

The Malignant Masquerade

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Harry thought she was done, but the ruse wouldn't let go. Four years of lies could not be erased overnight, and there were lies beneath the lies... As Harry tries to find normalcy and mend bridges, the Ministry trails her, Riddle hunts her, Voldemort haunts her, and her friends race toward Rigel's identity, certain he will need help before all is finished. Book 5, SOTL take on HP.

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The Malignant Masquerade

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Chapter 1

A/N: I changed the title, after some consideration, to The Malignant Masquerade. Because Harry thought she cut out the ruse like a tumor. But it had already metastasized.

The Malignant Masquerade:

Chapter 1:

It was weeks before they stopped warding the Floo. Even when the spells wore off, Harry didn't dare try her luck. It felt too much like a test- *prove us wrong*, the open Floo whispered. She wanted her parents to trust her again.

She also wanted to see Leo again.

There hadn't been time to talk. He hadn't pressed. A field of explanations lay fallow, and the more time went by, the more she worried he would think she wasn't coming back. The lord's daughter who cut ties when she was done playing pretend.

All she could do was continue sending potions to Krait and hope he understood. It was like a tiny pocket of warmth, that hope. A candle in the cavernous winter that was her frozen relationship with James and Lily.

Harry bottled the latest batch and carried it upstairs. The family owl would have to take multiple trips, but there was no help for it. James had finally been let back to work, and Lily had taken Addy to Sirius', so Harry nearly dropped the potions in alarm when she heard the floorboard creak in the living room.

Her magic flared and came back to her, reassuringly familiar with the signature it encountered. "Remus," she called. "My parents aren't home."

Remus sidled into the kitchen and watched her ready the potions for post for a long moment. "I fancy a walk, Harry. We could take those wherever they're going, if you'd like to join me."

Her first thought: *this is a trap*. "I'd have to ask Mum and Dad."

"I've left them a note." Remus gestured to the kitchen counter where, sure enough, his penmanship outlined the errand clearly. "I'm sure you'd like to get out of the house."

"I would," she admitted. "Lately, though, I've become suspicious of situations that seem to give me exactly what I want."

Remus shrugged. "By all means, continue your rather convoluted freighting method."

Harry scowled down at the owl harness and accompanying strings. "If you're taking the blame..."

"That is how you operate, isn't it?"

Harry winced. "Pretty sure it's too soon to joke about that."

Remus chuckled. "No, Harry. Joking is the only way through it in this family. Go on, you try."

She swallowed an awkward mouth of spit and said, "Maybe we should switch places for the trip. You carry the potions and I'll ask the penetrating questions."

Remus gave her an approving smile. "There she is. I was wondering if the Harry who faced down Regulus Black would ever emerge from the limpid lampshade she's donned."

Harry blew out a short breath. "I'm trying to turn over a new leaf."

"No, you're trying to turn Devil's Snare into a house plant." Remus put a hand on her shoulder, and it was not unkind. "Dimming yourself and tiptoeing around conflict won't make them forgive you."

"What if they never do?"

"You know them better than that. But Harry, you have to *earn* their good will again. Being invisible won't do it. Not causing more trouble isn't enough. You have to make it up to them."

"How?"

"Let's start with a return to normalcy." Remus picked up her potion crate and made for the Floo. "Diagon Alley, I presume?"

She hurried to get the Floo Powder for him and stared at the grate after he'd gone through, wondering if it was really all right to go on with life as though it hadn't changed ineffably. It shouldn't be okay. If the real world matched her internal experience, there should have been a violent rift-life before the ruse and life after. Surely, nothing as ordinary as a potions delivery should bridge the distance between those two realities.

Then again... Harry took a handful of powder and stepped into the grate. If anything *could* transcend the disconnect, it would have to be potions.

Remus waited patiently, as though he hadn't noticed the delay her existential crisis had caused. That was the dangerous thing about Remus; it was hard to know how much he really saw. She fell into step and tapped the bricks with her fingers to trigger the passageway. Remus' gaze lingered, and she hunched her shoulders instinctively, wishing for a crazy moment she had Rigel's face to hide behind.

"I don't have a wand," she said quietly. "Ri- *he* used to bring it back between terms, but... I don't suppose I'll see it again." He absorbed the information without commenting, assessing the implications. She didn't know what to do with the Phoenix and Holly wand. She couldn't use it, not when it was so intimately connected with Rigel. Her stomach turned at the thought of destroying it. So, it sat in her mokeskin pouch, suspended between lives, just as she was.

Jason tipped his cap at her as they passed the owl emporium. Harry wiggled her fingers, surprised that word of her new appearance had spread so quickly-it was only her second time in the alley since the change, after all.

"Remember last summer, when you weren't sure whether to tell me about the dueling tournament?"

She raised an eyebrow at the non sequitur. "Ralph hit me hard, but not enough to cause memory loss."

Remus didn't smile. "You asked me a question."

She cast a lure back through her mind, but nothing bit. "Which one?"

"You asked whether I'd rather know something but have to keep it a secret or not know it at all."

Ah. She nodded carefully. "You said you'd rather know."

"I said I would rather *someone* knew what you were doing, in case you ever needed help," he corrected. "And you trusted me because you know I can keep a secret. Both of those things are still true, Harry."

She swallowed. It was impossible to guess what exactly he suspected without incriminating herself. "I'll keep that in mind," she said as they took the fork down Knockturn.

Remus tensed slightly as they picked their way along the narrow alley. When they reached the Serpent's Storeroom, he studied the window with a furrowed brow.

Harry held open the door. "I stack the crates in the back-"

"Harry!" Krait dropped the bottle he was inspecting and rounded the counter to look her over. Only once he'd scanned for visible injuries did the worried look fall into something nonchalant. "Brave to show your face after worrying us all sick."

"Krait." She clasped his hand. "Sorry I was away so long. It's been... complicated."

"Not too complicated to keep you from a cauldron, I see." He eyed the crate as Remus set it down, then sized her uncle with a gruff, "Hired some help?"

"This is my uncle, Remus," Harry said. "Remus, this is my employer, Mr. Krait."

"A pleasure." Remus stuck out his hand and Krait inspected it before giving it a perfunctory shake.

"Bout time. Was starting to wonder if her family cared for her safety at all."

Remus went very still, and Harry winced. Changing the subject, she asked quickly. "Can you get a message to the Shrouds for me?"

Krait wrinkled his brow. "The vamps? I'd rather not."

"To Leo, then. He'll get it there." With an apologetic glance at Remus, she added frankly, "My mail is being watched."

Remus grimaced, but turned away to inspect an advert for Wolfsbane that read: *Inquire at Counter.*

"What's the message, then?"

"Just an inquiry into Gavril's condition. I heard some of what happened to him, and I'm sure it's a difficult time for the coven. If there's anything I can do..."

"They don't like help from outsiders," Krait said firmly.

"I'd still like to offer it. Have Leo talk to Kasten. He'll understand."

"I'll tell Leo when I see him," Krait muttered doubtfully. "He'll be fussed he missed you."

She smiled as though the thought of seeing Leo after their last encounter didn't scare her at all. "I know he meets with the merchants on second Tuesdays. How are things otherwise? Have they... settled?"

Krait gave her a long look. "Yes and no. Aurors had a lot of questions, but everyone knows what answers to give. Your friends have questions, too, but they'll wait for you to tell the tale yourself."

"I'll come back as soon as I'm able." Krait shot Remus a dark look, but Harry shook her head. "Don't blame them. My cousin and I made a lot of enemies. It's not safe for me right now."

"It was never safe for you," Krait said staunchly. "But we take care of our own."

She let the man see how the sentiment humbled. That the alleys still considered her theirs put an entire subset of fears back in their boxes.

Remus broke the moment with an incredulous question. "Do you really sell the Wolfsbane series at this price? It can't be profitable."

Krait raised an eyebrow. "Your family doesn't even know which potions you brew for me?"

Harry gave him an unappreciative look, but Krait was unrepentant. Remus turned his incredulity to her. "You take commissions for this, Harry? I know you make it for me, but I thought it required a license to sell."

She hummed. "I am licensed." Wolfsbane was the first thing she'd tested for, after Seifer's Solution. It hadn't been difficult to convince the Guild after all, with Aldermaster Hurst putting in a word for her—the only annoying bit was the outrageous 'administration' fee each license required.

"You're supplying it at cost, aren't you? This price can't be anything else." Remus said, still frowning. "You must be booked out for months."

"That's the sticker price. We have it on shelf during the Full Moon. It's a little cheaper if they order ahead, because I can buy ingredients in bulk when I know how much I need," she explained.

"And there's an additional discount if it's purchased with a week's worth of Potter's Protection Potion," Krait added, likely sensing a business opportunity.

"But to make enough to advertise... it's so much *magic*, Harry."

She could see the suspicion entering his eyes, so she shrugged in a particularly blithe way. "I'm homeschooling, and way ahead of the curriculum. What else have I got to spend my magic on? Once I figured out brewing to exhaustion made my core grow stronger, I started doing it all the time. I've got plenty, now; it's actually a bit of a waste if I *don't* make high-level potions with it."

Remus shook his head, but smiled ruefully at her. "I wish you would tell us about this stuff."

She bit her lip and said, not entirely truthful, "I didn't think it would interest anyone else."

Remus stopped smiling. "Is that really it? Or were you keeping so many secrets it was easier to hold everything back? I'm not trying to be hard on you," he added, seeing the look in her eyes. "Your parents will come around eventually, but they might sooner if you shared this part of your life with them. Whatever else you have going on, you're so obviously a good kid." He gestured to the price on the sign. "I mean, Merlin, Harry. They'd be so proud."

She swallowed and ducked her head in a nod. "Maybe you're right," she said hoarsely.

He let it go at that, and they said their goodbyes to Krait. Harry couldn't stop thinking about the idea of sharing her work in the alleys.

It was easier to hide things from her parents when they didn't know too much about her life. About her. All that was over, now. It was officially year one in After Ruse time.

Maybe... she didn't have to hide anymore.

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Sirius kept the snakes after all. There were several new rocks arrayed in the small courtyard at Grimmauld Place, each with a flat, inviting top, and at midday it looked as though the Blacks were running some sort of reptilian tanning salon.

Addy loved them. The toddler's approving babble punctuated an otherwise oppressively warm and still atmosphere, and Harry listened with one ear for any sign the snakes were growing irritated at the constant commentary.

Archie sighed as he rolled over to expose the back of his neck to the sun. He muttered something into the grass, and Harry nudged him lazily.

"What?"

Archie turned his head and repeated, "Dad's agreed to let Hermione come over."

Harry sat up straighter. "Truly?"

Her cousin nodded, pushing the grass with his head. "I'm going to show her my actual life and hope she continues to forgive me."

"I hope you work it out," Harry said encouragingly. "I'm sure Sirius will like her."

"Everyone likes Hermione," Archie agreed with a soft smile.

Addy attempted to generously bestow her sunhat on her favorite snake, and Harry rescued the straw bonnet from immanent sundering.

"Are you going to try to regain any of your friendships, Harry?" Archie asked quietly.

"As myself?" Harry snorted as she tied the sunhat under her little sister's chin, and Addy copied the sound like a miniature prize bull. "No. It was meant to be this way."

Addy rolled onto her back to defeat the intended purpose of the hat, and Harry scooped a small snake out of the way absently. "I've been thinking... it might be for the best that everything ended when it did."

Archie shot her a surprised look. "You think so, too?"

Harry picked at the grass. "Better now than three years from now, right? I always knew I would have to sever those ties. I tried not to weave them too strongly, but somewhere..." Her fists clenched around soft tufts and she shook her head. "I don't even know how it happened. I certainly didn't encourage-" She broke off when the blades of grass blurred into a verdant watercolor and she realized she was crying. "Sorry."

Addy's hand slapped against her cheek with a wet smack and Harry caught her up gently in her lap.

"Sorry," she said again as Archie's arm came around her shoulders. "It's Rookwood's wedding this week. It's stupid, but I finished their present ages ago, and I don't know what to do with it now."

"You should send it anyway," Archie said at once. Harry scoffed, but Archie squeezed her. "I mean it. I think... it'll mean a lot to them, to know Rigel is out there, safe enough to send them a wedding present, you know? As long as it can't be traced back to you... won't it make you feel better?"

She shrugged. "I'm a little afraid of things designed to make me feel better. Can't really afford that kind of self-gratification, can we?"

Archie frowned and transferred Addy to his lap, patting her hat-rumpled hair like she was an emotional support animal. Addy cooed, evidently pleased to be mussed. "I don't think there's anything wrong with self-gratification, and it kind of bums me out that the ruse has brought you to the point that you think it's inherently bad."

Harry thought about it as one of the more friendly snakes wound its way up her ankle. "Maybe I will," she said softly. "As a sort of apology."

"A reassurance," Archie corrected her.

Her mouth hitched. "If there's anyone left to be reassured by it." She flopped back into the grass with a hard sigh. "Assuming they don't *all* hate me."

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The letters came to her already open, but at least they came.

Esteemed Friend,

I know not what you have heard, but Gavril is indeed returned to us. He is weakened, but himself, and Grandfather expects with my assistance he shall make a full recovery. It provides me the opportunity to re-focus my work on healing essences. I have not yet

discovered many distillations which prove effective for our kind. Much of the work in the restorative field is done by wizards, whose access to active magics informs their solutions. Such draughts are ever beyond me, but I believe I have only begun to probe the boundaries of pure essences and their applications.

Your inquiry is met, as always, with pleasant surprise and a modicum of polite puzzlement. Grandfather asks, and I hesitantly relay the question: what is the manner of assistance you offer? If there is a specific brew you think to provide, please name it. If there is something you imagine we may ask of you, that, too, requires elocution. We are not in the habit of seeking assistance from wizards, and they are not in the habit of providing it. If, as I suspect, your offer to help was a verbal display of support of the kind one friend may extend another, then I thank you, and we shall say no more of it.

Yours in mutual understanding,

Kasten

She tucked the letter back into its heavy envelope, wondering how to rectify the confusion she'd caused the coven. Harry hadn't meant her open-ended offer of help to be enigmatic. She wasn't sure exactly what sort of assistance a coven whose lieutenant had been possessed by Voldemort would require, but she supposed they weren't sure exactly what help a wizarding schoolgirl with a cauldron could supply, either.

The idea that vampires couldn't brew potions as she understood them wasn't new, exactly-she knew that complicated brews required active imbuing and she knew that vampires had no ability to channel magic. She just hadn't thought through the implications before. Knowing that, it was more obvious what form her assistance would take. She just had to find a brew for the occasion.

Harry was tempted to begin brainstorming then and there, but the second letter glared accusingly at her from the workbench. She

couldn't avoid it forever.

Her mentor's handwriting slashed across the parchment-but then, it always did. There was nothing especially vicious about the slant of it now, no ink blots or nib-tears that would indicate a festering homicidal rage permeating the page. That was something, at least. She laid it flat so the shaking in her hands didn't distort the message, and even then, the letters crossed until she shook her head sharply to focus her vision.

Stupid girl. He can't do anything to you that you haven't already done yourself.

She let out a long breath and made peace with it; whatever Snape had to say, she had to hear it.

Potter,

I will not waste ink enumerating the many artifices that now shade our professional interactions. While you and your co-conspirators are no doubt awash in questions, I write to ask but one: have you been and do you remain in earnest about this apprenticeship?

Whatever else has been the fallout, the fact persists: I am left one student. If you should seek a continuance, the pressures and expectations on your shoulders will henceforth double. I trust you are prepared for this-as you appear to have been prepared for the rest of it in spite of any sane expectation.

You have now a rare opportunity only afforded those whose every plan has utterly unraveled. Re-examine your life. Decide what was real and what merely the trappings of a grossly convoluted plot. If, at the end of your evaluation, you find Potions stuck fast at the center of your being, we will speak again.

The relief and self-recrimination broke through her, almost indistinguishable. He was angry. He wrapped it in professionalism,

but Harry could tell she fell squarely within the shadow of his blame. What must he have thought, when Rigel was revealed? He, who was so unfailingly in Rigel's corner. He, who was so sensitive to betrayal.

For all that, he hadn't severed the apprenticeship. She'd expected cold silence or heated demands for information. She'd braced for a devastating extraction-a severing of lingering attachments-and she wouldn't even have blamed him. Of all the relationships Rigel built, Snape's mentorship had the strongest hold on her ego, wrapped up as it was in the very definition of her ambitions and self-worth. She was cognizant enough to know that, if he'd wanted to, he could tear a hole from her soul that no achievement would ever fill.

Instead, he'd given *her* the choice. Let *her* decide whether or not to preserve a bargain he must know he had no duty nor expectation to honor.

Even as her stomach unknotted, she told herself not to trust it. Snape would never accept the loss of Rigel so easily. If he made a show of forgiving her, it would be to gain her confidence. To get information on the student he truly cared for. The thought twisted her gut back into tight cramps, but it was better than the alternative.

It would have been for nothing, if Snape renounced her completely. Even if he only meant to use her to get to Rigel, at least she would have something to show for it all. An apprenticeship with Master Snape. It wasn't nothing, no matter how hollow it sat.

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The idea to find Harry Potter started as a whim, really.

Edmund was inundated with wedding preparations and Aldon didn't have anyone else to talk to about the thousand-and-one questions

that plagued him without end. Pansy had all but moved into Malfoy Manor, which illustrated rather painfully how well Rigel's peers were managing, and if one more of Aldon's own year mates suggested they'd *suspected Rigel was a halfblood all along*, he would not be responsible for the ensuing homicide.

Wizards older and more professionally connected than Aldon were searching for Rigel already. Aldon hoped they never found him. He could also accept that the odds of *his* finding Rigel were nearly zero without a significant trail to follow. Still, he needed answers, and an outlet for the restless out-of-place feeling that pervaded his reality. He thought there must be something only *he* could do, and that's when it came to him: Harriett Potter.

She hadn't disappeared to France or wherever. She knew Rigel-or at least the person Rigel pretended to be-better than anyone, and she was right there in England, waiting to be asked.

At least, he assumed she was. The papers had torn through the real Arcturus Black's interrogation at the Ministry, but no mention was made of Heiress Potter being officially questioned. People had largely overlooked her, probably because she was a halfblood. Aldon no longer knew what to think of halfbloods, and he suspected her part in the charade was more interesting than assumed. Aldon could recognize interesting when he saw it, and Harry had that in spades.

If she was more than incidentally involved, she'd be in danger if anyone else figured that out. Armed with urgent purpose, Aldon stopped *thinking* about finding Harry Potter and actually left his manor to go and do it.

His sense of purpose waned as he approached the Potions Guild on Craftsman Alley and realized he had no secondary plan in the event that she wasn't there. He could turn up on Lord Potter's doorstep, but it wasn't quite correct to call upon a young lady at home without sending a card first.

He disliked the feeling of having all his eggs clustered in a loosely-woven basket, but admitted silently that he didn't know the girl well enough to guess where, besides the Potions Guild, she might turn up.

As he dithered rather embarrassingly in the street, an urchin with a basketful of flowers curtsied before him somewhat charmingly. "A bloom for you, ser?"

He began to shake his head, but thought better. It would be rude to call on Miss Potter empty handed, no matter where she turned up, wouldn't it? "What kinds do you carry?"

The girl blinked solemnly up at him. "All kinds, ser. What's your occasion?"

Aldon searched for words to describe the situation. "What sort of flower would you give a young lady who does not know you are coming to visit and who has not, upon reflection, expressed any interest in flowers during past interactions?"

"You're not a stalker, I hope," the child said severely.

Aldon raised his eyebrows. "If I am to present the lady with a gift, that implies a certain willingness to be seen, does it not?"

"There's all types of stalkers," the flower girl informed him primly. "If she doesn't like you back, it has to be daffodils. If you have an understanding, red carnations are good. If you think you do but you don't want to come on *too* strongly, I recommend dahlias, for strength and grace."

"I'll take two dahlias," Aldon said weakly.

The girl wrinkled a dirt-smudged nose. "Two is awkward. Either make a small bouquet or take just one."

Aldon ran a hand through his hair. "Just one, then. Do you have red-"

"Too strong." She handed him a pink dahlia that he had to admit was rather striking. "Four knuts."

He fished into his robe pocket for his money pouch and peered into it with a frown. "Do you have change for a galleon?"

The child squinted disapprovingly at him but did produce the requisite coins from various places about her person. She took the golden galleon with trepidation and hid it with a slight of hand so smooth he didn't see where it went. With another jarringly incorrect curtsy, the girl trotted off to critique someone else's romantic interests.

Armed with a single dahlia, Aldon strode through the foyer of the Potions Guild and cleared his throat perfunctorily to gain the attention of the deskman.

"Need directions?"

"Indeed. I am looking for Harriett Potter, and I understand she uses the laboratories here from time to time. Would you be so kind as to tell me which-"

The man at the desk cut him off with a scowl. "Miss Potter is not an official member of the Potions Guild and I am to direct all journalistic inquiries to our public statement disavowing any knowledge of the Rigel Black Conspiracy and condemning the use of Dark Potions in acts of terror such as that witnessed at the Hogwarts tournament finale."

Aldon blinked at him. "I beg your pardon. I believe I have given the wrong impression-"

"I'm not at liberty to give any information as to the habits or whereabouts of any of the Guild-associated student interns, past or present, including Miss Harriett Potter-"

"I can see you reading from that little piece of paper," Aldon drawled. "If you'd be so kind as to allow me to explain-"

"What's all this, then?"

A man he recognized easily from the society pages was coming toward them with a slight frown. Aldon straightened to his full height before bowing to the proper degree.

"Aldermaster Hurst, my name is Aldon Rosier-"

"Got another tabloid scribbler after Miss Potter."

Aldon gave an affronted shake of his head. "I certainly am not-"

"-asking questions, he was-"

Aldermaster Hurst held up his hands peaceably. "Gentlemen, please." Turning to the deskman, he said, "Mr. Fawle, I thank you for your tireless work protecting those affiliated by the great science of Potions; however, I very much doubt the Heir of Rosier has picked up-what do the kids call it?-a '*side-hustle*' writing gossip for sensationalist rags. In fact, I'm certain I'd have heard if Lord Rosier disowned his only son." Hurst chuckled as though the end of an Ancient House could be considered amusing. "Mr. Rosier, why don't we speak in my office?"

Aldermaster Hurst was moving briskly before Aldon had quite registered his suggestion, much less given his agreement. He followed the man down several corridors to a handsome set of doors that opened onto a study that would not have been out of place in any manor of old. Aldon readied himself for an offer of refreshment, already eyeing the decanter of beautifully-colored brandy by the bookshelf, but Aldermaster Hurst simply sat and folded his hands on the eighteenth-century mahogany desk.

"What do you want with Miss Potter?"

Aldon paused for a moment, surprised into silence by the lack of invitation to sit, but gathered himself. "I would like to speak to her."

Aldermaster Hurst gave him a wry smile. "Many people would like to speak to Harriett Potter. From the flower in your hand, I would like to suppose you mean the girl no harm, but, alas, I cannot make such an assumption without proof in these troubled times."

"I wouldn't hurt her," Aldon said, taken aback by the stern interrogation. "I'm a... well, *friend* might be overstating it," he admitted, rather more freely than he ought. "We have met several times at various functions, and I was concerned for her wellbeing in light of recent events. I hoped to... reassure her. And to be reassured."

The words were pulled out of him by some force he couldn't name. Guilt? Decency? No- *magic* . He stepped backward away from the desk, pinpointing it after a moment as the source of the pull. "Just what in Salazar's name are you about, sir? Did you think I'd not notice the infernal mind magic inset in that-"

"My apologies," Hurst said at once, standing. As his hands left the desk, the subversive presence of magic faded. "You don't know how many ill-wishers we've dealt with on Harry's behalf. All the public knows of her is her work here, after all."

Aldon was completely off-balance. Never in his life had he been subjected to such ungentlemanly treatment. "Dishonorable," he muttered, eyeing the desk with extreme prejudice. "I could have taken a wizard's oath, if you required it."

"Would you have? Then you would be quite different from the others-even lords, yes-who have come intending to do the girl harm," Hurst said flatly.

Aldon paled. "I'd no idea it was that bad. There hasn't been much backlash in the papers yet..."

"The papers are careful," Hurst said on a long sigh. "They can only print facts and fish for quotations, with the combined legal thunderstorm of the Potters and the Blacks rumbling overhead. That doesn't mean people can't read between them, you know. Any mixed-blood associated with the Hogwarts Halfblood is a natural target. Poor girl."

"I've all the more reason to speak with her, then," Aldon said. "Is she here?"

Hurst shook his head ruefully. "She hasn't been back."

Aldon's hope sank. "It's safer for her at home, I suppose." Hurst hesitated. Just a fraction of a second, but Aldon caught it. "Unless there's somewhere else I should be looking?"

Hurst's face was hard to read, but he eyed the flower in Aldon's hand once more before saying, "There's an apothecary she brews for, and as far as I know she's still brewing."

"Nearby?" An apothecary. He had heard something about that, hadn't he?

Hurst rubbed his jaw. "It's down Knockturn Alley. Still want to go?"

Aldon suppressed a shudder. He hated that alley. As a boy, his father had taken pains to show him *exactly* what kind of a life he could expect outside the family. Penniless. Filthy. His children clad in rags, selling flowers or worse-

He cleared his throat. Swallowed. "That one on the corner past Borgin and Burke's?"

Hurst inclined his head. "The venerable Mr. Krait runs it, and he doesn't part with information about Harry easily. Tell him I sent you."

Aldon grimaced at the idea of being sent like a house elf, but turned it into a smile. "Thank you. I'll take my leave, then."

"Harry needs all the friends she can get," Hurst said, opening the doors in the first show of courtesy thus far. "I hope you find the reassurance you're looking for."

Aldon made an awkward gesture, somewhere between tipping an imaginary hat and saluting, and hurried out of the Potions Guild feeling somewhat less than the recently come of age wizard he was. Something about Mastery in a subject gave a person a perpetual aura of professorship. It was enough to make anyone feel like a schoolboy.

He stopped at the entrance to Knockturn Alley. Instinct told him to cover his face, hide the fact that the Heir of Rosier was about to stroll blithely through a den of iniquity. He fought against it: he was seventeen, now. He could walk anywhere he chose.

By Merlin, the *smell*. Gutters that hadn't seen a cleaning in days, and something he could only assume was rot. Aldon breathed as little as possible until he reached a corner that looked vaguely familiar. The Serpent's Storeroom. There were worse names, he supposed.

The door creaked on the inward push and the abrupt transition from afternoon sun to musty shadow had him blinking. The proprietor eyed him suspiciously from the counter, and Aldon put on his most pleasant expression.

"Are you Mr. Krait?"

"Who's asking?"

"Aldon Rosier, at your service." He bent at the upper back and smiled, but it died when the man sniffed dismissively.

"Rosier, eh? Don't sell dark potions."

"I am not in the market, thankfully," Aldon said, looking over his shoulder automatically. What a thing to say in an open room. And

just what was he implying about his pedigree? "I'm here looking for a brewer of yours, actually. Harry."

That got his attention. Krait stood with a swiftness Aldon would not have credited the older wizard. "Never heard of him. Get out."

Aldon stood his ground, lowering his voice in an attempt to smoothly deescalate the interchange. "Aldermaster Hurst sent me. I'm a friend of Harry's, and I know she brews for you."

"You don't know anything if you're showing up here bandying that name about like-"

The door creaked open and Krait snapped his mouth shut. His eyes flicked to the doorway and an unhappy scowl settled over his features. "Fine timing you have, lass."

"What's my timing matter?"

That voice. Different and yet familiar. Unable to believe his luck, he turned with his heart in his throat and faltered at the sight of someone-Harriett?-blowing black curls out of her face with a loose grin.

"Just be grateful I could get away today," she said, hauling the crate of potions in her arms toward the counter. "Got a double batch of-"

"Miss Potter?"

She froze, then very deliberately set the crate down and turned to face him. "Aldon Rosier..." she murmured the name to herself, almost disbelieving, then shook her head. "Mr. Rosier. What-are you here for potions?"

"He asked for you," Krait grumbled.

Her eyes-dear Salazar those eyes -landed on the dahlia he forgot he was holding. "How did you... find me? That sounded silly. I'm not

hiding ." She gave a self-deprecating laugh that died quickly. "What, ah-"

"I can see him out if you prefer, Harry," Krait growled.

Aldon took a step away from the counter and Harry shook her head quickly, coming to stand beside him-no, *in front of* him. Protectively.

"That's all right, Krait. Thanks for looking out, but I know him."

Krait give him a rather insulting one-over, eyes lingering on the gold chain of his pocket watch. "You know him. Really."

Without asking, Harry reached out and tucked the chain back into Aldon's robe pocket. "We've met, anyway," she muttered. Looking up at Aldon, she added, "What did you want?"

He pressed the flower into her hand and bent over it gallantly. "I had hoped to speak to you at some length. Are you at liberty this afternoon?"

She hesitated, staring at the flower. "I... am. Sort of. Is it about...?"

"I wanted to see how you were doing," Aldon said.

Harry didn't seem to believe him. She twirled the flower consideringly, and seemed to come to a decision. "Have you eaten?"

He shook his head. She took two steps toward the door, then looked back at him with a nervous smile. "Come on. I know a place."

Aldon was prepared to turn back toward Diagon, but Harry led him further away from the high street instead. He gave up trying to follow their progress after the first turn and instead tried to make sense of her absent rambling.

"-lucky my uncle was busy today and my dad still thinks he's accompanying me," she was saying. "I don't have to be home right away."

They stopped in front of a curtained food stall and Harry ducked in to rattle off two orders without asking his preference. She unstacked a pair of stools and nudged one toward him unselfconsciously.

"They do have you on lockdown, then," he guessed.

Harry nodded as she sat. "It's been better lately, but... we scared them."

"So, they didn't know," Aldon said. That confirmed one of his theories.

Her shoulders hunched and he regretted voicing the thought aloud. "No one knew. And now everyone does." She turned to look at him with haunting guilt. "Listen, I'm really sorry. About Rigel. It must have been a shock."

Aldon shrugged, ignoring the pit of churning worry and confusion that rioted in his stomach when he thought about Rigel. "In some ways it was," he said hoarsely. "In others... well, Rigel was special. We already knew that."

"He was." Harry said the words almost perfunctorily. "Even we didn't realize how special."

Aldon traced her features, ignoring how different they were now and focusing on the tension in her brow, the defensiveness in her eyes. He decided she was lying. Harry lacked the aura of shock Rigel's schoolmates now walked the world with. For all that she was clearly *sorry*, she wasn't surprised. She was too solidly planted. Too guilty.

Not that that was surprising. He'd come because he already suspected as much. Rigel spoke of her too often and too fondly. Rigel knew Harry, which meant Harry knew him. She had to lie to protect herself, but she definitely knew more than she implied.

Harry waved to someone across the street, and Aldon looked up to find the girl who'd sold him the dahlia perched on a slumping rooftop

overlooking the alley. Harry tucked the dahlia behind her ear with a grin, obviously guessing its source, and Aldon marveled at how *comfortable* she looked. A far cry from the stiff girl in tight shoes at the Gala, or the done-up doll from the Yule Ball. Perched on a low stool with a rough-cut flower in her hair, she looked at home.

Someone inside the stall called Harry's name, and she jumped up to collect the food as the flower girl disappeared from the roof above them. Harry came back with two bowls of steaming curry and Aldon took his with a cautious sniff.

"It's not spicy," she assured him.

Not sure if he should be insulted or grateful, Aldon took a small bite. People walked by them in the alley and he moved his shoes further back, wondering if this was her idea of private.

"I put up a muffling charm," she said.

Aldon frowned, not having noticed her casting. "You didn't use a wand."

"I don't have one," she said plainly. The grin twisting her lips told him at least she knew how absurd it sounded. "Rigel took mine to school. I was too afraid to go to Ollivander's at first, so I learned everything wandlessly. It took a lot longer, but turned out to be more useful."

He wondered why she would tell him such a thing, but was distracted when his mind caught up with the implications. "That's why Snape took Rigel to get a new wand his first term. Your wand didn't work for him."

She nodded slowly. "He gave that one back to Ollivander. I wonder if I should buy it, now that Archie's is no longer registered in my name."

Aldon shook his head. "But I saw you use one that night at the Gala... or you had it switched with Rigel's...?"

"Rigel wasn't there that night," she said gently. "That was the real Archie. He had his own wand and I had Rigel's, just for safe keeping, mostly. Didn't think I'd have to pretend to use it." Harry snorted into her curry. "Of course, Malfoy noticed and we had to 'switch back.'"

Aldon clutched the bowl with both hands, processing everything as fast as he was able. "So, you can't actually use one another's wands." Even as he said it, he felt entirely stupid.

"Of course not," she said softly, stirring her curry slowly. "We aren't twins with sympathetic magic."

"Of course." And wasn't it frustrating? Wasn't it just a bit nauseating that Rigel did so many impossible things they couldn't *tell* which ones were real and which were bald-faced lies?

