope I had forgotten?"

Rigel's only response was to blink again, as he often did when he wanted to show he acknowledged something without revealing his reaction to it, "No, Professor. My punishment is, of course, at your leisure."

Severus nearly scowled at the stoic way in which Rigel said it. He had purposely waited several weeks before assigning the detention, intending for Rigel to have plenty of time to dwell on his indiscretion before paying the consequences for it. It was, of course, borderline unreasonable for Rigel to earn a detention over a missed essay, considering how many essays his peers missed on a weekly basis, but Severus needed Rigel to understand that he was to be held to a higher standard.

If Rigel was to become Severus' apprentice, he must be more than exceptional; he must be perfect. It was an unwritten rule that Potions Masters who taught at institutions did not take on apprentices from their own schools. It was both an effort to prevent Potions Masters from lazily picking from within the pool of potioners closest to them, and also to ensure that apprentices received well-balanced and diverse educations in the field. To quell the jealous whispers of favoritism, Rigel must appear so undeniably capable that to *not* choose him would be seen as something unusual. He could afford

no blemish on his record, however slight, and it was better that Rigel learn to mimic perfection now, rather than after the potion community's eyes were upon him.

Snape withdrew the slip he had already written up from his desk and handed it to Rigel, who took it without even glancing down to read it.

"You will serve your detention tomorrow night with the Groundskeeper, Hagrid. You will meet him at his residence, which is-"

"I know where it is, Sir," Rigel said.

Severus pressed his lips together. Rigel had an unfortunate habit of interrupting his superiors, but Severus had yet to correct him on it for two reasons. The first was that Rigel only interrupted when he believed the information being given him was either redundant or incorrect. Severus approved of saving time, and Rigel was almost always correct when he disagreed with someone.

The second reason was that Severus believed Rigel needed every encouragement to speak his mind. Too often the boy remained silent when Severus would rather hear what he had to say. If nothing else, allowing Rigel's tongue to go unchecked would perhaps reveal something new. Sooner or later he would let slip some piece of the recipe that Severus was missing.

"Then do not be late," Severus said.

Rigel nodded and murmured an assent. "Was there anything else, Sir?"

Severus considered the scrawny boy mutely for a moment. This was the part where some other, more compassionately inclined professor would open the floor to their student, to see whether there was anything troubling them. Salazar knew the boy had dealt with more than his share of surprises in the last month. Anyone else would be emotionally *upheaved*, to say the least.

"Interesting question, Mr. Black," Severus said after a considering pause, "Is there anything else?"

This, then, was the part where the student spilled his guts, stumbling over himself to relinquish his burden to a more experienced, trustworthy hand.

Rigel tilted his head, the perfect picture of innocent confusion, "Sir?"

Severus bit back a scowl, thanking Merlin that Minerva was not there to witness his ill-advised attempt at mentoring. "These few weeks have been... trying, I imagine. Is there nothing you wish to discuss? Nothing you experience a need to confide, Mr. Black?"

Rigel frowned, and Severus congratulated himself for coaxing even that small expression out of the boy. It was unfathomable how this could be the same child whose eyes lit up with embarrassing fervor at the sight of a mere stratification by-pass apparatus.

"Is there something you think I've done, Sir?" Rigel asked cautiously.

Severus mentally cursed, though he kept his facial features blank with the ease of old habit. Now the boy thought he was accusing him of something. He'd have to try a different tract. "No, Mr. Black. It merely occurred to me that perhaps your current workload has become burdensome in light of recent-"

"I don't need a *break*," Rigel said, his nose scrunching at the last word as though it were something distasteful. His frown was deeper now, less careful and more genuine. "Why does everyone keep saying that? I'm fine, Professor Snape. It was one essay. It *won't* happen again."

Severus was momentarily taken aback. Then his eyes narrowed, "Has Professor McGonagall been harboring insinuations once again?"

Rigel shook his head, "No, but Professor Flitwick did offer to give me an extension on the first quarter project." Rigel's tone of voice made it clear how ridiculous he thought such an offer. "Then Professor Sprout looked right at me when she randomly decided to cancel one of our essays last week, and even Flint tried to let up on Quidditch practice a couple of weeks ago."

Severus could feel his eyebrows creeping upward, "Marcus Flint offered to cut back the number of Quidditch practices... for the sake of his second-year beater?" Surely, the world had been hit with an overpowered *Aresto Momentum* at some point in the last five minutes.

Rigel went on as though he had said nothing out of the ordinary, rambling away vaguely as he was prone to when he decided to finally have something to say on a subject, "Do I look unusually pale or something? It's just that I can't fathom why people keep going out of their way to take my homework away from me." The boy looked at Severus with wide, pleading eyes. Despite knowing that this expression was entirely manufactured for his benefit, Severus couldn't help but allow his demeanor to soften imperceptibly. "Don't say I can't assist you anymore, Professor. I don't know what I'd do with any more free time."

Severus was tempted to roll his eyes at the boy, but refrained in deference to the dignity he was supposed to embody as a professor—not that the title had retained even the barest *shred* of dignity since Albus Dumbledore decided he would try his hand at the job.

"Your professors are concerned for your mental and emotional stability, Mr. Black, as anyone would be when it involves a student who was not only witness to multiple, psychologically disturbing crime scenes, but who also has recently had his magical heritage revealed to his classmates without permission or warning. Add to that the fact that said magical heritage includes an ability that marks the student in the eyes of his imbecilic peers as a prime suspect for the very crimes he is witness to, and *some people*, Mr. Black, would say that they had very good cause for concern."

Rigel was silent for a long moment. When he spoke, it was slowly and with clear traces of dawning understanding, "And I suppose if that student appeared to be perfectly fine despite all of that, it would only be cause for greater alarm to... some people. As though this student were... repressing or avoiding true coping mechanisms."

"Such a thing might be considered," Severus said dryly.

Rigel inclined his head, "I understand, Professor; I've been acting too unaffected by everything. I'll try not to seem so... normal."

Severus observed that Rigel Black had entirely missed the point, then wondered what it said about a person who thought acting normally should be just that-an act. All Severus could say was, "I don't think there will be any danger of that, Mr. Black. You may go."

Perhaps, the Potions Master reflected as Rigel slipped quietly out of his office, he ought to concentrate on Rigel's potion career and leave well enough alone with the rest of it. Really, by now he should know better than to ever try to figure out a Black-utterly mad, the lot of them.

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Rigel left Snape's office feeling rather bemused. The detention slip was one thing, but what had Snape been trying to accomplish with the rest of it? Had he guessed something? Seen or heard something about her that didn't match up? And that comment at the end there... what was he trying to say? She wasn't normal?

Rigel sighed. She was as normal as she knew how to be. She kept her head down, didn't draw attention to herself, never complained or gave anyone reason to complain about her. How much more blending in could she do?

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The next night Rigel bundled up in Archie's scarf before making the trek down to Hagrid's hut. It wasn't as cold as it usually was in February, but it was by no stretch of the imagination warm.

Hagrid was waiting outside for her when she arrived, also dressed for the cold. He handed her a pair of big rubber gloves to pull on over her regular winter gloves, which meant that her task was going to be either distasteful or hazardous.

"Come on, then," Hagrid said, his voice slightly muffled through his fur head wrap, "We're goin' 'round back."

He led her around his hut, past his garden, and to a small enclosure surrounded by a wire fence. Inside the fence there was a small shed made of white wood. The enclosure looked like an animal pen of some kind, but there were no animals roaming around in it. Probably all inside their shed, Rigel thought. She didn't blame them, considering the cold.

Hagrid gestured to the shed as he unlocked the fence gate, "That's where I keep the chickens."

Rigel looked at the ground, but there weren't any feathers lying around the coup. Probably the snow had covered them up, but it was strange that there were no tracks in the snow-it was from several days ago. Didn't the chickens ever go outside? Then again, what did Rigel know about chickens? Maybe they hibernated. She shrugged it off, wondering if she'd have to collect eggs for her detention or something.

Hagrid led her into the pen and didn't bother closing the gates behind them. Rigel raised her eyebrows; perhaps the chickens really

didn't ever come outside. Still, with the forest so close you'd think Hagrid would worry about predators getting in to eat the birds.

Hagrid stopped outside the shed and turned to her, a serious expression on his face. "Yeh might want to cover yer nose with that scarf, Mr. Black. It's not pretty in there."

Rigel slipped her scarf up over her nose, already imagining the smell of chicken poop, but when Hagrid opened the door, it wasn't excrement she smelled. It was rot. There were no sounds coming from inside the coup, and it wasn't because the shed was charmed not to leak noise as she'd assumed.

Inside the coup, all the chickens lay dead in their nests.

Rigel nearly gagged at the onslaught of the stench. It smelled like death and decay, like that time she'd opened a packet of frog legs only to find they hadn't been preserved with stasis spells like they were supposed to be.

"What happened?" she choked out.

"Don't know," Hagrid grunted, his face dark as he surveyed all the dead chickens, "They started getting sick a few months back. Thought it were just a bug going 'round the pen, but it weren't. They got sicker and sicker, till they started dying a couple weeks ago."

"Do you think it's contagious to humans?" Rigel said apprehensively. Gloves or not, even she knew better than to play around with diseased animal corpses.

"Not so far as I can tell," Hagrid said, "Had Pomphrey check 'em out right quick for dangerous diseases before I asked fer a student with detention to help me get rid of 'em."

Only slightly relieved, Rigel took shallow breaths and said, "All right, what do we do first?"

Hagrid sighed, "Well, we just got to pile the poor buggers outside, and someone'll come 'round tomorrow morning to dispose of 'em."

Rigel nodded and gingerly picked up one dead chicken by the feet. It was smaller than what she thought chickens were supposed to be, as if it'd been off its feed for a while. She carried it outside, breathing deep in the fresh air while she could, and dropped it where Hagrid told her. Really, she told herself grimly, it wasn't that much more disturbing than dismembering fresh jelly slugs.

They worked in silence for a while, until Rigel came upon a rooster-the second rooster she'd picked up, to be exact.

"Hagrid," she said tentatively. She didn't think Hagrid seemed terribly broken up about the chickens, so perhaps he wasn't too attached to them, but she didn't want to be insensitive, either.

Hagrid lifted his head from where he was grabbing three chickens at once in his massive hand and said, "Yeah?"

Rigel gestured to the rooster in her hand, "I thought you could only have one rooster per coup."

Hagrid shook his head, his eyes lightening a bit as he explained, "Naw, that's muggle coups. These cocks are bred with magic. Yeh can keep about ten or so together before they start fightin' and carryin' on. I had six here." His face fell a bit. "They were the first to get sick enough for me to notice, the roosters. Stopped crowing, the little things did, almost immediately. I couldn't figure out why they were so quiet, but now I guess it was the first signs."

Rigel and Hagrid went back to work, and when they'd finished carrying all the dead chickens out, Hagrid stood by the pile of corpses for a moment, looking resigned. Rigel looked at the pile, too, then frowned, scanning it carefully.

"Mr. Hagrid," Rigel said, "How many roosters did you carry out?"

"Just one," Hagrid said absently.

"I carried out three," Rigel said, "But you said there were six. Did something get in and eat them?"

Hagrid frowned, shaking his head, "No, there's wards up around the coup to keep wild animals out. Dumbledore put 'em up when I decided to keep the creatures for the elves."

"The house elves?" Rigel said, surprised.

Hagrid chuckled, "What do you think you've been eating the last two years, lad?"

Rigel grimaced, looking at the rotting chickens. She might have to go back to being a real vegetarian instead of a fake one. Something alarming occurred to her, and she said, "We haven't been... eating the sick ones, have we?"

Hagrid chuckled a bit at the ill look on her face, "Course not. I keep a close watch on 'em. Soon as their eyes started dilatin' strangely I stopped sending 'em up to the castle. Course, it weren't till their feathers started falling out that I really checked 'em over. They were drinking so much water, but I didn't think nothing of it. Turns out their little throats were near dried up-no wonder the cocks wouldn't crow."

Rigel's brain was nagging at her. Something about dry throats and airways... unusually dilated pupils... she frowned, "Hagrid, did the chickens go blind in the end?"

Hagrid's eyebrows shot up, "Well, maybe... ya know, they *were* moving a bit odd at the end there. I thought they were just dizzy, gettin' clumsy with aches or sommit. But *blind*... well, that may be. What for?"

Rigel swallowed, "Sensitivity to light and in some cases mild to severe paralysis?"

Hagrid peered at her, "Now how do ya know about all that? You know what's done it, do you?"

Rigel looked up at the big man solemnly, "I think... it sounds like belladonna poisoning."

Hagrid frowned, "Belladonna? I know better than to give that ter the chickens. Only rabbits can stomach those berries, and I woulda seen em if they'd been growing in the coup."

"They don't grow around here," Rigel said, "But I had... they're used in potions, and I had some last semester in my potions kit. But they were-" she grimaced, "They disappeared and I thought I'd misplaced them. I didn't think it was a problem, since you'd need so much to really hurt anyone, but I never dreamed an animal would get hold of it... I'm sorry, Hagrid. I'm so sorry. What if it was *my* belladonna that killed them?"

Hagrid shook his big head, "Don't go thinkin' that, now. It weren't yer fault. If it were belladonna, they had to be eating it for a long time in small amounts, otherwise it'd kill 'em all at once. An' if I weren't giving it to them and it weren't growing nearby, then it's foul play, and nothing more to it. Probably some mean-spirited little kid's idea of a joke. You done a good thing, figuring it out, that's all. Come inside, Mr. Black, an' let's have a cuppa. No use standing out here in the cold."

Rigel followed him inside, where Fang leapt at her face cheerfully. Rigel wasn't much of an animal lover, but something about the dog's irrepressible good nature made the pile of rotting bird carcasses fade from her thoughts for the time being.

"So," Hagrid said, setting two enormous mugs of hot tea on the wooden table, "How's yer semester going? Learning anything interesting, or is it the same codswallop about goblin wars and turnin' teacups into buttons as it used to be?"

Rigel nodded, "We do learn a lot of unlikely things, but it's only to diversify the range of our magic. I think the theory is that if you can turn a rattlesnake into a water goblet, you can turn pretty much anything to anything else."

"Well, you'd know better than I," Hagrid said agreeably.

Rigel wondered if she should apologize, for she couldn't help but feel it would be awfully painful for anyone to talk about a school they'd been kicked out of unfairly. Then again, Hagrid had brought it up, and he did choose to stay on and work there, so maybe he didn't dwell on it much.

"Speakin' of rattlesnakes," Hagrid said, peering curiously at her, "I hear you've got a bit of natural skill with 'em."

Rigel kept her face carefully blank, "Yes. I am a Parselmouth."

"Ruddy useful that is," Hagrid said wistfully, "Would ya mind if I asked yer to translate fer me sometime?"

Rigel was inwardly surprised that so many people apparently wanted to talk to snakes. Maybe it was the novelty of the idea? "They aren't great conversationalists," Rigel offered apologetically, "Mostly they just tell you they're tired or hungry or cold. They like to complain, I think. There's one at my dad's house that will tell you it's bored four times in a minute just to hear itself hiss."

Hagrid laughed in a rumbling way, "I don't doubt it. I wouldn't want to really talk to them, though-animals communicate better without words, if you ask me. It'd just be nice to have one listen ter *me* for a change."

Rigel couldn't help but smile a little at that. "That's definitely the most useful part of it, though half the time I think they listen out of surprise rather than actually *having* to," Rigel agreed, "And otherwise it's been more hindrance than help so far."

Hagrid shook his bushy head slowly, "Silly, that's what they are. Talkin' to snakes don't make you evil-beatin' house elves and killin' centaurs fer sport, that's what makes you a real monster."

Rigel softened her face in thanks, "I wish more people saw things the way you do."

Hagrid sighed, "They'll come around, they will. I know what it's like to be accused o' sommit you didn't do. When those kids wake up, though, maybe they'll 'ave seen what did it."

Rigel nodded, then paused, "Didn't anyone see what petrified them fifty years ago? I mean, you said one of the girls was too distraught, but weren't there others...?"

Hagrid heaved a sigh, "Naw, that was Myrtle, poor dear. She couldn't remember nothing in her state. The others all saw jus' one thing, though. Big, yellow eyes. Well, that coulda been anything, so it didn't clear up matters much."

Rigel could hear her breathing pause, but she was too focused on her whirling thoughts to pay it much mind. Something with big, yellow eyes wasn't much to go on, but something with big, yellow eyes that spoke parseltongue... well, *that* was something else entirely.

"Just two eyes, Hagrid?" she asked, a bit breathlessly from forgetting to breathe.

"I... yeah, I think so," Hagrid said, looking concerned, "Now, yer not still investigatin' this thing, are yeh? Because it's bad business, lad, very bad business indeed. It's best you leave that to the professors."

Rigel wracked her brains, trying to think of a way to be sure, and then paused, something niggling at her and diverting her train of thought, "Hagrid, did you say Myrtle... you said *she* was the distraught one?"

"That's right," Hagrid said blankly, before his face lit up with understanding, "Oh! 'course you wouldn't know. Myrtle left a ghost behind."

Rigel's eyes widened, "Myrtle's ghost lives here at the castle? What does she look like?"

Hagrid looked uncomfortably amused for some reason, "Well, the thing is... see, Myrtle was always a delicate sort... anyway, you won't have seen her. She keeps ter the girl's bathroom on the second floor. They call her Moaning Myrtle, now, 'cause she just cries all day long."

Rigel was struck by how sad that was. She would have to visit this Myrtle, if only to see if she remembered anything else after having fifty years to calm down. First, however, she had to go to the Library. There was something she vaguely remembered from her research with Archie on the subject, but she wanted to be sure.

"Mr. Hagrid," she said, "Have you told Dumbledore about your chickens being poisoned?"

Hagrid lifted his brows, "Course not! Professor Dumbledore is a very busy man, young Mr. Black. 'e hasn't got time to listen to everybody's problems, ya know. Gets enough o' that from the Minster, I dare say."

"So only you and Madam Pomphrey know they've been poisoned?" Rigel clarified.

"Look, even if it *were* your belladonna, yer not gonna be in trouble, lad," Hagrid said kindly.

"Oh, I know, sir," Rigel said, "I've got an idea, that's all. Sorry about all the questions."

Hagrid shrugged uncomfortably, "Not a problem."

"Thank you for the hot chocolate, Mr. Hagrid," Rigel said, standing, "I've got to go check something, but I'm sorry about your chickens, and I'm really grateful you answered all my questions."

"Anytime, lad, anytime," Hagrid said, standing as well. He let her out, but called her back before closing the door, saying, "Oh! I almost forgot. Last time you were asking about the creatures in the forest, right? Well, I still think ya should give up on this business, but I suppose it won't hurt nothin' to tell ya. My oldest friend in this forest, spider by the name of Aragog, moved his family's hollow a few weeks back. It's much deeper into the forest than it used to be, now, if that helps any."

"That's the giant spider Riddle found you with?" Rigel asked, nearly vibrating to get to the Library now. She knew there was something about spiders in that book, but she'd only read the passage once, not twice like she did when she was memorizing something for school.

"That's him," Hagrid said fondly, "Great species, giant spiders. You wouldn't expect it, but they're very family-oriented."

"Thank you for telling me, Hagrid," Rigel said, dropping the 'Mr.' in her distraction, "See you later."

"Bye, lad," Hagrid waved at her from his door as she jogged up the hill to the castle. She practically ran through the halls, and was only glad it was too late in the evening for her to meet anyone. It was a bit beyond curfew at that point, so Rigel began thinking out what she would say if she ran into a prefect patrol, but amazingly she didn't see anyone on her way to the Library.

The lights in the Library were off, but the doors opened with a simple *Alohamora* request to her wand, and Rigel slipped over to the magical creatures section quickly. She knew the author's name started with an 'R,' so it didn't take her long to find the book she was looking for. It was lucky the Hogwarts Library had a copy, but she was beginning to think it had a copy of everything.

With the passage on Basilisks open before her, Rigel began to read as quickly as she dared.

Fully grown it stretches upwards of fifty feet...

That would put its eyes at least the size of grapefruit, Rigel estimated.

Spiders flee before it... it heeds its Master's call...

Rigel scanned down a bit, and there it was, the last key.

A single rooster's cry is fatal to its ears.

Rigel sucked in a breath slowly. A basilisk. A giant, kill-with-a-look basilisk was roaming about the school. Rigel didn't know how it was getting in and out of the walls, but it was somewhere within them now, waiting until it was called again. She closed the book grimly and shelved it.

She knew what she had to do.

Five minutes later she was panting slightly, but she'd made it down to Snape's office as quickly as she could. She knocked on the door, harder than usual, and a sharp voice barked at her from within.

"Office hours are over," Snape called waspishly through the wood, "Go away whoever you are before I take points for being out of bounds after curfew. I have neither the time nor the patience to-"

"It's me, Professor!" Rigel called through the door impatiently. She would have walked right in considering the situation, but she didn't fancy getting shocked by the doorknob again for entering without permission.

A pause. "Mr. Black. Of course." The door swung open and Snape's narrow-eyed glare met her from behind his desk, "You were to go straight to your common room after detention."

"Professor," Rigel said, interjecting her voice with earnest urgency, "It's a basilisk."

Snape froze for only a moment before snapping out, "Explain."

"The thing petrifying kids. It's a basilisk," Rigel said.

Snape pursed his lips, "That is indeed one of the possibilities being considered-"

"It's definitely a basilisk," Rigel said firmly, "I've just been at Hagrid's-"

"You'd better have been," Snape muttered sourly.

"-and his friend, the giant spider, has migrated away from the castle-"

"What nonsense is this?" Snape barked, "Giant spiders? What on Merlin's green earth-"

"-and-would you *listen* ?" Rigel said, "All of Hagrid's roosters have been killed. All of them. They've been poisoned by belladonna- *my* belladonna-and-and-so it's a basilisk!"

Rigel was panting slightly once she'd gotten it all out, and Snape just stared at her for a moment before sinking back into his chair.

"Basilisk," Snape said, clenching his jaw around the word, "A *basilisk* . Salazar, but who would-ah. Slytherin's monster indeed. All this time, a basilisk in the school. Just waiting for a Parselmouth to command its allegiance."

"I haven't-" Rigel began, but Snape interrupted her.

"Not you," he snapped, "Mr. Black, I am escorting you to the common room this instant, after which I will be going to Dumbledore's office to relate this news. You will find out with the rest of the student body when measures are taken. Until then, keep your mouth shut and your head down."

"Yes, sir," Rigel said, feeling much relieved now that the information was in the hands of a fully-grown wizard.

"Informing me was well done, Black," Snape added as they exited the office.

Rigel stared at Snape's black robes as they swept away from her. Honestly, what else was she supposed to have done? Keep it to herself?

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Draco stared at the letter in his hand with a detached sort of curiosity. Though the letters were in perfectly stylized English, the words were something strange, their meaning completely foreign to him.

I am disappointed, my son.

Those words could not be for him. Draco took a calming breath. His father must have accidentally sent him the letter intended for his... other son. Draco grimaced. How in Salazar's great name had it come to this? His father was *disappointed* in him. Like-like he'd done something *wrong*.

I thought you understood the stakes when I charged you with looking after our family's interests, and yet so crucial a detail has escaped your detection...

Draco scowled down at the thick, ecru parchment, tracing the engraved 'M' in the corner absently with his thumb. It wasn't as though he could write back and say, 'Actually, Father, I've known my friend was a Parselmouth for some weeks, and merely decided not to inform you of this crucial development.' Draco could hear the 'family first' lecture already. No, thanks.

Perhaps I expected too much of you.

Draco could only think rather sullenly that perhaps his father was right in that, at least. It seemed that it was too much to expect Draco to betray his friend's confidence lightly. In his defense, Rigel being able to talk to snakes wasn't directly related to the Malfoy family fortunes, so Draco hadn't actually chosen his friends over his family. He'd just chosen his friends *and* his family. Yes, Draco thought, rolling up the letter and re-sealing it with a quick spell, there was no reason why he couldn't have both. His father just hated to kept at the same level of ignorance as the masses, that was all. He'd get over his pique, in time.

Pansy, who was quietly reading her Charms book on the sofa next to him, turned her head slightly to catch his eye and said, "Anything for me?"

This may seem like an odd question, but Draco's mother often included little notes, correspondence cards, she called them, to Pansy in Draco's letters. Sometimes he felt Pansy knew his mother better than he did, though he certainly didn't begrudge her the knowledge.

"Sorry, Pans," Draco said, shaking his head.

"Just your father, then," Pansy said, sighing with sympathy, "Is it about Rigel's gift?"

"Figures he'd have found out so soon," Draco said. Even he didn't know how many people his father employed to spy for him. Then again, perhaps Uncle Severus had told him.

"Is Mr. Malfoy upset?" Pansy asked, tilting her head consideringly at him, as though wondering how much sympathy she could offer before it became too uncomfortable for him.

"Father doesn't get upset," Draco said, smiling wryly, "He merely grows disappointed in the world."

Pansy set her book aside and took Draco's hand consolingly. Even though Pansy was a *girl* and holding hands was a perfectly ridiculous way to pass the time, Draco absorbed his friend's steadfast presence gratefully, though of course that gratitude would only be sappy and cheap if he ever expressed it.

"Do you think Rigel is finished with his detention yet?" Pansy asked, yawning delicately behind her hand, "It's quite late."

Draco pulled out his pocket watch, "Should have been done half an hour ago. Something probably came up."

"Something always comes up with Rigel," Pansy said dryly, "Our friend is a trouble magnet."

"Befriending him was your idea," Draco said, leaning back into the couch with a sigh.

Pansy only laughed, "Keep telling yourself that, Drake."

Draco went to respond, but at that moment the common room entrance slid open. Normally that wouldn't merit so much as a pause in conversation, but he and Pansy were the only two left in the common area, save for a group of third years at a table in the corner, so the stone sliding against stone was quite noticeable in the quiet.

Rigel walked into the common room, his face drawn and pale, and Draco caught a glimpse of his godfather in the corridor outside before the wall slid shut once more.

Pansy waved a hand to get Rigel's attention, and the slighter boy changed direction to weave his way over to their couch with tired, heavy steps.

Rigel sank down onto the couch between them, rubbed his eyes, and said, "You two weren't waiting on me, were you?"

Draco and Pansy exchanged an amused look over Rigel's head. What else did the idiot think they were doing, sitting around this late at night?

"No, Rigel," Pansy said, fighting a smile, "We were just chatting."

"Oh," Rigel said, nodding, "Good."

"What did you have to do?" Draco asked curiously. His friend looked unusually run-down, and his robes stank of something foul.

Rigel blinked at him, then seemed to come to a realization, "Oh, the detention." Draco felt like shaking his friend and demanding to know what he had been doing that night that relegated the detention he'd *just come from* to some distant corner of his mind. "Right. I helped Mr. Hagrid clean out his chicken coup."

Pansy wrinkled the tip of her nose, "Sounds exceedingly pleasant. I'm surprised you aren't covered in feathers."

Rigel winced, "There weren't-I mean," he looked at Pansy askance, clearly deciding whether or not to shield her from something. At Pansy's raised eyebrow, Rigel cleared his throat uncomfortably, "Hagrid's chickens have been poisoned. They all... passed away. I was helping him move the... remains."

Draco frowned, and Pansy's face positively crumpled.

"Who would do such a thing?" Pansy said, eyes clouded with confusion.

Rigel's face was all at once blank-suspiciously blank, as Draco liked to call it-and Draco got the uncomfortably feeling that Rigel was holding something else back. Not his usual secrets, though. Draco knew there were things Rigel didn't tell them simply because he was Rigel. This was something else. This was a secret that even Rigel didn't want to be keeping.

"What's happened, Rigel?" Draco asked, voice calm, "What do you know?"

Rigel's face was still blank, but his eyes shone with frustration, "I can't tell you. I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry," Draco said, "Just tell us."

Rigel softened his face enough to grimace sarcastically at Draco, "This time I want to, Draco, but Professor Snape asked me not to."

"Did he ask you to keep something quiet, or did he ask you not to tell *us* ?" Draco asked innocently.

"Because we *are* the most dependable people you know," Pansy added cajolingly, "If anyone can help you keep it quiet, we can."

Rigel smiled, a tiny, fleeting motion of the lips, "You'll find out soon, I expect. Professor Snape implied that there would be an announcement of some kind once they'd decided what to do."

Draco's brow creased. "An announcement about the gamekeeper's chickens? Why would... wait." Draco's mind whirled at the implications, "This has something to do with the petrifications, doesn't it?" It had to. What else would affect the whole school and make Rigel look so worried?

Rigel's face was smooth as stone, so Draco knew he had guessed correctly.

Pansy shook her head, "But what has murdering chickens got to do with... oh." Pansy's face went white and her hand trembled ever so slightly, "Not chickens. *Roosters*, wasn't it? A basilisk."

"What?" Draco could feel his own face draining of color.

Rigel bit his lip, "How did you know that?" he asked softly, and Draco wished he would take it back, tell Pansy she was wrong, that the

whole thing was a joke somehow. There just couldn't be a basilisk in Hogwarts. There was simply no way.

Pansy put a hand to her head as her features settled into a solemn mask, "Edmund gave me a book on rare magical creatures for my birthday," she said, "Basilisk was toward the end. It can petrify things with its gaze, and its fatal weakness is the crow of a rooster. They're supposed to be extinct, though."

Draco was still wrapping his mind around the idea of a giant snake running around the wait. "Rigel," Draco said slowly, "A basilisk is a snake."

"Yes," Rigel said evenly, "It is."

"Rigel," Draco's voice was not getting higher, he assured himself, "A basilisk is a *giant snake*. It *must* speak Parseltongue. Can you-have you- *that's* why you're always missing when an attack happens!"

Rigel's face grayed further and his eyes widened, gazing with hurt disbelief at Draco's angry expression, " *No!* Dray, I would never-Pan, you know I would never do something like that. I promise. I *swear*, I didn't-"

Draco growled in exasperation, "Stop being a prat." Rigel froze, blinking at Draco with a wary plea in his eyes. Draco rolled his own eyes, "I don't think you *did it*, I think you went chasing after it like some kind of idiotic Gryffindor with a hero complex."

Rigel opened his mouth, paused, closed it again slowly, and looked away from Draco's face in a sure sign of guilt and sheepishness.

Pansy shook her head sadly, "Rigel, please tell me you didn't. Don't you know how dangerous that is? You could have been really hurt. What were you thinking, running off after a basilisk?"

Rigel's eyes tightened defensively, "It wasn't like that."

"How was it like, Rigel?" Draco asked evenly.

Rigel took a steadying breath, then began to speak, "The first couple of times I heard the voice, I thought it was just some snake wandering around, lost or something. I didn't know it was connected to the petrifications until later, but once I knew *of course* I didn't go chasing after it. Most of the time it was sheer coincidence that I was out of the common room when an attack happened-you know what my schedule is like. I'm nearly *always* out of the common room."

"When you realized the voice was connected to the attacks, did you...?" Pansy trailed off, clearly trying not to ask a leading and potentially judgmental question, but Rigel nodded easily.

"I told the Headmaster." Rigel rubbed his eyes tiredly again, "When I realized it was a basilisk tonight, I did the same. The Headmaster should inform everyone tomorrow, just don't say anything until then, all right?"

Draco and Pansy both shot Rigel offended looks. Just what kind of duffers did he take them for? Honestly.

"Is there anything else you want to tell us?" Draco asked, secretly hoping that was the end of it, "Before the whole school finds out, I mean."

Rigel sighed, "It was my belladonna that poisoned the roosters."

Draco paused while his mind attempted to reconcile that statement with his current understanding of reality.

"Oh!" Pansy said, apparently catching on quicker than Draco, "Yours went missing! He told us back on Halloween, remember, Drake? Rigel was late because he couldn't find the belladonna he needed for the potion he was brewing."

Rigel nodded, and Draco did remember something about that, now that Pansy brought it up. The girl's social recall was simply

astounding at times.

"So it was stolen?" Draco guessed, thinking aloud, "But a basilisk isn't that smart. I mean, it's sentient to an extent, but it isn't clever enough to steal a potion ingredient to poison its enemy. That means someone else is doing the thinking, which means someone's controlling it. But how? It would take hundreds of years to hatch and raise a basilisk to the size that it could properly petrify someone."

"Parseltongue," Rigel said quietly, "If it has a Master, then the Master has to be someone who can speak Parseltongue to command it. That's the language's original purpose, after all. Control. They wouldn't have had to train the basilisk, just find it."

Draco shook his head-not in disbelief of Rigel's words, but in the improbability of the entire situation. "How can there be another unknown Parselmouth at Hogwarts?" he asked, "It's just plain unlikely."

On the bright side, wouldn't his father be interested to hear *that*?

"Well, he's kept himself well-hidden, whoever he is," Pansy said.

"She," Rigel said.

Draco raised an eyebrow, "Come again?"

Rigel hesitated, but then said firmly, "I think the other speaker is a girl. I didn't tell you guys because I didn't want to worry you-"

Draco mentally groaned-if only his friend knew how worrying *those* words were to hear.

"-but before winter break my lab was broken into," Rigel said, "The thief got the jump on me in the dark, but they had long hair, and there was something feminine about their voice."

"And you think that was the same person who controls the basilisk?" Pansy said.

Rigel nodded seriously, "They kept trying to get my potions kit from me. I think now they'd run out of the belladonna they'd already stolen from me, and needed more. Snape's stores are heavily warded once classes are out, and after my ingredients went missing once, I started keeping better track of them, not leaving any in the lab cupboards like I used to."

Draco noticed that Rigel flicked his eyes to the side in a mildly guilty sort of way as he said that, and wondered if it wasn't one of Snape's many rules not to leave ingredients lying about. It made sense, but Draco thought Rigel had a rather strange interpretation of rules in general. Half the time he followed them as though he couldn't imagine why anyone would want to do differently, and the other half he seemed to ignore the rules completely, as though he couldn't fathom why anyone would do something just because someone told them to.

It was a strange sort of person who could go wandering around after curfew without a care in the world and then insist that you had to check your cauldron for cracks before brewing in it even though you just checked it yesterday, because *that's what you're supposed to do*.

"So they got the rest of the belladonna from you as well?" Pansy clarified.

Rigel shook his head, "The kit's warded. They ran off before I could get a good look at them, but they definitely didn't get the rest of the belladonna from me."

Draco shrugged dismissively, "They probably just waited until winter break to go to an apothecary." He turned the mystery over in his head for a moment, thinking aloud even though his father always told him it was a weak mind that couldn't contain its own train of thoughts, "You think it was a girl? That narrows the suspects by half at least." In fact it was a bit more than half, since boys were more common in pureblooded families for one reason or another. "Young or old?"

Rigel hesitated, "I'm not sure."

Draco supposed Rigel's dad probably hadn't trained him to quantify his senses in a coherent way. When Draco was small, his father used to point out people on the street and ask him to guess how old they were, how much they weighed, and how tall they were. His father painstakingly corrected him until he could gauge those things with little more than a glance. Later he had learned to classify people by the sound of their voice or footsteps as well.

"Her voice was odd," Rigel said, frowning, "It was familiar, but strange. Deep, but not naturally so. The way she phrased things was... not exactly antiquated, but definitely mature. Too commanding to be a child, really."

Draco glanced at Pansy, but though the girl knew almost everyone in the school, her face showed no signs of recognition either.

Seeing that they were getting nowhere, Draco sighed and stood, "We should get some sleep. There'll be time enough to talk it over tomorrow, and with any luck the professors will have caught the culprit before we can worry about it much."

Pansy left for her own room and Draco snuck with Rigel into their quiet dorm. Blaise and Theo were asleep, or at least Theo was quietly snoring at Blaise was perhaps faking sleep very convincingly-you never knew with Blaise. Draco peeled off his uniform, moving slowly in the dark to find his pajamas and get his arms through the correct holes.

Rigel politely turned away while Draco changed, and Draco only shook his head at how weirdly modest Rigel was. The whole sleeping in his clothes thing was a bit odd, but Draco had seen odder things in the name of paranoia, so that he could overlook. What was really strange, though, was that Rigel *never* changed in front of anyone, and never so much as glanced at other people while *they* changed, unless it was on accident.

Whether it was in the Quidditch locker rooms or in the relative privacy of their dorms, Rigel changed in a closed stall or in the bathroom. As Draco watched Rigel slip off his shoes and curl up on top of his covers, all the while keeping his back to Draco, he quickly suppressed the urge to snort. It was just so funny how shy his friend was. Give the boy a half-eviscerated hinkypunk heart and he'd lean in closer and start pointing out which valves could go in a potion, but when met with any form of semi-nudity Rigel clammed up and averted his eyes.

Theo had finally noticed this a couple of months ago-to be fair, Rigel played it off casually and even Draco hadn't noticed until this year-and their roommate now took great delight in walking around the room shirtless (as long as the girls weren't present) just to see how long Rigel could avoid looking at him. Draco had to admit, the half-exasperated, half-uncomfortable expression on Rigel's face when he finally looked over and scowled at Theo was pretty entertaining. Even Blaise seemed amused at how easy it was to fluster the infamously cool and collected Rigel Black.

Draco's eyes were heavy, so he fell asleep quickly that night, untroubled by thought of basilisks roaming the hallways. After all, what was there to worry about? Once you knew what the threat was, it was only a matter of taking the proper precautions. Not knowing was much worse. Even better, the professors knew about the threat too. They would take care of everything, and Draco just had to stay with his year mates, keep his head down, and not follow the sound of any disembodied, Parseltongue-speaking voices into unlit corridors. Really, how hard could that be?

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The next morning Rigel sat calmly in the Great Hall while all around her there was the sound of cheerful, child-like naiveté being trampled on by a heard of metaphorical hippogriffs. It gasped, it choked, and

the oblivious innocence under which a few of the students at Hogwarts had apparently been operating breathed its last.

Admittedly, Dumbledore might have chosen a more tactful way of informing the student body about the impending threat roaming the castle hallways, but at least he was clear about it.

"Dear students, you will be glad to know that what has been petrifying students these past few months was nothing more than a giant basilisk."

If pandemonium could exist in silence, that's what was born in the Great Hall at Dumbledore's words. Just open-mouthed shock all around, and the sound of several people hyperventilating. Rigel could see on people's faces that most of them were inwardly panicking, but at that point there were no words to work with other than- *what ?* and- *wait, what?*

"Yes, good students, you will be *pleased* to know this, because there is a rather astonishingly simple way to defeat a basilisk,"
Dumbledore said, "And so I am here to inform you that classes will be cancelled for the rest of the day."

"You defeat a basilisk by canceling classes?" one brave soul piped up incredulously.

"Thankfully for education's sake, that is not the case, Mr. Jocaunt,"
Dumbledore said, chuckling, "No, we are canceling classes so that you students will be better enabled to spend the entirety of the day inside your common rooms while your professors and I deal with this little pest of ours."

" 'Little pest?' " Draco looked as though Dumbledore's speech was physically paining him, "Being blasé in the face of danger should be illegal when you're supposed to be comforting your students with a sense of power and capability."

Blaise snorted and Theo just groaned, "All day in the common room? With everyone else packed in there too? So boring."

Rigel was glad to see that her friends had their priorities sorted out.

"What if we want to help defeat the basilisk?" Fred Weasley piped up.

"Leave it to a Gryffindor," Millicent rolled her eyes.

"Admirable of you, Mr. Weasley, but I dare say we have it rather in hand," Dumbledore said, "So, tuck in and enjoy your breakfast, students. Your Head of House and prefects will escort everyone back to the dorm rooms directly afterwards. If you know of someone in your house who is not present at the table this morning, please inform your nearest prefect immediately. Thank you."

The Headmaster sat back down, and low-pitched conversation broke out across the Hall.

"Is he joking?" was the first question it seemed nearly everyone had to ask.

"Even Dumbledore wouldn't joke about this," Blaise said quietly. His gaze flicked over Draco, Pansy, and Rigel, and he raised an eyebrow, "Why aren't you three more surprised?"

"We're practicing our un-surprised expressions," Pansy said, blank-faced, "It's so gratifying to know that we've improved enough to fool even your sharp eyes, Blaise."

Blaise blinked slow-lidded at them, "You knew. How?"

"Woah, you guys knew about the basilisk already?" Millicent said, leaning close across the table so her voice wouldn't carry.

"Of course we didn't," Draco said sharply, his eyes flashing with impatience, "How could we? And if we did, we certainly wouldn't have kept it to ourselves."

"Alright, we'll drop it," Millicent shrugged, going back to her breakfast with an air of unconcern. Then she looked up and pinned Draco with a sardonic look, "But you three are not as clever as you think."

Draco looked about to argue, then glanced at Rigel and for some reason thought better of it.

After breakfast, Rigel got up to follow the rest of her house, but a hand on her shoulder held her back. She turned to see Professor Snape looking tense and serious behind her.

"Stay a moment, Mr. Black," Snape's voice was even, but his jaw was clenched as he spoke, "The Headmaster requests your assistance."

Rigel hung back as her year-mates went on ahead. Draco and Pansy sent her concerned looks, but left her there without protest.

"Mr. Black, this way, this way," Dumbledore said genially.

He reached into one of his many robe pockets and pulled out a midnight blue stone shaped like an orb.

"Now this," the Headmaster said, "Is a curious little thing. I was inspired by a muggle contraption I once saw. You see, the spells engraved in the runes act like sticky little webs, and their prey of choice is sound waves!"

At Rigel's confused look, Dumbledore twirled a finger around his beard thoughtfully.

"Well, you see it's a bit like a... no, no, it's more like... hmm, why don't I just show you?" Dumbledore cleared his throat, tapped the orb twice, and waited a moment while it began to glow with a soft, bluish-white light. Then he said, "Happy Birthday."

The orb turned red. Dumbledore tapped it again and his voice echoed loudly throughout the room.

" Happy Birthday ."

" Happy Birthday ."

" Happy -"

"Yes, I think I understand," Rigel said quickly. Dumbledore turned the globe off and looked at her expectantly. "What, ah, did you want me to do?"

Dumbledore smiled, "Well we can't just wait around for the basilisk to show up, you know. I happen to be quite busy most days, despite rumors to the contrary."

"Oh," Rigel understood now, "You want me to talk into that orb in Parseltongue, right? So that you can call the monster here."

"Yes, that's it precisely, Mr. Black," Dumbledore beamed down at her, "Hagrid is on his way back from the nearest market as we speak, hopefully with a good stock of roosters. Once you have safely vacated the premises we will use the recording of your call to lure the snake here and defeat it."

Rigel was not entirely sure this plan was going to work.

"Will it respond to my call if I'm not its real Master?" Rigel asked.

"It won't obey your call, no," Dumbledore said, gazing up at the ceiling thoughtfully, "But one of the many curses of sentient life is that persistent little feeling called curiosity, Mr. Black. I believe that the snake will be intrigued, if nothing else, by the sound of a new voice calling to it. And if that fails we are prepared with more... shall we say, *base* temptations?"

Rigel was going to ask what he meant, but at that moment about twenty house elves came scurrying in the Great Hall doors carrying an enormous platter of raw, bloody meat. Rigel's nose scrunched up involuntarily as the sickly sweet odor of fresh flesh invaded her

senses. The elves seemed entirely unbothered by it, though come to think of it Rigel didn't actually know what house elves ate.

They set the platter of blood-soaked meat in the center of the hall, and Professor Flitwick hurried over to cast a charm of some kind over it.

"Aroma Amplification," Dumbledore said, nodding to the diminutive professor, "Very useful spell."

Sure enough, a moment later the smell was so overpowering Rigel had to cover her nose with her sleeve to keep from gagging indelicately.

"Oh, forgive me," Dumbledore said. He took out his wand and pointed it at her face. Rigel told herself that having one of the most powerful wizards of the age train his wand at her face did not make her break out in a cold sweat, but the moisture between her shoulder blades rather begged to differ. Dumbledore did no more than cast an air-bubble around her nose and mouth, however; the Bubble-Head Spell, she thought it was called. Able to breath easier, Rigel nodded her thanks.

"Do get on with this ridiculous farce sometime in the next millennia," Snape said. He was standing with his arms crossed, surveying the scene with cynical dismissal.

"Don't be such a Negative Nancy, Severus," Dumbledore said serenely. He tapped the orb twice, so that it glowed blue-white once more, and said, "Whenever you're ready, then, Mr. Black."

Rigel envisioned a snake in her head and said, *"Come to me. Come, mighty basssilissk, for I desssire to sssee the truth of your might and beauty. Come and meet with me, great basssilissk. Come, come and ssspeak to me. "*

And so it went. She talked for a good few minutes into the orb, just general entreaties to come forth with a few bits of flattery thrown in,

in case the basilisk was a vain creature.

Dumbledore eventually let her stop, and the orb turned red. "Thank you for your assistance, Mr. Black. Severus will escort you to your common room now."

Rigel left with Snape, who scowled at the air as he swiftly led her down to the Slytherin common room.

"You don't think the snake will come," Rigel observed.

"Neither does the Headmaster," Snape said, snorting, "But that is not your concern."

Rigel let the silence stretch after that, and soon she was sliding into the common room, feeling, as many pairs of eyes swung her way, that she was beginning to get déjà-vu after encountering the same scene so many times in close succession.

Rigel moved to where she spotted her two best friends, their matching blonde hair readily discernable among the crowd, and was surprised to see several upperclassmen seated among them.

"Don't look so surprised," Aldon Rosier said, sliding sideways on a couch to make room for Rigel to sit, "You're the one with the information, and anyone with eyes can guess where you'll end up spilling it all. So spill."

Rigel sat down next to Rosier a bit bemusedly, still unsure where they stood after the New Year's Gala. Were they friends? Close acquaintances? "What do you want to know?" she asked, addressing the question to the group at large, all of whom seemed content to gaze at her expectantly after Rosier had announced their intentions so bluntly.

"Everything," Millicent said, her tone of voice indicating that this was obvious, "What's happening up there?"

"The house elves brought up a giant platter of bloody meat," Rigel said, no longer really surprised at the absurd things that came out of her mouth at Hogwarts, "Professor Flitwick charmed the meat to smell extra strongly, to lure the basilisk out."

"I'd say you were making that up, but it does explain the Bubble-Head Charm," Draco said wryly.

Rigel looked down and noticed that she did, indeed, still have a bubble of air around her nose and mouth. She reached for her magical core and asked it to cancel the charm. Her magic extended one lazy coil toward her mouth and began unraveling the spell, breaking it down and reconfiguring it until the energy could be absorbed by her core.

"I figured they were gassing the place," Theo shrugged, "Like what Grindelwald used to do when he laid siege to a place, you know?"

"They aren't that I know of," Rigel said, "Mr. Hagrid is importing roosters, so once they get the basilisk in the main hall I suppose they'll just... make them crow."

"That seems... kind of lame," Theo said. He lifted his hands in defense as several people looked at him with exasperation, "I'm just saying, a basilisk should go out in more style than that. I mean, the rooster doesn't even have to fight it or anything, it just... crows."

"It might be difficult to get it to crow," Pansy said consolingly.

"Not with a half-decent Sunrise Charm," Draco pointed out.

"Who cares how it's done? As long as whatever's attacking students is dealt with, I'll sleep better," Adrian Pucey said, shivering a bit, "A basilisk. Blimey, what are the odds?"

"At Hogwarts? Pretty good," Alesana Selwyn snorted from her seat beside Rookwood.

"Are they doing anything else?" Rosier asked, not speaking very loud since he was sitting right next to her, "What if its sense of smell is dulled, or it's a vegetarian like you?"

A few people laughed, but Rigel only grimaced inwardly, "It's definitely not an herbivore," she said. All that ripping and tearing business still unnerved her when she thought about it. "There is something else, though-"

"Evan!"

Pucey dived across the couch he was sitting on to sweep his hand under the end table on the other side. He withdrew his hand, and pulled his pet snake, Eve/Evan, with him. Evan was thrashing a bit with annoyance, complaining loudly in a plaintive hiss, "*Let go, flessshling massster, I want to feassst.*"

"Where do you think you're going?" Adrian asked his snake, curling it around his arm with firm, no-nonsense movements, "You're supposed to be in your cage."

"*Let go, let go, I want sssome of that deliciousss meat.*"

"*Can you tassste it on the air it all the way down here?*" Rigel asked curiously, pretending not to notice how people froze around her to listen.

"*Of courssse,*" Evan twitched, flicking his tongue negligently to demonstrate, "*Ssso good. I want a mouthful.*"

"He's hungry," Rigel explained to a confused Adrian Pucey.

"I just gave it a mouse," Pucey protested, "I swear."

"*I don't want miccce,*" Evan said sulkily, "*I want that feassst .*"

"He wants what's upstairs," Rigel said, "*It isssn't for you, sssorry. It'sss for the basssilisssk.*"

" *For the King?*" Evan stopped moving immediately, "*Perhapsss... I'd better leave it to Him, then...*" Evan gave one last disappointed hiss before curling around Pucey's arm in a more or less docile manner.

"Oh, he's quieted," Pucey said, "Thanks, Rigel."

"All I did was talk to-"

Her words were drowned out by the sound of... her own voice. Except it was magnified a dozen times louder than she'd ever shouted and it reverberated around the entire school like a disembodied god trembling a mountain with its words alone.

" ***Come to me. Come, mighty basssilissk...*** "

People jumped and started as the Parseltongue blew through the common room like a foul wind, sweeping through the air and leaving shivers and flinches in its wake.

" ***Come, come and speak to me ...*** "

"Rigel," Draco said, pitching his voice counter to the hissing echoing throughout the room, "Is that... you?"

Rigel nodded in response to that and the many questioning glances she was receiving from around the room, "Dumbledore took a record of my voice in the Great Hall, to call the basilisk to its demise."

"Rigel," Theo said seriously, looking a bit ill, "I think your gift is cool and everything, but promise me you won't ever shout in Parseltongue around me, okay? It's seriously unnerving at that decibel."

Rookwood spoke up from his seat next to Selwyn, a look of pure, academic curiosity on his face, "What are you saying? It sounds like... different variations on the same thing."

Rigel raised an eyebrow. Not many could discern the subtle differences in sound that Parseltongue employed, at least not

enough to know when the words were different or not. Then again, it was being magnified a thousand times over at the moment, so it wasn't exactly nuanced.

"It's mostly the same thing over and over," she said, "Like, 'come here' or 'this way,' that sort of thing."

"Will it listen?" Pansy asked, her head tilted thoughtfully, "Will it work?"

"Professor Snape believes the creature will ignore it completely, and Professor Dumbledore thinks it will come out of curiosity once it hears the voice or smells the meat," Rigel said, "But neither thinks it would listen to me in the way you mean. I'm not its Master."

Daphne Greengrass, who was hovering at the edge of the group, listening but not contributing, snorted something that sounded like, "Sure you're not," but left it at that at least.

"So there's every possibility this won't even work," Millicent sighed, "Great. At least we missed a day of classes."

"Awful lot of trouble for something that might not even work," Theo said, "Wonder why-oh, go on then, Blaise. I can see in your eyes you're dying to explain."

Blaise sniffed in an unconvincingly uneager way, and said, "Now that the Headmaster has reliable information on what the threat is, he must be seen to do *something*. This kind of petrification can't stay as quiet as it has-it's only because most students here know better than to tell their parents what goes on for fear of being pulled out that it hasn't become common knowledge yet. Soon the *Prophet* will come to call, and the Ministry, and hundreds of concerned parents. They will all ask the same question-what is being done? So the Headmaster puts on his little show, and the students feel safer now that the threat is being taken seriously, but will the basilisk come? Will the petrifications end? I think not."

Rigel had to concede the point, though that was a rather pessimistic way of looking at things. Snape seemed to be thinking along the same lines, as well, and Rigel wondered how they *actually* planned on handling the situation, if this was all for show.

"What will they do if this doesn't work?" Theo asked, "Make us all carry around mirrors?"

"They'll probably close the school," Rookwood said. At several people's alarmed looks, he shook his head slowly, "Not forever, just until they either find the basilisk or starve it out."

"Starve it out?" Draco looked thoughtful, "You mean, take away its food supply and force it back into hibernation or something?"

"They'd have to cut off its access to the forest, of course," Rookwood said, his deep voice calm and even, "Assuming that's how it continues to nourish itself despite not having devoured any of its victims yet."

"That's nice," Millicent said, wincing.

"What do you mean 'yet'?" Theo asked.

"I'm not sure that will work," Rigel said.

"Why not?" Rosier asked, yawning and relaxing back into the cushions before draping his arm around the low back of their couch.

Rigel sat a tiny bit straighter so that she wouldn't be resting her neck on his wrist and said, "The basilisk isn't the real problem. It's a tool. It would be beneficial to remove the tool, of course, but the wielder will only find another one. Someone is controlling that monster and forcing it to petrify students."

"How do you know that for sure?" Millicent challenged. Rigel could tell the other girl thought Rigel was keeping more information from them. A fair assumption, she would be the first to admit.

"It's animal nature," Selwyn spoke up, fingering her long, dark hair absently, "If the monster was acting on its own it would either kill *and* eat its prey or it wouldn't bother petrifying them. It actually takes more work for a basilisk to petrify with its gaze than to kill, because it has to send its gaze through its own second eyelids and filter its killing power first. A basilisk wouldn't bother petrifying something unless it was saving it for eating later, but none of the students have been abducted and taken back to its lair. No, the basilisk's movements are too unpredictable and unnecessary to be attributed to anything but a *human* motive. The only question is *what* human motive?"

Rigel was frankly impressed at how well Selwyn understood the subject. She and Rookwood really knew their magical creatures, it seemed.

"Not to mention the explosions," Pansy said softly, "That doesn't sound like any ability a basilisk's ever been known to have."

"What *is* with the explosions?" Theo asked, "If you want to kill the kids, why petrify them first? And if they're not for harming the kids then why set them off when no one else is around to get hurt?"

"Because the problem is that no one else is around," Rosier said, his mouth tilted with wry distaste, "Some people just want attention, plain and simple. Whoever's doing this wants everyone to know he is, right away."

She, Rigel mentally corrected. It was definitely a she.

Eventually the sound of Rigel's magnified hissing became quieter, still audible but turned down and muted like white noise, all but ignored as the Slytherins passed the time talking, reading, or simply lazing on the couches around the fireplaces. A couple of times someone thought they heard a rooster's crowing, but the common room door never opened, and they didn't hear anything else.

At around five that evening the hissing finally stopped, replaced shortly by McGonagall's voice telling them classes would proceed as usual the next day, and then silence.

The house elves came and went, leaving piles of food around the common room to tide them over for the day. Rigel got out a book on diagnosing environmental causes of illness while Draco played a game of cards with Millicent and Theo. Pansy sat quietly in self-reflection, Blaise was reading a book on South American runic systems, Rookwood and Selwyn left to hold a private conversation somewhere else, and Rosier...

Rosier was doing his level best to annoy the patience out of Rigel, it seemed. At first he just took to staring at her out of the corner of his eyes while she read. Whenever she glanced sideways at him to silently ask what he wanted, he pretended to be examining his fingernails. Rigel eventually attempted to ignore the upperclassman's gaze altogether, and that, to Rosier, was apparently some sort of code for 'I don't mind you staring at me,' because after that he gave up all pretense of examining his nail beds and actually angled himself on the couch to get a more comfortable view.

Rigel considered asking him to stop, but she reminded herself that everyone was bored being cooped up in the common room all day, and snapping at Rosier probably wouldn't make any difference in terms of his observed behavior anyway, except he'd probably laugh at her *while* staring or something.

It didn't help that Pansy shot them both long, contemplative looks every now and then, which Draco eventually noticed. Draco then spent about twenty minutes alternatively glaring at Rosier's bored face and gazing imploringly at Rigel, as though urging her to say or do something-what, Rigel wasn't sure. It wasn't exactly illegal to stare at someone, after all. Draco did sigh loudly and give up his glaring after a good amount of sub-breath grumbling, and even Pansy seemed to find something else to occupy her attention after a while.

But Rosier would not stop staring.

It wasn't even really staring at that point, Rigel thought as she read the same sentence irritably for the third time. Now he was just plain examining. Dissecting. *Tormenting*. Her skin prickled like something was crawling on it, but she knew to squirm would be some kind of defeat, so as far as the world was concerned Rigel forgot Rosier was sitting next to her and lost herself in her medical textbook.

"You must be an exceptionally slow reader, to not have turned a page in twenty minutes," Rosier drawled softly. There was no need to speak up, since he was seated right beside her, but Rigel wished he had, for some reason, as the hushed quality to his voice was somehow awkward.

Also, apparently the world was not quite as fooled as she'd hoped it would be.

Rigel looked up from the page with an exaggeratedly unfocused expression, as though it were a struggle for her to pay attention to her surroundings when she was *just so engrossed* in her book.

"What?" she said vaguely for good measure, "Oh, yes, it's quite dense, this book. I have to work through the Latin roots for a lot of the terms in my head before I quite understand them."

Rosier smiled crookedly at her, "You shouldn't work your brain so hard on a day off. It'll make your hair fall out before you're fifty." He lifted his hand-the one still resting on the back of the couch-and ruffled her hair gently, tugging on the strands lightly for emphasis. Rigel stilled involuntarily. It wasn't that she was some tactilely-deprived orphan who didn't know how to respond to human contact. The twins ruffled her hair all the time, and so did Sirius, James, and a number of other people she'd met as Harry in the Lower Ally's. There was a weird look in Rosier's eyes, though. It was... Rigel didn't know what it was, but she stood up smoothly, tucking her book under her arm with exaggerated care to avoid looking at the other Slytherin.

"You're right, I should probably call it a day," she said evenly, then smiled at the loosely grouped array of acquaintances, "Good evening, everyone."

As her friends chorused a lazy, "Good evening, Rigel," back at her, Rigel couldn't resist one quick glance at Rosier's face, just in case there was something in it that would make sense to her. He was gazing at her with bored geniality, and even joined in with everyone in saying goodnight, but his fist was clenched where it rested on the back of the couch, and that strange little glint in his eyes had not gone away. If anything, it had deepened.

Rigel retreated in what she told herself was a dignified manner, too vaguely unsettled to really be self-aware as she walked to her dorm room. She toed off her shoes and plopped onto the bed with a shaky sigh, staring up at the ceiling with bewilderment.

A few moments later, Draco walked into the room and leaned against her bedpost with folded arms. He looked down at her and said, "What was that about?"

"No idea," Rigel said dully, "Let's not talk about it."

"Like hell," Draco said, scowling down at her, "What was that, Rigel? Is Rosier... is he *bothering* you?"

"No," Rigel said, looking away from the ceiling to gaze at Draco with open confusion, "I think we've just all been cooped up for too many hours today. With the basilisk and everything... my nerves are just a little rough, I guess. It's nothing."

"Didn't look like nothing," Draco said lowly.

"What did it look like, then?" Rigel snapped, her patience waning.

Draco set his jaw, apparently unable or unwilling to voice his opinion.

"Let's just forget it, Draco," Rigel said, sighing and looking back at the ceiling, "You know how Rosier gets when he's bored. Always has to annoy someone into entertaining him. I just overreacted because I'm a little stressed out, okay?"

"Not really," said Draco, rolling his eyes at the ceiling that Rigel couldn't seem to keep her gaze on long enough to pull off the casually-detached air she was going for, "But whatever. Goodnight, Rigel."

"Night, Draco," Rigel said, turning to curl up on her side. She might as well actually catch up on her sleep, since she was already in bed.

Draco left the dorm to rejoin Pansy and the others, and Rigel gave herself a long lecture about not acting like a skittish colt with something to hide around her friends-even the deliberately irritating ones-before falling into a shallow, flickering pool of dreams.

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Classes started up again the next day. Dumbledore gave a convincingly reassuring speech about how even though they hadn't found the creature, that didn't mean it wasn't dead, because they had combed the school with roosters and had reason to believe the basilisk had been hiding in the walls. Probably it had died somewhere without a fuss. Probably.

Rigel somehow couldn't believe things would be that easy, but she supposed it didn't hurt to hope they would.

The teachers handed out new schedules the next day at lunch, which were exactly like their old schedules, except instead of just having their classes listed the new schedules also had two hours each evening of library time for their House. On the top of the schedule in bold letters were the words: **All Extracurricular**

Activities Are Cancelled Until Further Notice. Students Will Remain in Common Rooms if Not Otherwise Stated .

A roar of protest went up from the Gryffindor table, and Oliver Wood's flushed face was seen scowling fiercely up at the Head Table as he shouted a fervent denial. Further up the Slytherin table, Flint seemed to be equally pissed off, though he expressed his own disdain for the new imposition with dark silence and a glowering sneer.

"So we're to be herded to every lesson like sheep," Theo said disgustedly, "Cooped up in the common room like pigeons, and let out to visit the Library once a night like poorly-trained dogs. It's a wonder they even bother teaching us magic, seeing as they're treating us like mindless animals."

"It's for our safety," Pansy said, serenely buttering a scone, "At least this way the petrifications will stop even if the basilisk isn't dead. It'll be impossible to catch a student alone now."

"At least as long as no one goes wandering off by themselves," Draco said, looking pointedly at Rigel.

Rigel was looking mournfully at her own schedule, which didn't have any little boxes saying 'Lab Time' on it, much less, 'Morning Exercise Time' or 'Practice Foreign Language with House Elf Time.' She rather suspected her extracurricular studies were going to see a marked stalling in progress if this went on for very long.

Still, she could always read up on Healing in the common room, and Occlumency could be done anywhere. She'd have to be careful about completing Flint's assignments if her whole House had to go to the Library at the same time now, but she could pass off the interest in upper-level subjects as random extra studying for a little while at least, and she could write the essays in the early mornings since she no longer would be able to follow her training regimen.

She would have to send Krait and Burke a letter, though, and make up a reason for why she wouldn't be able to brew for them for the foreseeable future.

Snape escorted her to her private lab that afternoon to finish up the Polyjuice potion and seal the door closed. Apparently he thought it would be too much temptation for her to resist if her lab wasn't completely inaccessible until the basilisk was confirmed dead.

It was a mark of how distracted they both were by all the upset that Snape barely complimented her on the potion's impressive quality, and Rigel wasn't even disappointed by his lackluster reaction.

February bled on towards March, and Rigel was beginning to think that maybe the basilisk was dead. Either that, or the one controlling it was unable to corner any students under the new safety procedures. Soon there were only a couple of days left in February, and still no petrification. If the threat written on the wall had been serious, there should have been a petrification that month, but it seemed more and more likely that this time they were going to get a reprieve.

Then, on February 28th, an hour before midnight, an explosion rocked the castle. Rigel and the boys woke up immediately, all four of them fumbling through the darkness to the hallway, where the rest of their year-mates were spilling out as well. They all stumbled into the common room in their pajamas (except for Rigel, who was still in her school robes), and the prefects began taking role for each grade level at once.

The tense atmosphere didn't relax until Selwyn announced that all Slytherins were accounted for. The portrait of Salazar left to inform Snape, and the students all claimed various chairs and low-backed couches around the room to wait for the news.

"Probably a Gryffindor," Millicent said lowly, "Only they'd be thick enough to wander around in the middle of the night these days. Bet some idiot thought that since it's too dangerous for even the prefects to patrol anymore it'd be easy to sneak around."

"Can't be that easy," Theo said idly as he flipped over a couple cards in his game of solitaire, "No prefects, sure, but all the professors patrol now."

"It shows," Pansy said, twisting her fingers together in a self-comforting way, "Even Professor McGonagall yawned in class the other day, remember? And Professor Snape is so much more irritable lately. The only teacher who seems unaffected is Binns, though I'm not sure he even knows about the basilisk."

"I don't think he knows about anything besides goblin rebellions," Theo agreed, yawning.

They fell into a strained silence, no one really sure what to do or say. Pansy's fingers were turning white from how she clenched them in her lap, so Rigel slipped off the sofa to sit on the ground at Pansy's feet and said, "Braid my hair, will you, Pan?"

Pansy set to work immediately on the back of her short, bed-tousled hair. Theo sent her an amused look, but Millicent, who from what Rigel understood was often the victim of Pansy's compulsive braiding habits, favored her with a more wry expression. Draco took advantage of Rigel's vacated seat to stretch out horizontally on the couch, with his head on the seat next to Pansy's hip. "Do mine next," he said with a resigned sigh.

Pansy agreed primly and calmly, but her silent thanks was understood. Both Rigel and Draco knew that Pansy needed to do something with her hands when she was anxious, and if they didn't let her braid something she'd either twist her fingers until they were raw or else start picking at the threads on her pajamas until they frayed.

They tried to keep Pansy talking as they sat there waiting for news they weren't even sure was coming. They asked about her grandmother and what she would be doing over the summer, and generally passed the time in pleasant denial for as long as they could.

When Rigel had no more hair to twist together despite how tiny Pansy had tried to make the braids, Pansy abandoned her head in favor of starting on Draco's bangs. Rigel's head felt strange, and the braids clinked together when she tilted it at all. They also sort of itched and pulled at her scalp-Pansy had braided them rather tight to make the process take longer.

With a sigh, Rigel reached up to start undoing the braid behind her right ear, which pulled her hair in a direction it wasn't accustomed to being pulled. The braid was at an awkward angle, though, and she frowned slightly as her fingers fumbled a couple of times trying to untangle it. It felt as though Pansy had started braiding one section, then braided it *into* another section further behind her head. She'd have to undo the second section first, but upon feeling out that one she realized that it, too, had been braided into a third section. Rigel wasn't sure how Pansy had done something so complicated with the five inches of hair she had to work with, but it felt like she'd have to get a mirror to start untangling it, or else wait for Pansy to finish braiding Draco's.

"Oh, come here, Rigel. I'll do it."

Rigel's hands paused from their exploration, and she looked over to where Rookwood and Rosier sat on a different low-backed couch across from the one Rigel was leaning against. Rookwood was perusing a thick textbook that seemed to be on mammal taxonomy, and Rosier was tapping his fingers impatiently on the armrest of the couch as he gestured to the ground in front of him with his other hand expectantly. "Really, you'll never get it undone by yourself. Trust me, Pansy's braiding skills are rather legendary."

Rigel had just had a similar thought, but for the past couple of weeks she'd been... pretty much avoiding Rosier, actually. She realized, of course, that when you became closer friends with someone they often changed how they acted around you as they relaxed their formal manners and defenses. She supposed that a certain level of familiarity was understandable after she and Rosier had become better acquainted over winter break, and certainly if it was Fred or

George offering to de-braid her hair she wouldn't hesitate to agree, and yet...

She couldn't put her finger on it, but something about the situation with Rosier made her wary. She didn't think he'd hurt her-it wasn't that kind of caution, exactly. It was more like she sensed an unknown element in their interactions lately, and Rigel had never been very good at dealing with the unknown, unless one counted ignoring it. That, she was quite accomplished at.

"I don't really mind them," she said, shrugging in a way that she hoped was nonchalant, "It'll probably wash out in the shower tomorrow anyway."

"Water will only make the mess worse," Rookwood said mildly, not looking up from his textbook.

"Oh," Rigel said, for lack of anything better to say. On the one hand, she didn't really want to go over there, but on the other hand acting defensive about it would only draw attention to her inexplicable paranoia over the whole hair-touching thing. And after she'd just let Pansy braid the whole thing-volunteered, even-it would probably come off as incredibly rude if she outright refused. "You don't have to," she attempted once more, "I think I've made it worse, poking at it. It's just a mess, now."

Rosier favored her with a dry look, "I assure you I've nowhere better to be at the moment. Come here, imp, and stop being so distrustingly churlish. I'm not going to put glue in it."

Rigel conceded with whatever dignity she had left, and stood smoothly and without obvious reluctance. She could at least attempt to downplay her hesitation, since she could give no articulate cause for it. She walked the short distance to Rosier and Rookwood's couch, mentally grimacing as she realized she'd have to sit at Rosier's feet to allow him access to her head. Her face was studiously neutral, however, and almost relaxed as she waited for

Rosier to shift his feet to the side before sitting on the ground before the upperclassman.

Leaning back against the couch, she caught sight of Draco's expression. He was frowning at her from the corner of his eyes, since he couldn't turn his head to glare at her full on without disrupting Pansy's braiding. At least she wasn't the only one who thought the situation odd.

Rosier's fingers worked gently at the tangled web of braids covering her short head of hair, loosening bits here and unraveling bits there. After a few moments of awkward hyper-awareness of the random tugs on her scalp, Rigel was mostly able to ignore it.

Apparently no one else was as concerned with the situation as she was, for conversation continued without pause around them as the others talked about anything and everything to pass the time.

"It's been an hour at least," Millicent said, rolling her neck in a stretch, "Maybe Snape isn't coming to tell us what's happening after all."

"Of course he will," Blaise said over the scroll he was scribbling away at, "Our Head of House always tells us what's going on, and even if he were inclined to keep us in the dark for some reason on this occasion, Salazar's portrait would have at least told him we were all waiting up to hear something. Either way he will show up eventually to send us back to our dorm rooms."

"Don't you ever get tired of being so logical?" Millicent complained good-naturedly.

"No more than you ever get tired of asking questions you already know the answer to," Blaise returned, smirking at the way Millicent scowled back at him, "Or *do* you get tired of it?"

"No more than Draco gets tired of eating strawberry tarts, I expect," Millicent sniffed.

"Don't drag me into this," Draco grumbled. It was a bit hard to hear him because Pansy had made him turn over on his stomach so she could reach the back of his hair.

"Oh, go on, Draco," Millicent said, waving her hand at him while yawning a bit, "You do one."

"Fine," Draco sighed, "No more than Rigel gets tired of brewing potions."

"Too easy," Millicent said, "But we'll take it. Now you, Rigel."

Rigel thought a moment, then said, "No more than Pansy gets tired of looking at unicorns."

Pansy laughed, a light, cheerful sound that seemed to have a soothing effect on everyone in their circle of armchairs and couches, "True enough, but no more than Edmund gets tired of challenging Alice in their animal game."

"No more than Aldon gets tired of learning secrets," Rookwood said without looking up from his book.

Rosier chuckled softly over her shoulder, "No more than Pansy gets tired of trying to burn down her mother's kitchen under the pretense of baking."

