

The Ambiguous Artifice

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Harriet Potter's third year masquerading as a pureblood boy promises to be even more complicated than the last two. All she wants is to get through her studies unimpeded, but with pureblood politics, ancient artifacts, and adolescent hormones getting in the way... well, at least she's up to the challenge. Alanna the Lioness take on HP, book three.

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Chapter 1

A/N: To all those peeved about the unwieldy length of SS14-I'm sorry. I didn't want to break it up and make it look like I'd done more than I had with multiple chapters. Seemed cheap and pointless. However, I did decide I'd try a slightly different style with this chapter-shorter, more to-the-point sections. There's a lot of plot to these next few chapters, so I need to get through a lot of information without bombarding you with another chapter like SS 14. At this point, it seems like most people 'get' Harry/Rigel's character, so I don't have to explain as much, but if stuff gets under-explained, or it seems too choppy, please let me know so I can adjust accordingly. -V

Also: One of the many readers (of which I remain completely unworthy), called Huny Bajer, is looking to do an AMV on this series. If anyone is interested in making fanart (of Harry/Rigel, Leo, Archie, or anything, I guess), it would be totally stellar if you sent it either my way or just directly to Huny Bajer, whose author ID is 3930840 I think. Thanks again to everyone who reads this story, and especially to those of you inspired by it! For all of the spinoffs, art, and helpful reviews you guys provide, I'll never be able to say thank you enough. -V

The Ambiguous Artifice:

Chapter One:

Rigel had once read that a strong physical foundation was the key to any truly impressive work of magical architecture. Whoever wrote that, she reflected, had never been to the Weasleys' house.

"Don't worry, it's more structurally sound than it looks," Ron assured her as they walked up the front walk.

"It'd have to be," Rigel said vaguely, still staring. The Burrow looked as if someone had taken a charming country home, stacked another

charming country home on top of it, attached half a semi-charming shed to the left side of that, and then added windows the way a child adds sprinkles to a cupcake.

"It's not much," Ron said, rubbing his neck uncomfortably.

"It's amazing," Rigel said honestly, "Do you know how much power went into the original keystones to make it stable?"

Ron blinked at her, then smiled wryly, "No, but I bet Percy does."

Rigel glanced amusedly at her redheaded... friend? Close acquaintance? Something like that. She wasn't sure why Ron was the one to collect her from Sirius' house, actually, since it was the Twins who extended the invitation, but she wouldn't complain. She liked Ron well enough, when he and Draco weren't scowling at one another.

"Well, here it is," Ron said grandly, opening the front door wide, "Home sweet-"

"Puppy!"

"You came!"

Two tornados swept Rigel around in a series of dizzying circles before she could get a proper look at the inside of the Burrow, and she took a moment to uncross her eyes before she greeted their exuberant grins with studied consideration.

"Let me guess," she said, tilting her head slightly to one side, "Dread and Scourge?"

Fred puffed up importantly and said, "That's Mr. Scourge to you."

George aimed a mock punch at Fred's arm, and Fred ducked dramatically.

"Dread?" George chuckled, "More like Fled."

"You're one to talk, *Porridge*," Fred sniffed.

Ron snorted, "Not sure that one quite works."

"Oh? How about this one, *Prawn* ?"

"More like Yawn."

"Or maybe Bon- *bon* ?"

"And that's my cue to leave," Ron rolled his eyes, "Thank Fate every day you don't have any siblings, Rigel. I'll go tell Mum you're here."

"Don't listen to him, Pup," George said good-naturedly, "Younger siblings are a blast."

"Are you quite done accosting our guest?" Percy came striding into the room, straightening his horn-rimmed glasses as he looked Rigel up and down, "You look well, Rigel."

"Older ones on the other hand..." Fred muttered.

"What was that?" Percy turned his sharp gaze on his brother.

Fred straightened and pasted on a smile that fooled no one, "Just giving Rigel a hand, I said."

"We were about to conduct a tour, in fact," George said, "We thought we'd start with your closet, Percy, specifically the collection of pen nibs you keep in a box up there, so if you don't mind-"

"This must be young Rigel Black, then."

A middle-aged woman with fiery hair and a welcoming expression bustled into the room. She spoke briskly, eyed the acid burns on Rigel's boots sharply, and smiled warmly. Rigel didn't think she'd ever been looked at so affectionately by someone she'd just met.

"Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Weasley," Rigel said, bowing to the same degree she would to Mrs. Malfoy, "My father has only wonderful things to say about you and your family. He sends his regards, and please, call me Rigel."

Mrs. Weasley chuckled, "So polite!" She turned to narrow her eyes at her three middle children, "Why can't you ever be that polite?"

"I am that polite, Mother," Percy said stiffly.

"Being polite is not the same as having a stick up your-"

"George!"

"I'm Fred, Mum," George rolled his eyes.

Mrs. Weasley sighed, "Sure you are, Dear."

Rigel was taken aback by their family dynamic. It was almost prickly, and yet... no one seemed to really mean any of the things they were saying, as if their dialogue was all part of an inside, family joke. It was... endearing, in an overwhelming kind of a way.

"Well, it is very lovely to meet you, Rigel," Mrs. Weasley said, "Come into the kitchen, won't you? I'll put a kettle on. I must say, I didn't imagine you'd be so thin..."

The Weasley matriarch bustled away into the next room, leaving Rigel to smother a wince and follow behind her.

"Don't take it personal," Fred whispered.

"She thinks Hagrid is too skinny," George added.

"Though you do seem to have grown in the last few weeks," Percy said, eyeing her critically.

"My Aunt Lily's cooking," Rigel said, affecting a shrug. Of course they would notice-even though the latest dose of Modified Polyjuice

hadn't changed her appearance *too* much, it was still an abrupt transformation. Most noticeably, the potion had increased her height by an inch and a half, giving her a slightly gangly look that she had learned to ignore.

They trooped into the kitchen, which held the biggest kitchen table she'd ever seen, discounting Grimmauld Place's formal dining table. The Weasley kitchen could probably seat twelve, at least. At the moment, the only one sitting at it was Ginny. Even though it had only been two and a half weeks since the end of school, Ginny already looked much better than she had the last time Rigel saw her. Not softer, exactly, but... calmer. More at peace, perhaps. Rigel hoped the Occlumency lessons would ground her even more, when they began.

"Hello, Ginny," Rigel said politely, "Good to see you."

"Hello, Rigel," Ginny said, "Couldn't get out of coming after all?"

"Ginny!" Mrs. Weasley scowled, "Don't be rude."

"It's quite all right, Mrs. Weasley," Rigel said, smiling slightly, "I like Ginny rude."

Ron made a choking noise that he quickly turned into a cough, and the Twins (whose title she always capitalized in her head for some reason) both guffawed.

"Well," Mrs. Weasley didn't seem to know what to say to that, so she set about making tea.

They all took seats around the table, and Rigel slipped into one next to Percy, still curious about the magic holding up the Burrow.

"Percy, do you know anything about the structural wards for this house?"

Percy raised an eyebrow before saying slowly, "A bit, why?"

"In potions, magic acts as the ultimate stabilizer, sometimes even compensating for otherwise unstable combinations, so I wondered if it might not be the same for magical structures," Rigel began.

Fred cut her off with an extremely loud throat clearing, and George contributed by putting a hand over Rigel's mouth. Rigel stopped talking, and raised her eyebrows at the two with calm patience.

"No shop-talk," George said helpfully, "This is a social visit."

When he moved his hand away, Rigel asked, "Is talking not considered social here?"

"Talking about academics certainly isn't," Fred said firmly.

"It's not academics, just a bit of magical theory," Rigel pointed out, "And I'm pretty sure asking about the host's family home is the very basics of social small talk."

"About the host family's *wards* ?" George drawled.

Rigel mentally awarded the point to George. It wasn't really good form to ask about another wizard's wards, as a matter of security.

Ron smirked, "He's got you there. But there's nothing wrong if it's just theory. How many times have you two regaled us with the theory behind your latest pranking invention at the table? I want to hear about the wards, too."

"Dad would know better," Percy said, "But I believe the Weasley who built this house had the help of a Light Lady. She supposedly instilled a great deal of power into one of the key-"

Percy was interrupted by the fireplace roaring to life. The sickly green color of the flames told them someone was coming through the floo, and the way the Weasley's all frowned or cocked their heads curiously told Rigel that whoever it was, they weren't expected.

Yet another redhead ducked into the kitchen, de-ashing himself with a careless shake.

"Bill!"

The newcomer waved a hand ironically in response to the cry that went up around the kitchen, "Yes, it's me. Did I surprise you?"

"What on Merlin's green earth are you doing here?" Mrs. Weasley planted her hands on her hips, "You said you wouldn't be home again till July."

Bill raised an eyebrow, "Not happy to see me, Mum?"

Mrs. Weasley rolled her eyes, "Oh, come here, then."

Bill grinned and strode over to kiss his mother on the cheek. Rigel didn't think she'd ever seen someone look cool while hugging their mum, but somehow Bill Weasley pulled it off. His hair was long, which made his mother cluck despairingly as she bustled about getting cups for tea. He was tall, lean, and when he turned his head to hide his grin from Mrs. Weasley's disapproving eyes, the silver fang dangling from his ear flashed as it caught the light.

"Who's this then?" the older boy-man, really-asked as he sat down. His eyes flicked over Rigel's face, but no recognition lit his mildly curious expression.

"This is Rigel Black," Ron said hastily, apparently taking responsibility for Rigel's place there, "He's in my class at Hogwarts."

Bill mulled that over for a moment before answering, "Sirius Black's son, then." It didn't sound like a question, but Rigel nodded in any case. "I hear you saved my little sister's life a few weeks ago, and that of my brother's a year before that."

Rigel blinked slowly to give herself time to formulate a response, "Ginny and I saved one another, and Ron's life was never in any

mortal danger from the sickness. It's a pleasure to meet you, however."

Bill gave a slow grin, "Modest, are you? That's good."

Rigel had the absurd impulse to say something inane like 'thank you,' but she resisted.

"Why are you back early, Bill?" Percy asked curiously, "Aren't you scheduled to be on a dig right now?"

"Bill's a curse breaker for Gringotts," George informed Rigel quietly, "He's been working in Egypt lately, on a series of old tombs they just uncovered."

"You'll hear about it soon enough in the Prophet," Bill said, shrugging, "But the dig was put on hold. One of the tombs we were set to excavate was broken into last night."

"What?"

"Merlin!"

"Was anyone hurt?"

"Everyone's fine," Bill assured his family, "They're not even *sure* it was a break-in. The air-seal over the site was broken, but no opening big enough for someone to get in or out of was created. Also, preliminary investigation seems to indicate that the treasures we expected to find are still in there. If it was broken into, they didn't want gold."

"Does that mean you're fired?" Ginny asked drolly.

Bill reached over to tug on her hair admonishingly, "Hush, you. No one fires Bill Weasley. I just get a few days off while they look for clues. Once that's done, we can get on with the actual tomb-plundering."

"When you said you wanted to be a pirate when you grew up, your father and I always laughed," Mrs. Weasley sighed, "I suppose the joke is on us."

"It could be worse," Bill shrugged casually, "Charlie wanted to be Vampire when he was little."

Mrs. Weasley tittered with an embarrassed glance at Rigel, "That was just a phase."

"He used to only come out of his room at night," Percy sighed, "And I remember him refusing to eat anything that wasn't red-colored."

"That's right," Bill chuckled, "He used to mush all of his food together until it was pulverized, then eat with his hands. It was disgusting."

"He was eight," Mrs. Weasley huffed, "And he was over it in a few months."

"What does he do now?" Rigel asked curiously.

"He's a dragon-tamer," Ron said casually.

Rigel's eyebrows rose. A curse-breaker, a dragon-tamer-the Weasleys certainly were a formidable bunch.

"We like a bit of danger," George said, as if he could guess her thoughts.

"Gryffindors," Fred shrugged, grinning.

"That's no excuse," Percy sniffed.

"Like you aren't going to be the most formidable lawyer that ever lived, Perce," Ginny scoffed, "I bet you set a record for most criminals who plead guilty and beg for mercy at the mere mention of you."

"I'm not going to be a trial lawyer," Percy protested, though his ears were pink at the praise.

"You say that now," Ginny smirked, "But we all know you can't resist the limelight for long."

Percy scowled, but Rigel could tell it was good-natured. They knew one another so well, this family. They knew each other's strengths and weaknesses, and they talked about them openly for all to hear. It was sort of amazing, to Rigel at least. Her family was warm, and open on the surface... but they all had things they didn't talk about, too. Diana, Lily's muggle relatives, their friend Pettigrew from school... the list went deep. Even Archie and she had secrets, now.

Then again, Rigel scolded herself, the Weasleys probably had secrets too-everyone did, didn't they? If they came to her house, it would probably seem like the Blacks and Potters were themselves an ideal family, at least at first.

Still, the *idea* of the Weasley family was nice, she thought.

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She didn't stay at the Weasleys' home more than a few hours. It was good to catch up with her friends from school, but she didn't have time to spend all evening away from her work.

Her internship started next week. It would last all of July and August, ending just before she had to go back to Hogwarts. As she understood it, most of the internship was research-oriented, but she wanted to be as prepared as she could be for any practical challenges she would face.

As such, she spent as many hours a day as she could afford in her lab. When she returned from the Weasleys' house, she stopped only

to change into her work robes before heading back into the basement. She was almost through with the latest batch of potions Krait had commissioned from her. She continued to conduct her business with Krait by owl mail, though she told herself she wasn't *avoiding* Diagon Alley. Or Leo.

If Krait noticed how much quicker she responded to his orders, not having to wait for the mail to go through Archie in America first anymore, he probably attributed it to her having more free time now that school was out. If he was offended she hadn't been in to see him personally since she got back, he didn't say so. Leo hadn't ever answered her letter, hadn't given an explanation as to why he'd deliberately set her up for exposure at AIM. If she traipsed through Diagon Alley every day, sooner or later she'd run into him. She had no interest in spending time with people she couldn't trust, however.

As she was making a supply list for the stores she'd depleted since Christmas, her father poked his head into the lab and called her name.

"Harry? You down here?"

"Just finishing up for the night, Dad," Harry said absently, deciding that it would be safer to order two bushels of winterfig twigs, just in case."

"How can you stand it down here for so long?" James ruffled up the back of his hair absently as he looked around the well-lit lab, "Don't you want a window, or something?"

"I have plenty of light, Dad," Harry said patiently, "I don't need a fake window with its accompanying, detrimental distractions."

"If you say so, kiddo," James said, obviously too tired to really care-not that Harry blamed him; his life was tiring, after all, "Though I don't know if there's anything *detrimental* about a little sunshine." The look on his face was affable bewilderment. It was a look Harry had always associated with her dad, as he wore it often around her. She knew

she confused him, but she also knew he didn't hold it against her, so their relationship was fine, no matter what others might think.

"You know Sirius would just charm it to rain frogs all day," Harry said, deliberately lightening the mood, "And *that* would be distracting."

"Yeah," James chuckled, "You'd be lucky if it was just frogs... still..." his face dissolved into puzzled concern once more, "You spend an awfully long time down here every day. Archie went over to see one of his friends from school today-the Weasley boy, you know. You could go visit Hermione, or another friend, if you wanted."

Harry smiled reassuringly, "I'm just preparing for my internship, Dad. You know how important it is to me. Besides, I did go out today-I went book shopping, remember?"

At least, that's what Archie, who was pretending to be Harry that afternoon, had done.

"Oh," James said, "Books, right. Potions books, I suppose?"

"Healer's books, actually."

"You're sticking with that, then?" James sounded approving.

"As long as I can," Harry said honestly. At her father's conflicted look, she added, "For me, not just for Archie."

James smiled, "You're a good one, Harry. Your mother and I are so proud of you."