Harry pivoted slightly on her stool to face him better. "What did you really want to talk about, Rosier? Please understand, I *don't know* where Rigel is."

He shook his head. "I don't want to know anything that might compromise his safety. You may not believe it, but I still consider Rigel my friend." She caught her breath, but Aldon couldn't look at her. Staring into his curry, he kept seeing Rigel's face that night in the kitchens, his eyes tight with something he hadn't understood. "I feel terrible about the way it... went," he confessed. "At the end, you know, he said he was tired. That he felt like a fraud. And I didn't listen-"

A hand pressed into his elbow and he regained control of his faculties at once. Harry's verdant eyes were soft. "You couldn't have known."

"I never imagined. But that doesn't lift the regret." He moved his shoulders in an almost-shrug, but the weight of it resettled, unshaken. Sometimes he wondered if the feeling of failure would ever go away.

"He wouldn't want you to blame yourself at all," Harry said quietly.

Aldon swallowed all the words he had for Rigel and ruthlessly focused on the girl in front of him. Clearing his throat, he said, "I really didn't come here to talk about him. I want to talk about you."

Harry blinked at him. "Me?"

He nodded. "My offer from the Yule Ball-"

" *Oh.* " Harry let out a short laugh. "Oh, no. Please don't worry about *that* ." She waved a hand as though to clear a sudden smoke. "With the legislation failing and all, I don't have any expectations of you."

He tried not to be insulted that she dismissed the matter so easily. She was trying to be kind, he was sure. "I mean quite the opposite," he said carefully.

"What?"

"I came to let you know that... my offer still stands." He almost didn't finish the sentence. The confused frown on her face wasn't promising.

"But the Marriage Law is finished."

"But the advantages of being pureblood in our society go on." She flinched, but he thought she needed to hear it all. "I've been thinking about the entire mess with Rigel, and I think you were more involved in the cover-up than you've admitted. Don't admit it-don't say anything. Just listen." He set down his curry and took her hand, gently at first, but more firmly when she squeezed back with wordless anxiety. "If you were complicit in the blood identity theft, as a halfblood, you could be in a lot of trouble. If you were bound to a pureblood... you might be shielded from the blowback."

Harry's breath evened out, and suddenly she was perfectly calm, like a switch being flipped. She squeezed his hand one more time and let

it go. "What do you think Archie's been doing all this time?" she said quietly.

Aldon pursed his lips. "If I'm right in thinking Archie was the 'Harry' I danced with at the Yule Ball, then I think he's very in love with his American classmate and might have taken the opportunity afforded by the legislation being struck down to break your engagement."

Harry grimaced. "That's a good guess. And he did, but I don't need protection. Nor do I deserve it."

He opened his mouth to object, but she put a repressive hand on his shoulder.

"Your loyalty to Rigel is admirable, to go so far even knowing I'm not *really* his cousin." She said the last teasingly, as though she could make light of the situation. "If I really am culpable, you shouldn't be trying to protect me anyway. Luckily for both of us, I wasn't as involved as you think. I'm in no danger, Rosier."

He didn't believe her for a minute.

"Thank you for checking in on me, though. No one else has. Not that I expect them to," she added with a little stab at her curry.

He wisely chose not to comment on the likelihood of Pansy Parkinson paying the girl a visit as soon as Draco could be trusted alone for more than an hour.

Aldon opened his mouth to ask whether she'd really been living on her own since she was eleven, but Harry jumped up to smile at a roughly-garbed stranger, bowl abandoned on the curb.

"Leo!" She smiled at the newcomer as though he was her best friend in the world. "I thought Margo might tip you off."

The older boy gave her a crushing hug before swinging her out for a once-over. "She said your new boots looked expensive."

Harry grinned and stuck out her foot to show them off. Aldon supposed they did look new. "They're the latest model. Non-slip, acid proof, *and* temperature controlled."

"The trifecta," Leo said, smiling at her fondly. "Who's this, then?"

Aldon stood from the low stool and bowed shortly. "Aldon Rosier, at your service."

Leo bowed back. "Lionel Hurst, at hers."

Harry nudged him with a roll of her eyes. "Leo is the Aldermaster's son," she said, as though the shape of his nose and the shared name didn't make it clear. "Leo, Aldon is one of Rigel's friends from school."

The understanding that lit in Leo Hurst's eyes was more suspicious than Harry's entire act had been. "Nice to meet you," the older boy said. He slipped a moneybag out of his pocket, and it took Aldon a long moment to recognize it. "I believe this is yours."

Aldon patted his robes and realized, yes, it must be. He reclaimed it with an incredulous stare, even as Harry grimaced at Leo reprovingly.

"They didn't know he was your friend," Leo said apologetically.

Harry sighed and nodded as though this was a perfectly intelligible turn of events. "Put it in an inside pocket," she suggested as Aldon made to tuck it away again. He did so with an embarrassed grunt.

"Do you have time to train this afternoon?" Leo asked her.

Harry's eyes lit up. "I do, actually." She turned to collect her bowl. "Sorry, Rosier. I've got to run, but-" She paused and gave him a long look. "It was good of you to come." Her eyes took on a wistful quality. "Rigel had a good friend in you."

"Has."

Harry's expression fell into something stern. "You'll never see him again." The words cut through him like a rapier. "Please understand that," she implored.

He buried the hurt and summoned a small smile. "Well, then. I've got an opening in my friend roster now, so..."

She bit her lip. "I... will keep that in mind."

He'd been sure she would refuse the offer, and the smile she pulled on said almost as much. Harry returned the bowls to the stand and restacked the stools. Before she left, Aldon beat back his pride enough to ask, "How, ah, do I get back to-?"

The flower urchin from earlier appeared at his elbow like a demon summoned to a dark ritual. "I'll show you the way."

"Thanks, Margo," Harry said, flipping the girl a coin. "Keep an eye on his watch."

"Won't let nobody nick it," the girl promised solemnly.

Aldon could hardly refuse. "Lead the way, Miss Margo."

The girl giggled and took his hand in her smaller, dirtier palm. "Aren't you glad you didn't go for carnations?"

He had no answer to that. He was leaving with far more questions than answers, come to think of it, but even so... he was glad he took the trouble to track Harry Potter back to her lair. If nothing else, she was still interesting.

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"How many more of your posh friends are you going to lead down these alleys?"

"I didn't lead him," she protested. "I never imagined seeing *Aldon Rosier* here." The mental image of him squatting on that stool with a bowl of street curry would never leave her.

"You say that like he's royalty," Leo pointed out.

"If the Wizarding World had Kings and Queen, he probably would be," she admitted ruefully. "Only the Malfoys and Lestranges stand above the Rosiers." At Leo's unimpressed look, she smiled slyly. "Little did he know he was graced by the presence of true royalty."

Leo pretended to inspect his bare fingers. "Should I have offered him my ring?"

She laughed. Leo stopped walking and took her hand. "That, right there. I've missed your laugh, lass. You've been away too long."

Harry swallowed. It was so easy to fall back into place with Leo and forget the unsaid things between them. With her father working late that night, she had no effective curfew. There could be no avoiding the long-overdue conversation. It had to happen.

It didn't happen.

Leo launched into a story about Marek and a gang of out-of-towners, and she forgot about their impending Talk until they reached the Dancing Phoenix. She waved at familiar faces as they wove through to the courtyard, but Leo didn't let her stop.

Only when he began to take off his shoes did she realize he really did intend to train.

"You're off-balance," he said, sinking into a ready stance.

She wobbled a bit copying him and grimaced. "It's maddening, being short again."

"Short can be useful," Leo said, darting in with a jab she ducked beneath easily. "Use it, don't fight it."

Harry grumbled, but launched into the practice with a sense of relief. This was a familiar problem. She'd take any distraction from having to fully explain herself.

The session went longer than usual, and Harry was far from holding her own, but even dusty and sweaty she felt better by the end of it. She still lost her balance and overestimated her reach, but the feeling of despair about it had receded. Maybe re-learning was a better answer than a permanent Polyjuice solution. With her luck, she'd get to a size she liked and then go through the second half of puberty.

Leo's whole crew was there when they trudged back into the Phoenix. Solom had a glass of milk waiting on ice, and Harry had to pretend her glasses had fogged when Rispah pulled her close and told her how very brave she was. Aled gave her grief about staying away half the year when she was only down the street, and they all had a good laugh at Marek for not realizing the bloke in America wasn't even her.

"Now I know why you were so cross with me for sending him," Leo sighed.

"A woman doesn't need a reason to be cross with a man," Rispah sniffed.

Leo shook his head, leaning back in his chair precariously. "My Harry's never cross! It was dreadfully out of character and can only be explained by a great deception."

Harry nudged his chair further back with her foot and smiled sweetly as he grabbed for the bench to stay balanced. "If I've deprived you of regularly experiencing my ire, Leo, I *do* apologize. I'll see to correcting that now that I have no secrets to keep."

"A woman must have *some* secrets," Rispah told her seriously. "It's part of the mystique."

"Everyone's seen your mystique, Rispah-"

Marek was on his arse before anyone knew what happened. He pointed accusingly at Rispah, who lounged in exaggerated indolence on Harry's shoulder. "How-?"

"Secret."

They laughed Marek back into his seat with a fresh pint to nurse his pride. As the guitarist in the corner struck up a note and the men jumped up to sing, Rispah dipped her head toward Harry's ear and said, "You look fully yourself, my dear. It becomes you."

Harry gave the beautiful woman a watery smile. "I'm sorry for deceiving you all-"

"Don't." Rispah let a single finger hover over Harry's mouth. "We understand it. What wouldn't we do for our own?" She gestured at the carousing group and shook her head. "I would do anything for my cousin. I just hope yours *appreciates* all you did for him."

She let Rispah see the pride in her eyes. "He'll be one of the greats. Now that he doesn't have to hide himself anymore, the world will see what Archie can really do."

Harry was looking forward to seeing it. She didn't know how much of his magic and attention had been tied up in continuous morphing, but she could imagine.

"You too, Harry."

"Me?"

Rispah nudged her. "You can show the world what *you* can really do now, too."

She hitched her mouth. "I haven't exactly been holding back."

As the sun threatened to set, Harry stood with a groan of stiff muscles. The group protested but she shook her head with a smile. "Dad'll never let me leave again if I'm not home when he gets in."

"And we all want Harry to come back again soon," Rispah said. She busied Harry's forehead and patted her cheek. "Mrs. Hurst's been worrying, too. Next time, drop by the clinic."

"If I had time, I'd go right now and have her heal the beating from my limbs."

"And cheat yourself of all the progress?" Leo tapped her bicep with a gentle fist. "I wouldn't let you."

"Better walk her home, Leo," Aled called.

"To save her from temptation," Marek added with a clink of his glass on the table.

Leo waved off their capricious comments and sent Harry through the door with a bow.

"A king would never bow so deep," Harry said lightly.

"He would to a queen," Leo shot back.

Stymied, she made a bee-line for the nearest public Floo. As the noise of the Dancing Phoenix faded behind them, Harry said, "You still haven't... asked me anything."

Leo took a deep breath and let it out slowly, looking up at the sky as he did so. "Way I see it, there's no need to rush through it. Is there anything you need help with right now?"

She shook her head.

He nodded. "Then I don't need to know anything right away."

Harry didn't know what to say to that. They walked in silence for a time, and she listened to the sound of his footsteps keeping pace beside her. Leo stopped at the Floo and put his hands in his pockets. "We have time, Harry. Just *be* for a bit." With a wry tilt of his head, he added, "You seem like you need a break from interrogations, anyway."

She smiled. It was *exactly* what she needed. "Somehow, you always know."

"If you're the only thing I know my whole life, Harry, I'll be a wise man," Leo said.

Harry shook her head, a grin fighting through her reproach. "And then you ruin it."

"You liked it."

"Goodnight, Leo."

"Sleep tight, Harry."

For once, maybe she would.

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It was Sunday morning, and Harry was meditating. She was supposed to be practicing her Animagus transformation, but James didn't know she'd already cracked it. He did know she was working on it, thanks to something Archie had admitted during his 'Morning at the Ministry,' as the family continued to refer to his interrogation. She wasn't sure what exactly was said, only that James had insisted on overseeing the remainder of her training, so she was pretending to try.

No one could know she'd had the ability when Rigel escaped. It was too easy to imagine an animagus slipping the Auror's net, and it was probably only unwillingness to know that preventing anyone asking whether Rigel was an animagus himself.

She wasn't even sure she *could* replicate the transformation outside of such an extreme fight-or-flight situation. She wasn't going to find out with her father watching.

A tap at the window broke her façade and she watched with unabashed interest as James crossed the room to collect the post. The owl shook its leg impatiently as James ran several spells over it, but he wouldn't be rushed. Once satisfied, he flipped through the mail deftly and handed an envelope to Harry without commenting.

Harry raised her eyebrows. "Are we done triple-checking my mail for letter bombs?"

"Keep joking about the death threats, Harry. That's sure to make me rethink your restrictions." James looked at her over the top of his coffee and she made a face at him.

Neither of them was completely joking, but they weren't deadly serious, either. Remus was a wise man. She went to open the envelope, pausing as her father added, "Besides-if the Potions Guild is trying to kill you, even I can't save you."

Harry slid the newest edition of Potions Quarterly from its sleeve with a smile that froze when she turned it over and saw the cover.

"Lestrangle," she muttered darkly. "Must be his thesis piece."

"You don't sound happy for him," James remarked.

Harry pressed her lips together, but flipped to the middle of the magazine against her better judgement. His pointy, inbred face stared out at her from a glossy centerfold. She recognized the view

from the window behind him and scowled. "He made them go out to his castle for the shoot? Ew."

"This would be his first publication under his own auspices, yes?"

She lowered the periodical to stare incredulously at James. "Without Master Whitaker on the byline, yes. But how did you...?" She flipped back to the front and realized he was paraphrasing the subtitle of the cover blurb: *'Breakout Brewer Caelum Lestrangle: First in Print with Fresh Ideas.'*

Harry tore back to the article, skimming it angrily until the content caught up to her. She shook her head and started back at the beginning. "It's... about Shaped Imbuing." It wasn't even bad. He outlined the concept in a way that was persuasively interesting before jumping into his ideas for theoretical applications and practical demonstration. She read the third paragraph several times before believing it.

'Shaped Imbuing, a method pioneered by novice brewer Harriett Potter, is the most revolutionary advancement to Potions in three centuries.'

Shaped Imbuing, pioneered by Harriett Potter.

"He credits me..." Harry felt her mouth fall open as she read on. "He cited my internship paper and-and there are *direct quotes* from our tutoring sessions." Unable to take anymore, she balled the magazine and threw it into the fire with a growl of rage.

James summoned it from the fire and doused the flames with an incredulous smile. "Is that how we treat repositories of knowledge?"

Harry jumped to her feet and began to pace angrily, not sure she trusted herself to control her magic without some physical outlet. "What the hell is he playing at?"

James looked between her and the article, clearly amused. "Is this some kind of weird potions courtship thing?"

She clenched her fist and shook it in his general direction. "Can you just burn that, please? I need some visceral satisfaction, but I can Vanish something into Non-Being if you'd rather."

"Not the antiques, please," James said calmly. He was skimming the pages. "Now, I'm no expert, but he seems to treat the subject fairly."

"Fairly? He's downright *respectful*," she snarled. "Constructively critical of its limitations and practically *admiring* in describing the discovery process."

"You've lost me," James said frankly. "Because those sound like good things."

"But they're all a *lie* ." Harry sent a fireball of magic into the fireplace and winced as the chimney shook. She ran static-charged fingers through her hair and buried her face in her hands. "They have to be. He's vile."

None of it made any sense. It would have been submitted months ago for review, but months ago he would have been brewing *that potion* . How could she reconcile the words with his actions? He could he treat her work, *halfblood work*, so professionally, yet hold such hate that he would work with Voldemort toward pureblood supremacy? Normal people couldn't compartmentalize their beliefs so completely. Could they?

"Maybe he didn't write it," she said, testing the words aloud. Only no one else could have quoted her like that.

James came to kneel beside her on the floor. "What's this really about, Fawn? I thought you enjoyed teaching this kid."

"He did something unforgivable," she muttered. "It made me realize he's just a bigot like all the others, and he'll never change."

James brought her into a strong hug until the fight went out of her. When she blew out a long breath, he said, "You know, it's very difficult to do what Sirius did."

She lifted her head to give him a look. "I know that."

"Do you? Maybe because you grew up with him, it seems normal to you that he turned his back on everything he knew for the sake of principles. For friendship." James leveled her with serious eye contact. "But it's really, really hard to do. Most people don't. That you've made *any* progress with the Lestrangle boy is... impressive."

"I haven't," she bit out.

James bopped her over the head with the singed article. "This was not written by a bigot. Don't give up on him yet."

Harry glared at him. "You don't know what he's-

"And you don't know what Sirius had done, before he turned his back on the Dark. Even *while* he was trying to." The grim truth in James' eyes gave her pause. She couldn't imagine Sirius doing anything unforgivable. Her father pressed the journal into her hand and said, "You don't have to forgive him for whatever he did or said. Just... be a hand, if he ever reaches out."

He stood and picked up his coffee. On his way out of the room, he added, "I'm not saying it'll work out. Some people never turn. But I know you're brave enough to try, Harry."

James left, and she sank her head into her hands again. Lestrangle stared at her through the cracks in her fingers, looking so sure of himself it had to be an act. He didn't deserve it. Maybe that wasn't the point, though.

Maybe... she could try again.

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"The so-called pureblooded elite will never buy into an equal society if it means willingly relinquishing their own undue power! The Rigel Black Child has shown us the only way! Revolution! Revolution from within and without!"

A general cheer went up about the alley. Harry slipped through the crowd, avoiding eye contact as the woman on a makeshift pedestal shot sparks into the air with her wand to accentuate her talking points.

"If we have to shove their high and mighty noses in it every day, we will-"

Harry turned the corner and was left to imagine how, exactly, the woman planned to bring the attention of the ruling class to her cause. It was the fourth protest she'd seen in the alleys that week. Rabble-rousers, James called them. Harry gathered it was a loosely-affiliated group of groups rather than a single, cohesive movement, and the Aurors didn't seem concerned. They were busy tracking down Voldemort and dodging political attempts to assign blame for the disastrous way Riddle's tournament ended.

One silver lining of said disaster was that Riddle had disappeared from the lime light completely. Brooding, no doubt, and nursing wounded pride. And furiously plotting Rigel's demise, she allowed after a moment's consideration. It would be a very good thing if she and Riddle never crossed paths again.

The sun had already set when she reached the Lamia Lodge. James didn't *like* her leaving the house so late, but he was the one who had officially lifted her restrictions. Trust had to begin somewhere.

She entered without knocking, as she usually did, and the door scarcely had time to creak before she was slammed up against the inside corridor with a cold fist around her collar.

"Human," the unfamiliar vampire growled.

"Guilty," she choked, pulling her magic tightly into her skin to keep it from lashing out. "Is there a new human policy I should know about?"

"More like a new menu-"

"Enough, Silo. The human is here to see me." Kasten appeared at the end of the hallway, dark eyes glinting in the dim light of the wall sconces.

The hand released her, and Silo, who upon second glance was quite a bit shorter than any vampire she'd ever seen, leered at Kasten as he passed. "Watch your tone, fledgling. And teach your pet the codes."

Kasten stared after the other vampire with reproof. Harry rolled her neck as she touched the bottle in her pocket to make sure it hadn't cracked. "Are there codes now?" she asked.

"Not really. The Rogue uses one, but Silo's rule of thumb puts humans up against the wall in any case."

"I'm sure it's effective security," Harry said, somewhat doubtfully.

"The coven is on edge," Kasten murmured.

Harry thought about the woman shouting in Diagon Alley and grimaced. "The whole world is on edge."

"Beings with sense are always tense in times of great anticipation." Kasten's face was hard to read, but he did not sound anticipatory so much as pained. "People feel a change coming. It terrifies some and galvanizes others. So it will always be."

"I don't mind if the world changes," Harry muttered. "I just wish it would leave me out of it."

Kasten shook his head and led her further into the lodge. In some places, she could see where the wallpaper had burned away, and the wood around the doorway into the foyer was noticeably charred. "In an upheaval, there is no safe place to stand."

She eyed the slumping front desk, which had somehow survived the spring's conflagration despite being the textbook definition of dry tinder. A pair of chairs in the corner of the room were new, and Kasten gestured to one of them, awkwardly hovering until she sat.

"Your lab?" she asked, glancing toward the soot-stained staircase.

"Still being refurbished," Kasten said. "It is fit for working, but not for human lungs."

Harry took the bottle from her pocket and passed it to Kasten for examination. "This should help with his disorientation. The mental scars of possession will heal with time, but Doggart's Dram will speed the recovery."

"You are certain it will work on our kind?"

"It works on Squibs and there are documented uses of it by centaurs and banshees." Kasten raised his eyebrows, and Harry shrugged. "I didn't look into the specific circumstances. Sentient minds are the key; it won't work on animals, but any being could benefit. Active magic is not required."

Kasten nodded. "I will test a small dose on myself if you don't mind. Just to ensure it is safe."

"I understand. If it works, I'll bring more."

"You do not understand," Kasten said slowly. "Not fully. Your assistance in *this* time is... it implies a certain relationship with our coven."

Harry frowned. "In this time but not in others?"

Kasten's eyes widened. "You do not know." At her blank look, his eyes grew distant and pained once more. "The coven goes to war, Harry. This night."

She startled. "Tonight? What, now?"

"The Carpathians have crossed a red line. They conspired with wizards to enslave a rival vampire." Kasten leaned forward as though to ensure she understood the gravity of his words. "It cannot be borne."

Harry took a deep breath. "I thought you were already at war with the Carpathians. They did all this." She gestured to the scars of fire and ash on the room around them.

"Covens attack one another from time to time. It is expected when tensions reach a breaking point," Kasten said slowly. "Now, however, we know that attack was orchestrated by a human. Now, we know this is no skirmish. After this night, there will be only one coven in the alleys."

Harry gripped the arm of her chair to keep from reaching out. Her touch would not be welcome, she suspected. "Will you fight?"

"Even I cannot remain aloof," Kasten said. "Though I am young, I am Grandfather's heir. I will-"

"You will remain here with Gavril."

They looked over to see Irvina coming in from the courtyard. She was bedecked in blood-red battle armor, the elegance of which Harry had never seen the like. Her beautiful hair was bound with black ribbon, and there was a flame in her eyes that gave her the air of an avenging goddess. Harry pitied anyone in her way.

Kasten stood, Harry a moment after. "I am of age," he began, but Irvina interrupted him.

"Gavril must survive. You will tend to him through the battle. If our coven falls, you will carry him to safety. You are the seed that must plant us anew, Kasten. Gavril will be your lieutenant. The Count has decreed it."

Kasten's face hardened. "Then it shall be done."

Irvina turned her deadly gaze on Harry. "And you, fleshling? Will you fight for us?"

Harry recalled trying and failing to fend off Voldemort in his vampire host. "I could never keep up," she admitted.

Irvina nodded once. "That is as well. War is for the wrathful. You will be more use to Kasten alive if we should fail." She tipped back her head and let out a deep-throated cry. Countless echoing cries answered from the courtyard. The vampiress curled her fingers into claws, and the fierce expectation in her smile was terrifying. "Blood has waited long enough," she crooned.

"Go home, Harry," Kasten advised her. "This night is not for humans."

Harry moved toward the door in a daze. She looked back at the door to see Kasten standing a silent sentry at the other end of the dark corridor. "Be careful," she whispered. "If it goes wrong-"

"I will write."

She nodded, and stumbled out of the Lodge-and into Leo.

He caught her on the step and shook his head exasperatedly. "Why am I not surprised to find you here?"

"Leo, what-is the Rogue involved in this?"

Leo pulled her to the other side of the alley. "The Court doesn't *strictly speaking* get involved in coven matters."

She gave his attire a once-over, noting the arm braces, extra sheaths, and the leather-backed steel collar that looked like it might turn a pair of fangs from the carotid. "But?" she prompted, armed crossed.

"But the code was broken," Leo said grimly. "The Carpathians sold out one of ours to an outsider, and even if they hadn't-these battles have a way of getting out of hand."

"How can you keep up in a vampire fight?" Harry asked, bewildered. Leo was fast, but he wasn't that fast.

He laughed, a short, hard sound. "We won't. My boys'll be setting a perimeter, trying to keep the fighting in and uninvolved humans out of the way. If we happen to catch any stragglers... well, that's as it is."

Harry worried, and it must have shown on her face. Leo clipped her chin with a finger. "We'll be all right, lass. Dealt with coven squabbles before, and I don't doubt we will again." He hesitated, then said casually, "That said, I wouldn't mind if the city fire-brigade got a little tip-off, if you take my meaning."

Harry stared at him. "You want me to... tell someone?"

Leo pursed his lips and tilted his head. "Strickly speaking, it's not illegal for two covens to work out their differences. Only thing is, vampire battles tend to involve a lot of fire. And last time, well, we ran our folk pretty ragged trying to contain it until the fire-dousers came round." He waggled his eyebrows at her. "Might be nice if they showed up sooner. Not too soon, mind you. But quick enough."

"Uh-huh. This seems a little outside the spirit of the Code," Harry said. "I don't want to see a tattle-tale tax on my next tithe."

"This is a somewhat gray area in the Code," Leo admitted. "Fact is, fire is dangerous, and there's enough folk in these parts without magic to make it worth erring on the side of preventative planning."

Harry nodded slowly. A fully grown wizard could escape a fire no problem, but children, Squibs, the myriad passive-magic beings... not to mention the entire population of muggles just one city sector over, who wouldn't even see the smoke until it spread beyond the alley wards. "I'll see what I can do, Leo."

"Get home quick, and watch your back, lass."

Leo slipped into the Lodge after a series of complicated knocks, and she hoped he was going to be as removed from the fighting as he implied. The nearest public Floo was just a couple of blocks, but she jogged the distance to settle the nerves in her stomach.

James was waiting for her in the Floo room when she stumbled through the wards. "Hey, Dad."

"Little late, don't you think?"

She stood and brushed the soot from her sleeves. "My friend had more to talk about than I thought."

James gestured to the sweat on her face. "And then you went for a run?"

Harry wiped her brow with her sleeve and nodded. "Well, things are a little... heated in the alleys."

"What does that mean?" he asked sharply.

"Who's the on-call team for dousing this week?" she asked casually.

James scowled down at her. "It's Kingsley's crew. Are the alleys on fire?"

Shacklebolt. Harry had heard how he'd pulled one over on Archie in interrogation and didn't feel too bad about saying, "Not yet. But you might want to Floo him and let him know to be on more of an... alert status tonight. Maybe he shouldn't even go to sleep."

"Harry..."

"No wizarding laws will be broken."

"I don't love the way you stressed 'wizarding.'" James rubbed his forehead. "You've been out of restriction one week and you've gone and set the alleys on fire. Do you see how this makes it hard to trust you?"

"I haven't done anything," she said primly. "I am a concerned citizen making an anonymous tip that at some point tonight an enormous fire *might* break out south of Diagon Alley and if someone wanted to put his fire brigade on alert it *might* be of benefit to the community that he protects and serves. Maybe."

James groaned. "Anonymous tips will be the death of me."

Harry pretended to yawn. "Gosh, I'm tired. I'm sure you have lots of paperwork to start, so I'll get out of your way."

"I should deputize you and make you do the paperwork."

"I'm afraid the Auror department doesn't accept interns of ill repute."

"I'm closing the Floo."

"Thanks, but I've finished my errands for the evening."

Harry pretended not to hear her father send a ball of fire magic into the Floo. She climbed the stairs and the worry settled back over her. For all that she'd told Kasten she wanted to stand to the side, it was difficult to sleep knowing people she cared about were fighting battles without her. When it came to a fight where she *could* keep up... how long would she really be able to stay a spectator?

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Regulus strode into the study without knocking, but straightened to attention upon finding him within. "My lord, forgive me. I assumed you would be taking supper."

Riddle eyed the missive in the younger man's hand. "Your report?"

Regulus inclined his head and crossed to the fireside armchair. "There's been an attack on the coven that aligned itself with the impostor."

"The Order?"

"No, other vampires," Regulus said. His mouth twisted on the word, and Riddle knew it rankled the proud man to be reduced to a gutter alley spy. Regulus was not yet forgiven for falling prey to Rigel's deception. If anyone should have seen through the act, it was him.

That was the problem with these old-school elitists. When it came down to it, they couldn't actually tell the difference. Rigel's power blinded them, and it took a blood ritual gone wrong to expose his impurity. Without unfathomable back luck, the boy might have gone his whole life without being caught. Might have climbed the ranks. Might have been given the very keys to the kingdom. Might have been the forceful change their kind *needed* to survive.

Instead, he was vapor in the wind. One more ghost story in the pantheon of purity myths.

Riddle tossed the report into the fire and let it smolder. "Inter-species squabbling doesn't concern us. When the Order and the impostor come to a head, that is our moment."

"My lord, about what I told you..." Regulus quailed under Riddle's sharp look, but rallied manfully. "Why not use the... mark of magic to track the imposter down and deal with it."

"I could do so quietly and efficiently and save the world a lot of trouble," Riddle admitted with a dark smile. "But that would not earn us any favors, Regulus, and we are sorely in need of good publicity."

"I see."

He didn't. None of the fools ever did. It wasn't really his fault-poor, sheltered pureblood, soaring, eyes closed, toward a burning sun, knowing not his coming demise, only chasing the warmth of it on his skin. Without him to lead them, they'd be gnats on the windshield of the world already.

Regulus bowed out of the room, but the door swung open almost immediately and a far more impertinent thorn took his place.

"Are we skipping dinner again?" Owens all but threw himself into the opposite chair, crossing his legs and allowing his foot to tap with American manners. "Only I wish you'd warn a guy. I could've eaten more at lunch."

"If you're looking for something to prattle at, the mirror in the foyer pretends to listen better than I," Riddle drawled, turning back to his book.

"I wanted to talk about the summer champion's tour," Owens said flatly. "Are we still going to-"

"No."

The boy sniffed. "Why not, though?"

Riddle snapped his book together and regretted it when he recalled in which century it had been bound. Smothering his irritation until it was discernable only as a thread of steel beneath his words, he said, "What would be the point of that, Jacob? The legislation is dead. We must nurture another opportunity to advance our cause."

"But I could show my face," Owens whined. "Make connections. Aren't I more useful as your heir if everyone knows who I am?"

"You are not anyone's heir yet."

" *I'm Slytherins'. You said so yourself.*" He spoke in Parseltongue as though Riddle needed reminding of his gift. At times he wondered if it had been a mistake to draw Isolt's line out of obscurity, but it was his nature to retain a fallback plan.

As annoying as that plan might be, it was preferable to having no alternative, particularly now that Rigel had gone and proven himself unsuitable in front of all and sundry.

"So, as heir presumptive you would give the media a spectacle? Should we leave an empty chair for our missing felon to remind everyone of the colossal, inexorable failure of the final task?"

Owens sunk into his chair and grumbled, "Maybe he'd come. Show-off likes attention."

"He'd be a fool to show his face, and Rigel is no fool. Never mind the Ministry. What I'll do to him when I have his lying neck within reach..." He allowed himself to picture it for one, satisfying moment. So many loose ends would be severed with the boy's death. The wildcard taken out of play, and all the vows laid to rest between them.

The Vow... there was a thought.

The wording had been... ambiguous, on the boy's end. *Any and all tasks required of a champion.* Did that proscription end when Rigel satisfied the condition of winning? Certainly, Riddle was still held to his part of it. He would not be so arrogant as to predict the exact boundaries of the Vow's interpretations; one never really knew until the blood began to heat in the veins.

Still, there was a chance. He risked appearing the fool if Rigel didn't show, but Rigel risked much more if the Vow considered the requirement valid.

It seemed he had one final wager to make with Rigel Black.

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He was trying to get his head right and be an adult about it. Trying to put his feelings aside and see how much bigger than him it all was. Trying to listen to what Pansy needed him to hear.

Some days, it was harder than others.

The conservatory was tastefully bedecked, with silver cloth draping that made the greenery stand out all the more. His mother had cried, as she always did at sacred bondings, and she would cry again when the bride and groom exchanged first spells. The reception was in full swing and shaping up to be a who's who of Dark society.

Draco wove through people without really seeing them. The notes of a string quartet drew his gaze to the dance floor, and he wondered how two people could possibly be so happy with so much chaos and confusion in the world. Watching Edmund and Alice sway, he thought people in love must exist in a separate reality from the rest of them.

He skirted the punch table and nabbed one of the undiluted fairy wines. His mother wouldn't approve of him drinking in his 'fragile emotional state,' but she would be too busy imagining Rookwood-Selwyn babies to notice.

"-can't believe how badly the Party misjudged that-"

"-wrong that I'm glad the law didn't go through? Wouldn't want to marry one of *them*..."

He took a long swig, wishing he could charm his ears shut with magic without being unforgivably uncouth. There was no avoiding politics at such events, but he was sick to death of the endless speculation about the legislation, the last task... *Rigel* .