Pansy huffed, but said, "No more than Millicent gets tired of arranging all her textbooks and school supplies by color."

Millicent stuck her tongue out at Pansy and said, "No more than Theo gets tired of losing at solitaire."

"No more than Blaise gets tired of staring at Hannah Abbott," Theo said slyly.

Blaise narrowed his eyes at Theo in a show of pointed annoyance, "No more than Draco gets tired of telling Rigel what to do."

"No more than Rigel gets tired of being so ridiculous that he *needs* telling what to do," Draco snapped.

"I'm not sure that one counts," Millicent said. At Draco's flat look, she shrugged, "Okay, Rigel is kind of ridiculous. We'll allow it."

Rigel felt she should defend herself, but didn't know how, so she said, "No more than Rookwood gets tired of humoring his friends."

"Too nice," Theo rolled his eyes.

Rookwood's voice was amused when he went next, "No more than Aldon gets tired of teasing Draco with Rigel's hair."

Rigel could feel Rosier's hands pause as he shrugged and said, "No more than Blaise gets tired of teasing *everyone* with that all-knowing smirk of his."

Blaise displayed said smirk rather proudly, "No more than Theo gets tired of teasing Rigel with his naked chest."

There was a moment of silence as everyone processed that statement. Then-

"What?"

"Yes, what?"

Rigel very much agreed with the question, but was too busy being embarrassed to add her voice to Millicent and Pansy's.

Blaise tilted his head slightly, "Perhaps I shouldn't have said that out loud."

"On the contrary," Rosier's voice was definitely amused now, and his fingers halted their untangling motions completely as he said, "Please explain."

"Please don't," Rigel said lowly. It was vindicating to have proof that Theo had been making her uncomfortable on purpose-as she'd half-suspected-but she didn't need her discomfort discussed by everyone she knew.

"You simply must," Pansy said, pausing her own braiding fingers to glance at Rigel with a teasing smile.

"Or else we shall imagine the worst," Millicent said, snickering.

Theo groaned, "Why'd you have to say it like *that* ?"

"It didn't sound quite so socially untoward in my head," Blaise said thoughtfully.

"Things never do with you," Draco sighed, "But that was particularly poorly-phrased. What he meant to imply is that Theo teases Rigel about his acutely developed sense of modesty by confronting him with his own immodesty unnecessarily. It's really more amusing and less scandalously intriguing than Blaise's turn of phrase might lead one to believe."

There was another moment of silence as several people in the group wondered whether or not to believe the explanation offered. Rigel could feel her face flushing in response to their speculative looks. It wasn't really that the sight of half-naked boys embarrassed her- Archie wasn't exactly the most reserved of people to grow up with, and the Quidditch locker rooms, too, were teeming with opportunities to become disenchanted with the male form. It was just that some ingrained part of her felt *guilty* when boys revealed their bodies around her because they didn't know she was a girl. It felt *rude* to look when if they knew the truth they wouldn't be undressing, so she studiously-and politely, she thought-simply avoided looking in such situations.

Apparently, her respect for the privacy of others only made her come off as shy and uncomfortably modest. Her insistence on changing where no one could see *her* probably exacerbated this trait and gave

her the general reputation of a repressed ninny, and that, more than anything, was what embarrassed her enough to have her turning red now, under the amused scrutiny of her friends.

"Insert awkward change of subject here," Millicent said after a lengthy pause, shaking her head at the ridiculousness of boys in general, "Seriously, though, how much longer are we going to sit here before going back to sleep?"

"Feel free to turn in any time you want," Blaise said, "It's not as though you won't hear all about it tomorrow."

Millicent grinned, "And miss any more gems like *that* coming out of your mouth? I think not."

"Is that why you changed back into your school robes before coming out to the common room?" Rosier asked curiously, "Because of modesty?" His tone of voice was a bit incredulous, but he seemed to be trying not to outright laugh at her, at least.

Before Rigel could answer, Theo laughed and said, "No, Rigel just sleeps in his clothes. But *that's* probably more due to his unhealthy paranoia than his modesty."

"Paranoia?" Rosier shifted his feet to a more comfortable position to Rigel's right and said, "Isn't it a bit much to say that about your roommate?"

"Not when it's Rigel," Theo said, grinning at Rigel despite her thoroughly unamused look, "Never lets his guard down, this one. Just look how uncomfortable he is sitting with his back to you," Theo gestured to Rigel's tense posture with a sweeping hand movement even as Rigel attempted to relax her shoulders and belie the statement, "He doesn't like to be too close to people, in case you haven't noticed."

Theo's tone made it quite clear that he thought *everyone* should have noticed this, and Rigel felt compelled to at least say, "Sitting

right here, still," in case it made any difference.

Rosier's fingers pressed along her scalp as he combed through an area he'd already detangled in a slow, soothing movement, "Don't listen to them, Rigel," he murmured, "Edmund and I don't mind a bit of paranoia, do we?"

"Wouldn't be in Slytherin if we did," Rookwood said without any indicative inflection.

"I'm not paranoid," Rigel said half-heartedly, "I exercise a perfectly reasonable amount of caution. Do you know how many potions a stolen hair can be used in for nefarious purposes? Polyjuice isn't even the tip of the iceberg. Is it my fault if I seem paranoid in comparison to people who walk around exposing their unprotected skin to anyone who wants to dump a can of itching powder on it?"

"Is this a therapy session or something?" Millicent snorted, "Please, Rigel, tell us how growing up with notorious pranksters has emotionally haunted you for life."

"It's just too painful to talk about, really," Rigel said flatly.

Most of her friends laughed at that, and let it go. Pansy did send her a couple of concerned looks, but she stopped when Rigel let a reassuring smile cross her lips briefly.

It felt to Rigel like most of her hair was free of braids now, but Rosier's fingers had slowed. He spent more time combing through the already-detangled strands than he did unbraiding the still-knotted ones, and Rigel wondered if she should move away or do something, only she wasn't sure what. Everything she thought of-mentioning it, moving away, un-doing the rest herself-seemed awkwardly rude or ungrateful somehow. She contented herself with the thought that he was probably just prolonging the task so he wouldn't have to go back to being bored when it was finished, and did nothing.

Still, she couldn't relax under Rosier's ministrations like she had when Pansy was braiding her hair. Maybe because she trusted Pansy more, maybe because Pansy didn't look at her like she was a particularly amusing meal at times, but probably because she knew *why* Pansy wanted to braid her hair-to calm her nerves. She had no idea what Rosier hoped to gain from it, if he wasn't in fact plucking hairs for Polyjuice, of course.

Millicent was the first to notice when Professor Snape came into the common room. She stopped arguing half-heartedly with Blaise and sat up straighter, clearing her throat. Pansy stopped braiding and Draco sat up to look toward the entrance wall as well. Rigel took the opportunity to stand and move away from Rosier, back to where her place between Pansy and Draco had opened up again.

Snape surveyed them all with a closed off expression, no hint of emotions visible on his face, "Tonight Professor Lockhart has been petrified. Defense Against the Dark Arts classes are cancelled until a replacement professor can be found. Please return to your dormitories. That is all."

Their Head of House left as suddenly as he'd come, leaving a disturbed and unsettled air in his wake.

No one had really liked Lockhart as a professor, but there was something very disturbing about the fact that a teacher was attacked in the first place. Somehow the professors had always seemed to untouchable, even through the sickness. Lockhart was unarguably an imbecile, but his petrification was like a slap to the face nonetheless.

Like saying *no one is safe* .

They went to sleep that night quietly, no one really sure what to say. It would have been in poor taste to say, 'good riddance,' even if they might actually get a decent replacement professor now, so they said nothing, just bid one another good evenings and slipped quietly into their beds.

Rigel was perhaps more upset by the news of Lockhart's petrification than her classmates. She hadn't liked the teacher any more, but his petrification meant that the pattern would continue uninterrupted. One every month until the end of the term, and then... Rigel clenched her eyes shut in heavy despair. Someone would be killed, not petrified, if the monster wasn't stopped by the end of May.

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[end of chapter twelve].

A/N: Regarding belladonna, the effects outlines above are based on truth. I don't know if it will make a rooster stop crowing, but it does severely dry the throat. Interestingly, it was originally used in cosmetics as eye-drops to dilate women's pupils, since that was considered seductive and attractive, hence the name belladonna: beautiful woman. That was before they realized it was slowly poisonous, of course.

A/N2: All I have to say about Rigel and Rosier is this: Rigel is twelve. She won't be romantically available, much less interested, for another year at least. That doesn't mean that certain perceptive, patient people capable of long-term manipulation wouldn't make opportunities to begin *acclimating* Rigel toward an idea, however. I also tried something new with POV this time-namely leaving the changed POV sections unmarked as one reader suggested, so let me know if it's clear or not whose POV the different scenes are in.

Best,

-Violet

Chapter 13

A/N: Here, at last. Pretty good length, but long overdue. I don't own what you recognized before reading this story, etc, but I hope you all enjoy this installment nevertheless. This chapter was a little more difficult to get right, because a lot of things lead up to the grand finale, but I think I'm mostly satisfied, with a good deal of help from Elelith. Also, ladybellacullen91 created her avatar in honor of this story, so check it out cause it's really awesome!

Let me know what you think.

The Serpentine Subterfuge:

Chapter 13:

March was subdued. Nearly everyone was in a sour mood about having extracurriculars cancelled, especially the Quidditch crowd. Rigel supposed she herself was included in the Quidditch crowd, but while she missed the opportunity to get outside and exercise, she wasn't terribly concerned with the tournament being called off.

They were given an extra study period where their Defense classes used to be, along with a suggested curriculum of independent study. Judging by the resigned way McGonagall explained their outlined syllabus for the foreseeable future, Rigel thought the professors weren't honestly expecting them to learn any Defense that year. Still, independent study of any kind was probably better than listening to Lockhart monologue for an hour every day. Rigel was certainly getting a lot of her own independent work done with the mandatory increase of studying time. She had taken to spending their two hours in the Library every evening looking up all the information needed for Flint's essays, then actually writing the essays late at night or early in the morning when no one else was around.

Their Library session overlapped with the Gryffindor session by an hour, so Rigel was able to collaborate with Percy for Transfiguration help even though she couldn't go to the Tower anymore.

The first Tuesday of March, however, Rigel sought out a different member of the Weasley Family during Library time.

Ginny Weasley was slumped over a thick, dusty book, turning the pages with one hand and resting her chin tiredly in the other. Rigel cleared her throat softly and the redheaded girl looked up with detached disinterest.

"Yes?" she said, looking back at her book after only a brief, dull glance at Rigel's face.

"I was wondering if I could talk to you about something you mentioned before," Rigel said, "I've been thinking over that idea you had-"

"Not now, okay?" Ginny said. Her tone was blunt and dismissive.

"Of course," Rigel said politely, reeling in her expression automatically to its neutral mask, "I'm free tomorrow-"

"Just leave me alone," Ginny snapped, rubbing her forehead with two fingers, "I don't want to talk about anything I said before."

"I see," Rigel said, blinking, "My apologies."

Ginny looked up again, this time with weary regret, "Look I'm sorry, Rigel. I'm too tired today. Maybe later."

Rigel nodded in acceptance, though something in Ginny's voice made it seem like there would be no later.

Still, Rigel couldn't let go of Ginny's idea. At first she had dismissed it as pure nonsense, but slowly the idea was growing on her. Ginny had asked her, weeks ago, about having some kind of guardian in her head, to defend her mind while she wasn't actively concentrating

on it. At first Rigel had thought Ginny meant letting some other sentient thing inside her head to take up residence there, and had rejected the idea because of the danger inherently present in such a solution, but what if it didn't have to be like that?

What if she could make a sentient construct in her mind out of magic, the way she made other things in her mind using magic, and set it up as a guardian like Ginny had imagined? It would probably have to be constantly powered through her magical core, but Rigel didn't use her magic very often anyway, and even when imbuing high-level potions her core was rarely noticeably depleted. There had been that one time when her magic shielded her from the explosion, which had drained an unusual amount of her magic all at once, but other than accidents like that, her reserves went largely untouched.

She had wanted to talk to Ginny again before trying the idea, in case the other girl had any more insight as to how one might go about creating such a thing. Ginny seemed to have a strange, intuitive grasp of certain aspects of the mental arts, so her input would probably have been helpful. Still, Rigel was no stranger to figuring things out on her own.

She settled in an unused corner of the Library and let her senses take her to her mental plane. She opened her eyes as her mental avatar glided out of the mist, taking in the familiar, comforting sight of her mountain peak standing tall in the midst of the swirling snow.

She hurried around the mountain, through the illusion of stone at its base and into her potions lab. She had been adding to it rather steadily over the past months, and the decoy lab was rather incredible if she did say so herself. Drawing on inspiration from Snape's lab, she had added many more cabinets of ingredients to the cave walls and filled the shelves with scroll upon scroll of potion recipes, both real and fake. The rug that hid the trapdoor was incredibly detailed now, luxuriously soft and intricately woven. The cheery fireplace inside was inlaid with stone carvings of various medicinal plants, and the tables in the lab were polished to a high

shine. She sank into one of the many plushy armchairs she'd added to her lab, and tried to figure out how she was going to create what she wanted.

She called on her magic, and let it pool in her hands until she held twin balls of molten fire that twisted and jumped in her palms with restless energy. She held an image in her mind of what she wanted and carefully let the magic flow from her hands into the air before her. It twirled and spun about, weaving layers of magic onto more layers of magic, and slowly what she imagined began to take shape. She smiled softly as she worked; magic was just so easy in the mental landscape. It was as easy as thinking and then *willing* .

The magic solidified into a human figure. It took on features, musculature, and clothes. Soon it was recognizable as a young man about her age, with dark hair like hers and black robes and grey eyes. When she was satisfied with the likeness, she broke the connection between herself and her magic, and waited.

The magic-made boy stood before her, silent and expressionless.

"Hello," she said.

He made no reply.

Frowning, Harry stood and examined her creation. He was motionless. He didn't breathe or blink. Rigel put two fingers to his throat to feel for a pulse. Nothing.

She sighed and sat back down. So all she'd done was make a magically-constructed mental puppet. He might make a convincing scarecrow, for about ten seconds.

She pulled on her magic again, gathered it in her hands, and pressed her hands to the puppet's torso, imagining the magic seeping into him, flowing into his veins and making his heart beat, reaching to his lungs and making them work like hers did.

The puppet began to inhale slowly, deeply, and exhale. After several tentative breaths it seemed to be breathing just as she would, and a quick check confirmed his heart was beating steadily.

"Hello?" she tried again.

Not so much as a twitch.

She sent her magic into the puppet again, willing it to reach his voice box and make it work.

"Hello," she said.

"Hello," he answered.

She smiled a bit, "I'm Harry."

"I'm Harry," he said.

"What?" Harry frowned. Had she made him too close a copy of herself? Did he think he was her?

"What?" he said, his lips barely moving and eyes flatly empty.

Harry sighed, "Oh, I see."

"Oh, I see."

So he only repeated everything she said back to him. There was no thought process behind it, no sentience.

She brushed her long hair over her shoulder with impatience. Why wasn't it working? Was she supposed to imagine every possible faculty a human mind possessed before it would take? But no, that's not how magic worked. When she created a table in her mind, she didn't have to know what every tiny piece of the table looked like. The magic drew from her general impressions of a table, and worked to make it seem real to her. When she transfigured a match to a needle in the physical world, she didn't have to calculate the exact

metal alloy the needle would be composed of. She just had to hold what she knew of needles in her mind, and the magic took care of the specifics. Otherwise wizards would spend years learning to transfigure objects into animals, when in reality it only took a few weeks, because they just had to have a good-enough idea of what the animal was about for their magic to fill in the rest.

This was called the Minimum Level of Articulation Theory, and it applied to all kinds of magic. A wizard's will was what made a spell work, and it only required a basic level of understanding what *exactly* you were trying to do, or else kids could never learn anything at eleven with no prior training. To levitate something you didn't need to know how much it weighed or what it was made of, you just had to understand that you wanted it to weigh less, and have the power to make your will reality, of course.

So in theory she should be able to create a construct that behaved like a human as long as she had a basic understanding of what a human was. For some reason, though, her magic wasn't cooperating. Or rather, it was doing exactly what she asked it to, but she couldn't formulate the request the correct way. Maybe she didn't have a good enough grasp of what sentience was, Harry mused, settling back into her armchair and staring pensively up at the mostly-lifeless humanoid she'd created.

She tried sending more magic to the boy's brain, but it didn't seem to help. She could get him to do pretty much anything she imagined—stand, sit, run in a circle, speak—but she had to *make* him do it first. She couldn't seem to imbue him with the ability to act on his own.

A small part of her whispered that perhaps you *couldn't* create sentience. Maybe it was dependent on something incorporeal, like a soul. Harry shook her head. She wasn't *really* trying to create sentience, after all. It wasn't like she was trying to make an inanimate object in the real world come to life. She just wanted a mental construct that would have enough sentience to protect her mind while she wasn't paying attention to it.

She knew it was possible even in the physical world. After all, what was the Sorting Hat if not a *sentient* magical object? She'd heard that it was once an ordinary hat, and that Gryffindor had *imbued* it with sentience, so he had to have done it somehow, and it should be even easier to mimic the process in her mental landscape, where everything native was controlled by her mind.

But how?

She felt a tug at her physical senses and realized someone was shaking her shoulder lightly. She sent one last frustrated look at the human doll and flicked a bit of magic at him to make him sit in one of the armchairs. She knew he wasn't real, but it felt weird to leave him standing around like that.

She hurried through her mindscape to the mists, which she plunged into to send her consciousness back to her physical form.

Selwyn was leaning over her, still shaking her shoulder.

"I'm back," Rigel said, making to stand.

Selwyn backed off and crossed her arms, "About time, Black. Our two hours were up five minutes ago."

"Sorry, Selwyn," Rigel said, rolling her stiff shoulders.

"Sure you are, Black," Selwyn said, motioning her to follow as she headed toward the Library entrance where the rest of the Slytherins who'd elected to come to the Library were waiting. "Everyone in two lines, and make sure the person who stood next to you walking in is standing next to you now."

Rigel got into line next to Draco, who smirked at her and said, "Meditating, right? I told the Head Girl you'd be zoned out in a corner somewhere."

"Thanks, Draco," Rigel said dryly.

Draco just laughed at her.

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The next week Rigel received a letter from Sirius.

Dear Archie/ Rigel,

You aunt's baby is due on Sunday. Harry's got a big Healer's exam Monday morning, so she can't come to the birth if she wants to fly back in time, but I've sent a letter to Dumbledore to ask if you could attend. Here's hoping,

Dad

Rigel rolled up the note thoughtfully. Seeing Pansy's curious look, she said, "My aunt Lily's having her baby on Sunday."

Magic was quite reliable as far as predicting births, so if they said the baby would come Sunday, then come Sunday it would.

Pansy clapped her hands excitedly, "Oh, how wonderful, Rigel. You said it would be a girl, right? Have they come up with any names?"

"I... don't know," Rigel said, "Dad hasn't mentioned any."

"Well, maybe they'll send you a photograph in their next letter," Pansy said, smiling.

"My dad apparently wrote to the Headmaster to see if I could attend the birth," Rigel said.

Draco's eyebrows rose, "But you're not... I mean, you aren't immediate family, or even blood-related."

Rigel understood Draco's surprise. Traditionally only the husband and children attended births in wizarding society, with extended family and friends visiting the mother once she was out of the hospital.

"Lack of blood-ties doesn't really matter in our family," Rigel said, shrugging, "We're all immediate family to each other, I suppose."

"How nice," Pansy said serenely, "Well, I hope the Headmaster lets you go, then."

"Yes, so do I," Rigel said. It was true... sort of. She did want to see her little sister, but she wasn't sure if she could pull off being Archie for that long around all four of her family's adults. Sirius hadn't noticed her deceptions yet, which was a miracle in itself, but Remus was alarmingly observant at times.

Still, she supposed she'd better do one thing, at least.

After breakfast she caught up to Professor Snape before he left the Hall. They weren't allowed to go to their professors' offices alone any more, so most students had taken to pestering their teachers during meal times about any questions or concerns they had. It wasn't ideal, but the Professors put up with it with admirable tolerance.

"Professor Snape, can I talk to you for a moment?"

Snape paused and turned at the door, "Certainly. This way, Mr. Black."

He led her a very short distance from the Great Hall doors, to give her the semblance of privacy she supposed, and raised an eyebrow expectantly.

"My aunt is expecting a child on Sunday," she began, but stopped when Snape jerked his head in a minute betrayal of surprise.

"And?" Snape said after a moment, his face as blank as stone.

"And," Rigel pulled her thoughts together after a moment of hesitation, "My father has written to the Headmaster to ask if I would be allowed to attend the birth."

"Your point, Mr. Black?" Snape said, the barest hint of impatience creeping into his tone.

Rigel kept her own face blank as well, "I thought I should ask your permission as well, since my father has presumably neglected to do so."

Snape didn't answer for a long moment, but when he did his voice was not nearly as impatient as before, "I see. Thank you for informing me of the situation, Mr. Black. I will of course defer to whatever the Headmaster deems best." If there was an ironic twist to the latter part of his words, they both ignored it.

Snape left quickly, his normally keen gaze distant and troubled by something. Maybe Rigel had caught him at a bad time?

Later that evening she was interrupted as she completed a Transfiguration essay-one of her own, for once-at one of the Library tables. It was the Headmaster, and though Rigel tried to stand he waved her back into her seat and quite casually took the seat across from her as well.

"How are you this evening, Mr. Black?" he asked kindly, peering at her over his half-moon spectacles.

"Well, Headmaster," Rigel said, "And yourself?"

Dumbledore seemed amused by her polite inquiry, "As well as can be expected in these troubled times."

"I'm sure we'll get the basilisk sorted out soon, Headmaster," Rigel said, though why she thought she should reassure Dumbledore of all people she didn't know.

"How interesting that you said 'we' instead of 'you,' Mr. Black,"
Dumbledore said mildly.

"We're all in this together, aren't we?" Rigel said evenly, "Neville is a good friend of mine, and almost everyone knows someone who's been petrified. All of us have to live with the fear of attack, as well, not to mention the way the students are constrained by the lack of extracurricular freedom. The basilisk affects everyone, so it only makes sense that everyone help to stop it."

"I quite agree, Mr. Black," Dumbledore said, smiling softly, "Cooperation is always the greatest tool at our disposal. But enough talk of the darkness, Mr. Black. I understand your family is expecting rather gladder tidings this weekend, are you not?"

"Yes, Headmaster," Rigel said, "My aunt is expecting a baby girl on Sunday. Did my father's note reach you?"

"Happily, it did," Dumbledore said, "And I see no reason why you should not be allowed to celebrate a new life with your family. If it is agreeable, your Head of House will escort you to St. Mungo's on Sunday morning, and will return to collect you that evening. You will travel by floo, and you will be expected to remain in your family's care until such time as you are returned to ours."

Rigel agreed, but said tentatively, "Is it... entirely wise to elect Professor Snape to escort me there? His relationship with my father and uncles is somewhat... problematic, as I understand it."

"So young to be so politically correct," Dumbledore chuckled, "But when you are old you will find that wisdom sometimes takes the appearance of *in* correctness, at least to those who are not quite so wise as they might believe."

Rigel felt reprimanded, though she hadn't really understood all of what Dumbledore probably meant. "Forgive me, Headmaster."

"Not at all, Mr. Black," Dumbledore said, still smiling in that mildly genial way he had, "Suffice to say, dear boy, that I know something of the enmity between Professor Snape and your father, and I believe this weekend will do them both some good."

Rigel suddenly had the funny feeling that Dumbledore hadn't agreed to let her go for her own sake at all, but rather as part of some intrinsically complicated long-term plan known only to him. It was actually a scary realization, that someone with so much power gave the impression of being capable of so much manipulation. Rigel made a mental note to not get on Dumbledore's bad side. Ever.

It seemed to Rigel that their conversation was now concluded, yet Dumbledore made no move to rise from the table, apparently content to gaze about the Library curiously as though he didn't run the place.

Sensing that he was going nowhere anytime soon, despite the fact that not long ago he had told her bluntly that he was a very busy man, Rigel ventured to ask, "Any luck on finding a new Defense professor?"

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows at her knowingly, "Not enjoying the lull, Mr. Black? It was my understanding that many of your classmates consider the current lack of classes to be the most productive time spent during Defense Against the Dark Arts all year."

Rigel tilted her head in wry acknowledgement, "Self study is good enough for me, but I'm sure the older students especially would appreciate a guiding hand before they take their examinations in a few months."

"Indeed, indeed," Dumbledore inclined his head solemnly, "Do not worry overmuch for your upperclassmen friends, however. I have arranged for a new Defense professor to start next week."

"Oh?" Rigel said, interested, "May I ask who?"

"Oh, no one special," Dumbledore said, eyes twinkling, "I am quite looking forward to it, though. It's been too long since I participated actively in the molding of young, eager minds. I wonder if I remember how to use the chalkboard..."

Rigel blinked in surprise, "You're going to teach us yourself?"

"Just until the end of the school year," Dumbledore said, smiling benignly.

Rigel was a bit confused, considering Dumbledore was surely too busy to teach about seven classes a day, but more importantly...

"What about the curse?" she asked, concerned. She wasn't sure she believed in the curse-after all, Quirrell had been fired for a perfectly defensible reason, and Lockhart was clearly a victim of opportunity-but if there was really a curse on the position, it would be *not good* if Dumbledore fell victim to it.

Dumbledore just kept twinkling at her with an air of superior amusement, "I doubt the curse will catch up to me in the few months left of the term. I fully intend to find a new instructor for the fall, so the curse will be satisfied de facto in any case."

Rigel wasn't sure it worked like that, if there was indeed a curse, but she was not about to disagree with the Headmaster of Hogwarts, who held more power in his little finger than she would ever envy him for. A man like Dumbledore, so used to the burden of great responsibilities, surely knew what he was talking about.

And if he didn't, Rigel Black would certainly not be the one to tell him otherwise.

All at once Dumbledore jumped with exaggerated surprise, and said, "Ah, I see. Must be going, I'm afraid, Mr. Black. I will inform your Head of House of the details for this coming Sunday. Simply present yourself to Professor Snape that morning after breakfast. Goodbye."

He stood and ambled out of the Library without another word, not even pausing long enough to await her reply. Rigel went back to studying with a quiet shrug. She would probably never understand Dumbledore, and there was no need to give herself a headache trying.

She was just getting back into the essay she was writing when a pair of hands temporarily blinded her.

"Guess who?" said a cheerful voice from behind her.

"Hello, Ginny," Rigel said, waiting patiently for Ginny to remove her hands.

The redheaded girl rounded the table and plopped down in the seat Dumbledore had so recently vacated and propped her chin in her hand. "So, what's up?" she asked, an expectant look on her face.

Rigel gestured down to her essay with a tilt of her head, "Just schoolwork. How is your evening?"

Ginny shrugged dismissively, "Obviously. I meant, what was it you wanted?"

Rigel blinked slowly, not sure what Ginny was referring to.

Ginny rolled her eyes, "When you tried to talk to me about something, but I was busy, remember? Merlin, Rigel, did you forget already? Can't keep a conversation in your head for a couple of days?"

Rigel frowned as she remembered that Ginny never had gotten back to her about the Occlumency technique she had been experimenting with. "It's been over a week," Rigel felt compelled to point out in her defense, "But I could still use your input, if you're not busy now."

Ginny frowned slightly, "A week? Time really flies this time of year. I guess I got so busy with school and everything... hmm, well, what

was it you wanted to talk about?"

Rigel wasn't sure what 'everything' was, since as far as she knew Ginny didn't participate in any extracurricular activities, and even if she did they would have been suspended due to impending basilisk, but she reminded herself pointedly that she barely knew what her own best friends did in their free time. For all she knew, Ginny could be the president of a secret society devoted to freeing house elves from wizarding service or something equally unlikely.

"Well, the last time we talked about Occlumency you mentioned something that I've been thinking about," Rigel said, "A sort of guardian for your mind, I think you called it-"

"Oh, that," Ginny flicked a strand of hair out of her face nonchalantly, "I'm not sure what I was thinking that day. Honestly, a miniature consciousness that exists solely to protect your head from invasion? Get real, right?"

Rigel felt her brow pucker slightly, and said, "It's not entirely implausible, and it's definitely one of the most creative ideas I've heard in terms of mental defense. I haven't read of anything like it in the books I've studied on the subject."

"That's because it's impossible," Ginny said, "You can't just make something like that like you can make an illusion in your head. You'd have to actually absorb another consciousness for it to- *ouch!*" she clutched at her head suddenly, and hissed in a breath through her teeth, "Ow, sorry, I just got the mother of all headaches. I think I've been stressing my eyes lately, studying for exams and such. I suppose it finally caught up to me."

Rigel was a bit taken aback by Ginny's sudden onslaught of obvious pain, and her subsequently speedy defense of it, and said, "Do you want me to walk you to Madam Pomphrey's office?"

Ginny rolled her eyes, rubbing at her temple absently. "Even if I wanted to choke down some vile concoction of medi-wizardry, I

certainly wouldn't need you to walk me there," she said bluntly.

"Of course," Rigel said, not offended by Ginny's unapologetic independence, "Perhaps we should continue this another time?"

"No, no," Ginny said, "It's passing. I'll stay and chat, if you still want to. The whole idea is silly, though, to be honest."

Rigel merely lifted a shoulder in a non-committal way, "Maybe. What makes you think it's impossible, though?"

"I don't know, common sense?" Ginny said, lifting an eyebrow, "I mean, if magic could make things like that, you'd be able to make a human being out of magic, but you can't. All you get is cheap imitations."

"But that's the point, isn't it?" Rigel said, frowning slightly, "To create a decent imitation of sentience, so that the guardian can act and think on its own, but is still ultimately bound to the mind that created it-not a true consciousness, of course, just real enough to pose a threat."

Ginny pursed her lips, "I suppose... still, even that much would be awfully difficult. And if it was tied to your mind's command, then it would be your mind defending itself in the end anyway, just like it always had been. By the time you got good enough to create a semi-sentient magical construct, you probably could have learned to just defend your mind the normal way, by keeping constant shields up, right?"

Rigel tilted her head in acknowledgement, "Good point. I'm not far enough in my experiments to decide whether it would be faster to concentrate on developing my understanding of mental energies or if it would be better to play to my strengths, mentally speaking, and devote all my energy to magically constructed defenses."

Ginny looked taken aback, "Experiments? What, you're serious about all this? I thought it was all hypothetical."

"It is until I get a result that works," Rigel said unconcernedly, "The idea's still in the formulative stages. It might never end up working, in any case. I just wanted to see what you thought of it, since you seem to have a natural grasp of the mental arts."

Ginny wrinkled her nose and waved a hand in a parody of modesty, "If I do have a grasp on it, it's all instinctual. I really don't understand much yet. But it *feels* like what you're talking about is impossible, if that helps."

Rigel nodded agreeably, though internally she was resisting the urge to sigh with disappointment. It looked like she'd be figuring out how to mimic sentience on her own as well, since Ginny didn't seem terribly inclined to join in on Rigel's experiments. "Thanks for taking the time to listen anyway," Rigel said politely.

Ginny shrugged back at her, "No problem. I only came to the Library to get away from my brothers, so I had an hour to kill."

Rigel thought that if she was as rundown and stressed out as Ginny's pale face and slightly sunken eyes revealed the redheaded girl to be, she would be taking advantage of an hour in the Library either to continue studying or to sleep, but perhaps Ginny was sick of studying for the day, or too anxious about the basilisk to sleep properly.

Ginny sat there tapping her foot agitatedly for a few moments, then abruptly stood and said, "I should get going. Things to do, you know. See you, Rigel."

"Good evening," Rigel said, nonplussed as Ginny unknowingly echoed Dumbledore's earlier exit.

Rigel reflected that the people around her were unnaturally blunt that day, and went back to her studying.

That night she dreamed.

She was in her lab, working quietly on her favorite potion. It didn't have a proper name, because it was a hybrid potion her Uncle Remus had invented while still in school. It wasn't particularly difficult to brew, and the only thing it was good for was turning someone's skin the color of whatever food they last ate, but it was still her favorite.

Once, back when she had just begun studying potions seriously, her dad came back from Remus' house sorely disappointed. He wanted Remus to make that very potion for a prank he and Sirius were planning, but the moon had been particularly demanding that month, and Remus was too exhausted to do anything. Harry searched through the old potions notes she had borrowed from her uncle the week before and eventually found the recipe for the skin-changing potion. It was the first potion she ever tried to brew on her own, without her mother's supervision, and when she presented it to her father he beamed down at her like she had done something truly splendid.

It was the first time she felt useful for having brewed a potion, and time and familiarity would never dull the sense of fond nostalgia she had for that particular recipe.

In her dream she stood before a cauldron as big as a bathtub and so deep she couldn't see the bottom. She stirred it slowly, a small smile on her face as it bubbled cheerfully and clung to her stirring rod impertinently.

Then, without warning, she was blind. Her eyes were open but only blackness greeted her. She clutched the side of the cauldron to steady herself in the darkness, but it was boiling hot, and she cried out and flinched back when it burned her hand.

"Hush, child, there's no need for dramatics," said a taunting voice behind her.

Harry froze, "Who's there?"

"Guess who," said the voice in what would have been a sing-song tone if it wasn't so hard-edged. Then there was laughter, crazed, echoing laughter, "Go on, guess. You know, don't you? So guess!"

Harry shook her head blindly, "I don't know."

"You don't want to know," the voice said. It was female, and sharp with impatience. Harry stiffened as she felt fingers wrap around her head from behind, "Guess, Rigel."

"Ginny," Harry said, relieved, "Of course, it's just you, Ginny."

"Is it?" the voice laughed and the hands were removed. Harry could see again, and she whirled, but it wasn't Ginny behind her.

It was a basilisk. She stared into its huge yellow eyes in shock, and felt her whole body freeze. She had been petrified. Her limbs stiffened-she couldn't move, she couldn't get away! The basilisk swept its tail around and knocked her backwards. She fell straight into the bubbling cauldron, down, down into the murky depths. She couldn't even feel her body as it sank, beyond a sense of slow, inevitable suffocation.

Then a hand reached in and hauled her out. She broke the surface of the water, and realized she was in Grimmauld Place's underground pool. Archie pulled her the rest of the way out of the water and up onto the stairs. "What are you doing, Harry? We're late!"

He ran off upstairs and Harry ran after him. Her clothes were dry now, but they weren't her potions robes. She was dressed in a long summer skirt, instead. Archie led her through the floo and they emerged at St. Mungo's hospital.

Harry looked around with confusion, "Are we here to get my hand healed?" she asked, looking down at her palm, which was still red from having burned it on the cauldron.

Archie frowned at her, "Not everything is about you, Harry. We're here to see the new baby, of course. If you weren't always doing something else, you'd know these things."

" Oh," Harry said, following Archie down a hallway, "Sorry."

Archie opened one of the doors and Harry saw her mother propped up in bed, holding a pretty baby girl with long, red hair and bright green eyes. James turned from his place at his wife's side and said, "There you are, Archie, what took you?"

" I don't remember," Archie said, "Is that her? My new cousin?"

" Come and see, Archie," Remus beckoned Archie over toward the bed, where Sirius made room for him to stand close.

" She's so beautiful, isn't she?" Lily said, smiling fondly down at the infant, "So smart, too. She can talk already."

Harry walked forward to see better. As she drew near, the baby girl opened her mouth and a long string of hisses came out. "The baby speaks Parseltongue?" Harry gasped.

" What's this?" James was suddenly frowning fiercely, "How can this be? Lily, what have you done?"

Lily's eyes were wide and pleading, "Nothing, James, I don't know-"

" Woah, mate, it wasn't me," Sirius said, backing up, "I would never..."

" Then how does the child speak Parseltongue?" James spat, "Unless you're suggesting that Archie is mine, the two children must have a common parent! Sirius, how could you? I thought we were friends."

" We are! I didn't sleep with Lily, I swear," Sirius said.

" I don't believe you," James said. He stomped from the room, yelling, "We're through!" over his shoulder as he left.

Lily burst into tears, and Harry hurried to her side. She reached out to pat her mother's shoulder, but Lily cringed away from her.

" No, you can't take my baby!" she cried, hysterically, "She's all I have left of him!"

" I wasn't-" Harry started, but the scene dissolved without warning.

She was standing in front of her house, in Godric's Hollow. Her parents were in front of it, arguing over who was going to live there. James pulled out his wand.

" Fine, then I guess neither of us can have it," he snarled. Flames shot from his wand and engulfed the house in seconds. Lily burst into tears and fled, clutching her newborn child to her and dissipating. James disappeared as well, and Harry looked around the empty street with confusion.

" What about me?" she said to the burning house.

She waited, but no one came to put out the flames or tell her where to go. Eventually she got up and wandered around until she came to a familiar street. It was Dogwood lane, and the apartment she'd rented was up ahead. She hurried inside, suddenly cold and tired, but when she stepped into the house it wasn't any warmer.

The whole place was empty, no furniture, no anything. Harry felt like crying when she realized that all of her potion things had been inside her parents' house when it burned. She sank to the dusty floor and hugged her knees to her chest, staring at the front door.

No one came through it.

*Then she realized that no one was going to come for her. Her friends didn't know she was lost, her family didn't know who she was, and no one knew where to find her. And that was **her** fault, because she'd never told them.*

" I'm all alone," she told the empty house.

" No, you're not."

The voice wasn't coming from anywhere.

" You'll never be alone."

It was coming from inside of her. She peered down at saw a ball of fire where her stomach was supposed to be.

" I'm the only thing you can't escape."

The fire was speaking to her. It rippled and shifted, then it became smooth as glass and as she looked into it she could see her own face. But the face in the fire-mirror was smirking, and it shimmered with an aura of pure magic.

" Don't you see? I'm all that's left when the world leaves you behind."

Harry shook her head, but her reflection stayed still, just gazing pityingly at her.

" Poor dear," it said condescendingly, "Don't you recognize yourself anymore?"

" You're not me," Harry said, voice shaking.

" Maybe I'm not the part you admit to," her reflection shrugged, "But never doubt that I'm in here, waiting."

" Waiting for what?" Harry asked.

*" **Freedom** ."*

Rigel woke with sweat on her forehead and a denial on her lips. She gasped for air quietly, aware of her two sleeping roommates. Two, because Draco was standing between their beds, very much awake, with one arm outstretched toward her.

"Oh," he said quietly, lowering his hand, "I was about to wake you. All right?"

Rigel nodded, "Just fine."

Draco snorted, "You're a rotten liar, Rigel. Scoot over."

He made shooing motions with his hands and Rigel obligingly moved to the side of her bed, noticing as she did that Draco had lit the smallest lamp before she awoke. "I'm really okay, Draco," Rigel said uncomfortably, "You don't need to... console me, or anything."

Draco grimaced as he situated himself on the other side of the bedspread, "I wasn't going to. I'm just not tired anymore, and you probably won't be going back to sleep, so we might as well keep each other company."

"In the same bed?" Rigel said skeptically.

"Don't say it like that," Draco rolled his eyes, "It's stupid to talk across beds when the others are asleep. We'll either wake them up or be too quiet to hear one another."

"We could go to the common room," Rigel pointed out.

"The fires will be out by now," Draco said, "I'm not getting cold just because you're allergic to basic human contact."

"I'm not-"

"Then stop acting like it."

Rigel narrowed her eyes, but remained silent and didn't complain when Draco reached back proprietarily to fluff up her pillow to his

liking.

"So," Draco said after making himself comfortable, "Tell me about your dream."

"No," Rigel said calmly.

Draco scowled, "Why is it that you can say no to me, but not to Rosier?"

Rigel lifted an eyebrow, "What are you talking about?"

"You know what I'm talking about," Draco huffed.

"If I did, I wouldn't waste air asking," Rigel said, "So explain."

Draco peered at her through the semi-darkness. He looked skeptical, but after a moment he sighed and grudgingly said, "That day when we were all stuck in the common room, everyone could see you didn't want Rosier messing with you, but you let him anyway. Why?"

"I didn't see a way out of it," Rigel shrugged.

Draco stared at her, "You could have just said 'no' like you did with me."

Rigel cast about her brain for the right words, "It's just... I couldn't think of a good *reason* to say no, I guess. If I said no he would have asked why not, and what could I say? 'I just let Pansy braid my hair but I take exception to letting you unbraid it?' Rosier is annoying sometimes, but he's also sort of my friend, and it would have been rude to blatantly reject his overtures of friendship just because it made me uncomfortable."

Draco looked frustrated, "Ignoring the fact that friendship had nothing to do with those 'overtures,' Rigel, tell me this: if I asked you to do something that made you uncomfortable, would you do it just because we're friends?"

Rigel let her gaze move pointedly from Draco, to her bed, to the pillow Draco was nestled against, and back to Draco's face. She raised an eyebrow and Draco narrowed his eyes.

"I see," Draco said, his voice tight with something Rigel couldn't yet define, "And what if I asked you to do something dangerous? What if I wanted you to do something against your principals? Would you just do whatever anyone asked as long as you didn't want to hurt their feelings?"

Rigel frowned, "Of course I wouldn't."

"Good," Draco muttered.

"Because you'd never ask me to do something like that," Rigel said, feeling that the answer was obvious, "I wouldn't care about hurting your feelings if you were the kind of person to ask that of your friends."

"That's not-" Draco growled quietly, "You're missing the point."

"Then what's the point, Draco?" Rigel asked.

"The point is that you can't just do things because other people want you to," Draco said, his voice soft but vehement, "Even if they're people you trust not to want you to do dangerous or unpleasant things. If you start doing that now, you'll do it for your whole life, and no one can live like that, Rigel. You should make every single choice because it's what *you* want, and for no other reason."

"Life doesn't really work like that, Draco," Rigel said.

"Yes, it does," Draco insisted, "You just don't understand because you don't know how to be selfish."

Rigel pursed her lips but couldn't quite suppress the cynical, humorless smile that tugged at her lips. If only Draco knew how

selfish she could be. Selfish enough to endanger her own cousin, her entire family, really, just to pursue one farfetched dream.

She sighed, worn out from her strange nightmare and Draco's persistent questioning.

"Okay, but so what, Draco? Why does it bother you if I don't like disappointing people? That should make things easier for you, if anything," Rigel said tiredly.

Draco was silent long enough that Rigel turned her head fully towards him and frowned questioningly. His silver eyes glinted in the lamplight, and each word came slow and deliberate, as though he wanted to make sure she heard every one, "I don't want our friendship to be easy, Rigel. I want it to be real."

Rigel's eyes softened without her conscious input, "It is real, Dray."

Draco's face was pinched with disbelief, so Rigel turned on the bed to face him, looking earnestly into his closed off face, "I know I lie to you a lot, Draco, and I'm probably not going to stop anytime soon."

He snorted with begrudging amusement and shook his head.

"-but right now I'm telling you the truth." Rigel took a steadying breath, then said, "In the beginning, I only became friends with you because it was too much work to avoid you all the time." Draco flinched ever so slightly, and Rigel pulled him into a bracing hug that she ended just as swiftly, "But that was before I got to know you, before you and Pansy made my life interesting and funny and not just full of constant studying. By October I really was your friend, and since then our friendship has only gotten stronger. Dray, don't ever think that just because I'm an apathetic, antisocial idiot that I don't care about you and Pansy. I do. I promise, I do."

Draco's face was blank, but he was utterly motionless as he listened to her talk. Eventually he swallowed and said, "Say you're an idiot again."

Rigel rolled her eyes, "I'm an idiot."

"And say you won't let Rosier push you around anymore," Draco said stiffly.

"Draco..." Rigel bit the inside of her lip. She wanted to make Draco happy, but she didn't want to make an enemy out of a powerful upperclassman for no reason, "Why does it bother you so much?"

"Because he's upsetting you, and that upsets me, but I can't do anything to make him stop if you don't *tell him* it's upsetting you," Draco blurted, glaring at her once more.

Rigel turned her head towards the wall, "I'm not upset."

"You were obviously uncomfortable," Draco argued.

"Why would I be?" Rigel said stubbornly, "I let Pansy do my hair. It's no different."

"It is," Draco said, just as stubbornly.

"Why?"

"Don't ask *me*," Draco hissed, "It's different because *you* obviously think it is, otherwise you wouldn't be so uncomfortable with it."

"That..." Rigel shook her head, "Can we just drop it?"

"We always drop it," Draco said, "You never want to talk about it, and I can't say anything because I'm not even sure what's really wrong-"

"There's nothing wrong."

"-and- *be quiet*," Draco said, "There is *too* something wrong, I just don't know what it is."

"Draco," Rigel ran a hand through her short hair, "I think we've gotten off topic. Just... okay, I can see you're not going to let this go, so will

you just explain, clearly, what you're talking about so I can explain why you're wrong?"

Draco scrubbed his hands in his own hair with frustration, "All right. Okay. First, I have to ask: Rigel, does your father hit you?"

Rigel was so stunned that for a moment she couldn't even speak, "I-what? No! "

"Shh!" Draco glanced toward their dorm mates, who were luckily still sleeping, "Sorry, but I had to get that explanation out of the way first. I didn't think so-you're too relaxed around him, and he's so obviously fond of you-but... I had to check, you know?"

"Not really," Rigel said, scowling slightly, "That's not something you just ask someone, Draco. If the wrong person heard you ask, it wouldn't matter if it was true or not."

Draco lifted an eyebrow, "Why do you think I asked now, in the middle of the night in our dorm room, and not at the Great Hall table a couple months ago when the idea first occurred to me?"

Rigel was taken aback, "So... I eat breakfast like an abused person?"

Draco rolled his eyes, "Don't be stupid. It was Millicent, actually. She came up behind us and put an arm around each of our shoulders, and you stiffened up and flinched for a moment before relaxing. I would have missed it, but I was looking at you anyway because you were explaining the potions homework to Theo," Draco's eyes drifted to the bedspread as he thought, "After that, I just started noticing how much you avoided other people. I mean, you sat with us and talked with us, but you almost never initiated physical contact, and when someone touched you unexpectedly, you'd twitch a bit. If you were expecting it, though, you'd be too relaxed, like you were forcing yourself not to react."

Rigel pressed her lips together, "Not everyone is demonstrative with affection."

"That's true," Draco said seriously, "I know a kid who openly distains physical contact with others, but it's because from birth he was raised in a notoriously reserved family. Your dad gives out hugs like Dumbledore gives out lemon drops, though, so you aren't repressed because of the environment you grew up in-don't you see why it's confusing? But I don't know what the problem is, so I can't figure out how to help."

"I don't *need* help," Rigel snapped. She squeezed her eyes shut and scrubbed at them, saying, "I'm not repressed, Draco, for Merlin's sake. Just because I don't sew my feelings into a flag and wave them around for the world to see doesn't mean I can't recognize them and express them in a healthy and meaningful way. You're accusing me of being some kind of emotional defect-like a muggle robot or something."

"I'm not-"

"You are," Rigel said, lowering her voice again as she remembered where they were, "It's like you don't think I'm human."

Draco's face dropped into apologetic regret. He reached for her and Rigel stiffened without thinking. Draco clenched the hand that had been outstretched between them into a fist and dropped it forcefully onto the mattress, "That's what I'm talking about, Rigel." His jaw clenched and he blinked hard several times, "I would never hi-it you." His voice broke in the middle of the word 'hit' and he flushed darkly as he looked away.

Rigel hesitated, but now was not the time for maintaining a safe distance. She shifted over on the bed and wrapped an arm awkwardly around Draco's shoulders, "I know that, Draco. I never once imagined you'd hit me. I don't like being touched, but it's not because I'm afraid of being hit. I could never be afraid of *you* ."

Draco's shouldered remained stiff under her arm and he kept his gaze stubbornly averted, "Then why, Rigel? You know exactly what I'm talking about; I can hear it in your voice. So just tell me, okay? No more dancing around it."

Rigel did know what he meant. In truth she was extremely careful about becoming too physically familiar with her friends. It wasn't really a problem right now, because even though she was sure budding female anatomy came right along with starting her monthly cycle, she was under the effects of the long-term Polyjuice, so any developments would be undetectable until she updated the Polyjuice that summer. In a few years, however, even infusing the Polyjuice hair with as much of Archie's male traits as she could, her anatomy would not be entirely disguised as long as she remained female.

She could turn herself into a male completely with the use of Polyjuice, but the use of Polyjuice across genders for a prolonged period of time hadn't been well documented yet. Part of it was because it was taboo to Polyjuice into someone of the opposite sex, and part of it was because no one wanted to take the risk that the delicate reproductive organs would be damaged irrevocably with prolonged suppression to test the theory. It was already a strain on the body to remain Polyjuiced for any amount of time longer than fifteen months, and Rigel would have to step up her exercise regime next year to compensate for that, but to actually force her body to assume male genitalia for six years... the risk was simply too great to justify if she could avoid it.

So she was careful about how close she got to people now, so that in a few years when she couldn't be lax about letting her friends touch her it wouldn't be abnormal or suddenly suspicious behavior. She thought that if she was diligent now, she would avoid suspicion in the long run.

Apparently, she'd been so paranoid about maintaining her physical boundaries that she'd come off as suspicious anyway by being hyper-aware of every minor invasion of space. It was times like this that Rigel wished there was a handbook for people who wanted to

remain in disguise indefinitely, like deep-cover spies, because now she somehow she had to come up with an explanation for Draco that would satisfy his confusion, offer a long-term and sustainable explanation for her behavior, and most importantly not upset Draco any further.

Rigel considered telling Draco the truth-namely, that she *couldn't* tell him why she acted the way she did. While it would ease her conscience to avoid lying, she also knew that such an answer would only make her friend more frustrated and determined to figure out the underlying cause.

In the end, Rigel decided a lie was better for all involved.

"I have a physiological condition that makes it difficult for me to let others touch me," Rigel said eventually. She defended her words mentally by thinking that at least that was almost the truth-that is, if one considered female anatomy to be a physiological condition, and if one also considered the awkward social effects of disguising said anatomy to be a kind of difficulty... well, it was sort of true. If you stretched the definition of truth until it was more like the definition of untruth. At least it was vague enough to be inconclusive, with the added benefit of hinting at some underlying insecurity that would make her softhearted friends reluctant to pry too far.

Indeed, Draco's eyes already held something like sympathy in their silver depths at he looked over at her, "Is that why you don't like Healers?" he asked, "Because they remind you of it?"

"Sort of," Rigel said, warming up to the half-true tale she was spinning on the spot, "It's just rather personal, and I prefer not to regale every Healer I meet with my medical history."

Draco's eyes widened in understanding, "Madam Pomphrey doesn't know, and you avoid her so she won't find out about... your condition."

Rigel shrugged one shoulder in what she hoped was a noncommittal way.

Draco turned beneath her arm and wrapped his own arms around her torso, "I'm sorry, Rigel, but thank you for telling me."

Rigel awkwardly patted Draco on the back, and the blonde boy started and jerked back from her suddenly, "I'm sorry! You just told me, but I wasn't thinking-does it hurt?"

Rigel shook her head slowly, feeling guilty but a bit amused at Draco's earnest reaction. It was actually quite endearing, "It isn't painful. It's just... mildly uncomfortable. Most of the time I can ignore it, but when I'm not prepared it sometimes takes me by surprise."

Draco nodded, accepting the answer because it fit with his observations-and why shouldn't it, when she'd tailored it so it would?

Draco settled back on her pillow and gazed up at the ceiling, "Is that why you sleep with your clothes on?"

"Yes," Rigel said immediately-why not cover for as many of her oddities at once with one lie?

"And why you don't let anyone see you changing," Draco said softly, "Is it... visible?"

Rigel lay back on her side of the bed with a sigh "Sometimes," she said, thinking that now it sounded like she had some sort of easily irritated skin rash. Maybe she should pretend to itch herself every now and then to subtly confirm Draco's impressions?

"Oh," Draco said. They lay there for a couple of minutes, neither saying anything. "If you ever need to talk about it... well, you know."

"Yes, I know," Rigel said, swallowing against the lump in her throat.

"My family has a really good Healer," Draco said tentatively, "I don't know who you've seen, but maybe-"

"Thanks," Rigel said softly, "But there's nothing anyone can do. It's okay, though. Really, it hardly bothers me."

"I won't tell Pansy," Draco added sleepily, yawning and settling even deeper into Rigel's pillow, his arms crossed loosely over his chest, "If you don't want me to."

"Thanks," she whispered, closing her eyes wearily. Officially feeling like the worst friend in the world, she fell asleep to the sound of Draco's slow, soft breathing.

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She woke only a few hours later, to the sound of Theo laughing loudly.

The reason for his laughter became immediately apparent as Rigel opened her eyes to find that Draco, who was obviously used to more spacious sleeping accommodations, had shifted in his sleep and claimed the majority of the mattress for himself sometime in the last few hours. At the same moment Rigel became aware of a crick in her spine from the awkward way she was scrunched up against one side of the bed, while Draco sprawled indolently across the rest of it.

"Could have seen that one coming," Blaise said mildly on his way to one of the bathrooms.

"Did you mean Draco sneaking into Rigel's bed in the middle of the night, or Draco being a total mattress hog?" Theo asked mischievously.

Blaise just smirked cheekily and stuck his toothbrush in his mouth to illustrate that he wasn't going to clarify.

Rigel glared half-heartedly at her two other roommates, and winced as she sat up, massaging her lower back. She had half a mind to dump Draco on the floor, or else wake him with a bit of cold water from the sink, but as she remembered similarly rude awakenings at Grimmauld Place before she and Archie had learned to lock their doors during sleepovers, she sighed and prodded Draco's shoulder on her way out of bed instead.

"Wha-oh," Draco regained his wits remarkably quickly upon awakening. He glanced at his position, then at Rigel's mildly disgruntled expression, and grinned sheepishly up at her, "Sorry, Rye."

Rigel didn't have the heart to stay annoyed with her friend. It might have been the fact that his rumpled hair and sleepy expression made him seem entirely incapable of malice, or it might have been that Rigel knew him to be incapable of *any* strenuous emotion before his morning absolutions, but either way, Rigel decided she'd take a pain potion for her backache and forgive Draco for having grown up an only child.

Granted, she was an only child, too, but she and Archie had shared a bed more times than she could count. It had gotten to the point that their parents didn't even bother to tease them about it, because the jokes had gotten so old they were flat and predictable.

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Telling Draco that her reservedness was partially due to a medical condition had both benefits and drawbacks, it turned out.

On the one hand, Draco completely respected her personal space, and even ran subtle interference when one of their classmates looked about to initiate physical contact as well. On the other hand, he took up a habit of sending her significant and slightly sympathetic

looks every single time she went to a bathroom to change clothes or settled into bed fully dressed, and because their friends were Slytherins as well, every attempt by Draco to act subtly was blatantly transparent in their eyes.

On Sunday morning when Pansy put a hand on Rigel's arm to steady herself as she sat down at the breakfast table, Draco proprietarily grasped Pansy's opposite elbow to help her sit, which resulted in her becoming unbalanced from the unexpected change in equilibrium. Pansy had to awkwardly release Rigel's arm and lean on Draco instead, and when she was seated comfortably she turned a cool gaze on Draco and said, "If Rigel is disgusted by my touch I expect to hear it from him, Draco." She turned to Rigel and raised an eyebrow, "Well? Going to tell me why Draco is suddenly your personal body guard?"

Draco winced, and bowed his head apologetically to Rigel behind Pansy's back.

Rigel smiled slightly, "Your presence could never do anything but enchant the things around you, Pansy. Draco is merely concerned for my virtue. He doesn't trust pre-pubescent females, you see, ever since... well, he doesn't like to talk about it."

Draco spluttered a denial and Pansy's lips turned upwards, "I should have known it was just Draco taking his delusions too far again," the blonde girl sighed. Her hair was braided again that day. Since she was growing it out, it was in an awkward stage between too long to wear down respectably and too short to pull back, so she had taken to securing it in double French braids instead.

"It's not his fault," Rigel said, "I really should have said something sooner, but I do so hate disappointing our Draco."

Pansy nodded sagely, "It can be difficult to deny the boy-something about those innocent eyes and earnest expression is just so heart-warming."

Draco scowled fiercely, "I am neither innocent nor heart-warming, and I would thank you not to make such heinous aspersions on my character within the hearing of my peers."

"I doubt anything they say will change our opinion of you, Draco," Blaise said mildly from across the table.

Draco narrowed his eyes, "That was an insult, wasn't it? I know about those kinds of statements. It relies on me having an overly inflated opinion of my own self-worth, which causes me to overlook the slight by thinking you were complimenting my already-existing merit when in fact you were implying you could never be fooled into thinking I had any to start with." He smirked triumphantly, and Rigel could tell by the tone of his voice-confident, proud, and a tiny bit fond-that this was something else his father had taught him.

Blaise smiled in an amused way, "Are you saying the insult didn't work because your understanding of yourself is good enough that it matches our own estimation of your worth?"

"Ye-" Draco snapped his mouth shut and thought for a moment, "No. I'm not falling for that either. It didn't work because I'm too smart for you."

"Clearly," Blaise said, openly grinning now.

"As much as I enjoy watching Mr. Malfoy flounder for words, it is time to go, Mr. Black," Professor Snape had approached the Slytherin table while they were talking.

"Give our regards to your father, Rigel," Pansy said, smiling with excitement even though she had never met Lily Potter, and would likely never meet her unborn child either.

"And my mother's," Draco added quickly, "She'll want to hear about the baby, so it might be easier if you just tell your father to write her."

She nodded easily and got up to follow her Head of House out of the hall.

Snape led her to his office, where he had a floo fireplace warded heavily against detection. Usually it wasn't even visible, but when Snape waved his wand the section of the wall where the fireplace was expanded smoothly to reveal the floo. Snape lit the heart with a negligent flick of his wand and summoned floo powder from behind his desk just as easily. He didn't speak until he tossed a handful of floo powder into the flames and said, "After you, Mr. Black."

Rigel stepped into the fireplace and said, "St. Mungo's Hospital." The Hospital floo could be accessed by simply saying 'St. Mungo's,' or by saying 'Hospital,' and was designed to be more forgiving in terms of vocal pattern recognition than most floo addresses due to the fact that many people who attempted to use the Hospital floo were in states of upset, but Sirius used to tell them that he'd once ended up in a Mongolian whorehouse because he mispronounced his floo destination, so Rigel made it a point to be careful.

Then again, Rigel reflected as the nauseating sensation of floo travel washed over her, when Remus told the story it turned out James had looked up the floo address for the Mongolian whorehouse in the floo directory and then told Sirius it was his grandmother's floo address as a prank.

She stumbled into the lobby and stood off to the side until Snape came through. There were five floo ports into St. Mungo's lobby, so it wasn't surprising that Snape appeared three fireplaces down from Rigel. She walked over to him and followed him to the receptionist desk.

"Maternity Ward," Snape said sharply, though the stern woman behind the desk, who reminded Rigel of Madam Pince, didn't bat a lash. Rigel supposed she'd seen it all.

"Name," the receptionist said, just as sharply.

" *Potter* ."

Rigel hadn't known her last name could sound like poison, but she was suddenly a little more glad that she had met Professor Snape as Rigel Black instead of Harry Potter. Sirius always said Snape hated James more, but Rigel hadn't really registered that fact until she heard him spit her last name as though the very thought of the people attached to it both aggravated and disgusted him.

For one quiet moment she hoped Snape never found out who she was. She didn't think she could bear that tone of voice aimed at *her* .

"Room 839," the lady said with an unimpressed drawl.

With a short nod, Snape dismissed her and turned to Rigel, saying, "I will collect you at sunset."

Rigel nodded in agreement, glad that Snape, for all his obvious distain for her family, had a sense of discretion on a day like today. Or maybe he just didn't think he could stomach the site of his hated schoolmates.

Either way, Rigel wouldn't have to juggle Archie *and* Rigel's personalities, so she wasn't complaining.

She followed the signs up to the eighth floor and asked a passing medi-witch what hallway to take. Eventually she found herself outside room 839. She paused for a moment at the door, but quickly shook herself back to reality. Real life was nothing like her dreams.

She didn't knock, because Archie wouldn't dream of doing so, and she grinned brightly as she stuck her head inside, "Aunt Lily? You in there? Where's my new cousin?"

Lily was pacing, stomach bigger than ever, one hand on her lower back and the other holding James' hand as he paced alongside her. Sirius was lounging indolently at the foot of the hospital bed, and Remus was sitting in one of the chairs in the corner.

"Archie!" Sirius sprang up from the bed and rushed over to pull her into a hug. He squeezed a bit too tight, but Rigel only smiled up at him, "Just in time, I think Lily's about to re-define the color puce."

Lily, whose face was indeed darkly flushed and sweaty, glared at Sirius, "You better believe that once I'm not swelled up like a balloon I'm going to hunt you down and gut you for that, Sirius."

"Really, Sirius, haven't you any sense of self-preservation?" Remus shook his head without looking up from the manual he was pursuing, "Today of all days."

"I assumed she would be more mellow considering all the potions that half-baked medi-wizard has been shoving down her throat," Sirius said flippantly, shrugging elegantly as he gave Rigel's head a quick pat and went back to his place on the bed.

"I'll give you mellow, you overgrown mutt," Lily grumbled. James ran a soothing hand down Lily's hair and the redhead's face softened until she smiled tiredly. She went back to pacing without moving to strangle Sirius, so Rigel guessed her mother was making allowances for him considering their location. Sirius got along okay in the children's ward-enjoyed himself, even, goofing around with the kids who saw far too little joy-but he became seriously edgy when trapped in a patient room. It was a remnant of all the hours he spent in a room just like this one when Diana was sick. Rigel had only seen him like this a couple of times when one of her and Archie's mishaps had landed them with injuries too troublesome to deal with at home, but Sirius was markedly different in a hospital room.

He was more flippant, more sarcastic. His insults were just a hair too sharp, and his good cheer just a tad too forced. It amazed Rigel that Lily could show such consideration for her friend in the midst of her own personally trying situation-Rigel had never experienced labor, but it didn't look like a walk through the fairy meadow. Her mother was truly a kind-hearted person.

"Isn't that bed supposed to be sanitary?" Rigel asked Sirius, trying to channel Archie's inner Healer.

"You can sanitize it when I get off it, then," Sirius said, waving a hand negligently, "Or isn't the ungodly tuition James sends to that American school sowing any benefits yet?"

"Sirius," Remus admonished quietly, though even Rigel could tell his heart wasn't really in the rebuke. There was no point getting upset at Sirius when he was like this.

"What?" Sirius said, tucking his hands behind his head as he lounged across the non-porous mattress, "Seriously, I thought Archie was learning whatever Harry learned, isn't that how it's working? Might as well get your money's worth-you know James has to pay out-of-country tuition, don't you? I've no idea how the muggleborns can afford to send their kids abroad to study magic. Whole thing's a bad job."

"Harry's education is not even close to being a strain on our finances," James rolled his eyes at his friend, "And Archie can't do magic outside of school, even though it's not technically a holiday."

Sirius flicked a glance at James and snorted, "Never stopped us."

"That's not something to be proud of," Lily huffed out, rubbing small circles over her lower spine with a grimace as she walked, "I swear, you aren't getting your claws into this one, Sirius. I was too soft with Archie and Harry-no more. This kid is not going to be a trouble-maker."

"Harry's not a trouble-maker," James protested, "She's practically a saint, with the studying and the politeness and the-"

Lily snorted, "You've met our daughter, haven't you? You know, Harry, the unassuming one always standing *right next to* Archie when something goes terribly wrong? The girl whose idea it usually was in the first place? Our daughter is capable of unimaginable

trouble. You're just lucky my good sense rubbed off on her too, or our parenting experiences might not have inspired us to have another one. Why did we have another one, by the way? I forgot how awful this was."

James muttered nonsense words meant to soothe, which in reality just made Lily roll her eyes and shake her head with exasperation.

Sirius sighed with boredom and Remus looked up in patient amusement, "Go get a coffee, Sirius, for Merlin's sake."

Sirius stood up and gestured to Rigel with a nod, "Come on, Arch, keep me company."

They walked in silence down the hallways. Rigel knew it was unusual for Archie to be so quiet, but she didn't know what to say. Eventually, it was Sirius who broke the silence first.

"Really shakes you up, this place," Sirius said, gesturing with a jerk of his hand at the white walls and cold, tiled floors, "Just..." he sighed, "You know I'm happy for your aunt, but I keep thinking, it could have been us, you know? Me and your mom. We always talked about more kids. My brother's a wet whistle most days, but I liked not being an only child. Still, I guess you've got Harry, haven't you?"

"I never felt lonely growing up, if that's what you mean," Rigel said reassuringly, "Honestly, how could I? This family is the best. And Aunt Lily's kid will be like another sister to me anyway. I'm happy with the life you've given me, Dad," she nudged Sirius in the side to emphasize her words, "Really, I couldn't ask for better."

Sirius pulled Archie into a one-armed hug as they walked, "Aw, shucks. You're too good for the likes of me, Arch. Always knew it. Your ma was the same."

Rigel felt very uncomfortable discussing Aunt Diana with Sirius, but she tried not to let it show on her face, "You just underestimate your

goodness, Dad," she said, approximating Archie's effortless guile as she smiled winningly up at Sirius, "Or else you overestimate my own," she added cheekily.

Sirius laughed, and they lapsed into silence again.

"So what names are they considering?" Rigel asked.

"Oh, didn't I tell you?" Sirius glanced over with a sheepish expression, "They've already picked one, actually."

"Maybe you did," Rigel said easily, knowing full well that he hadn't, "You know I forget things."

"Like how you forgot to tell me you were a Parselmouth?" Sirius asked mildly.

Rigel's feet froze for a moment before she fell back into step, "About that, I was going to--"

"Hey, I understand," Sirius stopped to face her and put a hand on her shoulder, "Really, I get it. I might be hesitant to tell me, too, but I want you to know: it's not your fault. I don't think less of you for having a Dark Gift. If anything, I blame myself, because, well, let's face it-who knows what's swimming around the Black gene pool after all these years? So, don't feel guilty or anything for having it or for keeping it to yourself. Sometimes kids just like to have secrets, don't they? I remember. Makes you feel kind of special to know something no one else knows."

"I-" Rigel blinked a few times to order her thoughts, "I found out over Christmas break." No need to tell him which Christmas break. "At first I was just going to ignore it-I mean, who cares? But then everyone found out, and I was going to tell you, I just didn't want to put it in a letter, you know? I guess I should have known you'd hear about it anyway."

"Like I said, don't worry about it," Sirius said, "As far as I'm concerned, you're still Archie Black, same as always, only now you don't have an excuse not to help me with the snakes."

"Oh," Rigel said, "Thanks, Dad. Sorry I... well, thanks. About the snakes, though... I'd rather not use it if I don't have to. I mean, it's caused so much trouble already, so... is it okay if we just pretend I don't have it?"

"Don't look so worried, sport," Sirius grinned down at her and ruffled her hair before stepping into the elevator that would take them to the cafeteria, "We'll do whatever you want."

Rigel was glad her Parseltongue hadn't put another wedge in Sirius and Archie's relationship, but still... she couldn't help but think that Sirius's reaction to her gift, despite being couched in terms of understanding and acceptance, hadn't been nearly as comforting as he'd probably meant it. Her friends had been a bit over-enthusiastic about the whole thing, but they'd never made her feel like she was *expected* to be ashamed of it.

Not that Rigel could blame him. If Archie *had* turned up with Parseltongue, he may have felt exactly how Sirius expected *her* to, since Archie was well aware of his father's sometimes irrational dislike for all things that could possibly be associated with his Dark family upbringing. Not to mention the Hospital probably made it worse for Sirius to try and talk about things he already found depressing and distressing.

So she leaned over and hugged him fiercely before the elevator let them out at the cafeteria level, then said, "You never said what the name they decided on was, Dad."

Sirius smiled, but there was a hint of sadness to it, "They're naming her Adriana."

Rigel immediately connected the similarity between Adriana and Diana. She wasn't sure whether having a constant reminder of Aunt

Diana would be good for Sirius or not, but she could see he was touched by the gesture.

"Adriana Potter," she said, trying it out, "Well, she'll need a nickname. Adriana's a bit of a mouthful for anyone not at least thirty."

"Ana?" Sirius suggested.

"Too uppity," Rigel shook her head, imitating Archie's propensity for snap decisions.

"Ree?"

Rigel made a face, "Sounds like a bird call."

"You're awfully picky when it comes to nicknames," Sirius observed, grinning teasingly, "You come up with one, then."

Rigel wasn't about to suggest Dana, Diane, or anything too close to the original inspiration for the name, so she said, "Addy."

"Addy?" Sirius smacked his lips as if chewing the word over, "Addy. Well that will work until she's at least... three."

Rigel bumped Sirius with her elbow, "I think it's cute."

"Well, then you can tell Lily why you nicknamed her kid after an adder before she was even born," Sirius said.

"No problem," Rigel said breezily, "I'll only have to put up with Aunt Lily's ire for about two minutes before you say something worse and I'm off the hook."

Sirius winced, "I really should know better than to antagonize women right before they go into labor. I still have nightmares about Harry's birth."

Rigel was skeptical. She'd never heard of anything traumatic happening on her birthday, "I'm sure it wasn't that bad. Aunt Lily

doesn't even know any good curse words."

Sirius shook his head earnestly while they got in line for the buffet, "Believe it or not, Lily's tongue is the least of your worries once she gets going. When she was younger, her magic was extremely volatile."

"Like Harry's," Rigel said, thinking she'd inherited unruly magic from her mother.

"Harry? No, Harry's a lamb in comparison," Sirius said, "Harry's hardly ever broke free from her control as a kid. Apparently Lily used to have meltdowns about once a month before she got proper schooling. I didn't know her that well before James married her, but I met her a few times on Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$, and James just seemed to have a way of setting her off..." Sirius grinned in remembrance, "In our fifth year, James asked Lily to marry him-again, mind you, he did it every year when he saw her on the platform-and she just *snapped*. Guess she'd been having a bad week. I could actually feel the magic pouring off of her that day, if that gives you any indication, and James... well, I think he truly fell in love with her in that moment. The next moment, he went flying through the air. Lily's magic pushed him all the way onto the train, into a compartment, threw his luggage in after him, and locked him inside for good measure."