"Thanks, Dad," Harry said. She didn't know exactly what his words were supposed to mean, but she took them for what they were: unconditional support, if not understanding.

"Oh, a letter came in the mail today-from that correspondence school of yours," James added before he left, "Are you sure you have time for more classes this summer? You've got that internship as well."

"I didn't sign up for very many," Harry said quickly, "I shouldn't have trouble doing both."

"If you're sure," James said easily, having long ago learned not to argue with Harry about what she could and couldn't do. He almost always ended up eating his words. "Dinner will be at Grimmauld tonight. Wash up first, okay?"

"Of course, Dad," Harry said, already turning back to her supply list, "See you in a bit."

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Dinner wasn't quite the same cheerful, noisy affair it had been the last time they were all home. It was still plenty noisy, and it wasn't that anyone was *unhappy*, but the meal was tempered by a kind of strained weariness that perhaps only parents of newborn babies could understand.

Addy was a joy to all of them, but Harry could see the toll that having a baby in the family again was taking on her parents.

Sirius kept up conversation with Remus and Archie, while Lily and James only participated when called upon, otherwise conserving their energy for eating. Lily's face, though full of love, was thinner, her eyelids just a little slower to blink. Harry knew, just based on how often she herself awoke to the sound of a baby's cries in the dead of night, that Lily wasn't getting much sleep. James laughed readily at Sirius' jokes, but half a beat slower than was natural.

Harry was in charge of feeding Addy that night-they all took it in turns. On the surface it seemed rather elementary: put bottle in baby's mouth, wait for baby to drink it all, then stop. Unfortunately, such a process depended entirely upon baby's cooperation, and didn't take into account the fact that Addy hated Harry.

As in, actually couldn't stand to be around Harry at all.

When Harry held her, she cried. When Harry leaned in to kiss her forehead, she cried. Whether Harry offered toys, milk, cooing noises, or diaper changes didn't matter-Addy still cried. After the first week, Harry had decided the best course of action was to stop antagonizing the obviously distressed infant. She still looked on fondly as Addy interacted with the other members of their family-from a distance-but the only times she directly interacted with her sister herself were feeding times.

Harry had quickly discovered it worked best if she laid Addy in a little nest of baby blankets, propped at half-mast, and arranged for the bottle to rest on another, smaller nest on blankets on Addy's little chest, also propped at an angle against her mouth. This way, all she had to do was watch as Addy drank, make sure she stopped for air and burps often enough, and take away the bottle when Addy was done.

All the others except Remus cradled the baby in their arms as they fed her. Harry's only consolation was that if Addy didn't like Remus much either, it at least meant she wasn't a great judge of character, and her dislike of Harry didn't mean Harry was inherently *dislikable*... probably.

Addy finally settled into her dinner-after Harry stopped touching her-and Harry kept an eye on her while she mechanically ate her own meal.

It went on uninterrupted for a few minutes, until Remus suddenly blurted, "Harry, that's meat!"

Harry looked down at her plate. There was indeed a piece of chicken on her plate. She must have absent-mindedly taken one from the center pile.

"I... eat meat now," she said, shrugging, "I'm going into adolescence-you've seen how much I've grown the past five months. It isn't

healthy to maintain a vegetarian diet when I can't devote the time or energy to really pay attention to getting the right nutrition anymore. Sorry I didn't tell you," she added as an afterthought.

"Sweet!" Archie said, cheerfully scraping the rest of his chicken onto Harry's plate, "Cause I'm full."

Harry looked down at the half-eaten chicken on her plate, "Thanks?" She saw Addy's bottle start slipping from the corner of her eye, so she reached out straightened it, ignoring the little whimper her baby sister let out when Harry's finger brushed her cheek accidentally.

Archie got up to rummage around the kitchen, "Where's the bunt cake Dad brought home yesterday?"

"Do you actually know what the word 'full' means, or is that just something you say when you want to leave the table?" Remus asked.

"I'm pretty sure the meaning of full is 'I'm tired of eating *this* and ready for something else,'" Archie called back.

The conversation moved on, and Harry mentally thanked Archie for the distraction. She'd gotten used to eating meat in the kitchens with Binny, which was probably the one place, apart from her lab, where she felt relaxed while at Hogwarts. Perhaps she had associated the relaxed feeling of eating at home with 'a safe place to eat meat' in her head, but it was still an unforgivable lapse in concentration.

On the up side, their parents (and especially hers) were noticeably less attentive to Harry and Archie this summer, and it didn't take a genius to work out that Addy simply needed their attention more. The infant's needs also drained the adults of their excess energy, made them less attentive and more easily distracted. On the down side, this meant Harry was becoming less attentive in turn, because any slip-ups she made were largely overlooked, but soon she would be back dealing with people who were *not* strung-out from dealing with

an infant all day on top of demanding careers, and those people would notice if she slipped up.

After dinner, James helped Remus clean up the kitchen, Archie went up to his room to 'finish a letter to Draco,' Lily took Addy back to Godric's Hollow to take a bath, and Harry went back to her lab. She was almost done with Flint's summer assignments, but she wanted to draft a letter to Blaise for his opinion on binary rune circles before she started outlining the Runes essay.

She wanted nothing to distract her from the internship, which loomed closer in the back of her mind each day. Sometimes Harry felt like she was being stalked by a beast she knew full well was coming, but couldn't turn around and face. But no, that was silly. She was ready for this internship. She was.

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That weekend she received a letter from Krait. He'd arranged a meeting with Horace Burke, and apparently (and a bit annoyingly) assured him she would be there to discuss a proposition for expanding his order.

On Sunday morning before most of the shops along Diagon Alley had even opened, Harry slipped out the floo while Lily was busy giving Addy her morning bottle.

She was no longer that wide-eyed child who'd coming traipsing through Knockturn Alley looking for a job last summer. She kept sharp eyes on passersby, and the hand in her robe pocket rested not on a wand-for she was banned from magic over the summer-but on a small platinum knife designed for only the most meticulous of ingredient preparation.

She relaxed only when she stepped into the familiar Serpent's Storeroom. After glancing around, she swiftly *un*-relaxed when she realized that Krait, and Horace Burke as well, were nowhere to be seen. Instead, she shared the shop with one Lionel Hurst, King of The Lower Alleys, and current number one on Harry's list of people she didn't want to see.

He was somehow even taller than he'd been over Christmas, his skin tanned and his clothes casual. His white teeth flashed in a smile when she walked in, but it swiftly faded when she didn't smile back.

She rested her back against the shop door and lifted her chin challengingly, "After your unprovoked sabotage at AIM you've descended to merely wasting my time with fake meetings, Leo?"

"Sabotage is a little dramatic, lass," Leo protested, not moving from where *he* was leaned indolently against a shelf across from the door.

"What do they call it around here when one person tries to ruin the plans of another person? Do they call it friendship, Leo?"

"Not in as many words," Leo muttered, lifting one shoulder uncomfortably, "Look, Harry, will you let me explain?"

"I asked for an explanation several months ago. You never replied," Harry said flatly.

"I felt I needed to explain in person," Leo said lightly, "And I didn't want to risk a letter, since it might be construed as yet another threat to your all-important secrets."

"Yes, my *important secrets*," Harry said slowly, "The ones you knew about, the ones I told you were important, the ones you betrayed when you sent your man to my school armed with the power of my undoing."

"When truth is a threat, you have to admit something's wrong-"

"Says the King of the Shadow World?" Harry snapped incredulously, "The only thing wrong is-is *me*, obviously, for misplacing my trust in you."

Leo stalked across the room so fast that Harry didn't have time to flinch. He was right up in her face, looming over her, and glaring as he spoke in a low, harsh bite, "Now don't start playing the trust card with me, lass. Don't act like you gave me your trust and I betrayed it. You didn't tell me your secrets. I pried them out of you-

"By sneaking around behind my back-

"By looking after you the way you clearly can't be trusted to look after yourself-

"What would you know of trust?" Harry scowled, "You, who sends Marek to my school to mess up everything? Did you even give it a second thought? Or did you just shrug and decide that only the things you decide are important are worth caring about?"

"Harry..."

"No!" Harry could feel blood flowing to her face, as it did on the rare occasion she ever got really upset, but she couldn't help herself. Leo had no idea how much damage he could have caused, but she had to make him understand that she wasn't playing. "You have to *listen* to me, Leo! Don't look at me and see a little girl who doesn't know any better, don't wait for me to finish and then ignore what I said, *listen*, okay?"

Leo took a breath so deep it pressed his chest up against her own for a moment, then he turned his head and blew it out, stepped back, and crossed his arms expectantly, "Okay. I'm listening."

Harry thought carefully about what she wanted to say. She took a moment to swing her point of view in Leo's direction, to think about why he might have acted the way he did, what he might think about

her, and how to address the real problems between them. If she wanted him to listen, she had to let him see she understood his side.

"I think some of the things you believe about me are wrong," she began. "When we met, you thought I was a boy, and when I finally corrected you about it, I think you may have come to the conclusion that I hide things casually, without good reason, and without thinking the consequences through, is that right?"

Leo tilted his head consideringly, then nodded slowly, "In a way."

Harry firmed her gaze, "That was a very poor example of the secrets I carry and the deceptions I carry out. I'm not trying to alarm you, Leo, but you need to understand that whatever you think of my life, it hangs in a precarious place right now. I've taken as many precautions as I can think of, fortified my position a hundred times over, but I know it isn't enough. You, however, don't know how dangerous a position you put me in when you sent Marek to AIM looking for me." She held up a hand to forestall Leo's objections, "I know it isn't your fault you don't know, because I can't tell you, but you *did* know that I was keeping secrets, you *did* know that they were complicated, and you *still* sent people to interfere. Do you understand why I'm angry?"

Leo shot her an unimpressed glance, "If you're done patronizing me, yes, I know why you're mad. I respect that you don't appreciate my interference, but I'm not the one who doesn't understand how dangerous your way of life is-I'm not talking about whatever perceived danger you feel will befall you if people know you're a girl, though I can guess it has something to do with the discrimination you feel exists against women in the potions community. I'm talking about the damage it will do to your psyche to put yourself under constant pressure like that. Secrets aren't good for the soul, Harry. They're going to consume your entire life, because that's what lies do-I'm not telling you this as some kind of White Wizard, Harry. I know this because I've *been* you. I understand living a complete lie, segmenting your life into different compartments with different identities that you never let overlap. I don't want that life for you,

Harry. I'm not trying to ruin your life. I'm trying to save it, before you get in too deep. You're twelve. If people find out what you're hiding now, it won't be that big of a deal. You can move past it, your friends at school will forgive you, and things will be okay. If you keep this up until you're seventeen, though... Harry, it's not a good idea. Surely you can see that?"

Harry felt her anger soften slightly. "Leo... thank you for looking out for me."

"But?" he said wryly.

"But you don't have all the facts," Harry said sadly, "I do see the sense in your advice, but I'm telling you... it's not that simple. It's already too late to go back and simply confess everything. What I've done... can't be undone. Please say you won't ever try and meddle in my life like that again."

Leo's face was mulishly unwilling.

Harry tried a different tract, "Not just for me, Leo, but for your own sake. You really don't want to get mixed up in-"

" *Don't* ."

Leo took another long breath, and Harry waited for him to find his words.

"Don't tell me what I do or don't want to do for you, Harry," Leo said softly, "I've said it before-I'm your friend. I'm not gonna keep away to save my own skin. If you're really sure you can't get out of whatever mess you're in... then I won't try to pull you out myself ever again. But please... please be careful. I know I said that before, but I didn't really believe that you could be in that much trouble. You're a Potter, practically royalty, and still a kid, how could you be in any real danger? That was stupid of me, I guess. I only have to remember myself at your age..." he grimaced, "Actually, I can't believe I didn't

think of it like that before now. Do you need papers to flee the country?"

Harry let a laugh escape her, and stepped forward to hug Leo briefly, "You're pretty foolish for a king, Leo."

"Well, you're pretty shady for an Auror's daughter, lass," Leo muttered into her hair.

Harry stepped back and shrugged, "I guess if anyone knows about not following in our parents' footsteps, it's us."

Harry turned to go, but Leo laughed, saying, "Oh, no you don't. I have something for you-an apology."

Harry raised her eyebrows, "Okay, I'm listening."

Leo laughed again, "Like I'm going to say it? No, you don't deserve the satisfaction."

"How do you figure that?" Harry asked dryly.

"Well if you hadn't been such an untrusting little-"

"Not seeing the apology part yet."

"Ahem," Leo coughed dramatically, "Follow me."

He took her out into the alleys, past the Dancing Phoenix... and up Dogwood Lane.

"This feels familiar," she commented as they stopped before number eight.

"Do you have the key?" Leo asked, smirking.

Rigel opened her mouth to retort, then realized that no, actually, she didn't. "I usually floo in," she mumbled.

"Sure you do," Leo said, "Come on, then."

He led her around to the backstreet, and took out his wand. Harry tensed automatically, but Leo held up his hands calmly, "I'm going to levitate you up to your window-which you don't keep locked-"

"I know that," Harry snapped.

Leo just gave her this *look*, and continued, "Don't wiggle too much or it'll compromise the spell."

Harry eyed his wand dubiously, "I won't be able to levitate you up after, because I'm underage... and so are you, aren't you?"

"Turned seventeen in April," he grinned, "And I'm going to climb up after you."

"Why can't we both climb?" Harry bristled, "Because I'm a girl?"

"Because you don't know how to scale a building," Leo said.

"So teach me," Harry suggested.

"Right now?" Leo rolled his eyes, "What will the neighbors think? I'll teach you later if you really want to know how, just hold still for a second, will you?"

Before Harry could protest, he swished his wand at her torso. Her magic, a bit on edge after the Chamber incident, flashed into a shield and intercepted the levitation spell in an instant.

Leo raised an eyebrow, "Really? Now who's violating the Minister's law?"

Harry sighed, not bothering to point out that not using her wand meant not being Traced, and asked her magic to lay low, allowing Leo to cast the levitation charm and hoist her gently into the air. As she floated upwards, she couldn't help but notice that Leo's magic

felt restless in a way most grown wizards' magic didn't. Was it because he was just now leaving adolescence?

She latched onto the windowsill and hefted the pane upwards as Leo held her steady in the air. When she had pulled herself halfway through, she felt the levitation spell dissipate, and not long after she had scurried inside, Leo followed lightly into the room.

When she looked around, the first thing she noticed was how full the room was. She stared, blinked, turned in a circle, blinked, walked into the kitchen, stared some more, and took a deep, calming breath. Every room was filled with appropriate furniture. The kitchen had a table, two chairs, a scattering of dishes, even. The living room had a settee, a coffee table, a bookcase-and there were books in it! Potions books, classics and newer editions, too. She ran her fingers along the spines, and turned to run her eyes wonderingly over a painting of Hyde Park that hung over the fireplace.

She suspected that if she went into the little bedroom, she'd find a bed, maybe even a chest of drawers. She looked at Leo, who was watching her with a twinkling grin, and swallowed hard.

She cleared her throat, "I was... ah, I've been wondering for a while where all this came from. I should have know it was you who-"

Leo shook his head and said, "Don't, lass, not with me."

Harry's hands trembled helplessly, but Leo caught them with his own and smiled kindly down at her, "I know you've got this place for a reason, and it looks less suspicious with actual furnishings, doesn't it? And I come here every now and then, make a bit of noise for the neighbors to hear... well, even if you only meant to use it as an escape hole, now it's ready for you."

Harry frowned, "That's not what-"

"Hush," Leo said, with no small amount of amusement, "I don't care what you want it for-I'll tell any tale you like, or none at all. I know I

messed up at AIM. I won't send one of my men there again. I did this so you'd know I'm trying to help you, Harry. I'm on your side."

Somehow, even though Harry had understood Leo's point as soon as she'd seen the furnishings, hearing those words...