"-and that thing-the amulet! It stopped the Killing Curse."

"Impossible."

"It did."

"That piece of refuse must not have cast it right."

"I think I know a perfect Killing Curse when I see one."

Draco turned to blink incredulously at the wizard who would say such a thing in mixed company. He had a beard that was either woefully neglected or a wild animal making a remarkably neat nest in the folds of his neck. The beard quivered as the wizard poked his friend in the chest and insisted, "That was a fully manifested curse and *something* stopped it."

A hand at his elbow made Draco start and slosh his wine onto his cuff. Blaise was there, apologetically siphoning the spilled wine off the fabric with practiced wand movements.

"Sorry, Draco. Didn't mean to startle you."

"Not your fault," Draco murmured. "I got distracted by-"

"The imbecile bragging about recognizing the most recognizable curse in existence?" Blaise shot the bearded wizard a droll look and shook his head. "Hard not to hear him."

"Sick of people talking about it," Draco complained.

"You're going to be sick for a while, then," Blaise said flatly. "In case you missed it, Rigel won the Triwizard Tournament, broke the

Founders' wards, revealed himself a halfblood, and then escaped from under the noses of the entire DMLE."

"You forgot 'survived a killing curse' and 'betrayed all his friends,'" Draco grumbled.

Blaise raised an eyebrow. "I assume you're kidding about the second part, as Pansy indicated you had recently pulled your head out of your arse, but as to the first-that was Lady Potter's doing."

Draco stared at him. "What was?"

"The Killing Curse," Blaise said quietly. "Rigel let me examine the amulet he was wearing. It had some *intense* protective magic woven into it, and Lady Potter designed and crafted the whole thing."

"The Potters just can't stop inventing things, can they?"

Blaise and Draco turned guiltily, and Pansy shook her head with a rueful smile. "Didn't I say we were going to go through it together? Come along, boys. The others are waiting."

Something about the way her elegantly secured ponytail swished when she walked away made Draco wonder if Pansy had led armies into battle in a previous life.

The others were gathered in an out-of-the-way clearing, loosely shaded from prying eyes by a trailing vine that had escaped its winter pruning.

Pansy cleared her throat and met each of their eyes before starting. "To be exceedingly clear, we are here to discuss the potential whereabouts of our friend, Rigel. We do not intend to turn him in and we are not here to blame or question him. Only to find him and help him, if needed."

All eyes turned to Theo, who scowled back defiantly. "I wouldn't be here if I wasn't still his friend. Anyway, I came around before Draco

did."

Draco narrowed his eyes, but Pansy said quickly, "Speaking of Draco, he is not to be questioned or tasked in regards to this matter. He is here as an interested observer only."

Theo smirked at him. "We know about the life debt. *Everyone* knows Lord Malfoy is in the dog house with Riddle because of it."

"All these years and no one's murdered you yet, Theo. Remarkable," Draco bit out.

"And we aren't here to argue," Millicent put in. "I have an update."

"Go ahead, Millie," Pansy agreed.

"There is no sign of him on the continent." At their frowns, Millicent gestured impatiently. "No, that's good, don't you see? We're narrowing it down."

"Or he's better at hiding than you are at looking," Blaise suggested.

"We traced every recently disgraced or penniless family," Millicent said defensively. "No lost heirs unaccounted for, and no one suddenly reappearing after a long time away. My father and uncles have been making inquiries, too. I know they haven't found anything."

"You're assuming he's associated with a prominent family," Theo argued. "That doesn't even line up with the account Arcturus Black gave the Aurors."

"I've chosen to treat Heir Black's account not as fact but as evidence of what Rigel wants us to think. We all know he's too smart not to have thought up a story ahead of time in case he got caught."

There was general consensus at this. "Does anyone else have news to share?" Pansy asked hopefully.

Aldon stepped forward with a smile so smug it was a wonder it didn't walk off his face and start its own line of leather shoes. "I found Harry Potter," he said.

"Was she missing?" Theo looked around to make sure he was not the only one confused by the non sequitur.

"She's been laying low," Pansy said, eyes narrowed. "My letters have been turned away unopened. Where did you run into her?"

"Knockturn Alley." The way he said it was deliberately provocative.

Theo whistled. "I knew she was cool."

"She works there, apparently," Aldon went on. At Pansy's sharp inhale, he smirked. "Not like that. As a potions brewer."

Pansy blew out a breath, color in her cheeks. "Obviously. I knew that."

"We knew she had a job, at least. Was it really in Knockturn Alley? I thought those rumors were nonsense," Millicent said.

"Which ones? I heard she was living in some old lady's attic. Then I heard she was living in a nest of vampires, acting as their blood bank. And *some* are saying she lived on the streets and stole to eat—only I guess she wouldn't need to steal if she had income." Theo scratched his head. "It's not easy parsing through all the mad stuff."

Draco could keep quiet no longer. "Harry brews for an apothecary in Knockturn, and for Horace Burke and a number of other distributors probably as well. I'm sure she doesn't need to steal anything." The others stared at him. "What? Rigel and Uncle Snape have both have mentioned it numerous times. Weren't you listening?"

Pansy gave him a soft smile, and he realized it was because he'd said Rigel's name aloud without growling it. "All right, so you found

her at work," she prompted. The attention turned back to Aldon, who preened like an underfed puppy.

"We had a long talk. She's doing surprisingly well, all things considered."

"Is she?" Pansy and Millicent exchanged a look.

"Well enough to leave her family's protection to wander about London," Aldon said, shrugging. "More than that, she seems... relaxed. Like a different person-and not just her appearance."

"Her appearance has changed?" Blaise said sharply.

Aldon nodded. "Drastically. She used to look like Rigel, remember? And so did Arcturus. All three of them have apparently been switching places for years."

"All three of them? Are you sure?" Pansy pressed.

"She *admitted* it. I think it was difficult to switch Rigel in and out of place while they were at home. At some of the social events we thought Rigel attended, it wasn't him at all. It was one of the other two." Aldon nodded in the face of their collective disbelief. "Hard to fathom, isn't it? That's why they all had to look alike."

"And why he was so bloody androgenous," Theo muttered.

Draco's stomach clenched at the thought that Rigel's unique femininity had been so precisely designed-a mask even Harriett Potter could wear. Aldon was right; it was mental.

"But which times was it the real Rigel, and which times was it Arcturus? Or Harriett?" Millicent put a hand to her head. "I have to think about this."

"Maybe we never saw Rigel on holidays," Aldon speculated.

"No, we did." Pansy was thinking furiously. "At the summer garden parties-that was definitely Rigel."

"And at the Yule Ball," Blaise put it.

"But that was *not* Harry," Aldon confirmed. "Archie went as her that night."

"Wicked," Theo breathed.

"What about the New Year Galas?" Pansy asked.

Millicent shook her head. "Too hard to tell. Maybe when he saved Mr. Ogden-"

"No, that was Arcturus and Harriett," Aldon said confidently. "I asked her about the wand switching thing. It's... not a thing."

Pansy turned with wide eyes to Draco. "You noticed they switched that night! Rigel had Harriett's wand, and Harriett-"

"Never had a wand. She carried Rigel's on holidays, but even now she doesn't carry one at all. Doesn't need it," Aldon said. Draco wanted to shake him until he dropped all his secrets at once instead of dolling them out like an old lady in the park who didn't want the birds to go away.

Pansy deflated. "Oh. I suppose that explains why Rigel had to get a new wand in first year."

"Doesn't it?" Aldon shook his head. "It's amazing how many things considered 'Rigel's eccentricities' were actually part of the act."

"Amazing," Draco muttered sourly. How could they act like they were solving clues at a murder mystery party? Didn't it kill them to picture Rigel's face? Didn't it feel as though a knife was twisting deeper with every new lie revealed?

"When you think about it like that..." Theo ticked off his fingers blithely. "There's his weird aversion to touching people, the way he sleeps fully dressed, and how none of us ever saw him change clothes. How do you explain that?"

"It's called modesty, Theo," Millicent muttered.

Aldon blinked slowly, something sad overshadowing the pleasure of knowing things no one else did. "Merlin, no wonder he was so damn self-conscious. I thought it was some kind of inferiority complex, but... it was more than that, wasn't it? Every day was a reminder that he wasn't good enough. That without the lie, he wouldn't be there."

"That would give anyone a complex," Blaise said slowly.

"And every time someone talked about the inferiority of lesser bloods, they might as well have been talking about him," Aldon croaked.

Even Theo winced at that. "He was too good at fooling us."

"We weren't looking for that sort of deception," Millicent said, somewhat defensively.

"Now we know better. Always look for the deception," Draco drawled.

"Our parents will be hamming that home for the next decade, yes. Thanks, Draco." Pansy's smile was devastatingly insincere. She turned to Aldon. "This is too much to process verbally. I need you to write down everything you remember about your conversation with Miss Potter and-"

Aldon took a scroll out of his sleeve and handed it over with a smile.

Pansy snatched it with a moue that was not quite a pout. "Thank you. Millie and I will go through this and cross-reference it with other facts. We'll come up with new theories and try to meet again before the new term."

"It's going to be weird without him, isn't it?" Theo said.

"This is what normal looks like, now," Draco said. "We just have to get used to it."

Pansy gave him a proud smile.

"You lot are the worst sort of wallflowers."

Edmund had found them, Alice at his side.

"The anti-social sort?" Pansy came forward to press Alice in a hug, which the older girl tolerated magnanimously.

"The conspiratorial sort," Edmund corrected. "Trading information?"

"More like pooling it," Aldon admitted shamelessly.

"We were just finishing," Pansy said quickly. "Looking forward to the, er, cake-cutting, Edmund."

"And the gift-opening." Blaise had a meaningful note in his voice, and Draco followed his gaze to a small package Edmund was holding half-hidden in his dress robes.

Edmund revealed the present with a slow nod. "That's why we're here. Our elf pre-screened them to prevent any unpleasant surprises and..."

"We got a pleasant surprise instead." Alice lifted the tag so they could read it.

Pansy took two steps forward with a small gasp, her eyes welling up. "Oh, *Rigel*. "

"He sent it?"

"He's alive, then!"

Alive. Rigel was alive.

"Alive and as predictable as ever," Alice said with a small smile.

"We didn't want to bandy it in front of prying eyes, but you all deserve to see it."

Without any fanfare, Edmund pulled on the ribbon and the wrapping fell away. It was a potion, and Draco wanted to cry because *of course* it was.

"A memory potion," Millicent breathed. "But those are so *rare*. "

"And difficult," Blaise murmured. "How does he have the time or resources on the run...?"

"What does it do?" Theo asked tentatively.

Alice was staring at the bottle like it might disappear at any moment. "It captures important memories. Like a pensive, only you don't have to know any mind magic to use it."

"They retain memories crystal-clear, forever," Millicent said.

"Did he... send a memory?" Blaise asked.

Edmund shook his head. "It's empty. But there's a note." He pulled a small card from his pocket and read it aloud. Draco couldn't help it- he heard the words in Rigel's voice.

Edmund and Alice,

I almost didn't send this, but there's no sense letting a good potion go to waste. If the words of a cheat and a cad mean anything, please accept my good wishes and know that I'd be an even worse person if I'd never met you.

Life is unpredictable. Everything can change in an instant, so cherish what you have as long as you can, and don't take the everyday

moments for granted. I put as much into this as I dared, and I'm confident it will hold a lifetime of memories, so don't wait for the big ones-save them all.

For myself, your friendship and guidance will be cherished always.

R

The words sank into Draco's soul and the fire there banked and eased just a little. Rigel's words said so much-except sorry. He was guilty and conflicted. He wasn't sorry.

Alice blinked hard against her mascara. "The little twerp is making it really difficult to stay angry."

Edmund pulled her close. "That isn't your angry face, love."

Millicent had her arm around Pansy, and Theo wrapped them both up with a loud sniff. Aldon pulled Blaise into the mix and the new bride and groom joined the embrace with quiet dignity. Then Pansy held her hand out for Draco, and waited.

He took it, and soaked in the presence of those who knew Rigel best. For a moment, he could see that they felt the loss as keenly as he, though they all expressed it differently.

"He's still our friend, too," Pansy whispered.

That much was clear. Rigel was still their friend and they would find him, no matter what it took. Maybe he couldn't actively look, but he could put himself in places and situations where he might hear something by accident. Pansy was right. Rigel needed them.

And they needed him.

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[end of chapter one.]

A/N: Please know that I gave myself stomach cramps writing Harry's reaction to Snape's letter. So naturally I had to invent an entirely unnecessary scene with Aldon getting his wallet lifted for comic relief. Because then I picked open the scab formerly known as Caelum Lestrangle. Sorry it's all over the place, but it feels good to jump into Book 5. I missed you, readers, and these characters, too. The soundtrack has to be Baby Steps by Amy Shark. Harry is pulling her life together... sort of.

Thank you for all the support that pours out of the fan-run Discord server Harry Get Some Sleep. The link is floating around the forums somewhere if you want to jump in. There are fanfiction and fanart events, nice, fun people, and all the theories to be had.

On a completely unrelated note, I started writing for a Webtoon comic. If you want to check it out, it's called Forever After and one free episode comes out every week online. The characters and themes are very different from this work, but the artwork is pretty amazing.

I hope everyone's spring was youthful and green.

-Violet

Chapter 2

The Malignant Masquerade:

Chapter 2:

When Hermione finally came to Grimmauld Place, she wasn't alone. Archie waited at the Floo, fairly buzzing with anticipation, but her father ducked through the grate first. Archie's smile froze in place as the man gave him a stern once-over. Mr. Granger helped his wife stumble through and put a protective hand on Hermione's shoulder when she stepped confidently from the fire.

Hermione looked between Harry and Archie with wide, solemn eyes. Her gaze went back to Archie, who had closed his fingers anxiously in an effort not to reach for her. She stared into his grey eyes as though she was meeting another human for the first time.

"I didn't think you would be taller."

It was almost an accusation. Archie slouched self-consciously. "Harry's a lot shorter than me."

Harry scowled at him, but straightened her face as Hermione turned to her. "Nice to see you again, Hermione."

"Have we actually met?" Hermione searched for something in Harry's gaze. "I wasn't sure."

"Several times, in Diagon Alley."

Hermione made a noise of understanding. Her eyes cut back to Archie's and held them. "That makes a lot more sense."

It was a little scary to watch Hermione's intellect at work. Harry suspected she'd filled a dozen boxes in her mental matrix with that single piece of information.

Archie glanced toward the corridor hopefully. "Do you want to talk in the courtyard? That is, if your parents don't mind."

The Grangers-Hermione had introduced them during the tournament, but Harry couldn't remember their names-exchanged a look. "We have questions," Mr. Granger said flatly.

Sirius cleared his throat and gestured to a side door. "Why don't we talk in the parlor? Let the kids catch up."

Hermione stepped from her father's reach and said, "I want to see your library, first."

Archie smiled. "I'll show you how the cataloging spells work."

Hermione followed Archie, and her parents went with Sirius. Harry moved slowly, not committing to either, until both groups were gone. Then she slipped through a false panel in the wall.

The magically expanded crawlspace between the parlor and the library was narrow, but clean. If one of the old wizarding families were visiting, Sirius would open the parlor side as a show of good faith. The Grangers would not expect such a gesture, nor understand what sort of family home had hidden spaces designed for spying on guests.

Harry and Archie had played hide-and-go-seek in the narrow passage, but she'd never used it for its intended purpose. All their family knew it was there, so it wasn't normally useful. Harry liked Hermione, but she wondered what the clever girl might have told her parents. She was one of the few who had spent significant time with all three of them-Archie, Harry, and Rigel. If there were any clues in their respective personalities and interactions, Hermione had them.

Sirius was making tea and the Grangers were perched uneasily on an heirloom loveseat when Harry slid the peephole aside. The listening spells activated automatically.

"-anted to know what kind of a family he was really from, you see."

Sirius turned to collect the kettle and hide his grimace. "We're an old family, but a small one. Archie is the only heir."

"He seems to have a lot to inherit," Mr. Granger said, looking about the room. The parlor had been redone in Sirius' style, but it still dripped indolently with established wealth.

Sirius set the tray on the table and expertly dressed each cup according to their requests. "He could take it, leave it, or give it all away. Makes no difference to me."

Mr. Granger took his cup but did not sip from it. "Do you suppose this cavalier attitude toward your son's activities might have contributed to the current situation?"

Sirius barked a laugh. "Just the opposite. I tried to curtail his wishes four years ago; I hope I've learned *something* from this mess." Sirius took a long pull from his teacup and set it down with a clink. "Every Black born with an ounce of magic has attended Hogwarts since the school's founding a thousand years ago. Every single one, until Archie. I lost my wife to a devastating disease when he was just a lad. I say I lost her, but really *I* was lost without her. I wanted to keep Archie close, to connect him to a place and an experience that changed my life for the better. Archie told me several times what *he* wanted, but I didn't listen."

"He did it to be a healer, Hermione said." Mrs. Granger's face was awash in sympathy for Sirius, who was too lost in his memory to notice.

"While I was folding into myself, Archie was looking outward," he said quietly. "Before I'd even processed my loss, Archie had decided, heart and soul, to spend his life sparing others that pain. I was thinking about his childhood, not realizing he'd already grown."

Mrs. Granger took Mr. Granger's hand in hers and squeezed it. "This is why we've come. We want to understand what sort of person H-Archie is. We've known for a while he's in love with our daughter. He cares about her, that's clear. It's everything else we're a bit confused on."

"Hermione tried to explain that there are... sociopolitical tensions at play in your world. And that your son was involved in some kind of social experiment about undermining the arguments of bigotry... or some such thing."

Sirius grimaced. "That is partly true, though I'm not sure I'd give my eleven-year-old son that much credit." Sirius downed the rest of his tea. "AIM's healing program is second to none. He could have gone to Hogwarts and bided his time, taken a healing elective, gone on to advanced education and taken an apprenticeship. He might have made full healer by the time he was twenty-five. Instead..." Sirius cleared his throat. "Instead, he took Harry's spot. That the boy who took *his* place at Hogwarts ended up sweeping the knees from the pureblood supremacy movement was a raw accident."

"Did Harry not wish to go to school?" Mr. Ganger leaned forward earnestly. "I'm stuck on this point-why didn't Harry simply take Archie's spot at Hogwarts?"

Harry felt her breath catch and closed her eyes against the wave of nausea that washed over her. They'd said it. As far as she knew, no one else had cut so swiftly to the heart of it.

"That would have been impossible." Sirius sounded a little amused and a little shocked when he replied, and Harry slowly let her breath out again. Of course, he would dismiss it. No one who understood how the magical world worked would ever suggest such a thing. It was the whole reason the ruse worked in the first place. "Halfbloods aren't allowed at Hogwarts."

"But a halfblood *did* attend," Mr. Granger pressed.

"A halfblood with nothing to lose," Sirius said. "Harry has a good family, a future, and plenty of other opportunities. She wouldn't throw it all away in such a risky gambit for so little reward. Hogwarts is a wonderful school, but it isn't worth dying for if you have other options."

"Dying?" Mrs. Granger gulped her tea. "Surely they won't *kill* the boy."

"That boy," Mr. Granger added, meeting Sirius' gaze squarely. "Hermione seemed to get along with him during the tournament, but do you think he's dangerous?"

"We understand he's on the lam," Mrs. Granger added.

Sirius prevaricated. "That's difficult to answer. He is capable of a great many things, as we've seen, but I don't think him deranged or malevolent, however the papers are painting him. He's certainly not a danger to you or your daughter, I shouldn't think." Sirius shook his head. "He's just a boy who wanted a chance at a real education. I don't believe he has some kind of vendetta, or anything."

The Grangers exchanged a look. "I wouldn't be so sure. We remember Hermione's reaction when she learned the British magical school didn't take 'her kind.'"

"Vendetta might be putting it lightly. For a while, she was out to prove her capability as a witch at all costs." Mr. Granger ran a hand through his hair, looking like a man who'd dodged a Killing Curse. "If she could have forced her way into that institution out of principle, she'd definitely have done it."

"Perhaps you understand Rigel better than I could," Sirius admitted. "I come from a position of power and so does Archie. Make no mistake: if Hermione had done something along the lines of what my son got involved in, she would not have gotten off with a slap on the wrist and a few tests to re-take."

"How... candid of you to say as much," Mrs. Granger murmured.

"Ignoring our privilege won't make it go away." Sirius's voice was raw as he added, "I sincerely hope they never find that boy. It won't go well for him."

"You don't seem angry that he impersonated your son for four years," Mr. Granger said shrewdly.

Sirius laughed roughly. "To be honest, I've come to be almost grateful. I feel terrible thinking it, but all the things that boy went through... I thought it was my Archie, see?"

They both nodded fervently. "Lost years of my life when Hermione entered that tournament," Mr. Granger said. "If we could have spared her that pain... but of course she'd never let us shield her."

Mrs. Granger rested a hand on her husband's arm. "Try as we might, it's not up to us, is it? They forge their own path. All we can hope is that we've equipped them with the tools to face down whatever they encounter."

Harry slipped out of the hidden passage and tracked Hermione and Archie to the library, where they were speaking quietly. Hermione turned to stare at Harry as she walked in. The girl blinked hard. "Sorry. You both look so different..." She caught Archie's eyes and looked away again awkwardly.

Archie bit his lip. "I could..." His face shifted smoothly to Rigel's features, and Hermione stiffened. Archie-as-Rigel looked strangely vulnerable as he added, "If it would make you more comfortable-"

"No." Hermione was entirely firm. Archie dropped the metamorphism and Hermione released a shaky breath. "Don't ever do that, Archie."

"Sorry."

Hermione took his hand and squeezed it. "Don't be-just be *yourself* . It's more than enough."

Archie absorbed her words like a plant brought out of the shade, and Harry hoped some part of him was silently healing.

Hermione turned to Harry and said, "We've been going over things. I gather you secured me the position at the clinic, after all."

Harry shrugged. "You did that on your own, but it was me that day, yes. Sorry to-"

"You both have to stop apologizing," Hermione cut in. "I've already forgiven everything. I'm just trying to understand now."

"Right. Well, the Lower Alleys is where I lived and worked the last four years. Archie doesn't know it that well."

"And Archie doesn't free-duel either, I take it," Hermione said shrewdly.

Harry winced. "You know about that?"

"Hard to miss it, with people coming in bearing knife wounds all the time." Hermione shook her head. "Lionel Hurst isn't very discrete. He's... fond of you."

Merlin, how much had she figured out? Harry tried a casual smile. "Normally, he doesn't have to be. The alleys are a tight community; outsiders stick out. Besides, I vouched for you."

Hermione raised her eyebrows. "You sound like Archie when you say that."

Harry and Archie exchanged a grin. "We're pretty good at being one another-"

"She's hopelessly obsessed with me," Archie drawled.

Harry shoved him. "Thanks for putting up with this one for four years. I really needed a break, and you're probably the only reason he hasn't been expelled yet-or have you?"

Archie shrugged. "I sent the administration a long apology and an application letter for fifth year. They haven't replied yet."

Hermione grimaced. "I hope they give you another chance."

"I'll have to blow them away on the entrance exams."

Harry suspected it would more likely come down to Sirius making a sizable donation, but didn't say so when Hermione was already offering to help Archie study.

"You have enough projects, don't you?" Archie ticked them off his fingers. "The clinic, the Fade..."

Harry's breath caught. Somehow, in the midst of everything, she'd forgotten entirely. How many people was she going to let down before she got it all straightened out? "That's right," she forced out, casual as anything. "Archie mentioned you'd made a breakthrough."

"Well, sort of, but with Rigel gone..." Hermione shook her head. "He was going to look deeper into the mechanics of the core, and I was really leaning on him as a sounding board."

Harry dearly wanted to offer, but it would be massively suspicious.

Archie was reassuring. "I'm sure you don't need Rigel. You've made great strides on your own already."

"But it helps to have someone who understands the esoteric parts of magic."

"You should ask my mum." It was inspired. Lily was working to re-create the Dark Detection Disk, but she always had time for a good cause. "She's a genius, like you," Harry started to explain.

Hermione's eyes were wide. "I *couldn't* . She's the most famous contemporary researcher in applied magics. She must be swamped with offers."

"She'll make time for this." Harry was certain of it. Lily had friends who had lost children to the Fade. "She's not with a laboratory or company right now, so it wouldn't be a sponsored internship or anything, but I'm sure she'd look it over and offer her perspective."

"I'd be grateful," Hermione said faintly. "If you think it's sophisticated enough, I mean. I haven't written anything formal regarding the preliminary findings..."

"It's groundbreaking, which is just what Aunt Lily likes," Archie said. "I feel stupid not thinking of it before."

Harry silently promised herself that 'Rigel' would put at much free time as he could into the problem and mail Hermione his findings. Some things were too important to be relegated to 'before the ruse' and left there.

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His Lord may have given up on him ever finding the imposter, but Regulus would not quit until every avenue was exhausted. The boy wasn't a ghost, for Salazar's sake. He was well-connected. Cunning. Probably hiding right under their noses.

Most people were not aware that Lord Riddle had commissioned the mirrors to record as well as transmit the champions' experiences. The material was intended to be spliced and trotted out as an advertisement and propaganda tool-after the boy won, of course. Now it sat dormant in the remaining 8 mirrors, waiting for the right runes to call it out.

Regulus watched the recordings dozens of times, analyzing the imposter's every move. At first, it only rankled. The boy was a bloody marvel. Magic to splash about like he was a living ley line and *tenacity*. Grit. That Regulus had once taken the boy's strength as a sign of their family's power now galled him. What wishful thinking. If Rigel was harder and more determined than the scions of old, it was because life had forced him to be. And because his generation had spoiled their children to ruin.

And yet, he *must* be a scion of old. The Parseltongue was unmistakable. A halfblood he may be, but not some random mutt from the continent, no. Rigel was the fruit of a branch pruned from an ancient family tree, and recently, if he knew the old ways convincingly enough to pull this off.

He thought the third task was the key. The dueling tournament. Regulus had studied dozens of styles growing up. He knew the signature moves of all the renowned duelists in the last century. If Rigel came by his skills honestly, he should have been able to determine their origin. And there was something familiar about his movements. A flicker of something in between all the camouflage.

And Rigel *was* a chameleon on the dueling stage. He matched his opponents' styles, transforming over the course of each match so that he almost seemed to be a different person each time. With Shang, he met and paid elemental magic in kind. He surged in aggression when Krum's offensive demanded it and mustered a seamless defense for Antiope, not blinking at the added challenge of balancing wand work with physical defense. None of the old families practiced swordplay, but it had clearly not been the first time he'd faced a blade.

There were places in Great Britain free-dueling simmered below the law's notice, but they were few. Regulus had warded tournaments for them all.

Rigel's duel with Antiope was too controlled to be of much use to him. The boy didn't really let loose until he faced Owens in the final

bout. Regulus had no sympathy for the obnoxious American wizard, but he didn't watch him get bucked across the stage by the stage itself a dozen times just for the amusement. He had to be certain the spell he saw next was what he thought it was.

The Lightning Jaw.

Coupled with the way Rigel physically accelerated a spell from his own wand-and wouldn't he be trying *that* little trick at his next club practice?-Regulus was almost certain his teacher could only be one person.

Lionel Hurst. The boy-king of the Lower Alleys.

He hadn't the time to watch most of the matches during the summer tournament; there had been a World Cup that also required his attention. He had made a point of watching Hurst's bouts, however. The boy was nobody, but he had a lot of friends in low places. It never hurt to keep such a one on his periphery.

The Lightning Jaw was one of his signatures, and he was certain he'd seen the boy banish his knife into an opponent's extremity in just the same way Rigel had banished that spell.

The terms of his contract from the previous summer forbid him from revealing Hurst's identity as the shadow king or mentioning his involvement with the Lower Alleys or the freedueling tournaments that took place there. He could not involve his Lord with this lead, but he could question the boy himself. Find out how many he'd taught.

There was a connection there... and hadn't Hurst himself been at the final task with his band of mumpers? He might even have smuggled the boy out in one of the caravans. Aurors never looked too closely at the denizens of *that* world. The idea that Rigel Black-or whoever had been impersonating him-would have connections to them was unthinkable.

It was precisely this lack of thinking that Regulus had to work against. Too long had they underestimated the boy. They could no longer assume anything above or beneath him. He would find the boy-king in his pretend palace and see just whom he'd been bestowing his favors on.

Regulus was turned back halfway down Knockturn Alley. He'd known the covens were fighting-had reported it himself-but to see the aftermath... the fire had scarred a whole swath of the Cesspool, cutting Knockturn in two. Ministry wards shimmered a warning. None of it would be fixed until the fire doublers finished their investigation.

He ducked down a side alley and wove his way in a series of switchbacks toward the Dancing Phoenix. A dead-end almost stymied him, but a breeze shifted a faded red cloth just enough to reveal a narrow passageway behind it. Regulus had to turn sideways to duck through it, but he came out in a wider space that was almost a courtyard, except that the buildings on either side were little more than crumbling rubble.

The cobblestones had all been dug up, exposing the soil underneath, and in every available patch, there were flowers. Flowers of every color and size, flowers straining up toward the sun and flowers stubbornly digging roots in this place nothing respectable should consider growing.

A girl tended to a patch of hearty dahlias. She hummed an off-color shanty as she watered them-but, no. Regulus took a step closer, unable to quite believe what he was seeing. The girl had no watering can. Not even a wand. She just *gestured* to the air and. It. Rained.

Nothing dramatic. No thunderclouds rumbling overhead or lightning splitting the sky. Just rain materializing from a dense section of air at the girl's fingertips.

"You-"

The girl spun and the raincloud dissipated as though it had never been. She eyed him warily, relaxing ever-so-slightly as her gaze took in his manner of dress. Was she relieved that he didn't appear to be a vagabond? Or just confident she could handle a lost tourist?

"'lo, ser. You come fer a flower?" The girl flashed a practiced smile even as he winced at her accent. "I'll cut any what suits yer fancy."

"Who are your parents?" he asked. He hadn't seen a weather mage since the Stormunger twins died trying to bottle a hurricane.

The girl didn't blink. "Have none."

"What family do you claim, then?" Regulus tried to bury his frustration but it wasn't easy. The weather gift had all but died from the old lines and this girl was using it to *water her gutter flowers*.

"None that you'd understand." The girl's chin lifted and she gave him a suspicious look. "Why? I don't need orphan services." She'd dropped the accent completely.

"I don't provide them." He sneered. "Your weather magic: who taught you?"

"Are you asking if I'm enrolled in the Ministry-mandated minimum schooling?"

"No." Regulus had to suppress a scoff at that. "It's a rare gift, understand? One I thought had died out." He took a step toward her but paused when she slipped into a defensive crouch. "Is there another who taught you?" She just stared at him, stubborn as her flowers. He pursed his lips. "Sure you don't know your family name?" The girl shrugged. He suspected she was being deliberately obtuse.

What was the world coming to? A child with the weather manipulation gift here, of all places. Regulus already had a mission that day, but he couldn't very well just leave her there...

The girl straightened from her crouch, eyes going wide. They latched onto something over Regulus' shoulder and he spun even as his magical awareness flared out to find the threat.

There was nothing.

He turned back around; she was gone. Only damp flowers remained to dispute the idea that he might have imagined her entirely.

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Harry surveyed the damage, Kasten at her side. Twilight did nothing to soften the fire's toll, but the vampire seemed ambivalent to the destruction.

"It should have been much worse." Kasten's deep hood swung around to face her. "The Ministry does not normally respond so swiftly."

"Looks bad enough." Harry toed the charred remains of... something.

"This battle will be remembered for some time. Perhaps long enough to deter the next nest of fools."

"Will your coven be at peace, now?"

Kasten was silent for a long moment. She wondered if he felt as helpless as she did, staring at the wreckage of a battle he hadn't fought. Finally, he said, "For a time."

He turned away from the hollowed-out crypt, footsteps trailing silently through the ash. Harry kept pace beside him to the mouth of the alley. It was a relief to leave the smell of scorch behind.

"The Carpathians had allies," Kasten told her quietly. "I do not interact with wizards, present company excluded, but in my time, they did not often think of such relationships as... reciprocal."

"You want to know if their allies are now your enemies," Harry guessed. She shook her head. "The wizards they allied with are the very worst sort. To honor an agreement with another magical race beyond the grave? Unlikely."

She would never forget how the basilisk thrashed on the heels of its master's order. *Bite yourself*. The trembling confusion in its voice. The way the construct had *sneered* at it. No, the mad parcel of magic wrapped in Riddle's childhood mantle would never respect another being enough to seek revenge for them. Voldemort only knew how to use people.

"How is Gavril?" she asked.

"Nearly recovered, thanks to your brew."

She had hoped as much, based on the potion's properties, but it was good to have it confirmed.

"I would invite you to visit him, but I fear what Irina will do," Kasten admitted.

Harry frowned. "Is she angry with me?"