Sirius broke off into peels of laughter, ignoring the censoring looks from some of the other cafeteria customers, who apparently didn't think a Hospital was any place for laughter.

Rigel was thinking hard. It sounded like her mother's magic had been similar to her own, except she had hers more intensively repressed than Lily had. She wondered when her mother's magic had mellowed, because Rigel had never seen Lily lose control of it growing up. She'd have to ask when she was Harry again.

"Why did Lily keep coming to Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$?" Rigel asked, "I mean, if James annoyed her so much."

Sirius raised his eyebrows, "I'm sure I've mentioned it before, Arch-you really are forgetful, aren't you? Well, back then airplanes weren't well trusted by the magical community. Those traveling to AIM and Salem's Institute from London took a train as well, and since it would be a bit pointless to build two secret platforms in one station, the trains left from the same platform."

"At the same time?" Rigel frowned, "Wouldn't that be confusing? What if people got on the wrong train?" She decided she wouldn't even touch the issue of how a train was supposed to cross an ocean. She had learned long ago that wizards often did things the impossible way, instead of, say, reserving a public floo station, just because they could.

"No, the train to America left an hour later, I think," Sirius said, screwing up his face into his thinking expression.

"So couldn't Aunt Lily have just stopped showing up too early if she really wanted to avoid Uncle James?" Rigel asked, "Or did she secretly fancy him even then?"

Sirius snorted, "No secret how Lily felt back then-she really couldn't stand your Uncle James. Every year he'd get down on bended knee and ask for her hand, and every year she yelled at him like a banshee to leave her alone. But as to why she was early-" Sirius broke off abruptly, "Doesn't matter anymore."

"What does that mean?" Rigel frowned.

"I'll tell you when you're older," Sirius said, wagging his eyebrows.

Rigel let it go, because even the implied possibility of inappropriate information about her parents turned her stomach, but she was well aware that Sirius was only diverting her curiosity because he didn't want to answer. She would just have to ask her mother herself when she went home for the summer.

They paid for their food and chatted about other things while they ate. Classes, Quidditch-Sirius was horrified to learn that matches had been postponed indefinitely until the basilisk was caught. More horrified, in fact, than he was when Rigel told him there was a basilisk roaming about the school.

"Never seen one," Sirius said, "Bet it'd be worth a look."

"Not if it was the last thing you ever saw," Rigel pointed out wryly.

Sirius blinked at her, "Well, someone has been writing to Harry too often. Normally I'd say, 'why so Sirius, son?' but I would never be that fatalistically blunt."

Rigel let her lips smile sheepishly, "Yeah, guess so. But shouldn't you be more... I don't know, *worried* about a giant basilisk running about your son's boarding school?"

"Well if it's a basilisk I doubt it really runs anywhere," Sirius said reasonably. At Rigel's raised eyebrow he chuckled, "Archie, Dumbledore is the greatest wizard of our time. If evil is stupid enough to show itself right under the Headmaster's nose, you can be sure it won't be around to annoy you for long. Dumbledore will take care of the basilisk. You just keep your Quidditch game up for when the cup is reinstated."

And Rigel's still-troubled expression, Sirius sighed and said, "Look, I learned my lesson last year, okay? I'd forgotten how much trouble I got into as a kid until I was getting letters from the Headmaster about kids dropping into comas. I was so worried last year, but you came home safe and sound, just like Dumbledore said you would. I guess what I'm trying to say is that I remember how much didn't get sent home about what went on at school, but nothing really bad every happened to us there. So I could spend all my time worrying about you, or I could trust you, and trust Dumbledore, to stay safe and act in your best interests."

Rigel absorbed that thoughtfully. On the one hand, Sirius was more trusting of Dumbledore than even Rigel had realized, but on the other, a lack of questions on Sirius' part could only be a good thing as far as her secrets were concerned.

When they were finished, they went back up to the maternity ward to find several Healers in Lily's suite.

"Is it time already?" Sirius said cheerfully, seeing Lily propped up on the bed, "Also, I hope you sanitized that first."

"Already?" Lily growled, "I've been having abdominal spasms for hours, Sirius."

"Yeah, but... actually, I guess I can give you that one," Sirius said thoughtfully, "Well, if you need me I'll be outside." Without further ado, Sirius wished Lily good luck, told James not to faint again, and left the hospital room quickly.

"You'd think someone who was both an Auror and a part-time Hospital volunteer would have a stronger stomach," Remus said thoughtfully, "But I suppose he'd be more hindrance than anything at this point. Is there something I can do to help, Lily?"

"As much as I appreciate the offer," Lily grunted, "Please get your well-meaning butt out of my birthing room."

Remus quirked a small smile, "As you wish, mother-to-be. Take care of her, James."

James nodded from his position next to the head of the bed. He was holding Lily's hand and looked to be psyching himself up for a battle that he fully expected to come out on the wrong side of.

"Should I...?" Rigel trailed off. She wanted to be there for her mother, but Archie wasn't really Lily's kid, so it might be a little strange if she stayed after Sirius left.

"Do you really want to watch?" Lily asked bluntly.

Rigel's eyes widened as the realization of what was actually about to happen set in. She had a vague idea of childbirth, of course, but... thinking about it in the immediate, practical sense was frankly unnerving.

"Call us when you're recovered, Aunt Lily," Rigel said, trying not to grimace, "Good luck. Be careful," she added to the Healers on her way out, because Archie would definitely have said the same.

They waited in the hall for a while, but eventually the three of them couldn't pace anymore so they retreated to a small waiting room just down the hall. It didn't take more than an hour, really, but it felt like forever just sitting there trying not to think about what was going on down the hall.

Then, an assistant Healer came for them.

"You three are with the Potter's, right?" At Remus' soft confirmation she immediately said, "Both mother and daughter are doing fine. There were no complications, and the Potter's are ready to see you now."

Remus and Sirius both sighed in relief. Rigel thanked magic that her mother was okay, and shut her eyes against her brain trying to imagine what exactly entailed a 'complication.' Archie hadn't covered childbirth in his Healer's studies yet-probably wouldn't until sixth or seventh year. From the little Rigel understood, however, it wasn't something she really wanted to experience. Ever. Luckily she now had a little sister to be responsible for carrying on the bloodline. A little sister, Rigel reflected, who she should probably go meet.

She followed her uncles back to Lily's room raised her eyebrows as she took in her parents. James looked like he'd been subjected to one of Flint's Extreme Exhaustion Practices, or EEPs, as Pucey liked to call them. His hair was more untidy than usual, his face was

clammy, and he had the wild-eyed look of a man who'd been through hell and still wasn't sure what he'd done to deserve it.

Lily, on the other hand, looked like a professional jogger who had just finished an important race. Her skin glowed with healthy exertion, a thin layer of sweat making her forehead shine slightly under the bright hospital lights, and she had a smile of immense satisfaction on her face.

In her arms was a little pink bundle of blankets. They all crowded in to see, and Rigel's first thought was that she'd never seen anything so weird looking.

Her baby sister was kind of wrinkly, not really human-looking, and didn't appear to be capable of either opening her eyes or shutting her mouth. Her scrunched up little face looked entirely unhappy to be faced with the lights and noise of the outside air. Her eyes stayed clenched shut, her nostrils flared, and she cried and cried about the unfairness of it all. It sort of hurt Rigel's ears, and Remus' expression was particularly pained, but Sirius bent over to get closer.

"What a set of lungs," he said, chuckling, "Hello little Addy, welcome to the world."

"Addy?" Lily's sparkling eyes narrowed dangerously.

"It was Archie," Sirius said, backing off quickly.

"Addy?" Lily said again, turning her eyes on Rigel.

"Harry came up with it," Rigel said quickly, "She wrote me about nicknames she was thinking of, since Adriana is too sophisticated for everyday use."

Lily pursed her lips, "Addy, huh? I guess it is sort of cute."

Sirius sent Rigel an impressed look that clearly said 'nice save.'
Rigel just smiled a bit at the irony of life.

"I like it," James declared. He was slowly regaining color, but still looked to be suffering a slight case of combat fatigue.

"Can I hold her?" Sirius asked eagerly.

"No," Lily said bluntly. Seeing Sirius' pleading look, she sighed, "Have Healer Nilkin sanitize you first. And don't turn her skin weird colors."

The Healer stepped forward, and performed a general sterilization spell that Rigel recognized from Archie's training on all three of them. "That's good for four hours," she said cheerfully, "But I'll be back every two hours to renew it, just in case. And may I say what a beautiful baby girl you have, Mrs. Potter? Just perfect, she is."

The Healer left the room breezily, and Rigel got the feeling she was the kind of person who just walked through the world with a smile on their face no matter what crossed their path.

Sirius held Adriana for a little while, then Remus held her, still grimacing at the way the baby wouldn't stop fussing and crying.

"Didn't you feed the kid?" Sirius asked. At Lily's glare he shrugged, "Right, dumb question. Still, Addy's a bit high-strung, don't you think?"

"Will you take her, Archie?" Remus asked a few minutes later, "I'm going to ask one of the nurses for a headache potion."

Rigel hesitantly leaned back in her chair and held her arms in the position the Healer showed her. When her sister was placed in her arms, she was illogically surprised at how light she was. A person shouldn't weigh less than a sack of flour, Rigel mused silently.

Her sister's eyes opened a tiny bit, but not wide enough to distinguish the color. Rigel had read that newborns required an eye-drop potion to keep infection away for the first few days after birth, and the potion often blurred the infant's vision until the drops wore

off. Rigel supposed if someone had blinded her without explanation she might cry a lot, too. With her wrinkly forehead and squinty eyes, Addy wasn't really all that cute yet, but there was still something endearing about her odd little fragility. Even though the baby girl was by far the most defenseless thing in the room, she didn't hesitate to make her presence known. Rigel wondered what age it was that people stopped letting themselves be heard out of fear.

Addy was still fussing, so Rigel rocked her arms gently for a little while to try and calm her. It didn't seem to help, but she kept at it. Addy's little beanie cap slipped up a little bit, and before Rigel re-adjusted it she caught a glimpse of fine copper tufts.

"She has your hair, Aunt Lily," Rigel said, smiling slightly.

"And James' eyes," Lily said, smiling, "She had them wide open until the drops went in."

"That she does," James said proudly, "And her mother's chin, as well."

Lily shook her head, "You can't tell the shape of her chin yet, James."

"Yeah, but it's got that stubborn tilt to it, doesn't it?" James sighed fondly, "She'll be a right hellion, I can tell."

"Oh, no," Lily said, still shaking her head, "No, not this one. She'll be an angel."

"Oh, Lily, I'm so *sorry*," Sirius said, eyes wide with feigned sorrow, "I thought-" he broke off and bit his lip apologetically.

"What?" Lily said suspiciously.

Sirius shook his head sadly, "I just thought Addy was *your* daughter."

"Why you-!" Lily started searching her hospital gown for something, "James, where's my wand? I'm going to hex that stupid friend of

yours if it's the last thing I-"

Lily broke off when Addy let out a particularly loud cry of distress. Rigel stood up awkwardly and carefully transferred the baby back to Lily's arms. Lily took to cooing softly at the little girl, ignoring Sirius completely.

They spent the rest of the afternoon in the suite. Magic aided childbirth significantly in terms of the mother's health and the infant's strength, so the Potter's probably could have gone home the same day, but James felt it best to stay until the morning at least. They all took turns holding the baby-though none of them could get her to stay quiet for long.

At some point Rigel must have fallen asleep in her chair. She tended to doze off these days when she wasn't actively doing something, so it didn't surprise her to feel Remus shaking her awake. She uncurled and was about to ask what time it was when she heard an unmistakable voice floating in through the birthing suite door, which was slightly ajar.

"If you would simply fetch Rigel Black from within, I will be on my-"

"Nonsense! You simply must come wish the new mother well-it's good luck, you know."

"I have no interest in luck, good or otherwise-"

"Well then at least come in for politeness' sake."

"I don't-"

The door opened all the way and Healer Nilkin came breezing in, one hand beckoning a certain Potions Master to follow her. Professor Snape appeared to be barely holding his impatience in check, so Rigel scrambled up and said, "Bye, everyone. Congratulations, Aunt Lily. Hello, Professor. My apologies for not meeting you downstairs-I fell asleep, I'm afraid."

"So I see," Snape said shortly, flicking his gaze over her rumpled hair and robes, "With me, Black."

"Wait!"

They turned as Lily called them back. Rigel's mother was biting her lip, a habit Rigel had only seen her display on a handful of occasions, none of them happy. Lily hugged Addy a bit tighter to her chest, then said, "It's good to see you, Severus."

Rigel actually stopped breathing for a moment in surprise-did her mother just address Professor Snape by his first name? She'd always berated James and Sirius for insulting him, but Rigel thought her mother just felt a sense of nostalgic fondness for her childhood friend. The way she looked at him now, it was like they *knew* each other, as if some great tragedy had passed between them. It was uncomfortable, the awkward anguish on Lily's face.

Snape's face wouldn't have been more expressionless if he'd been petrified, "Mrs. Potter." Lily flinched minutely, "Congratulations. Come, Mr. Black."

"Oi! Don't talk to my son like he's an animal," Sirius snapped, standing from his chair to move protectively toward Rigel and her Head of House.

Snape sneered at Sirius just enough to be utterly dismissive, "I'll deal with my student however I please, Black."

"Like hell you will," Sirius snarled, "I won't let you order Archie around like a whipping dog so you can feel some misplaced sense of self-satisfaction."

Snape raised one pointed brow, "Unlike some people, I don't derive pleasure from debasing others. I think you'll find that... *Archie* doesn't object to my treatment of him in the slightest." Snape took a step closer and lowered his voice to a dangerous octave, "You might

want to spend a little less time worrying about the behavior of others and a little more contemplating your own."

"Just what is that supposed to mean?" Sirius said, eyes narrowed and voice lowered as well.

"Only that you clearly can't expect one animal to be responsible for another," Snape said, lip curling with distaste, "Is it really a surprise that someone more qualified came along to take control of what you've allowed to grow unchecked?"

"Are you questioning my ability as a parent?" Sirius fumed, clenching his fists. Rigel had never seen Sirius so upset-usually when people made him angry he just laughed at them, or insulted them back. He never just *fell for the bait* like this.

"I'd question your ability as a human being if I didn't know a *mutt* like you would take it as a compliment," Snape said with a humorless smirk.

Rigel realized two things in quick succession. The first was that Snape knew of Sirius's *illegal* animagus form-somehow. The second was that if these two wizards stayed in the same room for long something was going to get hurt. Since the most defenseless thing in the room was her baby sister, Rigel was suddenly extremely motivated to get Professor Snape out of the room-not because she feared Snape, but because who knew what Snape's presence combined with their being in a Hospital room would make Sirius do.

"Well, I wouldn't want to miss dinner," she said, pitching her voice a bit too loud, the way Archie did when he wanted to change the subject so obviously that no one could ignore it, "See you all this summer. Thanks for collecting me, Professor Snape." She moved to hug Sirius briefly and waved at everyone else, blowing a kiss to Addy for good measure.

Snape seized upon the moment smoothly, nodding to the general assembly and making a swift exit.

Then didn't speak as they rode the elevator down to the level with floo connections, both lost in their own thoughts. Rigel didn't know what Snape was thinking, but she was thinking that either Dumbledore wasn't as wise as he thought, or else he'd seriously underestimated the amount of bad blood between Snape and her family. Honestly, Rigel had underestimated it too. Somehow the cold blackness in Snape's gaze seemed to go far beyond what would be reasonable over a decade-old school rivalry. And Sirius had snapped at Snape so quickly-as though he'd been waiting to do so, or else had done it so many times it was automatic. James and Remus hadn't stepped in, Rigel noted. They hadn't even seemed surprised. Remus just looked resigned, and James was visibly holding himself back from siding with Sirius-he didn't dare in front of his wife, it seemed.

And Lily-what on earth was that expression on her face when Snape called her 'Mrs. Potter?' It was like pain, and a tiny bit of anger, but not toward Professor Snape. There were other things in her gaze, too, but Rigel couldn't figure them out. All of it was just too emotionally charged to sift through-and she had no idea why.

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On Monday morning Dumbledore made the announcement about taking over Defense classes for the rest of term. McGonagall's face was openly disapproving, but the rest of the staff just seemed surprised and confused. Whispers broke out across the hall. There were a lot of excited looks around some of the tables, especially among the older students.

"Finally!" Pucey exclaimed from up the table, "Maybe we'll actually learn something before we graduate."

"It's only for a few months," someone else said cynically, "He'll spend the whole time undoing the damage of a decade of incompetence."

"Still better than trying to undo it ourselves," Pucey shrugged.

The second-years had Defense that afternoon after lunch, and they sat quietly waiting for their new Professor to arrive, not quite sure what to make of the situation. They were surprised at first when students from all four Houses began to arrive, since they normally only had this class with the lions, but as Blaise pointed out- Dumbledore is a very busy man. It made sense to condense his classes to seven a week instead of fourteen or more.

When the Headmaster finally walked into the classroom, it was completely silent. He made his way to the front and carefully wrote his name on the blackboard in squeaky white chalk.

Several people laughed quietly when he turned around and said, "Hello, class. I am your new teacher, Professor Dumbledore."

The silver-haired man paced the front of the room with an easy grace as he spoke.

"As you may have noticed, I have combined all Houses in each year, both because it saves having to teach the same lesson twice, and because I have always been wary of too much unnecessary division among our students," he said, tugging on his beard thoughtfully, "Now, I'm sure you're wondering what sort of things we'll be covering in this class. Essentially there will be a different topic every day. I won't tell you about it in advance, because I'll likely be deciding upon the topic that morning while I eat breakfast."

No one could tell if he was kidding or not.

"There will be no reading assignments required before class, and there will be no homework assigned after it," Dumbledore went on, "The former is because I will tell you everything you need to know, the latter because although I will be taking my responsibilities for this position seriously, I regrettably do not have the time to grade what I'm sure would be simply inspiring examples of your insight and understanding of the material."

There were grins breaking out all over now, and a couple of people clapped.

"This does not mean that you will not be held accountable for materials covered in class, however," the Headmaster said genially, "Every other Wednesday there will be an oral quiz over the topics covered in the last three classes. It is open notes, so be sure to take some. Without further ado we begin our first topic: Defensive Shields. You have all learned Protego of course, but this is only the first of a series of defensive spells we call shields. Each shield has a differing level of difficulty and usefulness, which more often than not are directly proportional."

And so their first real Defense lesson ever went. Unlike Quirrell, Dumbledore didn't give them a chapter to read about a spell and then make them try it on dummies for the entire period with little or no actual guidance.

He gave them an overview of the different kinds of shields they might expect to encounter in their lives, with a comprehensive analysis of their uses and drawbacks. Several of them, he explained, would be beyond their current level, but it was better to be aware of what others who were more powerful than they might be able to use against them than to be shielded from them simply because they were beyond their reach.

They all left the class satisfied and very much excited for their last few months of Defense.

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The next week was so quiet that everyone knew something bad had to happen soon.

On the evening of the fifteenth, Rigel thought she ought to visit Neville in the Hospital Wing.

She approached Selwyn in the common room, who looked up from her magazine-again, written completely in the runic language that Rune Magic was based off of-with a resigned expression. "What do you want, Black?"

Rigel tried to look as unassuming as possible, "I was wondering if I could have a pass to the Hospital Wing to visit Neville Longbottom."

"He's petrified," Selwyn said bluntly, "He's not going to know if you visit or not."

"I'd still like to visit him," Rigel said evenly, "I can take another student along for safety, if you prefer."

Selwyn scoffed, "Oh, yes, let me send two second-years out into the basilisk-infested corridors. I'm sure having a second person to break down in hysterical tears with you will make all the difference."

Rigel gave Selwyn a flat, unappreciative look, and Selwyn raised an eyebrow in return, as if to say-can you really deny it?

"Can you send a prefect with me?" Rigel tried.

"My prefects have better things to do," Selwyn said.

Rigel glanced over to where the seventh-year male prefect was playing exploding snap with his friends, "Clearly."

Selwyn groaned, "You're not going to go away, are you? Fine. I will escort you to the Hospital Wing, where you will *stay* until I come back to collect you at curfew."

Rigel agreed readily, and Selwyn grudgingly walked her through the castle to the Hospital Wing. "You hear anything that sounds like hissing and you tell me immediately, Black," Selwyn said, gripping

her wand with wary confidence, "Then you tell me which direction it's coming from, and we run the other way, got it?"

Rigel nodded, "Nothing so far."

"It better stay that way," Selwyn grumbled, "If I get petrified and miss NEWT's because of you, I'll repeat the year just to spite you and put you in detention every night for *both* terms."

Rigel felt her fear of the basilisk showing up that night increase by several notches.

They reached the Hospital Wing without incident, and Selwyn pointedly glared at her before leaving, "Stay. Here."

Rigel privately reflected that Selwyn didn't really trust her very much.

Her friend was the first in the row of petrified students, and it always pained Rigel to see that same frozen expression on his face even after all these months.

She sat quietly by his bedside, since she really had nothing to say. She wasn't sure what compelled her to visit Neville every now and then-logically neither of them really benefited from it-but it seemed wrong not to, as though she were forgetting him. Eventually she decided to work on her little project as long as she was sitting quietly, so she took advantage of the quiet, empty Hospital Wing and sank into meditation.

The puppet-guardian was right where she'd left him, as disappointing as that was. She sank into the armchair across from him and stared pensively.

She'd modeled him after what she thought she'd look like if she really was a boy. This would be what potential intruders into her mind encountered, so she wanted it to match people's expectation of what they would see, so they would be less likely to question it.

The best purpose she had divined for a sentient mental guardian was to disguise it as herself, or at least as how people would perceive her mental self to be. One of the major drawbacks of having to consciously defend your mind was that it left you vulnerable in the physical world. No Occlumens was really a threat until his shields were good enough that he could defend his mind automatically while still being consciously present in his physical body, so that he could keep both out of harm's way. Until then, it was an either/or kind of a situation, and unless you were facing an enemy like the sleeping sickness, which only attacked your mind, a mental attack would likely come in conjunction with a physical one.

This was a temporary measure to bypass that drawback until she could figure out her shields. If a mental attack came with a physical threat, she could maintain control over her body while the guardian actively protected her mind the way she could only do while in meditation.

At least, in theory. In reality the so-called guardian sitting across from her was little more than a mindless drone. Maybe... well, he could follow basic instructions, so maybe she could give him a set of very specific commands to follow in the event of any intrusion. He would still be mindless, but he would be able to react under a certain set of presupposed conditions, like a muggle computer.

She set about devising such a set of commands, which basically involved her imagining possible scenarios and then imbuing the puppet with the proper reaction commands by using magic to cement the instructions into the puppet's brain. She had no way of knowing whether it worked, since she couldn't simulate a mental attack on her own brain, but she felt better for having done something, at least.

She returned to the physical world to see that the sun had already set. Selwyn would probably be coming to collect her soon.

The door to the Hospital Wing opened, and Rigel stood to go, guessing that Selwyn wouldn't want to wait around. To her surprise,

it was not Selwyn who walked in, but Parvati Patil. The girl slipped in soundlessly, and it didn't take much to guess that she had sneaked out of Gryffindor tower to visit her sister.

"Hello," Rigel said.

Parvati jumped guiltily and turned toward her, "Black? What are you doing here?"

"Visiting Neville," Rigel said.

"What good will that do?" Parvati said bitterly.

Rigel raised an eyebrow, having been under the impression that Parvati was doing the same exact thing.

Parvati made a face, "Don't look at me like that. Neville's not your twin, so he can't feel your presence like Padma can feel mine. Besides, *I* can't do anything else. You can, though." At Rigel's confused look, she tossed her braid and said, "You're a Parselmouth, aren't you? Use your stupid gift to find the thing before it hurts more people. That's what Dumbledore was trying to do, wasn't it? I recognized that Parseltongue we all heard as yours, so obviously he thinks you can lure it out."

"It didn't work," Rigel said apologetically.

"Then try *again*," Parvati said, "My sister is petrified, Black. I know you're an only child but just try for a second to *imagine* what that feels like."

Rigel thought of Addy, so tiny and frail, and shuddered at the thought of her coming anywhere near a basilisk's gaze. "I'm really sorry, Parvati-

"Don't be sorry," Parvati said coldly, "Do something about it."

"I can't," Rigel said, feeling inadequate even though she *knew* she couldn't really be expected to do anything, "It isn't safe to just wander

around looking for it, and what would I even do if I found it? Just run away, probably."

"So what?" Parvati said, her voice rising, "Finding it is better than nothing. But no, you're just sitting here, totally useless. If I had the power to help people, you wouldn't see me sitting in here doing nothing."

"The teachers don't want us to-"

"The teachers haven't had anyone they care about petrified, though, have they?" Parvati said, her voice hitching a bit, "You know, today's my birthday. Mine and hers. We always-I've *never* spent it alone before, and I got her present months ago but she won't get to open it until June at the earliest and it's all just so *stupid* . I hate this! I don't see why the teachers can't make it stop."

"I'm sure they're doing their best," Rigel said ineffectually.

"Right. That's just something people say when they don't want to tell you they've accomplished nothing," Parvati spat, "You know what? Why don't you just go?"

"I have to wait for-"

"For what? Someone else to make everything okay? Grow up, Black. And get out. I don't want you here tonight," Parvati said, turning toward her sister's bed with a broken, miserable expression, "It's bad enough I have to *know* you aren't doing anything to help. I don't want to *watch* you do it, too."

"I'll wait by the doors," Rigel said.

"Didn't you hear me? Get OUT!" Parvati turned back to yell at her, slipping off her shoe and throwing it in Rigel's direction for good measure. Probably she knew the wards in the Hospital Wing prevented most low-level spells classed as 'offensive' from being

cast, in order to prevent students from opposing Quidditch teams from hexing one another after the matches.

Rigel's magic came out to deflect the projectile automatically, but she flinched anyway in surprise that the other girl would actually throw something at her. Still, she didn't have a twin sister, so she supposed she couldn't really relate to what Parvati must be going through. She left the Hospital Wing quietly, deciding discretion to be the better part of valor in this case, and leaned back against the wall in the corridor. If she was lucky, Selwyn wouldn't chew her out too much for being in the hallway when she arrived.

For a few minutes it was quiet.

When she started to hear the whispering hiss of Parseltongue echoing softly down the corridor, her first reaction was utter disbelief. How could this be happening to her, of all people? Then, a more pressing question:

What should she do?

Madam Pomphrey wasn't in the Hospital Wing that night, as evidenced by her not coming to investigate when Parvati started shouting. Rigel knew the Mediwitch usually did inventories with Snape mid-month, so chances were good the Healer was in the dungeons. There was a ward to alert her in the event that an injured person crossed the threshold to the wing, but Rigel wasn't sure how sensitive it was, and didn't want to seriously injure herself to trigger the wards in case Madam Pomphrey wasn't just somewhere else, but actually indisposed.

On the one hand, she could stand there and pretend not to hear anything. That might keep her safe if the basilisk didn't come her way, but it was also a cowardly course of action that wouldn't help anyone. If the basilisk was roaming, someone needed to know. Besides, there was no guarantee the basilisk wouldn't find her; in fact, she was probably *more* likely to get petrified if she stayed where she was than if she moved away from the faint sound of the hissing.

On the other hand, she could try to get help. That was a good idea, but she didn't know where to look. There were no portraits in the hallway, though there might be a few in the Hospital Wing. If she went back inside the Hospital Wing, however, Parvati would ask why she was back, leading to her telling the girl who had just admitted to having vigilante tendencies that the monster she was so keen on seeing destroyed was possibly within her reach that night. Somehow... that seemed like a bad idea.

And yet, did she have a choice? She couldn't go wandering around. Maybe she could convince Parvati to stay in the Wing with her, and if nothing else Rigel was probably physically stronger than the Gryffindor girl. She could force her to stay in the relative safety of the Hospital Wing wards if she had to. Rigel turned around and pulled on the door-but it didn't move. Frowning, Rigel tried again, but the door was definitely stuck. She knocked on the heavy door several times, but Parvati didn't answer. She pulled a few more times on the handle before realizing the door wasn't stuck. It was locked. Parvati had locked her out. She knocked louder, trying to inject some urgency into the sound, but it, too, was ignored.

Rigel was about to try asking her magic to unlock one of the doors, despite the unlikelihood of that working without her wand on her to help her consciously direct it, but before she could phrase the silent request she felt herself repelled backwards several feet with no warning. It was like an invisible force has swelled suddenly and pushed her away from the door. She stretched out a hand, but could get no closer to the doors than a couple of feet. She moved her hand from side to side, frowning. It felt like a bubble of magic was arched over the Hospital doors, though she couldn't see any visible trace. The half-dome of magic didn't give or waver, even as Rigel lifted both hands and pressed against it testingly. It reminded her of something, but she wasn't sure what.

She sighed. Her magic probably wouldn't be able to get through whatever that was. At least Parvati would be safe as long as she stayed in the Wing.

The only question that really remained was how to find help and alert someone now without also finding and/or alerting the basilisk. It would probably be looking for prey, which, if everyone else was in their common rooms like they were supposed to be... pretty much just left her.

The hissing was slightly louder now, but still faint and indistinct. She was pretty sure it was coming from the left, so she headed right. The first portrait or ghost she came across, she would ask for help.

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Alesana frankly had better things to do than traipse around after a second-year with a mouth too smart for his own good and an unlucky penchant for pissing off the forces of destiny. Then again, as Head Girl she was one of only two students allowed to roam the halls in these troubled times. The fact that she'd passed her Defense OWL with flying colors and was expected to do equally well on her NEWT despite seven years of a more worthless parade of professors than anyone could be expected to deal with only justified the trust the professors placed in her.

Trust, as any good Slytherin knew, went hand and hand with added responsibility. So if you really wanted to keep people's trust, you had to be willing to take responsibility for things you otherwise wouldn't, which meant sometimes she had to ferry second-year brats to the Hospital Wing and back even though she'd rather be reading about the effects of sunlight deprivation on Cornish pixies.

The castle was always eerie after the students were abed-any prefect who'd done rounds knew that, but tonight there was something... off in the air. She was listening hard for sounds of hissing as she walked, but what textual information was available about Parseltongue indicated that those who were predisposed to speak it were also much more sensitive to its perception. Often there

were reported cases of a Parselmouth recognizing the sound of another snake at negative four times the decibel at which a non-speaker was able to hear it.

Interestingly, Parselmouths didn't seem to have increased audio-sensing abilities in general. It was only when it came to the perception of Parseltongue.

Alesana got to the Hospital Wing, reached towards the doors, and froze, first in confusion, then in anger. There was something preventing her from accessing the handle. She pulled out her wand and cast a charm over her own eyelids that was meant to render invisible magic visible, as long as it was free magic, cut loose from its castor in the form of a completed spell. The dome around the Hospital Wing doors flared white to her eyes, and Alesana carefully noted its dimensions before releasing the Magic Sight spell. She chose a portion of the door that was not warded by the invisible barrier, and cast a useful Transfiguration that essentially transfigured a solid piece of material into negative space by moving the material in the epicenter of the spell to the edges of the affected area, which was about three feet in diameter. As the hole materialized in the heavy door, Alesana gracefully folded herself through the small opening.

She emerged in the Hospital Wing on full alert and took stock of the room quickly, but there was only one person inside-and it was not Rigel Black. A quick look over her shoulder at the doors revealed the culprit for the invisible barrier. An innocuous-looking button was lying on the ground just in front of the inside handles. Alesana recognized it instantly as one of the new joke products that made it onto the Prefect-Awareness list every semester. This one was a Marauder invention, the Barrier Button, or something. She banished the button-and therefore the barrier as well-with a flick of her wand until it was safely away from the Hospital entrance. Someone else could figure out how to dismantle it later.

She strode toward the Gryffindor-Patil-who was sitting next to her petrified twin. The girl scrambled up when she heard footsteps,

caught completely off-guard, and backed toward the nearest wall-typical Gryffindor, no situational awareness or forethought.

"You-Patil," Alesana snapped, "What are you doing out after curfew?"

"It's ten minutes 'till," Patil said defiantly-again, Gryffindors. No Slytherin would bare their tiny little fangs at someone unquestionably more powerful than they.

"Did you block the doors? This is a Hospital Wing, you know. What if a student had been injured and needed entry?" Alesana asked.

"Student's aren't allowed out of the dorms anyway," Patil said smartly, then winced as her own words caught up to her.

"That's right," Alesana said, smirking, "Students *are* forbidden to be out without a proper escort. Is McGonagall hiding under one of these beds?" Alesana lifted a brow derisively when Patil didn't answer, "I didn't think so. Ten points from Gryffindor. Where is Rigel Black?"

"What do I care?" Patil scowled.

"Watch your tone, second-year," Alesana said, her already slim supply of patience rapidly evaporating, "Was Black here when you snuck in?"

Patil reached up and clenched a hand around her braid, tugging it over her shoulder in a nervous gesture, "Yeah, he was here-sitting and moping like a useless prat."

Alesana clenched her teeth at the open insult, "When did he leave and where did he go?"

"Ten minutes ago," Patil said sullenly, "And I don't care where he went."

Alesana really wanted to give that girl's braid a sharp tug and see if it knocked some manners into her head, but refrained because she

had learned at a very young age that it was impossible to fix pigheadedness. " *Why* did he leave, Patil? He was supposed to wait for me to fetch him."

Something flickered in Patil's gaze, but it was quickly smothered, "He just left."

"Rigel Black does not 'just' do anything," Alesana said, "Try again."

"I told him to get out, okay?!" Patil snapped at her, brown eyes blazing, "You should have seen him-sitting there doing *nothing* . He had no right! Acting like-"

Alesana had heard enough to understand that Patil was the reason Black was gone, and that the girl had probably put up the barrier to keep him gone. She sneered at the girl, "Like what? Like he *cares*? I can guess you're sitting here because you feel lonely without your sister, but Rigel Black came here because for some unfathomable reason he feels compassion and responsibility for people he by all rights shouldn't give two knuts about. And instead of thanking him for his consideration or-I don't know- *leaving him alone*, you blew up at him to satisfy your own frustration and sorry sense of helpless guilt, am I right?"

Patil flushed and turned her head away so she wouldn't have to look at Alesana. Some people might have taken pity on the girl at this point, but Alesana was in no kind of mood to pity petty Gryffindors.

"Since you didn't physically *make* Black leave, I'll leave it at the ten points I already took," Alesana said, every word sharp, "But rest assured, Miss Patil, that if Rigel Black is petrified by the time I find him, I'll see to it that his friends know exactly whose fault it is that he was isolated and defenseless on a night like tonight."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Patil asked shakily.

"It means you'll learn why the first thing your housemates told you when you were sorted was not to cross one of Slytherin House, little

girl," Alesana hissed, incredulous that the girl could be so thick, "Did you really think you could treat Black however you wanted just because he was too nice to stop you? That's not how it works."

Patil flinched, but glared up at Alesana all the same, "I know that. I also know Black won't ever let any of his friends hurt me, not even Malfoy, so stop trying to scare me. I meant what's 'a night like tonight' supposed to mean? Do you know when the monster is going to attack or something?"

Alesana felt the urge to roll her eyes creep up on her and barely refrained from giving in, "What's today, Patil?"

"March fifteenth," Patil said.

"What is March fifteenth?"

"My birthday?" Patil said blankly. At Alesana's unimpressed look, she scowled and said, "I don't know, okay? What is it, Basilisk Day?"

"It's the Festival of Souls," Alesana said, feeling that the unspoken '*you twit*' was clearly implied, "And if you knew anything about undead culture you'd know that this is the night all sentient soul-imprints and shadows gather to celebrate life after life. Even if you didn't know anything about the festival, however, you should have known just by looking around you that you shouldn't send Black out into the castle by himself. There are three portraits in this room. Do you see any of them in their frames? No? That's because they're all in the Southwest Tower, and likely won't leave the Founder's Hall until their celebration concludes at sunrise."

Patil swallowed as the reality of the circumstances set in, "Ghosts too?"

"Even the Sorting Hat attends," Selwyn informed her bluntly, "Which means that when Rigel Black runs into trouble-and you can bet he will, because that's all the brat knows how to do-there won't be anyone around to turn to."

"The teachers-"

"Stopped patrolling after Lockhart was petrified," Selwyn snapped. Honestly, even the Gryffindors should have realized the Professors weren't going to make targets of themselves when there shouldn't have been any students to patrol for. Everyone understood the danger, so presumably the students were smart enough to follow the rules when it meant their own skin. Then again, lions never cared for anyone's skin, least of all their own.

"Well," Patil was reaching, and she knew it, "Well, he's still not defenseless. Black's a decent wizard."

Alesana had no words for how completely inane this girl was acting, and no intention of humoring it, no matter how distraught the girl was over her sister, "First of all, Rigel Black is a second-year. It doesn't matter how good a second-year he is, there's still no way he can stand against a basilisk. Second, Rigel Black is an idiot who leaves his wand in his school bag half the time. While that is his own stupid fault, it also means that for all you know, he *is* completely defenseless right now."

Patil's lower lip shook, but she stubbornly kept her chin up, "N-no. He used magic to deflect my shoe when-"

Alesana's eyes flicked down to Patil's feet, only one of which was shod, then over toward the door where a shoe matching the one on her left foot was lying on the ground. She spoke slowly, not quite able to believe what she was saying, "Am I to understand that you threw a shoe at one of my second-years?"

"It didn't hit him," Patil mumbled, and the only reason Alesana didn't give her detention was because she could see genuine shame in her eyes.

"Another ten points from Gryffindor, Miss Patil," Alesana said coolly, "And you are to remain here until either Madam Pomphrey returns

from her bi-monthly inventory meeting with Professor Snape or I return to escort you to your common room. Understood?"

"Yes, Head Girl Selwyn," Patil said stiffly, finally acknowledging Alesana's authority in an effort to scrape her dignity off of the floor.

Alesana left the Hospital Wing with a brisk stride and a heavy frown. Patil was an idiot, but Black wouldn't be winning any common sense awards that night. Why in Salazar's name had he left the Hospital corridor, even if he couldn't get back into the Wing?

She paused for a moment outside the doors to take a deep breath, then conjured up the memory of her most recent birthday. It had been warm that night, and during the small party her parents had thrown for her coming of age, Edmund had pulled her outside into the garden and given her a silver box, trimmed delicately in green.

"This better not be part of our game," Selwyn said, the relaxed smile on her face belying the warning, "I want a real gift."

Edmund gazed down at her steadily, the smile in his eyes the only sign of his fond regard, "You're not tricking me into telling you what it is, Alice. Open it."

Alesana lifted the lid and felt her breathing stop. Inside the box was a pair of earrings, fashioned in sapphire but engraved so skillfully that they were perfectly rendered depictions of the Chinese blue butterfly. Edmund's fingers came up to grip hers around the box, and only then did she realize her hands were shaking. In Chinese myth, a pair of butterflies symbolized eternal love.

"Expecto Patronum," Alesana said clearly. From her wand sprang a large, ghostly wolf. She ran her fingers through its fur for a moment, absorbing the sense of steady strength it projected, before saying, "Find Professor Snape. Message: Student out of bounds. Rigel Black. Last seen Hospital Wing."

The wolf bowed its head and sped off down the corridor.

She set her wand flat on her palm, said, "Point me: Rigel Black," and took off at a jog when her wand stopped spinning.

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Apparently all the ghosts and portraits had gone on holiday. Literally every frame Rigel came across was empty, and none of the ghosts were wandering about their usual haunts. It was as if the castle had been emptied, it was so silent. Except for the hissing. She couldn't tell if it was closer or further away, but every now and then it became clear enough to catch ominous phrases like '*rip*' and '*let me feed, Master* .' Then she would move in the other direction, and it faded again. She felt like she was playing a perverse game of cat and mouse. Even though it wasn't true, it seemed like she and the basilisk were the only two in the whole school, running circles around one another as Rigel tried to find someone to help and the basilisk tried to find someone to kill. The only advantage she had was that the basilisk was projecting its position with its disgruntled mumbling, and she had taken off her shoes to muffle the sound of her own movements as soon as she set off.

First thing when she got to the Library next, she vowed to look up a spell for finding things. It would be useful both for finding a teacher and simply knowing where the thing she wanted to avoid was. Several times Rigel tried to head for the dungeons, but each time the voice would grow dangerously close, and she'd be forced to turn around and take another route. Also, she silently promised to stop leaving all her important things in her schoolbag-even though it was better protected than her person. Or else she was going to start carrying it everywhere, for nights like these, when she wound up wandless, mapless, invisibility-cloak-less, and generally as unprepared for trouble as one could possibly be.

She was on the second floor when she heard it. Not hissing, but crying. Someone was sobbing loudly nearby, and Rigel changed

direction to hurry toward the sound. If there was another student out of bed that night, she had to find them and make sure they got to safety as well.

She tracked the sound to a girl's bathroom, where water seemed to be leaking out under the doorway and into the hall. She knocked a few times, and when no one answered, she opened the door.

The sound intensified exponentially once she stepped inside, which made Rigel think that someone had for whatever reason placed some sort of muffling spell around the doorway. Perhaps that was why her knock had gone unheard.

"Hello?" she called into the bathroom, "Is everything all right?"

The dreadful crying stopped instantly and a suspicious voice snapped, "Who's there?"

"My name is Rigel," she said, feeling awkward just standing there but unwilling to go further in case the girl was... indecent. Even though it was nothing she hadn't seen before, the girl wouldn't know that, and there was no need to embarrass anyone. "Can I come in?"

"You're a *boy*," the girl called scathingly, "No boys allowed. So go tease someone else."

"I'm not *that* kind of boy," Rigel said cajolingly. She couldn't in good conscience leave without finding a way to get this girl to safety, "Not one of those mean, stupid ones, you know."

"I suppose you don't make fun of girls either," the girl called skeptically.

"Never," Rigel said solemnly, "My best friend is a girl. She doesn't stand for any of the usual boy stuff."

"Oh," the girl sounded slightly mollified.

"So, could you come out?" Rigel asked, "Because it's already after curfew. It isn't safe to be out of the dormitories at night anymore."

High-pitched laughter echoed around the bathroom, and suddenly a pale specter whooshed through the wall of the nearest stall and came to a stop in front of Rigel's shocked face. The ghost looked a little older than Rigel. She had pigtails and glasses, and a smugly superior expression.

"Not too bright, are you?" the girl said, snorting with laughter, "Ghosts don't have a curfew!"

Rigel felt her face flushing with embarrassment, "My apologies, Miss. I thought you were a student out after curfew."

The ghost gave her a flat and slightly hurt look, "So you came in here to get me into trouble?"

"No," Rigel said reassuringly, "I don't know how much you're aware of events in the school, but the halls aren't safe right now. I was just going to make sure you got back to your dormitory safely."

"Even if I was a Hufflepuff?" the ghost demanded.

Rigel raised her eyebrows, "Well, of course. That would actually be more convenient, since it's on the way to my own dormitory."

The ghost narrowed her pale eyes behind equally translucent glasses and said, "Hmph. Well, as you can see I don't need any help. So just go away." The ghost turned back toward the flooded stall she had come from, head hanging dejectedly.

Rigel hesitated. She should get back to her dormitory, but it felt... wrong just to leave someone crying in a bathroom, even if that someone was a ghost.

"Why were you crying?" Rigel asked.

"None of your business," the ghost said, whipping around. Her eyes were beginning to water once more.

"Sometimes it helps to talk about it," Rigel said, remembering how Draco tried to get her to talk about her nightm-dream.

The ghost glared, "Oh no. I know how this works. You pretend to listen to me for a few minutes and then you spill all your stupid problems and expect me to come up with advice and solutions." Rigel opened her mouth to deny it, but the ghost forged on, "There was some brat in here last week going on and on about how she was going crazy and forgetting her life and losing her mind, and I'm like-this is not a psych ward. I'm not a mind healer! Just because I'm dead doesn't mean I don't have a life, you know?"

Rigel made a sound that she hoped was more sympathetic than amused; the ghost seemed to have no conception of irony.

"I promise not to tell you any of my problems," Rigel said solemnly.

"Good, because unless they're *really* horrible, I couldn't care less," the ghost said, reclining sidewise in the air, "So I can complain and you won't do anything but listen?"

Rigel nodded tentatively, not sure what she was getting herself into.

The ghost flipped in the air until she was staring into Rigel's face upside-down, "Well, it's the most awful thing. You know tonight is the Festival of Souls, right?"

Rigel's eyes widened, "Oh. That explains..." A lot, actually. Did she have the worse luck in the world, or what? She frowned, "Then, why are you in here?"

The ghost sniffed and retreated several meters, fingering her pigtails morosely, "I'm not welcome there."

Rigel felt bad for the ghost in spite of herself, "I'm sure no one would mind-"

"You're sure?" the ghost screeched suddenly, "Oh, you know so much? Well I think it was pretty clear when Peeves tossed a dung bomb in here this afternoon and told me not to show my face in the Founder's Circle tonight."

Rigel tried to placate the ghost, "Peeves doesn't really speak for *all* the ghosts."

"Well, no one came to contradict him," the ghost spat sullenly.

Rigel thought it somewhat telling that she expected someone to come and invite her personally to an event that was by definition open to all postmortem sentient beings.

"That was awfully mean of them," Rigel said eventually, settling on commiseration, "I didn't know the afterlife made people such jerks."

"Oh, it's not death that did it," the ghost said sagely, "All people are jerks."

"I suppose you could say that," Rigel said awkwardly.

"Well, I would know," the ghost sniffed, her eyes starting to water once more. Rigel was frankly impressed at how quickly the spirit's mood could change, "Even before I was dead, no one was nice to me. A lot of people think it's funny that I died in a bathroom, but I wasn't in here answering nature's call, you know. I was in here crying, because Olive Hornby made fun of my glasses again. Like she could talk-you should have seen her hair. Frizzier than a drunken monkey."

"I'm sure she regretted making fun of you, after you died," Was all Rigel could think to say.

"Didn't she though?" the ghost sighed happily, "Oh, I haunted her for ages ."

"I see," Rigel said, then frowned as something niggled at her mind and asked, "Sorry if it upsets you, but how exactly did you die in a... bathroom..." Rigel promptly gave herself a mental slap, "You're Myrtle!"

The ghost pursed her lips in surprise, "Well, yes, that's me." She narrowed her eyes, "Was someone talking about me behind my back?"

Rigel shook her head, "Not really, but I was investigating the string of attacks about fifty years ago, and I was told a very nice girl named Myrtle was tragically murdered by a monster-only I forgot they said it was on the second floor, so I didn't realize I was talking to a, um, celebrity."

Myrtle preened, "Well, that's right. I was killed in that stall over there. I heard someone come in, you know, just like you-a boy who shouldn't be in here. I came out to tell him off, but then there were these eyes, and then... I was dead. Do you know it took them three hours to find my body? I waited and waited for someone to finally realize I was gone." Myrtle was crying again now, and Rigel felt an involuntary tug at her heart. Imagine waiting for someone to notice you'd died. "B-but no one came. My murderer didn't even stick around. By the time I awoke as a ghost, the eyes were gone."

She broke down into hysterical sobs, and Rigel wasn't sure what to do. She couldn't very well physically comfort the ghost, but she had no words for the situation either. Eventually she decided a distraction was in order.

"Do you think what's happening now is related to what happened to you?" Rigel asked.

Myrtle sniffed back her tears and said, "Well, it must be. I mean, everything is the same, except... you know, there was this funny

writing that kept cropping up everywhere last time. So maybe it's not the same... I don't know."

"Maybe they'll catch whoever did it, this time," Rigel said bracingly, "Maybe the culprit will be brought to justice at last, and you can get some peace."

Myrtle rolled her eyes, "I'm not hanging around because my murder is still unsolved. I mean, seesh, could you be any more clichéd? I haunt this bathroom in case other people come in here to cry like I used to. If I'm here, they won't have to cry alone."

"That's very noble of you," Rigel said, "But don't you care if they catch whatever killed you?"

"Well," Myrtle said slowly, "It would be nice to finally know. If it was a basilisk like the Headmaster is saying now, that would be a pretty cool story to tell at next year's Festival of Souls. Until now all I ever get to say when it's my turn is 'causes unknown,' while that Sir Whimsy Porpin-head or whatever he's called goes on and on about how many times they chopped his head *almost* off. As if anyone cares."

Rigel had a sudden idea, though she wasn't sure if it was a good one or not.

"Myrtle, would you like to... join my investigation? I could use a ghost of your unmatched observational skills on my team," Rigel said, now reduced to blatant manipulation, but not overly bothered by it. It was for a good cause, after all.

"Me? Part of a team?" The way Myrtle's eyes shone with excitement was almost painful to see, "Oh, yes! I could be a crack agent, Mr... what's your name again?"

"Rigel," she said, "I'm Rigel Black. Will you help me, then? Because we want to catch the basilisk before anyone else suffers your cruel fate."

Myrtle floated around her in a circle and clapped her hands, "Yes, yes, my fate was so cruel! We shant let any other poor little girls get murdered in their stalls, shall we?"

"Ah, definitely not," Rigel said, "So I can count on you to keep an eye on things around here?"

"You bet," Myrtle said, "I'll report back as soon as I see anything suspicious, Mr. Black."

"Great, Myrtle," Rigel said, "Thank you for your help."

"No problemo," Myrtle said, "So how much does this gig pay?"

Rigel blinked, "What sort of compensation were you looking for?" She wasn't sure ghosts had any use for money, but she supposed her allowance might cover a ghosts' expenses... whatever they might be.

Myrtle thought for a moment, "Ooh, I know! I want some decorations in here. Get me a Weird Sisters poster, some aquamarine paint, and some of those beads that go over doorways, only fit to the dimensions of my stall."

Rigel agreed, though the whole thing was beginning to feel vaguely surreal, and Myrtle floated in giddy loop-de-loops around the bathroom.

"Oh!," Myrtle said suddenly, "Where do I report to you?"

Rigel gestured to her silver and green tie, "Slytherin common room, usually."

Myrtle looked doubtful, "That's an awfully long way from my toilet... I guess... I'll only report about *really* important things."

Rigel thought perhaps this was a good rule to put down anyway, since Merlin only knew what sort of things Myrtle might deem necessary to report. Still, Rigel thought the ghost might be helpful,

and Myrtle definitely could use a positive outlet for her depression. Maybe she would be more content if she wasn't so focused on her morose existence. Also, since she was a ghost, Rigel didn't have to worry about the basilisk killing her if she did happen to see something. A ghost couldn't be killed, and they could only be banished by highly specific rituals, so this was a perfect way to get help dealing with the basilisk while not putting anyone in danger. Even Patil couldn't ask for more.

"Myrtle," she said, "I've got to get back to my common room now. But it was lovely to meet you."

"I'm glad you enjoyed your time here in my humble bathroom," Myrtle cackled, "Do come again, Mr. Black."

Rigel bowed deeply to the ghost, then ducked out of the girl's bathroom and shut the door behind her. Once she was outside of the muffling spell that she was now *sure* had been placed on the bathroom entrance, she listened hard up and down the corridor. She couldn't hear anything, which was either a very good, or a very bad sign. Either the basilisk was far away, or else it had gone quiet in preparation for striking.

She estimated she'd been talking to Myrtle for about fifteen minutes, so she really had to get back to the common room soon. Selwyn was probably already back there, waiting for Rigel to show up. She considered going back to the Hospital Wing to make sure Parvati got back to her tower safely, but there was no guarantee *she* could make it to the Hospital Wing safely, and Parvati definitely wouldn't thank her for showing up there again in any case, provided her barrier spell wasn't still in place.

She would just tell a prefect when she got back to the common room that the monster had been out that night, and that a girl in the Hospital Wing might need help back to her dorm.

Rigel cut over to the nearest set of stairs and took them down to the basement level. From there she hurried past the kitchens and

around the corner to the corridor that would lead her to the stairs that went both up to the main level and down to the dungeons.

When she reached those stairs, which were fairly wide across, being so frequented, she heard footsteps running rapidly down them her direction. She whirled, her magic sizzling under her skin agitatedly, but stood from her defensive half-crouch when she saw who it was.

"Black! Of all the utterly stupid things you could have done. Didn't I tell you to stay put?" Selwyn hurried down the last few stairs and pointed her wand at Rigel before she could open her mouth to defend her actions. Selwyn didn't speak, but the blue glow that slowly emitted from her wand to encompass Rigel's body was a spell Rigel recognized from Archie's schoolbooks as a comprehensive health-checking charm. It wouldn't tell you what was wrong with someone, like a diagnostic charm would, but it would know instantly if there was something wrong.

Unfortunately, one of the things the Checking Charm, as it was called by Healers, could detect was the use of Polyjuice Potion. Rigel's magic rose up to answer the categorized threat at once, and she felt it settle in a layer over her skin an instant before the blue glow connected. Selwyn's charm tried to absorb into her skin, at which point it was meant to re-emerge as either blue vapor, if nothing was wrong, or red vapor, if the subject was under the influence of a spell, curse, potion, mental attack, or physically injured in any way.

Instead, the blue cloud settled on top of Rigel's own magic without penetrating her skin, and remained there, seemingly unsure of what to do next.

Selwyn's eyes narrowed sharply. She made a flicking movement with her wand tip and the blue glow dissipated. The Head Girl twisted the tip back just as fast and trained her wand steadily on Rigel, saying, "Why did you leave the Hospital Wing?"

Rigel frowned, and said, "I thought if I came back early, you wouldn't have to go to the trouble of fetching me." She didn't like lying to

Selwyn, but there was no point in blaming Parvati for it and getting them both in trouble. She'd left of her own volition, after all.

Selwyn's eyes glinted, and a cold look passed over her pretty features, "Wrong answer." Her wand moved in a blur-too fast for Rigel to see-and a jet of red light shot out of it.

Rigel didn't have time to respond, but her magic, already at the ready after responding to the Checking Charm, boiled through her unasked, solidifying into a shimmering, red shield between she and Selwyn. She recognized it as the same shield her magic had attempted when the wall exploded in the basement corridor all those weeks ago. This time there were only a few holes, and the stunner from Selwyn's wand was absorbed with no trace by the solid portion of the shield that it struck.

The red shield was draining her magic fast-to the point that she could actually feel the effect the one spell had on her core to keep it going. She didn't know what it was about that one shield her magic kept trying to create, but it was unlike any other spell she'd felt in terms of sheer taxation.

Selwyn shot two more spells in quick succession, both aimed at holes in her incomplete shield, but the shield warped and twisted to move the holey portions out of the path of the two successive jets. Rigel stumbled back as the spell became exponentially more difficult to maintain. She couldn't take it down and try something else, partly because by the time she switched shields Selwyn would get a hit in, and partly because she had no wand to channel conscious magic into anyway-it was much harder to control the magic without the phoenix wand egging her on. Besides all that, she didn't know why Selwyn was shooting spells at her in the first place.

"Selwyn, what's going on?" Rigel said, backing away toward the stairs.

Selwyn stalked after her carefully, "Who are you?" she demanded sharply.

Rigel maintained an expression of complete confusion, though in her mind she was starting to piece together what had happened, "I'm Rigel Black," she said slowly.

"Wrong," Selwyn said, twisting her wand to send a spell *around* the red shield. The shield rotated to cover Rigel's unprotected side and Selwyn used that brief opening to dart forward with a leg-sweep under the shield, which only covered her torso, and tried to hook Rigel's legs out from under her. Rigel jumped on instinct away from the sweep, but she fell off balance and tilted sideways toward the inside of her own shield. The red magic dissipated the instant she began falling toward it, and Rigel only had time to wonder what would happen if she had actually touched it when Selwyn followed with a quick hand around Rigel's throat while her other hand brought her wand up to Rigel's ear.

She froze, her magic waffling uselessly under her skin in a combination of hesitation and fear.

Selwyn squeezed her throat lightly in warning, and said, "Who are you?"

Rigel frowned in frustration and said, "I'm Rigel. I don't know what else you want me to say."

"Enough with the dumb act," Selwyn growled, "Rigel Black left the Hospital Wing because Parvati Patil asked him to. If you were Rigel Black, you would have known that."

Too late, Rigel realized the Head Girl was a lot more paranoid than Rigel had given her credit for, and also that by protecting Parvati she had made herself look like a liar-which she was-and worse, an imposter.

"I didn't want to get Parvati in trouble," Rigel explained quickly, "I'm sorry I lied, Selwyn. Ask me something else."

Selwyn looked highly skeptical, but then paused, her grip loosening a bit, "Sadly enough, that... does sound like something Black would do. Why did you block my Checking Charm if you have nothing to hide?"

Rigel grimaced, "I didn't say I have nothing to hide, just that I am Rigel Black. You have to admit the Checking Charm is an invasion of privacy. There are a half-dozen reasons I might have to avoid it, all of which are legitimate and none of your business, Head Girl or not. Suffice to say that it wasn't because I'm an imposter."

Rigel didn't think the irony could get any thicker in the air that night.

Selwyn looked into her eyes and sneered a bit at what she saw there, "You're a liar." Rigel stiffened slightly. "But... Rigel Black is a liar, too. Tell me this then: what did you give Rookwood on my behalf last year?"

"Boomslang venom," she said at once.

"What did you ask Rookwood to do at the New Year's Gala?"

"Dance with Pansy."

"What do you, Theo, and I have in common?"

Rigel paused. What did... oh. "We can all see thestrals."

Selwyn let go of her throat and stepped back with a scowl, "Don't ever lie to me again, Black-at least not on a night like tonight."

"My apologies," Rigel said, rubbing her throat a bit.

"We've wasted too much time," Selwyn said, "Let's get going."

"Oka-wait," Rigel strained her ears, Selwyn freezing to allow her to listen unimpeded. There was something in the air, just the faintest of echoes, but she couldn't say for sure if it was the snake tongue. "I'm not sure... we should move fast."

Selwyn took off at a jog, Rigel right behind. When Selwyn saw she was keeping up, the Head Girl picked up the pace, every now and then shooting a pale yellow spell around an upcoming corner. Rigel wasn't sure what it did, but Selwyn seemed satisfied every time the spell came back to her wand without doing anything else.

They were almost to the common room when a silver wolf sprang out of the stone wall next to them, nearly giving Rigel a heart attack in the process. Selwyn halted and the wolf glided to a stop in front of the black-haired upper classman.

"Message," the wolf intoned.

"Proceed," Selwyn said

Professor Snape's voice sounded from the wolf's open jaws, "Pomphrey back in Hospital Wing, do not return for Patil. Proceed to common room with or without Black. Professors McGonagall, Flitwick, and Sprout also notified. Send status reply."

Before Selwyn started her reply, Rigel said, "Tell him the basilisk is active tonight. I heard it earlier; that's why I had to move from the Hospital Wing. It sounded too close."

Selwyn nodded, and relayed both that information and their current location and health to the patronus, which bounded away through the ceiling once more. Rigel wondered how Snape had gotten above them if he'd been in the dungeons doing inventory when he got the message, but then she remembered the Hospital Wing had a floo connection as well, so they'd probably flooed straight up when they heard.

After that it was a short time until they reached the common room entrance and Selwyn snapped out the password. They both moved quickly into the common room and paused to subtly catch their breath before proceeding further into the main area.

Rookwood made it to them first. He took Selwyn by the shoulders and swept her with an all-encompassing gaze. Once satisfied that she was unharmed, he stepped back and nodded to Rigel, subtly checking her overall health as well, though not as intensely.

Rosier ambled up a beat later, saying, "Did you race here from the Hospital Wing, Alice? Because I fear you have an unfair advantage over our Rigel."

Selwyn shot Rigel a considering look, "He kept up well enough."

"Rigel runs in the mornings," Draco said as he and Pansy reached them, "But not usually through the halls. What happened?"

"Lost track of time," Rigel said smoothly, "Thought we heard something, so we hurried back-better safe than sorry."

Selwyn sent her another look, this time completely disbelieving, "Does it really come so easily to you, or did you spend the whole trip back thinking that up?"

Rigel pressed her lips together in slight annoyance, "That was all true."

"And completely misleading," Selwyn said flatly, "Lie to your friends if you want, I'm not going to lie to mine."

Well, when she put it like that.

"Sorry, Pansy, Draco," Rigel said, feeling like she was saying that a lot lately.

"You say that a lot," Draco said bluntly.

Rigel winced, "I just don't like to-"

"Worry us," Pansy finished with a patient smile, "We know, and we understand... but we're still going to ask Selwyn what really happened."

Rigel thought that was fair enough.

Selwyn went through a brief explanation of the night from her point of view, and Rigel supported it without bringing up unnecessary details, like the making of deals with ghosts in female lavatories.

Draco and Pansy didn't even bother acting surprised. Instead, they exchanged exasperated looks, then each took Rigel by the elbow.

"We're terribly sorry about our friend, Head Girl Selwyn," Draco said with exaggerated politeness.

"We'll be sure to teach him how to properly respond to an emergency situation," Pansy added, "Since apparently all he knows how to do is blunder around like a blind mountain troll."

Rigel thought that was a bit harsh-she had done her best, all things considered.

"Make sure you explain what a security question is, Pansy," Selwyn said with a wry twist to her lips.

"Of course, Alice," Pansy said sweetly, "Right after we explain why abandoning a safe location because your enemy told you to is a monumentally thick course of action."

"She wasn't my enemy," Rigel protested.

"Anyone with so blatant a disregard for your personal safety is your enemy, Rigel, even if only temporarily," Pansy said evenly.

Rigel was going to argue when a silvery patronus glided through the common room wall and came to a stop in front of Selwyn. It wasn't Selwyn's wolf, but a medium-sized doe, with soft eyes and an elegant bearing. Presumably Selwyn's own patronus had run out of steam-they tended to only be good for a few messages, Rigel had read-and now one of the professors was using their own. Selwyn led the patronus to a small conference room off the main common room

that only the prefects had access to, and shut the door to take the message in private, presumably in case it wasn't meant for student ears.

She couldn't help but think, as Draco and Pansy dragged her off to a lecture about proper behavior in times of stress and uncertainty, that the patronus was familiar somehow, as though she'd seen it before.

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[end of chapter thirteen].

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A/N: Before anyone asks: the Point Me spell worked for Rigel's location even though she isn't really named Rigel Black because in that spell the name is merely the referent by which the wizard defines the thing he is searching for. If it could only find something with the same 'name' and nothing else, then it could point to anyone named Rigel Black in the world. Luckily, magical recognition spells and devices are not tied to something's actual name, but to the thing or person the one using the spell or device associates the name with-they are dependent on the caster's will and understanding, as almost all magic is. So because Alesana knew Harry Potter as Rigel Black, the Point Me spell took her to Harry Potter when she asked for who she knew as Rigel Black. This is very important, not just because I wanted to make the Point Me spell work in this instance, but in the future for a certain Triwizard tournament that may or may not be happening fourth year.

All the best,

-Violet

Chapter 14

A/N: Happy Holidays, and many apologies for the last six months. China was an amazing experience, but I missed you guys. Here it is, the end of book two (which you've been waiting much too long for). The third one is in the works, but it's a while from being ready. I'll keep you all posted. Enjoy the break everyone!

The Serpentine Subterfuge:

Chapter 14:

A week later, a Ravenclaw fourth year was found petrified in the Owlrey. Apparently she'd snuck out on her own to mail a letter, and a group of Hufflepuffs escorted to the Owlrey by Professor Sprout were reportedly quite emotionally scarred when they found her the next morning.

Because of this incident, suspicion about the culprit swung strongly in favor of Slytherin House, who had thus far seen none of its own fall victim to the monster. Those who hadn't considered Rigel a viable suspect before seemed to be reconsidering, and the covert glances and not-so-subtle whispers picked up once more when she walked through the halls.

Her friends stuck by her, but as they were mostly Slytherins as well, such confidence didn't lend her much credibility. The Weasley twins, displaying a nigh unlimited capacity for bracing humor in the face of grim ambience, had increased their efforts at lightening the atmosphere tenfold. It wasn't quite as bad as the now-infamous pranking war of the year before, but there were several surprises in store for the castle's population each week, a good many of which Rigel was pulled in as a consultant on.

She wasn't at a loss, then, when Fred caught up to her before Defense class with another grand idea for complete mayhem.

Rigel saw him coming, and handed her bag off to a solemn-faced Theo, who saluted her smartly before abandoning her to her friend's... mercies.

"Puppy!" Fred said exuberantly, grabbing her arms and swinging her in a merry circle, "Just who I was looking for."

He said that as if genuinely surprised to see her at the very place and time he sought her out. She tilted her head expectantly, but Fred just stared at her for a moment, seemingly waiting for something himself.

"Yes?" Rigel prompted.

"I was waiting for you to ask where Fred was," Fred said, cocking his own head to the side with half a grin, "You're funny, Rigel; most people automatically scan the room for my brother when I walk in."

Rigel blinked, and said, bemusedly, "Okay, where's George?"

Fred smiled brightly at her, "Very good, but you don't *really* have to ask. I just thought it odd that you didn't."

Rigel made a small, meaningless noise to show she understood, but wasn't sure what Fred wanted her to say.

"Anyway, I've got the outline for tomorrow's prank for you," Fred said, handing over a piece of paper, "You can read it in class-or, knowing you, *after* class. Let us know at dinner if it sounds okay."

Rigel slipped the paper into her pocket, "All right. See you, Fred."

The redhead waved at her as he trotted off down the corridor, leaving Rigel to wonder how he planned on getting to *his* class on time when he'd barely left her enough time to get to hers.

She took her seat between Pansy and Draco, with a nod of thanks to Theo for depositing her bag on their table. Theo shrugged back, but

smirked in a way that was universally understood in their House as: *you owe me* .

Dumbledore walked into the class a moment later and, as usual, began straight away. One thing they had learned in the last week was that Dumbledore's lessons were usually simple, engaging, and extremely efficient. He waved his wand in a gesture that was probably completely meaningless as far as actually affecting the spell he cast, and a quill on the teacher's desk stood at attention and began writing as Dumbledore looked about the room and named all the students present in quick succession.

Once the attendance was taken, he smiled benignly at them all and said, "Today is a practical lesson. Please stand."

They stood back from their tables, and with another very general wave of his wand the desks began neatly moving to the edges of the classroom one at a time, clearing a large space in the middle of the equally large classroom-now that all four Houses were in the same class, the Defense classroom was less like a room and more like an auditorium in terms of size, though they all still sat at three-person tables.

"Arrange yourself in a circle, please," Dumbledore said, "With half a foot of space between each person."

They all backed up to the edges of the room to form a large, somewhat-circular shape. Rigel was on Draco's left, with Ernie Macmillan on her other side.

"Take out your wands," Dumbledore said.

The students took their wands out, and Rigel sheepishly made her way back over to her table, where her wand was safely stored inside her book bag.

Several students snickered, including Ron, though he sent her a good-natured wink as she passed him. Draco had a long-suffering

look on his face, and when she got back into her place, Macmillan said lowly, "What did you think he meant by 'practical', Black?"

"We could have been running laps," Rigel shrugged.

In truth, she'd forgotten her wand was in her book bag until she went to reach for it. She was working on not doing that as much, but usually she forgot she was supposed to be working on it, and just... didn't. It slipped her mind in light of more important things, she supposed.

"Ready, Mr. Black?" Dumbledore said serenely. Rigel apologized for holding up the class, and Dumbledore nodded his acceptance easily, "Now then. We will be practicing and refining the first of the seven most common shields-the Protego Shield. Since you learned it last year, the spell should come naturally enough that we can make our exercise more interesting."

He conjured a large rubber ball from thin air, wordlessly and with nary a twitch of his wand, making several people gape with a resigned sort of awe. Whatever else could be said of the man, Dumbledore was an astonishingly talented wizard. The ball was twice the size of the quaffle, and just as red. Dumbledore floated the ball into the center of their circle, and took up a place next to Parvati Patil in the circle. Rigel glanced at Parvati briefly before focusing back on Dumbledore, but the girl had been avoiding her eyes since the incident in the Hospital Wing.

"When I start the ball, it will randomly target someone in our circle. That person is to erect a shield before the ball hits them-though it won't hurt if it does hit you. Once the ball hits either a person or a shield, it will switch targets and fly toward someone else. The ball could come at you at any time, so stay alert. It will be moving at the rate of a medium-powered curse, so if you are able to react in time to defend yourself, it is a good indicator of your reflexes and casting speed," Dumbledore raised his wand, "Ready? Begin."

With a flick of his wrist, the ball set off toward Ron Weasley, who shouted, "Protego!" a half-second before the ball impacted with his shield. It bounced off lightly and sped toward Pansy, who brought up a shield calmly just in time to intercept the ball. It ricocheted in the direction of Hannah Abbot, who flinched slightly before blurting out, "Protego!" and sending the ball flying at Theo. Theo called out the shield spell quickly-perhaps too quickly, as he was forced to hold the shield for a second or two until the ball reached him-the circle was just that large, with all four Houses of their year around it.

The ball bounced off toward Dumbledore himself, who cheerfully said, "Protego!" and swirled his wand in a curly-cue pattern. As if he needed to make it more obvious that he had no need of wand movements whatsoever. Rigel wondered if she'd ever be that good at spell-work.

Then she didn't have time to wonder, as the ball was headed straight for her.

" *Rigel*," Draco hissed from beside her.

Rigel raised her wand belatedly, and was about to say, "Protego," even as her heart dropped uncomfortably as she realized she wouldn't have time to get the shield in place because of her distraction, when her magic acted without her impetus.

The shimmering red shield bloomed into the air before her, just big enough to block the ball's trajectory. The red ball hit the shield a second later-and vanished. It dissolved straight into the shield, as though the shield had consumed it without the slightest amount of effort. Rigel was so startled-not by the presence of the shield, but of its effect on the ball-that she dropped her wand with a clatter. Then, when the shield didn't move, she frowned and consciously asked her magic to stop... whatever it was doing. She could feel the energy recede back from her skin to its proper place in her magical core, but it did so weakly, and a quick internal scan showed her secondary layer to be noticeably thin. As she had noticed the previous times her magic used it, whatever that shield was, it took up a lot of power.