He was *on her side* . How many people could truly say that they were on Harry Potter's side, and have even an inkling of the trouble they were getting themselves into by declaring it? Archie, of course, and now Leo.

Harry stepped away from Leo and smiled with as much affection as she dared-it went all the way up to her eyes, and stayed there for a moment, vulnerable and true, before she let it fall again, "Thank you, Leo. I'm sorry I snapped at you."

"You're welcome any time, lass," Leo smiled back, "To the snapping, too, in fact. I suspect you don't let yourself shout as often as you deserve to."

"I'll leave most of the yelling to your mother," Harry grinned, "But thanks anyway."

She floored back to the Leaky Cauldron before floeing to Godric's Hollow-you never knew when floo records could be traced-and when her mother asked distractedly where she'd been all morning, Harry told the truth.

"I've been visiting a friend."

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The Potions Guild.

Harry knew plenty about it, but she had never dreamed of setting foot inside-not until she was about twenty, at least.

The building itself was intimidating, redone in the sixteenth century, and following the imposing Tudor style, all heavy arches, tall doorways, and steep roofing. It's wasn't beautiful, but it was *noticeable*, in the most tasteful of ways, of course. It sat in between the Ward Smith Guild and the Metallurgist Guild, on what most people called Craftsman Alley, which ran parallel to Diagon Alley, and was reached via an unnamed backstreet running next to an antique bookshop near Mr. Tate's shop.

Harry had known it would probably take the same amount of time to get to as the Serpent's Storeroom did, and she had still shown up fifteen minutes early. She hesitated outside the tall, narrow wooden doors. She could wait outside for fifteen minutes... and then just go home like the coward she was impersonating. She sighed, opened the doors, and stepped firmly into the rest of her life, closing the heavy oak decidedly behind her.

The front desk stood directly before her, so she approached it determinately.

A young man of about twenty sat at the desk, and as she drew nearer she could hear him muttering to himself as he shifted manuscripts from one place on the desk to another, seemingly at random.

She cleared her throat, "Excuse me, could you tell me where-"

"Yes?" the young man looked up with unfocused eyes, "What's that?"

"I'm here for the Guild internship," she said, "Where should I-"

"Down that hallway," he gestured to an archway to his left, "Down the stairs at the end, left until you see a sign for Lab 17. Master Rutherage will be down to meet you upon the hour."

"Thank you," Harry said, but the young man appeared too busy to notice.

She followed his directions, hiking up her new potions satchel as she went. She'd needed something unrecognizable as Rigel Black's-just in case-so she splurged on a potioneer-made bag with air-lock spells and manual pressure-adjustors built into the pockets. After all the brewing she was doing for Krait, she could certainly afford it, even after she set aside a good portion of her earnings for rent on number eight. Now as she approached the door to Lab 17, she had a moment of illogical fear that it would seem silly, her walking in with her new satchel, like a little girl with a new lunchbox on her first day of school.

She straightened her shoulders impatiently. She took pride in her work, which included owning top-notch equipment as well. She was a damn good brewer and had nothing to be ashamed of. She opened the door to Lab 17 quietly and calmly, as though it was no big deal. Just another door that needed opening. She only mentally cringed a little bit at how ridiculous her inner monologue was becoming.

Lab 17 was fairly small. Bigger than her personal lab, of course, but much smaller than the student labs at Hogwarts. She clamped tight on that thought-Harry Potter has no idea how big the labs at Hogwarts are-and distracted her mind by surveying the room, and the people within it.

The two other internees were already present. They were both boys, and both turned to face her at the sound of the door closing behind her. One was dark haired and dark eyed. He was relatively short for a boy who looked around nineteen, and his skin-tone suggested a southern-European ancestry. Maybe. Harry wasn't actually that great with guessing heritages in people. That boy looked at her curiously for a moment, then went back to the periodical he was reading-the most recent Potions Quarterly, she noted. She also wondered why he hadn't read it in May when it was released.

The other boy scowled at her from where he lounged with casual grace at the desk he'd chosen. When Harry recognized him, it took a direct assertion of will not to scowl back.

It was Caelum Lestrangle.

She turned all the dislike that surfaced at the sight of his perfectly pretentious face into icy coolness, and walked across the room to sit at a desk on the other side of the European-looking boy-better to keep him between her and Lestrangle, in case her magic got any funny ideas about what to do with the enmity he stirred in her.

"What are *you* doing here?" Lestrangle asked incredulously, "This program is for talented brewers, not amateur children."

Harry turned her head to look past the other boy to where Lestrangle was openly sneering at her. *You don't know him*, she reminded the part of herself pretending to be Harry Potter (ignoring for the moment how absurd it was that she had a part of herself pretending to be herself). "Have we met?" she asked quietly.

Lestrangle's face went even paler with anger, and Harry had to admit she knew why. It was the highest of insults among High Society to forget a face-even higher if you were pretending to forget, as Lestrangle no doubt suspected she was.

"Very amusing, *Black*," Lestrangle spat, "Too good to remember your betters?"

Harry let her eyes widen in understanding, "Oh-you've met my cousin, then, Rigel Black? Don't worry, this sort of thing happens a lot. We're very similar in appearance."

Lestrangle was taken aback only a moment before he regrouped, "Is that so? How convenient. Who exactly are *you* supposed to be, then? Regulus Black's bastard-"

"Careful," Harry said mildly, though with steel in her gaze, "Regulus Black doesn't take kindly to slights against the Black Family name. I'm not related to Rigel by blood, however. I should have said *honorary* cousin. My name is Harry, Harry Potter."

If anything, Lestrangle's incredulity only grew, "The Potter Heiress?" He stared at her for a beat, sweeping his eyes down her body, then snorted, "You've got to be the ugliest girl I've ever seen."

Harry's eyebrows snapped together sharply, but she took a calming breath. The fact that Lestrangle was here before taking his NEWT's meant he had some skill as a brewer. If he passed his Mastery, she would cross paths with him occasionally. Better to learn to neutralize his vitriol now. "Perhaps I am," she said evenly, "But I think it's awfully rude to say so."

Lestrangle only lounged back at his desk unconcerned, "Who cares what you think? A brat like you won't last a week in this program. They'll send you home crying like the little girl you are."

Harry bit down sharply on her tongue to stop it lashing out in retaliation. *He's not worth it*, she told herself, *He's not what you're here for. Ignore him, and be patient. His opinion means dirt.*

She turned her attention to the boy sitting next to her, who had yet to say a word, "I'm Harry," she said, "What's your name?"

"Renaldo," the boy said shortly, not even glancing at her as his eyes flicked lazily over the words of the article he skimmed, "Please don't talk to me, girl."

Harry turned back to her own desk slowly, blank-faced. She ignored the part of her that winced at Renaldo's dismissal, and crushed the part of her that growled at Lestrangle's derisive snort of laughter at her expense. She took a deep breath, counted to ten in French, and retreated behind a calm outer indifference. So she wasn't destined to make friends here-so what? Great potionneers didn't need friends, only test subjects. Look at Master Snape-he didn't have many

friends, and he was the *best* . She could be like that too; if her peers wouldn't give her the time of day, she would wear a watch.

A moment later, a great bear of a man with thick, wavy brown hair and sharp green eyes stepped into the small lab and surveyed them all cheerfully, "All here then? Good." The door slammed shut behind him and locked with an audible click at a flick of the man's wand, "If anyone is late, they will lose that day of instruction-so don't be. Welcome to the Guild's summer internship program. If you want to make anything of yourselves in the potions community, I suggest you start taking notes-NOW!"

Harry smoothly took out a sheaf of loose parchment and readied her quill. Lestrage and his pettiness retreated to the unimportant recesses of her mind. Finally, she was beginning her career as a potioneer. She was sitting in the Guild, learning from one of the senior Masters, as Harry Potter-not as Rigel Black or anyone else. It didn't matter if her classmates didn't like her. Harry was here, and no one could ever dispute that, halfblood girl or not.

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[end of chapter one]

A/N: So? How's that for a modest beginning? Timely and only 8,000 words to boot. I hope this brightens the day of anyone trying to get back into the daily grind after the Holidays. All the best!

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Chapter 2

A/N: I think it's official: I have the cleverest readers anywhere on the web. Or perhaps my mysterious hints are getting a little too predictable? Either way, many of you guessed several upcoming aspects to the plot-well done! Don't get overconfident, though. This fic is in for a bumpy ride... And for anyone worried that I'll be breaking a random prisoner out of Azkaban, letting Harry spill her guts as soon as she gets a crush on someone, or conveniently forgetting the loose ends still dangling from PP and SS-it's like you don't know me at all. Stay savvy, readers, but have a little faith, too. ;)

The Ambiguous Artifice:

Chapter Two:

Diagon Alley was alive with the chatter and clatter of a bustling Friday morning, and Harry darted and dodged her way through the crowds with the same flustered urgency as any of the frantic shoppers filling the streets around her. Usually, she wasn't bothered by all the bustle, and would let it sweep her along to her destination passively, but today she was late.

At least, she thought as she jumped over a stray crup licking up someone's spilled ice cream from the cobblestones, *I'm almost late* .

If she wasn't there on the hour, Master Rutherford would lock the door. No one had actually been late, so she didn't know for sure, but Rutherford didn't seem the type to make empty threats. He had a brilliant mind, a keen understanding of the intricacies of potion theoretics, and an up-beat disposition, but not, Harry thought, a strong inclination toward forgiveness.

She sidestepped a woman selling True Love charms, and almost collided with a man carrying a tall tower of singing wineglasses. At

the last minute, she threw herself out of the way-and promptly crashed into someone else entirely.

It was an older man, about her father's age, slightly heavy-set, with small, beady eyes that were nevertheless a pretty shade of light blue. He sat for a moment where he'd fallen in the street, apparently stunned by the abruptness of his tumble. Harry rolled to her feet with a groan and went to make a quick apology, but as she approached, the man's face took on a look of pure panic.

He was patting down his robes frantically, his eyes darting here and there among the throng of people stepping over and around the two of them in a rush. Harry, alarmed because he was so alarmed, began looking about as well. It was hard to even see the street because of the crush of passersby, but from her standing position Harry spotted a little brown sack that lay half-concealed behind the wheel of a cart vendor they had both nearly crashed into. She ducked down and snatched up the package quickly. The paper bag crumpled easily around her hand, as though it had been worked and worried over and over again, and she felt something hard and vaguely rock-shaped underneath as she carried it over to the man.

"Here," she said, thrusting the bag at him, "Is this what you're looking for?"

The man's eyes widened. He snatched the bag and felt the object inside possessively before taking a huge, gulping sigh of relief, "Oh thank Merlin, thank you Magic, it's here, it's safe, thank Morgana..."

He began to rise unsteadily, so Harry reached out a hand to help him up. He flinched minutely, but accepted her help with a nod of thanks. He shoved his package roughly into an inside robe pocket, and started dusting himself off. Harry stood watching anxiously, eager to get going again, but needing to make sure she hadn't injured the man as well.

"Are you okay?" she asked, "I'm sorry for running into you, Sir."

The man said nothing, only continuing to brush the street dust off of his cloak with single-minded attention. Strangely, the bottom third of his robes seemed to be covered with a silvery-black dust that Harry was sure couldn't have come from the street they were standing on. The dust in Diagon alley was whitish-tan, because that's what color the cobblestones were. She wondered where he'd been to pick up such dark-colored, metallic debris.

When he deemed himself satisfactorily dirt-free, he turned to her, as though he had only just then remembered her existence, "Hello, yes, do try and watch where you're going in the future, young man."

Harry nodded politely, "Of course, Sir, again, very sorry-er, I've actually got to run now-"

"Again?" the man shook his head, "Kids these days. Try not knocking into people on your way, won't you?"

"Yes, Sir," Harry said, bowing hastily, "Very sorry. Have a good day, Sir."

She took off running again, still feeling slightly guilty about her hasty departure, but she was really, really running late now.

She tore through the connecting street and emerged onto Craftsman Alley at a sprint. She didn't stop to greet the ever-hassled young man at the welcoming desk like she usually did, instead just running through the halls, down the stairs, and toward Lab 17, praying vaguely that none of the Masters saw her in such shameful disarray.

She ran straight up to the door to Lab 17, praying that it wasn't locked yet, willing it not to be locked. Be open, be open, come on, be unlocked, she chanted as she reached for the knob.

It turned.

With a huge gasp of relief, she hurried into the room, then froze as all three of its occupants turned to stare at her.

Master Rutherford was already inside. He was already lecturing, in fact, and both of his eyebrows rose in sharp question as she stood, unsure what to do, her hair windswept, bag slung haphazardly across her chest, panting like a lunatic who'd just run half a mile.

"It-ah-it wasn't locked," she said dumbly.

"Wasn't it?" Rutherford tipped his head toward her chosen workstation, but otherwise left it at that.

Harry had a sneaking suspicion. At the moment she couldn't feel her magic stirring beneath the blood still rushing through her veins, but it wouldn't take much to perform an unlocking charm... had she inadvertently forced the door to unlock itself? Or had Rutherford really forgotten to lock it? If he hadn't, why would he accept her unlocking it?

There was no time to decide which was the more likely scenario, as Rutherford was beginning to lecture again. Harry quickly found her seat and whisked out a sheet of parchment as quietly as possible.

Master Rutherford's lecture style was convoluted, sometimes difficult to follow, but always fascinating. He'd start on a random topic that had something to do with potions, introduce it generally, then ask penetratingly specific questions at random until he was satisfied that he knew the extent of their knowledge on the subject. Once he understood their level of knowledge, he adapted the rest of his lecture to filling the gaps in their knowledge as efficiently as possible.

On Monday, the topic was Classes of Ingredients. Tuesday had been Poisons and Antidotes, Wednesday Transformative Potions, and on Thursday... Harry mentally grimaced. Yesterday had been Love Potions, a subject she was admittedly woefully under-versed on. It didn't help that Lestrangle had snickered softly every time she gave an answer that was merely correct, and obviously lacking in rigor and depth. He seemed to find it hilarious that 'the girl' didn't know her Love Draughts back to front.

She banished thoughts of yesterday from her mind and focused instead of what Rutherage was saying now.

"Apart from hieroglyphs found in Egyptian tombs and texts preserved for spiritual reasons among the Hindu, little is known of medicine in the magical sense before the Chinese mystics began to combine their impressive knowledge of Herbology with their rather rudimentary understanding of Alchemy," Master Rutherage said, "What we do know is that medically-purposed creams and tinctures evolved into the earliest beginnings of the field we now know comprehensively as Potions, and it is no accident that most potions have an intimate relation with the human body-for better or worse, depending on whether you're brewing up a Swelling Solution, a perilous poison, or a Draught of Desire. Other branches of magic were developed to effect changes on the world around us, but to this day the majority of potions are still meant to be ingested..."

A smile began to spread over Harry's face. Today's topic was Healing Potions. She couldn't think of a branch of potions she knew better, expect, perhaps, pranking potions, but somehow she didn't think those would be covered in the Guild's program.

"Casillas," Rutherage said suddenly, "What are the broadest categories of Healing Potions?"

"Restoring Potions and Repairing Potions," Renaldo answered in his usual monotone, "The former are used to restore a person transformed or otherwise altered due to a spell or potion gone awry, the latter to heal damage done to the body in the form of wounds or other trauma."

"What would you classify Skele-Grow as?"

Renaldo thought silently for a moment, "It would depend upon whether you used it because the patient had broken a bone or had his bones altered by a spell."

Lestrangle chuckled in an infuriatingly smug way, which Harry knew infuriated Renaldo as much as it did her, even if the Spaniard was too collected to do anything besides grit his teeth.

"You disagree, Lestrangle?" Rutherage asked mildly.

"A potion's classification can't change just because you're using it to treat different things," Lestrangle rolled his eyes, "What a ridiculous assumption. Skele-Grow is always classified as a Restoring Potion."