"Just the opposite." A smirk crept into Kasten's voice. "Given the chance, she may pledge to your service for the next century." Her feet stumbled over air and Kasten caught her with two fingers under her elbow. "Careful, mortal. Danger abounds."

"My face encounters the dirt often enough that I no longer fear it," Harry said wryly.

"Your lack of fear is entirely the problem," Kasten mused. His hand hovered awkwardly close to her elbow for a moment, as though it

didn't know what to do once she had recovered her footing.

Leo melted from the shadows as they passed the Serpent's Storeroom and Harry felt her mood lift as though a wind had stoked the sails of her soul.

Kasten nodded politely and thanked Leo for his continued support while Harry looked her friend over for injuries. He seemed no worse for wear.

"Satisfied I've all my pieces?" Leo shot her a sideways glance as Kasten took his leave.

"Who says you started with a full set?"

Leo put a hand to his heart. "My poor old ma would grieve to hear it."

"She'd be more annoyed to hear you call her poor and old."

"Ah, but you wouldn't tell her, lass." Leo nudged her off the main path and into a half-alley draped with wisteria. He leaned close to say, "I know how good you are at keeping secrets."

Harry's breath caught in her throat. This was it. The moment he asked her for... everything. The answers to all his questions. The truth behind every lie.

Leo looked about them warily and stepped even closer, the front of his loose shirt brushing her arm in a way that was too slow and too sudden all at once. She ignored the shiver that wanted to chase goosebumps down her arm and said, "I don't want to keep secrets from you."

At the same time, he murmured, "Someone unexpected asked me about Rigel Black today."

Her eyes darted up to catch his and they stared at one another. His lips parted in surprise and he started to say, "Hang on. Say that a-

She cut him off sharply. " *Who* asked you about Rigel?"

Leo swallowed hard and shook his head forcefully. "His uncle," he said lowly. The words dropped like dollops into her ears alone. She wondered abruptly how they must look to passersby, a pair of teenagers ensconced in the shadow of a crumbling, vine-twisted alley wall. Trying to imagine the situation from the outside was somehow easier than being inside it. Simpler. Because he couldn't have said-

"Regulus? Why would he ask *you* about...?"

But she knew why. Guessed it before Leo gave a guilty grimace and admitted, "He recognized Rigel's dueling style. Asked if I'd taken on a student."

"What did you say?" she murmured the question on numb lips.

Leo tilted his head. "Told him I taught a bunch of people, even ran a class in the alleys." A player's smile drifted at the corner of his mouth. "Can't expect me to remember all my students."

Harry nodded, turning the explanation over in her mind. "Let him think it's a common style in the alleys-still, it places Rigel *here*, which is dangerous."

"I told him I took anyone who came around, local or no. Maybe I have dozens of pupils running around the Wizarding World."

"Running amok, maybe." Harry couldn't help but snort. "Imagining you teaching an entire army of free-duelers is actually a bit frightening."

"Thank you."

They exchanged an amused smile, but it died as the anxiety swept back in on the next wave of reality. "How should we handle him?"

Leo looked up at the wisteria as though it held the answer. "Bit high profile to disappear."

Harry bit her lip. "What are the chances he'll find the tie to me?"

"If he asks the right questions, he can find out you were in the tournament last summer. Too many folk know you, though they wouldn't give you up if he came on threatening, mind."

If he was nice, though-if somehow the proud pureblood scraped together enough human emotion to come across as admiring, even-people might not think to keep her participation a secret.

Harry took a slow breath, trying not to notice and catalogue Leo's scent as she let it go again. "If he does, I can cop to training Rigel for the tournament. Hopefully, he'll call it a dead end and look elsewhere."

Leo nodded. "We'll keep eyes out for him if he turns up again. Margo's got his make; she's protective of you."

"Tell her to be careful. Regulus might look like purebred Kneazle, but the Blacks don't raise housecats. He's dangerous."

"There you go again, worrying about everyone but yourself."

Leo took her arm, and they strolled the alleys as though they had nowhere to go and no cares to come back to, as though the evening was all that existed and it had been unfurled just for them.

"You haven't asked." Harry dared a glance at Leo's unruffled expression.

"You haven't offered," he corrected her.

"I want to," she confessed. "I think about it all the time: how to tell you. I just don't know where to start."

"I'll be around until you figure it out, and for a long time after," Leo promised.

She didn't think anyone could make such a promise. You could promise today, but never tomorrow. Tomorrow wasn't guaranteed. Perversely, it made her not want to tell Leo anything. Let him exist forever in the first half of his promise. Let them stand always atop the lies, and never find out if the truth could carry the weight of what lay between them.

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When Addy met Archie-the-fox, it was love at first pet. She cooed like a drunk pigeon and burrowed her face so far into his soft fur, it was a wonder she didn't have whiskers when she came up for air.

Archie bore it patiently, until the first tug on his tail. With a yelp that brought James' wand up involuntarily, Archie phased back to his human form in an instant. Addy kicked her feet into the sides of Archie's stomach and proclaimed proudly from the small of his back, "Ah-choo!"

Archie twisted his head around to give the child an unimpressed stare. She smacked him on the head-rare praise from the discerning goddler. "That's mean, Addy."

" *Me* Addy," the girl agreed solemnly.

"Well, I tried to warn you." Archie drew himself up onto all fours slowly enough that Addy was able to hang on with her fists in his sweater. "Unfortunately, mean little girls get-pony rides!" He shot off at an all-fours trot, circling the coffee table twice and sending Addy into shrieks and giggles that might have shattered glass, had all the glass in the house not been spelled shatter-proof.

Harry tucked her feet underneath her on the couch and slid her tea away from the edge of the end table. Lily poked her head in from the kitchen but retreated when it became clear Addy was having a grand time being riled into incoherence.

"She just ate," Remus reminded Archie mildly.

"So? She's a cub of clan Potter-Black!" Archie reared up on his knees and pawed the air like a lion rampant. "She's the steely nerve and iron stomach of a..." Addy's giggles became a gurgle, then an ominous sort of hiccup as Archie froze. With the grace of a panther, James swooped in and plucked Addy from her cousin's back just as Remus caught the projectile spit-up midair with his wand.

The sick promptly vanished into non-being, and not for the first time, Harry hoped nothing sentient lived there, after all.

Addy groaned unhappily and James took her to his shoulder, making slow circles on her back. "There, there, lion tamer. The world's not ready for you yet, is it?"

Sirius and Lily came into the living room with trays of after-dinner sweets, and Addy reached for a pink pasty as they passed. Sirius swung the tray out of her reach with a chuckle.

"Ambitious little tike. Got her father's eye for beauty." Sirius deposited the assortment with a flourish. They did look lovely enough to tempt.

"And her mother's temper," James grunted under the sound of Addy wailing a gusty protest in his ear.

For revenge, Lily pretended not to notice her husband trying to hand the crying toddler off to her. She sat next to Harry on the couch and bit into a tiny chocolate cake with an exaggerated moan of delight.

Remus reached around James' predicament to snag himself a pair of truffles. James shot them all a betrayed expression and Harry

couldn't help but snort.

Her father's eyes lit on her with terrible anticipation and Harry tried to run but was too slow to get her feet untangled. James thrust Addy at her like a hot potato, and Harry sat at once to keep the flailing toddler contained to her lap. Addy transformed into some kind of tiny hydra with a dozen limbs, writhing and lurching toward the sweet trays in a way that said she *knew* she wanted the treats more than Harry wanted to hold her.

Lily took pity on Harry only after her own cake had been judiciously devoured. "Come here, you octopus." She turned Addy upside down and held her by one foot over the sweet tray. "You want one?"

Addy swung for the pink pasty with a hiccupping grunt. Lily dipped her just low enough to catch one, then folded her into her arms and blew a raspberry into the girl's exposed belly. Addy squealed with indignation, but her noises turned to delight when she remembered she had the pasty safely in hand.

"I thought you said not to give her sweets before bed," James protested.

Addy bit into the pasty with abandon, shedding pink sprinkles down her front, and Lily chuckled. "That one's sugar free. She can't resist the sprinkles."

"We figured out why Addy likes Aunt Lily best," Archie said absently. His eyes were trained on the array of dessert, his fingers poised indecisively as he dithered.

"Better up your bribing game," Sirius advised James with a solemn nod. "Don't wait till the next birthday-keep the rewards small but consistent."

"She's not a dog." Remus gave Sirius a chiding look.

"You sure about that?" Sirius held his tart near Addy's cheek and she snapped her tiny teeth at it without further provocation.

"Speaking of birthdays," Archie cut in quickly. He had noticed Lily's narrow-eyed expression before Sirius. "We never celebrated yours, Dad."

Sirius pursed his lips. "That's true. I suppose we were all a bit preoccupied by the multiple felonies you committed." Sirius almost seemed to enjoy bringing up the ruse, lately. He acted as though it was part of the family mythos: Marauder lore.

"And was acquitted for," Archie reminded him.

"And were *pardoned* for after your Daddy paid a very hefty fine that will be coming out of your inheritance." Sirius' smile was wolf-sharp.

Archie grinned back just as fearlessly. "Still, though. It's not every day you turn, what, seventy-eight?"

"Seventy-you better run, you little rodent!" Archie and Sirius transformed within moments of each other, and the sight of the jet-black dog chasing the burnished orange fox across the living room would be a common one from then on, Harry realized with a pang.

She hadn't attempted her animagus form in earnest since that night. She had not completely lost the urge to fly away, but it was not at all clear where she could fly away to. She was already home.

Sirius and Archie collapsed in an exhausted heap, hair standing on end like they'd sprinted through a wind tunnel. Remus flipped them each a truffle and James let out a laugh so unrestrained it was like the past couple of months had never happened. Addy brayed for attention that Lily bestowed as easily as breathing, and Harry soaked it all in. This was the life she was always meant to come back to.

All the time at Hogwarts, Draco and Pansy, the Weasleys and Binny... it was like a far-off dream. This was real. It was enough. All

she had to do was accept it.

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As always, brewing bridged the gap between the days and weeks. She was brewing for Krait, brewing for the clinic, and brewing for her own experimental research. In between, she tried to be present for her family. She stayed at meals longer, made herself available to watch Addy on the weekends, lingered in the living room until her parents went to bed-anything to remind them that she was there and show them she still cared enough to be a good daughter.

The extra family time meant when she got around to delivering her potions, there were always several crates. Remus was her willing helper, and Harry let him accompany her when she had too much to carry on her own.

They dropped a load at Krait's and continued toward Maywell one sunny weekday afternoon. Remus knew the way without prompting, and she wondered how much time he spent in the alleys since he'd taken up tutoring. Leo was supposed to be limiting his contact to the kids alone as much as possible, but he lifted a hand to Old Tom as they passed the Phoenix and Harry worried. The occasional potions run and tutoring session was one thing; Remus becoming comfortable with her London friends was another.

Harry held the door while Remus shouldered the crates into the clinic.

"Harry, just in time!" Janice made space on the counter for the potions and smiled at the full crates. "Such a bounty, and us on our last Skele-GRO."

Remus shot Harry a look and she held up her hands. "I've told them not to call it that."

Janice rolled her eyes. "Yes, yes, the legally-distinct-because-of-some-esoteric-recipe-change-Skele-GRO-copycat-potion."

"You can just call it bone-grower or something," Harry muttered.

"How about Potter's Probably Prohibited Potion?" Remus suggested dryly.

Harry threw up her hands. "The royalties are most of the price for Skele-GRO! They're just asking someone to make a knock-off." She blew out a breath and added, "Anyway, it was a Potter who invented the base potion for it. We should sue *them* ."

Remus just shook his head on a smile as Mrs. Hurst came out of the back room with Hermione and Merriam.

Hermione gave Harry a wide smile. "Do you do anything besides brew, Harry?"

"Not if I can help it," Harry admitted. "How's the internship going?"

"She's a dream," Mrs. Hurst proclaimed. "If you keep bringing me such talented and hardworking people, Harry, I'm going to make you head of the clinic's human resource department."

Merriam and Hermione both flushed at the blatant praise.

"Harry has good taste in people," Remus said.

"If you do say so yourself, Master Remus." Mrs. Hurst chuckled.

"You remember my uncle from the tournament?" Harry didn't particularly like that.

"We met again more recently; one of my students suffered a minor burn when we were learning defensive charms," Remus said sheepishly. "Healer Hurst patched her right up."

"So now I know all the adults in your life," Mrs. Hurst said tartly, "And I completely understand where you get it."

"Get what?" Harry and Remus exchanged an innocent look.

"The same thing my Leo's got," she said flatly.

Merriam inclined her head gravely as the clinic's door opened to let in the summer air. "I've a boy with an equal affliction. Incurable, he is."

"Did you plan that remark with Mordred's own timing?"

Harry turned. She knew that drawl. Merriam's eyes lit with a steely fondness.

"You don't look injured, Marcus, so you must be here to annoy me," she said with a sniff.

"Is that any way to greet your only son?" Flint lifted a lip in an unattractive sneer, but there was no ice in it. "I have good news."

"You finally got a real job?" Merriam's hawk-eyed stare could have given Mrs. Weasley a run for her money. Mrs. Hurst drew Hermione into a discussion on linen supplies and Janice pretended to have papers that needed a sudden filing.

Flint narrowed his eyes right back at his mother. "I'm supporting myself; what more do you want?"

"I want you to look in the mirror and see a wizard you respect-"

Harry and Remus each took an unobtrusive step towards the door.

Flint's head whipped around to pin Harry in place. "Professor. Potter. What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same thing." He was the one who had been so insistent that no one know where his mother was hidden.

Flint rolled his shoulders unconcernedly. "Haven't you heard? We're free, now."

Harry's eyes widened. She *hadn't* heard about Flint Sr.'s passing, but in all the drama, she might well have missed it. "I'm sorry for your loss." The words were automatic, and undeniably hollow.

Flint barked a laugh. "He's not dead, mores the pity."

Merriam's expression was hard, but her eyes were bright. "Marcus challenged him in the Flint tradition-single combat, no seconds."

"You're looking at the new Lord Flint." Flint flashed his disarming smile and Harry raised her eyebrows.

"I'm sorry for your line, then," she said. The droll humor disguised her complete shock at his proclamation. He'd *dueled* his father for the family headship? And won? She knew Flint was a dab hand with his wand, but he'd never indicated that was even an option.

Flint laughed again, and it wasn't even caustic. She had never seen him look so... unburdened. Remus glanced between the older boy and Harry with polite confusion. "How do you know one another?"

Harry shrugged. "Rigel introduced us, but really he's Archie's friend."

"Archie's friend?" Remus was, if anything, more confused.

"Childhood acquaintance," Flint corrected her. "Haven't seen him in years, obviously. What with him not being at Hogwarts... ever. I apparently know *you* better than him, professor."

"You don't seem as troubled by it as others," Remus noted carefully.

Flint gave a nasty smile that went straight to Harry's gut. "But it all makes so much *sense* now. Archie was a Chaser. I never understood why he took the Beater slot on our House team."

"Quidditch doesn't explain everything." Harry tried to keep her tone light, but she was remembering just how much Flint enjoyed nettling people.

"Quidditch is a microcosm of the world," Flint said. "It reveals a person's character. The Archie I knew was bold, rambunctious, and direct. Rigel was none of those things. He was careful, calculating, and patient: a Beater through and through."

She watched the words land squarely on Remus' conscience. Harry could almost hear his self-recriminating thoughts, wondering how Marcus Flint had noticed what he never had.

To pull focus, she scoffed, "The Weasley twins are Beaters, too, and that doesn't describe them at all."

"The Weasleys are comets in human form, not traditional examples of Beater craft," Flint drawled.

"I take it you won't be recruiting them for your team?" Remus smiled weakly.

"How *did* you find a team that enjoyed being belittled enough to hire you, anyway?" Harry added, annoyed into nettling him back.

Flint stared at her, and too late, she realized it was the sort of thing Rigel might say. She kept her expression relaxed and expectant, and he seemed to let it go. "I work for a few different teams, and they only see me in small doses." At her frown, he explained, "The scouting thing is only part time. I have several different revenue streams at the moment."

"Sounds shady," Harry told him.

"It is," his mother said with a disapproving sniff.

"Like I care how it sounds."

"You were one of my brightest students, Marcus," Remus said mildly. "I hope you aren't letting that sharp mind go to waste."

A shark lurked in Flint's grin. "On the contrary. I solve problems no one else can solve."

Harry narrowed her eyes. "And what sort of people do you solve problems for?"

"The sort that can pay for it," Flint said frankly.

"The very worst sort, then," Harry muttered.

Flint's eyebrows rose. "Says the heiress."

Remus snorted and Harry shot him a betrayed look. "He's got you there, Harry. Your house is rather glass in that respect."

"And I know better than anyone where its cracks are," Harry said quietly.

Remus fell silent at that, but Flint stepped over to the counter and plucked one of the potions from its crate. "Is that why you're brewing Skele-GRO knock-offs in your free time, Miss Potter? Little rich girl guilt? Or do you get a cut of the community's tithe money?"

Harry scowled at him, but it was Merriam who spoke sharply. "Keep talking, Marcus, and prove how little you understand this *community* ."

"Harry donates a number of potions to the clinic," Hermione added from the other side of the room. Marcus sneered at her, and Hermione's expression grew, if anything, fiercer. "And it's a sight more than most bother to do at all."

"Yeah, you're a real goodie-two-shoes." Flint put the potion back and circled Harry as though he was scenting for blood. "Suppose that's why you let Archie hare off to America in your name, isn't it? Selfless Harry Potter, letting everyone else live out their dreams."

"I actually think I got the better deal," she said, chest tight but voice light. "Archie and Rigel had their traditional, inch deep, mile wide education, and I got to do the only thing I've ever wanted to do, every day, all the time." For a moment, she let herself imagine it was true. She let the confidence bloom in her stomach, swelled with it and let Flint see it for the perfectly grounded competence it was. "I'm good enough to do something useful in this world because I was giving my all to this *one* thing while you were idling on the Quidditch pitch, by all accounts squandering the opportunity for an education Rigel quite literally risked his *life* for."

Flint only smiled. "Everyone has things they take for granted. Even Merlin-touched Rigel learned that in the end; pity how he left things with his friends, isn't it?"

"It wasn't his first choice," Harry ground out.

" *Everything's* a choice, Potter. Even the things you don't do."

She stared at him, infuriated beyond words and not entirely sure if it was because of what he said or because of what she imagined he was saying. He couldn't know that *she* was Rigel, but his words found their mark anyway.

"That's enough, Marcus." Merriam stood between her and Flint, her chin high. "This girl gave me a roof and a respectable position when you couldn't. You'll not bully her here."

Flint bowed his head mockingly. "Some other time, then." He left, and all Harry could think was that he really did know too much.

One more thing to keep her up at night.

Merriam put her hand on Harry's shoulder and squeezed. "I can never repay you for making space in your little apartment for me all those months."

The fear shifted from Marcus to his mother, clear and bright. She knew that Harry hadn't been living in the apartment and knew she'd lied about it, too.

Remus made a joke to the effect of being glad Harry had some adult presence in her life while she was living in the alleys and Merriam smiled self-deprecatingly. There was a roaring in her ears that drowned out the response, but she heard when Merriam added with another squeeze of her hand, "I'll never forget your niece's kindness."

Harry patted Merriam's hand with a sickly smile, then ducked her head embarrassedly as it dropped away. She was as good as promising not to tell anyone, and yet-the beast of stress landed on wings of dread in her stomach. She wanted to trust Merriam. Wanted to think that reciprocity and gratitude would hold her tongue. She worried still. A person's word didn't feel like enough to keep her safe.

She wondered if she would ever sleep again.

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They were almost to the Leaky when they saw it. A great, rune-encrusted mirror with Riddle's great, smug-encrusted smile in it. Remus and Harry slowed as one, struck into stillness by the shock and confusion winnowing through them.

For a moment, she wondered crazily if Riddle had kept the mirrors as his own personal pulpit. Was he going to use them any time he wanted to remind the world what a self-promoting political sleaze he was?

A crowd had already gathered, and they joined it in time to hear Riddle's magnified voice say, "-despite our *spring surprise*, we feel

the True Triwizard Tournament has yet to be brought to a satisfying conclusion."

She'd almost forgotten how much she hated the sound of his voice.

"What's all this?" Remus asked a woman in twill patterned robes of purple and white.

"His lordship has some new announcement about the tourney," the woman said.

"Not sure he remembers he's only got two champions left," joked the man on the other side of her.

They both chortled, but Harry felt a shiver of unease down her spine. In no world had Riddle forgotten what Rigel Black had done. The farce he'd made of Riddle's entire tournament and political agenda.

"-in my purview as tournament chair, I have an important announcement."

The crowd held its breath and its comments long enough to hear what Riddle said next.

"There is still one task required of our champions: the crowning ceremony."

Talk burst from all around her, like birds taking flight.

"Crowning? He can't be serious."

"But the boy who won is *gone*, mate."

"He's on the lam, that one!"

"Maybe he means to crown the runner-up."

"That French girl?"

Harry didn't realize her breath had stopped coming until Remus took her arm and dragged her out of the crush. She heaved in oxygen and blinked against the spots in her vision. *This must be a nightmare*, she thought, over and over. It surely wasn't happening, wasn't-

The concern in Remus' face as he bent to look into her wide eyes was real. She steadied her breathing with willpower and a little help from Dom. "Are you okay, Harry? You shut down out there."

She nodded, unconvincingly at first, but with increasing certainty. She was fine. She was safe.

And this was real life.

There is still one task required of our champions. Required of them. He *had* to say it just like that. Anger came on the heels of panic. He was trying to invoke the Vow, trying to steal her victory-or at least give it a second edge.

"You're sure?" Remus's voice was soft, but the look in his eyes was sharply assessing.

"Sure." Harry fixed her features into a scowl. "Sorry. I just saw red for a second."

"That was anger?" Her uncle's eyebrows rose.

"It was *fury* ." Harry did not pull the punch from her tone. "I despise that man. For what he's done to the wizarding world, but mostly for what he's done to Rigel. Why can't he just leave him alone?"

Remus wrinkled his nose. "It is a bit desperate. Not at all Riddle's usual style. Perhaps the Ministry put him up to it to try and draw Rigel out into the open."

It would be as ham-handed as the government's usual approach to things, were it not for one thing. "You're forgetting the Unbreakable

Vow," she said quietly. Remus stiffened. "The wording-did you catch it?"

"He called the crowning ceremony a *task*," Remus realized aloud. "But-can he do that?"

"I don't know." She tried to imagine not dancing to Riddle's tune, pictured *not going* to the ceremony with all her might and-nothing. Her veins didn't heat. But she was not certain she had framed the hypothetical situation with enough belief to trigger it. If there was even a Vow left to trigger. With a growl, she stalked toward the Leaky. "We have to talk to Archie. Then we have to find a way to warn Rigel."

Remus glanced back at the mirror with a frown. "It's on a loop," he said. Harry paused long enough to confirm it-Riddle was repeating himself, the same exact smile on his giant, flat face. Harry had never wanted to break a magical object more. "And if there are other mirrors around the world with the same message, Rigel will hear about it soon enough."

Harry blew out a breath. He was right. There was no need to pretend to send a letter of warning to Rigel. Everyone would know about Riddle's little announcement. "Merlin forbid he let the papers report it like a decent, non-self-aggrandizing megalomaniac," she muttered.

They hurried toward the Floo, and with each step, Harry felt the anxiety that had haunted her over the last few weeks settle into place, like fat re-solidifying as it was taken off the burner. The strangest thing was that it wasn't a particularly *bad* feeling. There was a little relief in it; somehow, she was on solid footing again.

Because the world caving in on her was a *familiar* feeling. She understood it. She could rise to meet it. And maybe there was a part of her that had been waiting, all this time, for the other shoe to drop.

Somehow, she'd known it wasn't over.

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It was Archie who set up the meeting. He wasn't happy about it, but he couldn't think of a better alternative. They needed to know whether the Unbreakable Vow still applied, but the number of people they could consult on the matter were few.

Archie's carefully worded letter merited a swift, succinct reply: *on Wednesday evenings, I am known to visit my brother's establishment in Hogsmeade village. I often linger over a hot toddy, and I always appreciate company.*

If Dumbledore didn't know the answer, no wizard would. The only question was: whose face did she wear to the meeting?

Archie wanted to go as Rigel. He could look like anyone, and change disguises in an instant if need be. Archie didn't know Dumbledore, though, and his Occlumency wasn't that good. He would never be able to deceive the venerable wizard into thinking he was Rigel, and if he went as himself on Rigel's behalf, it was as good as admitting to being in regular contact with the fugitive. Bad enough the letter, which hadn't mentioned Rigel, could be traced back to him if Dumbledore bothered.

Harry was determined to go, but wearing Archie's face would be suspicious if anyone saw them. What would a teenager who wasn't the headmaster's student be doing at a bar with him? Plus, it implied Rigel had enough access to Archie's person to obtain a hair for Polyjuice. Going as herself and trying to play it off as a disguise was as bad as handing Dumbledore a roadmap of the entire ruse, and using anyone else's face would connect them to Rigel, too.

The best solution was still the blended-hair-based Modified Polyjuice, which even the Aurors hadn't quite figured out the details of yet. If she layered an illusion on top of it, she could keep anyone

but Dumbledore from seeing through it. Disguise in depth, she would call it. The only downside was getting rid of the Modified Polyjuice afterwards.

Archie manfully sacrificed a handful of hairs, all but one of which she set aside for a future necessity that seemed more and more likely to manifest. Harry filed a matching set of her own hairs beside them. She could have made Rigel look like anyone, she supposed, but it felt appropriate for him to retain a blend of her and Archie's features. He would be familiar to Dumbledore, perhaps enough to kindle the Headmaster's fondness. Assuming he had any left after Rigel tore down the Founders' wards and led Aurors on a midnight chase through his school.

The first Wednesday passed, and she did not go. The blended hairs were burning a hole in her trunk, but she wanted to do more research on the Thief's Downfall before she attempted the ruse again. She thought there had to be a copy-cat recipe out there, but a dip into the archives at the Potions Guild brought up nothing but warnings. Whoever the goblins commissioned to create the brew took his non-disclosure agreement very seriously. Or possibly they had killed him.

She understood where the goblins were coming from, keeping the recipe secret. If the details for their disguise defeating potion got out, someone might find a way to counter it. She wasn't trying to out-manuever it, though; she just wanted to use it for herself. She didn't feel too guilty, therefore, when she took a trip to the deep family vault and opened her small handbag surreptitiously just before the glamour charm she'd found in the back of Witch Weekly triggered the Thief's Downfall.

The goblin was sneeringly disappointed not to have caught an imposter, and Harry's flustered embarrassment over her beauty charm disguised the way she sealed the oil-lined handbag before any of the captured potion could spill out or become contaminated.

The second Wednesday passed, and there were only two weeks to Riddle's so-called crowning ceremony, but she was so close to cracking the recipe. She bought a mokeskin-lined trunk that cost more than she made from Krait in a month, and only then did she feel safe writing down her suppositions about the potion. Her notes went into the trunk, along with the blended hairs that would make Rigel's disguise possible, and no one, not even Archie, guessed what she was working on in the basement ten or twelve hours at a time.

Figuring out the ingredients was the hardest part. Some were obvious-the wiggentree sap she identified by smell alone. The boomslang skin hadn't even been fully incorporated; bits of it speckled, suspended in the liquid. After neutralizing a sample in dittany, she was able to detect erumpent fluid by taste. The color could have a number of culprits, but after some trial and error she recreated it exactly with neem oil and dragon's blood, which only made sense in something designed to cancel out magical disguises of any kind. The neem oil would soften the effects of knotgrass while the dragon's blood broke down the magic of fluxweed. It was precisely what she would have started with, if she were designing the potion from scratch.

When all the obvious ingredients were catalogued, she used Kasten's centrifugal technique to separate the potion's components and tested each unknown for reactivity to various substances. The starthistle reacted to concentrated skyweed. The Clabbert pustules reacted to powdered unicorn horn, and she was stuck on the Valerian root until she realized it *didn't* react to demiguise hair-almost anything else would have.

Once she was certain she had the full list of ingredients, it was only a matter of figuring out what each of them was meant to be doing in the potion, and then re-creating a recipe that would allow them to do that.

The camphor basil had to be added near the end. Starthistle and wiggentree sap had to be added together. Boomslang skin needed a

long time over heat to release the magic in its densest scales, and so on. Logic told her most of it, and anything necessity didn't dictate, the original creator would have been able to massage. Plugging those gaps was like adding grammar to a sentence of nouns and verbs, when you already knew generally what the sentence was supposed to say.

All that remained was to test variations.

The first variant only worked on glamours. The second only worked on disguises grounded to objects. The third didn't work at all.

One rather terrifying variant stripped *all* ambient magic from an object, regardless of intent or type. It would vanish conjured objects, dismantle anything held together with magic, and she shuddered to think of it falling on a person who'd been recently Healed of an injury. Harry tucked that recipe deep into the makeskin trunk and hoped she never had cause to use it.

Finally, she found one that worked on Polyjuice but burned ever-so-slightly. When she tested it on herself, it left her skin red, as though she'd been out in the sun without protection for several hours. It wasn't perfect, but it was good enough that she couldn't put off her meeting with Dumbledore any longer.

The third Wednesday, her parents were going to be out of the house, and it was too good an opportunity to miss.

Lily bussed Addy on the cheek and Harry on the head, her eyes serious and guarded. Harry hated that she had made going over to their friend's house an exercise in trust for her parents. "We'll be back late, but try to make sure she goes to bed on time."

Archie looked up from the Healing periodical he had his nose in and joked, "Midnight, right? And she gets three cookies for putting on her pajamas, or five?"

Lily turned to Harry, who nodded reassuringly. "No cookies after bath time, and at eight-o'clock, we start bedtime stories."

"I know a great one about the lead singer of the Weird Sisters." Archie grinned.

"Tonight, we'll be working our way through *The Bubbling Cauldron, Part II*," Harry said primly.

"Aww, Addy doesn't want to hear about the boring bubble-bath cauldron," Archie wined. "She wants to hear about rock stars and motorcycles."

"I hope you burned whatever children's books Sirius read to Archie," Harry told her mother. "We don't want another one turning out like this."

Lily shook her head. "Pots and kettles, both of you."

James came into the living room with two bottles of wine. "Does Alice drink white or red? I can't recall."

"Because she drinks whiskey, Darling. Augusta will take the red."

"Well, I'm not bringing it for her."

"Say hi to the Longbottoms for us," Archie said.

"Is Remus going, too?" Harry asked, casually. She thought he was, but needed to be sure.

"He and Sirius will meet us there," Lily confirmed. "If you need us for anything, just Floo-call Longbottom Hill House."

"Don't come *through* the Floo, though," James added with a grimace. "Augusta hates having ash tracked into her parlor."

"I'm sure we'll be fine," Archie said confidently.

"Have fun," Harry added.

Her parents left, and Archie took Addy from her arms with a troubled look.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?"

She shook her head. "We've been over it, Arch. No amount of caution will help if the Vow kills me for not showing up at Riddle's ceremony. Anyway... I trust Dumbledore."

"I don't know Dumbledore, but it's not him I'm worried about." Archie bounced Addy absently on his hip as he paced the living room. "Just make sure nobody sees you and you're back before our folks get home."

"I'll try," was all she could promise.

She took the stairs to the basement two at a time. The Modified Polyjuice was ready, and time had not improved its taste. Harry conjured a mirror and stared at the face within.

It was both her and not-her any longer. Rigel was older, almost startlingly so. He had grown into Archie's cheekbones and Harry's large eyes. The combination made him look more mature than the sixteen their blended hairs should have made him, but he was still between them in height, his body a strange androgynous mix; Harry's shoulders to Archie's waist. The over-robe would hide that, at least.

She had all new clothes for this meeting, even down to her shoes. All of it was black, befitting the dangerous, mysterious character he must remain. Nothing Rigel wore from then on would be associated with Archie or Harry. He was a completely different person. No wand. No identity. Nothing in his pockets except the copy-cat Thief's Downfall, which she had renamed Disguise Dissolution in her head. Alliteration was always better.

The only problem was his hair. She fingered the long strands. Harry had let hers grow, to differentiate herself from Rigel as much as possible, and now that vanity made it harder to reassume his identity. With a resolute breath, she used one of the sharpest knives in her workroom to lop it off just below her ears. Freed of its own weight, it began to curl at the ends but otherwise kept itself out of the way. It would have to do.

She didn't stop to say goodbye to Archie. She didn't want Addy seeing her like this, and there was no time to lose. Her parents would not be out all night.

She wove an illusion of shadows, straight from the Dark Disguise Book, over her face and pulled the hood of her cloak up over her head for good measure. She felt like the cheesiest villain in a serial fiction rag, but that was what Rigel needed: shadows within shadows. Avoiding attention was not as important as avoiding recognition.

She picked a public Floo in Hogsmeade, though it was a longer walk than the one at the Three Broomsticks, and went straight through.