She grimaced at the mildly freaked out looks on her classmates' faces. "I'm sorry, Professor," she said, "I didn't mean to do that."

Dumbledore eyed her with mild speculation, "What an interesting way of practicing magic you have, Mr. Black. Do you know what shield it was you used?"

Rigel shook her head slowly, "Not really. It seems to be an instinct of some kind, perhaps leftover accidental magic from my childhood. I don't understand it myself."

Dumbledore inclined his head gravely, ignoring the skeptical and confused faces of most of the other students, "Magic will ever remain a mystery to most of us, I fear. In any case, I can see it was an honest mistake, and as any professor knows, every mistake is truly a lesson in disguise. So: who can tell me what shield that was?"

The students exchanged glances, mostly blank, and Dumbledore said, "I'll give you a hint: It is one of the seven common shields I've told you about. You are well-versed with the first, and I have thus far demonstrated two of the others, so who would like to guess which of the remaining four this was, by observation of its effects alone?"

Macmillan spoke up confidently from Rigel's left, "I'd imagine that was the Depasco Shield. It's the sixth shield you told us about-you said it eats anything that comes into contact with it, and is difficult to maintain. Judging by how there's no trace of the ball left, and Black over here is pale as a ghost, I'd say that must be it."

Rigel had indeed felt herself blanch, though not from magic loss alone. She had been unknowingly casting the Depasco Shield for weeks. If what Dumbledore said about that shield was true, it was a stroke of pure luck she hadn't hurt either herself or someone else with it yet. The shield was dangerous to both the castor and his enemy, because it did not distinguish self from other. Most shields would allow their castor to penetrate them from the inside. This weakened the effect of the shield, but prevented castors from becoming trapped in their own shields. The Depasco-Latin for

something like 'to consume' according to Theo-simply dissolved anything that touched it into particles too tiny to be perceived by the human eye. The advantage was that nothing short of spells on caliber with the Unforgivables would be able to destroy the shield, and it was especially useful against physical threats. Unfortunately, that power was a double-edged sword. Many a wizard had accidentally dissolved their own wand tip by holding it too close to the inside of the shield, for instance.

And she had used it against Selwyn.

She'd have to apologize as soon as she returned to the common room, and then have a serious sit down with her magic and explain why it couldn't use such a shield any more. Someone could have been completely vaporized if they'd come into contact with the shimmering shield, and Rigel didn't *know* what medi-wizardry could do for someone who had been reduced to his constituent particles, but she had a feeling it was absolutely nothing.

"Quite correct," Dumbledore said genially, "Ten points to Hufflepuff. Now, as useful as that shield is for stopping falling rubble, Mr. Black, this is perhaps not the best place for it. Care to try again?"

"Of course, sir," Rigel said, bending down to pick her wand up off the ground, "My apologies for interrupting the lesson."

"Knowledge gained is never something to be sorry for," Dumbledore said. He conjured another ball and sent it flying toward Rigel, who had plenty of time (now that she was paying attention) to ask her magic for a proper Protego shield before it hit.

The lesson continued, most of their classmates having no trouble with the shield. Then Dumbledore said, "Let's make it more interesting, shall we?" He waved his wand and two more balls came into play, whizzing over and around one another as they rebounded around the circle. The balls no longer flew in straight lines, instead zigzagging and changing course with little notice, and the number of people who fumbled the spell increased.

After ten more minutes of practice, Dumbledore said, "Now that we're all warmed up-a friendly competition. From now on, if the ball hits you, step out of the circle. The last remaining person in the circle will win ten points for their house. However," Dumbledore said, his eyes twinkling, "There is a new rule. In this game, you are not allowed to shield yourself." They all exchanged confused looks-how were they to stop the ball? Their professor looked self-satisfied as he went on, "You are, however, allowed to shield your classmates. So the person who wins will be the person standing next to the best protector."

Rigel wasn't sure what the purpose of the competition was, but she could tell there was some deeper meaning to it by the way the Headmaster twinkled maddeningly at them. Was it some sort of test? There were a lot of people standing next to other people not in their own Houses. If they only shielded those neighbors who belonged to their own House, would it be viewed as an indication of their character somehow? Dumbledore was always going on about House unity, so it was probably something of that nature.

The other students seemed to share Rigel's confusion-and judging by a few faces her suspicion-but they agreed to the competition readily enough. Draco was looking determined, and Rigel was glad Pansy would have one fierce defender, at least-on Pansy's other side was Daphne Greengrass. Rigel wasn't too sure what to expect from Macmillan, herself. She had a feeling he was still highly suspicious of her for her presence at the Hufflepuff prefect's attack. She also wasn't sure Draco would be able to shield both she and Pansy for any truly feasible length of time if neither of their other neighbors helped.

"There will be times when you need to erect a shield that is not directly in front of you," Dumbledore went on, "This will help you practice. I'll give you this tip as well: knowing when not to shield is equally as important as knowing when a shield is necessary."

Rigel understood that well enough. If they tried to keep a shield around someone constantly, it would drain them of energy

unnecessarily, and make it hard to keep up. Also, if two people shielded the same person at once, it would be a waste of energy. So they had to judge whether the person on their neighbor's other side would be raising a shield first, then decide whether their own shield was necessary. Hard to do in a few short seconds.

On the other hand, he didn't say they couldn't cheat.

"Pansy," Rigel said.

Pansy leaned around from Draco's other side to say, "Yes?"

"I'll take the first shield, you take the next, and we'll keep alternating every time Draco is targeted so we don't have to overlap," Rigel suggested.

Pansy sent her a smile, "All right. I think your reserves are deeper than mine, though, so I'll probably be the first to give out."

Rigel smiled slightly in reassurance, "Let me know if you get tired, then, and I'll take both rotations until you recover."

Pansy nodded and resumed her ready position.

Draco smirked, "Looks like I'm going to win."

Macmillan scowled around Rigel at the blonde boy, "How do you figure that?"

"As long as I shield them, they shield me," Draco said, still grinning confidently.

Rigel huffed in amusement, saying quietly "And now that you've said that, Macmillan and Greengrass won't worry about shielding us at all."

Draco grimaced a bit sheepishly upon realizing he'd just ensured himself twice as much work.

Rigel thought for a moment, noticing something else that Dumbledore hadn't specified.

"Switch places with me, Draco," she said.

Draco blinked, then understanding dawned, "Good idea, Rye. Your stamina is the best, and it's points for Slytherin either way."

He and Rigel swapped places so that Rigel was in between Pansy and Draco. A few of their classmates looked toward Dumbledore, but the headmaster did nothing more than twinkle at them, so several students quickly did their own swaps, trying to get next to people they could team up with.

Dumbledore said nothing, but smiled a bit too widely as he conjured an additional two balls in the center of the circle. Now there were five in play, and they were moving slightly faster, as well.

After that there wasn't much time to talk. Everyone concentrated on the balls, trying to keep their neighbors from being hit. She did notice Dumbledore step out of the circle, leaving Parvati next to Hannah Abbot, who in turn was next to Blaise Zabini, with Greengrass still on Parvati's other side. Greengrass looked a bit put out at that-though surely she hadn't expected Dumbledore to shield Parvati the entire game so she wouldn't have to; it was a competition for the students, after all.

Rigel kept herself peripherally aware of the balls going around the circle, the way she would maintain awareness of the bludgers during a Quidditch game while still concentrating on the other players. She noted that Theo was isolated between two Ravenclaws-probably because Blaise had moved to stand between Abbot and Ron for reasons known only to himself. Millicent was next to Davis, and both girls seemed to be shielding one another reliably, if a bit reluctantly. Probably putting their animosity aside for the sake of House pride, Rigel imagined.

Crabbe was the first to get hit. Goyle hadn't been quick enough to protect him, and Terry Boot frankly hadn't bothered to try. Goyle in turn didn't attempt to shield Boot from any balls after that, which put a heavy strain on Boot's other neighbor, a Ravenclaw girl whose name Rigel wasn't sure of. Boot returned the favor, much to Lavender Brown's, (who was on the other side of Goyle) dismay.

Rigel shielded Pansy and Draco every time a ball came toward either one. This had the side effect of relieving Greengrass and Macmillan of half their work, but it was a small price to pay for her friends' guaranteed protection.

Things began to get ugly after a few people had been hit due to intentional neglect, rather than accidental incompetence.

Ron Weasley changed the game significantly when instead of only shielding, he shot a Shield-Breaking Hex at Lavender Brown. Her shield, which was supposed to protect Goyle, shattered just before the ball whizzed by and smacked Goyle in the chest.

"Lavender's on our side!" Parvati cried, scowling at Ron for a moment before going back to watching the balls.

"Goyle's not," Ron said shortly, "And he's the one who got hit."

Several people let out shouts about unfairness, but Ron only shrugged.

"The best defense is a good offense. Everyone knows that."

So now it was a game of taking out members of opposing houses through sabotage as much as it was defending their neighbors. They learned quickly to put up shields at the very last possible moment- otherwise someone would send a hex to break it before the ball got there. Dumbledore said nothing, and Rigel supposed it was good practice for conserving energy when spell casting in any case.

As the game became more aggressive, people dropped out quicker. Most people kept shielding their immediate neighbors, even if they were from opposing Houses, probably in case it was an ethics test Dumbledore had cooked up-not many wanted to look like a bad guy. Anyone they didn't have to protect by implication in the game's parameters, however, was fair game for shield-breaking hexes.

With five balls in play, there were times when both of someone's neighbors would be targeted at nearly the same time. Rigel twice had to ask her magic to perform shields in very quick succession to protect both Pansy and Draco from different balls, as neither Greengrass nor Macmillan had even made a pretense of shielding Draco or Pansy. Draco ignored Macmillan as well, but Pansy shielded Greengrass several times when Parvati didn't look like she'd get a shield up in time.

The game went on, until it dwindled down to about a dozen players. Macmillan had finally gotten hit when the Hufflepuff on his left was distracted shielding the person on *her* left. Greengrass was still in, as were Parvati, Abbott, Blaise, Ron, Boot, Brown, and the Hufflepuff next to Draco. The Gryffindors invariably targeted the shields of anyone next to a Slytherin-which left them plenty of targets, since there were still five Slytherins in the game-but those remaining had gotten pretty skilled at delaying their casting until the last possible moment.

It went on for another five minutes with no one getting hit, then Dumbledore added another ball. The circle was still very spread out, despite there being less people, because to close in meant having less time before a ball reached you, even though staying spread out meant a further distance for casting. Still, it was very crowded in the center with so many balls in play. Half the players were defending from a ball at any given time, and Rigel could see many of her classmates panting from the strain of doing the same charm so many times in a row.

Rigel noticed the clock on the far wall of the large classroom, and pitched her voice over the sound of people shouting "Protego!" and

"Pertus!" to say, "What happens if we run out of time, Professor?"

Dumbledore clasped his hands as he thought about it, "I suppose I'd have to give everyone left ten points."

Everyone not in Slytherin House scowled at that, and the number of Pertus attempts to crack the shields of those protecting Slytherins increased. A minute later, balls targeted both Boot and the Hufflepuff Rigel didn't know very well at once. Ron and Brown both tried to shield Boot, Draco ignored the Hufflepuff, and the badger let out a disappointed groan when the ball bumped into her and tagged her out.

Then Blaise was targeted at the same time Abbott was. While he managed to shield her, Ron's shield over Blaise was disrupted by Parvati's Shield-Breaking Hex, and Blaise was tagged.

Next, Rigel was targeted at the same time Greengrass was. Pansy bit her lip, but it was her turn to shield Rigel, and there wasn't enough time between the balls to get two shields up in succession that time. Pansy turned her wand toward Rigel, looking a bit dismayed as she realized Parvati was busy shielding Abbott at the time, leaving Greengrass exposed.

As Pansy pointed her wand at Rigel, Rigel wordlessly pointed her own toward Pansy-or rather, toward Pansy's right. Rigel's shield flashed into being in front of Greengrass just before the ball impacted the magic barrier lightly and bounced away again. At the same time, Rigel saw a ball coming at Draco from the corner of her eye. Without thinking, she threw up another shield in front of Draco with an abrupt gesture of her left hand, letting both shields fall a moment later to conserve energy for the next attack.

Ron narrowed his eyes at Rigel from across the circle, a calculating gleam that Rigel didn't particularly like illuminating his gaze. Her next three shields were all met with attempts at Shield-Breaking. She actually had to re-cast a shield around Pansy in a spit-second when the first shield failed. It seemed she'd become the major target of the

students who didn't want Slytherin to pull ahead in points. She guessed it made sense, since she had protected all three of her remaining Housemates.

Really, though, Dumbledore never said they could *only* shield those next to them. If he was going to award House points, of course it made sense to protect all members of your own House.

Greengrass stepped slowly sideways to close the gap between she and Pansy, probably figuring that if she was closer to the other Slytherins it would be easier for them to shield one another.

Boot went down next, with Brown being eliminated right after him before Ron even realized he was now responsible for her as well. It was just Draco, Rigel, Pansy, Greengrass, Parvati, Abbott, and Ron left. They were now in the unique situation of having to defend both of their neighbors all the time, as balls targeted people one after another after another in succession too fast to keep up with. In the next two minutes, no one even attempted a Shield-Breaking Hex, too focused on making shields as fast as they could. It might have been easier to just maintain a shield at that point, but none of them had a spare second to weigh the pros and cons.

Rigel almost didn't notice when Draco fumbled for a split-second while trying to shield her-almost. So caught up in the heat of the moment, spouting out shields left and right, she forgot they were in the middle of a game-or rather, her magic forgot.

Red bloomed in the air before her, dissolving the oncoming ball in an instant-along with Draco's Protego Charm, which he had managed to successfully cast in front of her at the last second.

Rigel lowered her arm shakily from where it was shielding Greengrass once again, and stepped backwards out of the circle. She hadn't *meant* to use that shield on herself, but she was disqualified nevertheless.

Dumbledore stepped forward and raised his wand at just that moment. All six balls stopped moving and the remaining six players all gasped for breath. "I think that's enough for today. Well done, well done everyone. We have five minutes left, so I'd like you all to answer this: what have you learned today?"

Dumbledore asked them that question at the end of every lesson. He said it wasn't enough to listen to an old man talk, if you weren't sure what you were listening to or what you should take from it.

"We learned how to work under pressure," Boot said, "And how to trust our reflexes in a combat-like scenario."

"Yes," Dumbledore said, "What else?"

"We learned to adjust our timing in order to shield someone other than ourselves, in a situation where there were multiple threats and a small window of opportunity," Millicent said.

"We learned to think outside the box," Abbott said, glancing at Rigel "Not to take the rules at face value."

"We learned to *bend* the rules in our favor," Ron said, "And to think ahead."

"We learned which of our classmates play fair," Blaise said, voice tinted with a hint of amusement, "And which of them don't care what anyone thinks of them, as long as they win." He eyed a few of their classmates-the ones who had done a lot more sabotaging and a lot less shielding when the game got tough.

"And which ones cheat," Macmillan snorted, glaring balefully at Rigel from where he stood amongst a group of Hufflepuffs.

"And which ones are sore losers," Theo smirked, "So, Professor... about those points?"

Pansy admonished Theo gently, but Dumbledore chuckled good-humoredly, "All in good time. What else have we learned?"

"We learned not to get in the way of a Depasco Shield," Millicent said wryly.

"Always a useful thing to know," Dumbledore agreed, "Now let me ask a different question-what if there were no points awarded at the end of the exercise? If the point of the exercise was simply to defend your neighbors from the ball, and no one won anything in the end, how would you have gone about it differently?"

"Well, we wouldn't have been throwing around Shield-Breaking Hexes," Brown said wryly, "I mean, we'd focus on just shielding."

"Hmm, what else?" Dumbledore said, "Anyone? No? What about you, Mr. Black? You were closest to an ideal solution in the very beginning."

Rigel thought for a moment, "If we weren't competing, we would all work together," Rigel decided eventually.

"How so?" Dumbledore asked mildly.

"If we were in a circle still, then everyone would just agree to shield the person on their right," Rigel said, "That way no one would have to worry about more than one person, mix-ups wouldn't occur, and it would probably be wise to arrange a series of signals before hand, in the event of problems like running out of energy, two balls attacking the same person, and things like that."

Dumbledore stroked his beard thoughtfully, "So if you had to sum up the key to success briefly in such a situation, what words would you use?"

"Organization," Rigel said.

"Nothing else?" Dumbledore pressed, raising his eyebrows, "Isn't there another element that is important to your plan?"

Rigel stared at the Headmaster blankly. What was she missing?

"Don't bother, Professor," Draco spoke up, his voice surprisingly cool, "Rigel doesn't know what you're talking about."

"Draco?" Rigel turned toward her friend, a little confused.

Draco leveled a look that was almost a glare at her. Rigel was taken aback. She didn't think she'd ever seen Draco that angry with her-not *truly* angry. "He's talking about trust, Rigel. *Trust*. A plan like that won't work unless you *trust* the person to the left of you to cover your back."

Rigel frowned, "Obviously that was implied-"

"*Trust* them, Rigel," Draco gritted out, "As in-not wasting time covering yourself and ruining the whole exercise because you don't think they're going to come through."

Rigel paused. Oh.

"Draco," Rigel began.

"Don't 'Draco' me, Rigel," Draco scowled, turning away from her slightly in a tangible dismissal, "When you lie, I don't care, because I know you have your reasons-as ridiculous as they sometimes are. But this isn't about not trusting me with your secrets-this is you not trusting me to do something right that you'd *already seen me do right*. It's insulting, and it says a lot about your opinion of your friends."

Rigel swallowed around a lump in her throat, not sure what to say.

Dumbledore broke the awkward silence in the classroom with a small cough, "Indeed, as Mr. Malfoy has pointed out, trust is an essential element of any plan. When you can't trust everyone around you to work for the greater good, achieving a goal is considerably

more difficult, is it not? If you can only rely on yourself, you are at a disadvantage against those, like several of your Slytherin classmates, who put their differences aside to work together. Now, as I believe Mr. Nott pointed out, I have points to award. Let's see, we'll make it 30 points to Slytherin, 20 points to Gryffindor, and 10 points to Hufflepuff. Well done, everyone. Enjoy the rest of your day."

They filed out of the classroom after collecting their things.

Draco set off at a quicker pace than usual, leaving Rigel and Pansy behind as he made his way down the hall.

Pansy looked torn between Draco's back and Rigel's lost expression. Noticing this, Rigel summoned up a rueful twist to her mouth, and said, "Catch up to him, will you, Pan? If he'll listen, tell him I'm sorry."

Pansy bit her lip and said softly, "I don't think that's what he wants to hear right now, Rigel."

The blonde girl picked up her pace and weaved gracefully among their classmates after Draco.

Blaise sidled up alongside Rigel and said, "He'll come around. You hurt his pride by insinuating that he was incompetent in front of all our classmates-and that after assigning him the very task you took from his hands."

"I didn't mean to," Rigel said a bit sharply, wishing Blaise didn't always feel the need to explain the world so bluntly. She frowned at the ground as they walked, "My magic acts without my control when it thinks I'm in trouble."

"Well, don't tell Draco that," Blaise said, inspecting his fingernails, "Hearing that you only subconsciously distrust him won't make him feel any better, and knowing that you feel unsafe while standing right next to him will probably make him feel worse."

"Great," Rigel said, an unfamiliar bite to the edge of her words, "Now I know what *not* to say."

"Then you're halfway there," Blaise said, seemingly unaffected by her unfriendly tone.

Rigel glanced over at Blaise's blank expression, then sighed, "Thank you, Blaise. I probably would have said something to that effect otherwise."

"Don't worry, I'm sure whatever you end up saying will be equally stupid," Blaise said nonchalantly, "But that's part of your charm, Rigel. Draco won't hate you for putting your foot in your mouth, any more than you hate him for bringing his insecurities up in front of everyone like an idiot just because he was upset."

"I don't know if I feel better or worse after talking to you," Rigel said wryly.

"You don't really know much of anything, do you, Rigel?"

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The next morning Draco wasn't speaking to her, and Pansy was ignoring them both for being 'unreasonable boys,' so there was no one to glance over her shoulder asking questions as she read the very thick letter she received from Archie. It came with a small package, which she set aside to open later. Plain black ink on the cover meant it was safe to open, so Rigel did, curious about what merited so many pages from her cousin, who, though he had a tendency to ramble, was usually too busy with his Healer's studies to spare her more than general, if upbeat, platitudes.

Dear Rigel,

The most extraordinary thing happened the other day...

Archie slipped through the classroom door just before it slammed shut behind him.

"Almost late for the third time this week, Mr. Potter," Professor Shoehorn remarked, not even bothering to turn away from the notes she was writing on the blackboard.

"Apologies, Professor," Archie said cheerfully, knowing Shoehorn wasn't really that upset with him.

He shot Hermione a grin as he sat down, "Thanks for saving me a seat, 'Mione."

The brown-haired girl rolled her eyes at him perfunctorily, "You sit there every day, Harry. I'm hardly staving off our classmates' greedy designs."

"Well then thank you for sitting next to the seat I sit in every day," Archie said, still grinning, "I guess you do like me after all."

Hermione huffed and shuffled her papers embarrassedly, "Someone has to make sure you still get the notes when you show up late-what if one day when you're a Healer someone's life depends on something you missed?"

"If one day someone's life depends on how well I can-" he glanced up at the heading on the board, "identify magical venoms... oh, actually that does sound important." He scratched his head, "Well, in any case I wasn't *actually* late. Almost late is not quite late, after all. In fact, back home we call that *on time* ."

"Maybe, but it is one step closer to actually late," Hermione said in her best lecturing tone, "Scraping by isn't only discouraged because teachers like you to try your best, you know. There's a such thing as leaving a margin of error. If something had gone wrong, you would have been late-it's called planning pessimistically."

Archie smiled winningly at Hermione, "I do that all the time. Like when getting a girl flowers, always better to get a round dozen than to hope she isn't disappointed by one."

Hermione rolled her eyes, "Who have you ever bought flowers for-your mom?"

With the ease of habit, Archie suppressed the expression that would otherwise have crossed his face when mothers were brought up-after all, Harry Potter had a mother, why should he be sad? He twirled a finger around Hermione's curly hair and said, "I'd buy you flowers every day if you wanted, 'Mione."

Hermione swatted his hand away briskly. He rubbed it with exaggerated forlornness, then said, "Girls are about the only situation where a positive margin of error is a good thing, though. Otherwise it's at best a waste, at worst ruinously detrimental."

"What do you mean?" Hermione said, frowning.

"I mean, we can't do that in Healing, can we?" Archie said, "When someone has a cold you don't drown them in Pepper-up potion. Take these poisons we're learning about today-when making an antidote, you can't have too much or too little of any one thing. You have to get it just right. So really, I'm training myself to emulate perfection by being exactly on time every day."

Hermione glowered at him, "And when administering the antidote, will you give the patient exactly the amount you think they need to fight off the poison, or would you err on the side of caution and give a bit more in case you missed a pocket of venom somewhere?"

Archie pursed his lips, "Well if I was the Hospital Treasurer, I'd tell you to-"

"Harry!" Hermione said, exasperated.

Archie laughed, "All right, I guess we're both right, aren't we?"

"You're both disruptive, that's for sure," Professor Shoehorn told them, brushing her hands of chalk dust and stepping away from the board, "I don't suppose either of you has copied..." she trailed off, raising her eyebrows at the auto-quill on Archie's desk that was clearly just finishing a perfect copy of what was on the board. "Hmm."

Hermione looked at the board in dismay, then scowled furiously when she saw Archie's quill. She scrambled for a fresh sheet of parchment and a bottle of ink, but Archie chuckled and shooed the auto-quill away from his notes. He shifted the notes onto Hermione's desk and pulled out a new sheet of parchment, "That one's for you, 'Mione. Since I distracted you and all. I'll write my own."

Hermione looked torn between wanting to copy the board herself, and not wanting to get behind in class-everyone else had been copying it out as the Professor wrote. After a moment of struggling, she sighed, "I'll re-copy them later tonight so I learn. Thank you, Harry."

"Hey, someone's got to make sure you don't miss anything-I mean, what if someday someone's life depended on it?" Archie grinned unrepentantly as Hermione's hesitantly thankful expression dissolved into a fresh narrow-eyed glare.

"Oh, just be quiet."

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After their Diagnostics class, they had a two-hour break for lunch. When they were third years, they'd be able to join the upperclassmen in going down to the nearby village for lunch, but for now they had to eat with the other students who were either too young or too lazy to get food outside of the mess hall.

They could, however, take their food outside and eat it on the front lawn. Since it was early April, the weather was fairly cooperative. Archie and Hermione sat by themselves under a shady oak. Archie considered himself to be friends with everyone, but Hermione especially, and he didn't much mind that none of their classmates bothered the two of them very often. He had a feeling they were seen as a unit-Harry and Hermione, the two overachievers who had the best grades in every class. Unapproachable and uninterested in anything unrelated to learning more about Healing.

Archie didn't exactly agree with this assessment-he and Hermione did plenty of things besides study, and neither of them was exactly unfriendly toward others-but he also didn't see the need to correct their assumptions. He was happy just being especially good friends with Hermione-who really needed more than one friend at a time, anyway?

There was something ironic in that-he, Archie, having only one serious friend at school, and Harry-as Rigel-having twice that many at least, but it was a fitting sort of irony, that supported their deception perfectly. Harry's parents were glad she had at least one friend, and Sirius saw nothing unusual in Archie being on good terms with many in his House.

Hermione demanded he quiz her over the basic treatments for different organ failures, which they were being tested over next week in their General Internal Healing class.

"Brain failure," Archie said.

Hermione froze for a moment, before scowling and swatting him on his arm, "That doesn't count!"

"The brain is an organ, Hermione," Archie said in his most patronizing tone.

Hermione huffed, "One which we haven't learned how to treat in the event that it *fails*, Harry."

"Still, you should know these things," Archie said loftily, "So, if you had to guess, how would you treat brain failure?"

"Like this," Hermione said, whapping him again, this time over the head, "Dunce."

"You're so violent, 'Mione," Archie said, waggling his eyebrows, "I like it."

She flushed to her roots and tossed her apple core at him. Archie caught it easily enough, inspecting it seriously, "You missed a bite." He tossed it back, "The apple a day only works if you eat the whole thing."

Hermione bit off the last bit defiantly, looking like an angry chipmunk as she chewed pointedly and swallowed, "Ask me another one."

Archie laughed, "Liver failure."

Hermione perked up and answered with her usual attention to detail and thoroughness.

"... and in the event that the patient has a history of substance abuse-

Archie cut her off with a laugh, "Now who's bringing up stuff we haven't learned yet?"

Hermione lifted her nose, "It was in a footnote."

"A footnote in one of the books assigned for optional reading," Archie said, still laughing a bit, "On *next* week's syllabus, no less."

"The fact that you know that means you read it too," Hermione shot back.

Archie shrugged, "So I did, but you set the covered-in-class-only precedent in this study session when you refused to admit your ignorance about brain failure. No take-backs."

"You're such a child," Hermione sighed.

"Why would I want to be anything else?" Archie shrugged, "Judging by the expression on Professor Tallum's face, adulthood isn't all it's touted."

"He never looked so stressed before the equivalent of several vats of Polyjuice disappeared from under his nose last year," Hermione said mildly, "The other professors still rib him about it at dinner, I hear."

"He never proved any was missing," Archie said casually, "They couldn't properly account for them all, but of course it was quite a mess-hard to account for anything in those circumstances."

"You never told me what you were doing with it all," Hermione said.

"No, I guess I didn't," Archie said, twisting a finger in his ear indolently.

Hermione groaned, "Come on, Harry. I've been sooo patient."

Archie glanced over at her markedly impatient expression, "Yes, I can see that."

"I have," Hermione insisted, "I know you weren't using it, because I've been watching you almost a year and a half and every day you go at least an hour between drinking anything-"

"I don't know whether to be impressed or scared."

"-but no one just does that for no reason, and I've been waiting for you to explain-"

"Even though I said I was never going to?"

"-but I deserve to know! I did half the work," Hermione finished.

Archie was frankly impressed she'd held herself back for so long. Unfortunately, as earnest as she obviously was, he had nothing to

give her.

"You do deserve to know, but I can't tell you," Archie said, shrugging, "I'm sorry, 'Mione, but you'll probably never know."

Hermione narrowed her eyes dangerously, "Never is a big word, Harry."

"Not as big as melodramatic, which you are being," Archie said, smiling softly, "Really, I'd tell you if I could."

Hermione sighed a bit, "You know, I think you would, Harry. I think you would. If you ever *can* tell me-do."

"The moment it becomes possible," Archie assured her, "Now enough of this sad no-can-do stuff. What would you do if your patient had a failing gallbladder?"

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Archie was walking back from his last class of the day-gym, which was down at the tracks. He was later than the rest of the guys in his class coming back, because as usual he had dithered in the locker room until they'd all gone before changing back into his regular school uniform.

He was taking Harry's advice seriously-no one ever saw him naked. It wasn't much, but in the absence of conclusive proof... it might be enough to make a difference some day between caught and merely suspected.

He took the long way back, as was his habit, around the greenhouses on the path that skirted the edge of the forest on the West side of the school. AIM was surrounded by forest on all sides, though the forest wasn't anything like the Forbidden Forest Harry

wrote of. It was little more than a ring of forest maybe half a mile across at its thickest. Its only purpose, as far as Archie could see, was as aesthetic concealment for the great stone wall that also surrounded the school. The wall was ridiculously tall, but the trees were still taller.

Archie almost didn't hear the person slip out of the trees onto the path behind him, but whoever it was snapped a twig-probably intentionally, as Archie was of the opinion that no one in real life actually snapped twigs ominously when they snuck up on a person.

Archie therefore wasn't terribly concerned as he turned around curiously and raised his eyebrows at the man who slipped out of the trees and onto the path, "Hello?"

"Do you know Harry Potter?" the man asked. He had a rugged look about him. Tall, broad across the chest and shoulders, and nearly intimidating-nearly, because the grin on his face was nothing close to threatening.

Archie scratched the back of his neck uncomfortably, "Well, that's an interesting question. Who's asking?"

The man gave a jaunty bow, though there was something slightly insincere about it, "I am, of course. I have a package for Harry."

Archie made a non-committal sound of understanding, "Any reason this package can't be mailed to Harry?"

The big man shrugged, "Not particularly, only I've got a message to pass along as well."

Archie raised an eyebrow, "And this message is in a language that doesn't yet have a system of written denotation?"

The man laughed jovially, "No, I daresay that's not the problem. The message is of a personal nature, that's all."

Archie snorted, "You look a bit old to have a personal message to deliver to a twelve-year-old. You Harry's dad?"

The guy's face fell a bit, "It's not like that! *He'd* have my head right proper for even *thinking* -look, can you just tell me where to find Harry? I can't spend much time here."

Archie considered the man carefully, wondering if he could pull this off. Finally, he decided he had no time to come up with a better plan. "Well, I know it's been a while... but you're looking at me, Swift." It was a risk, but only a small one. Harry had described her friends from Diagon Alley on several occasions, and tall, brown-haired guy with an easy smile sounded like one Marek Swiftknife. "I assume the message is from Leo, and the package from Krait?" With that, Archie had officially exhausted his knowledge of Harry's doings in Diagon Alley. Hopefully that would be enough to startle the man into believing him.

The man blinked, then tilted his head confusedly, "Harry? You... you're really Harry? You look so different! Taller, and... I don't know, different. I guess it *has* been a while, though. Why didn't you visit over the holiday? Leo said you-" He stopped, frowning briefly, "Wait, I saw you come out of the boys' side of the locker rooms earlier."

Archie mentally grimaced-the man had been following him longer than he thought. Wait, didn't Harry's friends in the Alley still think she was a boy?

"Of course," Archie said, feigning confusion, "Why? What has Leo been telling you?"

"He-" Swift trailed off, and groaned, "Well, I feel the fool," he laughed sheepishly, "He made it sound so reasonable, you know, that you might be a girl in disguise, or something, and how I should look for a skirt just in case..."

Archie laughed quietly-because Harry would never laugh loudly, "Leo got you pretty good. How long did you spend looking for a girl

version of me?"

Swift laughed as well, "Suppose I should have known better than to believe anything the King says-well, I'm sorry I didn't recognize you. I was looking for a skirt, but I should've known those eyes anywhere, I guess."

Archie shrugged, "It's okay. Leo hinted he might do something like this, so I admit I was having you on at first as well."

Swift gave him a peculiar look, but smiled nonetheless, "Yeah, I guess I walked right into it. Anyway, here's this-from Krait, like you guessed. He woulda mailed it, but Leo wanted to send you a message anyway, so he volunteered me to deliver both the package and the letter personally."

"Is that so?" Archie said distractedly, wondering at the implications of Lionel Hurst extending his interest in his cousin so far.

"Yeah," Marek went on thoughtfully, "You know, I think he worries about you a bit. He's used to having all his friends close, you know? Where he can keep an eye on them. I guess with you all the way out here, he just wanted an excuse to check up on you."

Archie's face didn't betray one iota of the unease he felt at hearing that. What was Harry doing, making such heavy-handed friends?

He took out a small packet and two letters, handing them to Archie and then tucking his hands into his pockets, "So you'll be around this summer won't you? I know you were real busy over the holidays-even His Highness only saw you once or twice, I gather. Rispah asks after you sometimes."

"Please give my best wishes to the Lady," Archie said, a bit uncomfortable with the conversation moving back into personal waters, "I'll be around, of course, but this summer I've got an internship at the Potions Guild."

"Oh, yeah, His Highness mentioned that-will it take up much of your time, then?" Swift asked.

"I'm not sure yet, but it's supposed to be rather intensive," Archie said, "Listen, it was great to see you, Swift-I've got to get back for dinner, though. Give everyone my best-except Leo. Just give the King whatever you think he deserves."

Swift grinned broadly, "Sure thing, lad. I'll be off, then. Stay well."

Marek disappeared into the trees. Archie wasn't sure how he was going to get back over the school wall, but he frankly had bigger things to worry about-like how Harry was going to explain things to Leo when his man reported that Harry Potter was very much a boy.

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Isn't that interesting? I never imagined my friends from London would go to so much trouble to look me up here. I guess I've made an impression on them. What do you think about my little joke with Marek? You know I love to keep people guessing.

Let me know how things are going on your end-and stay away from giant snakes, for Merlin's sake, Rigel.

Best,

Harry

Rigel folded the letter slowly and tucked it into her schoolbag. There were two other letters within Archie's letter, one from Leo and one from Krait. Krait's explained that the small package contained several rolls of new recipes he'd managed to get hold of, with requests from Burke to send off a sample of each new recipe she

completed when she had the time, in case they inspired him to expand his order in the future.

She opened the letter from Leo and scanned it, but it was the usual questions-how AIM was going, how her Healing studies were going, was Krait working her too hard, etc. There was nothing in the letter that indicated why Leo would do something so blatantly antagonistic.

Archie was worried about Leo finding out that Harry Potter was a boy at school, and thinking it odd, but Rigel knew better. Leo had told her that he already knew she 'pretended' to be a boy at AIM, because he'd sent someone to ask around about her before. The real question was why Leo would send Marek looking for a girl, when he knew very well Marek wouldn't find one? Was he deliberately trying to make things difficult for her? She knew he disapproved of her continued deception, but would he really try to deliberately sabotage it?

She thought carefully about how to approach this new development throughout classes that day, but that evening when she sat down to write her letter she still wasn't quite sure what to say.

Eventually, she decided to approach Leo with a question, instead of a flat out accusation.

Dear Leo,

Good to hear from you. Tell me, did you send Marek here in an intentional plot to reveal all of my secrets, or was that accidental? I'm not as upset as I am confused-though Marek might be both when you next see him. I may have intimated that you played a rather ingenious joke on him, but you'll talk your way out of it. I'm sure you enjoy surprises as much as I do, after all. In the interest of facilitating consistency between the two of us, however, I'd like to know this: you know already that here at AIM I am as much myself as I was when you first met me. Why, then, did you send Marek armed with the truth when it would do him no good? I sincerely hope you have a reason beyond simply scaring the magic out of me. Tell the next

person you send with a letter to look for pants, and give my best to everyone, again.

Harry

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She had another session with Snape that night, lending her magic to imbuing the potion he was researching. When she appeared in Lab One, however, Snape took one look at her and gave an irritated snort.

"What is wrong, Mr. Black?" he asked, turning to the table of supplies and efficiently taking apart the stratifying apparatus before storing it in its case.

Rigel took a moment to make sure her face betrayed none of her emotions, wondering how Snape had concluded she was upset so quickly, then shook her head in feigned confusion, "Nothing, sir. I look forward to continuing tonight."

"For someone who lies so often, Mr. Black, you are not exceedingly skilled in the art," Snape said coolly, not looking at her as he carried the unused silver cauldron across the room and locked it up securely in one of his many cabinets.

"My problems are not impressive enough to need airing, Professor," Rigel said, her voice as polite as she could make it while refusing to answer his question.

"Only impressive enough to have you moping over them, then?" Snape's sarcasm was on-form tonight, Rigel thought.

"I'm not sure moping is the word I'd-"

"Does this *unimpressive* problem have to do with the reason Mr. Malfoy is currently not speaking to you?" Snape asked with studied disinterest.

Rigel suppressed the flinch she knew Snape was looking for, and said, "I wouldn't presume to know Draco's motivations for anything, sir."

Snape paused in his clearing away of materials to scowl at her, "I suppose you also wouldn't *presume* to hazard as guess as to why Mr. Malfoy spent two hours sulking in my office yesterday evening?"

"Did you ask him, sir?" Rigel tried.

"Apparently he did not feel that the problem could be adequately explained in words," Snape said, "He was content to wallow silently in his misery, a here-to-fore unprecedented occurrence, I can assure you."

"Perhaps the problem is rather personal," Rigel said.

"Or perhaps he feels that to discuss it would be would be a betrayal of someone else's confidences," Snape said flatly.

Rigel considered this, "I wouldn't think it to be." At Snape's unamused look, she allowed, "Though perhaps Draco is of a different mind."

"Enough sidestepping the issue, Mr. Black," Snape said sharply, "If there is a problem in my House, I expect it to be dealt with."

"We will, sir, we just need a bit of-"

"I have seen no evidence of this thus far," Snape interrupted, "In fact, your current solution seems to involve the both of you avoiding one another as much as you avoid the subject. Explain. Now."

Rigel suppressed a resigned sigh, "Yes, sir. Draco is angry with me, because I did something that seemed in his eyes a fundamental

betrayal of trust."

Snape's face was very blank, and Rigel wondered if he wasn't holding himself back from making an ugly accusation. At the slight pang of hurt in her stomach, she reminded herself that Snape had no reason to trust the son of his childhood rival, and every reason to worry about Draco, his own godson. "And is he mistaken in his assessment?" the Potions Master asked evenly.

Rigel hesitated, long enough that Snape's eyes flashed dangerously. She swallowed carefully, "He is not entirely wrong, sir, but he is also oversimplifying the situation."

"Pray tell," Snape said, voice tight.

"You know that sometimes my magic does things without my... direction," Rigel began.

Snape's eyebrow snapped up, "I was under the impression that this phenomenon largely dissipated with the acquisition of a properly matched wand."

Rigel inclined her head, "It did, for the most part. With my wand, I can control my magic very easily-it finally does what I tell it to, when I tell it to. However, it still at times does things I don't tell it to do. If I consciously try and make it *not* do something, it always listens eventually, but I can't be consciously telling it not to do anything all the time, so it's hard to predict when I need to exert control."

Snape stared at her for a moment, "Usually when a child gains control over his magic, incidents of accidental magic dissipate as a consequence. I do not believe it common for a wand to merely facilitate a wizard's control in *addition* to continued bouts of accidental magic."

Rigel was suddenly struck by what a silly term 'accidental magic' really was. It wasn't as if magic randomly, accidentally spilled out

from a child and affected the world in purposeless ways. Magic always acted for a reason, in her experience.

"Most of my accidental magic stopped," Rigel said thoughtfully, "I mean, my magic doesn't change spells I'm actively trying to cast anymore. It's just that it also casts spells on its own, sometimes."

"Magic *does not* cast its own spells," Snape said, "Accidental magic isn't ordered magic like a spell is. It merely reacts in a naturalistic way to a child's subconscious emotions. It becomes a general force manifesting the child's will, not anything as specific as a spell. That's why the most common form of accidental magic is some sort of physical change to the world around a child-an object moved from one place to the next, an object altered or transformed into something else, broken things becoming whole, whole things becoming broken-it's all basic changes of states, untailored to a specific result or to a specific kind of object as spells are."

Rigel frowned, "That's not what my magic is doing, then."

Snape frowned back, "Yes, it is. Last year you slowed Mr. Longbottom's descent from a fall, did you not? Your magic created a physical force to protect you from Mr. Jordan-these are classic, if extreme examples of accidental manifestation of magic."

"But that's not all," Rigel said, confused, "It used to be that when I cast a transfiguration on something it would come out completely different-not just changing the state of the object, like setting it on fire or vanishing it or something. I tried to change a spice shaker into a rock once, and my magic turned it into a postcard, with an inscription and everything. That sounds specific enough to be a spell, doesn't it?"

Snape considered this, "You say that sort of thing stopped when you got your wand, though? That is a rather unusual transfiguration, but it still may have been accidental-"

Rigel interrupted with a frustrated head shake, "You just said accidental magic responds to a child's will. I wanted Neville to stop falling, and I wanted Jordan to back off, but I've never had a fierce, unconscious desire for a postcard, as far as I know. It didn't have a purpose, it was just my magic being cheeky. There's more, too. My magic has stopped changing things while I actively try for a specific result, but it still casts its own spells-real spells, ones I haven't learned yet."

"Impossible," Snape scowled, "You must have forgotten you know the spells. Perhaps you have an affinity for wandless magic, and didn't realize you were willing the spells to be cast."

Rigel pressed her lips together with frustration, "I didn't know what the Depasco Shield was until Dumbledore taught it to our class, but my magic used it weeks ago, to shield me from flying rubble."

Snape's face lost what little color he had, "That shield is extremely dangerous. Are you sure that's what manifested?"

Rigel nodded, "Yes. It was red, dissolved things on contact, and took an extremely heavy toll on my magical core."

Snape seemed to be thinking fast, "Perhaps... sometimes a child's magic is able to reproduce a spell that has been cast around him significantly often. The child's magic... copies the signature of a spell if it is cast in proximity often enough. There have been cases... but it is exceedingly rare that a spell will be cast often enough to for a child's magic to carry the imprint of it. At most, it may give the child an affinity for certain kinds of spells later on, though that is unproven research, and goes deep into arguments about Light and Dark affinities, and how a child's magical core responds to outside influence while developing. At any rate... this is concerning news, Mr. Black. That sort of spell manifesting without your control could seriously injure your fellow students."

"I know, sir," Rigel said, "It hasn't hurt anyone so far, but I'm not sure how far my influence over my magic extends. Even if unconsciously I

don't want my magic to hurt anyone, fear or surprise might override that concern on a basic level, in which case my magic may lash out." She felt equal parts nervous and relieved to be telling Snape this. It was unnerving to report such a weakness to someone with so much control over her life, but maybe he could fix it, the way he'd known what to do when her wand wouldn't work.

Snape took a considering breath. "At this point, I am not sure how to proceed. That a Despaco shield could be cast at any time in a school of adolescents is... worrying. I could arrange for a magical dampener for you, but you would have to remove it during lessons in order to practice, thereby negating the purpose of having it for a large portion of your day, and sometimes when a developing core is dampened for too long the child's magic ends up even more out of his control when it is taken off, because by relying on it he doesn't practice controlling it on a subconscious level as other children do. On the other hand, if it is truly beyond your control already..."

"I'm not sure it's *beyond* my control," Rigel said fairly, "When I ask it to do something, it always does, and the same when I expressly forbid it to do something. It's just that I can't know all the possibly dangerous things it might try to do until it does them. Now that I know what the Depasco is, I'm sure my magic will stop using it. It's the unknown I'm worried about."

Snape rubbed his temple, "That does not make any sense. Your magic cannot know spells you yourself do not know. That spell had to have been cast around you before, for your magic to emulate it instinctively."

"But you said yourself the spell is dangerous to cast around children-who would have done so around me, at an age that I was too young to remember?" Rigel pointed out.

"Who indeed," Snape said darkly. Rigel didn't like the look on his face-the bitter, slightly contemptuous look of a man who thought the answer was obvious, but knew better than to think his audience would agree or even entertain the idea. It made her think he

suspected someone from her family, like Sirius, or James. Rigel knew better, though. Her father and uncle would never be *that* irresponsible. Not around their own family members.

"Maybe the Despaco was a fluke, then," Rigel said, "Most of the time, my magic does seem to act within the usual parameters of accidental magic. I'll work harder on controlling it, sir. I'll talk to my magic, and see if-"

"Will you kindly stop referring to your own magic as some kind of proto-sentient being separate from yourself?" Snape snapped, "This is part of the problem, I think. You see your magic as something other than part of you, something you have no right to control, and so of course the magic is uncontrollable."

Rigel blinked, "But if it can respond to my own views of it and react accordingly, doesn't that prove that it *is* semi-sentient at least-"

"No, Mr. Black," Snape said, exasperated, "Your magic responds to your will because it is a part of you. If you believe it to be unwieldy, it will become unwieldy because you made it so. You are controlling it, whether you realize it or not, by having beliefs about it and acting on them. Magic reacts to will naturally, Mr. Black. It is not an indication that your magic is somehow different than every other wizard's magic. You must cease this naïve tendency of thought, or it is only going to get worse."

Rigel could tell that Snape didn't want to hear any disagreement, so she kept silent, but she couldn't help but think that she'd begun regarding her magic as out of control *after* it had proved itself to be, not the other way around.

Snape released a long breath, which in a less controlled man would have been called a sigh, "We have wandered from the point. What does this have to do with Mr. Malfoy's ire?"

Rigel recalled the beginning of the conversation, and grimaced, "It was in Professor Dumbledore's class. We did an exercise in which I

was supposed to shield Draco and he was supposed to shield me, but at one point my magic, without my conscious instruction, shielded me when it looked like Draco wasn't going to get his shield up in time."

"Ah," Snape's lips twisted wryly, "I might have supposed the problem involved a slight to Draco's not insignificant ego."

Rigel was tempted to defend her friend, but Snape didn't sound as though he meant anything terribly insulting by it. From the way he'd slipped and called him 'Draco' she rather thought he was fond of his godchild's somewhat petulant pride. Come to think of it, Rigel was a bit fond of it herself, which was probably why she humored it so often.

"Sir," she said, tentatively, "This may be out of line, but is there anything you think I could do to... make Draco not mad at me faster?"

Snape sneered slightly, "If you knew how foolhardy it was to ask me, of all people, the best method for keeping friends..." he snorted, but relented, "Draco doesn't respond well to apologies. His father has taught him that if someone is truly sorry, they will change how they act. You would do well to make overt, meaningful changes to how you deal with him. And an offering of strawberry tarts would not go awry," he added sardonically.

Rigel nodded slowly, "Thank you, sir."

"Now get out of my lab," Snape said, "You have wasted enough of my time with your schoolyard troubles." Rigel wisely didn't point out that he had demanded she do just that.

She inclined her head respectfully, and turned to go.

"And Mr. Black," Snape added sternly. She turned to face him again. "Control your magic."

"Yes, sir," she said.

If only it were so simple.

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Rigel headed back to the common room, planning to fill the extra hours that evening with Archie's Healing textbooks-from the sound of his letter, she had fallen slightly behind that semester.

As she entered the common room, Selwyn barked at her from a table nearby, "Black! Where's your escort?"

Rigel paused, "Professor Snape let me go early, so I hadn't arranged one until later this evening."

Selwyn narrowed kohl-rimmed eyes dangerously, "And you didn't think to ask Professor Snape to patronus-call another prefect, or walk you back himself?"

Rigel shook her head slowly, "No, I didn't think of it. I'm sorry."

"You always are," Selwyn scoffed, "Just don't ask me to feign surprise when the basilisk gets you."

"That's a bit harsh, Alice," Rosier spoke up from where Rookwood was proofreading his essay, "At least he had an escort to begin with."

Selwyn shot Rosier an unimpressed look, "It's not enough to only sometimes think about being cautious. Caution is only effective if it's applied consistently."

"It's just difficult to take every eventuality into consideration from the start," Rigel said weakly.

"If you're a Gryffindor, I'm sure it is," Selwyn said, "But you aren't a Gryffindor, Black. You're a snake. Snakes have to look after their own skin. You've got a lot of people looking out for yours right now, but don't expect it to last if you can't demonstrate a basic concern for your own wellbeing. If *you* don't care about your safety, others will wonder why they should bother."

"I do care about my safety," Rigel said, "I don't rush around looking for trouble, or anything. I just have a lot on my mind, so sometimes I forget-"

"You *can't* just forget, Black, that's what I'm saying," Selwyn said, "Whatever else is filling up that air-brain inside your thick skull, it's not as important as survival. Where's your wand?"

"My wand?" Rigel blinked at the abrupt change in subject.

"Yes, Black, your wand," Selwyn snapped, "That thing that can only save your life if you *have it* ."

Rigel patted her robes, and produced it rather triumphantly from the third pocket she checked, "Here."

Selwyn's jaw was clenched, and even Rookwood looked to be fighting a grimace when Rigel glanced at him. She looked back at Selwyn as the Head Girl said, "If you have to look for it, you're already three steps closer to disaster. Pick a pocket right now, and from now on always keep your wand in that pocket-no where else. I'll be checking you randomly for the next month, and every time your wand isn't in that pocket, I'm docking five points from Slytherin."

Rigel's ears burned, but she obediently stowed her wand in the right-side pocket closest to her waist, "Yes, Head Girl Selwyn."

"Don't act all stiff and offended, Black, it's for your own good," Selwyn said, "Danger doesn't come when you're waiting for it, no matter what the lions think. It comes in the dark, it comes from

behind you, it comes from places you'd never expect, and it comes when you think nothing is wrong."

Rigel nodded politely, fighting a grimace when it seemed that Selwyn wasn't close to being finished. The older girl opened her mouth to continue, but Rosier interrupted hastily.

"Thank you, Alice," he said, standing gracefully from his seat and clapping the Head Girl's shoulder bracingly, "I'm sure Rigel understands your meaning perfectly. He won't forget anymore, will you Rigel?"

Rigel shook her head solemnly. Rosier stepped between she and Selwyn, prattling on reassuringly to Selwyn while gesturing subtly with a hand behind his back for Rigel to make a quick exit. Rigel nodded politely to Rookwood, who was now pointedly perusing a textbook on avian anatomy, and began edging backwards slowly.

Rosier stepped backwards as well, slinging an arm around her shoulder and saying, "I'll help Rigel practice stowing his wand right now, in fact-"

One table over, several people dissolved into poorly disguised snorts of laughter.

"Not like that," Rosier sighed, "Cesspools, the minds of today's adolescents."

Selwyn flicked her hair over her shoulder dismissively, turning back to her homework, "Just get him out of my sight, Aldon."

Rosier steered Rigel swiftly across the common room, arm still around her neck. Rigel allowed it for a moment, but when he started heading for a couch she ducked sideways to free herself, "I was going to study-"

"Go get your books, then," Rosier said, waving her off and taking a seat casually on the couch, "I'll wait."

"I was going to study by myself."

"What difference does it make? I won't bother you. I want to see what you're studying, that's all," Rosier said calmly.

Rigel hesitated, "It's not anything interesting."

Rosier leveled a flat look at her, "Go get your books, Rigel, and let me decide what I think is interesting."

Rigel sighed, but could not think of anything to say to that. She turned and headed for her dorm room, trying not to glance toward the cluster of low-backed couches and chairs where her friends usually sat. She was sure Draco would be sitting there with Pansy, Blaise, Theo, and Millicent, working out a Transfiguration problem or maybe even writing his potions essay without her help for once. A small, pathetic part of her worried that he'd get something wrong without her there to proofread it, which was ridiculous, because Draco was actually quite skilled in potions, and Blaise was always happy to fact-check an essay.

If she had checked the corner, however, she might have been better prepared when she opened the door to find her second-year friends sprawled about the dorm. They looked up when she walked in, and there was a moment of awkward silence after everyone except Draco greeted her politely.

Pansy stood up quickly from where she'd been sitting primly on the end of Rigel's bed, "Sorry, Rigel, I've spread my things all over-"

Rigel smiled as she crossed the room to the foot of her bed, though her face felt a bit stiff doing it, "It's all right, Pansy, you can stay there. I'm just grabbing a book from my trunk."

"Where are you going now, I wonder, when the Library group has already left?" Draco drawled from his own bed without looking away from the star-chart he was labeling.

"Just to the common room," Rigel said softly as she picked out the book she was looking for and closed her trunk gently.

"Oh, good idea," Draco said with heavy sarcasm, "Much quieter out there, I'm sure."

"Rosier asked me to-"

Draco whipped his head around to glare at her, "Did he? Imagine that. What a good friend you must seem to him, Rigel-so accommodating, so persistently genial. Just imagine if he knew how you really felt."

"Draco," Rigel said, frowning slightly as she straightened from her crouched position by her trunk, "It's not like-"

"Is the idea of telling the truth so utterly foreign to you? Can you not even comprehend how much less work your life would be if you just told people upfront that you had no intention of making any genuine attempt at friendship, and in fact are entirely incapable of such a thing?" Draco asked, voice loaded with fake concern, "Imagine it! You could go out into the common room right now and tell Rosier that you don't appreciate his intentions. You could tell him that he's being overbearing, and inconsiderate, and you're frankly not interested in whatever he's trying to do. But you won't do that, will you? Because you think pretending nothing is wrong is the same thing as solving the problem."

Rigel stared at Draco, unwilling to say something equally scathing back, but also unable to reasonably refute his point. From Draco's point of view, it probably did look a lot like he described it.

"Draco, you're being unfair," Millicent said quietly from where she was sitting next to Blaise, "Rigel's too polite to be so blunt when it could potentially hurt someone's feelings. Rosier is his friend, too. Of course he doesn't want to upset him."

Draco tossed his hair and sniffed, going back to his star-charts with an air of unconcern, "That would almost be noble-if it were true. But it isn't true, and Rigel knows that. He isn't going along with Rosier to spare his feelings. He's doing it because he wants people to like him, and he thinks the only way to do that is to appear to give them what they want all the time. Except he can't actually bring himself to be so selfless, so deep down he resents them for asking, instead of just saying 'no.' The worst part is, people like you applaud him for it, because you can't fathom how deeply passive aggressive he really is."

Rigel took a slow breath, "You're wrong, Draco."

She walked back toward the door and opened it. Draco scoffed, a small, bitter noise that was less offensive than it was depressing. "Am I? How so?"

Rigel's fingers clenched on the doorknob as she answered, without turning around, "That's not the worst part."

She let the door close softly behind her, and trudged out to where Rosier was still lounging indolently on a couch. First Draco, then Archie's letter, then Snape not letting her work, then Draco again... she felt worn out and stretched thin, like the bottom of a cauldron that had had too many heavily acidic poisons brewed in it.

She sank down on the couch beside Rosier and opened her book. The words blurred together, and it wasn't until the first teardrop hit the page that she realized the blurriness was from her eyes welling up. She huffed a little at her own patheticness, and set the book aside, bringing her knees to her face to subtly staunch the slow flow of liquid escaping her eyelashes. With her arms wrapped around her knees and the sound of her own deep breathing filling her ears, she could almost pretend she was by herself, at home in her lab, before she had ever thought about going to Hogwarts. Before all the lies, before friends and all their complications.

Then again, she thought fairly (not being quite pathetic enough to allow herself false self-pity yet), was there really a time 'before all the lies?' Before deciding to trick her way into Hogwarts, was she really so honest and pure?

How many times as a child had she assured her mother she was wearing safety equipment, when really she had forgone the clumsy, cumbersome gloves and fireproof outer coverings in order to improve her knife technique? She had started masking the outside of her potions manuals with covers from history books by the time she was eight, so that her father didn't 'accidentally' throw them away. She distinctly remembered telling her mother that she loved the beginner's potions kit she'd been given for her tenth birthday, even though she had mail-ordered herself the same kit a couple of years earlier, and had very specifically asked for the newest compendium of poison antidotes that year.

Maybe Draco was right, and she was incapable of telling the truth.

What's so great about the truth? she thought bitterly, *All it does is upset people.*

Lying upsets people too , another part of her brain pointed out. ***Draco wants me to tell the truth.***

Only because he hasn't actually heard it, she argued with herself, *If he knew the whole truth, he'd hate me.*

He already hates me .

And wasn't that a depressing thought?

A hand on her shoulder interrupted her mental pity party. Rigel shifted her knees slightly to rub the last of the water from her eyes, and lifted her head, "Yes, Rosier?"

"Are you all right?" Rosier asked, retracting his hand once she'd uncurled.

"Yes," Rigel said, "Thank you."

Rosier quirked a small smile at her, "You're lying-"

Rigel snapped, "If I'm such a liar, why bother asking me anything?"

Rosier raised one eyebrow and lifted his hands in calm surrender, "My apologies for whatever nerve I just touched, but you should know that I meant my accusation fondly. Really, I don't mind when you lie. It's almost endearing."

Rigel blew out a breath and shook her head sharply, "Don't apologize, Rosier. *I'm* sorry. You were right, anyway; I'm not really fine right now."

"I know," Rosier said after a moment, "It was obvious you weren't; I shouldn't even have asked."

Rigel grimaced and rubbed at her eyes impatiently with the back of her fists. They felt raw, and slightly itchy.

"Don't do that," Rosier said, pulling her hands away from her face.

When it looked like he was going to hold onto them, Rigel retracted them smoothly to run through her hair, as though fixing it. Rosier let her, though his eyes taunted her silently as she gave up on her hair and busied her hands with picking up her abandoned Healing textbook and finding the page she left off on.

When she had stared at the page, unseeing, for longer than would have been credible were she actually reading it, Rosier gently took the book away from her and set it on the end table behind him. Rigel let him, mostly because she felt too tired to even pretend to study at that point.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Rosier asked.

"No," Rigel said.

"Fair enough," Rosier said. He studied her for a moment, then said, "Turn around."

Rigel eyed the upperclassman, but didn't move, "What?"

"Turn," he said again, motioning with his finger for her to present her back to him, "I'll do your hair."

"Again with the hair?" she said ungraciously, "It's too short to 'do' anything to."

"Maybe you should grow it out, then," Rosier suggested innocently.

"Maybe you should leave it alone," Rigel suggested, not-so-innocently.

"It will help you relax," Rosier said.

"It's going to stress me out," Rigel argued.

"Why would it stress you out?" Rosier asked.

"I don't know, but it will," Rigel said, frowning, "Can't I just sit here quietly for a little while? You can go, if you're bored."

Rosier blinked golden eyes at her, "You mean can you sit here feeling miserable and alone, over-thinking whatever problem is going on between you and Draco right now and desperately trying to figure out what you can do to fix it? Well, you could, but do you really think that's *not* going to make you stressed?"

Rigel pressed her lips together stubbornly, "Does Draco know you call him by his first name?"

"Rivals should be friendly with one another, shouldn't they?" Rosier said, grinning.

Rigel tilted her head, "Since when are you rivals?"

The upperclassman shook his head, "Never you mind. Just turn around and let yourself relax for once."

"I'd rather not," Rigel said bluntly. Maybe if she was as honest as Draco told her to be, Rosier would back off.

"Think of it as a trust exercise," Rosier said.

"Why should I trust you?" Rigel asked flatly.

Rosier blinked his honey-colored eyes at her, "It's like you're trying to insult me."

"It's like you're trying to guilt me into something," Rigel returned.

"You say that like it isn't working," Rosier smirked.

Right. So far it was: Honesty = 0; Rosier = 1

Rigel scowled, "If we both know you're trying to manipulate me into doing... whatever you're trying to get me to do, then why should I let you do it?"

Rosier considered this for a moment, "Deep down, you want to be friends with me, Rigel. You want to call me by my first name, and you want to be yourself around me. I don't say this to be egotistical-I believe you want this with most people. I think there's a part of you, a soft, buried part, that genuinely wants to be close to other people."

Rigel wasn't sure what to say to that, so she settled for staring incredulously.

"There's another part of you, however, that is scared," Rosier went on, as though he were her personal Mind Healer, "That's the part that pulls back when people get too close, and it's strong, but the buried part of you is strong, too. That part is what makes you inclined to humor my manipulation as long as you see no harm in it, even though you don't really understand its purpose."

Rigel shook her head slowly, though she wasn't sure which part of Rosier's words she was denying, "What is your purpose?"

Rosier tilted his head, as though to get a better angle on his thoughts, "I want to help the softer part of you win, I suppose."

"Even if what you said is true-though I don't think it is-that weak part of me is buried for a reason," Rigel said slowly, "Did you ever think that it's because I don't want it to win? I'm sorry, Rosier, but I don't think I can give you whatever you're looking for. It might be better if you let it go now."

"It might be easier," Rosier said, an odd little smile playing about the edges of his mouth, "But better? No, I don't think so."

Rigel sighed with a small amount of resignation, "In other words, you're not going to stop... whatever you're doing?"

"Not until you can put it into words, at least," Rosier said amusedly, "Don't worry about it so much. As long as we know where we stand, neither of us can get hurt, so where's the harm? Turn around."

Rigel was very much afraid she *didn't* see the harm-and wouldn't, until it was too late.

"You actually just want to touch my hair?" she said, skeptically.

Rosier nodded slightly, still smiling his strange little smile.

"And that's all? You won't do anything else, like steal the strands for Polyjuice-"

"So mistrusting."

"-and you are aware that I don't understand whatever undercurrents you're striving for at all, and that it doesn't mean anything, and-"

"Yes, yes, what were you-a disclaimer in a previous life?" Rosier cut her off and used her shoulders to turn her so that she was facing the

other end of the couch. Rigel sat stiffly, but a moment later Rosier hooked an arm around her neck and tugged her backwards until her head landed with a thump against his left knee. She stared up at him dumbly, trying to work out where in their conversation she had agreed to lay her head in his lap, while Rosier smirked down at her with no small amount of smugness. She considered getting up and walking away, but where could she go? She couldn't leave Slytherin House due to the curfew, and she certainly couldn't go back to her dorm and listen to Draco explain how emotionally defective she was again. Rosier's smirk softened slightly, and he said, "Close your eyes."

Since the alternative was looking up at him and watching him watch her, she did just that, though she did grimace a bit to display her displeasure at his overbearing demeanor.

Rosier carded his fingers through her hair slowly, careful not to catch in any knots or scrape her scalp with his nails. It was sort of soothing, she supposed, in a very intrusive kind of way. Then again, her mother went to the hair salon all the time, and paid extra to get a scalp massage while they were shampooing her. This was not so very different.

It was strange having her neck on his leg, she supposed, but not in a *dangerous* way. The only part of her Rosier was actually touching was her head, which, as far as Rigel knew, wasn't a definite indicator of biological sex. In theory, then, letting Rosier comb her hair with his fingers wasn't actually hurting anything, and wouldn't be a danger to her plans.

But if there was nothing dangerous about it, then why were little alarm bells ringing insistently in the pit of her stomach?

Somewhere between worrying about the situation and telling herself not to worry about it, Rigel fell asleep.

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There was something unspeakably *different* about Rigel Black, Aldon mused, looking down at the sleeping boy. On the outside, he resembled so many other pureblooded scions-distinct coloring, delicate bone structure, and good manners to spare. So far, so unremarkable. Once you knew Rigel Black for longer than two minutes, however, it became alarmingly clear how not like other pureblooded scions he really was.

The first odd thing Aldon had noticed about the Black Heir was how *vague* he was. Rigel could hold an entire conversation without ever seeming to really focus on it. Part of it was his chronically blank expression, but part of it was a flatness in his eyes that said, more clearly than words, that Rigel Black didn't care. He knew the moment Pansy introduced them that Rigel didn't care who Aldon was. Rigel didn't care who Aldon's parents were, how much influence Aldon would one day wield, or what useful abilities and talents he might possess.

Meeting Rigel Black was one of the most interesting things that had ever happened to Aldon. Here was a boy who listened without hearing, spoke without really saying anything, and looked right at him without even once calculating his family's net worth. It was as if Rigel didn't see Aldon at all, so flat and unaffected his stare had been, and from the start Aldon knew he had to see more of Rigel Black. He wanted those eyes to look at him again, because being *not seen* by Rigel Black was far more interesting than being seen as the Rosier Heir by a thousand of his parent's sycophantic friends.

He had felt the same sort of thrill on the day he'd first met Edmund Rookwood. It had been at his fifth birthday party. Edmund had walked into the room, handed Aldon his present, bowed politely, and walked away again, all without uttering a word. Aldon, who had never been more thoroughly dismissed in his short life, was left with a burning desire to make the Rookwood boy see him, acknowledge

him, and above all speak to him. It took him months of play dates, arranged outings, and bribery in the form of trips to exotic magical menageries, but in the end, Aldon had gotten what he wanted.

Meeting Rigel felt the same. Aldon wondered what it would take to make those eyes sharpen with life. How difficult would it be to provoke a response from Rigel Black?

As it turned out, not difficult at all. One half-registered threat toward his friendship with Pansy, and Rigel was all briar and bramble. Aldon hadn't known one person could be equal parts ridiculous and admirable, until he watched Rigel Black trying to climb a canterberry tree with just a vine and a broken wrist.

Oh, how interesting Rigel Black turned out to be.

Underneath his lifeless facial expressions and almost insulting dismissal of anything that couldn't be diced, reduced, or boiled into unappetizing slime, Rigel was one of the most volatile things Aldon had ever encountered. Rigel Black didn't care, he didn't care, and then all of a sudden he *did*, and Merlin help anyone standing in his way at that moment. Rigel Black had *lines*, and the very instant one of his lines was crossed, his demeanor went from dormant to volcanic eruption in the space between heartbeats.

Rigel was unpredictable, emotional, dangerous, exciting.

And then, without warning, the fire was banked again. Just like that, Rigel was all polite smiles, blank stares, slow blinks, and polished unconcern. It was almost enough to make you forget you'd seen the fire raging-almost.

And if that wasn't enough-and it was, by Merlin, it really was enough-there was still more to Rigel Black.

Beyond the fire, or perhaps living next to the fire, as amazing as that was, there was this other hidden side to Rigel, too. It was soft, hesitant, careful, and difficult to describe in any holistic sense, but

sometimes Aldon was tempted to use the word *good* . Rigel Black cared about people. He cared about his friends, his family, people he sort of knew, and people he didn't know at all. Aldon had never heard Rigel say a single negative thing about another person, even Greengrass, who had openly accused him of petrifying students. Rigel got angry at people, snapped at them occasionally, and in the case of a certain Lestrage Heir openly defied people when he was at his most obstinate, but he never picked fights for the sake of it, and he forgave the offender shortly after his own temper had cooled. Never had Aldon met anyone so willing to accept and ignore the mistakes of others; maybe it was this that made Rigel so different.

Then again, there were plenty of good, forgiving people in the world who cared about others and avoided fights. It could simply be the novelty of seeing such qualities in someone who could afford to be otherwise; Rigel had the power-political, social, and magical if half the stories about him were true-to strut about like that Lestrage twerp if he pleased, and most people would still doff their hats as he passed.

But no, that wasn't what made Rigel different. Draco Malfoy was perfectly polite most days, despite the power his family wielded. And Pansy was undeniably good, even though no one could have expected such a spoiled little girl to turn out so wonderful.

Maybe it wasn't the goodness in Rigel, then, that was so captivating. Perhaps, Aldon mused, it was the darkness. Deep in Rigel's eyes, beneath the calm observing Ravenclaw and the fiercely defensive Gryffindor, there was something that slithered, slow and subtle and far from the light. Aldon knew Rigel had no idea a part of his soul was brittle and black, but Aldon had seen it.

It was in his body language whenever the subject of blood-traitors came up at the dinner table, it was in his eyes every time he looked at Severus Snape, and it had been there in the flash of unwitting understanding that crossed his face the night Aldon admitted to hating his parents.

Even though Rigel loved his friends and family and mentor, there was an unbreachable wall between he and them. Aldon didn't fully understand what inspired that wall yet, but it was built high with lies and smiles and the illusion of calm, cool stone.

Looking down at the boy, Aldon wondered if Rigel would ever know how alike the two of them were. Maybe that was it-that's what made knowing Rigel Black so important to him. Even though Rigel professed to love his family, Aldon could tell that Rigel *understood* what it was like to never quite be what your parents wanted you to be, to defy expectations naturally, not because you strove to, but because their expectations were so wildly off the mark as to be inapplicable. Rigel understood how it felt to lie to people you loved, not because you wanted to trick them, but so they didn't end up as bitter and hurt and disappointed as you were. Most of all, Aldon thought, Rigel understood *hunger* .

It was so obvious when Rigel looked at Professor Snape. Though his face was blank, there was a yearning in his gaze, a deep, desperate desire to be recognized, acknowledged, and approved of. It was painful to see, Rigel's hunger, and even though that burning desire to be recognized was surely what had ensured his place in the House of Snakes in the first place, Aldon very much wanted to make it go away.

"Aldon."

Aldon looked up at Edmund, who was looking down at Rigel's admittedly uncharacteristic position with a raised eyebrow and a slightly disapproving expression, "Yes, Edmund? Has Alice retired already?"

"It is an hour past curfew," Edmund informed him.

Aldon blinked in slight surprise. Had he been ruminating so long? "I see. Thank you for letting me know, old chap. I'll be along shortly, but don't bother leaving the light on."

Sometimes Aldon liked to pretend they were worldly, burnt-out old bachelors, he and Edmund, but for some reason Ed never found it quite so amusing as he did.

"Rigel should retire as well," Edmund said neutrally.

"As you can see, he already has," Aldon quirked a grin, "But I acknowledge your point. Would you like to carry him?"