"And why is that?" Rutherage asked, smiling calmly. Sometimes Harry thought Master Rutherage was trying to goad them with his unassailable good-cheer.

Lestrangle sneered, "I don't know. I read it in the kind of useless book that teaches you how to classify things instead of teaching you how to use them."

"Ah, yes," Rutherage nodded sagely, "The world does abound with books such of those-unfortunately, those same books are rather highly regarded by the venerable witches and wizards who write your NEWT exams."

The unspoken 'so shut up and learn the information' was loud and clear, despite Rutherage's easy smile. The Master turned to Harry, saying, "Why is Skele-Grow *always* a Restorative Potion, Potter?"

"Because to use it you have to first vanish the bones you want to re-grow, regardless of what was originally wrong with them, so the direct problem the potion addresses is always vanished bones-or spell-altered bones, if you want to be technical," Harry's explanation might have been just a tiny bit overdone, and strictly-speaking she didn't have to glance at Lestrangle's face as she said it, but there was something satisfying about seeing his too-pretty face pinch in an ugly scowl as she answered a question he could not.

Rutherage didn't say anything like 'correct' or 'good job,' but Harry didn't need him to. The fact that he moved onto the next question

without further comment meant she had been completely correct, and that knowledge was enough for Harry.

"Lestrangle," Rutherage said, "What are the most difficult kinds of Healing Potions to brew?"

"Ones that affect the mind," Lestrangle said, his tone as lazy and indolent as ever.

"Why is that?" Rutherage pressed.

Lestrangle paused, then said, "Because the mind is so complicated. It's harder to make potions that affect it without damaging it, because the potions have to be more complicated, too."

"Yes," Rutherage said, eyes laughing, "But is the body not also complicated? Why is the mind so much *more* so when it comes to Healing magic?"

Lestrangle frowned, "I don't know. Ask Potter."

Rutherage turned to Harry, who lifted her chin in response to the challenging eyebrow Lestrangle sent her way-as if to say, *answer that one, if you're so smart*.

"A person's magic manifests itself in three ways," Harry said, smiling slightly as she sent a silent thanks to all the books on auras and Occlumency she'd read, "There's physical magic, mental magic, and aura magic, which is a combination of the first two. You have to take into account a person's mental magic when you create a mind-altering potion, and since mental magic is more *imprecise* than physical magic, it usually takes a complicated combination of ingredients to enact sufficiently *precise* effects on the mind. Mental magic is also much less understood than physical magic, so it usually takes a Potions Master who is also a Master of Mental Arts to create or improve upon potions of the mind."

Rutherford smiled widely, "Casillas, can you name two Potions Masters who fit Potter's description?"

"Laverne de Montmorency," Renaldo said, "She invented several mind-altering love potions. Also... Damocles Belby. He invented Wolfsbane."

"Both good historical examples," Rutherford mused, "But potions is a cutting-edge field. Can anyone think of current Masters who are also Masters of mental magic?"

"Master Severus Snape," Harry said, suppressing a smile with difficulty, "He's been responsible for the most recent breakthroughs with the Wolfsbane potions."

"Master Regulus Moonshine," Lestrangle added, "He recently developed a potion that works on the minds of hags, suppressing their appetite for human flesh."

Rutherford smiled even wider, "We've moved away from the central topic somewhat, but it's never a bad idea to be well-versed in the current body of research. History is important," here he smiled at Renaldo, who was by far the best-versed in ancient and classical potion development, "But the reason this internship is research-based is that history is happening all around us-so try to keep up. Potter, what sort of questions would you ask if someone came to commission a dozen bottles of Goslinder's Solution for their niece?"

"Well, first I'd explain to them that Goslinder's Solution cannot be legally sold in quantities exceeding 0.5 liters, due to the possibility that someone could get around the Ministry's sanction against Firemu seed oil by distilling large quantities of Goslinder's Solution, because it's so easy to reverse-brew by evaporating the binding agent," Harry said thoughtfully, "And then I'd ask how old the niece was, because although it's commonly used as a cure for nervous stuttering, it can actually be damaging to a child's vocal cords if taken either before they fully mature-before seven years of age-or

during the transition period between 13 and 17 when the voice begins to drop."

"Lestrangle, what ingredient would you use as a substitute if you wanted to make Wheezer's Relief for someone allergic to honey?"

"Marshmallow plant sap," Lestrangle said easily.

Harry glanced over in surprise-she wouldn't have thought of that. She'd have said ginger, also an antimicrobial like honey, or maybe sage, to tighten the mucus-producing pores that caused irritants in the throat in the first place. Still... marshmallow was a good idea, since it could coat the throat, and simply stop it from being irritated enough to cough. It would also probably make the potion taste better.

"Potter," Rutherford said, "You seem surprised by Lestrangle's suggestion. Do you disagree?"

Lestrangle shot her a glare that just *dared* her to argue with him. She was originally going to say that marshmallow was a good idea, but at the quelling look on his face, she bristled, then smiled slowly.

"It's not that it wouldn't work," she said sweetly, "But it would be difficult to incorporate into Wheezer's Relief without taking out the goldenseal root. With both the goldenseal root and the honey taken out, the potion would have no microbial agents at all, so you'd be treating the symptom, but not actually helping the patient get better. You could use ginger instead of honey, and still take out the goldenseal to balance the mixture, or just use sage, which would let you keep the goldenseal, while also letting you add marshmallow if you really wanted to... though marshmallow would also make the second stage of the potion more magically draining, because you'd have to add an oil of some kind to keep the red clover from sticking to the marshmallow until it had dissolved, and more oil would mean more magic to prevent the properties of the oil from affecting the firecrow feathers. That would in turn make the potion more taxing, both in terms of magic and ingredient usage, which means it would

probably be too expensive for most people in need of it to afford, since the majority of people who come down with Wheezing Coughs work at low-wage, labor-intensive jobs. Really, it would be simpler if you didn't use marshmallow at all."

There was a moment of silence as all three men in the room stared at her. Harry had to fight to keep her smile polite and distant, instead of letting it slip into the smirk it wanted to become at the sight of Lestrangle's patent disbelief. The older boy scowled, then turned pointedly away from her, clearing his throat at Master Rutherage expectantly.

Rutherage blinked, then smiled serenely again, "Casillas, what Healing Potions work best in tandem with spells or charms?"

And so it went. Harry was really on top of her game that morning, though she made sure to keep her expression either neutral or pleasantly engaged. The last thing she wanted was for her face to end up looking as smug or superior as Lestrangle's did whenever *he* answered a question.

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They got an hour for lunch each day, and rather than floo home and try to scrounge up something there, Harry had taken to walking down to the Dancing Phoenix to eat.

She walked into the cheerful inn and answered friendly greetings and inquiries from people who recognized her with a wave or a nod as she made her way to 'Leo's table.' It was the one closest to the central fireplace, and it was almost never completely empty. Today, Rispah was at the table, chatting animatedly with Solom and Marek and looking like a despoiled milkmaid, casually draped in creamy whites and browns.

Harry paused to bow courteously to Rispah before sliding into the seat beside her, "My Lady, how does the day find you?"

Rispah gave Harry her sauciest grin, "I could tell you, but Leo would have my ears for corrupting the youth."

Harry tried her hand at a conspiratorial leer, "He'd never hear it from me."

Even Rispah, player that she was, couldn't suppress a snort at that, "Your eyes are too narrow-you're supposed to be looking at me appraisingly, but it just looks like you're squinting to compensate for bad eyesight."

"And you should make your smile smaller," Marek put in, waving a hand vaguely to help articulate his point, "Not so wide, you know? It makes you look too juvenile. Curl the edges more."

"Like this?" Harry tried it out, widening her eyes and curling her smile upwards.

"No, no," Solom put his two knuts in, "Now you look like a crazed dictator. I thought you were good at facial expressions, kid."

Harry frowned, "So did I. Like this?" She smoothed out her lips a little, so they were quirked upwards, but not straining. She lowered her lids just a tad, and quirked an eyebrow for a dashing effect.

Rispah's own eyebrows rose, "Not bad. We'll make a rake of you yet."

Harry dropped the leer and grinned. She loved being able to practice her facial expressions where she could get honest criticism. She was already fairly proficient at subtle expressions-you had to be, to get by in Slytherin. She was also pretty good with all the variations on adorable and innocent, brought to a pinnacle in The Look, which she had perfected years ago. As time went on, however, she felt a larger

repertoire of expressions was in order-ones more suited to adult features, and to 'obvious' characters.

"You really think so?" Harry put on her best 'simpering' face. She fluttered her eyelashes and tilted her face upwards, while holding her breath for good measure.

Marek laughed outright, "That's a good one!"

Rispah shook her curls, "For now, maybe-let me teach you a better one."

Rispah closed her eyes, and when she opened them they were *shining* at her. Rispah's carefully lined lips were poised in the most hesitant of shy smiles. She looked at Harry sidelong, her eyes swimming with pure admiration and esteem-*esteem* for *Harry*. Harry could feel herself freeze, and tried unsuccessfully to gulp. Rispah lowered her eyes secretively, and when she looked back at Harry, her smile widened slightly, as though she couldn't help herself.

Harry cleared her throat, "That's... wow, what *is* that?"

Rispah broke the expression and chuckled deeply, "That, is much more useful than your childish simper. That look will get you anything you want-and the guy will think it was his idea."

Marek broke in hastily, "You can't teach him that! It's a *woman's* look."

Rispah huffed, "So? It'll work just as well for a delicate-looking boy-no offense, Harry."

"None taken," Harry took a deep breath, summoned all her admiration for Rispah's acting ability, and funneled it into her gaze, tucking her chin a bit to appear uncertain, then smiled at the older woman with hesitant hope.

Solom guffawed, "Not bad at all! This lad's a natural, by Merlin."

Rispah eyed her critically, "Put a little more yearning into it. Like this." The rouged woman tossed her a glance that seemed almost desperate for... something.

Harry focused on not blinking for a few moments, letting moisture well up to make her eyes glisten naturally, then tried to match Rispah's look. She parted her lips and quickened her breath to seem a little more needy, then brought her eyebrows ever-so-slightly together, as though she were at once pleading and at the same time worried about being rejected.

Rispah blinked at her, "Well... yes, that's almost perfect."

Harry relaxed her face into a grin, "Thanks."

Solom gestured to a serving lad, and one came running over right away. "Get young Harry here a shepherd's pie from the kitchen," the older man said, glancing at Harry for confirmation.

"And a glass of milk," Harry added, smiling in a friendly way as she fished a galleon from her purse. She flipped the coin the way she'd often seen Marek do, and grinned as it arched into the boy's waiting hand.

"Do you even serve milk here?" Marek asked Solom, sending Harry a teasing grin.

"Milk is good for you," Harry said.

"So is ale," Marek returned, "It'll put hair on your chest."

"I've got plenty of hair on my chest," Harry said. A choking noise from behind her made her turn around to see Leo, pink-faced and half spluttering, next to a redheaded man wearing rough, Egyptian-style garb and a neck scarf pulled up over his nose to ward off the blistering afternoon sun.

"Take a seat, Highness," Solom grinned, kicking out a chair for Leo, "And Master Will, you're most welcome as well."

Leo and his friend took seats across the table, Leo saying, "What's this I hear about Harry's chest?"

"It's hairy, that's all," Harry said, ignoring the snickers that went around the table at her words, "Why, isn't yours?" Solom and Marek choked on their own spit and Rispah snorted with hastily suppressed amusement.

Leo favored her with a confident leer, "Wouldn't you like to know?"

Two can play that game, she inwardly smirked. She brought out the new leer they'd just taught her, raking her eyes across Leo's clothed chest for good measure, "Maybe I would. You offering?"

It was Leo's turn to once again choke as everyone else burst out laughing, including Harry. It was too hard to keep the expression going at the dumbfounded look on Leo's face.

"You-" Leo coughed and turned an accusing stare on Rispah, "Cousin, what have I told you about corrupting the youth?"

This only made Rispah, Marek, Solom, and Harry laugh harder, remembering what Rispah had said earlier.

"I feel as though we missed part of that joke," Leo's friend, Will, said wryly.

At the sound of his voice, muffled though it was behind the scarf, Harry stopped laughing and stared at the man. There was something... familiar about him, now that she looked.

"It probably wasn't that funny," Leo said sourly, though he grinned when his cousin shot him a vaguely apologetic smile.

"What brings you here, Master Will?" Solom asked, gesturing for another serving boy to come and take the newcomer's orders.

"Just paying my tithe," Will said. He chuckled as Solom leaned closer to hear better, then pulled down his scarf slightly so his voice wasn't so muffled, "Sorry. It's not due yet, but I won't be in the country much longer-not that I think His Highness would have trouble tracking me down, desert or no."

A tithe was another name for the taxes everyone who made a living in the Court of the Rogue had to pay to the King. As far as Harry understood, the King then used the taxes to provide things for the people in his Court who needed them.

"What sort of work do you do in the Court?" Harry asked, a suspicion forming in her mind as she traced his features mentally. His red hair was worn loose, so she couldn't see his ears, and his scarf still covered most of his lower face, but the long, freckled nose and sharp blue eyes were familiar.

Will eyed her warily, then seemed to do a double-take as he said, "Black? What are you... no, wait." He leaned toward her from across the table, searching her eyes. Harry gave nothing but mild curiosity away, even as her mind finally put a name to the face she was looking at. "Sorry, but you... look like someone I know. Not the eyes, but you're otherwise remarkably similar of face."

"You seem familiar, too," Harry said, her eyes dancing lightly across the young man's freckles.

'Will' stiffened and his face closed, "Maybe I've seen you in the alleys before."

"Yeah, that's probably it," Harry said, willing to drop it if he was. Clearly he was suspicious of her similarity to Rigel Black, and he had no doubt determined from the way she eyed his remarkably red hair that she suspected he had some connection with the Weasley Family. She hoped her message was clear: *I won't dig further if you won't.*

Not that she was worried if he did. She could easily tell him she was Harry Potter, and prove it, too. She just didn't want to expose her gender to the rest of her friends in the Court yet. They'd treat her like a foreigner if they knew she was a 'Lady' from the Upper Court, as they liked to call the folk who were connected to the *officially* recognized government in Wizarding Britain.

The shepherd's pies came out a moment later, so the awkward silence that followed Harry and Will's strange exchange was soon filled with the sounds of eating and exclaiming about how delicious the food was. It was always good, but Solom never tired of hearing it praised.

As he finished his pie, Will stood and excused himself, "See you next month, Highness. It was good seeing you all-and nice meeting you, Harry..."

He trailed off, waiting for her to supply her last name.

"It was nice to meet you, too, Will..." she answered sweetly.

William Weasley grimaced at her, but she thought it seemed relatively good-natured, so she grinned back at him in a no-hard-feelings sort of a way.

Once he'd gone, Harry asked, "So what *does* he do, Leo?"

"Will's a curse-breaker," Leo said, eyeing her questioningly, "He does fairly steady business hiring himself out as a curse-detector for those looking to re-sell old objects of... uncertain origin."

"He does houses, too," Marek put in, "He's not bad with wards, though he's better at deconstructing than setting new ones, I hear."

"What's got you so curious about him?" Rispah asked slyly, "He is rather handsome."

Harry colored and promptly stuck her nose into her own lunch, "He reminds me of someone I know. Where's he from?"

"That's his business," Solom said gruffly, "Where're *you* from?"

Harry acquiesced the point and concentrated on finishing her pie as the subject moved on to other areas of business in the Court. They didn't talk about anything terribly important around her, of course, but their Court gossip easily kept her entertained.

Soon she had to get back to the Guild for the afternoon practical. Leo offered to escort her back, but she waved him off, citing the fact that he hadn't finished his own pie as her excuse. In truth, she didn't want to be seen hanging out with Leo around the Guild. If the other two interns saw that she was close with the Aldermaster's son, they'd immediately assume she got the internship through connections, rather than merit. Harry wouldn't even be able to blame them for thinking it, as nepotism was extremely common in their world, and they had no way of knowing that Master Hurst was impressed with her potions before he knew she was his son's friend.