The sun had already set, and the village bustled with evening patrons. Music and light spilled from open windows, and summer's promising serenade wove gaiety through the throng. Rigel stalked the side streets like a common criminal, up to exactly as much good as she looked, face in shadow, gloved and cloaked like it wasn't warm as a hot chocolate outside.

For better or worse, the Hog's Head served exactly her kind of clientele, and she didn't stick out at all as she ducked through the open doorway and declined to remove her hood like any normal, mother-respecting individual might.

Dumbledore sat at the bar, exactly as he'd intimated all those weeks ago. Rather, it was accurate to say that *Albus* Dumbledore sat at the bar and a different Dumbledore-his younger brother, Aberforth-stood behind it. One looked significantly happier to be there.

The headmaster had a spiced drink in one hand and a muggle pencil in the other. He was playing a one-drum rhythm against a blank notebook with its eraser and did not appear to notice as Rigel slid into the seat beside him. Aberforth did notice, and speared her with a look that said he was not at all impressed by her intimidating get up.

"Come to brood or drink?" he asked gruffly.

"Just looking for some conversation." The voice spell on her throat was perfect, and she knew her professor recognized it by the way his pencil stilled.

"Conversation's free. This seat ain't. Buy something or get out."

The headmaster spoke up smoothly before she could admit sheepishly she hadn't thought to bring any gold with her. "I could do with a bit of conversation, myself. Abe, can we have the back room?"

Aberforth gave his brother a hard look. "One of yours, eh? Tell him to lay off the illusions; he looks like a fake Unspeakable."

"I rather like the shadows," Dumbledore said with an unruffled smile. "Reminds me of that All Hallows' Eve party, was it forty years ago? You had that dementor's cloak, Abe, with the smoke spell that wound up setting off Grismelda's fire detection arrays-"

Aberforth dropped a rusty key in his brother's drink. "Go. Now."

The headmaster fished the key from the glass with a flick of his finger and gave Rigel an embarrassed smile. "Aberforth is still deciding whether he really wants customers or not."

"It's double rate on that room tonight." Aberforth gave a sneer that could put Snape to shame. "Busy season, you know."

Albus slid a handful of silver across the counter and stood from his stool. Unbidden, his notebook and pencil slid themselves into his pocket. Rigel was a step behind him, avoiding the gazes of the other

patrons and only faltering as they approached a room so heavily warded it could give Gringotts itself a run for its money.

"Lot of wards for a dining room," she commented quietly.

"No anti-apparition wards, but anti-pretty-much-everything-else," Dumbledore agreed.

The idea that she could apparate if needed was a welcome one, but the reassurance made her wonder how often Dumbledore met with shady characters to know so well how to set them at ease.

The room was small and hardly furnished, but Dumbledore pulled out a chair for her and conjured a periwinkle teapot and two cups. He produced two bags of English black from his pocket and filled the pot with hot water from the tip of his wand. Rigel sat quietly while he served their cups, taking hers with an automatic, "Thank you, Professor."

"Unfortunately, I am no longer your professor, Mr. Black."

She removed the hood and the shadowy illusion from her face.
"Unfortunately, I am no longer Mr. Black."

Dumbledore appraised her features for a long moment. "What would you like me to call you?"

"Rigel is fine, sir. As good as anything else, that is."

"And why are you here, Rigel?" Dumbledore's eyes peered at her from over his teacup as he sipped. "Not that an old man doesn't appreciate the company."

"I have a question I don't think anyone else can answer."

"You were always a good student, but I suspect this question is not entirely academic."

"It is the most urgent sort of practical, sir, but before I get to it..." She set aside her tea to steady herself. "I want to apologize. I'm sorry for lying to you-"

"That is entirely unnecessary." Dumbledore fixed her with a gentle stare. "I knew, you see."

Rigel's heart stuttered in disbelief. "You... know who I am?"

"Goodness, no!" Dumbledore refreshed the hot water in his cup with a smile. "I only knew you were lying. I was not even entirely sure about *what* . But you see, I have long since forgiven you for it."

"You never pressed," Rigel said slowly. "You weren't... concerned?"

Dumbledore's smile faded. "There were discrepancies in your person, but never any doubt as to your desire to learn, Rigel. You were clearly at Hogwarts for the right reasons, and so obviously a positive influence on all who knew you. If I never looked too closely, perhaps it was because a part of me did not want to know."

"But S-Lord Black is your friend." She couldn't understand what he was saying. He'd *known* she wasn't who she claimed? Or at least had reason to suspect, all along?

"I had no proof you were anyone other than Arcturus Black, and even if you were, there was no reason to suspect Sirius' son was in any danger. Indeed, your seamless presence would have depended upon his cooperation and support." Dumbledore's gaze turned distant, and he added, "You are not the first student to come to Hogwarts as something other than they appear. Less and less am I able to help those students. The Ministry ties my hands. The Board of Governors binds my feet. I am left only my mouth, and I find sometimes the wisest course of action is to not use it."

She supposed there may have been enough like Greengrass over the years to make him hesitant to dig too deep. "Because you never asked, you can truthfully swear you didn't know I wasn't Heir Black."

"And I have done so, several times since we last saw one another."

She winced, but Dumbledore merely sipped his tea, unconcerned.
"The Aurors questioned you, I suppose?"

"They were not inclined to believe that the 'great Albus Dumbledore' had been fooled along with everyone else."

"To be fair to them, you weren't fooled," she said dryly.

Dumbledore only twinkled at her. "They were especially loath to credit that I had no idea how you escaped the school grounds the night of the final task. Seemed to think I had spirited you through a secret passage. As though I have any idea how many secret passages the castle boasts."

"At least seven," she said quietly. "But that's not how I did it."

Dumbledore didn't say anything, didn't ask, but curiosity lingered in his gaze, along with worry. It was a weakness in the school's defenses, and he ought to know about it if he was going to help rebuild the wards stronger.

"The Aurors didn't ward against animagi. Almost nobody thinks to—even the original wards didn't protect against them."

Her professor's eyes went bright with understanding. "Ah. That would do it. To think you achieved an animagus transformation at only fourteen..."

"I'm seventeen." Or she nearly was, by her best estimate, but he didn't need to know that was due to an over-used time-turner. "And I'm sorry about the Founders' wards. I wasn't thinking clearly when—when I tore them."

"My child, I hope you haven't been recriminating yourself for that; you certainly did not destroy the Founders' wards." Dumbledore chuckled. "The wards had to come down, of course, in order for the

one entrapping you to be dismantled, but that is why I detached the lodestone myself as soon as we realized what was anchoring them."

"You... detached the lodestone?"

"Like taking the battery out of a string of Christmas lights," Dumbledore said cheerfully. "It takes time to re-hang the wards in the right order, but the magic of the Founders isn't gone. It will power the new wards just the same. Perhaps I will personally add one for animagi in your honor."

"Oh." That was good. She felt more relief than she expected, and wondered that she didn't notice the added layer of guilt she'd been harboring until it was gone. "I'm glad that's okay, then."

"I'm glad that *you* are okay, Rigel." Dumbledore finished off his tea and set the cup aside. "Which brings us to why you have risked so very much to come here and speak to me. Your question."

"Yes. I-you have heard about the ceremony Riddle wants to have?" At his slow nod, she explained, "He phrased it as a *task* the champions must complete, and I wondered..."

"Whether your Unbreakable Vow still applied." Dumbledore's brow lowered in a troubled crease. "I had not considered... but of course he would make this final effort to bring you within reach."

"There are not many who know about the Vow, and fewer still I could risk even speaking to at this point," she said quickly. "I know it is a trap, but if the alternative is death... I must know before I decide whether to go and allow myself to be caught."

"You certainly should not allow that, no matter the state of this Unbreakable Vow." Dumbledore gave her a hard look. "To turn yourself in is to do a disservice to the entire world, Rigel. You represent something important. Something defiant. You must never let them take that away."

"If I must go to this ceremony, I may not have any choice," Rigel said.

Dumbledore adjusted his spectacles and held out his hand. "Your wand arm, if I may?"

Rigel let him take her wrist and push back the sleeve until most of her forearm was exposed.

"Picture in your mind the ceremony as you understand it-as a task for champions of the Triwizard Tournament. Then attempt with all your will to decide not to go."

Rigel had tried that already, but she did it again, for his sake. She pictured Riddle's voice, demanding the champions presence for one final task, imagined refusing, staying home, not even considering the idea of going... and nothing happened.

Dumbledore turned her hand over and examined her wrist carefully before saying, "You do not bear the marks of one attempting to resist an Unbreakable Vow."

"Marks?" She had never heard of any associated with Unbreakable Vows. It was a pact between two people, not an oath or other public display of allegiance or alliance.

"When the promiser of an Unbreakable Vow makes a serious attempt to break one of its conditions, the ropes of magic that originally bound them will re-surface, often scarring the hand and wrist irrevocably." Dumbledore lifted her forearm, which was smooth save the occasional knife nick. "No mark means you have not attempted to subvert it directly, and it also means your counterpart has not broken his end of the Vow."

She frowned. "I'll be able to tell if Riddle tries to get out of his end?"

"If his attempt progresses to scarring him, it will mark you as well."

"He can mark me?" She did not like the sound of that.

"Only by risking death himself, which I assure you Tom is not keen to do."

That was good to know. Still, it was no guarantee. "In the tournament, sometimes I could feel my blood heat when I wanted to do less than my best to win the tournament, or when I wanted to do something that was less expedient. It never scarred me, though."

"Then it was not a serious attempt to break the Vow," Dumbledore told her. "Depending on the wording, these Vows can afford a surprising amount of maneuverability. The blood heat will warn you when you approach a boundary, but the scarring will appear if you attempt to cross it in earnest. If you succeed in crossing it, of course..."

"I die." But it wouldn't be all at once, at least. From what he was saying, she could wait and see how the Vow reacted before deciding. "I could wait nearby, or within Apparating range," Rigel said slowly. "And if the ceremony approaches and it gets to the point that the marks appear... then, I'll know I have to go."

"Just so. To be on the safe side, I believe we should plan for you to be forced into appearing." Dumbledore began stacking their teacups inside the periwinkle pot. "With a well-laid strategy, we should be able to keep you safe even if the Vow is still active."

"We?"

Dumbledore vanished the teapot and gave Rigel a bracing smile. "It's time I introduced you to a group of like-minded people, Rigel." She felt her eyes narrow and the old wizard softened his smile to add, "Only with your consent, of course."

Rigel wondered what he meant by 'like-minded.' The sort of people that gathered each year for his spring soiree? It would have to be the

sort of people who would overlook her lies, and she could only think of a few reasons anyone would be willing to.

"People like Moody, you mean?" she guessed. It wouldn't be the hardliner ideologues, but the ones who put results above methods, perhaps. The ones willing to ignore her moral shortcomings to use Rigel as a symbol. *You represent something important. Something defiant.* They were not just words, she realized.

"Alastor is one of these people, yes," Dumbledore said carefully. "It is a group of individuals dedicated to resisting the forces of inequality and injustice, in whatever form they present."

"I'm not looking to be *involved* in anything," she said. "I never wanted to start any kind of revolution or resistance. Whatever I did last year, whatever I said... it was about surviving, and then trying to win just one, rotten victory from all the pain and struggle, and we got that. I-it's enough. I've had enough."

"You don't have to commit to anything," Dumbledore assured her. "I won't wrap you up in something you want no part of. I think you should meet them, all the same. We can help you if the Vow forces your hand. At the least, let us offer you more protection than you have now."

Which was none, though he was too kind to say so aloud. Rigel had no one to stand with her, if it came down to it. Archie could not risk his name and neck again, and no one else knew enough to help, if they would even be inclined to.

"You'd help me even if I don't agree to join your... group." Whatever it was.

"I could do no less for you, Rigel, than you would do for anyone who asked." Dumbledore's piercing gaze held admiration, fondness, and *trust*. He trusted her, after all she'd done, trusted her enough to introduce her to whatever band of renegades the wizard kept tucked away for when injustice needed resisting. Or something.

Trust was a two-way street. She had walked in this far, and Dumbledore was the very last person she thought would ever turn her in.

"I will meet them." Rigel stood, weaving the shadows over her face once more, and took Dumbledore's offered arm.

"Hold tightly; it's a long way through the tube."

Side-along apparition was invented by a wizard who wanted to force all other wizards into learning to transport themselves across time and space. There was no other explanation for the sheer disorientation and wanton discomfort it caused besides malice. And a good deal of spite.

They re-materialized on the sloping lawn of a country manor home, sprawling but none the less elegant for it. Rigel followed Dumbledore up the torch-lit carriage drive and into the foyer of the great house, a little surprised when the wizard entered without bothering to knock. He must know the owners very well, to take such liberties.

"Ah, before I forget." Dumbledore turned to Rigel and fished a package out of his overcoat pocket. "This is for you."

It was a group of books, tied together with brown string. She moved the string to read one of the titles and had to bite back the sudden emotion in her chest. It was next year's Alchemy textbook, handwritten and all. The next three years', for the three years of instruction she would never have with him.

"One must not let a good education go to waste," Dumbledore said, patting her on the shoulder.

"Thank you," she managed, tucking the slim books into her robes carefully, minding the pages.

"You are always welcome to what modicum of knowledge I possess," Dumbledore said seriously. "Now, to business; your arrival may

startle a few of them, so I think it best if you wait in the corridor while I explain the circumstances of your presence."

"Right. Sure." She didn't know how Dumbledore was going to convince his secret organization to give her aid without a membership, but she had come this far. "I'll wait out here."

Dumbledore gave her a reassuring smile and slipped through a solid cherry door with a banal apology for being late. The door shut behind him, and she could hear nothing through its reinforced secrecy spells.

In the silence that followed, she had a moment to wonder what, exactly, she was doing here. Were a random group of people really going to help her not get caught by Riddle and the Ministry just because Dumbledore asked them to? And what would they want in return? Maybe Dumbledore could be so selfless as to help someone at great personal risk, no strings attached, but usually the world didn't work that way. Usually, there was a bill after the life-saving surgery.

Just as she was starting to think she ought to leave and face Riddle on her own terms, the door opened again and Dumbledore poked his head back into the corridor.

"Still here?" The headmaster smiled at her. "Minerva always thought you would have made a fine Gryffindor. Come inside, before these buzzards take my beard off with the strength of their curiosity."

Rigel was taken aback at Dumbledore's suddenly relaxed demeanor. Where was the ominous mystery of a few minutes earlier? From his tone now, you'd think she was late to a party, not crashing a meeting of his clandestine forces.

She stepped into the room, the sounds of a few dozen voices making themselves known as she crossed the spell line. The sounds fell silent, and she thought she must have crossed another spell line, until she realized they'd all fallen silent as they stared at her. At her

face, which the spells across the doorway had stripped of its shadowy illusion.

All she could think as she lowered the hood from her head was *thank Merlin* she hadn't relied on a glamour or spell-based transfiguration for her disguise that night. Her Polyjuice was left untouched. Which was good, really, because she recognized every person in the room.

"Rigel?"

"It *is* Rigel."

"This is the soul in need, Dumbledore?"

Dear Merlin, it was-everyone. Augusta Longbottom and Professor McGonagall. Mr. Weasley and Mrs. Bones. McKinnons, Prewetts, Medowes, Vances... every Light family in the book was represented and then some.

"Rigel? Rigel!" One voice cut through the others, and Mrs. Weasley pushed her way past her husband and eldest son to stand in front of Rigel with wide, accusing eyes.

"M-Mrs. Weasley," she stumbled. "I-"

"What do you mean, Dumbledore, bringing him here?"

She flinched as Mrs. Weasley rounded on the headmaster.

"He shouldn't be *here*, of all places. What are you *thinking*, Albus Dumbledore?"

Rigel swallowed her reaction. Of course, they didn't want her here. She would only bring danger to them-to this group of people who were not renegades at all but parents. Her friends' parents. *Her* parents, she mentally amended as Lily and James stood from the back of the room and met her terrified gaze.

She could tell even across the room that James was wishing he'd stayed home that night; knowing the whereabouts of the Rigel Black Child was exactly what he didn't need. Sirius was there, too, and Remus-he stood next to Frank and Alice Longbottom and she realized with a mental kick that this was the 'friends' gathering' her parents had run off to tonight.

Going to the Longbottoms' for game night. She supposed with a cynical glance there was a pack of cards on the table in the middle of the room, come to that. Probably this was even the Longbottom estate. And really, what had she expected? Some kind of black ops organization Dumbledore was secretly training to rid the world of evil? Of course not. Of course, it was the same people it always was, just behind an impressive set of secrecy spells.

"I have brought Rigel here, Molly, because he needs our help."

"But it isn't *safe* for him."

Rigel blinked at the woman. Wasn't safe for her? It wasn't safe for *them* . She thought Dumbledore was talking about a group of people like Auror Moody. Professionals. Not-not the very people she would give anything to keep out of harm's way.

"This isn't-" She turned helplessly to Dumbledore, shaking her head. "I can't put *them* in danger. Not for me."

"Hush, child." Mrs. Weasley bundled her into a hug without further ado and just... held her. Rigel held very still, then made to draw back, but the woman only hugged her more tightly. "We've been so worried, Rigel. *So worried* . Ron and the twins are beside themselves, Percy is ready to go to war against the DMLE, and Ginny-she hasn't been the same since that horrid task." Mrs. Weasley drew back to look Rigel up and down. "Look at the state of you: skin and bones. Are you eating?"

"I'm eating fine," she managed. "Really, Mrs. Weasley, I don't-I'm so sorry." She could barely get the words out. Her throat kept closing

and all that wanted to come up was sobs because she had no idea-*no idea* -how much she'd needed someone to embrace her as Rigel. To embrace him. She had no idea how much of the acid in her stomach would be neutralized in that single moment of grace. "I'm so, so sorry for lying to you." She tried to include the whole room in it, but her eyes kept coming back to Mrs. Weasley, who kept her in arms reach like she was something precious that needed protecting. "I hated it, every second, lying to you, to your children-"

"Rigel, there's no need." Mr. Weasley came around his wife to clap her on the shoulder bracingly. "We're just relieved you're all right."

"But what are you doing back in England?" Mrs. Weasley looked from Rigel to Dumbledore.

"I... never left. It is not so easy to travel internationally," she muttered, very pointedly not looking toward her father as she said it.

"Are you safe? Are you hidden?"

She didn't know how to answer those questions.

"Your parents..." Mrs. Weasley cupped Rigel's face with both hands. "Is there someone who takes care of you?"

Rigel fumbled, trying not to let her eyes dart to Lily and James. "It's-complicated."

Mrs. Weasley turned imploringly to her husband. "Arthur, we could make room. Surely..."

" No. " Rigel blurted. "I-I'm all right, thank you. I'm safe and cared for. It's better if no one knows where."

Mrs. Weasley seemed only mildly mollified, and Rigel wondered how much more of this her nerves could endure. She had been braced for an entirely different sort of confrontation and now had no idea

what to do or say. Bill drew his mother back to give Rigel a little air, and she took a deep breath to steady herself.

"So, he doesn't need food or shelter," a familiar voice drawled. Moody pushed himself off the wall and looked down at her expectantly. "What in Helga's cup is he doing here, then?"

"It's the Unbreakable Vow, isn't it?"

All eyes turned to Remus, some more horrified than others.

" *What* Unbreakable Vow?" Mrs. Weasley demanded. Her husband looked ready to echo the sentiment, but it was McGonagall who actually did so.

"Yes, Albus. *What* Unbreakable Vow?"

"Now, Minerva, I hope you don't think I condone children entering into death bargains."

"You'd better manufacture some surprise on your face, Albus, or start explaining," the Transfiguration professor snapped.

"It's not his fault," Rigel said over the bickering that began to break out. " I made the bargain with Riddle. No one else knew until it was too late."

McGonagall's face went white. "Riddle? You made an Unbreakable Vow with *Tom ruddy Riddle*? I'll have Severus' head for this, and don't try and tell me he didn't know about it either!"

"Professor Snape had no choice. I made him our bonder, and he couldn't very well say no in front of Riddle-"

"That slimy git, letting a child get dragged into-"

Rigel spoke over Sirius to finish her sentence. "-without Riddle realizing he was working against him."

"Explain, Rigel," Remus said evenly, one hand over Sirius' mouth.

"The whole thing was my own stupid idea," Rigel said on a defeated breath. "Riddle was pressuring me to enter the tournament. He was making threats, against you all, mostly, promising to ruin your lives and other rubbish, then promising to make me Minister of Magic in the same breath. I knew he would find a button that worked eventually, so I tried to make the bargain on my terms."

"You fought in that tournament under duress of an Unbreakable Vow?" Frank Longbottom exchanged a troubled look with his wife. "Is that even legal?"

"There must be something against compulsion or coercion in the rules..."

"I entered the Vow of my own will. Dictated two of the conditions myself."

"What were they exactly?" Mr. Weasley asked, frowning. "Word for word, if you can recall."

Rigel tried to remember, but it was Dom who pushed her the exact words from her memory. "The first two were for Riddle: 'will you, in the event that I willingly participate in the New Triwizard Tournament, give a public statement on behalf of your political party disavowing the actions of the group responsible for the World Cup attack?'"

" *You* got him to say that?"

"I thought he'd been possessed that day."

Rigel continued. "Then: 'will you, in the event that I am the outright winner of the New Triwizard Tournament, cease all attempts to introduce, promote, or pass legislation regarding the rights of non-pureblooded witches and wizards in the areas of employment, healthcare, and marriage, including any legislation encouraging or

requiring people to marry or not marry on the basis of blood status alone?"

"That was the one that stopped the legislation, then!"

"Now we know what you all were yammering on about that week-you *knew* Riddle would be backing off the legislation, but you didn't explain *why* ."

Her parents exchanged a look with Remus and Sirius, but said nothing. She wondered how much they had been afraid to say, afraid to admit how much their children knew about Rigel's doings.

"They'll make a politician of you yet, boy," Moody snorted.

"No politician worth his salt uses *Unbreakable Vows* to get his way," Augusta sniffed.

"Riddle did."

"The point stands."

"Regardless, that's only two conditions. What was the third, Rigel?" Mr. Weasley pressed.

"The third was for me: 'will you, in the event that you are chosen to participate in the New Triwizard Tournament, agree to compete to the best of your ability in any and all tasks required of a designated champion?'" Rigel looked around at them all. "That's why I'm here. Riddle has called a new task for the champions, and I don't know whether the Vow still holds me or not. I won, but... is the final condition satisfied?"

"Is there any way to know?" Frank asked.

Alice shook her head slowly, "The wording is unspecific in a way that favors Riddle, in this case."

Dumbledore inclined his head. "I thought much the same. We will not know whether the Vow applies to the crowning ceremony until it happens. Until then, we must assume that it does."

"But you can't mean to go," Mrs. Weasley protested. "It's sure to be a trap."

Bill muttered darkly, "The alternative might be death, Mum."

"If it's a trap, then it's one we can turn to our favor," Moody said firmly. "They've lost the element of surprise."

"This isn't a war, Alastor," Mr. Weasley admonished.

"Of course, it is," Augusta snapped. "Do you think the fight is over because one piece of legislation was snuffed? Rigel won a battle of ideology when he declared himself Triwizard champion and halfblooded simultaneously, but the moral high ground is only as good as its symbol. If we let them capture him, drag him away in chains like a common criminal, we lose some of that power."

That sounded a bit more like what she'd been expecting. She didn't want to be anyone's symbol, but if it meant avoiding prison, she would take the allies she could get.

Talk devolved into the different parts each person could play on the day of the ceremony. Some would be in the crowd, some on the stage itself as members of the tournament committee. James and Moody would handle the Aurors, and as they discussed it in low voices, her stomach churned with guilt. Was there a chance, if she had simply gone to her father, confessed everything and begged for his help, that he could have rallied this group of people himself? Would he and Lily have made this happen if she'd trusted them, or would they have tried to solve the problem alone, afraid to tell anyone the truth and risk Harry in the process?

She would never know. Her family was being forced into danger anyway, and without the benefit of knowing who it was really for.

Perhaps it was kinder this way. James would resent it, having to lie to his coworkers and go behind the Minister's back, but at least he wouldn't worry for his daughter.

Rigel kept her expressions reserved through it all, muted herself so there would be no connection between Rigel and Harry, renegade and relative, dissenter and daughter. She needn't have tried too hard-the Potters never approached her, even as the meeting was ended and one-by-one the members of Dumbledore's club filed out of the room.

Remus gave her a professional nod that said he still wasn't sure what to make of her, but it was Sirius who stopped before her and stuck out his hand. She took it, trembling slightly. If he cursed her, she wouldn't even blame the man, but he only shook it slowly up and down.

"When I thought it was my son, I was scared for him and proud," Sirius said quietly. "I can be no less now that I know it was someone else's son." Rigel stared at him, lost for words, but he was not finished. "Because of you, my son grew up safe and happy. Whatever else you intended, you have done House Black this service. As far as I'm concerned, our name is yours, however long you choose to use it."

Rigel did not recognize the words Sirius said next, but she felt the magic settle over her, sure and true. It wrapped her in something like a hug, warm and accepting, and her heart made room for it next to her bond with the Malfoys and her own family's magic, all burrowed in her breast like birds nesting side by side, as though the cold of the world couldn't touch them as long as they roosted together.

A tear escaped before she could stifle it, and Sirius pretended not to notice as he patted her on the cheek with a small smile. "Welcome to the family, for whatever it's worth."

"You've no idea what it means," she murmured, her heart an absolute wreck. "Archie is so lucky in his father, Lord Black."

"Just Sirius will do, being as you've called me 'Dad' for four years," Sirius quipped. Humor was always his shield, but she could see the soft spots through the cracks. Sirius cleared his throat and saluted Dumbledore on the way out the door. "Try not to surprise us so badly every time, Dumbledore. Some of these old vultures won't withstand too many more heart attacks."

"Consider your invitation *revoked*, Sirius Black," Augusta spat.

He yelped as the house magic sped his retreat. Augusta fixed Dumbledore with a look that dared him to object, then turned to Rigel and looked down her nose in unimpressed consideration. "I hope this means you will be signing on to the cause in earnest, young man."

"That is yet to be determined," Dumbledore said evenly. "As of now, we are merely attempting to keep Rigel alive."

"And when your life is secure, see you do something with it," Augusta sniffed. She left the meeting room, and Rigel supposed that was her cue to leave. Especially as she heard the Floo go off and realized *her parents* were going home *right now* .

It was already too late to get there first. She would have to hope Archie came up with a believable story, because there was one more thing she had to ask Dumbledore, one question that had been eating at her since she'd walked into the room and seen everyone except *him* inside it.

"Headmaster, where is Professor Snape?" Dumbledore gave her a considering look, so she pressed, "He is a part of this group, isn't he? Since I won the tournament, he is free of his own Vow. I know you trust him..." There was no way he wasn't part of this group.

"Professor Snape had an errand tonight, and he does not usually attend these meetings... but yes, he is a part of our organization. Albeit discretely, and only when available."

The wheels turned and clicked into place. "You've got him reporting on Riddle, haven't you? He should be free of that circle-"

"He is well positioned in those circles and more than willing to remain so," Dumbledore said gently. "Severus serves the cause as he wishes. No one commands him. Certainly not I."

Sure, Snape would say as much, but Rigel would bet her best cauldron his motives were much more convoluted than that. No matter. If she was to be... affiliated with Dumbledore's citizen army, then she would cross paths with Snape eventually. She would have the chance to apologize-grovel, likely-and to see whether he accepted it. Accepted her, after everything.

"I am returning to Hogsmeade, if you would like a lift," Dumbledore offered politely. Recalling the feeling of side-along Apparition with a grimace, she shook her head.

"I'll make my own way back, thank you."

"We'll be in touch before the ceremony." She was going to ask how, but then he pressed a phoenix feather into her hand. "Fawkes will come with any messages."

"It's not a good idea for you to know where I am," she said, not taking the feather.

"In one hundred years, I have never learned to speak Phoenix," Dumbledore said idly. "I don't think I ever shall."

"I'm still not keeping this at my house. I'll keep it somewhere safe and check for messages periodically, so leave plenty of time before expecting a reply." She would not budge on that, and Dumbledore, perhaps sensing as much, inclined his head in agreement.

Her pockets one phoenix feather heavier, she Flooed to the public grate in the Lower Alleys, weaving shadows into her hood as she transferred. The feather went to her apartment, released from

evidence by the Aurors when it was clear no trace of Rigel Black remained there. She'd paid the landlady twice that year's rent for the trouble, but it was worth it to have a place that was completely her own, still.

With the phoenix feather safely hidden, she stepped into the shower and dumped the entire bottle of Disguise Dissolution over her head. It burned the Polyjuice away, and she told herself through gritted teeth that she *would* get the recipe right before the next time she had to do this. The black robes she transfigured to look like her own, and her hair, poor mangled nest that it was, suffered a swift growing charm for its troubles.

Completely herself again but looking like she'd had a week-long vacation in Bermuda, Harry Flooed to the Leaky Cauldron, then stepped through the next grate to whatever awaited her at home.

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When the Floo went off in the living room, Archie knew from the lack of someone sprawling ungracefully to the floor that it wasn't Harry.

He became her, as easily as a polyglot slipped between tongues. The clothes took a moment longer, but he remembered what she'd been wearing well enough. He could transfigure clothes in his sleep- it was a useful skill to cultivate, when one had a natural ability to shift faces on a whim.

Addy startled at his sudden transformation. She sneezed disagreeably in his face and he appeased her with an upside-down twirly-plop that conveniently held her out of the way long enough to snag a throw and drape it over his legs. The height change was still difficult and took him longer, but no one would notice his too-long legs if he didn't stand.

James and Lily strode into the room on high-alert, the first inkling that something was very wrong.

"Harry." James slumped from his fighting posture and assessed the room with his eyes. "Where is Archie?"

"Just went up to shower," he said with Harry's vocal cords. "Addy... *expressed* herself all over his jumper."

Lily took Addy from his arms with an admonishing frown. "Is that why she's not in bed where she belongs?"

Actually, it was because Archie needed a distraction ready as the hours ticked by and it became increasingly likely Harry was not going to arrive before her parents. The auditory spell over the bathroom that sounded like running water he'd set up hours ago. It wasn't paranoia, he reminded himself firmly. It was preparedness.

"Addy also expressed that eight-o'clock was too early for bedtime, and demanded the recitation of a thousand and one stories else she cut off my head."

"Pretty sure that's *Arabian Nights* ." Lily's expression was unimpressed as Addy gave a wide yawn.

"She was doing cartwheels on the ceiling five minutes ago!" Archie insisted. At Lily's raised eyebrows, he dialed it back slightly. "At least, that's what Archie said. I was sort of reading and lost track of time until she vomited on him."

"Really, Harry." Lily put Addy's little head up to her shoulder and rocked slowly from side to side. "This makes it difficult to trust you with more responsibility," she added in a whisper.

James came back into the living room, evidently satisfied that the shower was, to all appearance, running. "Anyone call while we were out?"

Archie shrugged. "Who would call? All your friends were there at the Longbottoms' right?"

James gave him a sharp look that Archie was not sure what to make of, until Lily cleared her throat and said, "At the game night, yet."

"Did you win?" Archie asked. He couldn't help but notice the suspicious glance they traded before answering the simple question.

"You know Lily always wins at game night," James said stiffly. "Is Addy ready for bed?"

Lily nodded. "I'll take her up," she said softly.

James lingered a moment awkwardly, then muttered, "I'd better help." He followed Lily upstairs, and Archie had to conclude that more than one odd thing had happened that evening. There was whatever had kept Harry out so late, and then there was whatever James and Lily had really been doing all evening. Given that Sirius and Remus were supposedly there too, they were at least all in on the secret together.

Archie was not used to the grown-ups keeping secrets. Generally, it was the other way around.

He would not look a gift hippogriff in the mouth, however. When James and Lily were safely embroiled in the battle of wills that was attempting to put down a sleepy toddler, Archie jumped up from the couch and slipped into the basement where Harry kept her Invisibility Cloak. He tossed it over his head, snuck up both sets of stairs to the upper bathroom, and ducked inside without a sound.

After letting go of Harry's form completely, he cancelled the water spell, un-transfigured his clothes, and dunked his jumper in cold water until it was sopping. Then he wrapped a towel around his hair, stuffing the Cloak inside like a very heavy turban, and came shirtless into the corridor, dripping water everywhere.

He dripped all the way to the kitchen, where he abandoned the jumper in the sink. The Invisibility Cloak he stashed back in the basement, and his hair he fluffed with a wind spell as though he'd just dried it. In the Floo room, he tossed a handful of powder into the grate and called, "Diagon Alley!" in Harry's feminine tone.

That brought James thumping down the stairs quick enough. Archie looked over innocently from where he was elbow-deep in soap, scrubbing at his jumper. "Uncle James, how was game night?"

"Was that Harry leaving?"

"She said she had to grab something from the shop before it closed," Archie said blankly. "Isn't her curfew lifted?"

James ran a hand through his hair, and Archie sort of felt bad for him. "What did she need that was so urgent?"