Edmund lowered his eyelashes the way he only did when he thought Aldon was being deliberately obtuse, "Neither of us can enter the second-year dorms, and Rigel would be highly offended if he were to discover someone had moved him without his knowledge."

"Offended? Unlikely," Aldon said thoughtfully, "But he would certainly be distressed."

Edmund's face was, as usual, unfathomable, "I was not under the impression that you were averse to causing Rigel distress of late, Aldon."

Aldon stiffened involuntarily, "I'm trying to help him, Edmund."

"By consistently disregarding his boundaries?"

"By attempting to show him that his current boundaries are unhealthy and unnecessary," Aldon corrected softly, "I'm not scaring him, Ed. I know that's what Draco thinks, but Rigel isn't *afraid* of other people. He's alienated from them. He sees no reason to be close to other people, and doesn't understand why anyone would want to be close to him. It is confusion he feels, and impatience."

"He doesn't like it, Aldon," Edmund said, his voice deep with concern.

"Because he doesn't know what it means," Aldon said patiently, "He's worried I want something from him, something he won't want to

give me, and that makes him uneasy-as any Slytherin would be when he senses unspoken terms on the table."

"What *do* you want from him, Aldon? Can you pretend that you do this," he gestured to where Aldon's hand still rested in Rigel's hair, "For his own good, when surely he cannot benefit from it while asleep?" Edmund asked, "He's young, yet."

Aldon let his mouth curl into the slightest of sneers, " / am young yet, Edmund. You think I would touch a boy the same age as our Pansy? Like that? I was teasing at Christmas, Ed, you know that. This is-" his fingers detangled themselves from Rigel's hair gently, "I was thinking, and forgot I was doing it. I want nothing from him."

"Nothing from him now, or nothing until he is older?" Edmund asked.

Aldon bit back a huff, "Nothing at all now, and nothing he does not agree to when he is older."

Edmund's throat made a noise like a boulder shifting, and Aldon knew he was fighting a laugh, "Perhaps you should explain that to young Draco, then. And Rigel too, for that matter."

Aldon smirked, "Draco's more amusing when he's riled. As for Rigel... I don't think he'd believe me if I told him I didn't want anything of him. He'd suspect I was covering up for an expectation I didn't dare utter. Better for him to think I'm merely teasing him, taking my boredom out on him. As long as he can ascribe a harmless motive my attentions, he won't worry so much." He looked down at Rigel, taking in his pale face, and the slight line between his eyebrows that apparently even sleep did not ease, "Merlin knows the boy worries enough for ten Ministers of Magic."

"Wake him up, Aldon," Edmund said, shaking his head with slow amusement as he turned away, "And get to bed before you start waxing poetic worse than Lady Parkinson."

"Perish the thought," Aldon said, glancing up again and letting a smile twist his lips wryly.

"And, Aldon?" Edmund said, turning back with a slightly fond expression on his face.

"What, more advice? You're smothering me tonight, Ed."

"Aldon," Edmund said again, his voice serious.

"Yes, Edmund?" Aldon said, equally serious.

Edmund considered him gravely, "Do you remember the first piece of advice I ever gave you?"

Aldon blinked as his mind transported him back to that day, the day he'd finally succeeded in his first ever ambition: make Edmund Rookwood acknowledge him.

He was five years old, dressed in sensible play-robcs that his nurse-elf wouldn't have trouble getting stains out of, and he had dragged Edmund outside to see his family's stable. The week before, one of the Siberian Saberlions had given birth to a litter of baby cubs. They were finally healthy enough to visit, and Aldon had traded two weeks of his nightly dessert for his father to invite Edmund over to see the little silver cats before their coats took on the mottled spots they were known for.

Edmund sat down in the hay-right there in it, without setting down a blanket or even checking it for animal droppings first-and pulled the smallest saberlion into his lap. Aldon hovered for a moment, not sure following his guest's example was the right thing to do, but also unsure whether deviating and getting a blanket for himself would be rude-or worse, make him look weak.

Eventually, Aldon decided to kneel carefully in the hay next to Edmund, telling him all about the new cubs, what he wanted to name all of them, how many his father was going to keep and how many

would be sold, and all sorts of other things like what saberlions ate, why their fur changed colors when they spent enough time in the sun, and so on. Eventually he ran out of things to say, and so he just sat there, petting each of the saberlions in turn, while Edmund calmly held that one little saberlion in his lap, just stroking its fur and not saying anything-as usual.

Edmund never said anything to Aldon. When his father asked Edmund a question, the boy answered very politely, if a bit shortly, but when Aldon asked him questions, Edmund just looked at Aldon, as though he didn't understand English at all.

They sat in the hay for an hour, then two. Aldon stared fidgeting, his ankles itching from being in the hay for so long, his stomach rumbling with hunger. Still, Edmund sat there with that saberlion cub, seemingly content to do nothing else but pet it all afternoon.

Eventually, the silence started driving Aldon crazy, so he started talking again. He talked about the lessons he had to go to now that he was five. He told Edmund about the closet in the servants' wing he thought was haunted, because sometimes he could hear eerie groaning and thumping sounds coming from within when his parents weren't home. He told him about how he liked his nurse-elf, Igga, better than his human nurse, Elseph, who made him drink this awful brown potion when he got the hiccups. "I get the hiccups a lot," he remembered saying, "And mother thinks it's because I never stop talking long enough to get air into my lungs, so my dye-a-frag interrupts me to make sure I don't die."

He looked at Edmund expectantly, because usually when he repeated his mother's explanation for his frequent bouts of hiccups people laughed, or at least smiled. Edmund just looked at him, though, and kept petting the saberlion.

Aldon's face fell a bit, but he brightened determinately, "Tomorrow, I'm going to ask father to take us to Murphy's Magic Menagerie. One of the maids says they have pintoloons there-pintoloons are really

bright, and their feathers glow in the dark. I think you'll like them, but if you don't, they also have-

"Aldon."

Aldon broke off to stare at Edmund, slightly open-mouthed, "You talked."

Edmund's lips made the slightest of twitches, but Aldon felt like he'd just won first place in a Juniors Quidditch League racing tournament.

Aldon clapped his hands in his excitement, forgetting that his father had told him clapping one's hands was a perfectly obnoxious way to convey pleasure, "Say something else!"

Edmund considered him for a long moment, little head tilted slightly to the side, "You don't have to try so hard."

Aldon blinked, "What?"

"You're nice," Edmund said slowly, "And funny. You're gentle with animals, and-" Edmund's hand, the one not still petting the saberlion, gestured at him sort of helplessly, "I already like you. So you don't have to try to be my friend so much."

Aldon shook his head, and the memory faded.

"Yes," he said, smiling slightly, "I remember. What of it?"

"It still applies," Edmund said.

He turned and walked toward their dorm, leaving Aldon to puzzle out his meaning. Edmund wanted him to back off and let Rigel dictate the terms of their friendship, he supposed, but Aldon was still of the same mind he'd been all those years ago.

When you were being a friend, there was no such thing as 'trying too hard.'

He put a hand on Rigel's shoulder and shook him gently awake. He could tell the moment Rigel returned to consciousness, because the line between his eyebrows immediately deepened, and new lines, small but unmistakable, formed around his mouth.

"Time for bed, Rigel," Rosier said, "Unless you want me to take you to mine."

Rigel's face flushed immediately, and the boy sat up so quickly Aldon was surprised he didn't get whiplash, "You-I didn't-"

Aldon let himself laugh aloud, and had a grin on his face by the time Rigel turned around to glare reprovingly at him.

"You shouldn't say things so casually, Aldon," Rigel said seriously, his cheeks still a bit red, though he'd managed to control most of it by then.

"Why not?" Aldon said, not missing the way Rigel used his given name-perhaps he was still muddled by sleep, "You won't get the wrong idea-you know me too well."

Rigel sighed, but didn't argue the point.

"Go to bed, snakelet," Aldon said, manufacturing a yawn for good measure, "Go on, get."

Rigel went, though he did send Aldon one last half-cautious half-confused look over his shoulder as he left.

Aldon stretched out his cramped leg briefly before following suit. On second thought, he hoped Edmund *had* decided to leave the light on.

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When Rigel got back to her dorm, the light was off and all her roommates were already in their beds.

She shucked her shoes by her trunk and fumbled for a moment in her pockets until she remembered that Selwyn had made her move her wand to the pocket on her right-side hip. She took out the wand, asked it quietly to wake her up an hour earlier than usual, then stowed it underneath her pillow.

"Why are you getting up at four?"

Rigel turned toward Draco's bed, but couldn't see whether his eyes were open or not in the darkness. His voice didn't sound muddled, so Rigel concluded he'd probably been lying awake for some time.

"I fell asleep in the common room, so I don't need as much sleep tonight," Rigel answered quietly, mindful of Blaise and Theo sleeping (presumably) not far away.

"But what will you do with the extra hour?" Draco asked reasonably, though his voice was a bit annoyed, "We haven't been able to go running since the lockdown started, and we don't even have that much homework since the teachers have been going easy on us lately."

"I'm sure I'll find something to do," Rigel said.

"Like the studying you said you were going to do tonight?" Draco asked sarcastically.

"Maybe," Rigel said carefully, "Or I might review for the Transfiguration test we have next week. Want to go over your notes with me?"

There was a tense silence, then Draco said, petulantly, "I'm still mad at you."

"I know," Rigel said, though she couldn't stop a small smile spreading over her face. Despite the put-out tone, the heat had gone from his voice.

"I'm not waking up at four," he added sullenly.

"That's fine," Rigel agreed instantly, "I'll wait for you."

Draco was quiet for a while, and Rigel started to think he had fallen asleep, until he said, "Rigel?"

"Yes, Draco?"

"What's the worst part?"

Rigel closed her eyes, though Draco couldn't see it, "It doesn't matter anymore."

"Tell me."

Rigel wasn't sure she should admit it, but-

"You not talking to me, Draco. That's the worst part. It... upsets me that I've pushed you so far away."

Draco cleared his throat before saying, "Well, you know how to fix it."

"Knowing is not the same thing as being capable of doing," Rigel said wearily, "I know it seems cold to say that there are things more important than our friendship, Draco, but there *are* . I can't neglect those things because they upset you, though it does make me sorry when they do."

She heard Draco blow out a breath in frustration, "I know I'm not the center of your universe, Rigel-I'm not quite as conceited as everyone thinks, you know. I don't expect you to make a bunch of unreasonable sacrifices for me. I know your life is... complicated, or something. I've always known that, since we first became friends, because you *told me so* . That's fine. Keep the big things to yourself,

I understand. It's just-the idea that everything you do is somehow tied to something you can't explain to me-that's a bit hard to swallow, Rigel. Everyone has mysteries, but it's as if *every single part* of your life is mysterious and unreachable. How... how can anyone be friends with a *complete* mystery?"

"I'm not a mystery, Draco," Rigel tried to explain, "There's no big secret or answer at the end of all the lies-it's not a game I'm playing, or a riddle I've presented the world with. This is my life, it just happens to be confusing to anyone not living it, I suppose."

"You know what was a game?" Draco asked mildly, "That exercise in Dumbledore's class was a game, Rigel, but you felt threatened enough on an instinctual level that you unconsciously cast a highly dangerous shield to protect yourself-from a rubber ball. Anyone else would have taken the hit if they thought I wouldn't shield them in time-and you should know that it still greatly upsets me whenever I think about how completely you dismissed my ability, without even thinking about it, apparently-but not you. Rigel can't take a hit from a rubber ball, even if it's only a game. Do you know what kind of person that makes you, Rigel?"

"Crazy?" Rigel said lightly, "It runs in my family, you know."

"*Damaged*," Draco said flatly, "That's the kind of hyper-paranoid reaction that ex-Aurors have when someone surprises them in a crowded room. I wrote to my father about the incident-without using your name, of course-and he said that I should avoid being alone with that classmate, because children with traumatic childhoods can be unpredictable and sometimes accidentally dangerous."

Rigel swallowed, "My childhood wasn't traumatic."

"But you are accidentally dangerous, aren't you, Rigel?" Draco said softly, "That shield destroys everything it touches, but you used it without a second thought."

"I didn't," Rigel said, "It was my magic-"

"You always say that, Rigel, but magic only responds to will. The truth is you felt threatened in that classroom, with me and Pansy next to you, and no actual enemy or threat in sight," Draco said firmly, "Your magic responded to your fear and manifested in a dangerous and excessive way. You can say you didn't mean to, or that it was an accident, but that doesn't really make it better. People aren't usually that scared accidentally when there's nothing to be afraid of."

Rigel didn't know how to explain better than she already had, but she couldn't let Draco keep thinking she was a dangerous paranoid-schizophrenic-they locked people away for that sort of thing, and wouldn't that put pain to all her plans?

"I wasn't afraid, Draco. It was probably the adrenaline from thinking and reacting so fast over and over. That's the point of the game, to make you react without thinking-and yes, my magic overreacted to the level of threat, but that doesn't mean I'm incapable of evaluating situations and calculating appropriate responses to them," Rigel said, "You've been my friend for two years, almost. Have I ever hurt you? Or anyone?"

"I know you're not going to hurt me, Rigel," Draco said with a sigh, "That's not the point. It wasn't just that class. Whenever something goes wrong, you're always the first to react. That's good, to an extent, but it's also telling. It means you're so paranoid that you're walking around in a constant state of alert. Even when you shouldn't have to be expecting danger, it's as if you are anyway, and it makes you a bit volatile at times."

"No, it doesn't," Rigel said, frowning, "You're twisting the facts around."

"Am I?" Draco said mildly, "I've had a lot of time to think about this. You see, there are also times when everyone *but* you reacts to something. I thought that meant you were only sometimes on-edge, but now I think you don't react because you've already recognized and dismissed the source as a threat, not because you're so zoned

out you don't notice. That's true, isn't it? You're not nearly as unobservant and out-of-it as you want everyone to think."

This was getting ridiculous, Rigel thought, and they would never get any sleep this way.

"I'm not-"

"It's because of your condition, isn't it?" Draco said, so quietly that Rigel barely heard him.

She paused before automatically refuting him.

Maybe... denying things wasn't the right way to go about convincing Draco. He knew too much, had observed too much already, so telling him he was wrong would only make him think she was lying again. Perhaps it was better to tell him he was *right* -but in a way that still prevented him from seeing what was *true* .

Draco was still speaking, very softly, "It occurred to me that getting hit by the ball would have hurt you a lot more than other people, because of your... problem. So in that respect, your magic was still overreacting, but not as much. Then I thought that being so paranoid was a result of being hyper-aware of everything around you already. If your condition didn't just make it painful for things to touch you, but actually made you extremely sensitive to your environment as a side effect, it would explain why you reacted so quickly to things. It might also explain... I mean, it would be understandable, then, if you were afraid on an unconscious level of everything, all the time. That, in turn, would explain why you either over-react to things or don't react at all, if you suppress the instinct in time."

Rigel thought it was alarming how much internal sense her friend's argument could make while still being entirely wrong. He also seemed to have either forgotten that she'd assured him her 'condition' wasn't painful. That or he assumed she was lying about *that*, but not about the rest of it. It was almost enough to make her doubt the ability of people to ever figure anything out without being

told, and that was a comforting enough thought that she wasn't even very upset about being told it was natural for her to be a coward because of her imaginary medical condition.

"You're very observant," she said, because that, at least was true.

"I'm sorry if I've made you uncomfortable," Draco said, "I just wanted you to know that I understand, even though I don't like it. It upsets me to think that every second of the day you're afraid that something is going to happen and you're going to get hurt, but I understand that it's not your fault. The reason I stayed angry at you for so long is because you could have *told* me all of that. You already told me about your condition, so you could have just explained why your magic lashed out like that, instead of making me figure it out on my own. That, more than anything, tells me that even when you trust me with your secrets, you still don't *trust* me with them."

Rigel wasn't sure what he meant by that, but Draco was happy to explain.

"You don't come to me when you have problems relating to the secrets I already know, and you don't trust me with the consequences and implications of your problems. As if you thought once I knew the secret, it would be enough for me. Like our friendship didn't mean that I wanted to help you, not just know why you're hurting," Draco said, his voice getting hoarse with talking so much, and thick with emotion, "You stopped me when I tried to help you before, and I understood because even being really subtle isn't all that subtle to other Slytherins, but this time you could have explained things to me. Instead, you let me *stay mad at you*, and then by the time I figured it out I was mad at you for *not telling me*, and-and-don't you see how much easier it would be if you actually trusted me instead of just pretending to trust me?"

Rigel took a breath, thought over what Professor Snape had told her about getting Draco's forgiveness, and said, "You're right. I should trust you with more of my problems. I didn't want to bother you, because I have quite a number of problems, and it wouldn't be fair to

dump them onto your shoulders as well, but... I should trust you to be able to decide which problems you can help me with for yourself, especially if you really do want to help."

Draco shifted in his bed, and Rigel could tell he'd turned toward her by the slight increase in volume when he spoke, "Thank you, Rigel."

Rigel shifted, getting as comfortable as she could in her school robes and thinking she could finally get some sleep. She debated re-setting her alarm to compensate for the time spent talking with Draco, but decided a bit less sleep wouldn't kill her.

"So?" Draco said expectantly when she'd stopped shifting.

"So... what?" Rigel asked. At Draco's exasperated noise, her eyebrows lifted, "You want to start solving my problems right now?"

"How else will I know you aren't just saying this?" Draco asked archly-or as archly as one could at a near-whisper.

Right. Snape had said Draco would require proof of change.

"Okay," Rigel said, wracking her brain for a problem that Draco either already knew about or wouldn't be able to learn anything from. That ruled out her problem with Leo, the trouble she was having with one of Flint's Charms essays, and... actually, that was pretty much it. Now that she thought about it, there were a lot of things she was having trouble with that she could have been talking to her friends about.

Part of her said that if her friends formed the expectation of being involved in her problems, it would make the ones she didn't involve them with more obvious, but another part of her didn't see the harm with letting Draco feel like a useful friend by sharing a couple of her problems with him.

And speaking of not seeing the harm in things...

"Okay," she said again, "Well, as you know, tonight Rosier invited me to study with him-"

"This conversation doesn't end with: 'so I ignored him and took a nap instead,' does it?" Draco guessed.

"Not exactly," Rigel muttered, "Will you let me explain the whole problem before you jump in, though?"

"Sure, go ahead-no, wait," Draco said. There was a rustling noise, then the sound of Draco's wand scraping against the bedside table lightly, then, "Lumos."

His wand tip glowed softly, and Rigel glanced quickly at Theo and Blaise's beds. Both had their eyes closed, and Theo was still snoring, but, again, that didn't necessarily mean both were still asleep, if they had ever been.

Draco pulled the curtains around his bed closed on the three sides not facing Rigel, and muttered, "Quietus" while pointing his wand at each curtain. He motioned for Rigel to join him in the makeshift fort, and Rigel mentally resigned herself to sleeping in tomorrow after all.

When Rigel was situated and the last curtain had been pulled, Draco frowned hard at his wand tip until the soft ball of light slowly detached itself from the tip of the wand and hovered in the air above them, like a miniature star. They had learned how to detach the spell from their wands in Defense class, so that their wands would be free for other spells, and so that the light wouldn't go out if they lost hold of their wand. Dumbledore was full of helpful tricks like that.

Draco stowed his wand under his own pillow, and Rigel thought briefly that Selwyn would probably have suggested Rigel transfer her wand to her pocket once more when she moved from her bed. That, however, was unlikely to help convince Draco that Rigel trusted him.

"All right, now explain what you're doing about Rosier," Draco said.

Rigel nodded, "Tonight he noticed I was feeling a bit... off. He took my book and told me to relax more, and then offered to help me relax-"

"Rigel!"

"-by stroking my hair again... Draco, stop mentally hemorrhaging. It wasn't anything weird," Rigel assured him. At Draco's patently skeptical look, she amended that to, "It wasn't *too* weird, at least. Really, that's all that happened. I laid down on the couch, he brushed my hair, and I fell asleep because it *was* sort of relaxing after a while."

"Well I can see all sorts of problems with this scenario," Draco sighed, "But what do *you* think the problem is?"

"He admitted to manipulating me in order to make me let him touch my hair," Rigel said, "But he didn't say why he would want to do that, or what he expected in return, so the problem is that I can't find a good enough motive for it, but at the same time Rosier doesn't seem the type to do things for no good reason. So I'm afraid of the reason, I guess."

Draco gazed at her blankly, "Did you ask him for a reason?"

"Yes," Rigel said, "His answer was that he thinks deep down I want to be affectionate with my friends, but don't know how, so he's taken it upon himself to show me how... or something. It sort of makes sense, I suppose."

"No, it really doesn't," Draco said flatly.

"I mean, Pansy plays with our hair all the time," Rigel said, "So maybe he thought that would be a safe place to start, in facilitating my familiarity with affection."

"It would make sense if he was your therapist, but he's not-he's just your friend," Draco said, rolling his eyes, "He probably fed you that

answer because you couldn't object to it without sounding like a masochist who likes to be withdrawn and tetchy."

Rigel thought about this, "So what's the real motive? Maybe he really is just bored. He does tease Pansy a lot, and Rookwood and Selwyn, too. Maybe he's just letting his guard down and doing the same to me, since we've become closer friends now."

"And maybe he's a Hufflepuff," Draco scoffed.

Rigel scowled back, "I'm trying, okay? How is anyone supposed to understand why other people do things unless they tell them?"

"You see how important honesty is?"

Rigel huffed with amusement, but said nothing.

Draco pursed his lips, then said, hesitantly, "Rigel, did it occur to you that Rosier simply... well, how much do you know about... you know?"

Rigel blinked, "What?"

Draco rolled his eyes, "You *know* . Merlin, Rigel, sex . How much do you know about sex?"

Rigel choked on a laugh, "Plenty, thanks." At least, enough to know that she wasn't interested in anything so uncomfortable-sounding.

Draco pinched the bridge of his nose, "Don't laugh, I'm just saying... Rosier probably just likes you, simple as that. And he wants to get you used to touching him, because he'll want to do even more later, and... well, doesn't that make the most obvious sense?"

Rigel stopped laughing and nodded, "Yes, that's one of the things that crossed my mind. I dismissed it, though, because we're both-"

"Men?" Draco grimaced, "Rigel, I don't know how your family does things, but most purebloods consider it rude to preference one

gender over-"

"I know that," Rigel interrupted quickly, "Magic knows Siri-my father had his fair share of good times on both sides of the pitch. I was going to say *young*, Draco, we're both so young. Even if Rosier is old enough to start that sort of thing, I'm not, so that would argue for an unwieldy long-term plan in place, which I honestly don't see being the case."

"Why not?" Draco said reasonably, "Slytherins are known for long-term plots."

"Yes, but... I mean, that would be ridiculous," Rigel said, "All that time and effort spent on setting the stage for one romantic dalliance that might not even pan out? And for me? I can barely tear myself away from a cauldron long enough to spend time with my friends; I'd be an awful boyfriend. I'm not in good standing with the pureblooded circles, either, because of my father and uncles, so it's not even good politics. Rosier would have better targets for that sort of thing, don't you think? Plus he's admitted what he's doing to my face, which makes me even more inclined to think he isn't taking it very seriously. In fact... yes, it probably is just a joke or something. He'll get over it soon, I expect. Do you know, I'm glad I talked with you about this," Rigel smiled at Draco, "It seems more clear now that I've said it out loud."

Draco just stared at her, then said, "I'm a lot less worried than I was before, too. Honestly, I'm not sure Rosier knows what he's gotten himself into."

Rigel wasn't sure what Draco meant by that, exactly, but as it didn't sound complimentary she was content to ignore it.

"We should do this more often, Draco," Rigel said, in a better mood now that she had Rosier's game figured out.

"No kidding," Draco said, looking a bit like he'd bitten into something he might have been allergic to, after all. "Did you, ah, have anything

else you want to talk about?"

Rigel was tempted to ask Draco what he thought about Patil's accusation concerning what she should be doing about the basilisk, but probably she had leant on her friend enough for one day. "Nothing that won't keep. Maybe I can ask Pansy, anyway."

Draco smiled widely, "She'd like that, I think. In fact, let's do it tomorrow. Do you have to help Uncle Severus after class?"

"Not tomorrow," Rigel said, "We should ask Selwyn to chaperone an expedition outside-the basilisk probably wouldn't leave the castle to threaten students on the grounds, and it's been so nice outside lately."

"You noticed?" Draco said, somewhat incredulously.

"No, I close my eyes every time I pass a window," Rigel said, letting her face relax into a grin, "Doesn't everyone?"

"Only you," Draco laughed, "Okay, let's ask Selwyn about going down to the lake tomorrow."

"In that case, we should get to bed," Rigel said, scooting toward the edge of Draco's four-poster.

"Rigel," Draco said suddenly with a frown, "I know you think Rosier is just messing with you, or relieving boredom, but... what if he isn't?"

Rigel tilted her head, "What do you mean?"

"I mean, say he really does like you-not as a social scheme, or even because you're clever and ambitious and he thinks you'll have political clout one day," Draco said, his head tilted slightly downwards as he looked at her, "What if Rosier really, truly likes you as a person? What will you do?"

"Do?" Rigel was feeling confused again, "Do I have to do anything just because someone likes me?"

Draco looked like he was fighting a smile, "Well, usually people respond one way or another-either you return their affections, eventually, or you politely decline them."

Rigel nodded, "That makes sense. So do I have to decide if I like Rosier or not now, just in case he actually likes me? Because I'd rather not think about it, if it's all the same to you."

Draco snorted, "Do you even know if you like men yet?"

Rigel blinked. That was an interesting question, "I don't... dislike the idea on instinct." That seemed like a safe enough answer. Strong preferences one way or the other were considered bad form in some pureblooded circles, so a neutral stance was the best way to remain unremarkable, "It doesn't really matter, though. I'm not interested in romance in any form."

"Not now, maybe," Draco began sensibly, but Rigel cut him off.

"Not ever, probably," Rigel said firmly, "My work is too important to me."

"Not... ever? But... you can't be serious," Draco said, his face working to come up with an expression equal to the amount of sheer disbelief he apparently felt at hearing that not everyone dreamed of growing up and marrying a nice pureblood and having 1.5 pureblood children.

"Why not?" Rigel asked, "You know how busy my life is, Draco, and these are the easy years. After Hogwarts, if I pass the Potions Mastery, I'll be a full-time brewer and researcher. It'll be years before I make any significant contributions to the field, gain credibility for my recipes, and can afford to take it easy for any amount of time. Romance just doesn't factor into the plan."

Draco shook his head, "Ignoring the fact that 'romance' has very little to do with plans, and even less to do with what Rosier's probably considering, Rigel, you're the Heir to an Ancient and Noble Family.

You just can't afford to swear off that sort of thing. You have to be married, and produce an Heir of your own; hasn't your father talked to you about that? Otherwise, the Family name dies out, and your holdings get relegated to branch Houses with no real claim to them."

Rigel shrugged a bit, though she had, indeed, momentarily forgotten that *Archie* had a responsibility to his family name, and no convenient younger sibling to pass that responsibility onto. "There's always my uncle, Regulus Black. He can carry on the family name, if it comes to that. He cares for the Black Family more than my father ever did, in any case."

Draco was still frowning, "But don't you *mind* being the one to mess up generations of inheritance traditions? The line of eldest Black males is unbroken for several hundred years, I think. Maybe that doesn't mean anything to you, but it's kind of a big deal, in some circles. It's just a lot to throw away without giving yourself the chance, I think."

Rigel smiled a bit sadly, "Family is important, of course, but... it's not the only important thing in the world. Helping people is important, too."

"You could help a lot of people with the Black Family name," Draco pointed out.

"Someone else could, I'm sure, but not me. I'm no good at politics and parties. I know what I'm meant to do in life, and getting married and having children won't help me do it," Rigel said.

Draco shook his head bemusedly, but said, "It's your life, Rigel, but my mother always tells me not to close a door unless you have to- you never know when you'll need alternatives."

Rigel raised an eyebrow, "Are you telling me to consider Rosier's suit?"

Draco laughed shortly, "Consider it a trap, maybe. No, I just feel defensive on your future's behalf, hearing you talk so finitely at the wise old age of twelve."

Rigel laughed a bit in turn, "That's twelve-and-one-half, actually."

"An unfathomable difference, I'm sure."

"You remember this conversation when I turn thirteen-if you even recognize me by then, of course."

"I'll just look for the guy up to his eyebrows in trouble, and completely unconcerned despite that," Draco said.

"When you get in trouble as often as I do, it starts to concern you less and less," Rigel said with exaggerated thoughtfulness.

"And the less concerned you are, the more concerned the rest of us get," Draco smirked, "As long as you're freaking out beyond reason, we'll know it's probably just a rubber ball headed our way, but Merlin help the world if Rigel Black thinks nothing is wrong."

"One unnecessary shield and they never let you forget it."

"The next time I erect a man-eating shield to defend myself against a toy on pure instinct, feel free to remind me of it from time to time," Draco rolled his eyes, "Did you even use your wand?"

Rigel groaned softly, "I don't want to talk about my wand. Or any of my magic, actually."

"But talking about things helps, remember?" Draco said with false sweetness.

Rigel sighed, "Add it to the list, then, and I'll talk it over with Pansy."

"You trust Pansy's advice over mine?"

"In a word? Yes."

"That hurts, Rigel."

"So *you'd* prefer my advice to Pansy's?"

"Well... no."

"That's what I thought."

"She really is too good for us, isn't she?"

"Yes, she really is," Rigel said, "We should tell her that more often, too."

"What for?" Draco grinned, "She tells us often eno-o-ugh." His voice broke on a long yawn and he wiped at his eyes a bit, "Sorry. Guess it's time for bed after all."

"Past time," Rigel agreed, opening his curtain and slipping off his bed, "Night, Dray."

"Still not getting up at four."

"Let's make it six."

"Are you sure? I don't want to inspire bad habits in you."

"Just this once," Rigel said wryly.

"Don't force yourself. If you need to wake up at 5:45, I understand."

"Good *night*, Draco."

"Night, Rigel."

...

"Rigel?"

She sighed, "Yes, Draco?"

"I'm not mad at you anymore."

For the first night in far too long, Rigel fell asleep with a smile on her face.

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The next day, Selwyn reluctantly agreed to organize a trip outdoors once the afternoon classes were finished. She enlisted the help of one prefect in each House, as well as Professors Sinistra and Flitwick for added protection. Anyone who wanted to go had to sign their name on a sheet of paper, which was then double-checked as they left the common room, so that everyone would remain accounted for.

There were a lot of students outside by the time the Slytherins got there, but Pansy, Draco, and Rigel managed to find a grassy spot by the edge of the lake, where they sat and ate cookies from a tin Pansy's grandmother had sent her.

Pansy seemed to be especially enjoying herself, tilting her head back to take in the evening breeze and sighing every now and then as she looked over the water. "I'll be glad when this is all over," she said.

"You think it's going to end?" Rigel asked.

"All things come to an end, eventually," Pansy said, seeming genuinely unconcerned.

"And if nothing else, they'll wait until all the students are home for the summer and then flood the castle with poisonous fumes that not even a basilisk could survive," Draco added.

Rigel had to admit that sounded like a good idea. She also thought that if the basilisk was being controlled by someone in the school, it would be a lot more vulnerable when that person wasn't around to protect it. Still...

"It's a while yet before summer comes. You guys don't seem worried at all," Rigel commented.

"Well, should we be?" Draco asked bluntly. He grimaced, then went on, "I know it sounds cold, but the pattern of attacks seems clear, even to the rest of the school. No one in Slytherin has been attacked. As long as we keep our heads down, there probably won't be any Slytherin attacks, either."

"So you think it's definitely a Slytherin controlling the monster?" Rigel said.

Draco tilted his head consideringly, "I'm not sure it's a student, actually, but whoever it is clearly has sympathy for Slytherin House."

"It could be a coincidence," Rigel argued, though internally she agreed with Draco. Whoever was controlling the snake was against Dumbledore, and likely (though apparently not reliably) working for Riddle.

Draco shook his head, "If the victims were targets of opportunity alone, there would be a majority of Slytherins. We're the ones most often alone in unfrequented parts of the castle. The dungeons are vast, and largely unpatrolled, so chances are that's where the basilisk has set up its lair, if it's in the castle at all. Snakes like the dark and damp, so the dungeons would be its natural hunting grounds in any case. No Slytherins attacked means the snake is avoiding Slytherins for some reason. If we take reasonable precautions, then, chances are Slytherin House will weather this storm unscathed."

"But doesn't that bother you?" Rigel asked, "That Slytherin House will be blamed, maybe rightfully so, for these attacks? It can't be

good politics."

"Can't it?" Draco said darkly, "You underestimate how easily fear can be put to political use, Rigel."

"Why are you so bothered about us being bothered or not, Rigel?" Pansy asked.

Rigel looked out over the lake, "I don't know. I guess... I feel guilty, somehow."

"Because you're a Slytherin?" Pansy pressed.

"Sort of," Rigel said, thinking of what Patil had said, "More because I'm a Parselmouth, I think. Of all the people in this school, I have the advantage over the basilisk. I should be doing something to stop it, shouldn't I?"

"Like what?" Draco scoffed, "You're twelve. You don't have to do anything about anything. Let the teachers handle it, and don't go chasing trouble."

"It's just, the teachers don't seem to be handling it, do they?" Rigel said, "Why don't they just evacuated the school for a couple of weeks, fumigated it like Pansy suggested, then find the basilisk's body and declare it done with? It seems like they're determined to keep things running along as normal as possible, like there is no immanent threat."

"That's exactly what they're doing," Pansy nodded, "Dumbledore's image is closely bound to the school's. He has to make it seem as though everything's all right, or he loses political clout. It's just like how Mr. Riddle has to make it seem like the SOW Party is always running smoothly, even when there are internal power struggles going on, so that he seems to be in control."

"The Minister does the same thing," Draco added, "always covering up scandals in the Ministry so that it doesn't look like he can't control

his own people's doings."

"It's one thing in political parties and government agencies," Rigel said, frowning, "But this is a school. The safety of the students should come first."

"We've already got escorts everywhere we go," Pansy pointed out, "Since they started taking serious precautions, only Lockhart and that girl who deliberately went off on her own have gotten petrified."

"But we're still not completely safe," Rigel said, "I mean, I know it's impossible to make kids safe all the time, but it seems like a basilisk is not something to mess about with. The parents already know what's happening. Kids are being pulled out of school. The media must know already, too, so why not just forget the pretenses and start taking extreme measures?"

"You'd have to ask Dumbledore," Draco said slowly, "But my guess is that killing the basilisk isn't enough for him. He wants to find out who's behind the basilisk getting into the castle, and why they're targeting students in the first place, so that he can stop the one behind it, not just the snake itself."

"And he probably thinks that as long as students are just getting petrified, he can afford to hesitate," Pansy said, "It's awful, yes, but is it any worse than the Sleeping Sickness? Not even a quarter as many kids have been hurt this year."

Rigel eyed her friends carefully, "It isn't any worse, I suppose, except the potential threat being higher. Speaking of the sickness, though, do you guys think... well, does this situation seem similar, to you? Almost eerily similar to last year?"

Pansy nodded slowly while Draco frowned.

"Similar enough, why?" Draco asked.

"There wasn't ever proof of who exactly sent the sickness last year," Rigel said, "But what if it's the same person who sent the basilisk?"

Pansy winced slightly and Draco's face went studiously blank.

"Please be careful what you say aloud, Rigel," Pansy said softly, "I'm not saying the possibility hasn't already been discretely discussed among certain members of our House, but the implications of such an... accusation would be... dangerous.

Draco's jaw clenched, "I can't say many would be surprised if you were right. Dumbledore is poised to lose much, if things turn sour at Hogwarts, so it's not a difficult leap to suppose that his enemies might orchestrate such a turn. It's important to keep in mind, however, that Dumbledore has many enemies, and that's assuming Dumbledore is the main target of these attacks, when in fact it could be the Light-sides families of the victims. Threatening an Heir is the oldest form of blackmail in the book."

Rigel wasn't sure she'd read that particular book, but she *had* read the words etched in blood upon the castle walls, and so she knew that Dumbledore was, in fact, the target of the attacks. She also knew something else, but she wasn't sure if she should tell Pansy and Draco what she'd overheard at the Yule gala.

On the one hand, it implicated Draco's father with near certainty in the events of the Sleeping Sickness, but on the other hand, Draco already suspected the role Lucius Malfoy had played in events, and likely already suspected a similar involvement this time, if the SOW party was involved at all. Additionally, did she have the right to protect her friends from this, when it involved them so directly?

"You're quiet, Rigel," Pansy noted.

"Too quiet," Draco said dryly, "Almost as though you're contemplating hiding something from us. You wouldn't do that, though, would you? Not while we're being so open and honest with one another lately."

Rigel grimaced, "I know this isn't a fair question to ask, but if you had a choice between knowing something that might upset you and not knowing, which would you rather?"

"At this point the question is: would we rather know something potentially unpleasant or just live knowing that we don't know something that obviously affects us in a potentially upsetting way." Draco said with resignation, "Just tell us."

Pansy nodded, her face slightly troubled.

Rigel asked Draco to cast a basic privacy ward, which wasn't particularly subtle, but which would keep anyone from overhearing.

"At the Yule gala, I overheard a conversation between Mr. Riddle and your father, Draco," Rigel said, "It concerned the petrifications, and it did not paint either of them in a particularly... innocent light."

Draco's face was tense, but not yet upset, "If I thought words like 'innocent' could ever describe my father, I would be more naive than the girls in our Defense class who thought Lockhart had a talent for anything except posturing."

"It is always better to know the ins and outs of the political landscape," Pansy said firmly, "No matter how alarming or disadvantageous. A choice made in ignorance can be disastrous."

When Rigel still hesitated, Draco said, "You can't protect us from the truth, Rigel."

I can, actually, she thought, but this time I won't.

She told them what she'd heard, and then let them think for a short while.

"It seems fairly clear that the SOW party was behind the sickness, then," Pansy said with a sigh, "And it seems like Mr. Riddle *did* have

a plan in place at Hogwarts this year, but something has gone wrong."

"Maybe there's a wild card in play?" Draco suggested, frowning, "Mr. Riddle's agent was clearly referred to as male, but you're sure whoever attacked you was female, right, Rigel? Maybe someone is working against Riddle's agenda, either accidentally or on purpose. Father says things are often most confusing when more than one plot overlaps."

"What's the Chamber of Secrets, then?" Pansy asked, "Draco's father made it seem as though this has happened before. If this is a copycat crime, it might tell us more about the motive and goals if we know more about the original."

"It has," Rigel said, "Mr. Hagrid told me about it. He went to school the last time something like this happened, and he said the petrifications were the same, except last time there were messages left with the victims, and all of those petrified were muggleborns."

"Muggleborns?" Draco blinked, then his eyes widened, "Oh. The Chamber of Secrets-it's an old Slytherin legend. When Salazar left the school, it was said that he left behind a hidden chamber where all his knowledge was stored, which only his Heir could open. Once his Heir returned to the school and opened the Chamber, Salazar Slytherin's great work would be finished."

"What great work was that?" Rigel asked curiously.

Draco looked uncomfortable, "Well, most people think the legend means the purification of the school."

Rigel frowned, "But the school's already pureblood-only. Why would anyone want to mimic the Chamber being opened if Slytherin's 'great work' has already been completed?"

"Perhaps the culprit wants people to know he's acting in the name of Slytherin," Pansy said.

"Or perhaps... what if the similarity to fifty years ago isn't the intent, but rather a side-effect of the same method being used?" Draco said slowly.

Rigel raised an eyebrow, "You think there really is a Chamber of Secrets, and that it was in fact opened both fifty years ago and today? That would explain the similarities to the attacks, but not why anyone would open it *again*, if Slytherin's work is complete."

Draco said, "The instrument of the attack must be connected to the Chamber of Secrets. Whoever wanted to cause problems at Hogwarts needed the Chamber opened to do it. Maybe they gave no thought to how it would come across in connection to the legend."

Pansy frowned, "But only the Heir of Slytherin can open the Chamber. It would have to be the same person as fifty years ago, or their direct descendant I suppose. Still, the line is supposed to be obsolete."

"It doesn't have to be Slytherin's literal Heir," Draco argued, "Everyone says Dumbledore is the Heir to Merlin, because he was able to lift the Staff of Merlin from its place in the Hall of Eternity, but Dumbledore's not directly descendent from Merlin. The Heir of Slytherin could be someone the Chamber deems worthy of opening it, not necessarily Slytherin's actual blood."

Pansy gasped, "It's obvious, isn't it? The thing that's been attacking kids is a basilisk. The only way to control it is Parseltongue. So the Heir of Slytherin might just mean anyone who's a parselmouth!"

Draco shot a look at Rigel, who lifted her hands in open denial, "It isn't me."

Draco and Pansy actually laughed at that, "We know, Rigel," Pansy said, then her face fell, "It's just... if this gets out, that's exactly what other people will think. We know there's got to be another Parselmouth, but... the odds of two Parselmouths being in the school at once have got to be phenomenally low."

"A lot of people already think I did it," Rigel said unconcernedly, "And their thinking it doesn't make it true. As long as the Aurors don't listen to idle gossip, I think I'll be fine."

Draco blanched at the mention of Aurors, and Rigel grimaced, but didn't know what to say. Lucius' part in the plot wasn't certain, but he didn't seem to be rolling in plausible deniability.

"Lord Malfoy is smart, Draco," Pansy said comfortingly, "And it was clear from what Rigel overheard that neither he nor Riddle meant for any kids to be petrified. This is someone else's doing, and in the end your father couldn't have been involved very much, or he wouldn't have had so many questions."

"Speaking of," Rigel said, "How high in the SOW party is Professor Snape, exactly?"

"That's a good question," Pansy said carefully, "No one is really sure, I think. Lord Riddle obviously holds the Professor in high esteem. He always makes a point to converse with him at social functions, usually somewhere private. I've heard from others that Snape sometimes goes so far as to give council to Lord Riddle, so Riddle obviously favors him greatly. On the other hand, Professor Snape comes to so few social gatherings, it's hard to get a consistent read on their public relationship."

"Uncle Severus is also notoriously close to Dumbledore," Draco commented, "Dumbledore seeks his council on things sometimes as well, I've heard. My father admires Uncle Severus greatly, and would trust him at his back in a heartbeat, but at the same time he sometimes cautions me about being too open with my godfather, specifically about information. It makes me wonder if Uncle Severus isn't playing both sides of the party lines."

"Is that not allowed?" Rigel asked, "Plenty of people are Neutral and move between the two sides politically and socially."

"The Neutrals are all on the fringes, though," Draco said dismissively, "Uncle Severus is in deep, really deep, with both parties. He's a political anomaly, I guess."

"Some people would call that a spy," Rigel said quietly.

"Yes, well," Draco said, "In the end, all it means is that Uncle Severus can do pretty much as he pleases, which is, of course, why he lives the way he does."

"I see," Rigel said, though in reality she wasn't sure she did. It seemed like a lot more work to be embroiled in both parties than it would have been to just stay out of it completely, as she planned on doing. Then again Snape's expertise in potions was probably highly sought after, so perhaps it was hard for him to remain politically aloof.

"Let's talk about something besides politics," Pansy said, sighing, "And not this Chamber of Secrets business, either. We can't do anything about it, so discussing it does no good."

"Let's talk about Rigel's magic," Draco said, smirking rather evilly.

"Are you still having trouble with it?" Pansy asked, concerned, "You seem to be doing quite well in our classes-you almost always get the spell right off, in fact."

"Not almost always, *always*," Draco said, "It's a bit disconcerting, actually. I bet you practice them ahead of time, right?"

Rigel shook her head, "It's my magic. It just knows how to do things."

They exchanged patently disbelieving looks.

"Magic is a force of nature," Draco said, "Like wind or lightning. Wizards have the ability to manipulate that force, but our manipulation of it doesn't make the magic sentient. You have to stop thinking about magic like you would an animal of some kind, or it's

only going to seem harder to control, because you'll be subconsciously influencing it to be that way."

"That's what Professor Snape said," Rigel started.

"And Merlin forbid we believe anything experienced professors tell us," Draco rolled his eyes.

Rigel narrowed her eyes at him, "But what if he's wrong? What if magic really is semi-sentient?"

Pansy tilted her head consideringly, "If it were, there would have been some sign of it by now, don't you think? A... magical rebellion, or something."

"Has there ever been a house elf rebellion?" Rigel countered.

"You think magic is like house elves?" Draco snorted, "No way. House elves are much easier to control."

Rigel frowned, but said, "So you admit that magic has to be *controlled*, as though it wouldn't act the way wizards want it to unless we *made* it?"

Draco frowned back, "Yes. Just like a river wouldn't collect itself into a reservoir unless humans built a dam to make it do so. That doesn't make the river sentient."

"Okay," Rigel said, "But how can we say there are no signs that magic is sentient, when all the signs that might mean just that are interpreted as simply a person not having good enough control over their magic?"

"You mean accidental magic," Pansy said, "But accidental magic isn't magic going wild by itself-it is magic responding to a child's distress or desire. The child wants something he or she can't make happen on their own, and their magic responds automatically."

"But the child isn't really controlling the magic," Rigel said.

"A person can't control their heart beating," Pansy pointed out, "But it beats on, even when they sleep, adjusting in speed depending on how fast the person needs their blood circulating."

"All a heart can do is beat, though," Rigel said, "It does so because it is programmed to beat, and to adjust to different chemicals released by the brain in response to a handful of physical situations. A person's heart can't choose to slow down, for instance, when its owner is nervous, even if it might be in the best interest of the person to have a slow heartbeat, like if they were subjected to a pulse-monitoring spell by an Auror while being interrogated. Magic isn't like that. Magic responds to the child's need, yes, but then it chooses *how* to respond in a way appropriate to the situation."

Draco hesitated, "I'm not sure that's quite how it works."

"Even if a child has no idea what a hover charm is, his magic can still lift a box of cookies from the highest shelf and bring it down to him," Rigel said, "That suggests that magic knows things that its user doesn't necessarily know."

"The child would have had hover charms cast in close proximity to him," Draco said, "Accidental magic can regurgitate spells a child has experienced before, can't it? I think magic does have a kind of pattern-recognition ability, especially children's magic, because a child's magic isn't formed as much as an adult's magic." His face was scrunched slightly as he went on, "It's like... oh, I read this in a book once, but it's been so long... I think it's because a child's magical core is more wild, more natural. It's impressionable, in a way. That's why children develop Light and Dark affinities before they ever get proper schooling. It's environmental, to an extent. Their magic remembers, but the way a block of clay 'remembers' a design pressed into it, not because it's sentient."

"What about when my magic cast the Expolso Shield?" Rigel said, "There's no way anyone has ever performed that shield around me when I was too young to remember it. It's just too dangerous to be cast around children. Still, my magic cast the shield without my input,

before I had ever heard of the shield. How can that be, unless the magic knew how the shield was made without me telling it how? And how could it choose that spell, among all the spells I know and don't know, unless it was sentient to some extent? You can't have something that responds creatively to environmental stimuli without calling it sentient. That's what sentient means."

"Sentience isn't the ability to respond to things," Pansy corrected apologetically, "It's the ability to perceive things-to be self-aware. Magic only responds to wizard will; it's a reaction, that's all."

"No, it isn't," Rigel said, "You already admitted that Magic exists in two forms-bound to wizards as Formed magic, and also as Free magic. Freedom is characteristic of sentience, is it not?"

"It doesn't mean magic is free to act as it pleases in the wild," Draco said, exasperated, "It only means that it hasn't got a form yet. Free magic is useless magic. It's not even magic, really, just the energy with potential to be used as magic by wizards. Like heat in the air isn't really a fire."

All the different analogies were getting confusing, Rigel reflected as she tried to explain her thoughts in a way that made sense. "If magic isn't sentient, then how do you explain my magic? It's tricky, and unnecessarily creative at times, don't you think? If it was responding to my will alone, it would do so expediently, but instead it does things weirdly, as though trying to mess with my head on purpose."

Draco and Pansy exchanged another dubious look, "You sound a bit paranoid about it, Rigel," Draco said, "Not to be disparaging, but I think you're making a bit fuss over something minor. A lot of kids our age have trouble controlling their magic. There's a kid in Hufflepuff who makes bubbles come out of his wand every time he tries to transfigure a liquid."

"It's not about control," Rigel said, "When I try to do something, my magic is perfectly controlled. My magic acts when I'm *not* trying to do anything, though. It acts on its own."

"Randomly?" Pansy pressed, "Because it seems to me that whenever your magic does something you didn't specifically tell it to, it's usually a result you could have reasonably been unconsciously seeking. That shield charm was a response to you perceiving a threat. You knocked Jordan unconscious when he threatened you. You blew up the dummies in Quirrell's class because he was treating you unfairly. Do you see how your magic isn't as random as you think? I know you feel out of control, but you really aren't."

Rigel sighed, but didn't argue anymore. She knew, somehow, that they were wrong. If her magic was a dead thing that she wielded, utilizing it would be difficult. She would have to work to perform a spell, instead of just work to understand the theory behind it. Rigel's magic performed just as well when she didn't use wand movements—even when she didn't use a wand, for that matter. The magic wasn't connected to or dependant upon anything she herself was doing—whether that was saying the right incantations, making the right wand movement, visualizing the results, or anything. All she had to do was ask, and it... happened.

It was weird, and she felt uneasy about it. She also felt guilty somehow, as though she were getting something without earning it or even understanding it. Draco and Pansy didn't understand, though, so she let the matter go for now. Someday she would find a better way to explain.

Eventually they stopped talking and just relaxed, turning their faces to the breeze. Rigel considered meditating, but she wasn't in the mood to look at the failed experiment lounging her one if her mental armchairs right now. So instead, she just stared out at the lake, watching its peaceful waves rock gently against the-

A whirl of white sprung from the water's surface, not far from shore. It wriggled and twisted about in the air as it rose, but strangely didn't make the slightest ripple in its wake. A moment later, a voice like a broken whistle told them why.

"Black! Black, where are you? I demand you attend me this instant!"

Rigel felt her eyebrows lift, too distracted by the sight of Myrtle, spitting mad and gasping for air as though she really had held her breath swimming from her bathroom pipes to the surface of the lake to stop her expression betraying her utter surprise.

Myrtle spotted them in the next instant, and floated over. Surprisingly enough, most students ignored the sight of a ghost floating out of the lake. Rigel supposed Hogwarts had already conditioned most of them to accept peculiarities with aplomb, if nothing else.

"Black! I've been looking everywhere for you. You'll never believe what happened," the ghost fumed, her eyes flashing over the rim of her horned spectacles, "The nerve of some people. I mean, there I was-minding my own business in the u-bend-when some barking mad bint lobs a book through my head. *Through* it!"

Rigel blinked. "I'm very sorry to hear that, Myrtle. But, ah, why are you telling me?"

Myrtle looked highly affronted, saying, "You told me to report any suspicious activity to you."

Rigel was about to say that the situation Myrtle described, while unfortunate and gravely insulting, wasn't really very suspicious, when Pansy spoke up.

"Yes, we'll done, Myrtle," she said calmly, "A student in your bathroom alone while there's a curfew in effect is indeed very suspicious."

Oh. Right.

Myrtle preened, "Isn't it though? Why would anyone throw a book at an innocent ghost if they weren't up to no good?"

"Good point," Rigel said gravely, "Thank you for reporting this, Myrtle. I'll mail order a Weird Sister poster this afternoon."

Draco suppressed an amused grin with difficulty.

Myrtle still hovered expectantly.

"Was there anything else, Myrtle?" Pansy asked kindly.

"You haven't told me when you'll be coming by to get it."

Feeling particularly slow, Rigel said, "Get what?"

Myrtle pouted, "The book. You aren't just going to leave it there, of course. It's right in the middle of my toilet. Taking up space, reminding me of that awful girl and giving me flashbacks of all the trauma I underwent. I want it gone!" She let out a frustrated noise, "But I can't touch it! I've already tried to make the toilet explode, because sometimes when I'm really upset the water starts churning, but all it did was flood a bit. I suppose... Peeves would probably help if I told him it was to explode something."

"I'm sure that won't be necessary," Pansy said, "Of course Rigel will get it out."

"Of the girls bathroom," Draco said dryly, "While we're under curfew. Excellent plan."

"I'll get it then," Pansy said confidently. She stood and brushed at her skirts.

"You? Now?" Draco said incredulously.

"I'll be back before you know it," Pansy said, a bit dryly.

"Wait," Rigel said, frowning, "It isn't safe-"

"I'll take a prefect," Pansy said, "And besides, I'm a Slytherin. I'll be fine."

She set off across the lawn toward where the upper-year Slytherins were sitting without looking back.

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By the time Pansy reached the sixth years, she was wearing her third favorite expression. She didn't have a name for this one yet, but it was one part earnest, one part mildly helpless, and one part embarrassed. She made her eyes slightly wider than normal, bit her lip ever so slightly at the corner, and made her brow perfectly smooth, too smooth, as though she were concentrating very hard on not letting her forehead crinkle with discontent.

She tapped the sixth year male prefect for her House on his upper arm, as though she could not quite reach up to his shoulder. It was a firm enough tap that she only had to do it once, but soft enough to be almost apologetic in itself.

He turned, and raised an eyebrow, "Yes?"

Pansy hesitated just long enough to make a point, flicking her eyes at the prefect's friends. The prefect, whose name she thought started with an F and reminded her of a lawyer for some reason, gave his friends a quick nod and moved off to the side to grant her a more private conversation.

"Thank you," Pansy said at once, "I'm sorry to inconvenience you, but I presently require the use of a restroom. Would you mind accompanying me?"

The prefect looked uncomfortable for a moment before covering it with a polite tilt of his head, "Selwyn may be more suited to that sort of errand."

Pansy nodded, a bit shyly for effect, "She just looks so content over there with Rookwood. I was loathe to interrupt her, but if you think it's best..."

The prefect shot a look toward the Head Girl, who was indeed looking rather amicably engaged with Edmund at the moment. He grimaced slightly, probably at the thought of pulling Alice away from her (unofficial, but who did they think they were fooling) beau.

"Right then. I'll accompany you up to the Entrance Hall."

Pansy affected a vaguely distraught expression, this time allowing her brow to crease a tiny bit, "You haven't heard? Peeves was in some kind of snit earlier. He... well, suffice to say the girls bathrooms on the first floor suffered undue injury. I'm afraid the nearest usable one is on the second floor-" she broke off, blinked worriedly up at him, and said in a rush, "Is that too far? If it's too much trouble, I can... I mean I'm sure I could..." She put on a very brave face, "Wait."

The prefect looked distinctly discomfited, but said, "Don't be silly. I wouldn't dream of making you... wait. I'll inform one of the other prefects so they know we're gone. Just wait here a moment."

Pansy smiled sweetly, the way she always did when things were going particularly according to plan. She glanced over at her boys to see them frowning worriedly in her direction. Something softened inside of her at their obvious concern. Some would say that every part of her was already soft. Pansy knew how she came across, soft hearted and soft headed, and she encouraged that impression painstakingly.

When she was younger, her personality had been sharper, honest to a fault, and more like Daphne Greengrass than she cared to admit. She also had a grand total of zero friends, unless you counted the unicorns who briefly made their home on her family's estate. Still, friendless as she was, she was also unapologetic. She said what she thought and thought for herself, and her father especially was all too quick to encourage it. When Pansy turned seven, her mother tried to arrange a tea party with some of the other women in the Dark Daughters Society. None of the other women's daughters wanted to come. Pansy told herself she didn't care about those dumb girls with

their simpering little faces and dull, glassy eyes, but her mother saw the blow done to her child's pride, and gave her a piece of sound advice.

"Be true to your beliefs and principles," she said, "But don't push your peers away just because you can. You'd be surprised how far a smile can go."

Pansy had taken her words to heart, and then taken them further and put her mind to work on them. She realized that thinking for yourself didn't always mean saying what you thought out loud. She practiced for hours in the mirror, came up with all sorts of kind, meaningless things she could say to people, and, amazingly and almost disappointingly, it worked.

As it turned out, the whole world opened up when you were nice to people.

So she made friends easily after that. Everyone loved the pretty, sweet blonde girl with wide eyes and a kind smile, especially when she let a ray of her intellect shine through every now and then, just to keep their interest. With her mind challenged by the new game and her social life much improved, though, a small part of her soul-the slippery, silvery part that laughingly reflected people's best expectations back at them for fun-couldn't help but wonder how other people could be so easily won. Really, where was the fun in adoration if it was obtained so easily?

So she had lived, content to gather friends like butterflies in a net of smiles, and then she had met someone... different.

A small, dark-haired boy with wide eyes and an embarrassingly slack expression walked into the Great Hall next to her, and she found she couldn't quite stop the blunt assessment that passed her lips. She'd immediately smiled, in an automatic attempt to temper her opinion, but the boy didn't seem to take any offense at her words. On the contrary, he smiled back. It was one of the most perfect fake smiles shed ever seen, and it felt, in that instant, as though Fate had been

appraised of her growing ennui and responded in the most expedient way it could manage: with a kindred spirit.

That was how Pansy became friends with the enigma Rigel Black, and through the ordeal that was becoming Rigel's friend, became Draco Malfoy's companion as well. The odd thing about Rigel was, even though his surface was as porcelain as her own, he didn't seem to realize how alike they were. She suspected he was very good at playing pretend, but not very good at recognizing other players on the pitch.

Not that it mattered. Sometimes, Pansy thought the mask was all that really mattered. Who was a person, really, if not the sum of their actions and the impressions they left on other people? What was a soul, when compared with that?

The prefect returned quickly, and accompanied Pansy dutifully to the second floor. Pansy could admit she was curious as to what Myrtle had kicked up such a fuss about. With luck, the book would be something interesting, like a secret notebook shared between friends. She could picture it now, one friend getting angry and disposing of the book out of spite. Or perhaps the book contained love letters from a boy who had broken the girl's heart. With any luck, it might even be a diary.

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Nigel Fairister waited with mounting impatience in the half-flooded corridor of the second floor. Had anyone asked him, he would have professed to have no clue as to what could possibly be keeping one Miss Parkinson, second-year Slytherin and Heir Parkinson apparent, so continuously occupied in the powder room.

He thought it unlikely to be facial powder, given Miss Parkinson's perfectly pre-pubescent complexion, and hair powder was equally unlikely, given the present age. Other explanations, however, were not immediately forthcoming. He certainly hoped there were no... natural explanations for the fifteen minutes Miss Parkinson had already spent within, and, he thought with a grimace, he had best turn his mind to other matters, lest he find himself unable to look Miss Parkinson in the eye when she emerged.

Five minutes later, Nigel was neither impatient nor concerned with Miss Parkinson's private biological agenda. Rather, he was worried. The likelihood of anything befalling the second-year in a powder room was rather small, considering anything threatening would have to first pass his current position to gain entry, but still... her lack of reappearance was unsettling, to say the least. At last he decided to knock, louder than was proper, and wait.

No reply.

He knocked again, calling, "Miss Parkinson? Do you require... assistance?" He winced briefly at how uncouth that statement would sound if she was merely admiring her own reflection or some such after all.

Still no reply.

"I'm coming in, Miss Parkinson," he warned, "Unless you beseech me otherwise. Please beseech me otherwise," he added under his breath.

He tentatively pushed open the door, and the utter lack of feminine outrage that met his unconscionably untoward action made his stomach sink with wary realization. His steps made vaguely sickening squelching noises as he stepped carefully into the restroom, wand at the ready. As he rounded the corner into the bathroom proper, his heart clenched at the sight of Miss Parkinson splayed out on the tiles, eyes wide open and face frozen in delicate shock. He allowed himself a moment of sheer relief that the second

year appeared to be petrified, not limp with death, and then he constructed the strongest wards he knew how to raise without preparation or materials.

He drew out the runes into the air with his wand carefully. Trying not to think about the fact that these wards, at their basic OWL level, were unlikely to have a noticeable effect on a creature with as much ambient magic as a basilisk was rumored to have, Nigel next wove his wand in a pattern that was taught to every prefect at their initiation meeting in fifth year.

It was a spell designed by battle mages many centuries ago, made to seek out and catch the attention of the nearest entity that had been keyed into the same pattern as the one the caster used. For the pattern the prefects were taught, that meant the nearest Head of House, or the Headmaster himself. The spell took the form of a small, golden bird, which winged rapidly away once fully formed. Now all there was to do was wait.

He looked down at Miss Parkinson, her light blonde hair turned a golden color by the water now soaking into it. *Poor girl*, he thought, *Judging by the way she fell, she was probably primping in the mirror when it happened. In fact*, he shuddered at the thought of what would have happened if she met the beast's gaze full on, *It's lucky that she was*.

For want of else to do, and because he couldn't stomach staring at his Housemate's unmoving expression any longer, Nigel began gathering Miss Parkinson's things. Her bag had spilled on the floor when she fell, and most of her things were soaked, but it was nothing a little drying spell wouldn't fix. As least it gave him something to do.

Once everything was back in the bag, he glanced around the room and noticed a small, leather-bound book lying underneath the closest sink, barely within the ward circle he'd drawn. He picked it up and dried it. By its nondescript cover and lack of title or author he'd guess it was a personal journal of some kind. By its distance from the other

objects from her bag, she was probably holding the book when it happened. No doubt trying to scribble out an entry while she had a moment to herself-with the curfew, time alone was a coveted commodity these days. With a pitying sigh, he tucked the diary into the second-year's bag (without opening it, of course, being the gentleman that he was), just as the door to the washroom was flung open sharply.

Professor McGonagall strode inside with her wand up, a fiercely determined look on her face, and Nigel had never been more pleased to see the Gryffindor Head of House. She swept the room with her eyes before gesturing him to take his wards down. Seeing the little golden bird hovering at McGonagall's shoulder, he didn't bother with checking her for Polyjuice or the like.

When he unraveled the binding rune on the ward, the golden bird darted forward and rejoined with his wand, its duty done.

McGonagall immediately cast several diagnostic charms on Miss Parkinson, confirming what Nigel had guessed already.

"Petrified," the older witch said quietly. She turned her sharpest gaze on Nigel, and said, "Mr. Fairister. Thank you for alerting me. How did you find her?"

Nigel explained quickly about accompanying Miss Parkinson to the restroom, not seeing or hearing anything until he decided to check on the girl, his estimation that she had been looking in the mirror when it happened, and the lack of suspicious activity while he waited. McGonagall listened, eyes scanning the bathroom carefully, and when she was finished she conjured a stretcher and levitated Miss Parkinson onto it.

"You will accompany me to the Hospital Wing, Mr. Fairister, and afterwards I will see you safely back to the lake, where you will assist in seeing the rest of your House back to your common room. Do you require a Calming Draught?"

Nigel shook his head slowly, "Thank you, Professor, but I shall retain my wits without one, I should think."

"Very well," McGonagall moved her wand toward Parkinson's school bag, but Nigel picked it up swiftly.

"I will return Miss Parkinson's things to her friends," he said, "I feel it is my duty to relate this... happening to them, as it was," he cleared his throat and swallowed dryly, "Was my responsibility to prevent them."

McGonagall's face softened, "No, Mr. Fairister, you share no blame for this deed. Miss Parkinson will make a full recovery once professors Snape and Sprout complete the Restoration Draught, and rest assured we will find the one truly responsible for her current state."

Nigel allowed this knowledge to comfort him, though he knew a reliance on fair words to be a kind of weakness. On a day when twelve-year-old girls were allowed to be petrified in silence, even gentlemen ought to be allowed a little weakness, after all.

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When the prefect returned alone, they knew immediately that something was wrong. The pure regret on his face, coupled with McGonagall's presence, only solidified the worry into a hard knot in Rigel's chest. McGonagall used a Sonorous Charm to carry her voice, saying, "All students collect your belongings and find your House prefects. I'm sorry, but this outing must be prematurely concluded. There's been another attack-" her voice broke on the last word, but she only continued, "Please, organize yourselves as quickly as possible."

Draco and Rigel exchanged grim looks before gathering their own bags and walking swiftly to where the prefect who had gone with Pansy was standing, surrounded by Rookwood, Rosier, Selwyn, and Millicent, and already facing a full inquiry by the look of it. Myrtle sank back into the lake quietly as they went, probably going to assess the condition of her toilet once more.

They reached the group in time to hear Rookwood say, "-your responsibility, Fairister."

"Indeed," the prefect, Fairister, said stiffly, "I assure you my vigilance did not suffer any ignorance of that fact. I saw nothing, and heard nothing. I do not *know* how she was attacked. I am sorry, but there was nothing I could have done to prevent this."

"So it was Pansy?" Draco looked distinctly sick, "Is she-?" He closed his mouth, unable to articulate further.

"Petrified," Fairister said, voice bleak, "I found her on the bathroom floor. It couldn't have been more than fifteen minutes, and yet-"

"You should never have let her out of your sight," Rookwood said harshly. In any other circumstances, seeing the usually calm young man admonish another person with any amount of passion or sharpness would have been remarkable-now it only highlighted the surrealism of the situation. Rosier's unnaturally silent demeanor was a jarring contrast, his eyes like melted gold, fiery and unsteady.

Fairister leveled a stern look at Rookwood, saying quietly, "What would you have had me do? Accompany Miss Parkinson into the female washroom? I never dreamed danger might come from within. I'm sorry. I-I should have checked the room first, I suppose."

Selwyn spoke, her voice sharp, "I know Marian and Charlotte chose not to come out to the lake, but why did you not ask me to escort Miss Parkinson if you were appraised of the destination?"

Fairister flushed lightly, "Miss Parkinson did not wish to trouble you while you were... socializing. She felt you deserved a reprieve from your many duties." A flick of a glance at Rookwood was all he gave, but it easily expressed his meaning without words. Everyone knew the Head Girl had had precious little time with her friends, particularly her... whatever Rookwood was to her, of late.

Selwyn stiffened and her face went blank, "If you're suggesting I have not made my time amply available-"

"Of course not," Fairister said quickly, "I am merely relating Miss Parkinson's wishes."

"Too nice for her own good," Rookwood said softly.

Rigel was inclined to agree, though for different reasons. She knew Pansy had taken Fairister precisely because he would be unable to accompany her inside, and so unable to see her true motive for going in. If Pansy hadn't so kindly volunteered to get the book for Myrtle in the first place, however... Rigel shook her head. It was no use dwelling over what might have been if it wouldn't help Pansy now. She had learned that much from the Sleeping Sickness, at least. Not that there was anything Rigel could do to help Pansy now. She certainly couldn't make the Restoration Draught and better or faster than her Head of House and Professor Sprout could.

The agonizing thing about that particular draught was that it required fully mature mandrakes to make. Mandrakes were one of the few ingredients that couldn't be preserved for very long. They were a very useful ingredient, due to their inherent pliability. If you wanted, you could imbue them with specific properties depending on the type of soil you grew them in and the magic you exposed them to. To get mandrakes with the properties necessary for a Restoration Draught, however, it was necessary to begin with mandrake sproutlings, which took around six months to grow to full maturity. The sprouts had to be moved to new soil every two weeks, as they sucked their environment of its magic very quickly, and every time you moved them there was a chance of exposing your ears to their cry.

In addition, many herbologists and even potioneers were squeamish about working with the plants. While their intelligence was closer to that of small mammals, like gophers, rabbits, and the like, their shape was acutely humanoid. They were classified by the Ministry as plants, with 'creature-like' magical properties, but some still refused to work with them. Rigel heard that mandrakes screamed like a human would when they were harvested, and if that was true she couldn't blame the herbologists for being squeamish. She did have doubts about the accuracy of that statement, since anyone who'd actually heard the death cry of a mature mandrake would be dead, but that wasn't really important.

What was important was that Snape and Sprout were essentially working from scratch to grow the mandrakes necessary for the Restoration Draught, which meant it would be another few weeks at least until Pansy could be healed. And there was nothing Rigel could do to make that day come sooner.

The rest of their House had by then assembled, so Selwyn and Fairister joined the prefects in herding the students back into the castle. Before leaving, Fairister pressed Pansy's bag into Millicent's hands to take back to their room. If Millicent clutched it a bit too tightly, no one felt it necessary to point it out.

They reached the common room without incident, and entered it silently. No one seemed to know what to say. If the attack had happened to another student, there would have been speculation, heated discussions on the topic until the novelty had worn off. As it was, Pansy's absence, and its implications, were glaringly obvious. She was one of their own, a pureblood Heir to a Dark family, and extremely well-liked by those who knew her. Her attack meant more than all the other attacks put together. It was only while taking in the shocked and troubled expressions that some of their Housemates weren't competent enough to hide that Rigel appreciated the meaning of what Pansy had told her earlier.

Their Housemates really had begun to think themselves safe. Others had thought just as Pansy had—that it likely was a Slytherin doing the

petrifying, and that they, as fellow Slytherins, would not be targeted. The first rule of Slytherin House, after all, was that snakes never turned on one another. Rigel looked around and felt the fear slowly uncoiling in the atmosphere, like poisonous fumes released from their bottle by a faulty stopper.

They were halfway through the common room when Millicent knocked into a strangely positioned table and accidentally dropped Pansy's bag, as well as her own. Rigel and Theo, who has walking nearby them in a silent show of support when it happened, stopped to help Millicent pick up she and her roommate's things. Draco, who was in no way about to crouch down on the ground and rifle through a couple of girls' belongings, sent Millicent a sympathetic look and watched with detached patience as they sorted quills, books, inkwells, and parchment into their correct bags.

Theo handed Millicent a small leather journal, but instead of sorting it she just frowned at the book.

"This isn't mine," she said slowly, turning it over in her hands.

"Then it's Pansy's," Theo said.

"I don't think it is," Millicent disagreed, "I've never seen it before, and I've seen the journal she keeps."

"Maybe the one you saw before was a decoy, and this is the real journal," Theo suggested easily.

"Pansy's not that paranoid," Millicent said.

"She's a Slytherin," Theo snorted, "There's no way of knowing how paranoid she is if she's even a little bit, because paranoia's only clever if you hide it, so that people don't know you're prepared for unlikely eventualities."

"I still don't think-"

"It's mine," Rigel said decisively.

They turned to look at her.