She was decidedly *not late* as she took her seat for the afternoon session, though Renaldo was already there when she arrived. She had not attempted to make conversation with him again after he brushed her off the first day, and he reciprocated her silence entirely. The only consolation to that was the fact that he didn't really speak to Lestrangle, either. He seemed completely and entirely focused on learning, which Harry supposed was admirable in its own way.

When Lestrangle came in, he took one look at her and sneered. "Don't think your little act this morning fooled anyone, Potter," he said as he stalked gracefully to his own station.

Harry heaved an inward sigh and counted to ten silently in her head. *Un... deux... trois...* eventually she gave up, realizing she wasn't going to ever calm down enough to be nice to Lestrangle, and said, "Should I know what you're talking about, or do you want me to guess?"

"I watched Master Rutherage lock that door," Lestrangle told her, "The only reason he didn't kick you out for forcing your way in is because it would look like sexism if the only girl intern in the last decade of this program got kicked out the first week. They'll probably let you stay long enough to shut up the feminists, then get rid of you so that those of us with real talent don't have to accommodate a child's pace."

Harry could feel her eye twitching, so she bit back the retort she wanted to make, and instead plastered an innocently curious look onto her face, "You think a child like me could overpower the Master's locking charm? It takes one and a half times the energy the caster put into a locking charm to unlock it."

"I know that," Lestrangle snapped. He did that a lot, asserting that he knew things just after being told them. As though being told something twice could cause his brain to rot and die, or something. "He must have underpowered it so that you'd be able to get in-like I said, they can't get rid of you yet ."

"I wonder why he'd bother locking it at all then," Harry thought out loud, "It would be more defensible to simply pretend to 'forget' to lock it, don't you think?"

"What do you know?" Lestrangle said dismissively.

"A lot of things," Harry said seriously, determinedly not getting angry, "Most of them having something to do with Potions. Believe it or not, Lestrangle, I do actually belong here. And I won't be going anywhere anytime soon."

She thought she saw something flicker in his eyes, but he turned to begin pulling out his brewing kit with a derisive snort, clearly deciding not to dignify her statement with an answer.

A minute or two later, Master Rutherage came in, followed by three other men, all middle-aged and all dressed in good-quality brewing

robes. Harry flicked her eyes down and yes, they all had on flame-retardant boots as well. These men were potionneers.

"Good afternoon, interns," Master Rutherford said jovially, "Today is the final day of group instruction. After this lesson, you'll each be assigned one of the Guild's Masters, who will guide your research for the rest of the program."

In other words, Harry thought, these three Masters were there to evaluate their last practical lesson, and would likely make their decisions about which intern they wanted according to what they saw.

"They've all been briefed on your respective levels of proficiency already, so don't worry if you make a mistake this afternoon-it won't affect their decisions," Master Rutherford said.

Harry glanced at the other two interns' faces. They looked as skeptical as she felt.

Rutherford flicked his wand at each of them, and a roll of flameproof parchment flew from his desk to each of their stations, "Here is the recipe for today's potion. Some of you may not have brewed this particular potion before, so I'll tell you that the trick is in following the instructions exactly. Feel free to read over the recipe several times before beginning. You have three hours to complete your potion. Begin." With that, Rutherford conjured four chairs at the front of the room, and all four of the Masters settled in to wait.

Harry unrolled her parchment and glanced over the ingredient list. She frowned, and looked over it again. These ingredients... made no internal sense.

First of all, it called for chicken feathers, which she had never seen called for in anything... ever. Pencil shavings were also on the list, as well as baking powder and... snow. It actually said 'half a liter of snow.' Harry could honestly say she had no idea why a potion would need snow in particular, since snow was frozen water, and it would

melt in the cauldron almost instantly. In short, if someone had asked her to write a list of the most useless potion ingredients she could think of, half of the ones off the top of her head would be on this list.

Bemused, she looked at the title, and internally groaned. Jourdain's Amalgamation. She should have suspected, but she honestly never imagined the Guild would have them make something so completely pointless. *And*, she thought, looking at the three feet of small-print instructions, *unnecessarily complicated*.

Jourdain's Amalgamation was an infamous potion. It was said that nearly every NEWT practical for the last four decades running involved brewing at least the first stages of the potion as one of the components. The odd thing about this potion, and the reason Harry had never bothered learning to brew it, was that it didn't actually do anything. At all. It was extraordinarily complicated simply for the sake of being complicated. It was created by some sadistic individual to test how well aspiring brewers could follow directions and successfully complete a potion they were unfamiliar with.

Harry read all the way down to the end of the parchment, noting that the potion would go through several stages and changes, but would end up a bright green broth the consistency of liquid mercury when finished, and ought to smell slightly of peppermint.

She took out the materials she'd need at her station-no special equipment, thankfully, though she'd need knives of no less than four different materials depending on the ingredient she was preparing. She had a few of the ingredients called for in her own kit, but most of the ingredients were, well, *useless*, or at least impotent in reasonable quantities, so she'd have to collect the majority of them from the Guild's stores.

There was a storeroom connected to their lab, so Harry left her cauldron to begin warming up (after checking it for impurities and treating it with snake oil, as the recipe called for), and took her ingredient list with her to get what she needed.

Renaldo and Lestrage were already busy gathering their own ingredients by the time she got there. The storeroom wasn't very big, and they were all gathering the same ingredients, so it was quite crowded. Harry had to grit her teeth several times when Lestrage elbowed her 'accidentally' as he placed pre-packaged quantities of ingredients into his basket, but she wasn't inclined to pettiness when there was a potion to brew, so she ignored the older boy and focused on getting what she needed.

She had only collected a few of the things on her list when Renaldo fell suddenly sideways and knocked clumsily against her. Harry lost the grip on her basket, and wasn't fast enough to stop the ingredients falling to the floor. She sighed, knelt to pick them up, and glanced over with surprise when Renaldo knelt down beside her and helped her gather them. He looked upset, and Harry saw him glare angrily at Lestrage as the other boy swept out of the storeroom without a backward glance.

"Sorry," Renaldo said shortly, "Git pushed me."

"No problem," Harry said, annoyed at Lestrage all over again for being such a prick all the time.

Renaldo nodded, then stood. He seemed to hesitate, then said, "You'll have to get new lilac pollen-it's useless now, since you don't know what it came into contact with on the ground. New Madder root, too, I think."

Harry nodded, well aware of this, "You're right. Thanks." She turned to get a new packet of lilac pollen, hoping she wouldn't get in trouble for the one she'd spilled all over the storeroom floor. When she turned back, Renaldo was holding a bundle of roots in his hand, his expression still unreadable. She took the replacement Madder root with a grateful smile, which Renaldo returned half-heartedly. She wasn't offended-it was a start, at least. Maybe they'd be friends, by the time all this was over.

They gathered the rest of their ingredients in silence, and returned to the lab to begin what looked to be at least two and a half hours of intensive brewing.

Time passed quickly, as it always did while she brewed. For the first time that she could remember, however, Harry was looking forward to being done with a potion for the simple reason that brewing it was annoying.

Jourdain's Amalgamation was, frankly, a huge waste of time. Half of the ingredients she added did nothing except render inert other ingredients previously added. As she brewed, she couldn't help thinking up dozens of ways to make the process more efficient, mentally cutting out and shortening parts of the recipe that were entirely unnecessary. Then again, she supposed, if the recipe was expedient, it wouldn't be nearly so difficult.

As she added the Madder root, she couldn't help but feel like she was brewing one of her father's prank potions. Madder root was common in joke potions, because it's primary use was as a color additive. It would turn a potion bright yellow-though, because she had already added blueberry extract to the mix, this potion would actually be a very... pretty... green...

Harry's stomach dropped as her entire potion turned a vivid purple. "What?" she muttered, completely confused. How could it be purple? The Madder root was yellow. No possible combination could have made purple out of yellow. Even if she'd made a mistake before putting the root in-which she hadn't-this garish purple couldn't have happened unless the Madder root had been rendered inert by something else in the potion-or rather, not rendered inert, but corrupted to some kind of *red* .

Harry shook her head and pulled out her wand quickly. She cast a stasis charm on the cauldron until she could figure out what had happened-maybe she still had time to fix it. She couldn't get from purple to green directly, of course, so she'd have to first find a way to neutralize the Madder root, or perhaps extract it somehow-

Her thoughts were interrupted by a choked snort from across the room. She spared a moment to flash a glare at its emitter, and wasn't surprised to see Lestrage openly grinning in amusement at her obnoxiously purple potion. She offered him an unappreciative scowl, and turned back to her cauldron. On the way back to her own station, however, her eyes passed over Renaldo, who had the tiniest of smirks playing about his mouth as he stirred his cauldron.

Her face flushed and her hands clenched shut. She had to very carefully put her wand back into her pocket and focus on willing her magic *not* to overturn the jerk's cauldron into his lap. It was Renaldo who gave her the Madder root, after her own had fallen. *I bet Lestrage didn't even knock him into me*, she thought bitterly, recalling his half-hearted smile as he 'helped' her.

Harry took a deep breath, then narrowed her eyes at her cauldron. She was going to fix this. Her potion was going to be the *best*, or she hadn't studied under the greatest Potions Master of their age. She swept off to the storeroom once more, taking some comfort in the fact that they wouldn't dare sabotage her potion further while under the eyes of the Masters. She eyed the shelves around where Renaldo had been standing, trying to guess what he'd substituted for the Madder root.

There were several roots in that section (the cupboard being organized by ingredient type, not alphabetically), but there was only one other that was the same sort of off-tan color as the Madder. She eyed the Himalayan rubhada root, which was used in red dyes, and sighed. At least she knew how to get rid of it. She reached for the packets of actual Madder root, only to groan out loud as she spotted the empty shelf.

He'd taken *all* of the extra root, probably so that she couldn't fix it when she realized what had gone wrong. Harry scrubbed a hand through her hair, furious. Never in her life had she been the target of such low-handed tricks. Imagine, deliberately ruining someone else's potion. It made her sick.

What could she do? She didn't have Madder root in her personal kit, precisely because all it did was change the color of things. She'd have to use a different yellow-producing agent. She saw Larkspur, but as much as she'd like to use that, she couldn't. Larkspur was poisonous, and none of the ingredients in the recipe would neutralize it. No one would be drinking it as far as she knew, but it was illegal to create a poison unless sanctioned by the Guild for research purposes, not to mention just bad form. She debated Gamboge resin, but that would thicken the consistency of the potion, and cow urine (yes, really), would have a disastrous effect on the potion's smell. She looked in vain for weld, also called dyer's weed, which would produce a nice, sunny yellow with the right persuasion... but it didn't seem to be stocked in this storeroom.

Eventually, feeling the press of time passing, she decided on Indian gooseberry, which was edible, without being too aromatic. She hesitated over the Leucanthemum for a moment, but in the end grabbed a few Croton leaves instead. Both plants absorbed huge amounts of sunlight, a natural bleaching agent, but although the Leucanthemum was prettier, the Croton would be more efficient in releasing the energy it stored, in her opinion.

She hurried back to the Lab, knowing that she would have to work quickly to make up for the time she had lost. She took the potion off stasis, and turned up the heat as high as she dared, conscious that if she set it too high the integrity of other ingredients would be compromised. By heating up the potion, the red dye from the Himalayan rubhada root would unbind partially from the other ingredients. Harry de-stemmed the Croton leaves and cupped them in her left hand, pressing her right hand on top. The Croton leaves had a lot of energy in them already, but Harry needed them to be bursting with energy, to speed up the photons the Croton leaves had absorbed from the sun. She imbued the leaves until they felt warm to the touch, and dropped them in the cauldron, stirring quickly to dissolve their energy into the potion. Within a few minutes, the entire potion had turned white, as the energy from the Croton leaves bleached all color from the mixture.

She still had some of the blueberries left over, but they had been in balance with the apple seeds (for some reason that probably made no practical sense, but which Harry didn't feel confident enough to disregard), so she added more of both, and stirred until the potion was once again blue. *Then* she added the Indian gooseberry, and *finally* the potion turned the green it was supposed to be.

She was back on track.

Harry veritably flew through the rest of the potion, so fed up with the whole afternoon that she barely restrained herself when the recipe called for a five-minute wait while it simmered. She was pleased to note, as she added the last ingredient, that Renaldo had just finished his own potion as she set down her stirring rod, and by the way Lestrangle was still packing up his utensils, he couldn't have finished that much ahead of her either.

She eyed her potion critically, but despite the detour she'd taken around the Madder root, it *looked* right. It was green, thicker than oil but thinner than honey-just the thickness of liquid mercury, and it smelt faintly of mint, as it was supposed to. The shade might have been a hair off, but she flattered herself that by looking at the finished result you'd never guess it had been purple not fifteen minutes prior.

Master Rutherage came over and peered into their cauldrons, seeing that they'd all finished. He made approving noises over Lestrangle's caldron, hummed in a contented way over Renaldo's, and smiled at her as he leaned over to sniff at her own, "Got a bit lost there in the middle, did you, Miss Potter? What happened?"

"I'm afraid so, Master Rutherage," Harry said smoothly, "I'm afraid my Madder root may have been a mislabeled Himalayan rubhada."

"Ah, yes, that explains the... interesting deviation in color you experienced," Rutherage said cheerfully, "Good thinking to draw the color completely out, then reapply it. Any reason you didn't simply use actual Madder root as the recipe suggested?"

"Unfortunately, there was only enough Madder root stocked for three potions," Harry said, shrugging easily, as though she hadn't wanted to rip her hair out over the shortage earlier.

"Well it doesn't seem to have done any harm, your improvisation," Rutherfordage smiled again, "The potion is to specifications, so I suppose you've completed your task regardless."

"The task was to follow directions," Lestranger muttered sourly.

"How nice it must be that everything you do goes according to plan," Harry said, smiling politely at the Durmstrang boy.

"Hmm, quite right," Rutherfordage chuckled, "Adaptation is crucial to potion-brewing-though of course following direction is a good starting point, in best-case-scenario circumstances."

Harry barely suppressed a smirk at that. She wondered when her inner-self had become so vindictive, but it stroked something positively smug in her gut to know that Renaldo's little trick had backfired. Not only hadn't it ruined her potion, it had given her a chance to demonstrate quick-thinking and problem-solving on the spot, as well.

"Well, that's it for today's lesson," Rutherfordage said, waving his wand broadly and vanishing the contents of all three cauldrons, "And that concludes your group sessions, as well. From now on, you'll meet with your assigned mentor in the mornings, and do research in the afternoons. You'll need to have your topic chosen and approved by the end of next week. Experimental brewing is to be done *only* under your respective Master's supervision."

He stepped aside, and the three Potions Masters stood.

The first to speak was tall, poised, and classically handsome, with a straight nose and high cheekbones. His hair was long, like a pureblood lord, and Harry recognized him after a moment as Edgar Whitaker, the public face of the Guild. He looked different in color

than in the black-and-white photos printed in the Guild's bi-annual press release, but Harry recognized the big, even teeth as he smiled at them.

"I am Master Whitaker," he said, his voice smooth and his demeanor friendly. He was rumored to be quite personable, and Harry could see why. "My specialty, as some of you may know, is Transformative Potions."

Who didn't know about Whitaker's work with Polyjuice? Harry thought, hoping she'd impressed him enough that he'd pick her. He would be perfect as a mentor-she already had a great interest in Polyjuice, and she'd heard he occasionally worked with Professor Snape on Wolfsbane, too.

"Mr. Lestrangle," Whitaker continued pleasantly, "You're with me."

Lestrangle smiled broadly, and Harry couldn't help but hate that his face was even more beautiful when he wasn't sneering.