"Something about her stink sap being expired?" Archie shrugged. "To be honest, I wasn't listening very closely. It's always something with Harry."

"You can say that again."

James let out a long breath and crossed to the cupboard for a bag of crisps. Halfway through his third handful, he offered Archie a nab. Archie shook his head, smiling. "Didn't the Longbottoms' feed you?"

"Augusta Longbottom only eats from her own garden," James said sourly. "Vegetables, greens, fruits, and more vegetables."

That, at least, sounded true. "There's some ice cream left," Archie offered. "Harry didn't want hers." She hadn't come home in time to eat it, at any rate.

James moaned his appreciation and dug the container out of the ice box. "Don't know if Harry's even my kid, sometimes."

Archie winced at the poor jest. "Don't let her hear you say that. Your relationship is awkward enough."

James shot him an offended look. "Mind your business, Archie Black. Our relationship is... complicated."

"And not awkward at all," Archie muttered.

James gestured with his spoon, and a blot of ice cream dripped unnoticed onto the counter. "Well, we can't all be Archie and Sirius, best buds forever."

Archie felt his eyes narrow. "Dad and I have had our rough spots. Mostly caused by me, cause Dad is awesome. I don't know that you can blame Harry entirely for your situation, though."

"What's that supposed to mean?" James dared him to say it, but Archie was not afraid of his uncle.

"You pushed her away before she ever drew back herself."

It was something that had been true for a while, but maybe never voiced aloud until this moment. That was fine. Harry would never say anything, but Archie was not some outsider who didn't understand both sides.

"When Harry delved a little too deeply into that children's potions kit she got for her birthday, you binned it."

James pressed his lips together, but didn't admit to it. He didn't have to. Archie had seen him do it, and then heard him tell Harry it was lost.

"And when she asked for a new one, you got her a broomstick instead."

"It was for her own good," James said. He stabbed at his ice cream with a scowl. "Every kid I ever knew who was too into potions had a miserable life. I didn't want her to be the weird smelly kid at school,

all right? I didn't want her to be picked on, *laughed at*. Not my sweet girl."

"I know." Archie had understood for a while why James was so resistant to Harry's interests. Just as he knew James thought of potions kids as victims because he'd done his share of victimizing them. James had been popular in school and popular kids could not understand anyone not wanting what they had. "I think you underestimated Harry's strength of character, though, and overestimated your ability to change her. Harry would never let anyone bully her, not even you."

"I never-" James snapped his mouth shut and set the ice cream aside with wet eyes. He was quiet for a long minute, and Archie wondered if he was examining a few things in his memories under new light. "I wasn't trying to hurt her, but to protect her."

"I get it. The hardest part of going to America was leaving Harry here. Not because she couldn't take care of herself-Harry is the strongest person I know. It was hard because I wasn't sure she would ever make another friend." He was spinning truths with lies, now, but the heart of the emotion still choked him. "I thought she'd hide away in that apartment and never come out, deliberately pushing away everyone to keep me safe." And she had. Or she tried to. "Somehow, she made some pretty great friends despite the lies."

"Leo," James said, distaste on his tongue. "And Caelum Lestrangle. Potions boys."

"Harry's *friends*," Archie said firmly. Honestly, Harry hadn't even introduced James to Kasten yet. The man really needed to get over a few things. "They haven't replaced her family yet, but if you keep her at arm's length, she's going to find someone who won't."

James closed his eyes and swallowed. "Sometimes it feels like she's been walking away from me her whole life, and every year she gets a little further."

"So stop standing here and run after her."

James straightened. "You're right. Godric, Arch, you're so right. I'll go to Diagon Alley and-"

"Not literally, Uncle James-"

The after-hours Floo bell went off and the sound of Harry's butt hitting the ground announced her arrival.

"Harry?" Archie called quickly. "What's wrong, was the shop closed early?"

He and James strode into the Floo room and helped Harry clear the ash from her robes and hair. When Archie got a look at her face, he had to smother a laugh. She wasn't kidding about that Polyjuice-stripping potion. It looked like she'd washed her face with turpentine.

"Harry, what happened to your face?" James took her chin in his fingers and Harry winced.

"Ouch, Dad. I stepped into the grate before the Floo powder had fully took." Archie snorted with amusement and Harry made a very red face at him. "When I'm of age, I'm never traveling anywhere except by Apparition."

James grimaced. "Say that until the first splinching."

Harry grumbled something else, but it was distracted. She had a lot on her mind, and Archie could tell she wanted to talk to him about it. "Want to sleep over at mine?" he asked her. "Only you'll have to Floo again."

She put a hand to her face uncomfortably. "Sirius will never let me live it down. Can you stay here?"

Archie looked to James in question, and his uncle shrugged agreeably. "Always welcome, Arch, you know that." As they turned for the stairs, James added, somewhat awkwardly, "Ah, Harry?"

Harry turned with a carefully expectant face.

"What was it you needed at the shop? Some kind of sap?"

Harry flicked her eyes to Archie's, silently asking if this was a trap. Archie smiled reassuringly. "Stink sap wasn't it? Or did I get it wrong?"

"Stink bug *juice*," Harry said with a small eye-roll. "Honestly, Arch, where's your short-term memory? Hermione would be ashamed."

"Don't bring the goddess of mnemonic devices into this," Archie started.

"Stink bug juice, then," James cut in. "I can pick it up tomorrow on my way home from work, if you need it."

Harry blinked at him. "I... sure. If you like. I need undiluted... the red one. But I can get it, too. I'm in the alleys a lot anyway."

"Sure, right. If you weren't planning to go tomorrow, though..."

"I suppose I don't need to..."

It was like watching two boggarts try and figure out how to scare one another.

James bobbed his head. "Great, I'll get you some, then."

"Thanks, Dad." It was almost a question, but Harry smiled tentatively all the same.

James beamed at her, and really, their awkwardness was painfully unnecessary when they both wanted it to *not be there* so badly.

Harry watched James leave the Floo room whistling, then turned to Archie with a question in her eyes.

"Don't ask. Things have been weird tonight."

"You don't know the half of it," she muttered.

They pulled the spare mattress from the closet and said goodnight to Lily as they passed her in the corridor. Throwing up the usual silencing spells was easy. Getting Harry to start talking was harder.

So Archie started. "I pretended to be you." Because it would have been so much more suspicious if *she* was gone while Rigel was having a mysterious meeting with Albus Dumbledore. Harry's timeline could never match up with Rigel's. Even if no one had enough pieces to put it together.

"I knew you'd think of something." She gave him a relieved smile. "Sorry I was late."

"I thought I wouldn't have to do that anymore," Archie said.

Harry flinched. "I-I know. I know you don't want to keep doing this-"

"It's starting again, isn't it?"

Harry's face hardened. "Riddle started it. I'm going to try and finish it."

"It won't be that easy." Didn't she see that? "You're not just pretending to be me anymore, Harry. You're pretending to be a wanted criminal. Riddle, the Ministry, the public-they all want a piece of him." Harry said nothing, and Archie sighed. "I don't have to tell you it's dangerous. Just think about why you're doing it."

Harry's eyes, that decadent, disastrous green, flashed in the lamplight. "What do you mean, why? The Vow-"

Archie shook his head. "When we started this, you could pretend it was for me, at least partially. Not anymore. I don't want this... but I'm starting to think you do."

Under the red skin, he still saw the flush in her cheeks. The excitement. He hadn't seen Harry this way in a long time. Not since

the beginning, maybe. The guilt in her eyes was what confirmed it, though. Part of her was relieved. Part of her... had missed it.

"You're invested, Harry. This is more than just the Vow."

Harry bowed her head. "Dumbledore has an... organization."

"I'm guessing it's not a book club."

Harry shot him a look. "They're going to help me with the crowning ceremony, if the Vow makes me go."

Archie set his teeth. "And what does this organization want in return?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. Nothing explicitly. Implicitly... they want Rigel to be their symbol."

"And what does Rigel want?"

Harry frowned, and he knew she had not fully faced the question herself. "I... don't want to hurt this family any more than it has been. But I *do* want what they want for the world. I feel... responsible, still. Involved, as you said."

Archie thought it over, knowing she trusted his opinion and wanting to be sure he had every angle before giving her advice. "I don't know Dumbledore the way you do, but our parents trust him. This organization can't be ill-intentioned, at least."

"About our parents..." Harry sucked her teeth and Archie caught the exact same look in her eyes that Lily had worn when she came back from the Longbottoms'.

Archie cursed. "They were never at the Longbottoms', were they?"

"Technically, we all were."

Archie swore again. Then he laughed, a helpless, brittle release. "Of course, they were. Of course, they are."

Harry started to laugh as well. "I had that *exact* reaction."

"Because let's not do anything unless it's as *complicated as humanly possible* ."

Harry and Archie laughed until it hurt, and Archie let the relief course through him. Whatever else had happened, however far Rigel had climbed back into their lives, Harry retained enough of herself to see the humor. That would do for now.

She gave him a crooked smile, and pulled his head into hers in silent camaraderie. After they'd caught their breaths, she said wryly, "Look at it this way: if even we don't know what's happening, no one else stands a chance of figuring it out."

From her words to Merlin's ears. So mote it be.

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[end of chapter two].

A/N: Happy holidays everyone! This chapter is dedicated to the ten-year anniversary of the Rigel Black Chronicles! As of December 6th, I'll have been running around with this character in my head for a full decade. I doubt I'd be the same person without her.

To celebrate, the Discord server "Harry Get Some Sleep" will be helping me host two Q&A events this weekend, December 4th at 7pm EST and December 5th at 10am EST. If you have any questions for me you'd like to submit, there is a pinned thread available in the server.

In addition, there will be a prompt week for fanworks December 6 - December 13th! Prompts are listed in the server under

announcements, and you can find tagged works when they are finished in the AO3 collection. Thanks to everyone who continues to organize and participate in all the fic exchanges and masquerades and other events that keep the community well-fed in between chapters.

Chapter 3

A/N: Welcome to chapter 3! In which the phrase 'absolutely necessary' is creatively interpreted. Thanks for your patience. Enjoy!

The Malignant Masquerade:

Chapter 3:

"I know about the Unbreakable Vow."

His nostrils flared as his every sinew stilled and pricked. Severus turned slowly to meet Minerva's censorious stare. She was not typically to be found at Hogwarts over the summer break, and neither was he. That she'd caught him on the headmaster's staircase meant she knew he was coming and, like the overgrown cat she was, had lain in wait.

What he didn't know what which Unbreakable Vow she was so eager to condemn him for.

"You'll have to elaborate." No doubt she was dying to.

Minerva drew herself to full height, as though it gained her any advantage over his towering frame. "Rigel Black." He did not flinch. He had already hardened himself to whatever words she felt justified in hurling, but the name did send a ripple of pain through the part of his soul that was better left undisturbed. "Tom *ruddy* Riddle. How *could you*, Severus? You knew, saying nothing to the rest of us for all that we are charged with the safety of *every* student-" Minerva turned abruptly as her voice broke.

Severus was not interested in her dramatics, but he was interested in how she knew. It was not old knowledge, as she shook with the fury of fresh indignation. He'd thought no one knew apart from Riddle and Rigel himself. Cold suspicion washed over him. "You've seen him."

Minerva's smile was bitter. "Albus didn't even warn us. Just showed up at our meeting with the boy in tow, as though the whole world's not looking for him, and us with Aurors and Ministry officials in the room."

"How did he look?" The question was out of his mouth before he'd even considered stifling it.

"Scared out of his mind." Minerva searched his eyes, looking for something she would never find unless he let her. "He thinks this champion's ceremony is another task. One the Vow *applies* to."

That-His mind retreated from the present, and suddenly, the pieces aligned. The political megalomaniac, usually so careful with appearances, was dragging the crumbling bulwark of his failed tournament through its death throws, and Rigel had shown himself to Dumbledore, an act of desperation he didn't know how to countenance. And Severus had not seen it coming, had not even considered it. He hadn't bothered to listen to Riddle's grandiose announcement, didn't read the driveling gibberish that passed for press in their country unless absolutely remanded, so he didn't know what wording had been used but-Riddle easily could have. Which meant he had, of course. It was Riddle.

"So, he came to Albus." And Albus had brought the boy to them. Not to Severus. "Where is Rigel now?"

Minerva gave him a severe look. "I'm sure I don't know. He left as quickly as he'd come."

He could not have understood her correctly. "You let him *go* ."

"We weren't about to imprison the poor lad-Severus? Now wait just a minute, we are not finished!"

But they were. He left Minerva at the foot of the stair and rode the dizzying conveyance to its summit. It was not the moving staircase that brought nausea to the apex of his throat. Albus had Rigel in his

grasp, in the Longbottom's sodding estate no less, and he'd *let him go*.

The headmaster waited on the astronomy platform behind his desk. His gaze was fixed on the stars, though he looked merely with his eyes, not any of the dozens of delicate instruments that would help him divine their precise positions. Severus climbed the stairs brusquely, but Albus tore his attention from the night sky only reluctantly.

He expected a report, but Severus had nothing of value to relate. Evidence that the Party was dabbling in creature smuggling had turned out to be exaggerated, and now he had reason to suspect Albus knew that it would.

"Why, Albus?" The anger had abated on the long stair ride, and he wondered if that wasn't orchestrated as well.

The headmaster was not slow on the uptake. "Minerva has spoken to you before I could." The regret in his voice did not fool Severus for an instant.

"Did you send me on that errand to keep me from him?"

Albus examined Severus' face as though it was he, not the headmaster, whose actions were in question. "I had no way of knowing he would come tonight."

"But you did know he was coming." The anger roared back out of the grate, all the hotter for having been banked.

"I merely suspected." Albus turned back to the sky, his eyes troubled. "I suppose I did keep you from him, though perhaps not for the reasons you think. I needed to understand him. To be sure. You are not the least bit objective about the boy."

"And you are not my *keeper*. "

"I suppose Minerva mentioned I brought him to an Order meeting."

He fell into a familiar sneer. "I'm not sure what you're expecting, there. You think he refused Riddle to mascot your knitting club? Rigel has no interest in-"

Albus hummed. "I believe Rigel will agree to lend his not-insignificant voice to our cause."

"And his not-inconsiderable magic?"

The headmaster peered at him chidingly over his half-moon glasses, but Severus would not apologize for his cynicism. Albus employed him to see the darker machinations of the world, even if it meant seeing through him, on occasion. "There will soon come a time when the political and social work we have been pursuing will no longer be enough. Unrest simmers everywhere below the surface. Open prejudice and open support of muggleborns and halfbloods are both at an all-time-high. Soon, we may need Rigel more than anyone realizes."

Severus could not deny that. But- "He is not yours to control. He is my student. I need to see him."

"You will." Albus cut him a stern look. "When I am certain you will not attempt to compromise his identity."

Surprise squeezed his chest on a sharp inhale. "You cannot ask that of me." Of course he would discover the boy's identity. Rigel could not remain on the run forever.

"Then you cannot see him."

Severus growled low in his throat. "How can I adequately *protect* him if I don't know who he is?"

"His *only* protection is that *no one knows* who he is." Albus was rarely so firm on a point, and Severus realized he would not be

moved, even before he elaborated. "If one person finds out, even if it is you, even if it is me, he is less safe."

He struggled with all the things he wanted to say, all the retorts on the tip of his tongue, and swallowed each and every one. Seeing Rigel came first. Convincing the headmaster he was wrong would come later, if it came at all. More likely, he would be once again begging forgiveness.

"Severus."

Albus had seen the rebellion in his eyes. For the headmaster's sake, he made a show of working through it, of struggling with it, and then accepting it, all without drawing any of his true feelings out of their cages. "I-" He began again after clearing his throat. "I won't question him at Order meetings. Just don't keep me from him again."

He said nothing about outside of meetings. Seeing the boy alive and well with his own eyes was one thing, but Albus was wrong; Rigel would never be safer alone than with him in his corner. He had seen the utterly imbecilic decisions the boy made under his own auspices. He needed Severus.

He would find the boy, with or without Albus's approval. Wherever he was, whatever he was doing, it was sure to require Severus's help.

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Not for the first time in wrestling with the Disguise Dissolution Potion, Harry wished she had some help. No combination she tried resulted in a less-abrasive potion, and she knew she wasn't missing ingredients because she'd identified each of them from the original sample. At first, she thought it was a dilution issue, but it was pourable, it looked right, and the proportion of ingredients to base

was consistent with the sample. It had to be an issue with the order of operation, but she couldn't figure out what.

Archie found her staring dully at another finished cauldron of the version that gave her a sunburn, and, being an exceptionally smart individual, he approached her cautiously.

"All right there, Harry? Only it looks like you're trying to set that liquid on fire." Harry made a displeased noise in her throat, and Archie came around to look into the cauldron beside her. "I don't recognize this one. Not your usual stuff for Krait, is it?"

"No." Harry grimaced apologetically at her cousin. "It's-secret."

Archie stared at her. "Secret from me?"

Right. Obviously not. Harry shook her head. "It's the Thief's Downfall Potion. Sort of."

Archie's eyes flared wide and he took a deep breath before saying casually, "Stealing goblin secrets, now?"

"I... re-discovered it. Independently." Archie's eyebrows rose and Harry pursed her lips. "With a sample from Gringotts." Archie shook his head in slow disbelief, and Harry gestured to the cauldron in annoyance. "Anyway, it isn't quite right."

Archie's mouth quirked in a smile, and she braced herself for the bad joke that was going to follow. "I'd say. Supposed to be a waterfall, isn't it?"

Harry elbowed him with a groan, then froze. A... waterfall. " *Oh*. I don't have to dilute it; I just have to *apply* it differently."

Archie's face twisted in confusion. "You're not actually going to build a waterfall."

"Take this." Harry thrust a beaker of the potion into his hand and flicked her wrist in his direction. He rose into the air with a

disconcerted wobble.

"I am not a fan of being cast on without my permission."

"Sorry," she said distractedly. She cast a Glamour Charm that made her look like a human-Veela hybrid. "Can you sort of sprinkle it on me? Don't pour it directly on my head, I've done that. I'm thinking-

"-the waterfall is high, so maybe it's supposed to disperse in the air before it hits." Archie's voice grew more interested as he reached the same idea. "I'll sort of sweep it quickly back and forth, and you shouldn't stand still; you should walk through it."

"Brilliant!" Harry jogged over to one side of the lab. The carts moved fast, so she would get a running start. If she was right, there was no need to pour an entire bottle over her head to dissolve the disguise. She'd gotten soaked with the potion in Gringotts, but if her hooded cloak and robes had absorbed most of it before it touched her skin, then she'd been using too much when directly applying it to her head.

She ran quickly toward the levitating Archie, and when she was right underneath him, he poured the potion in an uneven stream-

And collapsed on top of her.

Harry groaned and Archie cursed. She rolled her cousin off of her and flexed bruised muscles with a scowl. "What in Merlin's name happened?"

"Don't look at me. You're the one who canceled the Levitation Charm." Archie rubbed his wrist and wiggled his fingers tentatively.

Harry examined his appendage for breaks, muttering, "I didn't cancel anything." Had her magic given out? She tried a general Healing on Archie's bruised wrist, and it worked perfectly. Not a problem with her magic, then.

Archie made a noise when she looked up at him. "Your face!"

She felt it, but found no sign of burns. The glamour was gone, too. Harry grinned. "It worked."

"Too well if it canceled your Levitation Charm." Archie shook his head slowly. "Do you think it's supposed to do that?"

Harry thought back to her experiences at Gringotts. The Thief's Downfall cancelled disguise-related magic from a person, but didn't strip magic from objects; her expandable pockets in her kit had remained intact, as had the magical devices on her person. Did it cancel active magic as well? She hadn't been using magic actively the two times she'd been underneath it, so she didn't know.

She and Archie stared at one another, both thinking the same thing. If that potion could interrupt active magic no matter the type, then...

"Merlin." Archie whistled low. "They could stop any wizard from casting."

"Maybe not from casting before or after, but it appears to at least *interrupt* active magic," Harry said. The implications were incredible. A splash of that potion could have interrupted the magic ritual Voldemort had attempted. It was a literal bucket of cold water on any magical fire. And the goblins had it all along.

"Why would they... oh." Archie's eyes were wide. "If someone was using an Imperious Curse or some other kind of magic to break into Gringotts, it would be interrupted. Long enough to stop them, maybe."

Harry frowned. "We don't know it works on Unforgivables." If it did, anyone suspected of being under the Imperious Curse could just be put on a Gringotts cart. That was too much to hope, however.

She pushed a hand into her hair and tried to marshal her thoughts. She had to test it against the Modified Polyjuice, of course, and she

should try it against other active magic to see where its limits were. She wondered if she would be able to replicate the application process by herself. She could-

"Harry." Archie snapped his fingers in front of her face.

She shook her head. "Sorry. I was just thinking."

"You're stressing me out just watching." Archie gave her a shrewd look. "Don't try and do too much again. It isn't healthy."

"There's so much to do, though."

"What can I take off your plate?" Archie said it earnestly, but there was a look in his eyes that told her he wasn't sure he meant it.

"Can you give these notes to Hermione?" She crossed the lab to escape Archie's all-knowing gaze and dug a packet of dictated notes from one of her many piles. She'd been dutifully recording everything she could remember about the various cores she had interacted with in the course of the Sleeping Sickness and after. She tried to recall everything that could be useful to Hermione about how magic manifested, was created, or could be drawn out of a core.

She had not had much time for new research based on her own focused meditation, but she hoped that would change, after the ceremony was over and the tournament settled at last.

"Sure." Archie took the notes. "I'll come up with an explanation for how I got them. Is that all?"

She couldn't think of anything else he could-or ought to-help with. "If I think of something, I'll let you know."

Archie was clearly torn between wanting to be more involved and wanting nothing to do with it. Harry couldn't blame him, and she wasn't sure herself how much she wanted to involve him at that point. He had a life he was trying to get back to. And she had... a life

still in stasis. She couldn't move on until the past was put to bed. Until she had no obligations or complications hanging over her. That wasn't Archie's problem, though. He should be looking toward the future.

She had already decided not to become more involved with the Order. For once, she would just accept someone's help and not try and bend over backwards to repay them for it. She would let them help her get past the Vow's final condition, and then she would never seek out Riddle or politics or anything that wasn't Potions-related in any life hence.

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She found the note tucked into one of Krait's empty bottles. She'd nearly poured a dose of Strengthening Solution right onto it, and wondered at the odd choice in communication vehicle. It wasn't as though he couldn't simply tell her whatever it was when she picked up the empties crate. Only, when she unrolled the tiny scroll, it wasn't Krait's handwriting at all.

Hog's Head, 4 o'clock, Room 13.

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She recognized the handwriting by the stupid way the H's curled back on themselves. How in Godric's name had Caelum Lestrangle slipped a message into one of Krait's bottles? How had he known this particular crate would go to her and not another one of his brewers? Was it even meant for her? Harry didn't think she was being too egotistical in dismissing that question as soon as it formed. Of course, it was for her. The real question was: what was she going to do about it?

Setting aside the sheer creepiness of asking someone to meet you in a hotel room in the middle of the day, the Hog's Head was notoriously shady. She would know, as she'd been there all-too-recently in a dodgy black cloak, layered in disguise spells. What was Lestrangle thinking? And why hadn't he sent a letter like a normal wizard?

Not that she would have read a letter, if the envelope indicated it was from him. She was nowhere near prepared to return to their previous, cantankerously productive relationship after he'd used her brewing technique for pure evil. Just where did he get off, dictating a time and place to meet him like she was his dirty little halfblooded secret? She wasn't some clandestine brewing partner he could call up out of the blue whenever he needed a fix or a second pair of hands. She was Harriet-bloody-Potter and her time was spoken for.

No matter how much she wanted to rail against him and demand answers for his article in *Potions Quarterly*, she wasn't going to hare off to Hogsmeade with less than a day's notice when he hadn't even solicited a time of her convenience.

If she did go, it would only be to give him a piece of her mind.

Lunch found her furiously slathering jam on a piece of bread in the kitchen. James Floored in on his lunch break and stalled awkwardly in the doorway as Harry looked up through her fringe at him.

"Harry, what are you doing to that sandwich?"

She considered it objectively and supposed it did have more holes in it now than when she'd started. Harry stubbornly wrapped it with a fresh piece of bread and bit through both with a jerk of her jaw that may not have been entirely necessary.

James slowly slid the butter knife out of her reach. "You seem..." He knew better than to say 'upset.' "Annoyed."

She was, at that. "Lestrage wants to meet." Harry wasn't sure why she told James, except that he was the one who wanted her to give the boy another chance.

"And you haven't forgiven him yet." James nodded knowingly.

"That depends; does forgiveness feel like wanting to kick someone's teeth in?"

James snorted. "It can, actually."

Harry looked down at her half-eaten jam-which and scowled. "He makes me so angry. I'm not sure I'm even capable of meeting him without hexing his stupid face off."

James plucked the bag of crisps from the table and unrolled it. "Hexes can be very cathartic," he agreed. "Only, you can't afford to get into any more trouble at the moment. Physical violence can't be traced with *a priori*, on the other hand."

"You're suggesting I literally kick his teeth in, instead?" Harry had to smile at the thought.

"Sometimes just imagining it is enough, I find." James munched a mouthful of crisps in fond reminiscence. "I hardly ever get to kick anyone's teeth in, these days. Too much paperwork."

"Your imagination must be all the stronger for it."

They grinned at one another, and moments like this, Harry couldn't understand how their relationship had become so warped.

James wiped his hand on his robes and asked, "Will you see him, then?"

Before she could answer, Lily came in from the study. Her eyes narrowed on the bag of crisps in her husband's hands. "I know you aren't spoiling your appetite with junk right before lunch."

James gulped. "I was just offering Harry some. She's going to meet the Lestrangle boy."

Lily and Harry both eyed the grease-mark on his robes in silent judgement.

"It's leftovers today," Lily said firmly. "No one is going anywhere until we finish the casserole Mrs. Bagshot sent over."

James and Harry made a face at one another behind Lily's back. Godric's Hollow had turned out in full force to support the Potters through their 'difficult summer,' mostly in the form of homemade food. Some of the very supportive offerings were more palatable than others.

Lily produced the haggard remains of a casserole that had been dead on arrival. No clue as to its once-edible precursors remained; had it been meat-based? Vegetarian? And what, in Morgana's name, had gone so horribly wrong that its status as an item of dubious consumability was discernable only by the baking pan it arrived in?

Harry held her jammed bread like a shield between the monstrous casualty of cooking and her innocent taste-buds. "I'm good."

"Sit down before I ground you from your lab," Lily said mildly.

Harry sat. James slid into the seat beside her, and she realized instantly it would be a competition to see who could slide more of the casserole onto the other's plate without Lily catching them.

Harry had to distract herself before she looked too closely at the pockets of congealed- "Addy with Remus today?"

Lily nodded as she served James first. "He's been a godsend this week. I'm just about ready to begin crafting a new amulet."

"Another Dark Detection Disk?" Harry asked. She accepted her portion of the casserole with only the barest of flinches as the smell

reached her nose.

"Are we keeping my name for it?" James began dividing his portion into pieces, perhaps to convince himself there was less of it than he thought.

"I've been calling it 'Practically Potter-Proof Protection,' actually."

James made a noise of offended protest, but Lily's joke did not keep Harry from noticing that her portion was significantly smaller than theirs.

"Is the Ministry paying you for a prototype?" Harry asked.

Lily nodded again. "The Department of Mysteries contracted-" She paused as the taste of the casserole, fleetingly resurrected by a Warming Charm, assaulted her tongue. Eyes watering, she drank half a glass of water before finishing. "Me."

"If you need raw magic to power it, I'm not using mine much," Harry offered.

Lily gave a droll smile. "One thing I have in plenty is excess magic. Did you know some witches' cores expand again with each subsequent pregnancy?"

"Molly Wesley must be terrifying." James muttered it into his juice, where his tongue was attempting to take permanent refuge.

Lily nodded. "She is, actually. I've been meaning to ask if she'll allow me to examine her core more closely. I think it could be a useful contribution to the research Archie's friend is doing."

"Hermione's Fade research?"

"But Molly hasn't lost any-oh."

"Exactly."

"Two major projects at once," Harry commented.

Lily grinned like a tigress. "It's an exciting time in experimental magic."

"If only everyone shared your excitement." There was a cynical edge to James' voice that Harry didn't recognize.

At Harry's questioning look, Lily made a face. "There are some people who believe a counter to the Killing Curse must be unnatural in some way. Not everyone at the Department of Mysteries supports my research."

"Because some Dark Wizards would prefer it remain unblockable." James stabbed his casserole with rancor. "No matter that Dark Wizards kill one another with that spell more than anything else."

"If anyone thinks your life-saving amulet is unnatural, they don't have to use it," Harry said, shrugging. "You can't force change on people. You can only unlock the door."

Lily leaned across the table to cup Harry's cheek. "You're right. And that's exactly what I'm going to do." She stood, taking her plate with her as she headed for the door. "I'm going back to work. See you at dinner, darlings."

James and Harry exchanged a suspicious look in her wake.

"She's definitely Vanishing that, right?"

"We'll never see that plate again."

As one, they slid the remains of the casserole-that-wasn't into the trash and left the kitchen to the tender mercies of a strong Airing Charm.

James ruffled her curls and gave her a smile she hadn't seen in a while before he headed for the Floo. As he disappeared, it occurred to her that the entire exchange had felt... normal. Nothing simmering

just under the surface, and no second- or third-order thoughts getting in the way of the words between them.

She slipped the tiny scroll out of her pocket and stared at it. If her relationship with her parents could come back from so much... maybe *any* relationship could be fixed with enough work.

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Harry had a plan. She would march into Lestrangle's ill-conceived hourly meeting place with righteous indignation stacked carefully in her heart. She would not listen to any cruel thing he felt entitled to say to her. She would make him understand that what he did was *wrong*, no matter how he was raised, and that she wouldn't tolerate the misuse of their discoveries in future collaboration.

Her plan made it to the door. Lestrangle opened it, and she just... stared.

He did not look like any version of Caelum Lestrangle she had encountered before. His hair had the volume of the continuously harassed, his robes rumpled and stained with something that was fresh and sour. He looked, she could only think, like James that first summer after Addy's birth.

"You came."

Whatever Harry might say-and she wasn't even sure herself-was belayed by the creature that stumbled out from behind Lestrangle's legs.

A miniature pony with a dragon's whiskers and tail. Her eyes traced its pointed ears, tufted head, and the golden scales running down its back. "Tell me that's not what I think it is."

"Get inside."

Lestrangle pulled her bodily into the room, and that's when she knew something was very wrong. He never touched her unless absolutely unavoidable.

Harry circled the tiny creature, unable to believe even with her own eyes. It moved on spindly legs, keeping her in its sights even as she paced around it. A chiming noise like the most delicate of bells came from its throat, and Harry put a hand to her mouth as the sound reverberated through her. "Lestrangle... what are you doing with a baby Qilin?"

Lestrangle leaned against the door. He looked exhausted. "It's a long story."

Lestrangle moved to sit on the bed, and the Qilin stumbled over to bump at his legs imploringly. The creature couldn't be more than a few weeks old. Lestrangle picked it up and cradled it in his arms, and Harry had never seen anything more incongruous in her life.

"I found him on the black market." Before Harry's face could settle into a dark scowl, he hurried to clarify. "I don't normally deal in such things anymore, but people occasionally approach me about items of particular interest. When I saw him, I... this is ridiculous, but I could hear your self-righteous voice in my head. I knew you wouldn't want it killed for parts. They wanted to sell me a vial of its blood, for-"

"Precognition potions."

"-yes, exactly. Instead, I-I bought it. On my parents' credit. For you."

"For... me." Why would Lestrangle think she wanted a live Qilin of all things?

Lestrangle avoided her eyes, stroking the Qilin soothingly, and the Qilin leaned into the touch with its eyes half closed. "Maybe I needed a reason to speak to you. I've been wanting to... apologize."

Harry had scarcely been more confused. "You... illegally acquired me one of the rarest creatures in the world to apologize for helping a violent extremist make a potion using my own technique that trapped my good friend and contributed to the unraveling of a ruse that upended my life. Am I getting that right?"

"It wasn't my first plan," Lestrangle said defensively. "I thought you'd see the article and understand, but then I realized you might not be getting your mail right now."

Harry wanted to sigh. "And this was the next best thing you came up with?"

"Look, I didn't ask for someone to try and sell me a Qilin."

"You just accepted it instead of reporting them to the authorities. And now we have an illegal Qilin!" She hadn't meant to raise her voice, didn't realize she had until the Qilin trilled and buried its head in Lestrangle's arms.

Lestrangle just stared at her, waiting for something else. He wasn't ever going to utter an actual apology, she realized. He was just going to hand her a basket of trouble and consider the matter settled.

Harry pushed a hand into her hair. "I don't know what to do here. Saving this creature was... a good thing. I do think well of you for it. And I did see the article." He lifted his chin, and she shook her head repressively. "But that isn't the same as *apologizing*, and I just... I don't understand. How can you treat me with professional courtesy and then work for a monster who thinks people like me should have their magic stolen?"