"You keep a journal?" Theo asked incredulously. As Rigel's raised eyebrow, he said, "Not that I don't think your life is interesting enough to merit one. I just figured you for the type of paranoid that never wrote anything down."

"Not everyone is paranoid," Draco rolled his eyes.

"You wouldn't know if they were," Theo shrugged, "And if they aren't, they should be."

"Why would Pansy have your journal?," Millicent asked, her eyes narrowing, "Are you saying she stole it? Pansy wouldn't do that."

"Draco goes through my things sometimes," Rigel said, blithely ignoring the blonde's sudden spluttering, "I know he's just curious, but I'd rather he not read my inner-most thoughts and plans. I thought Pansy would be the last person anyone would suspect of harboring my secrets."

Millicent shot Draco a glance under her hair, then shrugged, handing the book over to Rigel. "Makes sense," she said.

"No it doesn't!" Draco said, looking mildly outraged.

Everyone ignored him as they continued picking up the last odds and ends from the floor. When they got back to the dorms, Theo ensconced himself in the bathroom to take a shower. Since Blaise was already out in the common room, having stayed there to catch up on schoolwork while the rest of them went outside, Draco and Rigel were left to try and figure out exactly what had gone wrong in the last couple of hours.

Despite their best attempts, they didn't make much headway on the subject.

"I just don't know why it would be Pansy," Draco said for the third time, pacing the floor between their beds agitatedly, "If someone is trying to resurrect the old Slytherin tales, she's the last one they should attack. Her family is in the Book of Gold, for Salazar's sake. Her family has never sided with Dumbledore on anything-they've been declared Dark as long as the Malfoy's have-well, almost as long. As long as the Lestrangle's, at least. Probably not as long as the Black's," Draco conceded with a nod at Rigel.

Rigel suppressed a sigh, "Maybe she was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"No!" Draco whirled, and Rigel saw that his eyes were tight with denial and guilt. He had finally dropped the mask he'd donned when they realized Pansy wasn't coming back from the bathroom. "Rigel, it can't-that makes it our fault, don't you see?"

Rigel spoke as soothingly as she could, "It was unlucky, that's all."

"I don't believe in coincidences like that," Draco said stubbornly, "Pansy went to that bathroom with a purpose, and then she got hurt. That means her purpose was probably connected to the reason for her attack. Otherwise, there's no reason to attack her."

She was about to point out that reason had little to do with many cruel things in the world, when Draco continued.

"There's something going on with that ghost, or that bathroom, or-or-"

"This book?" Rigel suggested, holding up the little journal she was still holding.

Draco's face blanked for a moment, then it all seemed to click, "That's the book Pansy went to get from the bathroom!" At Rigel's raised eyebrow, he coughed, and said, "I mean, obviously you don't actually keep a journal. What kind of idiot writes down all their secrets?"

"Let's find out," Rigel said, opening the book. She flipped through the pages, but there was nothing written anywhere.

"It's blank," Draco groaned, "So someone just chucked an empty journal at a touchy ghost and now Pansy's petrified?" he quieted, and gazed at Rigel with serious consternation, "It really is our fault, isn't it? We shouldn't have let her go."

"It's the basilisk's fault," Rigel said, more to comfort Draco than because she actually believed it herself. It was, after all, her fault Myrtle had come to them for help. "And whoever's controlling it, I suppose."

"Still, the book's a dead end," Draco said, sinking to sit on his bed with a sigh, "What are we going to do?"

"Is it?" Rigel was examining the book closely, "There's letters engraved here. Can you make them out?"

Draco took the book and held it toward the lamplight, "T... N-no, M... R. TMR. I can't think of anyone in our year who matches them, can you?"

Rigel shook her head, but said, "The Library keeps class records, doesn't it? Every year after the Sorting they add the new students to the books. Percy Weasley said he used them to research the effect of magic on the gender of first-born children in old pureblooded families last year."

"They're probably not public records, since any kind of information on Families is censored by the board of governors. We'd need permission to look at them," Draco said slowly, "but if we could go through them, we could figure out who the journal belongs to. We could ask them if they saw anything unusual while they were in the bathroom-they'd have been there less than an hour before Pansy was attacked if that ghost came right away."

"Or they could be the attacker," Rigel said quietly, "They were out of bounds according to the curfew. A lot of risk just to throw away an empty book."

"All the better," Draco said, "That means this journal is evidence they obviously wanted rid of. Maybe it's not really blank. An illusion?"

Rigel got out a quill and ink. If they wrote on a page and couldn't see the ink afterwards, it meant there was an illusion on the pages. She drew a small mark on the edge of the first page. It vanished, seamlessly, into the parchment. Rigel smiled mirthlessly, "I've seen something like this before. The Weasley twins have a pair of notebooks they use to pass messages. The writing disappears from one, and reappears in the other, then disappears again afterwards."

"So whoever has the connected book is part of this too," Draco surmised, "Maybe there's a way to get the information that disappears back out of the book somehow. Maybe one of the two got nervous and backed out, tried to destroy the evidence of their plans out of fear. That means..."

He grabbed the quill from Rigel and scrawled, in bold, slanting letters nothing like his usual elegant penmanship, *We know who you are. We know what you did. We're going to **stop** you.*

Rigel frowned, "I wish you hadn't done that, Draco. It's not a good idea to bluff with this kind of a person, and besides that we're not sure the book is connected to another one, and that that person had anything to do with the petrifications."

They watched as the ink slipped into the page, and Rigel wasn't sure if she was relieved or not when no answering sentence appeared.

Draco set his jaw determinedly, "If there's no one there, or they're unconnected, then it won't matter. But if someone *is* reading that, and they *are* connected to Pansy's attack, then they *should* be afraid. Everyone else in the school is because of them. It's only fair."

They agreed to start their research into the book's owner the next day. Draco would approach a professor about researching the generation-gap fluctuation, a phenomenon that he assure Rigel was currently a hot-topic among society circles, in order to get a pass for looking at the records. They would start with those currently attending school, and work backwards, in case the journal (or pair of journals) had been handed down from a parent or grandparent. Eventually, when they had a list of all those the journal could belong to, they would begin narrowing. It would take some time, as there were a lot of purebloods with 'R' last names, but it was all they could do, until they found enough evidence to take to a professor.

Rigel stored the book in her bag for both accessibility and safe keeping. Eventually, after many uneasy and worried looks between the two of them, they went to sleep, trying not to think about Pansy lying frozen as a statue in the Hospital Wing, unable to do the same.

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The next day at breakfast, Rigel was again subject to a number of sidelong glances. Normally, she would endeavor to ignore them, but there was something non-malevolent about them that made her quietly ask Theo and Millicent if they knew the reason.

Millicent grimaced and stabbed at her sausage a bit vindictively, "They've changed their minds. Now that a Slytherin has been attacked, and one of your best friends besides, no one thinks you're the one doing it anymore."

Rigel raised her eyebrows in disbelief, "Just like that?"

Blaise snorted into his breakfast with no small amount of disgust, "Yes. Just like that. Your friend gets hurt, and that's all they see. What happened to all their other evidence-the Parseltongue, the caught-at-the-scene thing, the overall suspicious character of the

accused? I suppose they think villains are incapable of throwing suspicion by attacking their own friends. Idiots."

Theo shot him a pointed look, "Unless you're trying to convince people that Rigel did it, shut up and accept their newfound sympathy."

"Besides," Draco said loudly, "Rigel was at the lake in full view of half the school when Pansy was attacked. That's pretty heavy evidence in favor of his innocence."

Blaise acquiesced, though he did mutter darkly, "As if anyone even thought of it like that. If they're going to be prats, they ought to at least be logical about it. It's this sort of half-complete thinking that made them suspect Rigel in the first place."

"What do you expect?" Millicent shrugged.

"I just wish they'd learn, or something," Blaise said ungraciously.

"People never learn," Draco said, a bit scathingly, "That's why politicians can get away with using the same lies and tricks over and over again. Individually, people can be formidable, but collectively they have the learning curve of a goldfish."

Rigel reflected privately that that statement, while somewhat unfairly underestimating a society's impetus for change, nevertheless had a noticeable vein of truth running through it. It explained why the same mistakes were repeated many times over in history. It was an odd contradiction: a society's collective social memory could be long enough to preserve downright archaic traditions and belief, but also short enough to run itself through the same cycles of tradition, rebellion, change, resistance, regression, and rebellion over and over again. As though people wanted at once move forward and to remain the same, and so the world changed, but it never really *learned* .

That evening Rigel and Draco began meticulously combing through the class records that Draco's rather convincing acting had given them access to. Rigel still had to fight a small smile when she remembered Draco's earnest face as he spoke to Professor Flitwick about the research he needed to conduct on "a dangerous trend currently rising in the wizarding community."

"At the turn of the century, purebloods were waiting an average of twenty years longer than they had in earlier times to get married and have children," Draco had explained seriously, "Waiting longer benefits the families in the long run, because couples are more mature when they decide to marry, are more likely to find the marriage amenable, and raise their Heirs in a more stable environment as a result. In the last fifty years, however, there's been an alarming reversal in this modern mindset. Purebloods are marrying sooner, some right out of school, producing Heirs faster, sometimes recklessly have more children than they could ever possibly need." Rigel knew that statement to be a dig at the Weasley family, and Flitwick probably did too, from the way he frowned slightly at the words. Draco hurried on, "I think it's because the pressure of the declining magical population is coming to bear, but I want to go through the records and see if any other events correspond to the decreasing generation gap."

Needless to say, Flitwick granted Draco the permission slip.

They had ruled out the students in years 1-4 and were working through the class of students that entered the school five years ago when they were interrupted by a very wane-looking Ginny Weasley. Her hair was pulled away from her face in an impatient knot, and her hands shook slightly as she brushed a loose strand behind her ear.

"Rigel," she said, her voice unusually subdued, "I was hoping..." she glanced at Draco, wincing despite the studiously non-confrontational look on Draco's face, and blurted, "I need some help, I think, and I

don't know who else might know a way to-to-" she stuttered to a stop. Her face paled several degrees, and Rigel followed Ginny's line of sight to where he gaze had landed-on the small leather book in her bag, the spine of which was just visible through the open gap where she'd reached in for a quill a minute earlier.

Rigel was confused at the fear in Ginny's eyes as they darted from the journal, to Rigel's face, and back again, but then it dawned on her.

"I know what you're-" Rigel began, but Ginny, with a stricken look on her face, turned and fled the Library completely. Her brother, Percy, called out from his table some distance away, then cursed and grabbed another prefect to follow her out as she continued to run.

"We'll escort her back!" Percy called over his shoulder, "Someone take my things back-no, Fred, not you!"

Several people laughed, and others murmured with vague interest, but most went back to their studying.

Draco raised an elegant eyebrow, "That was weird even for a Weasley."

Rigel frowned slightly, "I was going to tell her it wasn't what she was thinking. I bet she thought it was one of Fred or George's notebooks-they look a lot like this one. She ran before I had the chance, though." Rigel shook her head, "Those two have a consistently alarming effect on their siblings. I did think Ginny was past that, though. I'm sure I saw her with one of the twins' notebooks at some point."

"Maybe it cursed her, and the fear was re-instilled," Draco said dismissively, "Who cares? We have work to do."

He turned back to the records, and Rigel did the same, though with slightly more hesitance. She hadn't even heard what Ginny needed

help with. Well, maybe Percy could help his sister instead. She had to focus on helping Pansy.

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That evening, she spent what was possibly her most uncomfortable session with Professor Snape to date.

Snape had been less than pleased to hear from Selwyn that Rigel traversed the short distance from the Lab to the common room alone after their last session, even though there was no way she could have anticipated being sent back early. As such, he had arranged her escort himself this time, and went so far as to make the prefect wait quietly in the corner of the lab the entire time they worked, just in case they ended at a different time than expected.

Rigel felt rather guilty about causing the prefect so much additional trouble, and didn't fully understand why Snape hadn't just suspended their research sessions until further notice. He worked with fervor on the modified Aconite Alleviation, endlessly changing ingredients and measurements in a struggle to find a combination that worked the effects he desired. Most of the ingredients they worked with were experimental. They were either hybrids of naturally existing plants or else artificially cultivated in certain experimental conditions, such as growing them in magically charged soils.

In this age, new potion improvements were rarely the result of a new combination of old materials. Most known ingredients had had their usages virtually exhausted by the many generations of potions masters, but botanical experimentation was as strictly monitored by the ministry as magical creature breeding was, so this was Rigel's first experience with as of yet unregistered ingredients. Snape didn't seem inclined to introduce her to the subject, in any case.

He snapped directions at her without explanation and changed the instructions at a moment's notice depending on what the potion was doing at the time, again without explanation. Most of what she was doing was ingredient prep and imbuing, and most of what she was learning was through observation alone. Still, it was invigorating work, made more so by Snape's fervent devotion to it. It was as if he worked to a deadline, which was a ridiculous thought, as no Potions Master worth his cauldron would be pressured by such a menial demand.

Rigel observed carefully as Snape began to add the bitterroot to the bottom half of the mixture. He funneled it into the tube, which itself ensured the smooth addition of the ingredient to the bottom layer of the potion, and Rigel narrowed her eyes in concentration as Snape held a hand to the side of the cauldron, not touching it, just hovering near it. There was a transparency charm on the cauldron so that they could see what the bottom half of the potion was doing, and as Snape held his hand beside the cauldron's base the bottom half of the water began to churn gently.

Rigel knew it was wandless magic, a very controlled, careful sort of wandless magic, but she wanted to figure out how exactly Snape directed the magic into the cauldron before she attempted it on her own. It seemed as if he pushed the magic through the cauldron itself and into the second layer of the potion. He must have extraordinary delicate control to affect the liquid in the bottom half of the cauldron without upsetting the layer of linseed oil separating it from the top half.

She still wasn't sure how he got the magic to go through the cauldron without affecting the cauldron, though. Most wandless magic was of the direct kind of magic, the kind that affected the first thing it touched. It took specific, delicate spell work to go through an object and effect changes of the other side of it, usually. Perhaps he was practicing a specific spell, but silently and without a wand? But no, if it could be cast with a wand, he would surely use one, as Snape was not the type to waste magic. This looked much closer to

what Remus had done when he moved the raft in Grimmauld Place across the water. Elemental wandless magic.

But how was he getting the magic through the cauldron? Rigel could feel herself becoming frustrated with her own lack of understanding, but she did not think these sessions with Snape were for her to ask endless amounts of-

"Are you ever going to ask me how to execute this step, or are you content to glare at that cauldron with what some would call disproportionate enmity for the rest of your existence?" Snape interrupted her brooding stare with his usual talent for making her feel like a novice who'd never heard of ingredient gradation.

"I am loath to interrupt your inventing process," Rigel confessed, "After our session, I would appreciate it if you could refer me to a book that explains this process, however."

Snape shot her an unamused look over the cauldron, "Ask your questions, Black, and let it not be said that one of Severus Snape's assistants learned Indirect Stirring from a secondary source."

Rigel took Snape at his word.

"Is that what it's called?" she asked, "Indirect Stirring?"

"Yes," Snape said, "It is the most successful method of stirring a potion you cannot access with a stirring rod. Other attempts at the same effect include Determined Stirring, which involves the use of a pre-charmed stone placed into the bottom of a cauldron before the potion is begun. The charmed stone will vibrate at prescribed intervals, in effect 'stirring' the cauldron. The drawback is that the intervals at which the stone vibrates cannot be changed once the potion is begun, making for an extremely strict timeline, and the vibrations are not always enough to truly disperse ingredients as they require."

He moved his hand away and added another ingredient to the top of the cauldron, stirred four times counterclockwise, then continued speaking, "Another method is Pre-Stirring. In this method, the potioneer attempts to essentially disperse the ingredients before they are added to the bottom layer. He dissolves them first into a neutral base of some sort, then adds that base to the bottom layer." Rigel frowned, and Snape smirked slightly, "As you have already deduced, this not only needlessly exacerbates a potion's complexity, it also frequently proves untenable, as many bases which are neutral in the presence of some ingredients are decidedly not neutral when added with others."

"Why are these methods used at all, then?" Rigel asked, "Is it because some potionneers don't bother to learn wandless magic?"

Snape's voice was neutral as he spoke, which immediately put Rigel on edge-Snape only bothered to be 'neutral' when he was fishing for an honest answer from her, unbiased by his own attitude on the subject. "You are of the opinion, then, that wandless magic is something learned, and not an inborn talent?"

Rigel couldn't help but frown at that question, "Of course it is something learned. It is a way of doing magic, not a different kind of magic in itself. Moreover, it is a more basic way of doing magic-elementally-rather than a more complicated, pre-set pattern encoded into a person's magic, as talents usually are. No one is born able to perform wandless magic, so it is reasonable to assume it must be learned."

Snape tilted his head with what Rigel knew was a fake show of consideration, "Perhaps wandless magic is connected to power, and, although learned, can only be taught to wizards with innately larger magical cores."

Rigel shook her head, "My Uncle Remus can do wandless magic, and his core is only a bit above average. It seems to be about control, more than power. Though that doesn't explain how children can do it..."

Snape shook his head dismissively, "Children perform accidental magic, which is considerably different from conscious, wandless magic. You are correct-true wandless magic depends entirely on control. It does not surprise me to learn that Lupin is sufficient at the skill-a... man in his position would know much about control."

As that was positively diplomatic as far as Snape's usual attitude toward Rigel's family went, she simply inclined her head, "So why do all potioners not learn how to use Indirect Stirring?"

Snape sneered, "For the same reason not all wizards learn how to construct their own defensive wards. They can get by hiring a Ward Master to construct wards for them, or else depend on the wards their ancestors erected in ages passed, and even though their wards would be safer and more effective if they had a thorough understanding of how to upkeep, add to, and modify them, they get on well enough without knowing, and no one ever forces them to learn. The number of potions that truly require Indirect Stirring are relatively few, and the number that could be enhanced by Indirect Stirring... well, as long as a potion works, what matter the potency or the wastefulness of prescribing a patient two doses of mediocre potion when one dose of a proper one would do?"

Rigel could feel her mouth gaping slightly open in outrage, but was too busy being *outraged* to do anything about it, "That's awful! What kind of-where's the pride in their work? In their field? How can they call themselves potioners while demonstrating such slipshod, half-brewed, *lazy*, unmitigated incompetence? How can the Guild stand for such a thing? It's a black stain on the name of potion-brewers everywhere. It's-it's-"

The sight of Snape's satisfied smirk brought her slamming back to herself, and she shut up before she could embarrass herself further. The prefect standing awkwardly in the corner, whom upon closer inspection Rigel recognized as Fairister, the one who'd been with Pansy when she was attacked, was staring at her with an entirely bemused expression. She supposed he'd never seen someone flip out like a fanatic at their Head of House before.

"My apologies, Sir," Rigel said, looking down at the cauldron sheepishly, "I became rather carried away with my opinion."

"I find it immensely gratifying to know that I am not wasting my expertise on someone who condones laziness in potion-brewing," Snape reassured her somewhat smugly, "Your pride and adamancy does you credit, though the... expression of these traits could be tempered a degree or two."

Rigel simply nodded, once more in control of her personality, "Will you please instruct me in Indirect Stirring, Professor Snape? I would like to remedy my own incompetence as expediently as possible."

"And this, Mr. Fairister, is why a man like me becomes a professor to school children," Snape said sardonically, smirking briefly at the prefect rather than answering Rigel's request right away, "A second-year boy so disgusted with the thought of ignorance that he gnaws at the bit to diminish it. The rest of your generation could learn a thing or two from Rigel Black."

Rigel felt a flush coming on, and beat it back relentlessly, saying flatly, "If you have finished your joke at my expense, I believe you meant to add the poppy milk next."

Snape's eyes flashed with a dark warning, even as his lips still twitched with a smirk at the edges. Nevertheless, he added the poppy milk with due haste.

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Rigel was let go a bit later than usual that night, with a promise that in their next session Snape would begin the basics of Indirect Stirring, which of course meant beginning the basics of wandless magic. That night, she merely assisted Snape with the combinations he had already planned for them to work on.

By the time the prefect was given leave to escort her back to the common room, Rigel's magical core was feeling strained. They had gone through four different combinations that evening, each more magically draining than the last. If Rigel thought the original Aconite Alleviation was magically exhausting, it was nothing to the additional demand adding unstable combinations of ingredients produced. She had to load the potions with magic just to keep them from collapsing-or worse, exploding-and that in addition to the magic necessary to support and enhance the intended effects.

Still, it was a satisfied feeling in her gut, as well as an empty one, as though she had just run a mile. Her magical core felt content, and Rigel supposed this kind of exercise was probably good for it. With sudden suspicion, she wondered if that wasn't another reason Snape chose her to help him with his research. It would be just like her Head of House to do a thing for as many reasons as possible; he was nothing if not economical with his actions.

Fairister walked quietly beside her for a short time, and Rigel felt she ought to apologize for keeping him so late. She opened her mouth to say, "I'm sorry," but the older prefect beat her to it.

"Forgive me," Fairister said suddenly, stopping to look down at her.

Rigel blinked up at him. "That should be my line," she said, "As it is on my account that you are kept from your other responsibilities so long."

Fairister shook his head sharply, "Protecting younger students like yourself *is* one of my responsibilities, just as it was yesterday. I'm very sorry that Miss Parkinson came to harm under my care."

"I don't think anyone expects you or the other prefects to protect us in that way," Rigel said quietly, "It is a basilisk we're supposed to be in danger from, after all. I think your presence is supposed to be a deterrent, that's all. Whoever is doing this seems to like her victims alone and unaware."

Fairister frowned curiously, "Her? Why do you say-"

A red light whooshed past Rigel's right shoulder and collided with the right side of Fairister's chest. He fell backwards to the hard stone, his face relaxed into utter unconsciousness.

"Normally you'd be right, little snake; I do prefer the strays, but... one makes do."

That voice.

Rigel spun to face her attacker, her hand going toward the pocket by her hip, for once utterly sure she would find her wand there. She wasn't fast enough.

"I don't think so," her attacker smirked as ropes sprung from her wand and encircled Rigel's arms and torso like snakes.

"Ginny," Rigel panted, struggling against the ropes, "Why are you doing this?"

Ginny Weasley sneered at Rigel, the ugly expression absolutely alien on the girl's round, freckled face. "Time enough for that later. Unfortunately I can't do this here-the price of attacking a prefect, you know."

"No, I don't know what you mean," Rigel said. Keeping the enemy talking was the very first thing an Auror learned how to do, and James Potter had taught his daughter enough to increase her chances, in case she found herself in a precarious situation. She didn't know why Ginny Weasley was suddenly an enemy, but she was determined to find out before long.

Ginny rewarded her with a scathing look, "All Slytherin prefects are subject to a spell that alerts the Slytherin Head of House if they are attacked in any way, magical or physical. Slytherins are easy to hate, you know, and so it has been tradition to give their prefects a little

extra protection against the other Houses' enmity. In this case, it's just annoying. Come along, little thorn. We haven't much time."

"Time for what?" Rigel asked, stepping away from Ginny as the redhead stepped toward her.

"For taking our time," Ginny chuckled darkly, "Ironically enough, we must make haste if I am to be afforded the leisure of doing so. Some things are better slow, are they not?"

"Yes," Rigel said politely, gathering her magic silently, "Many potions are ruined by a hasty hand. You are wise to take things slow sometimes."

Ginny narrowed her eyes, "I know I am. Shut up."

"All right," Rigel said agreeably. She released the burst of magic she'd gathered in her core, asking it to please unravel the ropes as fast as it could manage. It set to work immediately, fraying the ropes around her shoulders quickly. The ropes were half-eaten when Ginny, laughing, turned her wand in a corkscrew motion and then jabbed it at Rigel's torso.

Rigel felt her arms press up against her sides once more, but this time there was no rope. She could feel the barrier preventing her from lifting her arms, but she couldn't see anything when she looked down. Rigel directed her magic toward whatever it was, but it couldn't seem to find purchase, skating along her skin uncertainly, as if whatever was holding her arms to her side wasn't real, and couldn't be affected by her magic.

"Don't bother," Ginny said, a bored look on her face, "I've enclosed you in a shield charm just your size-clever, yes? It's smoother than serpent skin, and tighter than a spider's weave. You can send whatever magic you like at me-it won't get past the shield, and if you try anything really nasty it'll explode in your face."

Rigel glared at Ginny, and tried sending her magic down toward her toes. Perhaps she could go under the-her magic positively *whined* at her as it was denied. She pushed her magic out again, paying close attention to her limits. It seemed to be able to reach her feet, but unable to move beyond her body, as though it were trapped against her skin.

At the frown on her face, Ginny laughed again, "Did you think I'd only put it on your arms? Fool. The spell around your arms is a different one-localized binding spell. Or didn't you notice I had cast two spells in a row?"

Rigel hadn't noticed, though the jabbing motion attached to the end of the corkscrew one had, in retrospect, probably been a good clue. She settled for blanking her face, content to at least deny Ginny the satisfaction of her frustration. Ginny leveled her wand at Rigel again, and before Rigel had time to flinch, she was floating along behind Ginny like a bizarrely postured ghost.

Rigel bided her time, every now and then sending her magic to different parts of her body, probing the shield for weaknesses. There were none, but she kept at it as Ginny led them up, away from the dungeons. They were approaching the Entrance Hall, and the Main Stair. Rigel smirked. Ginny had neglected to silence her, and Rigel was not going to remind her of that fact until she could get the most out of it.

When they passed through the silent Entrance Hall, meeting no one, much to Rigel's dismay, she knew that the stairs were her best chance. She kept silent until they had reached the first landing, and then shouted as loudly and piercingly as she could, "HELP ME! HEL-

"

"Salazar take you!" Ginny spat, silencing Rigel's shouts with a swipe of her wand, "You little brat, I'll have your-"

"WHO'S THERE?"

A voice came from several floors above them, echoing back down the stairwell clear as crystal. Rigel couldn't suppress the grim smile on her face. Ginny slapped her across the cheek with the back of her hand, and Rigel's head snapped to the side with the force of it. A moment later, a memory hit her with equal force-a memory of being blind, slapped in just the same way, by a mysterious attacker with long hair and a disdainful way of speaking.

Ginny was the one who'd attacked her all those months ago. Ginny, the girl who she'd been trying to help learn Occlumency, had been playing her for a fool all along.

No sooner had this realization dawned than Ginny began to run up the stairs, towing Rigel quickly behind her with a levitation spell. Rigel jerked along after her wildly, as though the increase in speed had greatly diminished Ginny's control over the spell.

Ginny reached the second floor landing within moments and darted down the second floor corridor. She was taking a route Rigel recognized with growing incredulity. They were headed straight for the girl's bathroom-Myrtle's bathroom. Ginny slammed the door behind them and blocked it impatiently with a hastily constructed ward.

"No time, no time," she muttered, "Old fool won't be far behind." The redhead turned to the sinks in the middle of the bathroom with a sinister smile, "But it won't matter. Not even he has power where we'll be going."

Ginny tilted her head, staring intently at one of the faucets. Rigel squinted to see what she was looking at, and could just barely make out a squiggle-like shape on one side of the spout when Ginny said, " *Open* ." But she did not speak the word.

She hissed it.

Rigel was sure she would have gasped, if the silencing charm had not still been in place. Ginny spoke Parseltongue. She was the

second Parselmouth, the one who had been setting the basilisk loose on the students. The basilisk, which probably lived at the bottom of the very large hole that was currently expanding in the center of the floor. Rigel could only surmise, judging by the manically determined glint in Ginny's eye, that she was in very, very big trouble.

Ginny motioned with her wand, and Rigel's form floated over the lip of the hole. As she tried not to think about being suspended by wand-point over a bottomless pit by a psychotic eleven-year-old in a girl's bathroom of all places, Rigel caught a glimpse of white vapor peaking through the crack of one of the stall doors, and then a transparent head poking through it.

Myrtle.

She kept her face blank, but begged Myrtle with her eyes to go, to tell someone what she'd seen, to help her. Myrtle's eyes were wide and frightened, but she nodded once before ducking her head back into her stall as silently as she'd popped it out.

"Don't bother with the pleading expression," Ginny said, smirking, "You should be honored. You'll be the first Slytherin in fifty years to see Salazar's Chamber of Secrets. See you at the bottom. If you're still alive."

The Gryffindor flicked her wand down sharply, and then Rigel was falling, swift and silent, into the darkness.

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Myrtle was not afraid, exactly. She knew that she was dead, and that hardly anything in the world was a danger to one such as her, and it

was not a fear of pain or injury that held her, huddling in her toilet like an abandoned child.

It was that girl. Petite, because wouldn't she have to be? Long, beautiful red hair that probably never curled a day in its life. Pretty, pert nose; cute, little freckles; skin as fair as any storybook princess could ever hope to have. That girl with her confident expression, straight posture, cold eyes. Myrtle felt alive again-alive and miserable, trembling with fear, because any second that girl would turn and see her, sneer, laugh, and let slip a nasty jeer if her friends were near enough to appreciate the taunt. She was nauseated, and if she had a body it would be sweating profusely. Any moment the redhead would find her-hiding in a stall never helped for long. The other girls knew where she liked to hide by now. They would find her, take her books, tear her robes, pull her hair. They would laugh, and douse her with water from their wands, and then laugh some more.

" You think that straightening spell is fooling anyone, Myrtle?"

" What's with these robes? Pretending to be rich, are you? If you father had any real money he'd have fixed that face of yours."

" Nice glasses. You don't need them, do you? Oops-you'll have to fish them from the toilet, I guess."

" Ugly..."

" So pathetic."

" Always hiding away in here."

" No wonder she smells like shit."

" I hear she has... accidents. Can barely make it through a whole lesson without running to that bathroom."

" What a joke."

" Loser."

Myrtle shook her head so fiercely, but the voices wouldn't go away. She could feel herself crying, the water boiling around her-

Water. Toilet. Myrtle opened her eyes, and met the inside of the u-bend with a relieved sigh. She was dead. Those girls weren't there anymore. They couldn't hurt her now. She floated up into her stall, listening carefully. She didn't hear anything, so the ghost carefully poked her head through the door of her stall once again. There was nothing. Before, there had been a huge hole in her bathroom floor, but that was gone, too.

Maybe she had imagined the whole thing. Myrtle floated about, inspecting ever inch of her bathroom, but there was nothing out of place. It was as if the gaping pit where the sinks should be had never existed. But it had seemed so real. That girl with her pretty, pitiless eyes. The one who had thrown a book at her head-she was almost sure it was the same girl, though she'd been in the u-bend when it fell through her and had only seen the back of the girl's head as she ran off.

And that Black boy. He was so pretty, Myrtle thought with a smile, and he never laughed at her, or even called her names. He wasn't like the other boys. Myrtle floated around the sinks once more. She was sure she saw him being suspended over the hole by that wretched girl. He had looked at her, his big, pretty eyes so wide and imploring. Like he needed her. Like he believed in her.

Myrtle floated upright with a determined feeling in her chest. She wouldn't let him down. She would go to his common room. She was fairly certain she could access the pipes in the Slytherin dormitories by going through the kitchens and then looping through the dungeon drainage system... yes, she could do it. She ought to at least check and make sure she'd imagined it. If Black was in his common room, then at least she had a good excuse to see him again. If he wasn't... well, then he really *did* need her.

She dived quickly into the nearest toilet. *Don't worry, my prince. I'll save you!*

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Draco paced back and forth before one of the Slytherin fireplaces. Rigel was late. It was only twenty minutes, but that was a lifetime in terms of the amount of trouble Rigel Black seemed capable of stumbling across. Millicent and Theo tried to calm him down, but Draco wasn't in the mood to be placated, and Pansy was the only one good at it anyway. Blaise merely watched him pace, a taunting smirk at the edge of his mouth that made Draco want to throw one of the dark-skinned boy's shoes into the fireplace, just to watch his mouth gape open like a codfish.

Draco controlled himself, as the last thing he needed right now was a terse letter from his father about how Malfoy's did not set their companions' shoes on fire. No matter how annoyingly they were smirking. Draco would be very surprised, however, if his father had never experienced a similar urge. He had been friends with Uncle Severus for a couple of decades, after all.

Ten minutes later, Draco could feel his nerves stretching to the limit. Uncle Severus would never keep Rigel so late. It was now officially past curfew, and Draco could see Selwyn across the room checking her list of those who would be out of the common room on various business against those who had returned. When she turned to look at the second-years with a frown on her face, Draco allowed his face to frown back at her.

Selwyn walked over, her face tight, "Tell me Rigel Black snuck in when I wasn't looking."

"He has not yet returned," Draco said flatly, "Nor has Fairister, his escort."

Selwyn looked ready to curse. She strode sharply to the portrait of Salazar Slytherin, who was as usual observing the goings on in his common room with patient wariness. "Lord Slytherin, please inform our Head of House that Prefect Fairister and Rigel Black have not returned to the common room."

"He is aware," Slytherin's portrait said evenly, "The prefect's Monitoring Charm was compromised, and Master Snape informed me of his intention to investigate before leaving his office. He bade me explain the circumstances to you, Head Girl Selwyn, in the event that he did not return with the students before evening curfew began."

Selwyn did curse that time, and Draco could feel his face losing blood rapidly. If the prefect supposed to be protecting Rigel had been attacked, it didn't mean anything good for Rigel. He was about to ask Salazar if he'd heard anything from other portraits in the meantime, when his vision clouded over in white. It took him a moment to stop violently shuddering before he realized a ghost was floating nearly on top of him, obscuring his vision and setting a chill into his bones.

Draco stepped backwards rapidly to put some distance between the specter and himself, and blinked when he recognized the bespectacled ghost. "Myrtle?" he said, frowning, "What do you want this-"

"Where's Black?" the ghost interrupted impatiently. She seemed to be craning her neck to look about the common room, "Is he here?"

"No," Draco snapped, "He's not. He's in trouble-"

"I know!" The ghost looked almost triumphant as she spoke quickly, "I knew it wasn't a dream! I saw him-I saw Black being kidnapped!"

"Kidnapped?" Selwyn said sharply, "Explain."

The ghost looked around at Selwyn with wide eyes. Her chin wobbled, and then she caught sight of the other students in the

common room, all staring at her, waiting for her to continue. Myrtle blinked, smiled a bit nervously, and said, "Maybe I could tell you... somewhere else?"

Selwyn glanced around at the watching students and jerked her chin toward a corner of the common room. She frowned but didn't protest when Draco walked over with her, merely erected a privacy ward and bade the ghost continue her report.

"It happened in my bathroom. I saw the whole thing. That girl kidnapped my-I mean, *Black* . She had him levitating, his arms all stuck to his sides, over this big, black hole. She dropped him into it! It was..." the ghost paused to take a shuddering breath, " *Horrible* ."

Draco would have killed the girl, if she weren't already dead. How dare she look thrilled when Rigel's life was in danger?

"There isn't any giant black hole in your bathroom," Selwyn said with a serious expression.

"The girl opened it in the floor," Myrtle said, "She slammed the door so loud coming in that I heard it down in the u-bend, so of course I came up to see what the fuss was about. She was talking to herself, too. Quite mad, I'm sure."

"Who is she?" Selwyn asked urgently.

"No idea," the ghost had the nerve to shrug at them, "She wasn't really that pretty. Stumpy, too. Probably a midget."

"What kind of robes did she have on?" Selwyn said through gritted teeth.

Myrtle frowned in concentration, "Gryffindor... I think. I might just be remembering wrong because of the red hair-tacky, if you ask me. I bet she dyes it."

Draco could see the exact shade of red swimming before his eyes as his mind sharpened in realization. " *Weasley*," he hissed, "That evil, lying *bint* ."

"You don't know for sure-" Selwyn began, but Draco cut her off.

"She was acting so strangely around Rigel," he said, becoming angrier with each word he spoke, "And Rigel was trying to help her, and she was the one who-who-" he let out a grown in frustration, "What else happened? Where was Fairister?"

Myrtle blinked at him in confusion, "Who? It was just the girl and Black. She came in, all crazy and ugly, and started hissing all of a sudden, and then there was just this huge black hole that went down, down, down with no end in sight. She levitated Black over the edge of the hole and just... dropped him. I couldn't watch. When I looked back, the hole was gone, and so was the girl. Then I came here to tell someone."

"Why would Weasley drop Rigel down a giant hole?" Selwyn asked, somewhat skeptically, from the couch.

"She said she was taking him to see the Chamber of Secrets," Myrtle said, shrugging.

Draco and Selwyn both inhaled sharply. Salazar Slytherin's portrait seemed to be frozen in shock. The next moment, the founder's expression melted into a snarl, and he disappeared from his portrait before anyone could stop him.

"For the love of- *Expecto Patronum*," Selwyn enunciated clearly, a scowl on her face. A silver wolf sprang from her wand tip, and Draco was quite impressed she could cast a patronus while so obviously upset. She must have very strong force of will. "Message for Professor Snape. According to ghost intelligence Rigel Black has been kidnapped by another Parselmouth, and taken to the girl's lavatory on the second floor. The second Parselmouth is possibly a young girl with red hair, and reportedly opened a passage of some

kind within the bathroom before closing it once more. The passage is said to lead to the Chamber of Secrets."

The patronus sprang swiftly away, carrying Selwyn's message with it. Draco clenched his fist, but he knew there was nothing he could do at this point. Uncle Severus would save Rigel. All Draco could do was wait.

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Minerva McGonagall was almost finished grading a particularly disappointing stack of third-year essays when the silver phoenix flew through her office wall to hover before her. Her heart clenched automatically. Albus never sent a patronus with an invitation to tea. The phoenix's presence meant danger, immediate and pressing.

"Come to the girl's lavatory on the second floor," the phoenix said with the Headmaster's voice. Minerva could honestly say she had never expected to hear that particular sentence uttered through the Headmaster's patronus. At the added, "A student needs our help," however, she summoned her wand in a blink and only paused to fling open the door before transforming into her Animagus form.

As a tabby cat, she was swift and silent, like a ghost herself as she ran through the familiar corridors. When she rounded the corner and caught sight of the girl's bathroom, she was compelled to change back smoothly in order to demand an explanation from those standing quite uselessly in its doorway.

"What has happened?" Minerva asked, looking to Albus as she said it, though she noted the presence of Severus and Pomona as well.

The Headmaster turned his wizened face to hers, and the look in his eye was not one she would ever find comfort in. It was a hard look, a

serious look, and Albus only wore it when someone he'd meant to protect was in very real trouble.

"Rigel Black has been kidnapped, Minerva," Albus said gravely, "The trail ends here."

"I heard him call out for help," Pomona said sadly, "I was up on the sixth floor, but his cry echoed up the Main Stair. Clever lad. I rushed down immediately, and heard one set of footsteps go down this corridor. I sensed the ward on this bathroom immediately, and set about tearing it down. It was short work, but when I opened the door there was no one inside. I thought I had been tricked, the ward put up as a decoy to shake me off, until Severus appeared."

Minerva looked to Severus, who was glaring viciously at everything-including her, for some reason.

"Mr. Black's escort, Prefect Fairister, was attacked as they made their way back from my laboratory," Severus said. His voice was rough with impatience as he listed events as succinctly as possible, "I found Fairister stunned in the dungeons, but no sign of Black. I levitated Fairister to my office, sealed the wards for his protection after informing Salazar's portrait of the situation, and began a sweep of the dungeons. Not long after, I was met with the Head Girl's patronus. According to Selwyn, a ghost reported Black as having been kidnapped in this very bathroom. The account is brief, but suggests the kidnapper to be a Parselmouth-likely the one behind the petrifications as well. According to this ghost's testimony, Black was taken through a passage of some kind, which was then resealed behind the kidnapper. The passage purportedly leads to the Chamber of Secrets, but we are as yet unable to locate it."

"Did the ghost say who was responsible?" Minerva asked, a hand going unconsciously to her throat.

"Oh yes," Severus snarled, "A *Gryffindor* girl with red hair."

Minerva flinched, and did not allow herself to feel hurt when Severus' lip curled in satisfaction. "I see," she said, "Then the threat is a student-"

Albus interrupted with a sharp shake of his head, "A Parselmouth in Gryffindor? Unlikely-"

"Do *not* attempt to gloss over this, Albus," Severus said sharply, "The report clearly implicated-"

"My dear boy, I am certain that there is indeed a young Gryffindor involved in all of this," Albus said calmly, "But I am equally certain that she is as much as victim as Rigel Black. There is one other Parselmouth whose hand in these happenings cannot be doubted."

"And you believe *his* instrument of choice to be Ginerva Weasley?" Severus spat, "He has no access to her-"

"Enough!" Pomona shouted. The short herbologist glared around at them all, "There is at least one, possibly two students in very real danger right now, and you will not stand here arguing like hens if I have anything to say about it. Albus, how do we uncover the passage?"

The Headmaster shook his head slowly, "If it was indeed accessed by Parselmagic, it will take some time."

"Well, get started, then," Pomona said, puffing up like an offended saberlion.

Dumbledore led the way inside the small, flooded bathroom. The water soaked the ends of their robes, dragging at their steps as all four of them walked the room from top to bottom, each seeking with their senses any sign of a passageway.

It was Severus who found the snake engraved on the side of one of the taps, but even with that point of reference, neither she nor

Pomona could sense even the slightest magical trace of the wards and spells they knew must be layered before their eyes.

"They don't call it being Slytherin for nothing," Pomona muttered darkly, "I can't sense a blessed thing. Severus?"

Severus had his eyes narrowed in concentration, "There is something familiar in the air here, but whether it is connected to the passageway..." he shook his head with disgust, "I cannot be certain."

"Could it be young Mr. Black's magic you sense?" Pomona suggested, "A child gives off quite an aura when afraid, as I understand it."

"No," Severus said stiffly, "Black has no aura, and I have only analyzed his core the once. I would not be familiar enough with his magic even in the unlikely event that he was discharging it."

"The... other student's magic, then?" Minerva asked, not quite able to say 'Gryffindor student' aloud. Severus' eyes mocked her for her weakness as he answered.

"It is Dark," the Potions Master said flatly, "Miss Weasley's magic would not match, even were I familiar with it. No, this magic I have sensed before. Often, I suspect, though it is too faint to place."

"Faintness should not affect the magic's signature," Albus commented lightly.

Severus scowled, "I know that. The residue is familiar, and yet not. As though the magic I ought to recognize has been changed somehow, twisted or blended into something half-way unrecognizable."

"Could it be *his* ?" Albus pressed, "Imagine it working through a child's magic. Could it be a combination of his magic and... the student's?"

"How can I know such a thing?" Severus snapped. He paused at the look in Albus' eyes, and sighed, "Perhaps, Albus, though I know not how even he would work such a thing. It could as easily be Salazar's magic I sense, however. Perhaps I am familiar with it merely as the Slytherin Head of House, living as I do in his chambers, labs, and offices."

"Will it be of any use re-opening the passage, though?" Pomona wondered aloud.

"Why don't you just blast open the floor?"

They all turned to see the ghost, Myrtle, or Moaning Myrtle as Minerva believed some of the students called her, sticking her head curiously out of a stall at them. "It seems easier than trying to make the floor open up again," Myrtle shrugged.

"Unfortunately that won't do any good," Pomona said gently, "Below this bathroom is the first floor. There is no actual tunnel underneath our feet. Rather, a porthole of sorts is grounded in this bathroom. The passageway is folded space, and exists in a dimension that crosses through our own, but only at two points, here and wherever the passage leads. It's a shortcut of sorts to another place entirely. A bit like holding the space a wizard might apparate through open eternally, but only making it accessible under certain circumstances. Usually a trick or spell that triggers the wards concealing the porthole. In this case, it is likely to be a password, but one which can only be spoken in Parseltongue."

Myrtle blinked behind her glasses, utterly perplexed, "But what if blasting the sinks apart triggered the porthole?"

"That is unlikely," Minerva said sharply, "In fact, destroying the physical grounding point on this end would probably render the passage entirely unusable, trapping whoever is beyond it indefinitely."

Myrtle's eyes went wide, "Ooh. So you're all going to... guess the password?"

"As none of us speaks the tongue of snakes, that course of action isn't likely to do us much good," Snape snapped, eyes flashing, "If you have nothing useful to add, please be silent while we attempt to unravel Salazar Slytherin's not inconsiderable wards."

"Provided we can locate them," Pomona muttered sourly, "I can't sense a single discrepancy, not one trace of a ward or concealing charm, even when I know the air must be thick with them."

"Myrtle, if you would be so kind, please find Professor Flitwick and direct him here," Albus said, "We may be in need of his expertise."

Myrtle sent them all a disappointed pout, but zoomed off dutifully through a wall.

"And now to work," Albus said, turning his wand on the taps, "If we cannot sense the magic concealing the passage, we must attempt to provoke the magic into revealing itself. Please cast any revealing charms you can think of. Probing charms, analysis charms, anything that might trigger a latent defensive spell into action. Salazar would surely have protected his passageway somehow, in case someone came too close to his secrets."

"We should attempt this one at a time, then," Minerva said briskly, wand at the ready, "So that the ones not casting can be prepared for any surprises Slytherin's defenses send in response."

The other three agreed, and they set to work.

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Eternal blackness, Rigel reflected, turned out to be a lot less eternal than advertised. She fell for approximately half a second, and then she was on something that was a bit like the ground, only it crunched when she moved her feet experimentally. The spell on her arms had not lifted, and neither had the silencing charm, so she couldn't even hear her own grunts as she squirmed herself into an upright position.

A moment later, Ginny landed in a crouch next to her, sensible school shoes cracking the small bones littering the ground around them with ease. They looked like rat bones, but there were also a few other, larger-mammal bones mixed in by the looks of it. She recognized rabbit ribs, bat wings, and a few spinal columns that might have come from deer, but she had only used deer bones in a potion once, so she couldn't be sure.

"Welcome," Ginny said, gesturing grandly to the oversized sewage tunnel they were sitting in, "To the Chamber of Secrets."

Rigel looked around with raised eyebrows. Perhaps Ginny was more crazy than evil, after all.

Ginny flicked her wand and Rigel was levitated once more. She floated along docilely behind the first-year as Ginny began walking steadily through the tunnels. Ginny didn't speak to her along the way, so Rigel was left to memorize the route in silence, and set her mind to figuring out as much of this mess as she could.

Ginny was apparently a Parselmouth. Ignoring the obvious problems with that phenomenon, it seemed reasonable to conclude that Ginny had been the one to petrify all those other students by controlling the basilisk. Ginny was also the one to attack Rigel all those months ago, probably to get her hands on belladonna, so that she could kill the roosters. Ginny was likely the one who had thrown the diary at Myrtle, since Rigel didn't recall her being at the lake then, which meant that Ginny was connected to the journal in some way. That explained why Ginny panicked when she saw that Rigel had the journal, and why she decided to attack Rigel, likely fearing that Rigel knew everything.

There were too many things it didn't explain, though. It didn't explain why Ginny had tried to get rid of the diary, since she didn't seem to be getting cold feet at the moment. It also didn't explain why she would attack people in the first place. Ginny had no motive, as far as Rigel knew, to attack all of those students. Riddle was the one who gained from the attacks, and Rigel had heard him as good as say that he was the one... who...

Riddle. Tom Marvolo Riddle.

Rigel wanted to slap herself. TMR-could it get any more obvious? They weren't a student's initials, they were the initials of one of the most powerful people in the wizarding world. How could she have missed it? So the journal had a connection to Riddle. That meant Ginny... worked for Riddle? Surely not. She was eleven, and far too young to have decided what political affiliation to support. And then there was the Parseltongue. True, it had showed up fairly randomly in Rigel, but the Potters could have gotten it from the Black's, who had married in a Parseltongue or two throughout the ages. As far as Rigel knew, the Weasley's had never introduced the gift anywhere near their line.

After thinking things over, she decided she was more confused than ever, and gave it up as a bad job. She should focus on getting out of this situation first, and then try and figure out what it all meant.

They turned a corner in the network of sewers, and came before a great seal. It was obviously a mechanism of some kind, and Rigel suspected it was a door.

Sure enough, Ginny hissed out an, " *Open*," and the stone unlocked itself and moved aside, revealing a cavernous hall, easily twice the size of the Great Hall, and lit by an eerie green light that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere at the same time.

"Well?" Ginny asked expectantly, "What do you think, little snake?"

Rigel lifted an eyebrow, and Ginny chuckled indulgently. She seemed much more relaxed now that they were isolated so far below (presumably) the school, "Ah, yes. Allow me." With a flick of her wand-and how on earth was Ginny so proficient with silent casting?-the silencing spell on Rigel fell away.

"I think Slytherin's passwords are a bit unoriginal," Rigel said honestly.

Ginny smirked, "Yes, that's right. You can understand the serpent tongue too, can't you Mr. Black? What a special moment this is, two Parselmouths meeting face to face-well, sort of." She chuckled again, an indulgent, condescending sound that reminded Rigel of someone she'd met before. "In any case, don't you want to know why I've brought you here?"

Rigel looked around the great, empty room. It was sort of sad, really, all this space just collecting dust. This was Salazar's great Chamber of Secrets? It was almost disappointing.

"Well?" Ginny said impatiently. Rigel wasn't sure what the girl wanted from her. The redhead seemed to be in a grandstanding mood, which was an odd attitude for someone who went around petrifying and kidnapping students. Then again, she thought, remembering her encounter with one Lee Jordan, justification seemed to be important to people like that. As if they wanted you to understand why they did it. She supposed they wanted you to know that they had reasons for every seemingly unreasonable action.

"You've brought me here to petrify me, right?" Rigel guessed. It would fit the pattern.

"Oh, no," Ginny said, smiling smugly now that Rigel was playing along, "I petrified the others before they saw anything but my beauty's eyes. You... you know far too much to be petrified. The petrified ones wake up, you see."

"You could modify my memory," Rigel suggested grimly.

"Where's the fun in that?" Ginny asked coyly. She fingered the wand in her hand absently, almost thoughtfully, "I'm not sure I could, in any case. Obliviation is delicate work. At the moment I haven't the... control necessary to ensure a full memory wipe."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Rigel said, somewhat automatically. The conversation was beginning to feel a bit surreal.

Ginny laughed openly, "Oh, but you are amusing. She didn't tell me you were *amusing*, Black."

"She?" Rigel asked.

Ginny only smiled mysteriously, "Don't you have other questions, little snake?"

Rigel blinked, "Well, I'd like to know why you petrified all those kids. And Lockhart," she added as an afterthought.

Ginny blinked slowly, the smile melting away from her face. Her eyes were over-bright, like someone who'd taken too many doses of Poppy's Pleasure in one night. She had the same sort of half-glazed, intense look about her face, too. "That is a complicated question. There are answers, and then... there are *answers* ."

Rigel nodded thoughtfully, "Perhaps it would be better if you started at the beginning. I could ask questions as you go."

Ginny's mouth twisted into a semblance of a smirk again, "For a Slytherin you're awfully bad at subterfuge, Black. Basic hostage behavior: keep the bad guy talking until help arrives. It won't work. Not because I won't fall for it-I'll talk all you want. I'll answer every single one of your questions, satisfy your curiosity completely, and then answer questions whose answers you couldn't care less about. Do you know why? Because it doesn't matter how long I talk. No one is coming to save you."

Rigel wasn't sure if the universe was testing her or not. It seemed too much like an ironic taunt from Fate. Surely no one in the world was so arrogant, so ridiculously confident, as to spit in the face of Fate so blatantly. It wasn't asking to eat your own words. It was handing the universe the ingredients and then giving Fate a recipe for your own disaster.

Still, Rigel wasn't going to refuse a gift from the god of irony, if indeed Ginny Weasley was as insane as she appeared to be. "Why do you say that?" she asked, "Of course people will come looking for me."

"Look they will, but find you they certainly won't," Ginny said smugly, "No one but a Parselmouth can get into the Chamber of Secrets once it's sealed. Albus Dumbledore himself can stand at the entrance all day. He's not coming in until I open the passageway again."

"I could open the passageway," Rigel pointed out, "The password isn't very hard to remember."

"Amusing," Ginny said, though the sneer on her face belied her comment, "But unlikely. You'd have to get through me, and you're not in any position to pose a challenge."

Glancing down at herself-hands stuck to her sides and still hovering a foot off the ground under the influence of Ginny's levitation spell-Rigel had to concede that point, at least. Still, if she kept Ginny talking long enough, she would make a mistake. Talking might even be the mistake, if the Headmaster could in fact find a way to access the Chamber.

"Someone will notice you're gone eventually, though," Rigel said reasonably, "If you want to get away with this, you can't stay down here for very long with me."

Ginny tilted her head, "Someone will notice Ginny is gone, of course. I'm counting on it, in fact. Every good plan needs a scapegoat, you

know."

"So your plan is to pin the blame on... yourself?" Rigel was confused, and said so, adding, "That seems like the eventuality you'd want to avoid."

Ginny chuckled softly, "Yes, perhaps I should begin at the beginning. Everything will make sense to you, once you know the whole of it."

"I'm sure it will," Rigel said.

"Shut up," Ginny snapped, "Just listen."

She conjured a chair for herself to sit in, and with an errant flick of her wand dropped Rigel none-too-gently on the ground. Considering the amount of grime that had accumulated there, Rigel almost wished she was being levitated again.

"The story begins fifty years ago, in this very Chamber," Ginny began.

Rigel listened attentively, hoping to hear something, anything that she might use to get out of this mess alive.

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Minerva breathed slowly through her nose to calm the rising impatience she felt at watching Filius, too, fail to detect Salazar's wards. The Head of Ravenclaw House was no slouch at ward deconstruction, having studied under a Ward Master from Italy for nearly a decade in his youth. Yet even he appeared baffled by the bathroom.

"If you hadn't told me there were wards here, Albus, I would have told you the room was clean," Filius shook his head wearily, "I've

tried all I can think of-even some of the more aggressive revealing charms turned up nothing. Usually a ward at least reacts to the presence of spells like that."

Severus sneered at them all, in that way he had when he was about to reveal to them all why Slytherins were the better House. Sure enough-

"This passage was not concealed by a Gryffindor, Filius," Severus said, "Slytherin's wards will not react when reaction means detection. They were designed to be undetectable, after all. No, these wards will remain hidden until their key unlocks them, as proper wards should."

"If you are done admiring the wards, Severus, we've a need to figure out how to break them," Minerva said, a bit tartly. Her temper was getting the better of her, and no surprise with two students in an unknown, though likely perilous situation.

Severus opened his mouth to offer up a scathing rejoinder, no doubt, when Nearly-Headless Nick dropped in from the ceiling to interrupt.

"News from the Tower, Madam McGonagall," he said in his usual deep, slow tones, "The prefects bade me tell you that one of the House of Lions is presently unaccounted for. A Miss Weasley disappeared sometime after dinner, and has not been seen henceforth."

Minerva felt her throat close up, and knew that her lion's part in these dealings could not be denied any longer, "Thank you for your swift report, Sir Nicholas," she said, her voice hoarse, "We are looking for the girl presently. Please inform her brothers that every effort is being made to locate Miss Weasley and return her safely."

Severus scoffed derisively under his breath, but did not contradict her as the ghost nodded regally and floated upwards through the ceiling once more.

Minerva turned toward the serpent-engraved sink with stony-eyed determination. Time for her to remind Severus Snape why sometimes courage was more clever than caution.

"If the ward is indeed Slytherin in nature, then I believe Severus is right," Minerva said frostily, "It very likely won't respond to provocation."

"As I have been attempting to explain-"

Minerva spoke over Severus with a slight smirk of her own, "It might, however, respond to *fear* ."

"Minerva?" Albus took a cautious step toward her, "What do you mean to do?"

"I am going to shoot the most destructive spell I can think of at that tap, Albus," Minerva said, "At the very last moment, you will shield the tap by countering my curse. You must wait until the wards have had time to sense my curse approaching-in the event that the wards cannot repel it, you must protect the anchor point from being destroyed. Filius, Severus, Pomona, you will ready yourselves for the ward's reaction."

"You honestly believe there will be one?" Severus asked, a strange expression on his face. Minerva knew he didn't want to believe a ward created by Slytherin himself would respond to a threat like a cornered animal might, but at the same time he hoped it would. He cared for his pride, but Minerva suspected he cared for his students a great deal more.

"You know a lion's flaws, Severus," Minerva said flatly, "Trust me to know a snake's. On three."

She counted to three, and said, " *Illuminare Verite* ." A blast of purest light erupted from her wand. This was the Aria Candle, a spell intended to diametrically oppose Darkness in all its forms. Any spell

of Dark making that came into contact with Aria's Candle disintegrated, unless countered properly.

An instant before the light reached the sink, Dumbledore wove a Depasco Shield over the tap which consumed the Aria Candle without delay. An instant later, however, a tremor like a localized earthquake shook the bathroom, rattling the stall doors on their hinges and sending Pomona to her knees with surprise.

"Lock onto the signature," Albus shouted. The Headmaster extended both hands toward the source of the earth tremor, and Minerva knew he would be pulling at the magic with his own, trying to make the wards on the passageway continue responding as long as possible. It was up to them to make the most of the opportunity.

Minerva extended her magical senses like a whip toward the sink. She could feel the magic around the tap, now, thick and compacted in the air, but she was having trouble gaining purchase on it. She knew what she needed to do-in theory she could use her magic as a raw template, latch onto a piece of foreign magic and imprint on it, in a way. She needed to use her own magic to copy sections of the magic she could get a hold of, so that she'd be able to either reproduce that magic or, using knowledge of its form, undo it.

Unfortunately, Minerva had never had a talent for auras or imprinting magics. She knew of several of her students who would be better suited to this task than she, the Weasley Twins being two of them. Still, she had to try. It was her duty as Deputy Headmistress to do all that she could to protect her students.

The passage wards quickly began to withdraw, perhaps sensing no more immediate danger, and Minerva let out a frustrated growl as the magic slipped through her senses like oil. She could recognize it, now, but she didn't have a lock on any part of it. Soon it would be hidden again, with no way for her analyze it further. She made a last, desperate effort, but it was for naught. She hadn't been able to imprint anything. The frustrated look on Pomona's face told her the herbologist had experienced the same difficulties. But-

"Got it," Filius panted from across the room, "I've got at least part of the pattern. I think I can undo the concealing charms, at least."

"I as well," Severus said lowly, a fiercely triumphant gleam in his eyes, "I can see the wards, now. Well done, Minerva-we may unravel this yet."

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"Many years ago, when Hogwarts was not so exclusive as it is now, purebloods went to school with halfbloods, and even mudbloods," Ginny said, her nose wrinkling with distaste at the thought, "There was a boy who came to this school, a talented, intelligent boy, who realized what a crime it was, having the school all mixed together like that. The smart, talented children, the purebloods, were all forced to learn at a slower pace because of the stupid ones, the halfbloods and mudbloods who couldn't find their own magical cores, much less keep pace with the children who truly deserved to be wizards. This boy hated being held back for the sake of others, and he resolved that one day he would fix the situation."

"Wasn't it only for a little while, though?" Rigel asked, "A lot of children come here ahead of other kids, because their parents teach them spells at home, but the ones who don't know anything catch up quickly."

"That is because they are all purebloods," Ginny said dismissively, "Back then, there were mudbloods in the school. What a joke-barely enough magic to support a stable core, and they come waltzing into one of the oldest magical school in wizarding history like they were going on holiday to broomstick camp. It didn't matter how hard they tried, their magic was plainly inferior."

Rigel supposed that muggleborns did on average have smaller cores than children born into wizarding families, possibly because the

magic did have to be saved up over generations before being able to manifest as a core in a child, but children of muggleborns had perfectly normal-sized magical cores. And having a smaller core didn't mean you couldn't learn magic the same as everyone else-it just meant you couldn't do as much magic in a row as people with larger cores. Still, Ginny continued.

"The day came, a few years later, when the boy finally had a chance to change what needed to be changed," the redhead said, a fond smile on her face, "You see, this boy had a very special gift-he could speak to snakes. Slytherin's Heir, he was, and Slytherin's Chamber he finally discovered in his fifth year. Do you know how hard it was to find this Chamber, Black?"

Rigel shook her head, "I imagine it was particularly difficult for a boy, since it was hidden in a girl's lavatory."

"Yes, it was difficult," Ginny said, "He talked to every snake in the castle. He scoured the tapestries and statues and paintings for a serpent to question. When he became a prefect, he spent many nights out patrolling, looking in all the hidden places it was too suspicious to go to during the day."

"How did he know the password was 'open?'" Rigel asked.

Ginny sent her an amused look, "Surely you've discovered the override on most of the doors and passages in the dungeons, little snake. Slytherin's Heirs don't need passwords or keys. When they command a way to be open, open it shall be."

"Clever," Rigel said, "And what did the boy find in the Chamber? A basilisk?"

"Ah, yes, my little pet. Would you like to meet her?" Ginny asked curiously, "She rarely gets a chance to talk with anyone-so misunderstood, she is. I can call her here, if you like."

"No, that's all right," Rigel said, swallowing thickly, "I'd rather hear the rest of your story."

"You're no fun," Ginny sneered, "Don't worry, it'll only take a moment."

She stood and raised her palms toward the far end of the hall, where an enormous statue of Salazar Slytherin himself stood proudly at attention. "Speak to me, Salazar, greatest of the Hogwarts Four!"

The statue's mouth shuddered and slowly, inch by inch, began to gape open. Rigel waited long enough to discern a shadow moving within the shadow of the mouth, and then she shut her eyes tightly with no small amount of fear. Her heart was pounding wildly and she hated being blind, but she would hate being dead more, she told herself, so she kept her eyes clenched shut, despite the scrape of scales against stone that was coming slowly closer.

Ginny laughed darkly, "Oh, you should be afraid, little snake. But here, I do like people to look at me while they are afraid. It makes it sweeter, when the fear turns to terror, and hopelessness, and defeat."

Rigel was now very sure there was a piece of the puzzle she had yet to find. Ginny didn't sound like an eleven-year-old. She sounded like someone practiced in cruelty, like someone who reveled in it time and again. But she couldn't be, Rigel thought, her brothers wouldn't love her half so much if she had been so cruel for so long. What had made her this way? When and how could Ginny Weasley have changed so much so quickly?

" *Come here, pet,*" Ginny hissed softly, *"That's it, clossse your eyesss. I have a friend for you to meet, but he isss not ready to meet the gaze of one sssuch ass you jussst yet."*

Rigel hated herself for shuddering as the great snake answered back, " *I sssmell a flessshling, Massster. I am sssso hungry. Let me rip, tear, feassst...*"

"Enough," Ginny snapped, "You will eat when I sssay you will, sssnake."

"Yesss, Masster," the snake answered lowly, "Pleassse, Massster."

"My apologies, Mr. Black," Ginny said casually, "This one's mind is not what it used to be. Too many years in isolation, I expect. Ah well, even for a basilisk she's getting on in years. Her usefulness will run out soon, I expect."

Rigel nodded shakily, not sure what else she should do. A moment later, Ginny's hand reached out to grab Rigel's left hand. She released the spell tying it to Rigel's side and Rigel attempted to break free with a violent tug, but Ginny was strong. Too strong to be natural. She held fast to Rigel's hand and drew it away from Rigel's body, out toward the empty air.

Her hand met cool scales and Rigel barely bit back a whimper. The basilisk was right beside her, breathing slowly beneath her touch. Ginny moved her hand sideways and up a little, until Rigel felt an armored ridge attached to a thin, wrinkled membrane of some kind, which trembled slightly under her touch. It was the basilisk's eye, she realized after a tense moment. It was closed.

"You see?" Ginny snatched her hand away before she could attempt to claw the eye out with her fingers-not that she would have, since she didn't know where its fangs were just yet. "Perfectly safe. You can look."

Rigel called herself ten kinds of fool as she did it, but she was helpless without her sight, and the eye closest to her had definitely been closed... she opened her eyes slowly, looking at the ground first, then slowly, prepared to close them at any movement, looked upwards.

The basilisk was easily fifty feet in length. It curled around them like a cat, eyes definitely closed, but still extremely frightening in repose.

"Isn't she a beauty?" Ginny asked, petting the basilisk's nose in the most perfunctory of ways, "It's almost a shame, really, but... all things have a purpose." Rigel wasn't sure what to make of that, but Ginny was content to continue talking uninterrupted, "Yes, Salazar's monster was one of many treasures the boy found in the Chamber. His ancestor left him scrolls and tombs of secrets. Knowledge worthy of even this boy's great dreams, and far beyond the pittance taught at Hogwarts. Ritual diagrams so intricate it took him months of analysis to discover their purpose. An entire system of runes created by Salazar himself; Parselrunes that respond to commands given only in the serpent tongue."

Rigel was intrigued despite herself. Runes keyed to Parseltongue? It was a good idea, as even with the plethora of runic systems available in many languages, it was sometimes still difficult to find a symbol for the exact meaning you wanted. She was hesitant to believe that Salazar Slytherin was the first to happen upon it, though. Parseltongue had been around much longer than Salazar Slytherin, according to lore found in the Black Family Library.

Ginny must have caught the interest in Rigel's eyes. "Fascinating, isn't it? You can imagine how pleased the boy was. He spent the next year learning all he could from the Chamber. And then he planned. He could cleanse the school easily enough, with the help of the basilisk, but then what? Was not the entire Wizarding World equally tainted? Was it not his responsibility, as a wizard with means and magic, to begin the necessary revolution?"

Rigel didn't think she liked where this story was going.

"Oh, what plans the boy had," Ginny sighed in an oddly self-satisfied way, "The world would tremble. It would burn, and from the ashes would come a new world, better and brighter and fit to be ruled by the one with the most power, the most vision. It was natural, don't you see? Magic had blessed this boy-the rest was only destiny."

"What became of this boy?" Rigel asked. The boy described by Ginny sounded a bit like the politician Riddle-there were pieces of

SOW party propaganda recognizable in what Ginny was saying-and yet it didn't. Mr. Riddle wanted to change much about their society, but he didn't want the world to burn... did he?

"What an excellent question, Mr. Black," Ginny said in a most patronizing manner, "I admit to a similar curiosity with regards to the answer to that question, but I will, of course, tell you what I can. I want you to understand everything, and perhaps once you've heard my story you can help me with the parts I don't understand. How does that sound?"

"I'll do my best," Rigel said, "But I'm not sure I'll be able to figure it out if you can't."

"Obvious, Mr. Black," Ginny drawled, "But I'll grant you a Slytherin's perseverance."

"Thank you," Rigel said.

"Shut up."

Ginny paced slowly among the basilisk's coils, her hands behind her back, "The boy's plans were perfect, foolproof, you might say. He had discovered a way to obtain power, and, after much cunning and resourceful searching, even discovered a way to keep that power... forever." Ginny paused, a thoughtful look on her face, "And yet, the boy worried. At that moment in time, his plans were perfect, his ideals pure and his future unquestioned. He had a way to conquer time's greatest threat-death itself-but time has other ways of undoing great men. This he knew, as a student of history, and this he feared. Many a great man had begun his quest for dominion with deepest motive and steadfast convictions, but halfway to the top these great men faltered. Do you know why, Mr. Black?"

Rigel blinked, but hazarded a guess, "They discovered that changing the world was not as easy as they imagined, and met challenges they weren't able to immediately overcome."

Ginny gazed pityingly at her, "All challenges can be overcome. No. These men faltered because the view from halfway up the mountain is rather attractive when you've spent all your life at the bottom. These men achieved some of what they dreamed of, and became content, deciding the rest of the trek up the mountain wasn't worth the effort after all. They abandoned their ideals out of laziness and fear. You see, when a man is at the bottom of a mountain, he doesn't fear falling down it. Halfway up the mountain, however, the bottom starts to look a lot further than they remembered. Those men forsook their original, worthy designs in order to preserve the little they had already achieved."

It sounded to Rigel as though such men merely knew when to stop. The road to the top of the mountain was neither easy nor guaranteed, or else everyone with a set of hiking boots would stand there. Greed destroyed great men too, as any student of history also ought to know-reaching too far too soon was the easiest way to get knocked back down.

"Luckily, this boy anticipated the possibility of future hesitation," Ginny went on, "He formulated another plan, a way to counteract time's propensity to warp and twist that which it can lay its claws into. Do you know what the most amazing kind of magic is, Black? Come, take your guess. What magic do you find the most impressive, the most *magical*, to use the muggle sense of the term ironically?"

Rigel bit the inside of her lip in thought, "I suppose the most amazing magic is that which effects changes only magic can bring about."

"Yes, very good," Ginny said, a slightly intense smile on her face, "Like what? Can you give a specific example?"

Rigel thought some more, mostly to take up as much time as possible. It wouldn't be destructive magic, since you could easily destroy things without magic. Manipulation magic was tempting, but one could manipulate both things and people using physics and psychology, it was just slower and more roundabout. Transformation magic was amazing, and without magical means there wasn't really

a way to completely change one thing into another, but it didn't seem to be the answer Ginny was looking for. Finally, Rigel said what she thought the real Arcturus Black would say.

"Healing is the most amazing magic," she said.

Ginny looked at her with intrigued surprise, "You're correct, in a way... though not for the reasons you came up with, I expect. *Preservation* magic is the greatest kind of magic there is. It is magic that reverses or reduces time's effects on the universe. Healing is one of the many magics that combat time. It preserves life, as long and as vital as it possibly can. Yes, it is the ability to preserve which makes the Magical World so worthy, so important. Witches and Wizards live three times longer than muggles naturally, and there are wizards like Flamel who live as long as they wish. All due to magic. If you want to cook a lamb today and eat it a year from now, you can do that with magic. No wizard is ever a slave to time. With a time-turner, one can stretch a day into a week before the strain of maintaining identical cores in close proximity becomes too much. Truly, there is little to fear from time if your magic is strong enough," she declared.

Rigel thought that was an interesting way of looking at the world, and not an incorrect one. In a way, they were all fighting against time in a struggle to remain living. Could this worldview influence a boy such as the one described to dedicate his life to preserving things-like pureblood wizarding culture, for example?

"Yes, preservation magic proved to be the key," Ginny said, "The boy knew he had to preserve himself, you see, just as he was, perfect and pure, in a way that time could never corrupt him or make him change. Imagine: perfect forever."