"It's an honor to meet you, Master Whitaker," Lestrangle said, and Harry couldn't even sneer at the awed tone of the other boy's voice, because she was feeling the same way just being in the same room at Whitaker.

The next Master to step forward looked vaguely familiar, but Harry didn't recognize him until he introduced himself. "Master Montmorency," he said, his voice slightly clipped, "I'll be mentoring Mr. Casillas."

Montmorency the Meticulous, some called him. He was known for his tediously extensive experiments and the slow rate at which he published his papers. That said, he never retracted anything, because he never released his findings until he was absolutely certain of their implications and shortcomings. His specialty, Harry recalled enviously, was Healing Potions. His latest research was on stasis potions, and if she remembered correctly he'd actually come

up with the version of Snowhit she'd used during the Sleeping Sickness. And he was *Renaldo's* mentor.

Harry suppressed a sigh, and pasted an eager expression on her face as she turned toward the third Master. He surveyed her with half-lidded eyes, looking... rather bored, actually. She altered her expression into a politely neutral one, and offered her hand, "I'm Harry Potter, Master..."

He reached out and clasped her hand, but his grip was weak, his expression disinterested, "Thompson," he said lazily, "Guess you're with me."

She nodded, not sure what else to say. She'd never heard of a Master Thompson-though the name was so common, perhaps she just didn't remember reading it. He didn't offer his specialty, and she hesitated to ask, feeling embarrassed that she couldn't remember him from anywhere and not wanting to offend him.

Thompson turned his gaze to the ceiling and examined it idly for a moment, before looking back down at her, "We'll meet at ten on Monday morning. My Lab is number thirty-three. I'll leave it unlocked."

"Not that a lock would stop Potter," Lestrangle sneered as he moved past them, amusement at his own joke glinting in his eyes.

Harry forced a pleased smile, "I look forward to it, Master Thompson. Good afternoon."

She gathered her things, stowed her cauldron away at her station, and walked slowly out of the Guild, ambivalence in her heart. She wasn't that upset about Renaldo switching her ingredients. It pinched a bit that the other two interns so actively disliked her, but, she reasoned, not everyone in the world *had* to like her. She was mildly disappointed that Lestrangle had been picked by Master Whitaker, when she probably knew more about transformative potions than he did. More than that, however, she was disheartened at her own

mentor. She knew it wasn't always the case, but usually when a Potions Master wasn't well-published, it meant he wasn't contributing much to the field. This was a research internship, so she had imagined she'd be mentored by someone really *relevant* to current research, as Montmorency and Whitaker both were.

She shook her head sharply to clear the nonsense out of it. What was she thinking? Thompson was a Potions Master, well-published or not, and to think that there was a Potions Master she couldn't learn from... well, that was sheer folly. Probably, on Monday, she would see that her anxiousness was for nothing. The bitter, suspicious part of herself that whispered poisonous thoughts-that maybe the Guild didn't think a *real* Potions Master should be wasted on the upstart female brewer who'd only been let into the program on Master Hurst's recommendation-well, that part was just wrong, wasn't it? It had to be.

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Godric's Hollow was empty when Harry arrived home. It was late afternoon, but not quite time for her parents to get off work. James' schedule had been very reliable since he was taken off active duty, so he'd be home around five o'clock, but Lily sometimes worked late, still making up for the weeks she'd taken off for maternity leave, so Harry would probably see her around dinner.

If Harry were a better sister, she would floo over to Grimmauld Place and pick up Addy. Sirius watched her during the day, both because Addy still hadn't taken to Remus very well, and because her parents thought Sirius could use something other than his pet snakes to focus on.

She should go over and relieve Sirius of babysitting duty... but instead she changed out of her brewing robes and into her loose running clothes. Addy would only cry if Harry picked her up, and it

was important that she keep her exercise regimen as regular as possible. Remus was disappointed by how much her stamina had suffered while the curfew was in effect at Hogwarts, and he wouldn't increase her weights until she could do a solid five kilometers again.

She pulled on her shoes and did a few stretches before heading out the front door. Godric's Hollow was a small village, and the Potters lived on the outskirts, so Harry usually made her run around the perimeter. The sun hadn't quite set, so she didn't spare much thought to where her feet took her. As was her habit, the sounds of her breathing faded from her consciousness and her thoughts turned inward as her feet drummed on the earth.

She wanted to come up with a topic for her research with Master Thompson, but she found her mind drifting to other questions instead, like what Bill Weasley was doing earning a living in Leo's Court, when he already had a respectable job as a curse-breaker for Gringotts. That he wasn't open about his identity meant his family probably didn't know he worked for thieves in his spare time. She wondered what he needed to supplement his income for—he was young, single, and presumably debt-free if he still stayed at his parent's home on breaks from his job.

Maybe he has a gambling problem, she thought, before shaking her head in self-disgust. Who was she to speculate about someone else's secret life? If anything, she should be more concerned that *he* would figure out *her* secret life. She might have to make her trips to the Dancing Phoenix less frequent, though it would be a shame to do so. Leo and the other members of the Rogue were fun, and they let her relax. They never asked her very personal questions, never insinuated that she be grateful for their discretion, and seemed genuinely unconcerned with how secretive she was. With them, she could almost forget she had secrets. She didn't have to be Rigel Black, or even Harry Potter. She could be just Harry, a kid with a knack for potions.

Then again, 'just Harry' didn't get to study under Master Snape at Hogwarts, so she wasn't ready to run off and join the Court herself

just yet. *Maybe after I take my NEWT's*, she told herself jokingly.

She made it home just before true dark set in, and quickly changed out of her sweaty clothes before flooing over to Grimmauld Place. The smells of dinner greeted her as she stumbled out of the grate ungracefully.

Her mother was directing her wand as it chopped vegetables adroitly, Addy strapped to a carrier on her back. Harry's little sister peered over Lily's shoulder curiously, seemingly entranced by the wand's quick movements. Sirius was squatting down in front of the oven, hands covered with pink and blue protective mitts.

"It won't bake faster just because you watch it," Remus said from his seat at the table as Harry walked in.

"It won't burn either," Sirius said absently, staring through the little oven window and wriggling slightly in anticipation, "It's almost done, I just know it!"

"Most people set timers for cakes," Lily said, her voice tired, but amused. She left off the vegetables and flicked her wand toward the cupboard to summon plates and cups for the table. Harry had thought her mother was rather lazy, growing up, as Lily tended to take any excuse to use her wand. When she got older, though, and realized that her mother had been raised among muggles, Harry decided she couldn't fault her mother for her near-constant use of magic. Lily no doubt appreciated her abilities more than wizard-raised witches would, and so included her magic as intimately as possible in her lifestyle.

"As if time has anything to do with baking," Sirius scoffed, "I am an artist, not a chemist."

"What would *you* know about chemistry?" James asked, setting the cutlery.

"I know it's a soulless, exacting pursuit that attracts only the most repressed and critical of individuals. Rather like potion-mak-" Sirius broke off in a cough as he caught sight of Harry's reflection in the oven door, "Harry! We were just talking about you-no, I mean, we were talking about... um..."

"The soulless and repressed nature of those pitiful wraiths who are drawn to become potioneers?" Harry suggested wryly. She bent down next to Sirius to peek in the oven, "Chocolate? Or is it just burnt?"

"It's not burnt!" Sirius said, though he did peer worriedly through the window before turning back with an apologetic smile, "And I didn't mean you, of course. Just... certain other people who become greasy old Potions Masters because they can't find a way to actually participate in social reality."

"Professor Snape is your age, Dad," Archie said cheekily from where he was mixing Addy's bottle, "But I guess you are kind of old now that I think about it."

And he's probably improved more lives with his 'greasy' research than Sirius has giving prank toys to children at St. Mungo's, Harry thought uncharitably. She pursed her lips, immediately repentant. Sirius brought a lot of joy to the world, between the Marauder line and his volunteer work, not to mention the annual donations he made to a number of worthy causes. Harry didn't know where all these petty thoughts were coming from that evening, but suspected she was simply in a bad mood because of her afternoon at the Guild.

Sirius must have mistaken her pursed lips for disapproval of his comments rather than disappointment in herself, as he said, "Sorry, Harry, if I offended you. I was only joking."

Harry smiled unconcernedly, "I know, Uncle Sirius. I'm not cross with you, just tired-long afternoon, you know."

"So forgiving," Sirius grinned, ruffling her hair with an oven-mitt-clad hand, "Why can't you be more like Harry, Archie?"

Archie half-choked on a laugh, "I honestly don't think I could be *more* like Harry if I tried. We're practically twins, aren't we Harry?"

"Separated at birth, no doubt," Harry agreed, "It's the only explanation for you turning out so much cooler than Sirius-he must have snatched you from my mother's arms when he realized what amazing kids his friends were blessed with."

"Oi!" Sirius protested, "Archie is so not cooler than me."

"I've been meaning to tell you, Dad," Archie said mournfully, "But we all voted, and... I am definitely cooler than you."

"Impossible!" Sirius declared, tossing his head proudly even as he finally retrieved the cake from the oven.

"It was almost unanimous," Remus chimed in.

"The only vote in your favor was Lily's vote," James agreed apologetically, "And we counted her vote in Archie's favor simply because of how wildly off-mark her cool-detector generally is."

It was Lily's turn to gasp with affected dismay, "My cool-detector is just fine. I think *you're* cool, Darling."

"Exactly," Remus chuckled softly.

James threw a playful scowl at Remus and added, "You thought Snape was cool when you were younger, too."

"Master Snape *is* cool," Harry said automatically.

Sirius and James both turned disbelieving eyes on her, "Snape? Cool? That is just... wrong."

"How would you know, anyway?" James added, "Anyone can seem cool on paper. In real life, he's *decidedly* not."

Harry turned raised eyebrows on Archie, who froze for a moment, before shrugging sheepishly. "Uh, Professor Snape definitely has a... presence..." Archie fumbled, "I mean, he's sort of... intimidating, actually. But it's kind of cool... the way his cloak swishes when he turns..."

Harry resisted the urge to smack her own forehead as Archie somehow managed to compile the descriptions of Snape she'd given him into a litany that made him sound like a besotted idiot.

Sirius was staring with abject horror, "No... Archie, no, you can't think Snape is cooler than me. You just can't...." he trailed off into indistinguishable mutters of denial.

"I think you broke him," James said, looking disturbed, "Maybe we should all pretend you didn't say that, Archie."

"He's my Head of House," Archie said, flushing, "I can't pretend to hold him in contempt."

"Professional respect is one thing," Sirius said, snapping out of his daze with a vaguely ill expression on his face, "Personal admiration... is just so unnecessary. It's *Snape* ."

"That's not an argument in and of itself, you know," Harry said, annoyed enough to speak up in Snape's defense, "Your dislike of the man has skewed your perception of him greatly, Uncle Sirius."

Sirius grimaced, "That doesn't really bother me, since I know his opinion of me suffers the same distortion."

Harry shrugged, consenting that point easily enough, "I guess neither one of you is better than the other, then."

"Salad's done," Lily broke in cheerfully, flapping her hands toward the table, "Let's eat."

Everyone grasped the change of subject readily, and exuberant praise and thanks for the meal were given and received until a general air of light-hearted gaiety returned to the kitchen.

It was only her cranky mood that made her wonder why her family was so good at ignoring the uncomfortable truths and focusing on the inane ones.

When they were clearing away the dishes, Sirius said, suddenly, "Archie, I forgot to tell you, but you got a letter today."

Archie left off teasing Addy with her pacifier and cocked his head curiously, "Who from?"

"Malfoys," Sirius said, half grimacing.

"Oh," Archie dug through the pile of mail on the counter and pulled out the square, off-white envelope addressed to him, "Looks more like an invitation."

"Another one of those summer parties the Malfoys had last year?" Harry asked with affected innocent.

Archie seized on the reminder, "No doubt Draco's birthday party as well." He ripped it open and scanned the embossed invitation briefly, "Cordially invited... hmm... it's this weekend-tomorrow! Dad, when you said I got a letter today, did you mean you just bothered checking the mail today? How long has this been sitting here?"

Sirius shrugged apologetically, "I don't check the mail often, so... two weeks?"

Archie laughed, but Harry frowned, "Will you have time to get Draco's present by tomorrow morning?"

"I'll go to Diagon Alley to get something before the party," Archie said.

"I'll tag along," Harry said nonchalantly, "I have a few errands to run tomorrow in the Alley anyway."

Archie agreed distractedly, still looking at the invitation with unease, "Dad... you're on here, too."

"What?" Sirius wasn't the only one who looked confused, "Let me see." He bent over Archie's outstretched hand, "Huh. So I am."

"Why's your name after mine?" Archie asked, frowning, "You're the Head of the Family."

Sirius shrugged, "Maybe they think if they make you the primary attendee and me the secondary, I'll disregard the Split and go. Or it might just be that your connection to Draco is stronger than my ties to the Malfoys, despite Narcissa's marriage, and decided to only invite me through proxy."

"Will you go?" Harry asked, trying to hide her unease at the idea.

"I..." Sirius trailed off, thinking, "The New Year's Gala was one thing. That was a political event... sort of. This, though..." he grimaced, "James, what do you think?"

James lapsed into thought, running a hand through his hair pensively, "It would be a stretch, but you could claim you went as a chaperone to Archie, not a real guest. If anyone asks. Do you want to go?"

Sirius shrugged uncomfortably, "I don't like Archie going alone."

Harry noticed he didn't really answer the question.

Remus spoke up tentatively, "Do you think the Split is still all that in effect? It's been so many years... principles are important, of course, but it's also your family, Sirius. This situation has always been harder

on you than on others. Maybe you should reclaim your place in society."

"I never really had a place," Sirius said weakly.

"Exactly," Lily spoke up, "Sirius, I know you've chosen Light politics, but perhaps its time to become socially Neutral. For Archie's sake, at least. He'll be attending more and more of these gatherings as he grows older, with the friends he's made in school being who they are. It might be better if you had a bit of leeway in guiding him through society. You don't have to sympathize with Dark politics, of course."

" *Please* don't join the Cow Party, Dad," Archie begged comically.

Sirius barked out a laugh, "They wish! Once a Marauder, always a Marauder."

No one said anything about Peter 'wormtail' Pettigrew.

"Okay... I'll do it," Sirius said, more seriously. Then he grimaced, "Does this mean I have to get Lucius' whelp a birthday present?"

Archie rolled his eyes, "Yes, Dad, you have to get my *friend* a birthday gift if you crash his party."

"I was *invited* ."

"After me," Archie smirked, "Guess I should be Head of the Black Family, seeing as I'm obviously more important than you."

"Don't forget cooler, too," Harry put in, smiling despite the sinking feeling in her chest. How was she going to pull this off?

"This new generation is a complete wash," Sirius complained.

"Whose fault would that be?" Remus asked, smiling pleasantly.

"Lily's, no doubt," Sirius sniffed.

"See if I let you watch Addy next week," Lily sniffed back.

"Who else would watch her? Remus?" Sirius laughed.

"I think she's starting to like me," Remus said hopefully, reaching out to pat Addy on the head gingerly. The infant's bottom lip trembled, and Remus retracted his hand quickly. "Or not," he muttered.

"And Harry can't watch her, with that Guild thing all day," Sirius said smugly, "Face it, I'm your best option."

Lily grumbled something about seeing if Alice Longbottom was available, and James turned curious eyes on Harry. "How is that going, by the way?"

Harry shrugged, "I'm learning a lot. I got assigned a mentor today from the Guild, and he's going to help me with me research starting next week."

"You're doing original research?" Lily frowned, "Is it safe?"

Harry hid a smile at her mother's naiveté. She'd hate to think what her parents would say if they knew Harry had already created-and tested-potions on herself. "Perfectly safe, Mum. Master Thompson will oversee any experimental stages."

"No one's better equipped than the Guild, Lily," Remus said reassuringly.