"I didn't know that's what they were going to do with the potion!" Lestrangle stood on a wave of emotion, putting the Qilin's fuzzy head at her eye-level. He could not gesture wildly and keep hold of the Qilin, but she could tell by the tension in his arms he wanted to. "That's not even what the *potion* does. I didn't know about the ritual at all. It was just a resurrection potion."

Just a resurrection potion. Did he even hear himself? "You just thought that would be put to an innocent use? That someone who commissioned such a potion was just *eccentric*?"

"No. I..." His shoulders curled inwards, hunching around the Qilin. "It was my father." The words were so quiet she had to lean forward to catch them. "He asked if I could design such a potion and I... couldn't say no." His face screwed up into something bitter. "You wouldn't understand. Your parents stepped out of a *Witch Weekly* column. My parents have never, not *once* treated my interest in Potions as anything but an embarrassing obsession that was beneath the son of Lestrage. When he asked, I realized your technique could do it. A technique no one else but Master Snape was capable of, and I..."

"You couldn't resist."

"I wasn't kidding myself," he admitted quietly. "I know what sort of people my parents associate with."

"The sort that deal in illegal Qilins?"

"Yeah. Only I just... didn't think about it. The implications." He shrugged. "I got lost in the intellectual challenge, and I just wanted them to-to see that-"

He couldn't finish the thought aloud, but Harry already understood. He wanted his parents to be proud of him, to admire him for doing what no one else could. And blast it, how could she stay mad when she'd already forgiven Blaise for what she assumed was the very same thing.

Blaise's mother had sent him that runic ward problem, and he'd taken the assignment without thinking about its potential uses. Lestrage was not so different, except that Harry was more inclined to think the worst of him, perhaps.

Lestrangle rummaged in the sling around his shoulders, and when he leaned over to submerge his whole arm in it, she realized it was undetectably expanded. He pulled out a roll of parchment and handed it to her. "This is the recipe."

Her hand froze on the ribbon. She was no longer sure she wanted to look.

"I thought you deserved to have it, since it was your technique."

She put the scroll in her robe pocket without looking at it. She would think about what information could be gleaned from the recipe later.

They stared at one another for a long moment, and then Lestrangle held the Qilin up sheepishly. "So... can you take him? I've been hiding him in my lab for a couple of days, but I don't want to keep risking my parents finding him."

She knew she had already decided to, so it didn't make any sense to hesitate now, but Harry gave herself a moment to breathe before she held her arms out for the Qilin. Lestrangle settled it against her chest and carefully transferred the sling to her as well.

"He's got plenty of space inside the extended compartment, so you don't have to worry about him while he's inside. He won't want to stay in there all day, though." Lestrangle stepped back, and the Qilin's head followed him plaintively.

"He likes you," Harry observed. That was perhaps the strangest part.

Lestrangle stood there awkwardly, Qilin hair on his robes, a somewhat lost expression on his face. "Qilins don't judge your past. They only look into your future."

Harry eased the Qilin into the expanded traveling sling. She prayed it had Silencing and Cushioning Charms woven into it.

"Are we-" Lestrangle struggled to find the right word. "Good, then?"

"We're..." She didn't know what they were. "Still colleagues. Menesthes and Zosimos." She lifted her chin. "Perhaps I will cite your paper in my first article."

Lestrangle sniffed. "It'll be obsolete by then."

"I'm testing for Mastery this year."

"You're only fifteen," he spluttered.

"I'm done playing truant." Harry could not be more serious. "I'm good enough for Mastery and I know it." It was time for the rest of her life to begin. "So, don't think you can sit on your laurels for the next three years."

Lestrangle gave her a disbelieving look, but his lips hitched. "We must continue to move the field forward, mustn't we?"

Harry affected his snootiest tone. "The rest of the peons aren't going to do it."

She took her leave, pondering the concept of forgiveness. She didn't know if forgiving Lestrangle was the right thing to do. How many chances did he get? And were people inherently limited in the number of chances they deserved?

And what the hell was she going to do with an illegal Qilin?

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She Floored directly to her apartment. It was the only place she could think a Qilin might go unnoticed for a short period of time. If she brought it home, her father would have no choice but to launch an investigation, and while it would be satisfying to have those involved

in its trafficking brought to justice, she wasn't sure she was ready to upset the precarious balance she'd found at home just yet.

Did that make her no better than Lestrage? It was not a question that sat well in her stomach.

She peered down at the Qilin in its carrying pouch, marveling at the size and stability of the inner compartment. Her potions kit relied on numerous sub-pockets that were all carefully packed to keep contents from shifting even with the stabilizing spells. The Qilin gazed up at her trustingly, perfectly relaxed on a bed of warm blankets, with no evidence that the Floo had done it any significant jostling. Lestrage had either given her a family heirloom or paid good gold for the bag. And gold was not something the boy usually seemed to have in ready supply. She wondered uneasily how he was going to explain the sum he'd put on his parent's credit to acquire the Qilin.

Harry fished the Qilin from the pouch and set it in the middle of her small living room. After a moment's consideration, she cleared the area of Potions supplies, pushed the furniture out of the way, and laid down a ward with a vial of Protection Potion. The Qilin stared at her from behind the ward, and she couldn't help but smile as she compared it to the label her dad had designed for the potion. A baby Qilin looked a lot like a young deer.

"Sorry," she offered. She did feel a little bad penning it up behind the ward, but she needed to think without worrying it was going to get into something. "If it makes you feel better, I do the same thing to Addy sometimes."

She crossed to the kitchen and lifted the lid on one of the ceramic cookie jars Leo had furnished her apartment with. She didn't know if Merriam had ever kept cookies in it, but it was where she'd hid the phoenix feather.

Every now and then, when she was passing through the alleys, she'd lift the lid and take a peek to see if anything had happened.

She didn't know what she expected, that one day it would be glowing, perhaps, or blinking urgently, but so far it always sat undisturbed. That day, she lifted the lid and found the feather had made friends.

Nestled beneath the feather was a slim notecard in the headmaster's familiar writing, and next to it sat a blue marble. She eased the card out of the jar and read it quickly. Then she sat down and read it again.

My dear boy,

A much-anticipated event is happening in Paris. I took the liberty of procuring means of transportation, should you still be interested in attending. How is 11 o'clock? My friends and I look forward to witnessing a satisfying conclusion to a very long year.

Yours in anticipation,

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Paris. No one had said the crowning ceremony would be happening in Paris. Granted, no one had said *where* it was to be held yet, but somehow, she'd assumed it would be at Hogwarts, or maybe the Ministry.

Then she realized-Fleur. It was happening in Paris in deference to the default champion, because no one expected Rigel to actually show. And he wouldn't. Unless absolutely necessary.

Harry pocketed the marble, trusting it not to activate until eleven on the day of the ceremony. She considered the feather for another moment. Aloud, she wondered, "Can I send a message back?"

The feather winked in and out of existence. She supposed that was her answer. On the back of the card, Harry scrawled:

Have a semi-urgent, unrelated matter. Illegal Qilin acquired accidentally. Do you have contacts who can give it a safe home? Sorry to bother. Thanks.

She didn't sign it. Dumbledore would understand who it was from if he looked at the other side of the card.

She placed the card under the feather and said, tentatively, "Message for Professor Dumbledore."

The feather and card winked out of the cookie jar. There. That was good. Now she only had to wait until she received a reply-

The feather reappeared, a card attached. Harry blinked at it. Had her note just been returned? But when she picked it up, it was clearly a new card.

Kindly bring Qilin to event in Paris. Old friend will meet you after to collect.

Well, then. Harry eyed the Qilin doubtfully. She just had to keep it alive for a few days... but she knew little about Qilins and nothing about what they ate. Lestrangle hadn't explained any of that, come to think of it. What had he been feeding it? She would have to find a book.

In the meantime, she couldn't stay there with the Qilin. She could bring it along to the bookstore, but something about its wide, brown eyes made her not want to stuff it back into the bag until she had to. "Don't look at me like that." Harry paced the apartment floor. She couldn't leave it there alone, even with the ward. Someone might break in and steal it, or drop by unannounced-

Only Leo would drop by unannounced. Leo, who was probably at the Dancing Phoenix about that time, relaxing after a long day's work. Harry took a deep breath, crossed to the Floo grate, and threw a handful of powder into the fire.

The Phoenix would be too crowded and loud to hear someone Floo-calling, so she stumbled straight through and craned her neck over the crowd toward Leo's table.

He was there, Rispah to his left and Aled to his right, a trio of pints between them. Harry pushed her way over, returning the smiles that greeted her upon her appearance.

"Harry!"

"About time you dropped by."

"Pull up a chair. Solom! Milk for the King's favorite!"

Harry shook her head quickly. "Thanks, Rispah, but I can't stay."

Leo's eyes sharpened, sweeping her for injury. "Trouble?"

"Not the violent kind. I do have a situation I was hoping you could help with. If you aren't busy." She tucked her curls behind an ear to keep them out of her face as she added, "Shouldn't take more than a couple of hours."

Rispah smiled slyly. "Ambitious, aren't we?"

Leo elbowed his cousin in the corset. He tipped the remains of his pint into Aled's glass, effectively turning the man's guffaws into a choked protest. "Come, Harry." Leo rounded the table and took her arm. "We rise above the imaginations of the masses."

Harry waved to the others and towed Leo back toward the Floo. "I have this thing in my apartment I need someone to keep an eye on for a little while," she explained lowly. "It came up kind of suddenly, and I wasn't prepared."

"Is it dangerous?"

"It's adorable," she admitted.

Leo raised his eyebrows. "Do I finally get to meet your little sister?"

He was not as far off as he might think. Harry went through first and made way for him on the other side. Leo spun out of the grate like a dancer, landing in a graceful crouch as his eyes darted about the room, assessing.

Harry gaped at him. "Do you practice that?"

Leo rose from his crouch with a smirk. "I can do a somersault, too."

Harry rolled her eyes, but couldn't stop the smile from spreading on her face. She missed Leo when he wasn't around. "So, this is the... thing." She gestured to the ward in the middle of the room and the Qilin napping peacefully inside it.

Leo circled it without speaking for a long moment. "That's a Qilin."

"Yes. Someone... gave it to me. Today. And I don't know how to take care of it."

Leo gave Harry a gentle look. "Lass, I don't think you can keep it."

Harry made a face at him. "I'm not *keeping* it. Merlin." As if she didn't know it was an internationally protected species. "Another friend it going to get it to a proper home in a few days; I just have to keep it safe and alive until then."

"Ah. And you want my help doing that?" Leo seemed a little relieved that she wasn't planning to keep what amounted to the Queen's jewels in animal form penned in her apartment for the foreseeable future.

"If you don't mind. I was going to run to the bookshop before it closes, to see if they have anything on the care and keeping of Qilins. Do you think you could watch him for an hour?" Harry looked at the sleeping creature with trepidation. "I don't feel safe leaving him

here alone. Even carrying him around feels like I have the Philosopher's Stone in my pocket."

"No kidding." Leo shook his head. "I didn't even know there was a pregnant mother alive right now. I'm surprised I haven't heard of a search."

"It was found on the black market," Harry said. "Its mother might have been there for some time."

"Might even have been raised there herself," Leo agreed. "Probably an underground breeding program. Trickster preserve me, but you do get into the oddest spots of trouble, Harry."

"I don't mean to." Harry bit her lip. "And obviously, you don't have to feel obligated or anything."

"Harry, I don't," Leo began. He crossed the room to look her directly in the eyes. "I don't ever mind helping you."

Harry wanted to be sure he understood her. "I don't mean to take advantage of your friendship, Leo. I just... need someone to help me protect him, and you were the first person I thought of." She felt safe with Leo, and somehow, she knew the Qilin would be safe with him, too. "You're good at protecting people."

Leo wrapped her in a slow hug. "You don't always make it this easy."

When the moment stretched and she reached a point where she no longer wanted to pull back, she knew she had to. She turned to the sleeping Qilin and said, "You be good for Leo." She dug the ward-disrupting potion out of her bag and set it on the counter. "Use this if you need to get to him before the ward wears off. I'll be back as soon as I find something useful. Thanks, Leo."

"Whatever you need, Harry."

She was not smiling stupidly as she closed the door behind her. Leo had already given her everything she needed, whether he knew it or not. He claimed she didn't make things easy for him, but he made everything easy for her.

She could breathe when she was with Leo. Where everywhere else the air was too thin, in his presence, she found an ecosystem that felt as though it had been made for her. She wanted to plant roots there and soak in the energy he radiated. She could flourish with Leo, given half a chance.

Soon, that chance would come. After the crowning ceremony, it would all be over. She would have the headspace to explain everything, like he deserved, and maybe it would be nice to have one person finally know all of her. Maybe it wouldn't be terrifying at all.

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The bookshop didn't close until eight, so she had plenty of time to get there and find the right reference. She moved unhurried through the quiet streets, at home in the familiar neighborhoods she passed through. There was something nice about walking rather than Apparating or Flooing. The world felt like a tapestry of continuous threads, instead of a hanging mobile of individual pieces, connected by invisible wire.

She glanced at the lit windows of the Serpent's Storeroom as she passed, and the last person she expected stepped out of the doorway into Knockturn Alley.

The evening sun tangled like a crown of fire in her golden hair, the longest tendrils of which trailed down her back and swung when she turned to find Harry staring at her. Pansy.

"Hello, Miss Potter."

"Your hair..." The words stuck in her throat. It was a strangled moment before she worked past the lump. "Miss Parkinson, forgive me. I almost didn't recognize you with your hair so long. It's been a while." Hadn't it? "You look well." She had to stop talking. What was Pansy doing there? Was Harry destined to have every possible emotional confrontation in the alleys that summer?

"Thank you." Pansy eyed Harry's mess of curls, and she wondered if they were noticeably brittle. "You also look well."

Harry snorted. "I look a mess." She probably had Qilin fur on her robes and a strained look in her eyes. She fingered a curl self-consciously. "The growing charms are brutal, I know. I can't seem to stop singing them, though."

It wasn't defensive to offer an immediate explanation, she told herself. Pansy would notice either way. Best to head her off before her intellect wandered down that road.

Harry cast a glance toward the Serpent's Storeroom. "Been waiting for me long?"

Pansy gave her an offended look. That was good. Offended she could work with. "Actually," the other girl said stiffly. "I was placing an order with the proprietor for a modified recipe. He was quite accommodating."

A modified recipe. "For Draco?"

Pansy frowned at her. "How could you know that?"

Stupid. It didn't matter whether or not Draco was on Nutrient Potions again. She no longer got to know such things. Harry shut the part of herself that was Rigel away in a box firmly and tried to brush the question off nonchalantly. "No Acai, right? I've taken commissions from Lord Malfoy before."

"Of course." Pansy gestured to the storefront with a nod of her head. "This is your apothecary. I just hadn't realized you filled every custom order."

"I don't." Harry shifted her weight awkwardly. "So, you really weren't waiting for me? You'd be the first. Rosier was by earlier this summer."

"Anyone else?" Pansy asked. She showed no surprise at Aldon's actions. Harry wondered if they were working together.

"No one you would associate with."

At least, she didn't think Pansy kept in touch with Lestrage. All she needed now was for Draco and Snape to jump out from behind Eyelop's and her bingo card for difficult encounters would be full.

Pansy pressed her lips together. "Ignoring your presumption in assuming my associations, I won't pretend I wasn't... hoping to see you here. I have concerns."

"You have questions."

Pansy's expression sharpened in offense once again, and Harry kept her chin up unconcernedly. Rigel would never be so rude to Pansy. Harry had to be so different there wasn't even a comparison to be made. "Yes, I do. And I'm not the only one."

"Are you an emissary, then? For Rigel's friends from school?"

Pansy glanced around, and she was right to worry, but Harry wouldn't be going off-script. "We'd like to know where Rigel is," Pansy said firmly.

"I can't tell you that."

"Because you don't know? Or because you think you're protecting him?" Pansy moved closer, tilting her head in a way that meant she wanted Harry to look deeper in her eyes. Pansy could be so very

persuasive, when she wanted to be. "Because you don't need to. Not from us."

"No offense, Miss Parkinson, but your friends' families are spearheading the search."

"We are *not* our parents. We care about Rigel and we would never betray him to *anyone* ." Pansy's eyes were bright, her lips soft. So very believable. "We just want to know he's safe."

"Then know it." Harry allowed Pansy to stay in her personal space. She spoke softly, to let her know she understood and even empathized, but would stand against her anyway. "In your heart, know that he is safe, but also gone. He can't afford to look back when it would only bring danger to us all."

"Why? What is happening?" Gentle supplication peeled back to reveal the stress beneath. "Look, we can't help him if we don't know." At her continued silence, Pansy's face hardened. "We're learning Occlumency. All of us."

Harry wanted to cry. *Oh, Pan. That will never be enough.*

Pansy wasn't finished. "We'll be able to keep his secrets and help him with whatever is going on. Between us, we have access to a lot of resources."

"Money and power can't fix every problem." Harry did not allow her voice to waver. "Rigel is in danger, and the more people know where he is, the more danger he is in."

"So, you do know where he is?"

"I have only guesses. Unlike you, I haven't asked." Harry tried to put censure into her tone. "I respect his choice to maintain distance at this extremely complicated and dangerous time in his life."

"And I care about him too much to let him do this *alone!* " The end of Pansy's sentence came out on a sob that went straight to Harry's gut. She had never, ever wanted to make Pansy cry. Pansy's hand reached out to press against Harry's heart, and she wondered if the other girl could feel how wretchedly it beat. "Please, Harry. I am one of his closest friends. Rigel would want me to know."

Harry placed her own hand over Pansy's and squeezed. "No, Pan. He wouldn't."

Pansy stared at her, slow tears squeezing out of the corners of her eyes. "Only he gets to call me that." She wiped the tears away angrily, too upset to realize he just had.

And Harry was grateful for it. Let her stay angry. Keep them angry and off-balance, and they wouldn't press deeper.

Harry stepped back and gave the girl a moment to compose herself before she asked suddenly, "What do Qilins eat?"

Pansy gave her an incredulous frown. "What?"

"Qilins." Pansy had taken the Magical Creatures elective, and there was very little chance of her ever mentioning the random question to Lestrage, even if their paths did cross anytime soon. Even then, Harry could admit to having been in contact with a Qilin. It was Rigel who should not be so casually connected. "What do they eat?"

Pansy looked as though Harry had handed her a riddle she wasn't sure how to answer. Too late, she realized the blonde might take it as a clue to Rigel's whereabouts. Before Harry could further clarify, she said, "They eat only dead vegetation."

"Oh. That's what I thought," she lied. "Thanks."

She said goodbye before she could make things any weirder. At the very least, Pansy was not crying anymore. She was frowning as Harry took her leave.

Frowning was good. *Stay angry and forget.* That was all she could hope.

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Grimmauld place was decked in AIM banners. Confetti covered the floors in a treacherous snowfall, and all four Potters were given a magically-adhering party hat when they Flooed through onto the grate.

"Welcome! Cocktails and pre-dinner refreshments in the kitchen. Just put your coats anywhere."

"It's summer," Lily reminded Sirius.

"And we've been to your house a million times." James trod a careful path through the confetti, Addy in his arms. "What's the formality for?"

"Just practicing."

The Floo flared to life, and the Grangers stumbled through next.

"Oh." Mrs. Granger looked around at the self-waving banners. "How festive."

"Hello again." Hermione's father took Sirius's hand warmly. "Thanks so much for having us."

"Archie wouldn't hear of celebrating without Hermione," Sirius assured the man. "Plus, I wanted to get your opinion on the new decoration scheme. I'm going for an updated, more muggle look."

"More *modern*, you mean?" Hermione gave Sirius an admonishing look.

He grinned unrepentantly. "Just so. Right through here."

"Has Remus arrived?" Lily asked.

Sirius was already halfway to the kitchen. "He can find his own way, the smug bachelor!"

"Should we take our shoes off?" Hermione asked.

"Never leave your shoes, or any article of clothing, for that matter, unattended in this house." Harry walked her through to the kitchen.

Archie sprang from his stool and nearly bowled Hermione over in a hug. "I did it! Can you believe it?"

"Can I believe you tested into exactly the class you should have been in after four years of study?" Hermione smiled as they broke apart. "I'd be concerned if you hadn't."

"Devastated, too." Archie waggled his eyebrows at her. "Who could ever replace me as a study partner?"

Hermione seemed entirely immune to his charms. "What's devastating is the amount of correspondence I've been fielding from our classmates over you."

Archie gave Hermione a hopeful look. "You, ah, explained things to them?"

"I did not. I said you would explain it yourself when you returned."

Archie tilted his head in confusion. "I just told you I passed today, though."

Hermione smiled. "I never doubted you."

Harry let them have a moment as she went to get a plate of fruit from a platter that had been arranged to look like the American flag.

Strawberries, blueberries, and dragon fruit formed an odd but not unappetizing mix on the palate.

"Did you pass your entrance exams as well?"

Mrs. Granger had a kind smile on her face, no notion of how sore a question that was. Harry avoided her mother's eyes as she said, "I'm taking my O.W.L.s at the end of the summer, and if I pass, my parents have agreed to let me continue homeschooling."

Grudgingly, but they had allowed it. They didn't know she planned to take the Potions N.E.W.T. soon after, and the Masters as soon as she met the qualifications. She wouldn't need any other N.E.W.T.s once she had a Mastery. The rest would be history.

"Are you really? A whole year early." Hermione gave her an impressed look. "Sometimes I wonder how I would have fared homeschooling-I did consider it, when Mrs. Figg explained the employment considerations to me-but I wouldn't trade my time at AIM for anything."

"A well-rounded education is essential for many," Harry said. "But I've always known where my talents lie."

"Some real hard-headed eleven-year-olds, we had," Remus said dryly. Giving Lily and James a look, he added, "No idea where she gets it from."

"Yes, yes. We shoulder all blame and take all credit due," James waved his free hand dismissively. "Let's not talk about the past tonight." He raised his glass of amber alcohol. "To the future. May it be as bright as our children think they are."

Everyone raised a glass or plate and clinked with the nearest to them.

"To the future!"

"Well said."

"And on that happy note, dinner is served." Sirius ushered them into the formal dining room, which Harry didn't think she had ever seen used. The long table was ornately set with goblin-made plates and crystal water goblets.

James eyed the silverware distrustfully. "That's not the cursed cutlery your uncle passed down, is it?"

"Bought fresh this morning," Sirius said cheerfully. "I'm certain there hasn't been enough time for anything to settle onto it yet."

The reassurance seemed to leave the Grangers a good deal less assured. "Do you have an issue with... ah... curses in your family?" Mr. Granger looked at his daughter uncertainly. "That is, I have heard they can run in families."

"That's something else." Hermione corrected him gently. She glanced at Lily and smiled self-consciously. "I've been telling them about my research into the Fade. It's not a curse, though. It's a congenital problem that is made more likely in certain families due to genetic predisposition, so to speak."

"Although curses can run in families," Sirius said thoughtfully. "Blood curses, and the like."

"Sounds ominous." Mrs. Granger was slicing her heirloom carrot very slowly.

"I'd much rather hear about Hermione's research," Lily put in.

Hermione nodded. "I've been meaning to set up a time to speak with you about it."

"How's Saturday?" Archie suggested.

Awkward looks were exchanged around the table. *Oh*, Harry thought. *This will be good.*

"Saturday is the crowning ceremony," Hermione said quietly. Naturally, she had been following it, too.

"Have they asked you to go?" Remus asked.

"She declined." Mr. Granger punctuated the statement with a stab of his fork. "Hermione doesn't want any more to do with that hysterical nightmare of a tournament."

"Wise girl." James was soundly approving.

Just to nettle him, Harry asked, "Aren't you going, Dad? As security?"

"Yes." James cleared his throat. "I'll be working it."

"It's in Paris, I thought. Bit outside your jurisdiction, isn't it?" Mr. Granger was not entirely wrong.

"Well, the French have their own security, of course, but the British Minister will want a personal detail. So." James threw back the rest of his drink with a quick grimace.

"What about you all?" Harry asked the rest of her family. It was a bit cruel of her, since she already knew at least some of them would be there, to help the Order with a distraction, but at least it gave them a chance to air their alibis.

Sirius and Remus exchanged a look. "We might go along. Keep an eye on things," Sirius said slowly.

"You expect Rigel to come?" Hermione was quick. Her sharp eyes turned to Archie. "He wouldn't, would he? It would be incredibly foolish."

"Rigel's not a fool, you know that," Archie said easily.

"I doubt there will be any trouble," James added.

The Grangers once again remained spectacularly un-reassured.

"I might visit Alice that day," Lily declared suddenly. "Harry, would you be up for babysitting?"

Harry pretended to consider it. "I was thinking of watching the ceremony with Leo in Diagon. I haven't seen him much." It was a bald-faced lie, as she'd been returning to her flat to check on him and the Qilin any spare moment she could, but her parents weren't very good at keeping track of her when they had so much on their own plates.

"They've got a mirror up, haven't they?" Mrs. Granger smiled. "We saw it looking for new robes for Hermione. Sprouting like a weed, our girl."

"Mum." Hermione's cheeks pinkened.

"It's a fun bit of magic, those mirrors," Mr. Granger added. "Almost like a telly."

"They are fantastic representations of runic flexibility," Lily agreed. "Not something you can accomplish with wand-work alone."

The conversation segued to the various branches of magic and the capabilities and limitations. The Grangers were fascinated, and Lily and Remus in particular were happy to expound on things. When they found out Remus was a teacher, the questions grew more pointed still, and soon the four of them were having an entirely separate conversation.

Hermione smiled sheepishly at the rest of them. "I don't take them to magic things as often as I should. I think they feel bad always asking me questions. I don't mind," she added. "But I don't know everything."

"Remus and Lily are in their element," James assured her. "We should have you three over to our house next. It'll be nice to have

more friends our age."

It was as good as an invitation to the family, and Harry could see her cousin vibrating in excitement on the other side of the table. "Let's definitely do that," he said loudly.

Sirius ruffled his son's hair. "All right, calm down. No engagements until you're seventeen."

"You let Harry and me get engaged at twelve."

"Let it not be said Sirius Black can't learn from his mistakes." Sirius gave Hermione a sidelong look. "Speaking of which, I've been meaning to enlist your services to spy on my son while he's at school this year."

"Oi!"

Archie's objection was studiously ignored as Hermione asked, "How often would you like a report?"

"Ideally, every week, but I understand if you feel that to be excessive."

"Shall we say biweekly, with a by-exception clause built in for extraordinary circumstances?"

They shook on it, and Archie sunk three inches into his seat. Sirius patted him on the head. "You understand, son. Just making sure you're still there."

"I understand," Archie muttered weakly.

"I could spy on Harry in the alleys as well, Mr. Potter." Hermione gave James a winning smile.

James looked a little too interested in this offer, so Harry cut in quickly, "No need to go to any trouble, Hermione."

"I work in the clinic anyway, so it would be no trouble." Hermione's smile had an edge Harry didn't trust. "Only until the end of the summer, of course. I can't look out for her during the school year."

"I have plenty of people looking out-"

"Harry won't be returning to the alleys-"

James stared at her and she stared back. "Harry," he said slowly. "Homeschooling means schooling... at home."

"Right." She knew that.

"Where Lily can check your work and Remus can help you with any practical portions you don't understand." James' eye-contact had not wavered.

Harry held firm under the suspicion in his stare. "Uh-huh. Looking forward to it."

Actually, she had been looking forward to having her own space. Not that she wasn't happy at home, but she hadn't spent a whole year there since she was ten. She had already finished her fourth- and fifth-year course-work, in any case. It was a prerequisite for testing for O.W.L.s, but her parents must be under the assumption she would begin N.E.W.T. work next.

They would have to revisit the conversation when she was ready to test for Mastery.

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[RbRbRb]

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It was the day before the crowning ceremony of the Triwizard Tournament, and Regulus had nothing to do. He should have been in Paris, overseeing the security wards around the Place Cachée, but

Riddle had found an... alternate Ward Master for the event. As though his diminished standing in the Party needed rubber-stamping.

With nothing therefore prescribed that afternoon, he meant to infiltrate one of the dubious establishments that passed for a pub in the Lower Alleys. At the Phoenix, the little king liked to hold his court, so that was where Regulus would watch and wait. He had not given up the search for Rigel Black. Nothing but success in that endeavor could return him to Lord Riddle's trust. And with the Malfoys out of the picture, no one was better positioned to succeed.

The market was packed with shoppers stocking up for the weekend. Regulus wove among them, but slowed to a stop as he passed a stall selling old vegetables by the ounce. There was a girl with riotous black curls speaking to the proprietor, and as he approached, she froze and turned deliberately to face him.

"Potter." He didn't know how she had sensed him in the crowd, but she did not look at all surprised as their eyes met.

"Black." She hefted her sack of vegetables over her shoulder and flashed spell-green eyes at him. "How surprising to find you at market. Have your house-elves gone on strike?"

He ground his teeth at her audacity. "How surprising to find you out unattended. Are the death-threats not getting through?"

"No, I'm getting them." She pushed back her curls unconcernedly. "The words of uninspired bigots don't really bother me."

"Let us hope you don't learn to heed them the hard way."

Her eyes narrowed and she took a step closer. "Now what would a man of your pretension be doing wandering the Lower Alleys on a Friday afternoon?" She pretended to think. "We've no use for a Ward-wizard that I can think of."

"And you know everything that happens in the alleys, do you?"

"Nearly." She bared her teeth at him. "And Leo keeps track of everything else."

He sneered. "Where is your boy-king? The pub, playing knights and ladies?"

"Leo's taking care of something for me." Potter's amusement soured his own mood further. Hurst was at her beck and call, too. What strange power did this chit have over the boys of her generation? "Why?" She rocked back on her heels, and he had seen that posture before, hadn't he? "What are you looking for?"

Her casual disrespect tempted him to brutal honesty. "I'm looking for Rigel Black, and I think someone in these alleys knows where he is." There. Let him see how she reacted to that.

The Potter girl only smiled pityingly at him. "If you haven't found him yet... well, they say the first forty-eight hours are crucial in a missing person case."

Regulus bit back a snarl. Carefully, he said, "It is *vital* that I find him before tomorrow. More than you know."

Potter raised an eyebrow. "Before the crowning ceremony, you mean?"

He made a show of looking around before telling her, "He will be in grave danger if he does not appear at the final ceremony."

"In danger if he *doesn't*?" Potter scoffed. "That's rich. What makes you think someone here knows where he is, anyway?"

He watched her face closely, but saw no evidence of dissembling or concern. Privately, he agreed with her assessment, but Lord Riddle had assured him that anyone with first-hand knowledge of the RBC's circumstances would know what danger he spoke of in that context. Potter continued to stare disbelievingly at him, and he had to conclude she did not know whatever it was.

Except, last time, she had known something even Lord Riddle hadn't been aware of. Something that made the wizard extremely interested in discovering Regulus' source. Only the notion that pursuing the source would lose him the Black Family support entirely stopped his inquiry. For now.

And the intimacy required to know such a thing-to know that Rigel, who had carried a piece of Lord Riddle's magic inside him, had somehow transferred it to the imposter while being imprisoned and possessed-there was no reason she would know such a thing and not now know of what Riddle spoke.

Unless their connection had since been broken. Was that the case, or was she a very good actress?

To answer her question, Regulus gestured to the alleys around them. "There was a tournament here, last summer. I saw Hurst use the same moves that Rigel used in the dueling task of the Triwizard Tournament. There can be no doubt there is a connection."

Potter didn't deny it. Instead, she smiled widely. "Of course." She spread her arms, bag swinging along with the motion. "The connection is me."

His heart stuttered, and he thought he must have misunderstood her. She was-

"I taught Rigel to free-duel, as Leo taught me."

His breath hissed out. Salazar, but that made too much sense not to be true. Of course, she was the link to the alleys. The chit was always too close to everything. She'd been living there, so it made sense that she would be the point of contact between the alleys and Arcturus and Rigel. She looked so at home in the filth of Diagon, he wouldn't be surprised if she had more to do with the shadier aspects of their deception than either of the other two had. "Does your father know you free-duel in your free time?"

"My dad is learning a lot about me this summer," she said ruefully. "Not that you're at liberty to talk specifics about the alley tournament last year."

Potter was much too informed about his role in the Lower Alleys. He hadn't even known she'd been in the tournament last summer. He didn't like it and he didn't like her, but at least he had learned his time there was wasted going forward. " *If* you see Rigel, do give him a warning."

"He wouldn't trust any warning that came from you," she said immediately.

"From you, then." His lip curled. "I don't care if the boy comes to harm, but you do. So warn him or don't. It'll be on you."

"I'm sure Rigel doesn't need me to tell him anything." She had an odd look on her face. "He's two steps ahead of us all."

Despite his words, there was a part of him that hoped she was right. If Regulus knew where the boy was, he'd tell him to stay as far away from Paris as he could get. Whatever danger came to Rigel in staying away, it couldn't match the threat that awaited him if he showed.