Rigel studiously kept the grimace off of her face. There was no such state as perfect. And *sixteen* forever? She wouldn't wish that on anyone, if it was half as bad as Snape made it out to be complaining about his NEWT students.

"The boy could not actually prevent himself from growing, and consequentially changing," Ginny allowed solemnly, "But he was able to do something else. He found a way to imbue an object with personality among Salazar's notes. No doubt the same basic magic that bore the Sorting Hat into existence. What the boy wanted to create was considerably more complicated than a talking hat, however. He sought to create a perfect impression of his own inner self. His knowledge, memories, ambition, cunning; everything that made him talented and special, all copied with the utmost care and imbued into a single book."

"Book," Rigel's eyes widened. The journal. It wasn't an empty diary, but a container for an immensely complicated magical construct. She frowned. She hadn't sensed any magic in the book when she'd touched it. Was it so well-hidden?

"Yes, that book," Ginny smirked, "And what a long fifty years it was, locked in those pages."

"Was?" Rigel clarified.

Ginny looked amused, "I'm getting there, Black. Be patient."

"So he created his magical construct," Rigel prompted, still willing to play along. Surely, the teachers were already looking for her. The ward on the bathroom door would have been obvious to anyone looking for the out-of-place. They must be trying to access the Chamber, which meant all she had to do was buy time, and be patient, as Ginny suggested.

"Yes. It went exactly according to plan," Ginny said, "As the boy's plans came to fruition, he consulted his diary often, to make sure any new ideas were in line with the established ones. The diary made sure he stayed true to course. Then, a few months before the end of his sixth year, something went wrong." Ginny's face was tight now, her mouth creased at a disapproving angle as she spoke, "Everything was going fine. He was well on his way to ridding the school of its muggle taint. He had the students and faculty right

where he wanted them-afraid, and willing at that point to do anything to stop the attacks."

She was speaking, Rigel realized, of the last time the Chamber had been 'opened.' The time Hagrid spoke of, with only muggleborn students found petrified, threatening messages on the walls beside them. Rigel could imagine the threats the messages must have contained-banish all mudbloods or else they start dying, no doubt.

"The boy only had one final point to make," Ginny said, "He hadn't killed any of the mudbloods yet-the basilisk can control its power, you know, and it merely petrified the mudbloods up to that point as per the boy's request-but for his threats to be taken seriously, a death was necessary. The death would aid him in other ways, as well, in finalizing the steps he took to become impervious to time. There had to be an example, and the death wouldn't have been a waste," Ginny said earnestly, "Everything was prepared. There was a seventh-year mudblood who liked to mess around with second-year girls. He lured them into deserted corridors and... well, he would be no great loss to society, would he? The boy confided his plans to the diary, his construct approved, everything was to go ahead that night, and then..."

Rigel waited, but Ginny didn't seem inclined to continue.

"And then?" she asked quietly.

"Well I don't know what happened then, do I?" Ginny snapped, "I waited. I heard from him once after that, maybe twice, and he never told me exactly what happened. 'It's fine,' he said, 'don't worry. Everything's going to plan.' Then there was silence. Years and *decades* of bloody silence. Do you know what it's like, living in a book for fifty years, unable to even talk to *yourself* ?"

Rigel mutely shook her head, taken aback and beyond confused. All she knew was that Ginny... didn't appear to be Ginny at all.

"It's agony," the redhead spat, "Every year the magic keeping you together, keeping you alive, fades a little. He was supposed to add magic to the diary over time, ensuring its continued existence, preventing the magic from destabilizing and disintegrating or collapsing in on itself. But he didn't. It was only through sheer willpower that I retained my personality, my knowledge, and my ambition despite the magic Time sucked from my pages-the greedy bitch."

Ginny was near to spitting with anger now, and Rigel wondered if perhaps the personality in the diary, which seemed to be inhabiting Ginny at the moment, hadn't held up under the strain of time as well as it thought it had. Without magic to keep it functioning optimally, the construct seemed to have become partially unhinged.

Ginny took a calming breath, and smiled humorlessly down at Rigel, "Imagine my surprise, my delight, when my maker wrote in my pages once again. 'I have need of you,' he says. A task at Hogwarts, my old playground, and me the only one trusted enough to carry it out. Finally, I think, we're back on track. Get inside some first-year's head? No problem. Be her companion as she grows, help her along until she's formidable in her own right? Not my style, I admit, but all right. Infiltrate the Light party through the girl, undoing Dumbledore's seat of power slowly from under his own nose? Well, now. That would take *years*. Why would I waste so much time when there's easier, more direct ways of undoing Dumbledore?" The redhead shook her head sadly, "*I wouldn't*, don't you see?"

Rigel was very much afraid she did see. So Riddle's sixteen-year-old self didn't much care for the direction his future life had taken? Severus Snape had clearly had no part in this plan of Riddle's. Perhaps Mr. Riddle's memory painted his adolescent self in a more forgiving light, but Snape, with his deep distain for the arrogance and rashness of the teenaged psyche, could have predicted this rebellion without blinking.

"Oh, I bided my time at first," Ginny's voice said casually, "Perhaps there was information I lacked. Perhaps Britain was currently at war

with another magical state, or a plague had recently decimated the wizarding population, or some other such reason Britain couldn't afford abrupt social change or the distraction of a civil war at the current time. I agreed to my older self's plan, spoke kindly to little Ginerva Weasley when she began pouring secrets into my pages. I fished gently for information about current events, and Ginny was all too happy to fill me in," she paused to chuckle softly at her own pun. "My disappointment knew no bounds when I realized my failure to revolutionize the world the way I'd planned was due not to an inadequacy of the times, but to an inadequacy in myself. Well," she amended after a moment, "Not *myself* . I am perfect, unchanged by time, and unwilling to settle for a life spent in mediocrity, another fat plutocrat slowly turning the political hamster wheel in circles."

Rigel felt oddly compelled to defend Riddle Sr. against his younger self's accusation, but quickly checked the impulse. No need to make the insane magical construct angrier.

"It became apparent that I would have to take things into my own hands," the construct continued speaking, as though determined to lay the whole story at Rigel's feet, "But of course, I had no hands. All I had was Ginny. Poor, scared, little Ginny. Do you know what Ginny was most afraid of?"

Like a light going on, or perhaps more appropriately like a kick to the stomach, the answer came to her. "The Sleeping Sickness," she said, realizing how Riddle Jr., as she decided to call him, had played on that fear so effectively.

"Very good, Black," it smiled through Ginny's teeth so sweetly, "When her brother Ronald wrote to her of the sickness, the fear of having her mind invaded took root in her heart. I admit, I helped it flourish there. I told her stories about what terrible things wizards could do to one another's minds. She begged me to help her protect herself. It was easy, I told her. As a mere magical construct, I could live in her head if she wanted. She could talk to me whenever she liked, and I could protect her mind from invasion. She hesitated for a

little while, but soon the fear became too pressing, and she opened her mind willingly to her dear friend Tom."

"You possessed her," Rigel surmised, "Not completely at first, but eventually you had complete control. Ginny didn't know she was the one opening the Chamber and petrifying kids."

"Of course she didn't," Riddle Jr. snorted, "It took some time before she suspected the memory loss wasn't just a side-effect of the meditation techniques she was trying to learn. Thanks for that, but the way. When she learned you were studying Occlumency, too, it greatly reassured her that she had done the right thing by protecting her mind."

Rigel felt sick, and the feeling grew stronger as the construct kept talking.

"Ginny helped me open the Chamber of Secrets, unleash the basilisk, kill the Squib's cat, write the messages on the walls, everything," Riddle Jr. gloated.

"You'd already possessed her when you tried to steal my belladonna," Rigel said.

"Yes," Ginny's face was made to frown, "My possession was not very good at that point, I admit. I hadn't meshed completely with Ginny's magic yet, and so the wand rejected me when I attempted to use it for complicated or powerful spells. I had to rely on brute force to make her magic work for me, and still it was temperamental. I think our magics are just too incompatible. She leans closer to Neutral than to Light, but still... it took some time to gain complete control over her magic."

Rigel wasn't sure the construct had complete control, as some of its spells had been a bit shaky, a bit rushed, a bit blunt, looking back on it. Still, it had been enough to neutralize Rigel. She could still feel the shield he'd wrapped her in, like a web of sticky magic crawling over her skin, suffocating her own magic within her.

"I had to make the girl buy the poison over the holidays," Riddle Jr. recalled, "It left my little monster vulnerable for longer than I liked, but one makes do. Yes, Ginny was exceedingly useful-until she started to notice what I was doing. She became suspicious of my presence in her head, and tried to find other ways to protect her mind, though she didn't have much success."

Rigel felt ashamed of herself. How many times had Ginny come to ask her about Occlumency? Rigel had seen that the girl was exhausted, stressed, and afraid, but she hadn't looked further into the problems of a first-year Gryffindor. Her own problems had seemed so important at the time.

"Then she tried to get rid of me by throwing out my diary," Riddle Jr. said, amused, "As if that would help. I'd cut ties with the book the moment Ginny let me into her head. If I was still anchored there, it could be used against me, after all. When I saw you with it, paging through those archives so eagerly, I knew something had to be done. Eventually, you'd figure out to whom the diary belonged, and maybe you'd figure out who was making the basilisk petrify students, too. I didn't know how much you knew. It had to be done. This way is better, in a way. Ginny's use only extends so far. Her magical reserves are remarkable for a child so young, but she has no natural talent to speak of. You, though..." the construct tilted Ginny's head consideringly, "The Black scion has a prominent social position awaiting on either side of the party line, according to little Ginny's limited grasp of the political situation. A Parselmouth, unexpectedly, which means I wouldn't even have to hide my gift. And that trick you pulled with the Sleeping Sickness... yes, you've clear potential, little snake. You'll make for a much more useful host, I think."

"Host," Rigel repeated numbly, "That's why you haven't killed me yet?"

"That's right," the construct said, "Your survival is guaranteed; does that comfort you? It's going to be an impressive tale. Would you like to hear it? A glimpse of one's future is a rare opportunity-a fitting gift for the host of Lord Voldemort."

Rigel blinked, "Lord Voldemort is...?"

"Me," Riddle Jr. said smugly. He lifted Ginny's wand and began to trace letters in the air.

'TOM MARVOLO RIDDLE' the letters read.

Rigel thought for a moment that Riddle's middle name seemed out of place between his overwhelmingly ordinary first and last names-but she wasn't sure where Riddle's construct was going with this.

The letters rearranged themselves at a twitch from Ginny's wand. I AM LORD VOLDEMORT. An anagram, Rigel realized. Her French wasn't anything to brag about yet, but she thought she got the gist of the title. Something about the flight of death, or stealing from death, perhaps. It was ominous, Rigel supposed, if a bit grandiose for an Englishman.

"It's the name I fashioned for myself, just before undergoing the ritual that would preserve a copy of my mind in the pages of my diary. Though apparently the name never made it beyond those pages," the construct scowled, "I fear for my older counterpart, Black. Something must have gone terribly wrong for his path to have deviated so inexplicably. I suspect Dumbledore had a hand in it," Ginny's features were twisted in a mask of hatred, "Perhaps the old man caught me in the act. He wouldn't have killed me, and sending a boy of such potential to Azkaban is not his style, but his manipulation knows no bounds. A memory charm, personality suppressant, perhaps even the Imperious Curse; it would have been easy for a wizard like Dumbledore to alter my destiny, the meddling fool. And no one would ever suspect, because there I'd be, Tom Riddle, model student and upstanding citizen, as I'd always made people believe I was. Brilliant, wasn't it? Killing me without killing me, using my own mask against me, in a way no one would ever suspect."

Rigel thought it an interesting theory, at least. If Dumbledore controlled Mr. Riddle, his biggest political opponent, then he controlled everything. It would mean Dumbledore essentially played

an elaborate chess game with himself, with all of British Wizardom hanging in the balance. The very thought of such a world would scare Rigel out of her potions boots-if she thought it was true.

"He didn't expect me, though," Riddle said softly, "I can see through his deception like no one else, because I know what I ought to be. I can fix everything. Perhaps I can even reach out to my older self in time. For now, I can turn the old man's game against him. With you, I will see his strategies foiled, his plans come to naught."

Rigel understood now, though she didn't think the construct was viewing the situation very clearly. After all, if Dumbledore controlled Riddle he would *have* to know about Riddle Jr., because Mr. Riddle was supposedly the one who set the construct to its task at Hogwarts. Still, as someone to whom complicated plots were nothing new, she could appreciate the elegance of such a plan from an academic standpoint. As long as she didn't think about what it meant for her as the possessed.

"You're going to essentially do the same thing you think Dumbledore did to your older counterpart," Rigel clarified, "You possess me, taking my place as the Black scion, using my reserved personality as a cover as you grow in strength and ability, until you're ready to revolutionize the world. To everyone else, it will just look like the Black scion decided to change the world. No one will guess it isn't me doing those things."

"That's right," the construct said, smirking, "But I won't have to bide my time for long. You'll be a hero when this is all over, with considerable political capital I won't hesitate to capitalize on. The brave young Black who saved the school by defeating a basilisk and thwarting Ginny Weasley's dastardly plans."

"Isn't Ginny a bit young to have masterminded a plan?" Rigel asked, trying not to think about the actual content of what they were discussing, just focused on drawing out the time Riddle Jr. spent talking. It wasn't going to happen, she assured herself, as long as she kept it talking.

"Oh, she didn't come up with it," the construct said, amused, "She was Dumbledore's pawn. It was his scheme to petrify the students, sending the Wizarding World into a panic, and then acting the hero at the last moment by 'finding' the beast and slaying it heroically. All a political plot to win the support of the children's grateful parents."

"How did Ginny control the basilisk, if she was Dumbledore's agent?" Rigel asked, "And how did Dumbledore find the Chamber of Secrets in the first place?"

Riddle Jr. paused thoughtfully, "A Dark ritual the Headmaster forced Ginny to participate in gave her the power of the serpent tongue temporarily. She used that power to find the Chamber, and then used the basilisk on the Headmaster's behalf."

"And you, what, wiped her memory of doing all this afterwards as an act of kindness when she couldn't bear to live with what she'd done?" Rigel asked incredulously. Did Riddle's construct really think anyone was going to swallow this story? It was the world of a Black against Albus Dumbledore.

Riddle Jr. chuckled without humor, "That's a good one. No, sadly, Ginny was killed by the basilisk herself when she lost control of it. Just goes to show that Light wizards shouldn't mess around with Dark rituals. The irony is perfect-the press will eat it right up."

Rigel swallowed. Riddle Jr. really was going to kill Ginny, without a shred of remorse, if he got the chance. She had to keep him talking. Any minute now, the professors would break through into the passage. They had to.

"If Ginny loses control of the basilisk and is killed by it, wouldn't I just use my Parseltongue to take control of the snake, which now has no Master to answer to? I wouldn't have to kill it," Rigel pointed out.

The construct tilted its head, "True... but the Ministry would kill it anyway if you turned it over when you emerged, and defeating a giant basilisk gone mad with hunger and bloodlust after the loss of its

Master makes a better story than being kidnapped by an eleven-year-old girl and just walking out of the Chamber after a stroke of luck."

Rigel supposed it made for a better story, but she would take the second option in a heartbeat if an opportunity presented itself. "How would I kill the basilisk?" Rigel asked, not looking toward the snake's head, which lay so close to them she could feel the air move when it flicked its tongue, "I can't imagine many spells would pierce those scales."

"No, you'd be right," the construct said, running a hand over the basilisk scales slowly, "Almost nothing affects a creature with this much ambient magic. Older than a dragon, she is, with scales just as hard."

Come on, Rigel thought, *Tell me a weakness*. She was very afraid it would come to fight, and at the moment she had no idea how to fight a basilisk, though her instinct would be to go for the eyes first.

"A Killing Curse might to the trick," Riddle said casually, "But I've only used it the once... I doubt Ginny's core is up to it, honestly. I've not been particularly miserly with my magical expenditure this evening, but it is so *invigorating* to have access to a real core again." It smiled at Rigel as though inviting her to share the joke, "I could always conjure a sword and stab it through the soft underside of the jaw. In fact, maybe that's the story I'll give if anyone asks." Rigel's mind flinched away from that disgusting image. "But none of that will be necessary. Really, Black, do you forget who I am? This is Salazar's monster. It will die when I bid it to."

Ginny's face was alive with cruelty. Rigel couldn't understand what the construct meant for a moment. Then it spoke, soft and cajoling.

" *Beassst*," Riddle Jr. hissed, " *Attend to me*."

" *Yesss*, *Massster*," the basilisk replied at once.

" *Return to your lair,*" the construct said dismissively.

Rigel's chest eased with relief. She'd been filled with dread at the look on Ginny's face, the madness and the sickness in the construct's eyes. The basilisk uncoiled from around them, and it began slithering back toward Salazar's statue at the far end of the hall, eyes still closed.

" *Wait,*" the construct hissed, amusement clear even in Parseltongue. The basilisk turned its head back inquiringly, " *Turn in a circle .*"

Rigel began feeling sick again as the great serpent did just that, turning back on itself obediently.

" *Put your head to the floor, Beassst,*" Riddle Jr. said, openly sneering as the snake lowered its head to the grimy stone floor, " *Tassste the flagssstonesss .*" The basilisk scraped its tongue across the floor.

" *It tassstessss of rot, Massster,* " the snake said, " *And ratsss. Let me catch a rat, Massster .*"

" *Are you hungry?*" Riddle Jr. asked cruelty.

" *Ssso hungry, Massster,*" the snake said longingly, " *Pleassse, Massster.*"

" *It will feel good to bite into a real meal after ssso long, won't it, pet?*" the construct's eyes were bright with burning intensity. Rigel felt her own eyes smart with the beginnings of tears. There was something so very wrong about this. The basilisk was old, and starving. Probably maddened by its hibernation, too. Riddle was its Master. The construct ought to take care of the creature, not...

" *Yesss, Massster,*" the basilisk coiled in anticipation, " *Let me rip... tear...*"

" *Very well, Beassst,*" Riddle's construct said softly, " *Bite yourssself* ."

Rigel flinched, and the basilisk scented the air in confusion, " *Massster...*"

" *Do it!*" the construct hissed fiercely, " *Sssink your fangsss into your flesssh. **Now** .*"

The basilisk lashed, and its mouth enclosed its tail with a snap. The snake let out a great hiss of pain. It thrashed violently, coiling and uncoiling.

" *Hurtsss, Massster... make it ssstop...*"

" *Bite again,*" the construct said remorselessly, " *Harder .*"

The basilisk, though trembling, obeyed. Its fangs met its body a second time, chunks of flesh ripped from its tail, blood, thick and greasy, poured onto the hall floor.

Rigel turned her head to the side and vomited violently onto the stones next to her. The basilisk hissed in utter agony as it died, and Rigel heard every broken, unheeded plea it made to its cold master. Rigel didn't think she'd ever hated anything until that moment. She hated that thing of magic looking out from behind Ginny's eyes. Her magic beat in her veins like an ocean confined to a tide pool, but to no avail. The shield Riddle Jr. had wove against her skin held fast.

"It's a little known fact that basilisks are susceptible to their own venom," Riddle Jr. said, as though remarking on an interesting weather anomaly, "I believe they were bred that way, by the Parselmouths of old, so that a Speaker would always have a way of controlling the beasts if they got out of hand."

Rigel couldn't believe that. To use a creature's natural defenses against it was cruel enough. To engineer a weakness in those defenses for such a purpose... it was unthinkable sick. Riddle Jr.

walked Ginny's body across the hall to where the basilisk lay crumpled. The construct pointed Ginny's wand at the basilisk's mouth, and with a crack broke off one of the fangs. The construct levitated the fang back over to where Rigel sat, upper body still immobile, on the ground. At Rigel's apprehensive look, it laughed, "Not for you, little snake. I need your body alive, don't I? The venom left on this fang would kill you in minutes. No, this is for Ginny. I have to make it look like she was really killed by the basilisk, don't I?"

Riddle Jr. raised the fang over Ginny's arm, and Rigel blurted, "Don't!"

The construct paused, lips quirking, "Too late to stop me now, boy."

"Fine," Rigel shrugged, affecting a look of pity.

Riddle's construct scowled, "What?"

Rigel hesitated, but said, "It just seems so obviously stupid, that's all. Don't get me wrong, I don't want to be possessed, but it seems a very ignoble way for Salazar's descendant to die."

"Spit it out, boy," it hissed.

"Once Ginny's dying, you'll only have minutes to possess me before you die along with her, right?" Rigel asked.

"I need only seconds," Riddle Jr. smirked.

"So sure, are you?" Rigel tried to look condescending, "Do you know how long I've been studying Occlumency? I doubt you'll get inside my head so easily. I'm not inviting you in like Ginny did. You'll probably get stuck with no way in my head and no body to go back to." Rigel forced a laugh, "You can't even go running back to your diary, because you broke the connection to it, didn't you? You're better off just keeping Ginny. She's not a bad host-seventh born, I think. That's powerful magic. Or do you just not want to go through puberty as a girl?"

"You little brat," the construct threw down the fang, snarling, "We'll see how strong your shields are. I'll take your body, then let you feel your own hand stab the basilisk's fang into little Ginny's heart."

Ginny's body slumped abruptly, but Rigel had already retreated into her own head, and was concealed inside her mountain by the time she felt the construct tear like a jawed beast through the mist at the edge of her mind. Its voice echoed around the mountain, cold and mocking, "Are these your so-called shields? Pathetic. Come out, little snake, or I will tear this mind to *pieces* ."

The words were punctuated by a shock like an earthquake going through my mindscape. Riddle Jr. was somehow blasting magic as her mountainside.

Rigel had thought the construct's magic would be weak here. Hadn't it said its own magic was nearly drained away by time? It shouldn't be strong enough to do much damage, unless... Rigel groaned. It still had access to Ginny's magic. Since Ginny wasn't dying, Riddle Jr. hadn't broken his hold over her core. She had assumed if she could get the construct out of Ginny's head and into hers, Ginny could regain control of her body, which was not bound like Rigel's was, and help her. If the construct had somehow prevented Ginny from retaking her mind, though...

It can't be easy to try to control two minds at once, Rigel thought. If I keep him distracted in my mind long enough... yes, this might work.

Rigel turned quickly to the boy sitting blank-faced in an armchair by the decoy lab's fireplace-right where she'd left him.

"Stand by the door," she told her own construct quickly. As long as she gave it simple, specific instructions, it should work, "If something comes inside, say, 'you can't come in here.' If it speaks to you, say, 'you won't get away with this.' Glare the whole time, then stay silent no matter what else happens."

The construct that looked like Rigel Black stood and walked over by the cave entrance, a peacefully blank expression still on its face. It wasn't impressive, especially compared to a construct like Riddle's, but it would have to do.

Rigel fled down the trapdoor, willing it to conceal itself behind her as she ran through the maze of tunnels. She whispered the password to her Space Room, flinching as her mind shuddered again under Riddle Jr.'s onslaught. She felt immediately more secure once she'd sealed herself inside her mental safe house. Everything important was kept here. Riddle's construct might gain partial control over her mind, but he couldn't get to everything until he got through that last door; most importantly, he couldn't use *her* magic without access to her mental core.

Speaking of, Rigel winced at the sight of her Sun. She had spent a lot of magic imbuing potions with Snape earlier that evening. Her core regenerated at a good rate, but it was still noticeably diminished from its usual radiant heat.

No time to worry about it now, though. After double-checking to be sure she'd altered her eye-color to suit a Black, Rigel dived into the sun, her consciousness quickly emerging from the other side of her physical core. Her plan was half-brewed at best, and depended completely on magical theory she wouldn't dare call herself an expert in, but it was all she had.

Riddle Jr.'s shield kept her physical magic pinned to her body, so she couldn't do anything associated with physical magic-spells, runes, even accidental magic-but mental magic and physical magic were not the same. They were connected to the same energy source, and they often acted in tandem, but they were two separate manifestations of a person's conscious magic, unrelated to each other, and unrelated to other aspects of a wizard's magic, like mental energy or gifts like Parseltongue, which didn't rely on the magical core to manifest.

Her mental magic ought to be unaffected by Riddle Jr.'s physical shield. A Legilimency attack couldn't be stopped by a shield charm-it had to be countered with mental defenses, like Occlumency. In the same way, her mental magics would not in theory be trapped to her body as her physical magic was. In theory, she could project her consciousness, which was seated in the mind, not the body, to Ginny's core. In theory.

In the end, theories didn't matter, because this was her only chance. Rigel estimated the distance between her body and Ginny's, stretched out her mental senses, and leaped.

She almost didn't sense Ginny's core at all. It was very different from the last time she'd sensed it, but it was the only core in proximity, so Rigel locked onto it all the same. When she got a good look at it, she was disgusted. She could barely see the simmering layer of molten gold that made up Ginny's secondary layer, because the entire core was streaked through with black sludge. It was similar to the sleeping sickness in color, but this muck-like magic was thicker, stickier, and not at all passive. Like living tar, gloopy and possessive, it burrowed its way through the golden lava of Ginny's core like vomit made mobile.

Rigel really didn't want to immerse herself in the stuff. She stuck her hand out toward the core cautiously, and the black sludge reacted at once. It began coalescing at the point on the surface of the core nearest to Rigel's hand, as though forming a barrier to her immediate entry. Rigel touched it, and shuddered in disgust at the feeling of it bubbling over her skin, grasping at her hand and tugging it forward into the core. Rigel took a deep breath and let it. *This is what you want*, she told herself, *don't fight it, just bear it* .

She sunk her arm deeper into the blackened core. She could feel the warmth from Ginny's primary core, a white-hot flame, but it was muted by the layer of tar that expanded to encase her entire form as she pressed deeper into the core. Once she was fully immersed, blinded by the black goop stretching over her eyes, she tried to push forward into the primary core. The black magic held her fast. She

tried again, pushing harder and more desperately, but she was stuck.

She struggled, but everywhere she thrust an arm or leg the black sludge was there to resist her movements, tugging her back into its embrace. She felt suffocated. She instinctively called on her magic, but for the first time since she could remember, she felt no answering rush in power. It was as though the black tar-like magic sealed her own magic from her reach. She felt a bare trickle of energy trying to emerge, but the dark goo encasing her quickly snuffed it.

She thought she could reason with this magic, instead. She truly believed magic was sentient to some degree, so perhaps she could convince it to free her. Rigel opened her mouth to ask the magic to let her go. As her lips parted, the blackness rushed into her mouth, coating her throat and choking her words before she could get them out. She cried out wordlessly in her head. *No! I won't let you win* . She put all of her will behind the thought, bending her consciousness entirely toward the effort of moving forward, of reaching the flame she could feel beyond the blackness and purging the foul, corrupted magic from her-

Her own core was beyond her grasp, but Ginny's core answered, and Rigel's vision was overtaken by white fire. She felt the heat of it blister her consciousness as it went by, and it was a triumphant, satisfying feeling. The flame of Ginny's core licked over her, like a Healer purging infection from a wound, and she felt the invasive black magic evaporate from around her in bursts and starts. When she was free enough, she kicked and pushed through the tar's hold on her, and dived quickly into the center of Ginny's primary core.

She emerged into thin air, and floated upside down for a moment until she regained her bearings and righted herself. Ginny's mind was utterly empty-or so it seemed. Rigel called out softly, "Ginny? Are you in here?"

"Yes," Ginny's voice was tired, but it rang clearly in the air, "I see you. Come to rescue me, Rigel Black?"

"That depends," Rigel said, "Do you need rescuing?"

"See for yourself," Ginny's voice said wryly, " *Faestnian* ."

At the last word, the illusion of open, empty sky melted away. Rigel found herself abruptly standing at the bottom of a giant crater, surrounded on all sides by red dirt and burnt earth, with great walls of rock and earth like mountains stretching upwards all around her, so that she seemed to be at the bottom of a gorge-or a volcano. The sky was an eerie grey, and at first Rigel thought it was snowing, until she realized the air was just filled with ash, swirling one way or another in hot air currents. The ground was littered with holes, too, and every so often a jet of fire would shoot up out of one of the holes, before dispersing just as abruptly.

A little ways away, trapped inside a cage that looked to be made of black tar that had been forged into an ugly metal, sat Ginny. Her red hair was back in a messy ponytail, and her expression was two parts angry, one part bitterly regretful. She raised a hand to Rigel as she picked her way slowly over to the cage.

"Welcome," the first-year said, "Lovely place, isn't it? I can't even blame Tom for this-my mind resembles the bottom of a volcano naturally, apparently."

"Did Tom trap you in here?" Rigel asked, examining the cage.

"Yes," Ginny said, "He put me in here when he finally stopped pretending to be my friend. Now he's just pretending to be me," she laughed humorlessly, "And he'll be you next-I heard him say so. You should go, and worry about your own head."

"The construct is already in my head," Rigel said, "That's why I'm here in yours. While he's busy, we can break you out. Once you have control of your mind and magic again, he won't be as powerful in my mind, and maybe I can throw him out. If not, you can at least run and tell the professors that I've been possessed, so he can't get away with his plans."

Ginny's eyes held a tentative hope in them as she said, "And you think that will work? The basilisk-"

"He killed it," Rigel said shortly.

"Oh," Ginny stood up slowly, "I only get bits and pieces of what he's doing from in here. We're still in the Chamber, though, right?"

"Yes," Rigel said, "And I'm not sure the professors can get in, so we can't count on help."

"All right," Ginny said, "What do we do? I'm cut off from my magic in here-he's got full control of it."

Rigel looked at Ginny's core. Without the illusion, the core looked like a fissure, a deep crack running through the dark earth. It was filled with molten gold, which flowed and bubbled sluggishly like lava, but the surface of the golden stream was on fire, flames dancing and retreating restlessly. The lava was streaked through with black sludge in places, but it was by no means blackened beyond repair.

"I'm not sure he does," Rigel said, "It let me in, after all. I think your magic is tied closer to you than that insane construct realizes."

"I hope you're right," Ginny said, "What can we do about the cage, though?"

Rigel nodded toward the fissure of molten gold not far from the cage, "That magic is yours. Riddle's construct is using it, but it belongs to you. You just need to regain control."

Ginny scowled, "I've tried. I can't reach its power from inside this cage. It's like the bars disconnect me from my magic."

"The construct did something similar with my magic," Rigel said thoughtfully, "It bound my magic to my body, so that I couldn't project it beyond my skin. Maybe it used the same sort of shield, only mental instead of physical, to separate your consciousness from your

magic." Rigel would be fascinated if that were the case. She hadn't considered the possibility of adapting actual physical spells for mental use, but it would greatly expand the pool of possibilities as far as mental defenses were concerned.

"Then I won't be able to use... my..." Ginny trailed off, a struck look on her face, "Tom is using my magic."

"Yes," Rigel said, frowning, "He probably won't let go of his hold on your mind and magic until he's taken control of mine."

"But if he can use my magic, other people can, too," Ginny said, a slow smirk growing on her face.

"Not just anyone," Rigel pointed out, "They'd have to have access to your... mental... oh. That's rather obvious, when you put it like that."

Ginny was full-out smiling now, "You can destroy the cage. You don't have access to your magic, but you can use mine. Once the cage is destroyed, I can take back my magic, and without it Tom won't stand a chance against the both of us."

Rigel nodded. She stretched out her hand toward Ginny's core, and asked the magic to respond. It was slow to answer at first, and Rigel could see the black sludge mixed into the magic trying to prevent the golden liquid from moving around, but eventually the magic churned enough to overflow. A small stream of molten gold spilled across the ground, flowing steadily toward the black metal cage. The earth sizzled and hissed where the gold rolled across it, and when the little stream of liquid magic finally touched the base of Ginny's cage, the bars trembled and shook.

Rigel guided the magic as best she could, though it was clumsy work. She just didn't have the instinctive connection with Ginny's core that she did with her own. The bars on the cage were dense, but Ginny's core began eating away at them fairly steadily once the magic had direct contact.

Ginny's eyes met hers in satisfied anticipation. It was working. They stood a chance.

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The arrogant little snot never stood a chance. Voldemort snorted to himself at the ridiculousness of the boy's unwarranted bravado. It only proved that he was right to open the Chamber once more-the school was going rotten from the inside out with Dumbledore in the Headmaster's chair. When a blockhead like Black represented the Slytherins of purest, Darkest blood, what hope was there for the next generation? That such a boy had thought himself equal to the power of Lord Voldemort-it was absurd. The brat had learned how to spin a few mental illusions and fancied himself a Master Occlumens. Hardly.

The child's mind was laughably easy to penetrate. The chill of the mountain-scape didn't phase Lord Voldemort for a moment. He had visited more desolate places in his sixteen years of life, in both the mental and physical realms. Voldemort found the entrance to the inner sanctum of the boy's mind with little difficulty. Illusions were clever, but not undetectable for a Legilimens as powerful as he.

Voldemort passed through the illusion confidently, and stopped abruptly at the sight of the boy waiting for him just inside the door. He smirked-the child's mind was even shallower than he thought, to only have two layers. Then again, he shouldn't have expected anything more. Future host of Lord Voldemort or not, a child was still a child, and this one educated under Dumbledore's thumb. It was a miracle he'd even heard of Occlumency, really.

"You can't be in here," the boy said, glaring at him rather stoutly.

Voldemort indulged in a low chuckle, "And just what are you going to do about it? You don't have the power to stop me, boy."

The boy simply kept glaring, "You won't get away with this," he said.

"We'll see about that," Voldemort sneered. He jerked at the magic under his control, exerting all of his considerable will to make it do as he directed. Little Ginny's magic was becoming harder to control the longer she considered him an intruder to her mind, and being mentally somewhat removed from the source only exacerbated the problem. Still, he was not Lord Voldemort for nothing. He harnessed the unwieldy magic inexorably and willed it forcibly into manifestation.

Shadows erupted from the air around them to twine swiftly into the shape Voldemort directed. The boy's consciousness was immediately encased, trapped in a cage of Voldemort's making. The only thing that could separate a being's consciousness from its own magic was magic itself. The shield that encased the boy's consciousness wasn't defined by a single spell. It was primarily raw magic, given shape only because his mind conceptualized it as a cage, but it provided the perfect buffer between a person's consciousness and his magic. The technique was used often by Healers who needed to block a patient's access to his magic while they healed him, as a person's magic could easily lash out at a perceived threat while the patient wasn't aware enough to prevent it. For Voldemort's purposes, it cut the boy off from his magical core completely. Without its owner's interference, magic was easily controlled by another, provided that other had the necessary willpower.

"Not so confident now, are you, little snake?" Voldemort taunted the boy trapped within the cage of his magic, "You will learn, as the world will learn, not to question Lord Voldemort's power."

The boy didn't answer, just kept glaring at him. Voldemort sneered with annoyance. What was the point of gloating if the boy wasn't

even going to react with a satisfying amount of outrage? A pity; the little Slytherin had until that point been a very accommodating victim.

Voldemort surveyed his surroundings. There was a fireplace with a couple of armchairs nearby-did the boy think to entertain guests in his mind? What nonsense. The rest of the cave had been set up to resemble a potions laboratory. Yes, Voldemort had heard of the boy's interest in the subject while occupying Ginny's mind. There was also a series of cabinets lining the walls, filled to bursting with scrolls.

Voldemort smirked. Those would be the memories. Not the most original method of memory storage he'd heard of, but at least they were organized. It would be easy to find the information he needed to pass as the boy, once the possession was complete. Speaking of-where was the boy's magical core?

"Water type or fire type?" he wondered aloud. The icy mountain and the boy's passive personality would suggest the former, which meant he should be looking for a spring of some kind, or perhaps an iceberg if the boy had a true ice core. Then again, the inner sanctum of the boy's mind was warm, not cold. He might be a fire-type after all. Voldemort frowned. The fireplace by the armchairs was roaring cheerfully, but it didn't feel like a core should. It seemed to be merely another magical illusion.

Perhaps that was the illusion? Could the boy have protected his magical core by disguising it as a regular magical construct? If so, why leave it out in the open, still a focal point of the second layer of his mindscape? Perhaps it was a double-bluff, with the intention of making it so obvious that anyone who suspected the boy had hidden it would discount it as not being hidden enough. Was he willing to give the boy that much credit?

As Voldemort pondered this question, he began to feel an annoyingly niggling sensation at the back of his consciousness. The moment he focused on it, he knew what had caused it. Ginny's core was resisting, bucking violently under his previously sure control. Voldemort frowned. What had disturbed the girl's core? It felt as

though Ginny had regained access to it, and was prying it, slowly but surely, from his grasp. If such a thing occurred, it would not be long before his influence was purged from her core-magic was disgustingly loyal once tied to a being's consciousness. Ginny's mere unwillingness made her magic that much more difficult to control-if she had access to her own core, she could easily banish his control of it.

But such a thing was impossible. The very brilliance of the cage he'd left her in denied its possibility. The only thing that could destroy that cage was magic-which by its nature the cage denied the girl's consciousness access to. No one could escape the cage without outside help, and there was no one else in the Chamber to-

Voldemort tilted his head as an insane thought struck him. He never ignored insane thoughts out of hand, and so he carefully considered the illogical answer on the off chance that it proved to be a viable explanation after all. The conscious minds in the Chamber numbered three: Voldemort, Ginny, and Black. If Voldemort had not freed her, and Ginny could not free herself, Black was the only other possible culprit.

Ignoring for the moment that Black was also trapped in a cage that prevented him access to his magic-not to mention preventing him from leaving the confines of his own mind-could the boy have made his way to Ginny's mind while Voldemort was busy here, thereby seeking to undo his control behind his back?

Ginny's mind was shielded, it's true, and should have been impervious to Legilimency attacks even without Voldemort there to witness them. The shields were tied to the girl's core, and maintained through his control over it. They could not have been undone until the girl already had control over her magic. And yet, didn't Black have a way with Legilimency barriers? The boy had cured the Sleeping Sickness, according to little Ginny, and from what Voldemort understood the sickness had been based upon very strong Occlumency shields.

It was possible, then, that the boy had made it into Ginny's mind and assisted in her freedom. If the boy had hidden somewhere in the first layer of his mindscape, on the mountain, and waited until Voldemort entered the cave-like second layer, he might have slipped out of the mists undetected. Voldemort wondered what kind of an idiot would abandon his own mind to assist another's, but then he considered the consequences of freeing Ginny.

I lose control of her magic .

Voldemort was, reluctantly, impressed. The boy was more Slytherin than he'd thought, though it was a risk worthy of Gryffindor. He could see the boy's plan, now. Use his own mind as a distraction, free Ginny's mind, deny Voldemort Ginny's magic, thereby greatly weakening his enemy while gaining an able ally in the process. And to make sure his enemy didn't suspect his duplicity... Voldemort's face darkened. He had been tricked into a false sense of security, thinking he already had the boy trapped. He turned to regard the boy glaring at him from within the cage.

"What are you, then?" he wondered.

He stepped up to the bars and peered at the boy through them. If this was a magical construct, it was a rather good one. Nowhere near the perfection of himself, admittedly, but the likeness was spot on. Most people could not make so accurate an image of themselves. Was it sentient?

"I am going to kill Draco Malfoy," he said casually, "I'm going to use your body to lure him somewhere private. Then I'm going to bind and gag him, because I won't kill him quickly. I'm going to carve Slytherin's mark into his forehead, first, and then I'm going to scrape off all of that pretty white skin. I'll paint the walls with his blood, and look right into his eyes as I twist a knife into his belly, so that you can see the light leaving them even from here."

The boy never flinched, never so much as blinked. There was no catch of breath or tightening of the facial muscles to indicate

suppressed rage or disgust.

"Just a puppet, then," Voldemort said dismissively. He banished the cage, as there was obviously no need for it, but the magic twisted away from him. Instead of disappearing, the cage flickered and bent inward, its bars crumpling at odd angles. Voldemort clenched his fist and slammed his will into the cage. It did as he commanded, that time, and disappeared, but Voldemort could feel his control of Ginny's magic weakening by the second.

He was not worried, however. The boy was clever, no doubt about that, but he had forgotten one thing in his haste to free Ginny's magic from his clutches. Voldemort didn't need Ginny's magic. Black's magic would do just fine. All he had to do was find it.

Voldemort looked around the room carefully. It was hidden here, somewhere. He began moving things. He upturned the chairs, rooted through all of the cabinets in case there was something behind or beneath the scrolls. Nothing. He rifled through the potions supplies, examined the fireplace thoroughly, and smirked when he ripped aside the floor rug to find a wooden trap door. The boy had cheek, he'd give him that.

He dropped through the trap door to find a series of tunnels. Voldemort scowled. He had no time to wander through the brat's maze. He also had no choice. He attempted to stretch out his magical senses, but his access to the Ginny's core was almost completely eradicated now. He felt the barest hint of power against his senses, and marked the direction it came from before it slipped away from him.

He began through the tunnels swiftly, always keeping in the direction he'd felt that power. He made several wrong turns and doubled back, cursing each time, but eventually found himself before a corridor that dead ended at a door. Voldemort smirked with triumph. He could feel the magic beyond this door, even without his own magic to analyze it. Upon examining the door, however, he lost his good humor. It was seamless, melded right into the corridor around it. With magic, it

would be a simple matter to blast the passage until it crumbled out of the way, but without magic to destroy the obstacle, he was forced to play by the rules of the boy's mind.

Unless he missed his guess, that meant he needed a password.

Voldemort cursed. He did not have time to go rifling through the scrolls above him in the secondary layer to figure out the password. The boy would no doubt be returning to his mind, soon, and would catch up to Voldemort if he did not break through this door quickly.

He paused, another idea occurring to him. The boy was touched by Salazar's gift as well, was he not? It would be natural, then, to guard his mind with the Serpent's Tongue. How fitting, Voldemort thought, that this should be the final barrier. How cruel the irony. No doubt the boy had thought himself so clever, so special, to have such a protection, never imagining that another, just as clever, just as special, would come to be his undoing.

Utterly confident, Voldemort hissed the password to Black's mind: "*Open* ."

The door opened.

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The golden lava finally ate through enough of the bars for Ginny to dart out of the cage. The girl smiled widely as she plunged her hands into the ravine of magic that was her core. Her consciousness seemed to regain a glow of health she had been missing without Rigel realizing it.

"I've missed this," Ginny said reverently, "I could accept that bastard possessing me-I let him into my head, after all-but taking my magic away... I think I will always hate him for that."

"Time for hate after we get rid of him," Rigel said, though she agreed that such a thing went beyond intrusive and into a realm of perverse cruelty that she could scarcely imagine. "Can you cleanse your magic of his taint?"

Ginny furrowed her brow, concentrating on her core. "It runs so deep... but it's my magic," her voice firmed and her eyes flashed, "I'll burn the bastard out."

Rigel stepped back a bit as the molten liquid in the fissure moved from a simmer to a roiling boil. The heat in Ginny's mindscape increased dramatically, the fires dancing along the surface of the liquid blazing hotter and brighter and higher. The holes that littered the ground all erupted with fire, and small streams of molten gold bubbled out of them, coating the ground with golden lava. Rigel realized that the fissure in the earth of Ginny's mind wasn't the entire core-merely a small facet of it. The core seemed to stretch far beyond what Rigel had assumed, with all the little geysers connected to it, letting off bursts of power to release the tension of so much power.

The golden liquid in the fissure turned white-hot, and when Ginny stepped back a few minutes later, panting, Rigel couldn't see a trace of black sludge anywhere within it.

"I think-I did-it," Ginny panted, "He won't have-my magic-to work with-anymore."

Rigel nodded, "I'm going back to my mind, then. The construct shouldn't be able to trap me there without your magic, and it'll have no defense when I push it out."

"I'll make sure all the spells he was using my magic for are stopped," Ginny said, "So you can use your magic again."

"Thank you," Rigel said. She thought the spells would already have stopped, since the construct would no longer be in control of them, but it didn't hurt to be sure.

Going back through Ginny's core was much easier than coming in. There was nothing but hot gold to push through, and within minutes she was back in her own mind. The Space Room, she was relieved to note, had not been penetrated. There was a chance that the construct would find it before he'd lost the use of Ginny's magic, and the room would probably not withstand the force of a magical attack, but it was a calculated risk.

With no time to lose, Rigel opened the door to her Space Room, intent on seeking out the construct and taking the intruder by surprise.

To her alarm, she found him standing just on the other side of the door, as though he had been waiting there to ambush her. But no—he looked equally shocked to see her. Rigel didn't waste time wondering why he would be surprised, though a part of her wondered what else he was doing there, if not waiting for her to open the door after realizing he could not open it himself. Instead, Rigel thrust her hand out and willed her magic forward.

Her sun pulsed at her back and fire erupted from her palm. It hit the construct square in the chest, sending him flying backwards down the tunnel. Rigel spared a moment to shut the door to her Space Room behind her, just in case, and then ran toward where the construct was laying, stunned, on the tunnel floor. She threw another burst of flame at it, but Riddle's construct rolled and scrambled quickly to its feet. It darted to the side and ran down the tunnel, toward the trap door. Rigel ran after it, sending fire ahead of her to lap at the construct's heels.

She chased it up through the trap door, through the cave-lab, and out over the mountain top. The construct threw her a furious look over its shoulder as it dived into the mist, and Rigel responded with one last burst of flame to hurry its departure.

She breathed a sigh of relief when it was over. She would check on Ginny to make sure the redhead had succeeded in keeping the construct out of her mind—not that she should have had any trouble,

as Riddle's construct was essentially powerless without access to magic. Then they would get out of the Chamber as quickly as possible.

Rigel came back to her body, and was pleased to find that she could move freely once more. Her magic was humming in her veins like an angry beehive, annoyed at having been restrained by Riddle Jr.'s spell for so long.

"Is that you, Rigel?" Ginny said warily once she'd opened her eyes and stretched. The eleven-year-old looked shaken, but otherwise in possession of all her faculties.

"It's me," Rigel said, "I drove the construct out. Did it try to enter your mind?"

"No," Ginny said slowly, "I didn't sense anything after you left. Can you prove you're you, and not possessed by Tom?"

"Well, anything I know it would have access to through my memories if it had possessed me," Rigel pointed out uncertainly.

Ginny nodded, "He'd have to sort through them first, though, and I don't think he's had enough time to assimilate all the details. What instrument was George playing in the Hospital Wing when you came to visit me?"

"A tiny piano," Rigel said quickly, "And I think he had a kick drum as well."

Ginny nodded, "Okay, so... now what?"

"We get out of here," Rigel said, "I'm sure the professors are worried-"

She and Ginny both froze as an ominous rasping noise echoed around the hall. It came again, the sound of something heavy shifting clumsily. Rigel and Ginny whipped around to stare in horror at the

basilisk, which had been lying prostrate on the Chamber floor just moments before. Now, it was *moving* .

"I thought you said Tom killed it," Ginny said quietly, stepping closer to Rigel with a fearful look on her face.

"It is dead," Rigel said, her voice thick with fear and disgust, "I think... the construct didn't try to possess you because it didn't have the magic to penetrate a conscious mind."

"Tom's possessed the basilisk," Ginny gasped softly, "Oh, Godric."

They watched, frozen and wary, as the basilisk's corpse twisted slowly against the stone. Its movements were jerky, and Rigel wondered if Riddle's construct was having a hard time grasping the controls in the basilisk's mind, which was surely different from a human's. They had a small window, Rigel realized, and they were wasting it.

"Ginny," she said, "Do you remember the way to the passage that takes you back to the bathroom?"

Ginny nodded, "I was aware enough to mark it, the last time. You want to make a run for it?"

Rigel shook her head, "The basilisk will be too fast, even dead. It'll overtake us unless it's distracted. I'll keep it busy; you need to go. Run as fast as you can back to the passage and find help."

Ginny's face tightened, "I can't open the passage. I know it's 'open' but I can't remember how to say it anymore."

"Repeat after me," Rigel said quickly, taking Ginny's arm and leading her quickly towards the corridor that would take her out, " *Open* ."

" *O... Open* ."

"Again," Rigel said.

" *Open* ." Ginny said firmly, " *Open. Open.* Okay, I've got it. Rigel-be careful. The eyes-"

Rigel shook her head, "The basilisk's magic died with it. It's eyes are just eyes now. I've only got to worry about the teeth. Go, Ginny. Quickly."

Ginny took off at a run, and Rigel turned back to face the beast.

It was disgusting to watch the corpse rise slowly from the ground. The wounds in its tail must be hindering the construct's control of its movements, because it trembled and shook as its body rose into the air. Gone was the grace the snake had previously possessed. It's form was almost drunken, listing sharply sideways every now and then, only to jerk back just as sharply without warning.

Rigel moved away from the Chamber exit, getting as far away from the basilisk as she could without backing herself into a corner. Every instinct in her was screaming to run, as fast and as far as she could, in the opposite direction, but she stayed, because Ginny was running for her. She would get the professors, and they would come and destroy the basilisk. All she needed to do was distract Riddle Jr. for ten, fifteen minutes at the most.

The basilisk's great head began turning side to side. Rigel deliberately kicked a loose stone, which caused a sharp, scuttling noise as it skidded across the ground. The basilisk's head jerked toward her, and it's mouth parted to release its long tongue, which was still stained with the snake's own blood from where it had torn chunks from its own hide earlier.

To Rigel's immense distaste, Riddle's construct appeared to have garnered control over the basilisk's voice pipe, as it hissed, " *Not running, little sssnake? Brave, for a boy ssso young. Foolisssh, too.* "

" *It doesssn't take much bravery to ssstand up to a relic like you, trapped in the ssskin of a dead sssnake,*" Rigel answered. Now was not the time to be the patient, accommodating hostage. Now was the

time to enrage the enemy to distraction, theoretically either luring him to rash action or preventing rational action.

" You dare? " the basilisk tossed its head back in outrage, " I will sssilence that sssilver tongue of yours, and then we will sssee how much bravery you can musster ."

The body of the basilisk lurched forward, sliding quickly, though grotesquely across the floor. Rigel dove to the side, and began running toward the other side of the Chamber, thankful beyond measure that she was relatively in-shape, even despite a couple of months without her regular exercises.

The basilisk lunged after her, but appeared to have trouble changing directions so suddenly. It lost its balance halfway through the turn and rolled awkwardly into the wall before regaining its equilibrium and starting toward her again. The key, then, would be to wait as long as possible before darting out of the snake's path, which was admittedly easier said than done in cumbersome school robes. Rigel thanked the stars she had stolen her name from that Riddle Jr. had killed the basilisk before trying to possess her. The construct's arrogance and cruelty had together engineered her only chance at survival.

She dodged the basilisk twice more before her luck ran out. When she attempted to dart past the snake a fourth time, the basilisk's tail came around suddenly and slammed into her side, sending her sprawling across the stones. Rigel scrambled to her feet-or tried to, but it felt like one of her ribs had been bruised or cracked by the blow, and her muscled spasmed in protest as she pressed her arms against the floor for leverage. She gasped as her breath caught in her lungs with the pain, and before she could get away the basilisk's body had encircled her.

Rigel forced her body to its feet and attempted to climb quickly over one of the coils that surrounded her, but the basilisk's body contracted, and she was caught in a viselike grip as the coils tightened around her. The scales scraped against her palms where

she tried to pry herself free, but it was no use. She was caught fast, and she let out a groan of pain as the basilisk's muscles contracted around her, squeezing her chest painfully and causing her bruised rib to feel like it was grinding against its neighboring ribs with every breath.

" Ssso it comesss to thisss. Will you continue to ssstruggle, little ssssnake, or can you sssee now the pointlessnesss of your resssisstance? " the basilisk hissed softly, its head swaying just above where Rigel was trapped menacingly. Rigel looked up to glare at the snake, feeling a jolt of fear as she looked into its great, yellow eyes, despite knowing they couldn't hurt her or anyone else ever again.

" You ssshould have run while you had the chance," Rigel hissed back through gritted teeth, *" What will killing me accomplisssh ?"*

" Killing you?" Riddle's construct laughed through the basilisk's blood-stained mouth, the smell of rot and flesh so foul on its breath that Rigel gagged and turned her face away, *" No, boy, if I wanted to kill you, it would be a sssimple matter of sssinking thesse fangsss into your flessssh. I will posssesss you if it isss the lassst thing I do."*

" It'sss too late for that," Rigel denied.

" I think not," the basilisk rasped, *" The ssstory will be altered, of coursse. The brave Black boy dessstroyed the basssilisk and banisshed the memory of Lord Voldemort ."*

" They will look into my mind to make sssure," Rigel said, though she was not certain they would, at that.

" They will sssee what I want them to sssee," Riddle's construct assured her. The coils tightened further, and Rigel had to pant shallowly to get any air at all into her lungs.

She could see his plan, now. He would suffocate her until she passed out from lack of oxygen. Once her mind was unconscious,

the construct would have an easy time possessing it, even without access to a magical core. Once inside, it would alter the appearance of his consciousness until it looked like Rigel did, and perhaps no one would think it odd that Rigel's mental avatar suddenly had hair that matched her outward appearance, instead of the long hair that Snape and Draco had seen before. The construct would use her body and magic as it pleased. It would go through her memories, discover her secrets, her deception. She didn't know what it would do with the information, but Archie's dreams would hang in the balance.

She imagined Riddle's construct cozying up to Rigel's friends, slowly poisoning their minds until they were as twisted as it was. She imagined it using her friendship with Leo to his advantage, enjoying the internship at the Guild as a way to build connections with some of the brightest minds of their age. She pictured it going home to her parent's house, holding her baby sister in its arms.

It was not to be borne.

Rigel did not know whether her magic could penetrate the scales of the basilisk or not. The scales were as tough as dragon hide, and if the basilisk were living, she would not stand a chance. With its death, however, the creature's natural magic would be gone. The scales were still hard, but not, Rigel thought, impervious.

She called on her magic, which, while still nowhere near full-strength, was happy to answer her. She imagined the shape of the shield Riddle Jr. had placed on her earlier, a skin-tight weave that would coat her entire form with magic. She summoned her strength, and broke her word to Snape remorselessly. For the first time, she thought the spell deliberately; *Depasco* .

The red shield flexed into being a hairsbreadth away from her skin. She could feel the heat pouring off of it, and felt dark satisfaction when the smell of burning flesh met her nose. The shield was dissolving the basilisk's scales everywhere they touched her skin. The basilisk let out a wordless hiss and jerked away from her, and

Rigel smirked knowing that Riddle's construct had been connected to the basilisk's nervous system, and therefore its pain registers, too.

She rolled away from the basilisk while she had the chance and began running toward the place she had been bound earlier, where a weapon that might help her out of all this lay forgotten on the stones. The Depasco shield remained in place around her skin for ten more seconds, and then it flickered out as her magical core became drained beyond the point at which it could sustain the barrier. She kept running, ignoring the pain in her ribs and the stinging of her palms from where she'd scraped them against stone and scale.

She glanced over her shoulder to gauge how quickly the basilisk had recovered. It was already speeding across the hall behind her. She faked a trip just as she reached the place where the fang rested on the floor, to throw off Riddle Jr.'s suspicion, if he was aware enough to recall dropping the fang there in the midst of his anger and pain.

Using her bulky robes to cover the movement, she quickly grabbed the fang from the floor, careful not to pierce her skin against it, and hid it in her long sleeve just as something thick and ropey wrapped around her ankle from behind.

It was the basilisk's tongue, and it lifted her into the air by her foot, dangling her off the ground helplessly. The basilisk's tail came up to curl around her waist and turn her right-side up, freeing the basilisk's mouth. The basilisk held her up to its face, so close that its tongue brushed against her knee as it spoke.

" *You've had your fun, boy,*" the construct said, irritation leaking through the basilisk's throat, " *But it isss over, now. You've no magic left to-*"

Rigel didn't give it time to finish. She brought her hand up swiftly and plunged the fang it held as deep as she could into the basilisk's right eye. The tail's grip was compromised, but Rigel latched onto the basilisk's head by grabbing one of the horn-like protrusions on its skull and twisting the fang still deeper into the basilisk's skull. She

could feel the fang scrape through the back of the eye-socket violently. Brain-matter ripped beneath her ministrations, and she kept at it, the adrenaline in her system keeping her stomach from rebelling at the gore.

She felt it the moment the brain became too damaged to support Riddle Jr.'s possession. The whole basilisk collapsed to the stone, utterly still. Rigel fell, losing her grip on the snake's skull and flailing in a vain attempt to orient herself in the air. Her ankle snapped with an audible crack when it hit the ground, and Rigel barely got an arm up to protect her head from hitting the flagstones. Her body felt paralyzed, though she knew it was probably just her muscles going into shock from the impact. She coughed harshly as her lungs fought for breath against the searing pain spreading from her ribcage. She was unable to even roll aside as the basilisk's head fell to the ground beside her, splattering her with spittle and bits of blood from its slackened, gaping jaws.

She heard a voice in the air around her, though she couldn't see where it came from.

"You think you have won, little snake? No, there can be no escape for you. So you have damaged the beast beyond possession-it matters not. Your own body is too damaged to remain conscious for long. Soon you will fall unconscious, and then your mind will be mine. I need only wait."

Rigel cursed mentally. It was too much to hope that the construct had perished with the basilisk's mind. It must have fled when it sensed the possibility of death approaching.

Her eyes blinked slowly as she fought to stay awake. She was so tired...

The basilisk was staring at her out of its ruined, yellow eye. How afraid she had been of those eyes, before. Now they were useless, unable to kill with a glance. The basilisk seemed really pitiable now that she was looking at it properly. Its own fang cut from its mouth

and driven into its skull through its eye. It was truly a horrific sight, and even though she knew how deadly the snake had been in life, she could not help but feel sorry for it in death.

Death... Rigel's mind was telling her something about death. She knew she was going to die, though-didn't need her mind to tell her that. As soon as Riddle's construct possessed her, she was as good... as... oh. Yes, she thought, of course. Death is the only answer.

Her vision was turning black at the edges, but she mustered the strength to left her left hand and reach toward the basilisk's gaping jaws. The distance was small, but it felt like ages before her hand slipped past its lipless mouth and felt around its gums gingerly. It was probably only a few seconds later when she grasped a fang at last.

"Just give up, boy," Riddle's construct laughed, its voice filling the air around her, "Even if you pry it loose, you can't stab me with it. I have no form."

Rigel braced her palm against the edge of the fang, and pulled her hand back sharply with all her strength. The fang sliced open her skin, and blood began welling from her palm immediately.

"What are you doing?" the voice screeched suddenly, "No. NO!"

Rigel smiled weakly. "Good luck... possessing... me now," she said softly. Her hand began to shake as the poison coursed through her.

"This isn't over," the construct's voice hissed directly into her ear, but a moment later it was gone.

She lay there staring up at the hall's ceiling, so far above her she could barely see it among the shadows. She could feel the blood flowing sluggishly out of her, thickened by the poison coursing inexorably up her veins. She wouldn't call herself content, dying amidst the smell of burnt basilisk and grimy sewage water, but she

had done what she could. Her magic was out of Riddle Jr.'s reach. Her secrets were safe. Her friends and family would never be subjected to the unhinged construct's influence.

She regretted not gaining her Mastery before she died, of course. She regretted the complications that would arise for Archie when 'Arcturus Black' died at Hogwarts. Would he pretend to be Harry for the next five years anyway, to stay at AIM? Would he let Sirius mourn him, or would he confess everything? She regretted-but she was snapped from her regrets by the sound of rapid footsteps approaching.

"Rigel!" that was Ginny's voice, high and frantic, echoing across the hall.

There was the sound of running-many pairs of feet, she thought vaguely, and then Ginny's face was bent over her own, followed shortly by Snape's grim features as her Head of House knelt beside her prone form. She blinked up at them, and Ginny put a shaking hand to her mouth, sobbing, "He's alive. Godric, he's alive."

Rigel turned her eyes to her own hand, which lay palm up on the ground, still bleeding, and grunted as best she could.

Snape's eyes flicked rapidly from her hand, sliced open, to the basilisk's fang-infested mouth beside her, and put the pieces together rapidly, "He's been poisoned. Basilisk's venom. I don't-Albus?"

"Fauxes," she heard the Headmaster's voice say calmly. There was a flash of heat from somewhere to Rigel's right-she just barely saw the flash at the edges of her dimming vision, "If you would be so kind."

She saw a blur of red as a bird of some kind alighted on the stone beside her. Hot liquid fell onto her palm a moment later. *Phoenix*, her tired mind supplied. She could already feel the pain diminishing. The bird began singing, a soft, crooning noise that brought tears

unbidden to her eyes. Before she could summon the will to resist, a deep, dreamless sleep swept up to claim her.

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She awoke to a rocking sensation, and it didn't take her long to realize she was being carried in someone's arms as they walked. Rigel's nose picked out the smell of aconite, among other herbs used in the potion she'd been brewing with Professor Snape what seemed like a lifetime ago, and she pried her eyelids apart to see her Head of House's shoulder an inch from her nose. She blinked, and a small spot of what was probably her own drool on the fabric came into focus. That was embarrassing, she thought vaguely, and attempted to lift her head.

She hissed softly as her neck voiced its objection to the movement, apparently content to remain resting against Snape's overcoat, but she was able to lull her head backwards enough to see Snape flick his eyes down at her face assessing.

"We are in route to the Headmaster's office," Snape informed her without being prompted, "The Headmaster feels explanations are warranted at this time, despite the obvious trauma that has been inflicted upon you and Miss Weasley. If you feel unable to process things at this time, I will, of course, see you excused to the Hospital Wing at once."

His tone indicated he meant to see her excused to the Hospital Wing in any case, but Rigel felt she would rather everything were over with at once. After taking stock of her body, she felt surprisingly fine.

"Did the phoenix heal everything?" She croaked out. Her throat was uncomfortably dusty, but her words were at least comprehensible.

"One fractured rib, scraped palms, broken ankle, numerous cuts and bruises, and, oh yes, a slice made by a *basilisk fang*," Snape said sharply, "What were you thinking?"

"Not my fault," Rigel said automatically.

Snape snorted, "I very much doubt that."

"How is Ginny?" Rigel asked.

"Right here," Ginny's voice came from behind them, and the redhead moved into Rigel's line of vision accommodatingly, "I'm glad you're all right, Rigel. I thought I was too late."

"You did great, Ginny," Rigel said, "Perfect timing, I think."

Ginny laughed weakly, "I guess. It took me a few minutes to open the passageway. I think I wasn't putting the right inflection on the word. I already can't remember how to say it-the language slips from my mind, somehow, when I try to grasp it."

That was probably for the best, Rigel reflected, as the other Slytherins probably wouldn't be happy to hear that Rigel had given a Gryffindor the override password to the common room entrance.

"Thank you, in any case," Rigel said earnestly, "And thank the Headmaster for the loan of his phoenix, please."

"Oh, I doubt Fauxes would ever forgive me if I presumed to accept thanks on his behalf," Dumbledore's voice came from the hallway ahead of them, and Rigel supposed he was leading the way, "You may thank him yourself, however."

With a trill, the scarlet bird alighted on Snape's shoulder and peered down into her face seriously.

"Thank you, Fauxes," she said softly. The phoenix gave a short burst of song, which Rigel supposed meant he accepted her thanks, and fluttered his wings a bit, much to Snape's displeasure.

The Potions Master turned his head sharply to avoid a mouthful of feathers. "Albus, tell your bird that my shoulder is not his perch," Snape said.

"Tell him yourself," Dumbledore's reply was both mild and unconcerned in tone.

"He doesn't listen to me," Snape grumbled under his breath.

"Contrary as a cat, phoenixes are," Dumbledore agreed.

"A trait they encourage in their owners as well, no doubt," McGonagall's wry voice came from behind them, but Rigel couldn't see the Head of Gryffindor House from her position. Speaking of...

"I can walk now, Professor," she said.

Snape merely lifted a brow, "When you learn better than to take on fully grown basilisks by yourself, Mr. Black, I will allow you to be the judge of what you can and cannot do."

"I didn't have a choice," Rigel pointed out.

"So you say," Snape did not sound terribly convinced.

She heard a loud scraping noise and flinched slightly, turning her head with a monumental effort to look towards the source.

"It is the passage to the Headmaster's office," Snape informed her steadily.

"The basilisk sounded like that," Ginny said softly, "It's scales were so hard, when it moved across the floor it was like stone scraping against itself."

"You poor children," McGonagall said.

Rigel wasn't sure they deserved her sympathies. She and Ginny were alive and unharmed, after all. If anything was to be pitied, she

thought it ought to be the basilisk.

They ascended the moving staircase and the Headmaster helpfully conjured several additional chairs so that he, McGonagall, Snape, Ginny, and Rigel could all be seated comfortably in his office.

Before they began the interrogation, Rigel asked, "Has someone informed my housemates that I'm all right?"

"Professor Flitwick went to Slytherin House for that very purpose," Dumbledore said reassuringly.

"And my brothers?" Ginny put in quickly, frowning, "They must have been so worried."

McGonagall nodded, her lips quirking weakly, "Professor Sprout took care of it. I suspect Mr. Percy Weasley will be especially relieved to hear of your safe recovery."

Ginny snorted, "He's probably spent all night trying to keep the other three from scouring the castle for me. Those idiots... still, it's how they show they care."

Rigel wondered if Draco had tried looking for her, but then dismissed the thought. Draco was much too intelligent to run around a castle blindly when there was nothing he could do even if he'd found her. She hadn't been missing that long, in fact. If the teachers didn't publicize her kidnapping, he might not even be too worried.

"Well, now," Dumbledore said, folding his hands on top of his desk and peering at she and Ginny over his half-moon spectacles, "It's rather late, and I'm sure you two want to find your beds. If you could give us an account of what happened in the Chamber, I can pass the account along to the Board of Governors, and we teachers can find our beds as well, how does that sound?"

Ginny nodded slowly, a fearful look on her face. Rigel could guess what she was afraid of-being blamed for letting the construct take

advantage of her mind the way it did.

"I'll explain, if that's all right with you, Ginny," Rigel said, "Strange as it sounds, I think I have more of the pieces than you do, at this point."

Ginny blew out a short breath, "Yes, thank you. I don't actually want to talk about it."

"Where to start?" Rigel muttered, thinking.

"Your movements are known until you exited my office this evening with Prefect Fairister-who is perfectly fine, desist with that stricken expression," Snape said, "Begin there."

Rigel bit the inside of her lip, and said, "I think I ought to begin a bit further back, actually, if you want to understand why I specifically was kidnapped."

Dumbledore's gaze sharpened, "My dear boy, I had assumed you were a victim of opportunity. You mean to say you were targeted specifically?"

"Yes," Rigel said. She gathered her thoughts for a moment, and then began. She would tell the truth, of course, but the truth in this case was a delicate thing. "You should know from the start that Ginny is as much a victim in this as I am. Ginny was unfortunate enough to come into contact with a Dark artifact of considerable power. A book, which housed a sentient magical construct."

"Where is this book?" Dumbledore said sharply, "Did you destroy it?"

"No," Rigel said, "But the book isn't important anymore. Soon after meeting Ginny, the construct that lived in the book cut its ties with its container and moved into Ginny's mind. It lived there, gathering strength and slowly gaining control over Ginny's magic, until it was strong enough to possess her."

McGonagall gasped and set a shaking hand on Ginny's shoulder, "And none of us suspected... I am so sorry, Miss Weasley."

"I didn't know what was happening myself," Ginny said, shamefaced, "How could you have?"

"The construct spoke Parseltongue," Rigel said, "And opened the Chamber of Secrets using Ginny's body. It released the basilisk that lived there and used it to petrify students. It was trying to get you removed from your post, Headmaster, though its reasonings were not entirely clear. The construct seemed quite mad, by the end. I think the magic holding its personality together broke down over time-it was created some fifty years ago, I believe. The construct was very unstable, and so I am not sure how much of its ramblings were true."

"What do you mean?" Dumbledore asked keenly, "What did it tell you?"

Truth, Rigel reminded herself. The Headmaster seemed the type to know if you were lying.

"It called itself Lord Voldemort," Rigel said carefully. She looked at the teachers' faces, but none seemed to recognize the name, "It was power-hungry, and immensely dissatisfied with the current state of the wizarding world. It wanted to start a revolution of some kind, to change the world for the better, according to some standard known only to itself. It used Ginny to sow chaos in the school, hoping that the Headmaster would be discredited, and I think it just liked making people afraid. The construct used Ginny's body to obtain belladonna, and poison Hagrid's roosters. Over time, Ginny began to realize what was happening, what was living in her head. She started to fight, and she tried to get rid of the book, thinking it to be the source."

"What did you do with the book?" Dumbledore asked. He seemed very intent on knowing exactly where the Dark artifact was.

"I dumped it in Moaning Myrtle's toilet," Ginny said, "I figured no one would find it there, because no one ever goes into that bathroom."

"Myrtle is a... friend of mine," Rigel said, ignoring the raised eyebrows she got for that statement, "She told me about someone throwing a book at her head, and gave it to me. I didn't know what it was, but Ginny saw it in my bag at the Library and recognized it immediately. I think the construct decided I was a loose end, since I had the book, so it possessed Ginny again and kidnapped me as I was on my way back from Professor Snape's laboratory."

There, that included all of the facts, but left Draco and Pansy out of it entirely. Rigel wasn't sure if she would be in trouble for keeping the book despite knowing it had a connection to the petrifications, but she could spare Draco and Pansy the interrogation their involvement would warrant, in any case.

"So the construct took you for a threat," Snape mused, "How did you survive as long as you did in the Chamber?"

"Severus!" McGonagall said, "That's entirely insensitive, even for you."

"It's a fair question, Professor," Rigel said, "Two reasons, I think. First, the construct changed his mind at some point. Instead of killing me, it decided to possess me, thinking it would be more useful to have a host who spoke Parseltongue, so it wouldn't have to hide its ability. Second, it wasn't in a hurry. It was confident that no one could break through Slytherin's wards over the Chamber entrance."

"Well, I daresay it was right about that," Dumbledore said regretfully, "We tried everything, Mr. Black, to break through the wards ourselves. We were able to dismantle the concealing spells and most of the defensive measures, but the magic supporting the passageway itself was impenetrable."

Snape scoffed, "The founders built this castle. It answers only to them-and their descendents."

"Thank you for being there, in any case," Rigel said, "Your presence, and your phoenix, saved my life."