"Yes, you're right. Still, be careful, Harry," Lily said worriedly, "I think you're too much like your father, sometimes, and I've heard what *he* got into at your age."

Harry smiled reassuringly, but inwardly mused that no matter how much trouble James got into as a teen, it would never amount to what *she* had gotten herself into in the last two years.

That evening, Harry followed Archie up to his room. She needed to get back to her lab to work on Draco's present, but strategizing

tomorrow's subterfuge was more important.

Archie shifted great, heavy toms on Healing off of his bedspread to make room for them to sit. Harry knew many would be surprised by Archie's studiousness, but his carefree, often facetious nature was only the cheerful veneer that masked a deep, conscientious empathy for the world, and a sharp, engaging intellect. He was much like his father in that respect: he played the part of the jester willingly, finding laughter in any situation, but behind his smile lived an acute awareness of how sober reality could really be.

"So," Archie said, plopping down and hugging a pillow to his chest with the kind of ingénue affect that Harry couldn't help but envy.

"What are we going to do about this?"

Harry took a seat beside him, wondering the same thing.

"We don't look exactly the same anymore," Archie said, thinking out loud, "It's close, but I think our actual bodies are starting to differ too much biologically-I'm growing to look more masculine, and you're starting to look more feminine. So my guess is the last dose of modified Polyjuice couldn't blend our features exactly without leaning slightly in the direction of the chosen biological sex."

Harry had been thinking the same thing. She and Archie were both androgynous and slightly awkward looking after the most recent dose of Polyjuice, but Archie had a masculine edge to his features that the Polyjuice couldn't replicate in her unless she changed herself into an actual boy.

Harry nodded, "There is a slight difference in our features now. The question is, is the difference noticeable enough that Sirius would recognize me as not you if you weren't there for the comparison? Could I style my hair in a new way and make him think any difference was due to something superficial like that?"

"As long as you give him no reason to look for deception... I don't think he'll notice," Archie said, "The change in our features is only a

few weeks old, so he's probably not completely used to it yet." He didn't sound completely confident, but he nodded, as though trying to convince himself, "I have new robes that are cut in a different style than I usually wear. Put those on, comb your hair back from your face, and maybe put in a bit of product to change the texture slightly. Dad'll be preoccupied with those changes, and won't notice other changes."

Harry traced Archie's features thoughtfully, "It's our jaws that really differ, I think. Our shoulders, too-yours are a bit wider now. I could change my posture to make up for it-maybe put my shoulders back and lift my chin a bit when I'm with Sirius."

"Won't your friends from school think that's weird?" Archie said critically, "Rigel's personality is rather reserved from what you've said."

"They'll notice, but they're already under the impression that I act 'differently' around Sirius to fulfill some sort of perfect-son expectation they think he's projected onto me," Harry said, "The change in my behavior will be 'in-character' for Rigel, especially if I 'slip' and make it clear that I am changing my behavior for Sirius' benefit. Sirius is the one I have to fool. He can't know that I'm changing my behavior, because you wouldn't do that around him."

Archie grimaced, "I don't know whether to be impressed by us or disappointed in the rest of the world. It just shouldn't be this easy to lie to everyone."

Harry raised an eyebrow, "You think this is easy?"

"Well, not easy," Archie cast about for the right word, "It's just eerily effective. We create these personas that account for everything that goes wrong and seamlessly integrate all the parts of our stories that overlap-I keep expecting to be caught out, but it's the simplest thing to let other people rationalize away any contradictions or holes they see."

"I know what you mean," Harry admitted quietly, "Sometimes I come up with an answer to one of my friends' questions that not only satisfies their curiosity about *that*, but also answers other questions I didn't even know they had-as if they were looking for a reason to have their suspicions allayed."

"Maybe they don't want to admit you're doing anything wrong," Archie said, "They're your friends, and people all like to think they have good taste or judgment, even when it comes to other people. Maybe they value your friendship so much that they explain away some of the inconsistencies for you, because they know that maintaining the illusion is good for you and their relationship with you. Win-win."

"Those psychology classes really took, Arch," Harry said, grinning slightly, "But... you might be right. Sometimes when Draco questions something I do, he has this worried look on his face-underneath his angry, disappointed look, I mean. When I come up with a good enough explanation, he seems relieved. Maybe part of it is he's relieved there's not a more sinister explanation, but part of it could also be that he doesn't want to deal with the consequences of realizing the extent of my lies."

Archie hummed thoughtfully, "We can use that... but it's going to make us feel more guilty."

"I'm not sure I *could* feel more guilty," Harry said, sighing, "I try to open their eyes to my unsuitability as a friend as much as is safe, but usually my friends just ignore the veiled warnings, or get offended by them, as if I'm insinuating that they can't handle my friendship, when I'm only trying to explain that I'm unworthy of it."

"You're not unworthy of friendship, Harry," Archie said sharply.

"I didn't mean it like that," Harry said, "I'm quite comfortable with *our* friendship, Archie. You have to admit that it's hard to defend a friendship built on lies, though. Don't you feel like that with Hermione?"

"Not really," Archie said seriously, "My friendship with Hermione isn't dependent on details like what my name is. We're friends because of our shared interests, experiences, and the emotional work we've put into our time together. Lies can't destabilize a friendship like ours, because what I'm lying about isn't related to the reasons we're friends."

Harry chewed on that for a moment, "Maybe you're right." Then again, the lies she spun were a bit more complicated than the ones Archie lived with. He wasn't secretly a girl, after all.

"Enough moralizing!" Archie said suddenly, "You need to get some sleep. We'll switch places in Diagon tomorrow, and if anyone asks you're going book shopping-that's what I'll do until the party's over."

"What if Sirius wants to come to Diagon with you tomorrow?" Harry asked, frowning.

"Oh," Archie bit his cheek, "Maybe... can we switch now?"

"I have to go make Draco a birthday present," Harry said, shaking her head. "Tomorrow morning? I'll come over early, right after breakfast, and we'll 'study Healing' for a couple of hours before the party. That way Sirius and I can floo to the Malfoys' together."

"What will you say about the present, then?" Archie pointed out.

"I'll say Harry was kind enough to help me out last night, since I confessed I didn't know what to get Draco. In fact... come home with me now, so we can 'work on it together' in my lab," Harry suggested.

Archie agreed, and they explained the circumstances to Sirius, who shrugged and told Archie to be home before the late night floo wards went up.

Archie took a stool and watched curiously while Harry set up a standard pewter cauldron.

"So what are you making?" Archie asked.

Harry, already in brewing mode, twitched slightly at the question, but she said, honestly, "No idea."

Archie laughed, "What did you get him last year again?"

"A potion that would let him fly temporarily," Harry answered, recalling her success at incorporating formed magic into an already-complete potion the year before.

"What, really?" Archie looked interested, "Cool. You could do that again. I'd like to see you brew it."

Harry smirked wryly, "Give a repeat gift to the great Draco Malfoy? He'd never forgive me the lack of originality, not to mention the slight. He would think I didn't put much thought into it, and that would hurt his pride and his feelings."

Archie blinked, "Your friends are a lot of work. Hermione would love it if I got her a book for every occasion."

"It's part of his charm," Harry said absently. What could she brew for Draco? He didn't have any ailments, so he didn't need healing potions. She refused to brew anything dangerous, especially if Sirius was there to witness the gift.

"Think out loud," Archie said, "It's boring just watching you think."

Harry huffed, but complied, "It has to be something he can't buy at the local apothecary. Something he'd value as unique or useful." She was struck by a sudden thought. "Archie-you're not great at potions."

Archie raised his eyebrows, saying, "Gee, thanks, cuz. I'll have you know your scar-fading technique isn't all that elegant, either."

Harry shook her head, "I mean, you'd know better than I what kind of potions are interesting to someone who can't just brew them

whenever she wants. If you could have any potion, what would it be?"

"The Potentialis Potion," Archie said at once, "Hermione told me about it last semester. She wanted to brew it for herself, but the Potions Master at AIM wouldn't give her extracurricular lab time. I actually had to talk her out of brewing it illegally in an unused bathroom stall."

Harry cocked her head, "The Potentialis Potion? I could brew that for you, if you want."

"Brew it for Draco," Archie said, "You can't get it in an apothecary, right?"

Harry nodded. It was a good idea. A *really* good idea, actually. The Potentialis Potion revealed a person's magical potential. When drunk, it pulled at a wizard's magic, forcing it to manifest in the ways it was most suited to. Generally drunk while the wizard was by himself, so the magic couldn't hurt anyone else when it manifested, the Potentialis Potion could reveal a wizard's Light/Dark affinity, elemental nature, and even the kinds of magic they were best suited to, like transformative magic, locomotion magic, mental or emotional magic, and so on. It had even been known to reveal magical gifts, like Parseltongue. Also, it normally wasn't recommended to children under thirteen, because their cores might not be developed enough to respond to the potion properly.

"It's very difficult to brew," Harry said thoughtfully, "And the ingredients needed are nothing to sniff at, but the real problem is it has to be imbued with the person's essence in order to be keyed to their use only. That's why you can't get it in shops-it has to be custom-made every time." Unlike Polyjuice, where you could add the essence after it was completed, the Potentialis Potion required the essence of the target to be added during the brewing process.

"Don't suppose you have 'essence of Draco' lying about," Archie said jokingly.

Harry hummed, "Actually..."

"What?!" Archie choked on a laugh, "You... you can't be serious."

Harry shrugged her shoulders defensively, and went to retrieve her travel potions kit, the one she used at Hogwarts. "You never know when something might come in handy," she muttered. She reached into one of the magically expanded compartments and pulled out a single, blonde hair.

Archie shook his head, "You seriously stole you friend's hair knowing you might use it in a potion one day?"

"I didn't steal it," Harry retorted, "I found it. Not my fault he left it on my pillow." Archie choked, but Harry ignored him, "I'm always telling people to be more careful about where they shed their essence, but no one ever listens to me."

"Because you're the only one who actually sees discarded fingernails as an opportunity for future potion endeavors," Archie chuckled, "That's really too much, Harry. What are you going to say when he asks where you got his essence for the potion?"

"I'll say 'I told you so,' and maybe he'll be more careful in the future," Harry sniffed, "It's a good life lesson."

Archie just laughed, "Whatever you say, Harry. Do you have all the ingredients you need, then?"

"I think so," Harry began moving about her lab stores, plucking things from shelves and drawers and arranging them in order of anticipated use on one of the lab stations. She collected everything she could remember, then moved over to the bookcases on the far wall where she kept reference materials, "I'm pretty sure Graham has a good recipe somewhere in *Occasional Potions*..."

It took nearly two and a half hours to brew the Potentialis Potion. The recipe had at least five distinct stages, and she imbued more magic

into it than was required for three Snowhit batches, but it looked *perfect* by the time it was finished. Archie was yawning tiredly, but even he commented on how well the final product matched the description in the book.

Harry bottled the correct amount for a single dose, and Evanescoded the rest. It would be useless to anyone who wasn't Draco, and he didn't need more than a single dose to figure out his magic.

"I hope Master Snape didn't think to brew this for Draco," she said, frowning at the little bottle.

"You worry too much," Archie said tiredly, taking the sample from her hand carefully, "I'll see you tomorrow morning. Night."

"Thanks for staying, Arch," Harry said apologetically.

"Anything for you, Harry-or, for me, I guess," Archie chuckled, "All for the ruse, after all."

All for the ruse indeed, Harry thought, clearing and clearing her workstation. How far *were* they willing to go?

She shook her head, the answer obvious. *As far as necessary*.

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[end of chapter two].

A/N: So there were mixed reviews about the last chapter length. This one is a bit longer, 13,800 words, but not long enough to be considered a monster chapter, so we'll see if it works out. Also, a lot of people didn't like Harry's passivity in the last chapter. All I can say is... Harry's passive. She has to be, to grow up in a family that doesn't understand her without resenting them (much). I don't think I've changed her character much, so all I can think is that during the school year her *friends* stand up for her, and without them there it

seems like she's getting walked on? Well, she is, but she doesn't notice, because that's just how she is. Sorry if it bothers you, but it's a defense mechanism she needs to stay level-headed throughout the game. Thank you to everyone so patiently reading and reviewing. All the best. -V

Chapter 3

A/N: In case anyone was wondering if I could do another entire chapter set all in one day-well, I can make it all in one afternoon, actually. Ha. But seriously, the summer will speed up after this... kind of. Thank my sister for harrying me into posting this, even though I'm not *quite* satisfied with it yet.

The Ambiguous Artifice:

Chapter Three:

The Malfoy gardens were even more breathtaking than Rigel remembered them. Even Sirius, who had grown up amidst the splendor and decadence of pureblood high society, was moved to whistling as they descended the white stone patio to deposit their packages on the gift table. Sirius' was wrapped in beautiful silver, while Rigel had gone for the more understated green. She didn't know what Sirius' gift was, since he was being remarkably restrained in bragging about it, which meant it was probably some kind of prank. She just hoped it didn't embarrass Draco.

It was quite warm that Saturday, but a summer breeze swept through the yard with such consistency that it must have been spell-induced, and there seemed to be no shortage of iced beverages being passed around by beautiful serving girls. Rigel eyed one of them, noticed the way her fern-green eyes sparkled with an inhuman shine, and guessed they were nymphs, hired for the occasion.

Sirius caught her speculative glance, and nudged her, grinning, "Bit out of your league, Arch, unless you've got veela in you somewhere."

"Is that an impossibility?" Rigel let one of her eyebrows raise, "Don't tell me there was a pot our ancestors didn't dip their hands into-genetically speaking."

Sirius laughed lowly, "No telling. Still, no nymphs until you're sixteen, eh? They'll chew a boy up and spit him out a man."

Rigel fought a grimace, "I'm not sure Nymph Regurgitation is how I imagined that particular transition occurring."

Sirius nodded sagely, "I did figure you more for a were-cat type of guy."

"I was thinking valkyrie," Rigel said dryly.

Her uncle winced dramatically, "You're a better man than I, then."

"Surely that was never up for debate," another voice broke in.

Regulus Black stood there, looking as though something utterly mad was unfolding before him.

Sirius summoned up a grin, "Reggie! How nice to... well, you're here."

Regulus ignored his older brother's antics, "What are you doing here, Sirius? This is a *private* event."

"Haven't you heard?" Sirius said innocently, clearly enjoying himself, "I'm Neutral now. I can go to all sorts of private events if I want. I may even come to *your* birthday party this year."

"I haven't had a birthday party since I came of age," Regulus said absently, still eyeing Sirius suspiciously.

"That explains so much," Sirius said sadly, "I'll invite you to mine next year, how's that? It'll be space-themed, just like when we were kids."

Regulus didn't seem to relish the reminder of his childhood, for he sent Sirius a long-suffering expression and said, "Are you really Neutral? Now there's no getting away from you, I suppose."

Sirius smiled almost fondly, "Admit it, you missed me."

"Like a toothache," Regulus drawled.

Rigel didn't think Regulus' heart was really in his show of disdain. Maybe the many years apart had thinned whatever bad blood ran between the two brothers, or maybe the Black family had always been somewhat... dysfunctional.

"Your Heir is looking well turned-out, at least," Regulus said, skimming Rigel's (well, Archie's) robes with a discriminating eye. The robes she wore were high-collared, with tapered sleeves. She thought they made her look more elongated than gangly, disguising her awkward elbows and knees with longer, more forgiving lines. Then again, what did she know about fashion? Perhaps she simply looked like a proper Heir was meant to, prudish and stifled.

"You look well also, Uncle," Rigel said, smiling politely, "Have you been here long?"

"I haven't made my rounds yet, if that's what you're angling," Regulus said, raising an eyebrow.

"My son doesn't *angle*," Sirius said stoutly, placing a hand on Rigel's shoulder, "If he wants to ask you something, he'll just ask it."