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"I've grown so fond of this guy."

Leo sat on the floor, a lapful of Qilin, looking as though Harry had demanded his first-born.

"He was never ours to keep." Harry turned back to the conjured mirror and carefully applied a Transfiguration that would make her look like a Weasley's bastard. She'd already taken the Modified

Polyjuice that would form the base of her disguise, but that was only a backup, in the event that her Transfiguration was cancelled by some other magic in the course of the afternoon. She had learned that lesson at Longbottom House.

When her hair was the color of a carrot and freckles dotted her cheeks, she let the mirror dissolve and turned back to Leo. To his credit, he didn't even blink at her altered appearance.

"Maybe I can visit him, wherever he ends up."

"I'll ask if that's an option," Harry said doubtfully. "His native habitat is in China, though."

"I've never been to China. Could be fun." Leo cradled the Qilin as he stood. With a gentle nod, he bumped foreheads with the small creature. "Goodbye, little prince. I shall miss you." The Qilin solemnly inclined its head in turn. Leo carefully situated the Qilin in the sling around Harry's torso, then gave her a dangerously imploring look. "I don't suppose you'll change your mind about letting me come with you?"

Harry looked away. "There can't be any connection between Harry and Rigel. If someone recognizes you-" Will, or anyone else in the Order or at the ceremony, for that matter. "-it puts me in danger."

"You're already in danger." Leo searched her eyes. "I don't like this."

She knew he wouldn't. There were so many words still left between them. "If I don't come back-"

"That's it." Leo palmed his wand and rearranged his features before she could protest. "You're not the only one who can change faces." His hair was black, now, his cheeks a little sharper and his nose smaller. He took her by the hand as the portkey began to warm, and she let him keep it. "You are coming back, Harry. I'll ensure it."

[LhLhLh]

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He had not been to Place Cachée since his own crowning. Just after taking the title, he'd met with his counterparts in Dublin and Paris. It was good form to keep tabs on the other major Wizarding communities, when it was so easy for people and goods to move between them. Not all underground leaders were friendly or even civil, but he'd liked Nadine well enough. That didn't mean he was keen to let her catch him mucking about in her city, mind.

The disguise served more than one purpose.

There were unmistakable signs that the British had stuck their foot in the decoration scheme. Intermixed with streamers and ornaments in Beauxbatons' powder blue were staid MoM banners with the logo for the Department of Magical Games and Sports prominently displayed.

A stage had been hastily erected in the center of the public square. It shone in his Sight with fresh magic and the unmistakable perfection of a conjured item. He supposed it would make for easy cleanup. In the center of the stage, reflecting the mid-summer sky, was one of the enormous magical mirrors so ubiquitous throughout the tournament.

The crowd was thin, but filling in quickly. French Aurors stood at checkpoints wherever alleys met the square, and a team of them were slowly filtering people through the statue that guarded the main entrance to Place Cachée, as well.

The portkey had deposited them *inside* the security perimeter, a fact Leo took a moment to fully appreciate. Others were portkeying in alongside them, dignitaries with official entourages and symbols of office, even some celebrities in outlandish and expensive dress robes. Leo looked at Harry in her nondescript black cloak and stolen face and wondered what powerful friend had procured that portkey. It

had to be someone above scrutiny, but why would someone like that aid a wanted criminal in evading capture? There was still so much he didn't know about her.

Harry's hand snuck out of her cloak to take his arm and together they made their way to the stage. With a few carefully placed elbows, they were close enough to see the fake grain in the floor of the stage. Not in the very front row, but they could get there in a hurry.

He was not one hundred percent clear on the plan, but he didn't think Harry was either. She had explained that there was an Unbreakable Vow she had to put to rest, and he was all in favor of that, but she claimed she wouldn't know what completing the Vow entailed until it happened. Which was not comforting.

She also claimed to have friends in the crowd, people-he wasn't sure how many-who would help cause a distraction, if absolutely necessary, when the time came. Then they would go to a safehouse, whose coordinates she had rattled off of a little card in her pocket. It was a messy, play-by-ear kind of a plan, but he was no stranger to reacting in an emergency. The relief that had not quite faded since Harry accepted his hand in her apartment came back, blood-heady and coursing. Even with no idea what was to come, he liked her chances better with him at her back.

His mother would twist his ear for such chauvinistic thinking, but he couldn't help it. He wanted to be there when things went wrong in her life, wanted to fix them so she didn't have to. He wished he could put his wand and knife and influence in the way of any problem that approached her, whether she needed his help or not. He knew that was impossible. He couldn't always be there for her, but today he could. Right now, that was enough.

The Minister took the stage and held his hands up for quiet. He cast a Sonorous on his throat when that didn't work.

"WELCOME, ONE AND ALL, TO THE CROWNING CEREMONY OF THE NEW TRIWIZARD TOURNAMENT."

The crowd yelled their approval all around him. Some eager spectators even sent crackling sparks into the air with their wands. The Minister adjusted the volume on his Sonorous so that he could be heard without deafening them.

"Now, now, no unauthorized use of magic in the security perimeter," Fudge chastened half-heartedly. "Don't make me call those nice Aurors in to calm things down."

Leo doubted he spoke enough French to order those Aurors to do anything, and Fudge's own entourage of Aurors did not look big enough to subdue an entire crowd of boisterous witches and wizards.

"I, along with my counterpart, Minister Houdin, would like to thank you all for coming here today to celebrate the finalists and crown our tournament champion!" Fudge gestured for the French Minister to ascend the few steps to the stage. Minister Houdin repeated more or less what Fudge had said in French, at least Leo thought so. Admittedly, his French was not very good either.

But even he understood when Lord Riddle was invited to the stage.

The man did not walk as a wizard in the midst of losing everything walked. He did not talk like a leader whose supporters were abandoning his platform in droves. He made eye contact. Smiled. Mounted the stairs of the platform as though he were on a one-way ride to the halls of history.

Leo had to admire his courage, if nothing else. He wondered: would Riddle pretend not to hear the world's amusement, or would he somehow turn it to his favor?

Even the most enthusiastic of the gathered grew quiet for Riddle.

"The fugitive known as Rigel Black-" Leo felt Harry tense completely at his side. "-is the undisputed champion of the Triwizard Tournament!"

Riddle smiled even in the face of the raucous response he received to that declaration. "Yes; he shocked us all, I assure you. The matter of his blood notwithstanding, Rigel Black surmounted the competition in every category." Riddle shook his head as though pained. "He is, of course, invited here today-" Riddle continued to speak over the rising noise, no waver in his confident expression. "-as is contractually required by the nature of the tournament by-laws, but we do not expect an appearance."

Riddle's eyes held a challenge, and Leo wondered who it was for, if he did not expect Rigel to show, after all. "No, ladies and gentlemen. Though we are wizards of our word, and prepared to honor his achievements in absentia, I'm afraid he cannot be said to hold the title of Tournament Champion, or indeed, be considered to have finished his obligations to the tournament at all, unless he does indeed appear to claim his prize."

Leo felt more than heard Harry suck in a breath beside him. This was it, then. The Vow's conditions would rest on claiming whatever prize was presented.

"The prize, of course, is the famed Rod of Zuriel!" Riddle unwound a cloaking enchantment and the silver staff appeared on the stage, planted squarely in the center, just in front of the magic mirror. Anyone who wanted to claim it would have to mount the steps and be reflected before all. "This prize is Rigel's by right and obligation, but if he does not appear to claim it by the end of the ceremony, we are prepared to crown the runner-up, Miss Fleur Delacour."

He gave a moment for the audience to calm down before continuing. "Before we get to all that, let's bring out our tournament contestants! Won't you help me welcome them to the stage?"

From one the adjacent alleys, a line of teenagers appeared one at a time. Aurors made a path for them through the crowd. Leo recognized the other contenders, but unless he miscounted, they were a few plums short of a pudding.

The young witches and wizards climbed the stage to thunderous applause. Delacour led them, followed by Owens. Antiope came next, then Sousa, and finally the Zahi boy, the only one among them to wave back at the crowd. Hermione was not there, nor Shang, nor Krum. They lined up along the center of the stage, on either side of the mirror; Delacour and Owens on one side, and Antiope, Sousa, and Zahi on the other.

"Let's give these extraordinary witches and wizards our deepest appreciation." A tidal-wave of applause filled the square. "And to those participants whose schedules didn't allow them to be with us today, another round of recognition. Thank you. Thank you all for supporting these gifted young people. And now, our runners-up will get the chance to say a few words." Riddle gave Delacour a gentlemanly half-bow. "Miss Delacour, if you will."

He did not go far from center stage or the mirror, Leo noticed.

Delacour pressed her wand to her throat and began her speech off a small notecard. "Zank you, Mr. Riddle. Zis tournament and etz aftermath 'ave been rife with talk of blood and purity."

Leo's eyebrows rose as he realized the girl was going straight for the point. The expression on both Ministers' faces suggested they had not heard her speech ahead of time. Delacour's eyes flashed in angry defiance, and Leo almost hoped one of them would dare to try and stop her from speaking.

"Zere are zose 'oo zink ze tournament finals were not valid, because zere waz no pureblood champion represented. So, Rigel waz a halfblood. So what? Zen I am ze pureblood champion of ze finals. My grandmozer was a full Veela. Does anyone 'ere zink zat makes me lesser?" Her eyes glowed. "'ardly. To me, and to all of us in

France 'oo are not bigoted and backwards, zat means we did have one pureblood, one halfblood, and one muggleborn finalist. And ze halfblood won. Good for him, 'ooever he is. I am 'appy to accept ze runner-up prize and put zis whole matter to bed now." She released her Sonorous Charm and stepped back to her place in line with her head held high.

Beside Leo, Harry's gaze held only worried dismay. "Don't be the next target," she mouthed.

Riddle's smile looked like it had petrified. "Thank you, Miss Delacour, for your... creative interpretation of the tournament results. The second runner-up is also here to be recognized. Mr. Owens, is there anything you'd like to say about your time in this tournament?"

Owens raised a hand to the crowd and smiled broadly. His voice came out already magnified, and Leo realized with a snort that he'd cast the Sonorous a while ago and had been waiting for his turn. "Hello Paris! Always wanted to come here. What a beautiful city." He paused to smile directly into a press camera, then continued. "It is a boon to be here after all that has happened. I was not sure we would get this chance. I never suspected," he said, shaking his head dramatically. "Who could have guessed? Though, looking back, the boy was a little off." Owens smiled at a few of the audience members conspiratorially, a boyish glint in his eyes. "The blood magic he used- did you catch it? That should have been a clue. It takes Dark magic to fool so many brilliant wizards for so long."

He did not notice the malevolent stare Riddle was aiming at the back of his head, but Leo did. It was something stronger than the annoyance he'd aimed at Delacour. Something more personal. Owens smiled self-deprecatingly, completely in his element on stage. "I just hope the world will be more careful who it exalts in the future. Someone more worthy, perhaps."

"Thank you, Mr. Owens." Leo did not think Owens was, in fact, done talking, but Riddle had taken command of center stage once more. "There are a few people we'd like to thank before continuing."

Riddle gestured to the great mirror at his back. "These mirrors. These stunning and irreplicable works of magical genius, were commissioned by the tournament organizers and completed by none other than famed Alchemist, Nicholas Flamel." Riddle bowed to an elderly man in the front row, and Leo's eyes widened as he realized they were standing not ten feet from the famous wizard and his wife. They looked ancient beyond any wizard or witch Leo had ever seen, and yet Flamel smiled and waved as though he were a spry seventy-five. "Like many of your contributions to wizard-kind, these mirrors are an innovation that is sure to change the Wizarding World forever."

Leo had no idea how they'd managed to trot Nicholas Flamel out at such a controversial event, but perhaps that was precisely why they felt the need to. If anyone's presence could give a weight of legitimacy to the proceedings, it was the most beloved man in all of France.

The Department of Magical Games and Sports was recognized, as were a number of other organizations and people Leo stopped paying attention to, and then Riddle's demeanor changed, and he could feel the crowd's energy shift in anticipation.

"Our final wish, before the champion's crowning, is to once again highlight the spectacular achievements of this bright cohort of young witches and wizards." The mirror came to life behind Riddle, bright with the strength of the magic powering it, but it was not transmitting anything currently happening elsewhere. It showed the first presentation of all nine champions in a room he recognized from pictures as the great hall in Hogwarts. He had not seen the image in the mirror before, and by the way Harry squeezed his arm, he gathered she also hadn't known the tournament organizers had captured that moment.

"How much did they record?" Harry said quietly. Her eyes were tensed against whatever was to come, as though she knew, on an instinctual level, that something bad awaited.

"As we remember the many highs and lows of our illustrious tournament, Rigel Black will have one final chance to claim his prize." Riddle looked out over the crowd carefully. Looking for Rigel, or just trying to appear intimidating? "At the end of this recording, we crown Miss Delacour Triwizard Champion, with all accompanying rights and privileges."

Harry sucked in a breath. Leo took her hand gently. "Steady, now," he murmured. There was no way she'd make it to the stage undetected with everyone in the square staring at the mirror, and therefore at the Rod of Zuriel. They had to wait for the distraction before they could act.

The image in the mirror began to change and-it was so much worse than anything Leo had expected. It went straight into an image of Rigel-of *Harry* -swallowed by a column of dragon-fire just as her shield collapsed. Even knowing it was long-finished, Leo had to bite his tongue to keep from reacting.

All of Harry's air went out of her, and Leo realized she had never seen any of this before. She had always been on the other side of the mirror, and now she was going to re-live the worst moments of the last year and he couldn't believe for *one second* he'd ever considered letting her come and do this alone.

She should never have to be alone.

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Harry-Rigel-who was she? Who was the girl in the mirror?

She didn't recognize herself, or maybe she didn't want to.

The highlights were awful. Images flashed in the mirror so fast, and yet agonizingly slowly.

She and Hermione peeking out from the trailing soil of an enormous, rotting root bed, a troll lumbering across the clearing in search of their scents.

Antiope fighting a Sphinx.

Treeslider throwing himself between her and the werewolf.

Krum struggling against the quicksand.

Shang playing a lullaby for a Snallygaster.

Hermione hanging from a floating platform.

Antiope struggling against a ward that was slowly crushing her bone by bone.

Rigel, shaking off sleep spores.

Rigel, pulsing magic so strongly it destabilized the entire obstacle course.

Duels-one after another.

Tahiil turning into a hyena.

Hermione conjuring a flock of birds.

Shang sending a burst of wind across the stage.

Dramatic shots of the nine of them casting, diving, shielding, sweating, bleeding, falling...

Then the lake. Rigel being pulled along by the giant squid. Rigel pulling Pansy and Johanna up toward the surface desperately, drowning, screaming for air-

On and on they came. Each a punch to her gut. Each a terrifying reminder of something she never wanted to think about at all. Even

as Leo curled an arm around her and brought her into his chest, her breath wouldn't steady, her eyes wouldn't close.

She had to look away, she couldn't watch the fifth task. It was too-too everything. Her gaze landed on the staff before the mirror instead.

The artifact taunted her. Its blood-red stone called to her, mesmerizing even from so far away. Leo didn't seem to notice. No one else did, but it had a presence like soft shadows and she could swear she felt its inky black fingers reaching out across the air toward her.

It repulsed her, but she had to claim it, and she was running out of time.

It could be worse. She didn't have to make a speech or shake anyone's hand. She just had to get the rod and then get to the safehouse Dumbledore had prepared. She even had an undetectably expanded bag to put it in. The Qilin wouldn't mind sharing, and it wouldn't be for long.

Soon, one of the Order would cause a distraction. She had her dad's cloak. She had the muffling stickers on her shoes. She would take the chance. She would grab the rod and simply... run. She would not use magic that could be traced. Invisible, she would run until she lost any pursuers and found the safehouse. And Leo would try to cover her tracks, and join her when he could.

Soon, this would all be over.

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He had noted the many members of Dumbledore's fan club, some in official capacity, some obviously planted for another purpose, but he

paid them little mind. It did not matter what grand plan or distraction they had orchestrated to shock and awe the security forces into losing sight of the main objective.

Tom had already won.

Rigel would come, because he had to, and he would take the Rod of Zuriel, because he had to, and so the rest of it didn't matter at all.

Perhaps he would escape. Tom doubted it, given the complexity of the security wards even now enclosing the square, but he would not particularly mind. Seeing the boy brought low in Ministry custody would be mildly satisfying, but hunting him down on his own? Away from the eyes of the world where they could settle things as wizards had always settled things? Infinitely preferable.

Tom kept his eyes on the Rod even as horrified gasps and whistles of approval punctuate the crowd's rapt attention to the double-sided mirror. His press team had really outdone themselves, compiling the reel. Anyone with an ounce of humanity would not be able to look away. They would miss the fact that what they were really looking at, what the whole world was watching at that very moment, was the Rod itself.

It was amusing, how Fate sometimes circled back on itself. He hadn't even known what he was going to do with the Rod, when he found it. In the early stages of the search for the Dominion Jewel, another, less powerful jewel had made itself known to him. The Rod of Zuriel had blanketed the rule of countless hypnotic autocrats over the centuries. It had an innate ability to suppress the waking mind, subjugating the consciousness of all but the very strongest of Occlumens who dared to lay hands on it.

It had been all too easy to introduce a subtler version of its power to Dumbledore's precious school. The Rod was a poison, and children's minds so easily infected. Now, despite his escape from its clutches once before, Rigel would be the one infected. The hair he'd

used in the bonding spell was the only useful thing Owens had provided him thus far.

He'd tried to use the hair in Polyjuice, first, to see what Rigel really looked like. Who he really was. But the hair was tainted already with a non-traditional blend of the same potion and the magical signature was too warped for a tracking spell. Assuming the boy used the same method of disguise today, however... the signature would be a perfect match.

Rigel would take the Rod and it would be his. And then the boy would be Riddle's.

He was waiting for it, so he was perhaps the only person in the arena who didn't flinch when the first explosion came. Two more eruptions followed the first. The mirror kept playing, but people were shouting and screaming for wholly different reasons, now. There was no heat. No smoke. But the sound had been unmistakable. It took him a moment to realize the explosion had not come from inside the Place Cachée after all. He was loath to take his eyes off the Rod, but he spared the barest of glances to ensure that-yes, it appeared to be outside the magical district altogether, in nearby muggle Paris. Billowing black smoke rose over the rooftops surrounding the square.

Bombing muggles, that was a new play in Dumbledore's book. He had to admit, he would not have expected such tactics from the old man. Then again, he hadn't defeated Grindelwald with twinkles and lemon drops.

The French Aurors were shouting for order, both Ministers had been whisked off the stage, the tournament contestants were looking to him for direction, and Tom. Didn't. Move.

It was all so believable. The Aurors reacted exactly as they usually would, right down to Dumbledore's plants. The crowd's response was almost *too* believable. Complete panic, fear, and, of course, distraction. He had to commend them for creative thinking. A

disaster there in the square could be swiftly handled by the numerous security forces, not to mention the powerful collection of wizards present. But a distraction outside the wards? It would have everyone looking away from the happenings in the Place Cachée, wondering what section of Paris had been hit, wondering if it was their home or shop or Ministry being attacked.

Brilliant. A pity it was for nothing.

Even if the rest of the world turned away to look, Tom was there, and he would not. In fact, the chaos was likely to aid Rigel in reaching the stage and securing the Rod of Zuriel, which of course worked toward his ends as well. Dumbledore's chattel working for him; he could get used to the ease with which his plans fell thusly into place. There was no way in or out of the square once the event started, and this time there was no lodestone to be loosed. The wards would stay up until Tom brought them down. The boy would not get away so easily.

"Mr. Riddle, what's going on?"

The Grecian girl had inserted herself imperiously between him and the Rod. He brushed her to the side, but she grabbed onto his wand-arm with surprising, if suicidal, strength. "Releasse me *at oncce* ." He did not bother to keep the hiss from his voice, but the redheaded girl dug in her heels despite the fear he could see in her face.

"Not until you tell us what's going-"

Wandlessly, he levitated her bodily off of the stage and deposited her behind him, out of the way. He could not afford such distractions at this-

"Mr. Riddle, should we be getting off the stage?"

"We're safest *on* the stage."

"But what waz zat-?"

The champions were bickering, jostling one another and getting in between him and the Rod. "Move aside. Exit this stage at once, or I will-"

The Unbreakable Vow flared to life in his blood, the intensity of the magic strangling his words in his throat. Power coursed through his veins; on its heels, heat and pain. For one burning instant, he thought he had miscalculated. Was the boy not coming? Had he chosen death after all? But-the bond flared one final time and... *broke* . The hold the magic had in his chest went slack all at once, and no amount of mental groping could locate the bond any longer. In disbelief, he looked to his wrist, but there were no fresh markings. Rigel had not broken the Vow. He had satisfied it.

Which meant-but the Rod was still *there* . It was there, in the middle of the stage, and he pushed toward it, but the champions were in his way. A pulse of magic sent them scurrying or flying backwards. Spells came out of the crowd at his back-he barely caught the first in time, could not identify its caster in the sea of people around the stage-and then he was deflecting other spells, spells from all directions. Tom shielded with a snarl, livid that anyone would attempt to waylay him at this moment. He looked to the Rod; no one had moved it. But somehow, Rigel had already claimed it. Then-

He's touching it now.

The bond he had laid in trap would hold him while it settled. Tom had but moments left to act. Ignoring the magic still raining down upon him, he mustered the strongest disillusionment-dispersing spell he knew and hurled it through a pinhole in his shield at the Rod. This was it, then. The moment the world would see-

Nothing. There was nothing revealed. The spell had made it through, he was certain, but there was nothing there. Tom was paces from the Rod, just moments from it when he saw it move at last. It lifted, twisted, and-disappeared. He was there.

"Rigel!"

Tom was not the only one who noticed the staff move.

"He's here!"

A wordless containment spell left his wand, but it collided with a spell sent from Delacour's wand at the same time that Owens sent an overpowered "Finite!" at the spot the Rod had stood. Tom's spell canceled against Delacour's, the Finite hit the stage and-

The stage Vanished, its conjuring canceled by Owens' overzealous spell. The teenagers screamed as the ground literally fell away beneath them. Tom allowed his magic to catch him gracefully, his hair barely ruffling at the sudden dip, but he forgot the mirror.

It crunched into the cobblestones and cracked down the middle. The crowd screamed as it shattered into an avalanche of glass, and by the time Tom shielded himself and those around him from the worst of it, the space where the Rod and boy had been was overrun with panicking spectators and there was no sign of Rigel at all.

He rounded slowly on the tournament participants. Delacour, Sousa, and Antiope stared unrepentantly back at him. So they had not come to be recognized. They had come to help the traitor escape. He put a ward around his rage. He would not curse schoolchildren for the world to see. It was no matter. The perimeter wards would keep the boy inside the square, and he could deal with their blatant interference later.

Owens shot him a terrified look, and Tom wasn't sure he was entirely pretending. It had been his responsibility also to watch the staff. The last contestant wasn't even looking at him. Zahi waved over the milling crowd, calling into the chaos, "Good luck, Rigel!"

He wanted to scream.

Instead, Tom sent his magical and mental awareness out with a savage thrust. There were too many people to catalogue completely,

but Rigel should stand out even in a crowd. A boy with Occlumency shields but no aura.

His Legitimacy pressed against a number of unfamiliar minds, some better guarded than others and some significantly more compromised by the din and shove of hundreds of people who were realizing en masse that there was no way out of the square. Aurors, ministry officials, socialites, office workers-he flickered from one to the next, searching, searching for the one with no aura who had shields he recognized.

There was no one with Rigel's characteristic un-presence. No sign of the boy at all.

Tom did not panic. He was... irritated, yes, that the world had endeavored to disappoint him again. So many fools wanted Rigel to go free, when it would be better for all of society if Tom brought him safely to hand. Still, he did not erupt. The Vow had been broken, and the boy had disappeared, but there was still time to find him before the wards came down. And Rigel had the Rod. All was going according to plan.

What's more, he had another piece of the puzzle.

His spell should have disrupted *any* form of invisibility, be it spell or object-based. Even ghosts would have been revealed. Only one form of invisibility might be immune.

Death's Cloak.

Rigel had it. So he was from one of the old Peverell Lines. Tom already knew there was a connection; the Parseltongue made it obvious, but the Cloak-that would not have been accidentally passed to a bastard or handed down through obscure branches. An heirloom like that would follow the main line of a family. He should know. And the number of families who were left to inherit such a thing could be counted on both hands.

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She collapsed on the other side of the wards and let her animagus form slip away immediately. It was too much of a strain to carry the Qilin's sling as a raven. She pulled the Cloak around her with shaking fingers and just let herself breathe for a moment.

The din of the crowd in the square below her was deafening, frightening. She put her hands over her ears to shut it out, needing a moment to think, to process-

Because she'd done it. She had the Rod and she was free.

She couldn't stop the tears that streamed down her face, but there was no need to. No one could see her, hidden under the Cloak and stories above them on the rooftops of Paris.

The feeling when the Unbreakable Vow had dissolved from her soul: it was like shackles dropping away and a wind rising up to take her all at once. She'd felt a little drunk at first, high on the freedom, like her entire being was suddenly suffused with a buoying, beautiful magic, and she wasted several moments on the platform simply marveling at the lightness of her soul, at the click of something off re-aligning at last. Only then had she realized what an anchor the Vow had been.

How she could have thought she was free of it before, she'd never know. It was so obvious, now. She'd felt like flying-had almost spontaneously transformed into her animagus form right then and there on the stage-but she'd managed to hold on just a little longer. When she reached the perimeter and realized the wards prevented Apparition, it had been the simplest thing to scale one of the buildings, mostly covered under the long, trailing Cloak. Someone would have had to look in exactly the right place to see the occasional hand or foot sticking out for a hold. Leo would be proud.

She'd made it to the roof and discovered the wards went much higher, but it didn't matter. Away from prying eyes, with a giddy kind of relief and the feeling of wanting to fly still warm in her heart, she shucked off the Qilin's sling and transformed. She wasn't worried about the Rod of Zuriel-if the Cloak was fine being transformed alongside her, the staff likely would be as well-but she wasn't sure what side-along animagi transformation would do to the Qilin, even protected within the expanded sling.

As a raven, she had picked up the bag and flown in through the wards with ease. Truly, nobody thought to ward for animagi, and all those painstaking months of frustration trying to figure out how to manage it seemed entirely worth it in retrospect. The raven had saved her twice, now, though she was still trying to accept that she had actually escaped. The sound-permeable wards behind her told her exactly what the Order's distraction had cost.

The crowd had been crushing, confusion and terror warring with one another in a frenzied mob. Everyone remembered the attack on the World Cup, and while the danger had not been in the square, the idea that they could not Apparate away, could not escape, had preyed on the throng and spurred them to panic.

She wasn't sure she agreed with the choice of distraction. Didn't Dumbledore realize how nervous the public already was? Some fireworks might have done it, or a smoke-screen or something. Explosions were a bit much, and the frantic reaction of the Aurors had seemed all too convincing. No wonder people panicked. She had seen James dive on the Minister. Seen the French Aurors set up an immediate shield around the French dignitaries.

She had also seen the spells Riddle hurled at her on the stage, and the many answering spells that burst out of the crowd to waylay him.

She rubbed a hand down her face, then re-secured the sling across her shoulders under the Cloak. As she climbed down the far side of the building, she tried to calm her hammering heart and not worry too much about Leo stuck back in the square.

If he was smart, and she knew he was, he'd drop the disguise spells and leave as a normal spectator when they let people out. Leo had nothing to hide from the French Aurors. Riddle didn't know him. He would be anonymous. He had assured her, before she'd slipped on the Cloak and made a run for the stage, that he could make his own way back to England if they were separated. She knew first-hand that Leo could take care of himself. Still, she would wait as long as the portkey allowed and hope he remembered the coordinates to the safehouse.

Remaining under the Cloak, she cut through a number of old, winding streets as she attempted to follow the Point-Me spell on the card. The needle had her carefully circling the perimeter of the Place Cachée to the southeast, which meant the safehouse was on the opposite side of the plaza from where she had escaped.

She hadn't wanted to go that way, with black smoke still billowing over the rooftops, but she had nowhere else in the city to go, and if she made it to the safehouse, she could get off the narrow streets.

She kept hearing Muggle police sirens going off as she hurried through the twisting cobblestones of the Marais, and she wondered if Dumbledore had planned for their reaction to the distraction as well. Dumbledore probably thought of everything, she told herself. The fallout from the distraction was not hers to deal with, though she couldn't help but feel a little guilty about it.

A lot of people had gone to a lot of trouble to set her free. How could she live up to the risks they took on her behalf? *By being better*, she told herself. *Every day, every hour, remember what it cost to secure this feeling*. She would make it worthwhile. One day, as she had once promised Snape, she would pay it forward.

The air was hazy with smoke and particulate matter. The closer she came to the card's coordinates, the thicker the smoke became, until the needle stopped spinning and she stopped walking and she realized.

The safehouse was the fire. It was *on* fire, and there were muggle fire-dousers milling about the street, confused, because they could see the smoke and feel the heat but they could not see the house or the fire.

She looked dumbly at the card in her hand, then back at the house, flames roaring and rubble littering the street. A great, gaping hole in the side of the fifteenth-century standalone and the flickering runes left on a lodestone that had fallen all the way into the street at her feet told her exactly what the explosions had done. It was a wonder the Notice-Me-Not spells were still intact.

It didn't make any sense. Why would Dumbledore send her to a safehouse the Order was planning to destroy?

He wouldn't.

As she was standing there, frozen under her Invisibility Cloak, a man stumbled out of the burning house. He was a great deal older than her parents, but not as old as the headmaster. He wore casual wizard robes but clutched a muggle briefcase to his chest.

He was injured. Blood stained his sand-colored robes and he stumbled on a bad leg out into the stone-strewn front walkway. Harry stepped forward to help him, about to pull the Cloak off, when a masked man stepped out of the house after him.

Scar. He aimed his wand at the sky, and a monstrous snake in green smoke swallowed the air above the house. Scar turned to the injured man, leveling his wand in preparation of finishing him off, but Harry had gotten to him first.

She Apparated, the man in tow. She had never Apparated with someone else before, and for a moment, she was not sure it would work. She felt the older man resisting her, resisting the forced side-along, and she was grateful she hadn't tried to jump far.

They landed in an alley she had just walked through minutes before. The older man clutched his briefcase and looked around, bewildered, until she pulled the Cloak off and gave him an apologetic grimace.

"Sorry. Are you all right?"

"You're English." So was he. The man pressed a hand to his stomach, and Harry hoped the sudden Apparition hadn't splinched him. "Are you the one Dumbledore sent to me to meet?"

"Code word: Qilin?" She put a hand to the sling at her side. "I suppose it wasn't you who blew up the safehouse, then. That was not the distraction the Order had planned at all, was it?"

"No." He shook his head regretfully. "No, I was waiting for you when they came. They got me by surprise. Got my wand and then..." He indicated his stomach and leg, and she crouched beside him to look closer.

"May I?" When he nodded carefully, she cast her awareness into her magic and examined his injuries. It didn't take a complicated diagnostic to see his leg was broken and his abdomen lacerated. She set to work Healing him, murmuring, "What happened?"

"Took down the wards like it was nothing," he said. His face had begun to relax when he felt the Healing magic enter his system. "Used some kind of device that held magic trapped within. I don't know how they found the house. It's unplotable. Dumbledore himself designed the protection spells and-sweet salamanders, they have the stone."

His hand gripped her arm in sudden urgency, and she froze in the midst of Healing. "You have to let go so I can finish."

"We have to tell Dumbledore. The *stone*. "

"I don't understand. The lodestone?"

He stared at her. "Do you know whose house that was?"

"No...?" She was getting a bad feeling though.

He shook his head. "I suppose it's a little late for rushed dramatics." The man struggled upright, and she hurried to brace him from one side. "Get me somewhere safe, and we can talk."

He gave her an address. They started to stumble along toward it. And she wondered what new fire she had walked into, when all she'd wanted to do was leave the inferno of the tournament behind.

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[end of chapter three.]

A/N: I watched the new Fantastic Beasts movie and... the Qilin just appeared, woven into the outline as though it had always been there. I am not sorry. Regulus Black, also not in my outline, steals screentime like it's brownie points with Riddle. And the final POV for Riddle was a fun experiment in how many times em dashes can be used without breaking the reader's mind.

The edited migration to AO3 turned into a re-write somewhere around chapter 6, so while the new versions will be up on AO3 as I finish them, I won't change the versions on FFN for a little while at least.

Sam Gabriel has started a new audio version of the story, using the edited chapters, and he does live recordings for anyone interested every Sunday morning (US time) in the 'Harry, Get Some Sleep' Discord.

Also, I moved to Taiwan this month! Starting a new chapter in life and very excited to have more time dedicated to writing and editing going forward (the everlasting hope that lives just out of reach ^^).

Thanks for reading,

Violet