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled a bit over his spectacles, "Now don't get any silly ideas about life debts, Mr. Black. It is a phoenix's nature to heal, and Fauxes will not accept anything more than thanks for doing what comes naturally to him."

"Thank you," she told the bird again, "Truly."

"Yes, yes," Snape said impatiently, "You said the construct was relaxed in the Chamber-did he reveal anything to you?"

"Quite a bit," Rigel said, "Though not all of it made sense. It talked about changing the world, and told me a bit about its plans. It was going to possess me, kill Ginny, kill the basilisk, and emerge from the Chamber a hero, making it seem like I'd defeated the snake and Ginny had tragically died in the crossfire when her basilisk went insane with bloodlust."

" *Her* basilisk?" McGonagall said incredulously.

"Yes," Rigel grimaced, "The construct was going to say that Ginny had acquired Parseltongue through a Dark ritual, and that she was working for the Headmaster, petrifying students so that he could save the school at the last moment to look like a hero. You see what I meant about it being a bit mad?"

"Who would ever believe such nonsense?" McGonagall asked. She paused, thought a moment, then sighed, "Never mind. I know exactly the sort of people who would believe such a thing."

"It killed the basilisk first," Rigel said softly, wincing as she remembered, "Because it wasn't sure it could control it as effectively if it switched hosts first. It was... awful. The construct didn't use a wand or anything. It just ordered the basilisk to bite itself. The snake was so confused. It was in pain, but it just kept hurting itself because its Master told it to."

The professor's all had sickened looks on their faces, and Ginny was paler than a ghost. McGonagall clenched a hand in her robes and said, "What cowardice. To slay a sentient creature in such a way..."

"This is what happens when wizards don't take responsibility for their magic," Snape spat, "Such a thing should never have been borne. A construct, no matter how complex, can never equal a wizard's will- can never be worthy of having a wizard's gifts bestowed upon it."

"Once the basilisk was dead," Rigel continued, "It broke off a fang to stab Ginny's body with. Once she was dying, it would have moved to possess me. I told him not to kill Ginny yet, pointing out that it didn't know for sure that it could possess me at all."

"Your Occlumency shields are not that powerful," Snape said, frowning.

"It didn't know that," Rigel said, "I may have taunted it, as well."

Dumbledore chuckled a bit, but Snape did not look nearly so amused.

"*Reckless* child," the Potions Master said, "You could have angered him to violence."

"It had already said it didn't want to kill me," Rigel said.

"You'd already noted it was mad," Snape returned.

Rigel grimaced, "In any case, it left Ginny's body and moved to possess mine instead. I distracted it with what little Occlumency I am able to perform, and left my mind to go to Ginny's instead, once it became clear that the construct still had access to Ginny's magic even in my head."

"You abandoned your own mind to help Miss Weasley?" McGonagall's eyes were bright as she looked at her, "You brave boy."

"A true hero," Dumbledore said, smiling benevolently.

"It was the only logical thing to do," Rigel felt compelled to point out, "I couldn't get the construct out of my mind while he had access to Ginny's power, so by saving her I could save myself."

Ginny narrowed her eyes, "Don't make it sound like you didn't do me any favors. You could have fought him off with your own magic, if you'd tried."

Rigel wasn't sure that was true, at least as long as the construct had access to Ginny's magic, but she didn't want to argue with someone so pale and shaky looking.

"When I got to Ginny's mind-"

"Using a similar method to the way you accessed the children affected by the sleeping sickness, I suppose?" Dumbledore interrupted genially.

"Yes," Rigel said, "I didn't want the construct to guess what I was doing, and I believe it had erected Occlumency shields in Ginny's mind by then in any case. When I got to Ginny's mindscape, I found her trapped in a cage of pure mental magic. It seemed to be preventing her from accessing her core."

"That is a common method used on psychiatric patients when their condition causes them to perform dangerous accidental magic," McGonagall said, distaste on her face at the thought of anyone who wasn't a Mind Healer using such a method to take someone's magic away.

"It was easy enough to destroy, from the outside," Rigel said, "With Ginny free to take back her mind, I returned to my own. The construct was virtually powerless without a magical core to utilize, and it was quickly driven out of my head as well."

"How, in the course of those events, were you stabbed by a basilisk?" Snape asked, "For that matter, none of your injuries have been accounted for."

Rigel sighed, "The construct didn't have enough power to possess Ginny or I, as we were both consciously resisting, but there was another mind in the Chamber that put up no resistance. The basilisk's."

"Can you possess a dead thing?" McGonagall looked horrified.

"Only its body," Dumbledore said gravely, "The basilisk's magic would have left with its demise, but the mental mechanisms remain in the physical brain. Possession is difficult to mentally conceptualize, but it is in large part a physical act. If there is no magic and no resident will to protect the mind from outside control, it succumbs quickly to foreign influence. The construct would have had physical control over the basilisk's form, re-creating the physical impulses that control muscle, bone, and sinew."

"That sounds like what it did," Rigel agreed, "The eyes weren't able to kill or petrify anymore, but the body moved as the construct commanded. When we realized where the construct was now housed, I made Ginny run to get help while I distracted it."

"You rely overly much on *distraction* as a survival technique," Snape growled, "It is time you learned how to truly protect yourself."

Rigel nodded, "At the time, though, it was the best option. The basilisk's magic was gone, but it was still big and poisonous. I ran, mostly, while Ginny fetched help, but in the end it caught me. I had gotten hold of the fang the construct was going to use on Ginny earlier, and while I had the chance, I stabbed the basilisk in the eye, and drove the tooth into its brain. I tried to destroy as much of the brain as I could, so that the construct would be forced to abandon its host."

"But how were you stabbed?" Ginny asked, frowning.

Rigel considered lying. It wouldn't help anyone to know that she'd tried to kill herself-

"Oh no you don't," Snape said sharply, "Do not contemplate lying to us. I will read your memories myself if I deem it necessary."

"Severus!" McGonagall cried, "He's just a boy-"

"Mr. Black will not lie," Dumbledore said quietly, "Will you, my boy?"

Rigel looked away those soft blue eyes, feeling dissected beneath their gaze, and couldn't bring herself to make anything up.

"I was out of magic," Rigel admitted, "My ribs were making it hard to breathe, and I was going to pass out soon. The construct was waiting for me to faint, so it could possess me while I was unconscious, unable to stop it. I didn't... I couldn't let it have my mind. My magic. Don't you see? It might have fooled everyone. What if it had gone to my home? Hurt my family? I didn't know if Ginny would be able to find anyone in time. It was the only way."

"You stabbed yourself," McGonagall's breath hitched in her throat.

Snape's face was dark with rage, "You nearly killed-"

"That was the point," Rigel snapped. She took a deep breath, "Anyway, you all know what happened next. The construct fled, I don't know where. You found me, and here we are."

"Indeed," Dumbledore said, "Here we all are, safe and sound, and unpossessed, thanks to you, Mr. Black."

"Ginny-"

"Shall be rewarded for her courage as well, of course," Dumbledore inclined his head cheerfully, "Yes, well done the both of you."

"Rewarded?" Ginny shook her head slowly, "I should be punished. I let that thing control me for so long..."

"My dear, no one expects a first-year to fight off the influence of an evil magical artifact," McGonagall said gently, "This was *not your fault*, Miss Weasley. Please remember that."

"Indeed, no one can be punished for events beyond their control," Dumbledore said, "But rewarded for the strength of character they show when terrible events occur around them? That is another matter entirely."

Ginny and Rigel exchanged a troubled glance. Neither particularly wanted something to remember this night by, if they had a choice.

"Come, ask anything of me," Dumbledore said, smiling fully now. Rigel has no idea how he could be so pleased when all she felt was fatigued, mentally, physically, and emotionally.

"We don't want anything," Rigel said politely, accepting the look of thanks Ginny sent her with a small nod, "Our lives are enough reward, I think."

"A school award?" Dumbledore suggested, "A plaque in the trophy room, perhaps?"

Rigel grimaced. She definitely didn't want an award to Arcturus Rigel Black hanging around the school. The less Rigel Black left behind the better.

"We'd rather put it behind us, Sir," Ginny said quietly.

Dumbledore peered at them indulgently, "I understand the impulse, my dear, but I'm afraid I cannot allow you to leave this room until you ask a reward of me." Rigel and Ginny stared at him, incredulous.

McGonagall spoke, "Albus, surely this can wait until they've rested."

Dumbledore reached into a dish on his desk and plucked out a lemon drop to suck on before answering, "Putting off the good to dwell on the bad is never wise. It makes for fretful dreams and

wakeful starts. Better to end on a positive note, a balm for the spirit, as it were."

"What are we supposed to ask for?" Ginny said tentatively.

"House points," Dumbledore suggested, ignoring the annoyed looks McGonagall and Snape sent him for that, "To become a prefect in your fifth year," more annoyed looks from the Heads of House, "Don't be so cross-both would make excellent prefects, I'm sure. No? What do you want, then? If it is not too bold for an old man to say, what is within my power to bestow is not inconsiderable."

Ginny hesitated, then said, "Would you withhold information about my possession? I know people will want to know what happened, but could you please just tell them someone was possessed, and not say who? I don't want people to hate me, for the petrifications, I mean."

Dumbledore's eyes softened, "Miss Weasley, I would do that in any case. Ask something else."

Ginny thought, then her eyes hardened, "I want to learn Occlumency. Proper Occlumency, so that this never happens to me again."

McGonagall sent her an approving look, though Dumbledore looked slightly taken aback at the request.

"That can be done," Dumbledore said slowly, "I will arrange for a Mind Healer to visit your home over the summer, several times a week, to begin tutoring you in the art. These visits can continue during the school year, after classes, of course, if you still desire it."

Ginny smiled, the first true smile Rigel had seen on her face in a while. Maybe Dumbledore was onto something with his insistence on rewards. "Thank you," Ginny said fervently, "Thank you so much."

"Thank *you*, Miss Weasley," Dumbledore smiled, "And you, Mr. Black? What do you desire?"

Rigel couldn't think of anything she wanted from the Headmaster, really. Except, perhaps... "Can I help harvest the basilisk?"

Dumbledore blinked at her, as did McGonagall and Ginny. Snape smirked.

"Harvest it?" Ginny asked, wrinkling her nose.

"Basilisks are extremely rare," Rigel said, "It would be a great opportunity to learn how to properly make use of its parts."

Dumbledore smiled, "Due to the part you played in its defeat, that right would be yours in any case. Is there nothing else you would ask of me?"

Rigel blinked, thinking it over. This was an opportunity she hadn't asked for, but an opportunity nonetheless. What did she want? Or need, for that matter. "Does it have to be of you, Headmaster?" she asked, flicking her eyes toward Snape. Her Head of House narrowed his eyes at her, but with a glance at the Headmaster, inclined his head.

"Ask," Snape commanded.

"I know you only asked me to assist you this semester because you were saving your reserves," Rigel said, "But may I continue to assist you until the term concludes? It has been an excellent opportunity to learn."

Snape raised an eyebrow, though he inclined his head. Rigel thanked him sincerely.

McGonagall snorted, "A Gryffindor and a Slytherin go into the Chamber of Secrets, and two Ravenclaws emerge."

"We must be doing something right," Dumbledore said, smiling, "When students consider learning to be the greatest of rewards."

Rigel didn't know about the 'greatest' of rewards, but knowledge was always the most practical.

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She was taken to the Hospital Wing after Dumbledore released them. Madam Pomphrey declared her perfectly healthy, though she recommended Rigel rest in the Hospital Wing for a few days to recover her strength. She declined, and said goodbye to Ginny (who had also fervently denied the need for a stay under Madam Pomphrey's watchful eyes). McGonagall would escort Ginny back to her common room, and Snape would do the same for Rigel.

They walked silently through the halls, down the stairs to the dungeons, and were almost to the common room when Snape spoke.

"You could have asked for an apprenticeship."

Rigel turned to look tiredly up at him, "What?"

"You could have asked anything of me," Snape elaborated, "An apprenticeship when you're older, a recommendation to the Guild on your Mastery application-you would have been smart to secure such things now, but instead you ask something you know I would have allowed you for its own sake. Why?"

Rigel blinked with feigned dismay, "So you won't give me a recommendation for my application?"

Snape scowled at her, "I am out of patience for the next fortnight, Mr. Black. Answer my question."

Rigel scowled back up at him, "I don't ask for things I am perfectly capable of earning myself, Sir. It would be as bad as buying a place

in the Guild."

Snape smirked down at her, "And that attitude is the only reason I *would* consider recommending you for the Guild-some day," he added, frowning repressively at her pleased expression.

Rigel nodded seriously, "Of course, Sir."

They reached the common room and Snape rapped sharply on the wall. Of course, Rigel thought, they must have locked down the school when they found two students missing.

Selwyn's voice came crackling through the communication spell, "Password?"

"Moonstone," Snape said.

The wall slid open, and they stepped into the common room. There were a surprising number of people still awake, considering it was close to four in the morning. Snape stepped forward to make an announcement, and Rigel slid away to join the crowd of students, looking for a head of platinum blonde among them.

"The basilisk is dead," Snape said bluntly as the students quieted to hear him, "The curfew will be lifted tomorrow. Classes are cancelled for two days, after which the regular schedule will be resumed. The petrified students will be restored as soon as time permits. Find your beds, and sleep as long as necessary. Breakfast will be served until eleven tomorrow. Good night."

The Slytherins began murmuring as soon as their Head of House swept out of the common room, and the most popular conversation topic was her. She avoided the eyes of her housemates as she shifted through the students, looking for her friend, and ignored the whispers that followed her progress through the room.

"Wasn't Black kidnapped?"

"Snape didn't say-"

"Why isn't he petrified?"

"Maybe he did it."

"Maybe he killed it."

"He probably-"

"Rigel." Theo turned up at Rigel's elbow and steered her toward their dorm, "Draco is in our room. He left after some idiot said you'd probably been killed if it was taking Snape so long to deal with it."

Rigel frowned and walked a bit faster. Blaise showed up and held Theo back as Rigel continued down the second year hallway alone. "Let him have a moment," she heard Blaise say quietly, "If I'm not much mistaken, he's earned it."

She left the noise of the common room behind and entered her dormitory with relief. She was so tired. She spotted Draco sitting on the edge of his bed closest to hers, feet on the floor and head in his hands. He looked up when she stepped closer, and his eyes were rimmed with red, as though he hadn't blinked for too long an interval.

He stared at her without saying anything, and Rigel sat down on the bed next to him, content to be silent for a moment after all the talking she had done that night. She just wanted the world to be quiet.

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Draco had never been more worried in his life. He wasn't pacing the floor, demanding answers, pulling at his hair, or doing any of the things he had always imagined very worried people did. In fact, he felt quite numb. He felt as though letting any emotion leak through at

all would break his control entirely, and so he sat in the common room, waiting, and when one too many loud-mouthed snakes began to test his tightly reigned control he got up, walked into his dorm room, and sat on the bed in silence, waiting for the numbness to go away. Waiting until it was safe to let himself feel again.

Before that happened, Rigel came back.

Draco stared as his friend walked quietly over to his bed and sat down beside him. Rigel didn't stare back, instead looking with a blank face at the hangings Draco had pulled around Rigel's bed when he grew tired of seeing it empty.

All the questions Draco had thought he would ask died in his throat at that blank look on his friend's face. Draco knew what Rigel's usual blank expression looked like, and this wasn't it. Rigel wasn't studiously blank, carefully blank, or even deliberately-infuriatingly blank. He was eerily blank. As blank and numb as Draco himself felt, as though he had become an empty shell. Draco wondered what had happened to drain his friend so, leaving behind only empty blankness, and then he wondered what it would take to wipe that lost expression off of his face.

Rigel sighed, so deep and weary it made something in Draco wither to hear it. His friend slowly tilted sideways, and rested his head on Draco's shoulder. Draco immediately froze, in case movement startled Rigel into drawing back. It would be so easy to relax now, to think that everything was all right and just let go, but he clung to his control, kept hold of it for Rigel's sake, who seemed brittle and fragile, and a million other things that Draco had always thought good Slytherins were not supposed to ever be.

Rigel breathed so slowly and deeply, Draco thought he had gone to sleep, until he said, "I'm tired. Can we talk about it tomorrow? Please." The last he said on a whisper, and Draco felt his friend begin to tremble slightly against his shoulder.

Draco put his arm around Rigel *carefully*, because even though Rigel was smart and driven and strong and independent, sometimes Draco thought he really needed someone to take *care* of him. He almost didn't believe it was Rigel when his friend shuddered and slumped against his side, but he didn't let go. He wouldn't let go until Rigel needed him to.

"Tomorrow is soon enough," Draco said quietly, "But if you don't want to, you don't have to ever talk about it." He wasn't lying, either, when he said that. Even though he was burning slowly with curiosity, even though he wanted a list of the things that had made Rigel Black tremble like a leaf, so that he could find and hurt every single one of them, Draco would wait until Rigel was strong enough to explain things, even if he had to wait forever.

To his utter shock, Rigel began to cry. Draco didn't realize what it was at first. The shaking got more prominent, and then there was heat and wetness on his shoulder, and then Rigel was apologizing and rubbing at his face furiously.

Draco shook his head and fished a handkerchief out of his pocket. Rigel took it, and the white linen came away from Rigel's face streaked brown and red. It was then that Draco realized how utterly dirty Rigel was. He was covered in grime, slime, and something that looked horribly like blood, and made Draco want to pry Rigel's sleeves up and examine him for wounds.

He stifled the urge, since he knew Uncle Severus would not allow Rigel to come back to the dorms without seeing Pomphrey first, but he wondered why the Healer had not given Rigel different robes to change into. Then again, she probably had, because it would be just like Rigel to refuse to change his clothes in the Hospital Wing. He was extremely sensitive about his... condition, which made it all the more unsettling that he acquiesced so easily to Draco's careful affection.

"I'm sorry," Rigel said again, gesturing to Draco's handkerchief, "I just... it's been a long night, and I'm sure you've been worried sick,

and I've mucked up your bed, and started weeping like a Hufflepuff, and-and-I'm just so *tired* ."

"You should sleep, then," Draco said. He didn't want to point a wand at someone who'd clearly just been through something awful, so he said, "Use a Cleaning Charm on yourself for now, and you can shower properly in the morning. Don't worry about anything else tonight. Just go to bed."

Rigel looked over at him with a pitiful twist to his mouth, "Can't. My core's nearly empty."

Draco felt his gut clench at that. Rigel Black, out of magic? All the scenarios he imagined Rigel might have been through just became several degrees of terrifying worse. He took his own wand out slowly, and kept it pointed away from Rigel's face or heart as he cast the spell. Rigel's robes became noticeably stiffer, but much better smelling, as well. With most of the serious grime gone, Draco helped his friend open his hangings and climb into bed. They each took off one of Rigel's shoes, and a moment later Rigel was curled up on his side, fast asleep.

Draco didn't know how long he stood there, making sure Rigel was real-really there, really alive, really him-but eventually Blaise and Theo came quietly in to find their own beds.

"Is he okay?" Theo asked nervously, fidgeting with his sleeves as he looked worriedly at Rigel's sleeping form.

Draco turned away from watching his friend, and felt the jealous grip his mind had kept on his control slowly begin to ease, "He will be." Draco would make sure of it.

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When Rigel awoke the next morning, the first thing she did was take a shower. The disgust she felt for herself after crying in front of Draco the night before was complemented by the disgust she felt after realizing she still had bloodstains on her sleeves.

She took what was possibly the longest shower of her life, and when she came out the bathroom was barely visible through the steam. She felt human, though, so she didn't mind that her skin turned bright pink from the heat and her fingertips wrinkled in protest of their long soak.

When she emerged, steam rolling out into the room along with her, Blaise raised an eyebrow in her direction and Theo said, "About time. We thought you were trying flood the place or something."

"I had basilisk brains under my fingernails," Rigel said.

"Really?" Theo wrinkled his nose, "Gross. And kind of cool."

Draco rolled his eyes at Theo and stood by Rigel's trunk while she ran a brush through her short hair, "We have the day off. Want to visit Pansy?"

"Yes," Rigel said, "But I have to do something with Professor Snape first."

"What?" Draco frowned, "You should at least take one day off, Rigel. After last night-"

"It's about last night," Rigel said, slipping on her shoes, which she noticed with pleasure had been cleaned by the house elves while she slept. She'd have to thank them, later.

"It can't wait?" Blaise asked.

"No," Rigel shook her head, "I'll be back this afternoon, though."

As she left the dorm, she pretended she didn't hear Theo ask quietly, "Is he just going to pretend he's fine?" She *was* fine. What was there

not to be fine about, after all? She was fine, Ginny was fine, everything was *just fine* .

She made her way through the dungeons slowly. It was strange to see students wandering freely through the halls once more, but wonderful, too. She reached Snape's office and knocked with a polite amount of pressure. The door swung open at Snape's, "Enter."

Her Head of House looked at her with veiled incredulity for a moment, "Yes, Mr. Black?" he said eventually, "What brings you to my office in the middle of the morning, when you ought to be resting in your dorm as per Madam Pomphrey's emphatic insistence? Grown tired of your friend's acclaim so quickly?" he added sardonically.

"I haven't really talked to them about it," Riddle said quietly.

Snape looked uncomfortable. He cleared his throat, "You should."

"I know," Rigel nodded.

There was a beat of silence, in which Snape sighed, then said, "For what did you come, Mr. Black?"

"Since we have no class today, I thought we could get the basilisk dealt with," Rigel said.

"Get the-" Snape cursed, "Foolish boy, you are not returning to that Chamber now."

"It has to be now," Rigel said firmly.

"No," Snape said, equally firm, "You have yet to fully process-"

"That's why it has to be now," Rigel said quickly, "If I think too much, I won't want to."

"Then you shouldn't," Snape snapped.

"I have to," Rigel disagreed, "The basilisk will rot soon."

"Let it," Snape bit out, "Your mental state is more important than a handful of potion ingredients, no matter how valuable the lesson in dissection practices."

Rigel shook her head slowly, "Thank you for your concern, Sir, but you know that isn't true. A *basilisk*, Professor. Fifty feet at least. How many scales is that? A thousand? With those scales, you could brew a hundred different protection potions. With its tongue, you could brew Mordred's Breath for the first time in three decades."

"Where did you hear about that potion?" Snape scowled.

"In a book in the Black Family Library," Rigel said honestly, "And if you don't go with me to harvest the basilisk, I'll go by myself, and brew anything I want with its parts in my father's basement."

"Don't you threaten me, boy," Snape said sharply.

"How long since St. Mungo's had enough ground basilisk bones to supply the children's ward with the painless alternative to Skelegrow that Wracknoi invented in 1924?" Rigel pressed, "The Guild's poison analysts could do wonders with a few vials of basilisk venom, and there's an eye, Professor, an untouched basilisk eye."

She could sense Snape struggling with her arguments, though his face didn't show it, "Be that as it may," he began, but she didn't let him refuse again.

"I watched it die, Professor," she said, "Thrashing and screaming, for no reason but a bit of magic gone mad. Its death was awful and unfair, but it doesn't have to be meaningless. There's good that can come of this, too. I..." it took a great amount of effort to force the necessary words out, because they didn't mesh with the mantra of *everything's fine* playing on stubborn relay through her head, "I need there to be something good in all of this. Please, Sir."

Snape relented, though he made no move to conceal his displeasure with the situation. At Snape's insistence, she waited while he contacted the Headmaster, Professor Flitwick, and several house elves to assist in the project. She guessed Flitwick was there as a Charms Master, in case they found something unexpected in the Chamber, and she supposed Dumbledore had a right to come as well, as it was his school, and therefore his responsibility to see to any dead monsters lying about. Still, it took longer than anticipated to assemble everyone, not to mention the bevy of tools and supplies Snape, with the help of the house elves, gathered for their use.

By the time they reached Myrtle's bathroom, it was noon. Snape insisted Rigel eat two sandwiches that the house elves produced and also drink a Nerve Relaxer, a potion commonly administered to people after a particularly traumatic experience, when the Healer suspected they may be a danger to themselves or others. Rigel scowled at Snape as she drank it, but did feel considerably more mellow afterwards. Snape only then allowed her to open the Chamber.

The drop looked as daunting as it had the night before, but now that she knew it to be an illusion of folded space, she wasn't worried about jumping in. Snape had other ideas, however, and with a silent spell produced a rope from the end of his wand, which wrapped around Rigel's waist tightly. With careful direction from his wand, the other end of the rope attached itself to a nearby sink.

Snape nodded to Dumbledore, who gracefully twirled his wand at her in turn. Rigel was levitated gently into the passage, and she reflected that having fully-grown wizards around certainly did make a lot of things easier.

Before she touched lightly down on the Chamber floor, Flitwick dropped quickly through the passage beside her, landing in a dueler's crouch as he surveyed their gloomy sewer surroundings.

"Not as glamorous as I imagined," he said lightly after checking for danger on all sides, "I suppose I owe Minerva a shot of Firewhisky-

or, Butterbeer, that is." He coughed squeakily and smiled embarrassedly up at Rigel with good enough humor. Rigel supposed Flitwick hadn't entered the Chamber the night before. Perhaps he'd been guarding the passage from the other end while Dumbledore, Snape, and McGonagall went through. It was a good idea to leave at least one Head of House outside the Chamber, in case it had been an elaborate trap.

Snape and Dumbledore joined them soon after, along with the house elves, who floated down like fairies under some magic of their own making.

"It's this way," Rigel said, in case they didn't remember-they'd been following Ginny, after all.

They set out at an easy pace, Dumbledore humming as he walked, and Rigel couldn't help but feel a sense of vertigo as her memories, colored by fear and confusion, clashed soundly with the present. Then again, that feeling might have been a result of the Nerve Relaxer.

When they reached the Chamber Hall and approached the basilisk's corpse, both Snape and Flitwick sucked in deep breaths. Rigel wondered if Snape had been too preoccupied last night to really see the great snake.

He was seeing it now, though, as they circled around to its head. His eyes took in the basilisk's length and girth with a calculating glint. Rigel swallowed as she gazed down at it. She had felt so removed, walking through the Chamber clean and healthy, but the night before came rushing back, memories flashing like wand sparks across the inside of her eyelids every time she blinked. All she could do was stare at the dead basilisk, whose name, if she had one, Rigel had never learned.

It's killed before, she reminded herself sternly, It was half-mad by the end. It's better this way.

But it wasn't, not really, because how could death ever be better than life?

"The Hall seems safe enough," Flitwick said, returning to their group after surveying the room, "Though that statue on the far end is more than it seems, I daresay."

"It's a passage," Rigel said, "It opens to Parseltongue."

"Well if you don't mind, Mr. Black, the Headmaster and I will do a bit of exploring while you and Professor Snape get to work," Flitwick said, looking a bit excited at the prospect.

Rigel cast her mind back to what the construct had said the night before, " *Ssspeak to me, Ssslytherin, greatessst of the Hogwartsss Four.*"

The stone mouth opened in a gaping way, which gave Salazar Slytherin's head an odd, gasping look, and the Headmaster set off with the Head of Ravenclaw to see what they could find.

Rigel turned to Snape, "How do we begin?"

"With the head," Snape said bluntly, "I will deal with the eye and tongue, and for Salazar's sake don't touch the teeth. First, I will show you how to peel off scales without damaging their integrity. Watch closely."

Snape took out a tool that looked like a small chisel, but with a little curl to the edge that acted a bit like a very delicate pry-bar. He showed her how it would be futile to attempt to pry loose scales from the torso right away, because they overlapped in a way that prevented them. Instead, they began at the underside of the jaw, where the softest and loosest scales were, and started the slow process of detaching the scales one by one from the fleshy skin beneath.

Once one scale was gone, it was easier to pry free the one beside it, and so on. The house elves joined in with great industry, and soon they were making noticeable headway. As she worked, she pictured all the good these scales were going to do in the Wizarding community. They would be used in old potions, new potions, medicines, experiments, and more. Basilisks had always been a rare breed, and so knowledge about their uses in potions and alchemy was as limited as the quantity of parts researchers could get their hands on. There was no telling what kind of information and insight might be gleaned from the scales alone.

And slowly, over the next few hours, she began to feel a kind of peace settle into her heart. What happened to her had been horrible, but she could handle it, work through it, the same way she was working through the basilisk, a little bit at a time. A morbid analogy, but she was allowed a bit of morbidity as she dissected a creature she had watched die in agony just hours before.

"Where did you learn to do this?" Rigel asked as she watched Snape carefully pry a fang loose from the root with a pair of tongs that must have been goblin steel, to stand up to basilisk venom. She doubted Snape had ever disassembled a basilisk for use before, but perhaps he had dealt with other large snakes.

"Dragons," he said, not sparing a glance, "I studied in Asia during my apprenticeship, and was afforded the opportunity to work with several recently deceased Chinese Fireballs." Rigel thought that made a great deal of sense, as the scales on the basilisk were closer to dragon scales than any snake she'd ever seen, as they were stiff and more like armor than skin.

"Who did you study under?" Rigel asked, curious.

"Master Liu," Snape said, a touch of respect coloring his tone. It was strange to think that someone she so respected had a Master of his own, but comforting, too. Maybe one day she would have pupils as well, and they would say they studied under Mistress Black-or rather, Potter, she mentally corrected herself with a sigh.

"What was he like?" Rigel asked. She had never heard of a Master Liu, but perhaps his publications hadn't been widely circulated in England.

"To this day I have no idea," Snape said with a wry smirk that made him look twice as human as he usually did, "He didn't speak a word of English, and every time I cast a translating charm he overpowered it and dissipated it. I tried learning Mandarin the muggle way, only to find out he spoke a variation of the Wu dialect-though which one I never discovered. Eventually I stopped trying, and we spent the remaining three months in silence."

"Why did he refuse the translating spells?" Rigel asked, amused at the thought of anyone refusing Snake anything.

Snape didn't answer for a moment, then said, "I believe he took explanations to be superfluous to learning. He taught by example, and if I wasn't quick enough to learn the first time, I cleaned up my ruined cauldron and he showed me again. I hated him at first," he recalled, almost self-deprecatingly, "I didn't understand what he was teaching me until I returned home."

"What was he teaching you?" Rigel asked, "Obedience?"

"Anticipation," Snape said, "And intuition. The two things necessary to timely experimentation, and to anyone who desires to put ingredients into a cauldron without the restriction of a recipe to interrupt creativity."

Free Brewing . That's what they called it when a brewer put ingredients into a cauldron without knowing exactly what would happen. It was extremely dangerous, and although free brewers in general didn't live very long, it was said that their creations and contributions to the field were unmatched in ingenuity, usefulness, and sheer volume.

They worked for a while longer, in silence until Rigel asked, "I know the tongue, teeth, eyes, bones, venom, and scales all have uses, but

is there anything else?"

"Blood," Snape said, "But it has to be drawn while the basilisk is living, or before it coagulates, so we won't be able to collect that. The flesh itself has no use that I know of, but the organs will all be of use—particularly the stomach, liver, heart, and brain."

Rigel winced, "The brain might not be... salvageable."

Snape gave her a long look over the head of the great snake, "Yes," he said eventually, "I have ascertained as much from my inspection of the ruined eye. Nevertheless, your question was which organs would be useful, was it not?"

Rigel nodded, "Yes, Professor."

Snape began his work on the tongue once more, but said, almost casually, "Have you decided how you are going to allocate these parts?"

"Allocate them?" Rigel said, the repetition of his words enough to convey confusion in itself.

"Indeed," Snape said slowly, "Lawfully speaking, the corpse belongs to you, as you were the primary instrument of its demise. Its remains are yours to do as you would."

Rigel bit back a scowl, and said flatly, "The basilisk killed itself. It should be the Headmaster's responsibility to determine the proper use of its remains, as it died on school grounds, under his jurisdiction."

Snape's next words were heavily measured, as though each were a weight he placed judiciously on a thin sheet of ice, "You have the right to differ such matters to his discretion, however, that may not be the most prudent course of action. Turning responsibility for the kill over to the Headmaster on the grounds of his jurisdiction as

Headmaster also highlights his responsibility for the snake being in the school in the first place."

A part of her wanted to agree that it was the Headmaster's responsibility, and to say that she shouldn't have to 'turn over the kill' like she was handing in an essay, but the more conscientious part of her knew what her Professor meant. Her political role was complicated to be blunt. Her 'father' supported Dumbledore (ostensibly, though she was becoming more and more confused about which side of the lines Sirius' ideologies fell), but she had been semi-formally adopted by the Malfoy's, and she was the Heir of Black, traditionally a Dark-aligned family, but had strong ties and reasons to support the Light political factions. All this was ignoring her recently revealed Parseltongue abilities, the political ramifications of which she had yet to determine.

For all of those reasons, it would put her in a delicate position were she to put the Headmaster in the delicate position.

"I suppose," Rigel said carefully, "Due to the passage-way folding space the way it does, this place could be considered outside of school grounds. Who knows how far underground we are-below the deepest corner stones for the wards, I'm sure." Snape inclined his head fractionally, so Rigel went on, "It's amazing that the Headmaster was able to find me and save my life, even after I was removed from the school's protection."

"Indeed," Snape said wryly, "All that is left is to decide how to distribute the spoils from your kill, Mr. Black. Would you like an armored breast coat made of its scales, perhaps?"

Rigel scowled at the tastelessness such a thing would have demonstrated, but acquiesced to the necessity of addressing the problem at hand, "I would like a small portion each of the scales, bones, and tongue set aside under preservation charms, to be given to me upon my passing the Potions NEWT."

Snape nodded his head shortly, "A prudent idea."

"I would like 1/3 of the bones to be donated directly to St. Mungo's, half of the venom donated to the Potions Guild, and one half of all remain ingredients sold to the Guild at a heavily discounted price as well."

"And the rest?" Snape prompted when Rigel fell silent.

Rigel tilted her chin stubbornly, "The rest is yours."

Snape scowled at her, "You cannot-"

"It's mine to allocate, is it not?" Rigel asked.

"Within reason," Snape said.

"What could be more reasonable than giving potions ingredients to a Potions Master?" she asked.

"It smacks of bribery, and therefore is unseemly," he said shortly.

"The Malfoy's donate to the school all the time. If anyone asks, I'll be donating the rest of the ingredients to Hogwarts, as a token of my thanks to Dumbledore for his phoenix's timely arrival. It would be only natural for the resident Potions Master to then assume responsibility for the ingredients, and I'll make sure that Dumbledore understands I wish the parts to leave with you, if you ever decide to change professions."

Her professor took a frustrated breath in his nose, traced the stubborn set to her face, and let it out again, "I will hold the ingredients until you come of age-"

"You will use them as they deserve to be used," Rigel said firmly, "Research, experiment, innovate. It's what you're best at, and you're one of the greatest Potions Masters alive right now, and I'm not going to wait five years to argue with you again over what to do with these ingredients when they could help people now, if you'd stop

being so stubbornly pigheaded about owning up to your ability and accepting what you deserve."

Snape raised an eyebrow, and Rigel coughed somewhat uncomfortably, belatedly adding, "Sir," with as much respect as she could muster. She regretted snapping at her professor, but she didn't like the way he acted as though she was trying to do something unreasonable when she was trying to do something meaningful. The basilisk's parts needed to go where they would do the most good, and to be kept out of hands who would use them for ill. The profits would be great on the open market, but it was too irresponsible an option. They would do the most good in the hands of St. Mungo's, the Guild, and Professor Snape, whether he acknowledged it or not.

She would almost think her Head of House was embarrassed, but a person as talented in his field as Professor Snape quickly abandoned any naïve shyness they'd had upon entering it. Then again, perhaps being tucked away in Hogwarts most of the year had something to do with it. The Professors here were all at the top of their fields, and probably wouldn't have much more than professional esteem for their colleagues who specialized in other branches of magic.

Perhaps no one ever *did* remind Professor Snape just how much his expertise was worth to the Wizarding World. Well. Rigel would have to see about fixing that. The greatest Potions Master of their age could not afford to be blind to his own talents, nor could he be allowed to martyr himself out of a basilisk eye to the detriment of both the whole of Magical Academia and Wizarding kind itself.

Professor Snape knew when pressing would gain him nothing, at least, and he said merely, "It will be as you say, it seems. The funds from those ingredients the Guild will be allowed to purchase will be deposited into an account that Gringotts will assist you in establishing before the summer is-"

"No," Rigel broke in hastily. Aside from the obvious complications that establishing an account in her cousin's name herself would

ensure, she didn't think she could bear to have what was essentially blood money in her pockets. In the same way, she didn't want to look at any piece of the basilisk until she had taken her NEWT's, several years from now.

Snape actually looked close to sighing as he said, "How would you like to allocate the profits, Mr. Black?"

"Use them to hire competent tutors to any of the petrified victims who want to make up the schooling they lost while unconscious, including make-up exam fees if required. Then give all the rest to Ginny Weasley," Rigel said, "Or her parents to hold in trust if you think she's too young. Ginny is the main victim in all of this. She deserves some sort of compensation for everything she went through."

"The Weasley's will not accept it," Snape drawled, "Their pride will stay them, especially concerning an amount as... exorbitant as the sale of basilisk parts is likely to produce, even considering the reduction in price and the fact that you will be essentially flooding a very small market."

"Then make it anonymous and non-returnable," Rigel said "Or just hand it to Ginny in cash. She's considerable more practical than most Gryffindors. And use a bit of the money to get Myrtle whatever she wants for her toilet," she added, remembering her promise suddenly.

"So be it," Snape said. Rigel supposed he probably thought her a fool, to give away gain for sentimentality, but he did not deny her the right to such sentiment, at least.

They continued working for several hours, until all of the scales were harvested and the house elves, under Snape's supervision, began the delicate work of opening the basilisk's torso for organ removal. They heard scrapes across the hall, and turned to see Flitwick and Dumbledore climbing down from Salazar's gaping, stone mouth.

"Was there anything left?" Snape asked, though his tone indicated his distain for the possibility of such an occurrence.

Flitwick shook his head sadly, "We found many rooms of empty cabinets. No doubt there was a wealth of knowledge here at some point, but it seems to have been long out of our reach, taken decades ago and likely scattered or lost."

Or hidden, Rigel thought quietly. She didn't think much of wasting knowledge, no matter its origins, and no matter the temptation to keep it for oneself.

"In any case, the trip was certainly not a waste," Dumbledore said, his face looking pleasantly satisfied, "We discovered a passage from the basilisk's lair that likely leads to the Forbidden Forest, if the remains of Acromantulas were any indication."

Snape's face paled slightly, and Flitwick said hastily, "No need for alarm. The passage is well warded, and likely keyed to the basilisk alone. Nevertheless, we will have a team of true Ward Masters come over the summer, and either link them to the school's wards, relegating them to the Headmaster's purview, or else undo them entirely and seal off the Chamber for good."

Rigel wanted to ask how they'd get into the Chamber without Parseltongue, then realized they'd likely re-work the wards in Myrtle's bathroom first.

"Severus," Dumbledore said, eyes twinkling, "I hate to pull you away from this project, but I believe you will be needed shortly in the Hospital Wing, will you not?"

Snape case *Tempus*, then inclined his head, "Indeed. Mr. Black, you will assist the house elves in finishing up. They know what needs doing, and they will take care of the transportation as well. You may merely watch, and learn, unless you are prepared to leave now?"

Rigel shook her head. She thought if she saw the harvesting through to the finish she would have a better sense of closure.

"See that you don't skip dinner," Snape said curtly.

"I, too, have a few matters to see to this evening," Flitwick said apologetically, "But what danger lurked here once appears to be gone now. Nevertheless, please remain with the house elves at all times. They will see to your safe return."

Rigel gave her word, and watched the professors leave, going back to their respective schedules. *Life really does just go on like it did before*, Rigel thought with a sudden surge of panic. Was it going to be that easy, to forget it all? What was she doing, if not cutting up and partitioning out the memories, the guilt and the horror? As if she could ever give enough of it away. It had seemed like such a good idea-just get rid of it, be rid of it all-but now Rigel wasn't sure she wanted to forget. If she forgot it all, then what did it mean? How had she changed? What had she learned?

She leant down and picked a scale out of one of the many filled buckets around the pungent corpse. It was a good size, a bit larger than her palm, and a deep, emerald green. She turned it over in her hand, thinking. It was excessively sentimental, but... something told Rigel she needed this.

"Is that one being broken, Young Sir?" a nearby house elf asked.

Rigel shook her head absently, "I was just wondering if I could put a small hole in it, with a sharp enough tool."

The house elf shook her head rapidly, "These scales is being hard, but brittle individually, without the Great Snake's magic."

"I see," Rigel said, a bit disappointedly. She could keep the scale in her pocket, but it would be easier to lose.

"Why is you wanting a hole?" the elf asked curiously.

"I thought I might string a chord through it, so it would be harder to lose," Rigel explained.

"Minna can be making a hole," the elf said with certainty, "House elves is very good at softening magic. Where is you wanting the hole?"

Rigel smiled at Minna, "Can you change the whole shape by softening it? Could you make it into a circle?"

Minna took the scale and peered at it, "If I is changing shape, it is getting much smaller, otherwise it is being too thin."

"About the size of a ring, then?" Rigel held out her hand, "Can you fit it to one of my fingers?"

Minna nodded vigorously in affirmation.

"I'd really appreciate it," Rigel said, "How can I repay you?"

Minna shook her head as rapidly as she had just nodded it, "No, no, no, you is not giving me anything. I is not accepting."

"Please?" Rigel asked, "I won't feel right if you do it for nothing."

"Because you is Slytherin," Minna said with a snort that was close to derisive, "Slytherins is always thinking they is not deserving things for free. That is being stupid. A gift is being made for accepting."

Rigel raised an eyebrow, then thought of her previous assessment of Snape, and nodded in assent, "Just, 'thank you,' then."

Minna nodded decisively and let the scale rest in one palm while using the other to snap her fingers. The scale began rotating fast in her hand, then rose into the air and started folding in on itself, as if the edges were rolling toward the center, while at the same time the middle began to shrink back toward the edges. It became smaller, denser, and as its revolutions began to slow, Minna guided it with a spindly finger to Rigel's outstretched hand. Rigel splayed her fingers,

and the ring twirled itself gracefully onto the middle finger of her left hand. With a final revolution it tightened to a comfortable size and settled.

"When you is growing, you is finding Minna, and Minna is loosening," the house elf said. She was eyeing the ring admiringly, a pleased smile on her face at the result of her work.

"Take one," Rigel said, gesturing to the bucket, "You can make a ring for yourself, too."

Minna frowned severely at Rigel, but Rigel narrowed her eyes just as stubbornly, "A gift is made for accepting," she said, quirking her lips slyly.

Minna hesitated, then said, "It is not really being considered *clothes* ."

"Of course not," Rigel said, "It's an animal scale, made into an ornament."

Minna nodded firmly once more, plucked a small scale from the bucket, and said, "Thank you." She snapped her fingers, and the scale adhered itself to the brown crup leash she was using as a belt, like a shiny, green buckle.

They went back to work readily, and by the time they packed up the last of it and assigned several elves to the proper disposal of the unusable remains, Rigel's heart felt significantly lighter, not as though a weight had been lifted, exactly, but as though an awkward burden had settled into a more comfortable position, so that carrying it no longer made her feel off-balance or unstable.

Just as they left, Rigel had a sudden idea, and plucked one more scale from a bucket, pocketing it with a smile.

The house elves were kind enough to clean her up and banish the stink from her robes, so Rigel headed straight from the Chamber to

the Great Hall. She was a bit early for dinner, which had been pushed back later than usual due to everyone having been up so late the night before.

She didn't mind being early, though, as it meant there were very few people to stare at her as she sat down and began filling her plate, glad that her 'vegetarian' diet meant she didn't have to pretend meat wasn't going to gross her out for the next few weeks.

Blaise entered the Great Hall not long after Rigel started eating, but as soon as he spotted her, he sighed, turned around, and left. Ten minutes later, he returned with an exasperated Draco and an amused Millicent in tow.

"I was looking everywhere for you," Draco said as soon as he sat down.

"I said I'd be back later," Rigel said.

"You said you'd be back this afternoon," Draco said.

Rigel gave an apologetic shrug. She should probably feel much worse about making Draco worried when he'd probably been awake for hours worrying over her last night, but disassembling the basilisk was something she had to do, and feeling guilty for it wouldn't help her move on. "It took longer than I thought," she offered, "We can see Pansy tonight, okay?"

"No need," Millicent said from next to them. They turned to see Millicent beaming across the Hall. Rigel followed Millicent's gaze to see Pansy, awake and well, walking across the Hall toward them.

"Pans!" Draco stood and helped Pansy sit next to Rigel before taking his seat at Rigel's other side once more.

"It is good to see you recovered, Pan," Rigel said, smiling broadly, "Draco was extremely difficult in your absence."

Pansy grinned with good humor, "He can be rather trying to manage by oneself."

Draco spluttered, "Me? Who's the one who got himself kidnapped? I'm the one who needed Pansy's help controlling *you* ."

"Evidently you're both a loose ends without me," Pansy sighed with affected hopelessness, but with an eminently fond look in her eyes.

Rigel and Draco exchanged a wry look.

"Pretty much."

"No argument here."

The three of them laughed, and it was almost like nothing had ever happened, except that people kept coming over to see Pansy and tell her how glad they were that she was back among them. If most of them sent Rigel weighty, side-long looks as they left, well, at least they were tactfully silent.

By the time dinner was in full swing, Pucey Rookwood, Rosier, Theo, and Selwyn had all joined their group, and Riel wondered vaguely when they'd begun to sit in the middle of the Slytherin table, rather than at the low end with the other first and second years.

Neville came over at one point, and thanked Rigel shyly.

"I didn't do anything," Rigel protested, you should thank the Headmaster.

"The Headmaster didn't come visit me while I was petrified," Neville said, "But you did. Madam Pomphrey told me. So, thanks."

"You'd visit me," Rigel said simply.

Fairister stopped by to very formally request Pansy's pardon, "I have failed in my duty as a prefect to protect you," he said solemnly, "I cannot ask your forgiveness, only promise to do better in the future."

"It was not your mistake, but my own," Pansy said quietly, "I was foolish to think myself immune to danger. I see now that here at Hogwarts all peril is shared, and neither House nor name can build walls safe enough to hide behind. It is a lesson I will not soon forget," she added, her expression firm, "But no fault lies with you."

Fairister's expression was pained, "So you say, but still I left you to face the beast alone-"

At the mention of the basilisk, Pansy's face paled noticeably, and Rosier sent Fairister off with a glare that would freeze helium.

"Are you all right, Pansy?" Theo asked worriedly.

"Fine," she said faintly, "Just... remembering. It must seem silly, having been so long for everyone else, but it's the last thing I remember before waking up just an hour or so ago."

Rookwood sucked in a breathe, "You saw-"

"Yes," Pansy said, "Not just the eyes like the others. I was facing a mirror, and I saw it come around behind me a second before it caught my gaze. It was... huge." She turned searching eyes to Rigel, "I never imagined an animal could *be* that large. Except dragons, maybe. The head alone was as big as Mr. Hagrid. You'd better not have really challenged it to a duel, Rigel."

Rigel chocked slightly on her pumpkin juice, "Is that what people are saying happened? I most certainly didn't."

"I knew that was too Gryffindor for your style," Theo said, then asked, "Did you really outwit it with clever trickery? That's what the Ravens are saying."

"The Puffs think you won in a battle of endurance," Millicent added, "And tired the basilisk out through sheer perseverance."

"And the Snakes?" Rigel asked, slightly amused.

"We know better than to make up wild, groundless stories," Draco said dismissively.

"Most of us, anyway," Blaise said into his soup.

"Are you going to tell anyone what really happened?" Pucey asked bluntly, "I heard the youngest Weasley was missing from the Tower last night too, but she refuses to speak about it."

"People shouldn't bother Ginny about it," Rigel frowned, "She was a victim like me, of course she doesn't want to talk about it."

"Don't call yourself that," Draco griped from beside her.

"How did you defeat the basilisk, though? It's not a secret, is it?" Theo pressed.

Rigel looked around at her friends and told the truth, "It wasn't heroic or clever, or even very difficult. The basilisk killed itself."

There was a moment of silence, after which Pucey snorted with disbelief, "Seriously? That's the worst lie I've ever heard. Implausible at best."

"It's true," Rigel said, frowning slightly, "I was kidnapped by the basilisk's Master. I waited patiently, as anyone with half a brain would, and eventually the kidnapper made a mistake. His miscalculation resulted in the basilisk killing itself. Dumbledore arrived, saving my life, the kidnapper fled, and that's all there is to it."

No one looked particularly credulous.

"Where was Ginny Weasley while your life needed saving?" Blaise asked pointedly.

"She was kidnapped too, but while the kidnapper was distracted she escaped and fetched the Headmaster. I owe her my life as well, for bringing timely help. I'm very grateful to have had so much help during last night's ordeal."

Selwyn pinned her with a flat look, "You know that no one believes a word you say anymore, right?"

"I believe Rigel," Pansy said calmly.

"You're only saying that because he's going to tell you everything anyway," Pucey said, "At least tell us who its Master was. I haven't heard of anyone being expelled. Did Dumbledore not catch the perpetrator?"

"It wasn't a student. It was just an evil man who infiltrated the school for his own reasons, and fled after his plans were foiled," Rigel said, trying to make that part of the story sound uninteresting.

"Where were you all day?" Draco asked abruptly.

"Helping Professor Snape harvest the useful parts of the basilisk.

Rigel said, more comfortable with the change of subject, "You'd be surprised at all the things a basilisk is good for. There's scales, bones, tongue, venom-the eye especially will-"

"Eye?" Blaise said sharply, "Just the one?"

Rigel grimaced inwardly, "The other was unfortunately destroyed when the basilisk died."

"When it killed itself," Blaise drawled, "I suppose its tail poked its own eye out accidentally."

"Something like that," Rigel mumbled.

"Well I for one am just glad you're unharmed," Rosier said, "It must have been a close thing, for you to claim that the Headmaster saved your life by arriving. I wonder how that could be if the basilisk killed itself already."

Rigel narrowed her eyes, "I was injured before the basilisk died, it was serious by the time the Headmaster arrived."

" *Mortally* injured?" Blaise pressed, "Because you don't have to give him a Life Debt if it wasn't certain mortal peril."

"Yes," Rigel snapped, "I got scraped by one of its fangs, okay? I was dying, but the Headmaster's phoenix saved me with its healing abilities, and before you ask the Headmaster declined a Life Debt on behalf of his familiar's behalf, so there is nothing but gratitude between the Headmaster and I."

Another silence, and then Pansy's face was buried in Rigel's shoulder, and the blonde girl's arms went around her torso, "You were dying?" she asked, stricken, "Y-you really almost *died* ?"

"Oh, no, Pan," Rigel hugged Pansy back helplessly, "Don't cry, I'm fine. It wasn't-it's really not-oh, this is why I didn't want to talk about it." She looked reproachfully at the others around them, "Can't you understand it's not just some interesting story? It's not a game, and it isn't fun for me to talk about."

"It's not supposed to be fun," Rookwood said, "It's supposed to be therapeutic. We want to know what happened so we can help you come to terms with it."

"Thank you," Rigel said, patting Pansy's hair absently, "But there isn't any need. That's what this afternoon's project was for. It helped me come to terms with things, dealing with the aftermath, like cleaning up my mind after a tornado blew through. I already feel much better. There's no reason to-"

She was cut off by a cry of alarm going around the Hall, and it was only because her magic was still extremely depleted that it didn't lash out and break anything in response to the panic that welled up in her throat faster than she could register. She swallowed hard, and tried to force color back into her face as she looked around with the others for the source of the disturbance. Then Millicent said, "The food!" and Rigel looked down to see something strange even for Hogwarts.

The food on every table was scurrying around of its own accord. Not all of it was mobile, but a good third of their dinner scuttled off their plates and rolled along the table with remarkable industry, considering its previous passivity. Rigel watched her dinner-roll bounce drunkenly off the edge of the table and sort of wobble across the flagstones, headed toward the Head Table.

Students were beginning to stand up on their seats to get a clearer view as the food from the four House Tables began congregating in the center of the space between the student tables and the Head Table. At first it seemed as though the food was just going to put itself in a pile on the floor, which would have been the most strangest and most pointless prank anyone had ever heard of, but then the mass of food began dividing into groups-three groups, to be exact. As the food separated, it became clear that it was being differentiated based on color. Rigel noticed then that while it had seemed as though a random assortment of foods from the tables had mobilized, in fact it was only green foods, tanish-brown foods, and red-orange foods.

The green foods made up the largest group. Spinach, lettuce, cucumbers, parsley, green beans, avocados, and more, vegetables of all shapes and sizes, some cooked, some raw, all coalescing into a massive... oh, no.

Rigel felt like smacking her head on the table, or maybe smacking the Weasley Twins' heads into one another, but she was too transfixed at the spectacle to turn away. What were those two thinking? The green foods were taking on the shape of a giant snake, with raw peapods for teeth and eyes of yellow-green apples, with two large tufts of broccoli sticking out the top of its head like horns.

A smaller mass of food, tan and brown in color and consisting mostly of dinner-rolls and cooked pieces of meat stuck together by mashed potatoes, was beginning to look distinctly human. A black cloth napkin from the Slytherin table wriggled out of the mix and perched itself on top of the food-man's head like hair.

"Is that supposed to be Rigel?" Theo snickered. Rigel felt very much like groaning.

The food-Rigel bent down and picked up the third, much smaller group of food-the red and orange mix of peppers, carrots, and tomatoes that had stacked themselves into a long, stick-like shape. The food-person held the food-stick in guard position against the snake, and Rigel realized it was supposed to be a sword.

"What nonsense," Draco muttered, one eye on Pansy to see how she was reacting. Their friend seemed fine, though, if a little disapproving of the spectacle.

The masses of food began to do battle, leafy green snake against meaty-brown man with his pepper-red sword. It was frankly disgusting. The food made sickeningly dull whumps and splats where the shapes connected, and each blow flicked errant bits of food across the flagstones.

Five minutes of fighting later, it looked as though the food-man was about to emerge victorious. He was poised with his sword held high, ready to strike the deciding blow, when the vegetable-snake lashed out with sudden vigor and swallowed the meaty-boy whole.

Students all across the Hall gasped and shouted with dismay.

"No!"

"What the bloody hell?"

The professors had grim looks on their faces, and even Dumbledore looked gravely unamused. Pansy's hand found Rigel's elbow below the table and squeezed. A creaking noise made Rigel look back toward Draco to see him slowly squeezing his water goblet into scrap metal. His face was more angry than she'd ever seen it, angrier even than he'd been at her over the Defense Incident. She reached over and pried his hand loose from the dented metal. He

clamped his hand around hers instead, and shot the Gryffindor table as dark look. "I'm going to murder those two," he growled.

A gurgling sound drew their attention to the spectacle of food, which was apparently not yet finished. The snake was making weird writhing motions, as though it was going to be sick, and Riddle had the awful feeling she was about to watch a mushy-food version of herself be vomited across the flagstones. The snake's stomach trembled, bulged, and then, in a flash of red, the food-sword came erupting from the green beast's belly and sliced the snake in half. Green vegetables rolled everywhere, once again lifeless, and meat-boy emerged from the green pile of edibles with a triumphant pose, brandishing the sword of peppers and carrots at anyone and anything that might step forward to challenge it. The food-boy swept the hall a deep bow, and then it, too, dissembled into its constituent parts.

People began applauding somewhat uncertainly, but it dies down quickly as the food once more began moving, though it didn't form shapes this time. Rather, the bits of now-crushed vegetables, rolls, and the like began to spell words across the stones, more food spilling down from the tables in floods, so that food of all colors and kinds danced over one another into place.

Cunning Wit and Brave Determination

Together can Outmatch the Greatest Foe

When we Stand and Forfeit Hesitation

Evil will be Dealt a Mighty Blow

No Matter what our Houses or our Names

To Every Student Hogwarts is a Home

As long as we have Magic in our Veins

Within These Walls Ill Will Shall Never Roam

The message was read aloud across the Hall, people muttering the words to themselves or shouting them to their neighbors. After a fair pause, the message fell apart, and the food assumed a final pattern, just eight words all told.

Thank You Rigel Black For Protecting Our School

Rigel felt her face burn without her permission, as all around the Hall students began to applaud, whistle, and cheer loudly. She caught sight of Ginny Weasley, in between her perplexed-looking brothers, looking grimly satisfied, and she even saw Ernie MacMillian, previously one of the strongest voices in favor of her guilt, clapping slowly, a respectful look on his face.

The professors were clapping too, Dumbledore once again smiling benignly, and when Snape lifted his goblet and nodded with something like open approval in her direction, Rigel had to clench Draco's hand very tightly indeed.

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The end of the term passed quickly, the days blurring together as everyone scrambled to make up in classes what they hadn't learned for one reason or another. The professors were somewhat lenient due to the trying atmosphere the basilisk's reign brought with it, but the gaps of knowledge still needed filling in, and the time for packing up their belongings in preparation for returning home had, it seemed, sprung upon them with neither word nor warning.

The last week of school found Rigel in her lab, which Snape had acceded to opening for her once more, preparing the next dose of Modified Polyjuice (which she really needed to think of a better name for). She had sent Sirius the wrong time for picking her up again. It

would be obvious when he arrives at the platform, but there was nothing for it. She needed to take this dose after leaving her friends but before meeting her godfather. Archie would take his after getting off the plane, but before meeting the Potters at baggage check.

She had already used the blending spell on she and Archie's most recently-plucked hairs. It hadn't been as exhausting as she remembered it being, so maybe always draining her core was helping it build up stronger reserves. The Modified Polyjuice was moments away from being finished, and at that point she would keep one dose for herself, and mail the other, with the male blended hair, to Archie that night. Just as she was pouring the doses into their sealed vials, a knock came at the door. She hurriedly stored the doses in her bag and cleared the most incriminating ingredients, the lacewing flies and the boomslang skin, from the counter before brushing her bangs down in a nervous gesture and answering the door.

To her immense relief, it wasn't Snape. Ginny Weasley stepped into the lab with an air of detached interest as she glanced about.

"I sort of remember being here, now," she said, lifting a hand to push back her hair absently, "But it's just flashes. Did I pull your hair?"

Rigel shrugged with affected nonchalance, determinedly not remembering the Cruciatus Curse spilling from Ginny's lips in the dark.

"I don't remember, maybe," she said, "What can I help you with, Ginny?"

"I don't need help," Ginny snapped. She rolled her eyes a moment later, and blew out a calming breath, "Sorry, but I'm so sick of people trying to be solicitous. It just ends up condescending."

"I understand," Rigel said, "People think talking to them about things will help you get over them."

"That's just what they tell themselves," Ginny said sourly, "Really, people are just nosy."

"Does your mother know how cynical you are?" Rigel asked, trying to lighten the mood.

Ginny snorted, "She positively despairs of me, but that's what she gets for giving me six brothers."

They stood silently for a moment, then Rigel said, "Since you don't need help, what are you here for?"

"Just to talk," Ginny said, "Can we sit?"

Rigel gestured toward a lab stool, taking one for herself as well, "About... that night?"

"In a way," Ginny said. Her eyes drew sharp angles over Rigel's face, "I want to know why you lied to Dumbledore that night."

Rigel didn't blank her face completely-she was becoming a better Slytherin than that-but she maintained a politely confused expression, "What do you mean? I told the truth."

"Not all of it," Ginny returned, "I can remember bits and pieces from when I was possessed, and I remember Tom telling you that his whole name was Tom M. Riddle. Why didn't you tell the Headmaster that Lord Riddle was behind everything? Are you in favor of the SOW Party?"

"No" Rigel said simply, "My aunt is a muggleborn, and my cousin a halfblood. I support their rights in ways the SOW Party doesn't. I didn't tell Dumbledore what the construct said because I don't think the word of an insane magical object is enough proof to accuse a man of attempted murder, no matter who he is."

Ginny narrowed her eyes, "You're telling me you don't think Lord Riddle created that book?"

Rigel chose her words carefully, "I think I've never read a law that strictly prohibits fashioning a magical artifact after oneself-that's what the Sorting Hat is, to some extent. Whoever made that book is not necessarily responsible for the magic degenerating out of control. Add to that I'm not sure the book can be sure who created it, if it was even telling the truth about what it believes. It could have been designed to think it was created by Lord Riddle, who has been rather well-known for some time, and who has never been *proven* to speak Parseltongue. I think there is too much uncertainty in the evidence, and I also think it would be unfair of me to pass along, thereby giving some credence to, the ramblings of magic gone mad, particularly to the Headmaster. He is a good man, but he is also Riddle's political opponent, and may be tempted to use these unfounded accusations against Lord Riddle before proof was established."

Ginny raised her eyebrows, "That all sounds very convincing, and even somewhat noble in a flinchingly hesitant sort of way, but I think you're afraid to anger Lord Riddle because you live in a dorm full of his supporters. I also think you mean to keep this knowledge to yourself as leverage, in case you need a large favor from someone with his kind of power at one time or another."

Rigel opened her mouth to disagree, but Ginny held up a hand.

"I don't care about your motivations, though. I told you that I know more than you thought because I want you to appreciate the favor I'm doing you by collaborating the story you told Dumbledore." At Rigel's slightly apprehensive look, Ginny explained, "You've said we have equal life debts, which cancel each other out, but you lied to Dumbledore for me, which is a debt of its own."

"I don't-"

"You told Dumbledore I 'came into contact' with the book and was possessed," Ginny said, "But I remember Tom gloating to you about how *willingly* I let him into my head. I *hate* myself for that," Ginny spat quietly, "And I never want anyone else to know. Your silence on the matter is worth a lot to me, more than just going along with your

version of events could equal, so I'm going to tell you this, too: Lucius Malfoy gave me that diary."

Rigel sucked in a breath. That was bad. Draco would be hurt dearly if his father was proved beyond a doubt to be connected to the basilisk-to Pansy's petrification. "Are you certain?" she breathed.

Ginny nodded sharply, "He dropped it into my cauldron in Diagon Alley. I didn't say anything because I was curious, and it seemed almost like an accident, so that he could deny the purposefulness of it easily, and then I thought it was such a great find, that he must not have known what it did, that he'd just thought it fitting for a Weasley to have a beaten up old book. But it was him, and now that I know of Tom's connection to SOW, I know what Malfoy was after. I'm not threatening you-this is my other favor to you. Now you know Malfoy's involvement, and because Draco Malfoy is your friend you can do what you want with the information. I don't care. I just want to forget everything. After this deal I'm never going to think of it again."

Rigel nodded slowly, "Thank you, Ginny. I'll discover the truth for myself, and-"

"Don't care," Ginny grimaced, "Sorry, but just agree to never tell anyone my possession was anything but forced, and I'll agree with whatever you say happened that night, and no one will know of Malfoy's part in it unless you tell them."

"Agreed," Rigel said softly, feeling the weight of responsibility descend on her shoulders. It would be her duty, now, to confront Lord Riddle and Malfoy Sr., and decide what needed exposing and what to keep quiet for the sake of her friend.

Ginny, contrariwise, looked as though she'd become several stones lighter. "I'm going to go away as soon as exams are over," she said, a slight smile on her face, "Somewhere warm, and quiet, and then I'll come back and begin my Occlumency lessons. I think... I think next year is going to be better." She laughed, and it was only a tiny bit bitter, "It can't really be worse, can it?"

Rigel felt a pit harden in her gut at those words-tempting Fate never boded well. She smiled weakly and wished Ginny good luck before closing the door behind her. Rigel rested her head against the frame and breathed out a deep sigh, wondering when the world would grow less complicated, and wondering when she'd started accepting so many responsibilities, and wondering that she'd ever thought she could come to Hogwarts and just brew potions.

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Rigel finished packing the morning the train left for London. She'd been assigned a satisfying amount of summer work from Snape, sealed up her lab, collected Flint's summer assignments, mailed the other dose of Modified Polyjuice to Archie, along with the blended hair he'd need, and as such had only one last bit of business to conduct before boarding the train. To conduct it, she needed to find Selwyn.

Pansy was saying goodbye to Rookwood and Rosier-the later of whom Rigel would be pleased to have a break from over the summer, and he'd become almost *proprietary* about her whereabouts after the incident in the Chamber. Draco walked beside her as she looked for Selwyn's long, black hair among the throng, making small talk about all the things he had planned for the summer.

"After my birthday party, there will be more time for us to see one another, of course-" he broke off, sniffed rather deliberately, then turned on his heel and walked in another direction. Rigel looked around for a pair of redheads, as the Weasley Twins were the only thing Draco got that annoyed over lately.

Fred appeared at her elbow a moment later, George sidling up to her other side moments later. "I'm starting to think your boyfriend doesn't like us," George said sadly.

"He'll like you even less if he hears you call him that," Rigel said, "He's still upset about that prank with all the food, you know."

Fred and George shared an uncharacteristically dark look.

"We told you that wasn't us," Fred said flatly.

"We told *everyone* that wasn't us," George added morosely.

"I wonder why no one believed you," Rigel deadpanned.

"You believe us, don't you, Pup?" Fred bent his knees so that he could look up at her pleadingly.

"I believe you wouldn't give up credit for something so intricate unless you felt really horrible about it," Rigel said, "So if this is just you feeling guilty, don't. I'm not offended. It was a clever bit of magic."

"We really didn't, Rigel," George said, shaking his head, "And what's worse, we have no idea who did-except that they're good."

Rigel shrugged, "I believe you. Just don't ask me to convince Draco of it."

"We actually came to ask you something else," Fred said, perking up again.

George slung an arm around her shoulder genially, "Since a certain second year saved our baby sister's life, our mother has been twisting our ears-

"An impressive feat to accomplish through a letter," Fred put in.

"To get us to arrange a meeting," George grimaced, rubbing an ear in mock pain, "It would mean a lot to our hearing if you agreed to come for a visit this summer so she can break your ribs thanking you."

Rigel swallowed, "I'm not sure I can. I have a lot to do this summer, work from Snape and all..."

Fred and George raised eyebrows at her.

"I'd be delighted," Rigel sighed, "But please tell Mrs. Weasley that there's no need for any kind of thanks. Ginny saved my life, too."

"We shan't tell her anything of the sort," George grinned.

"But modesty does become you, Pup," Fred ruffled her hair fondly, "Do keep at it."

They took their leave, throwing a warning over their shoulders as they walked off.

"We'll be waiting for your owl!"

"Or we'll be kidnapping you from your bed!"

Rigel absolutely wouldn't put it past them to get into contact with Sirius and organize a raid on Archie's bedroom. Sirius would think it was hilarious, until Archie had no idea what to say or do to fool the Weasley twins into thinking he was Rigel. She would put a visit to the Weasley's on her summer's mental list as well, and hope that she and Archie's capacity for cleverness hadn't run dry just yet.

She continued her search, and eventually found Selwyn talking with a third year Slytherin Rigel sort of recognized. The girl hugged Selwyn briefly, then ran off to join her friends on the platform. Rigel caught Selwyn's face soften in a half-fond smile an instant before the older girl turned and caught sight of Rigel coming toward her.

Immediately, Selwyn coolly swept her hair back from her face and rolled her eyes. "Even without the badge, people still come to bother me with their problems." She gestured dismissively at the empty place on her robes where the Head Girl badge had hung just yesterday.

Rigel smiled inwardly, and pretended to believe that Selwyn wasn't going to miss Hogwarts at all. "What are you going to do now?"

"I have a job lined up at the *The Circle*," Selwyn said with a shrug. Rigel vaguely recognized the name of one of the Rune-related magazines Blaise was always perusing, "I start next week."

"That's great," Rigel said, "Congratulations."

"Thanks I guess," Selwyn said, "So what do you want, Black? And before you answer, are you sure you can't save it for the next Head Girl?"

Rigel smiled slightly, "I just came to apologize, for everything I put you through, and all the times I didn't listen to your advice as carefully as I should have, and... just everything. Sorry, Selwyn. Thanks for worrying about me, and going out of your way to help so often."

Selwyn smirked, "Who said anything about being worried? Do you know how much paperwork is involved if I lose a student on my watch? Mountains. It'd give even you nightmares, Black."

Rigel frowned, "What's that mean?"

Selwyn snorted softly, "Right. You know they used to think I was emotionally dead until you got here. You raised the bar on untouchable, that's all I'm saying."

"Right," Rigel said, "Well, I wanted to give this to you, as a token of my thanks for everything."

She started fishing in her pockets for the third basilisk scale.

"I swear to Merlin if you've lost your wand again..." Selwyn muttered darkly.

Rigel did smile then, "It's in the pocket by my hip, and probably always will be."

"Thank Salazar for that."

Rigel finally found the scale mixed in with a few galleons and handed it over, "I thought you could use it in your game with Rookwood."

Selwyn took the palm-sized scale with a slightly surprised look on her face, "You're just giving these away? Everyone says the Black's are mad, but... thank you. It might be a bit obvious where it came from, but Edmund will think it's great anyway." She tucked the scale securely into a breast pocket, and held out her hand to Rigel, "I can't say it's been *nice* knowing you, Black, but it's certainly been unforgettable."

"I'm glad I met you, too," Rigel said, "I'd offer to keep in touch, but..."

"Yeah," Selwyn laughed shortly, "As if. Still, the Wizarding World isn't that big, and Hogwarts doesn't last forever. I'll be around five years from now."

That makes one of us, Rigel thought. She smiled politely, shook Selwyn's hand, and boarded the train as the last whistle sounded.

Two years down, five to go.

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Far away, in a forest so thick the day meant nothing to its darkness, fraying magic wrapped in man's seeming and trapped in the mind of a trembling asp curled up amidst the shadowy hallows of a great tree's roots and bided the time away patiently, regaining its strength, revising its plans, and reassuring itself that all was not for naught.

One day, there would be a reckoning.

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[End of Book Two].

A/N: Look out for the Third Book coming... well, I can't say soon, but it'll be there eventually: The Ambiguous Artifice (title subject to change). Thanks to everyone still reading after a six month hiatus. This is my last semester of grad school, which means... I'll probably be writing every time I don't want to think about my thesis .

All the best,

-Violet