"I certainly hope that isn't the case," Regulus sighed, "Sirius, just because you've managed to live with your head in the sand doesn't mean your Heir won't need to learn politics eventually. You must begin preparing him now, or the family name will suffer for it later when he makes a fool out of himself."

Sirius' face flushed with anger, and Rigel hastily cut into the conversation, "Dad's already taught me all I need to know, Uncle. Please, don't trouble yourself worrying over our good name."

"He has, has he?" Regulus positively smirked, "Let's just see about that."

Before either Sirius or Rigel could protest, Regulus cast a proprietary hand around Rigel's shoulder and pulled her away from Sirius' grasp. Sirius had no choice but to follow swiftly as Regulus steered her toward a nearby group of adults making polite conversation.

At their approach, conversation paused for a moment, and the small circle of people, five at the most, parted politely to accommodate them. Most of them were quite venerable, looking to be at least a generation older than Sirius and Regulus, but that didn't stop one of the old witches from tittering girlishly when Sirius bowed gallantly over her hand.

"Abigail, it's been too long," Sirius said, grinning rakishly at the tiny crone.

She flapped a gloved hand at Sirius, patting at her white-grey hair with the other, "Who let a rascal like you into a well-to-do place like this?"

Sirius laughed appreciatively, waggling his brows, "You've got me, madam-I snuck in."

The old woman laughed gaily, "Not even you would be so audacious as to gate crash a Malfoy party."

"Anything to see your lovely face, Abigail," Sirius insisted.

The others in the group were chuckling softly now, and Rigel could only admire how *good* Sirius was at this. He acted out his own reputation as well as any of the players she'd met in the Rogue could have.

"And Regulus!" the woman, Abigail, clasped Regulus' hands between her own, "What a pleasant surprise-a rare treat to see you at one of these summer gatherings, isn't it?"

Regulus inclined his head in a way that was both charming and self-deprecating, "Precisely why I accepted this year. It never does to

become predictable, Madam Burke."

As Madam Burke rewarded Regulus' ironic wit with another small titter, Rigel wondered if suaveness ran in the Black family, and hoped she could keep up. Then those sharp old eyes turned on Rigel, and she fought to keep from gulping. This lady was intimidating, never mind that she could be Rigel's great-grandmother.

"And who've we here, eh?" she peered at Rigel from approximately eye-level, though Rigel was a tad bit taller, "This wouldn't be your Heir, Sirius?"

"Sharp as ever, Abigail," Sirius said, smiling proudly, "This is my son, Arcturus Rigel Black. Rigel, may I present Madam Abigail Burke?"

Rigel stepped forward to bow deeply over her gloved appendage, and when she rose, said, "It's a pleasure to meet a lady who has so enchanted my father and uncle. Any relation to one Horace Burke, Madam?"

Madam Burke blinked bright eyes at Rigel, and smiled warmly, "My nephew, in fact. Have you made his acquaintance, Mr. Black?"

"Just Rigel, please," Rigel said with a coaxing smile, "Being on such distant terms with a lady of your charms would wound me to the quick. I have not had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Burke, myself, but I hear excellent things about his owl-order business, particularly the potions side of it."

Madam Burke sighed exasperatedly, "He'll be glad to have it known as such, but when is he going to settle down and give me some grad-nieces? Daughters, that's what a man like Horace needs, not rushing after that business of his day in and day out."

"You think everyone needs daughters, Abby," another woman in the circle said, "Some of us do find fulfillment in our work, you know."

"Yes, yes, Suzie," Madam Burke said, "But you can't deny that having daughters *helps* ."

"Perhaps that's where I've gone wrong," Sirius said, gazing at Rigel speculatively.

Playing her part, Rigel affected an expression of veiled hurt, "I told you I would take that gender-changing potion if you really wanted me to, Dad."

She thought she heard a muffled choke from Regulus, but couldn't be sure as the others in their little circle has all burst into startled laughter just then. Sirius positively beamed at her, which Rigel took to mean she was doing well in passing off as Archie.

After a few minutes more of meaningless chatter, they politely excused themselves and Sirius turned to Regulus with a triumphant grin, "How about *those* apples, brother mine?"

Regulus merely shrugged delicately, "He can charm a few old biddies, I'll give you that-but what about serious politics?"

Sirius scowled, "Enough of these games, Regulus, my son is not a trick pony."

"Are you saying you think I don't have any other tricks, Dad?" Rigel smiled cheekily, "I think I'm offended."

"Your Heir isn't complaining," Regulus said silkily, reminding Rigel of Master Snape for a moment, "Don't be so uptight, Sirius."

Sirius winced, but could say nothing to that without breaking character entirely, and so conceded that round to his brother, saying, "Lead on, then. Perhaps when you see my son's social competence for yourself, you'll be satisfied that I've not run our House into ruin quite yet."

That was about what Rigel had been thinking, actually. Regulus obviously wanted to prove something, so why not let him try and prove it? She knew she could act as long as she needed to-she did it all day every day anyway, just in different ways. Once he had what he was looking for, he would leave them to enjoy the party, and she could find her friends.

The next group of people Regulus led them to was a little more mixed-Rigel recognized Mr. and Mrs. Parkinson right away, though Pansy was not with them. There was also an elderly wizard who looked vaguely familiar, standing next to an equally elderly witch who smiled with reserved friendliness at Rigel as they approached. She started wracking her brain to recall if she'd met either of them before-and whether it was as Rigel or Harry-but still hadn't placed them when Sirius gestured her forward to be introduced.

"Some of you already know my Heir, Rigel," Sirius said, nodding at the Parkinsons in acknowledgment of their daughter's friendship with Rigel.

"It has been too long, Rigel," Rose Parkinson said, leaning in to embrace Rigel's shoulders lightly. It was the greeting one might give a close friend, and Rigel was honored to be considered so well by her best friend's mother. "My, how you've grown!"

"The better to admire your beauty, my lady," Rigel said easily, "Your eyes are surely most beautiful when viewed from an equal level."

"Then I trust you'll take care not to grow any taller," Rose said conspiratorially.

"I will certainly put effort toward such an endeavor," Rigel assured her solemnly, "And how does the summer air find you, Mr. Parkinson?"

Mr. Parkinson seemed to consider the question carefully before responding, with a tilt of his head that caused his glasses to catch the sunlight, "Quite invigorated, thank you, Rigel." Rigel tried not to

blink at the use of her first name, reminding herself that it was to be expected, with her 'father' and 'uncle' there to make 'Mr. Black' rather confusing. "Pansy will be glad to see you here-she always entertains the idea that you'll disappear over the summer and never be heard from again, for some reason."

Rigel tried to hide her unease at that ominous statement, "I can't imagine why. I would never miss Draco's birthday party, after all. I will reassure her of my continued existence when I see her, however."

"You pay commendable attention to your friendships, Young Mr. Black," the familiar-looking witch said approvingly, "I knew we had the right impression of you last summer."

Rigel suddenly placed her-it was Griselda Marchbanks, who she had indeed met last year at the Malfoys' party. That meant the wizard next to her was Tiberius Ogden, the man who had almost ingested Nimue-laced nightshade. She had a fleeting hope that they wouldn't mention the incident, but-

"Dreadful circumstances, of course," Ogden said, looking a bit pale at the memory, "But you certainly did make an impression."

"Elder Marchbanks, Elder Ogden," Rigel bowed to them, "You are too kind to me, as always. I'm surprised you still remember such a little thing."

She could feel Sirius' gaze burning the side of her head, but she assumed a mildly sheepish expression and pretended ignorance to his curiosity.

"Little thing indeed!" Ogden said, huffing, "Never met a more modest Heir, Lord Black. You've certainly done well by him."

Sirius accepted the compliment gracefully, if a tad uncertainly. She was certain Archie had never told Sirius about the poison attempt,

though Rigel thought she had confided the circumstances to Archie at some point, just in case it ever came up.

"There are many of us with cause to be proud," Marchbanks nodded imperiously, "This next generation is turning out *quite* handsomely."

"We know whom to thank," Rigel said, glancing up at Sirius warmly. She could see the way the others in the circle softened at the obvious affection between father and son, and even Regulus, who Rigel suspected recognized the ploy easily, looked approving when Rigel glanced at him.

When that group broke up a little later, Sirius silently raised an eyebrow in Regulus' direction.

Regulus looked down at Rigel, his delicate face impassive, "He isn't a total loss, at least."

Rigel gave Regulus her best fake-smile, and was rewarded when his right eyelid twitched slightly in annoyance. She let her smile melt into a more natural smirk, and said, "Never doubt a Black, Uncle."

"Couldn't have said it better myself!" Sirius crowed, clasping her shoulder with true affection. His face took on a more serious cast as he said, "That was a bit cryptic, though. I don't recall you mentioning making nice with two Wizengamot elders. What's this 'impression' you gave them, Arch?"

Rigel hesitated, looking between Sirius and her 'uncle,' both of whom stepped closer in response to her furtiveness, "It wasn't a big deal, really."

She could feel her expression slipping, but was too busy figuring out how to explain without making Sirius upset or worried in any way to hold onto her guile, "I did a favor for Mr. Ogden-not a political favor, I mean, it just sort of... happened."

"Spit it out, boy," Regulus snapped.

He sounded so much like Snape in that moment that Rigel blurted, "They kind of owe me a life debt."

Sirius blinked, "What?"

"I'm sorry," Rigel said, frowning apologetically, "I know you told me not to make friends with any politicians, and I wasn't, but there was poison-and-"

"Two elders of the Wizengamot owe you a *life debt*?" Regulus looked like he didn't know whether to laugh or to growl, "How on *earth* did such a thing come to be?"

Rigel sighed, and spilled the whole story, from noticing the Nimue's Breath to Madam Marchbanks' insistence that she take full share in the debt. Since Marchbanks and Ogden obviously weren't keeping it to themselves, it would probably be common knowledge sooner or later. Better for Sirius to hear it from her now, when she could explain.

"It's not a big deal, though," Rigel assured them, "I tried to talk them out of it-"

"You did what?" Regulus bit out.

"-but they were insistent!"

Sirius just shook his head wonderingly, "First the Malfoys, now a couple of Wizengamot representatives... these life debts are getting out of hand, don't you think?" It was a weak joke, and no one laughed.

Regulus inhaled sharply, "The Malfoys owe such a debt to you as well?"

Rigel nodded cautiously, "I saved their son from the sleeping sickness."

Regulus nodded slowly, as though remembering something he'd heard but not really paid attention to before. "Well," he said, visibly gathering himself, "Well. It seems your son does know something about politics, Sirius. Though it will be a wonder if there's anything left of politics when he's finished," he added under his breath. Rigel wondered when he'd start addressing her directly, instead of indirectly, but decided to be glad he'd found what he was looking for, at least.

"That's my boy," Sirius said, though his smile was a bit forced, "I'm going to get a drink. Ar-I mean, Rigel, will you be all right if I-"

"I'll go find my friends," Rigel said quickly, "Catch you later, Dad. It was nice to see you again, Uncle."

Regulus nodded to both of them, and all three went their separate ways, Sirius to flag down a moss-eyed nymph, Regulus to rub elbows with more of his acquaintances, and Rigel to search the gardens for a tell-tale splash of purest blonde.

She weaved through the crowd slowly, knowing that moving at any pace less than completely dignified would only draw attention to her in a gathering like this. Several nymphs tried to push sparkly drinks on her, but Rigel refused them all politely. Eventually, she found her friends in the same place they'd been last year-the gazebo.

"Rigel!" Draco jumped up from his seat in the center of the group and came to stand before her, grinning widely, "You came."

He seemed to be holding himself back from hugging her, so she smiled in return and put a hand on his shoulder in genuine affection, "Of course I did. Happy Birthday, Draco. Thirteen is an auspicious year."

Draco smirked, "That's what I told my father when he said I to choose between a new racing broom and a customized wand-holster."

"Did it work?" Theo asked with amusement.

"You'll have to watch me open my presents to find out," Draco said, though his eyes were on Rigel as he said it.

Rigel resisted the urge to duck her head guiltily, since she had missed his gift-opening the year before. "It's embarrassing to watch someone open your own gift," she said.

Pansy smiled teasingly, "Only you think so, Rigel. To everyone else it's a perfectly gratifying experience."

Rigel sat next to Pansy with a tilting smile of her own, "Gratification feels a bit like self-indulgence, doesn't it?"

"And what's wrong with that?" Millicent asked pointedly, "You could probably afford thirty seconds of self-indulgence, don't you think?"

"It's a slippery slope, I hear," Rigel said dubiously, enjoying the relaxation of casual banter immensely. The internship was turning out to be more stressful than she'd bargained for, but that was probably because she put so much pressure on herself over it.

"None slipperier," Nott said cheerfully, "That's what makes it so much fun."

"I'm not sure that's a word," Draco scrunched up his nose in thought, "Though it doesn't sound any worse than 'more slippery' I suppose..."

Rigel looked around when a certain dark-skinned erudite didn't offer to settle the matter, "Where's Blaise?"

"Not here yet," Millicent said, "For once you're not the last to arrive, Rigel."

"I shall have to reprehend Blaise for usurping my rightful position," Rigel said.

"Which position would that be?" Theo snickered, "King of Lateness? The Minister of Well-Timed Entrances, perhaps?"

"The Prince of Un-Punctuality," Millicent suggested.

"The Belated Baron," Draco said, grinning.

"He's more like a Delayed Duke," Pansy said.

"It is so difficult to find good subjects these days," Rigel sighed.

"Our deepest apologies, Your Tardiness," Theo bowed deeply in mock reverence.

"What's this? You didn't tell me you'd been Knighted, Rigel."

They turned welcoming smiles on Blaise, who took up a seat with a curious expression.

"You have the immense pleasure of addressing Sir Sluggard, the Dilatory," Rigel said snootily, turning her nose up and sniffing exaggeratedly, "You may grant me obeisance now."

Blaise swept a hand before his hastily bowed torso in a mockery of an old gesture of deference, "This ignoble plebian can only be grateful for your magnanimous patronage-may your clocks run ever slowly."

They all dissolved into laughter, drawing curious looks and indulgent smiles from many adults within hearing.

"I've missed this," Rigel said suddenly, surprising herself as the words came out spontaneously. Her friends turned serious eyes on her, and she shrugged sheepishly, "Sorry, didn't mean to kill the moment. I just... the summer's not the same without you guys around, and I just realized it, and... maybe they should call me the Baron who Blurts-Things-Out instead."

Pansy curled her hand around Rigel's elbow and squeezed briefly, "We miss you too, Rigel."

"Yeah, I for one can't wait for school to start up again," Theo said, smoothing over the awkwardly poignant moment easily, "The summer is boring-your birthday being the obvious exception, Draco."

Draco nodded, "I know what you mean. Father's arranged tutors for me most mornings, but learning is dull when there's no Gryffindors to compete against."

Blaise rolled his eyes at that, "Learning is only a competition with yourself, Draco-it's a challenge to learn something every day that you didn't know the day before."

Millicent wrinkled her nose, "How can you learn *anything* over the summer? I wouldn't set foot indoors if I wasn't expected to eat dinner with my family."

"I agree with Millie," Pansy said, "I spend most days out of doors, riding or enjoying the forest life. It does get a little lonely, though."

"We should have play-dates," Theo said suddenly.

Most of them wrinkled their noses immediately and Draco went to far as to shudder.

"No," the blonde haired boy said, "Just... no. Never again."

"Not like when we were kids," Theo rolled his eyes, "I mean, not with our mothers arranging everything-and none of those stuffy formal robes, either. Just us, meeting up sometimes."

Pansy tilted her head consideringly, and Blaise looked intrigued.

"Once a month?" Millicent suggested, "It would be nice to keep in touch."

The others nodded, then turned expectant eyes on Rigel.

Rigel inwardly grimaced, "I'm not sure if I can..."

Draco frowned, "You're the one who went all nostalgic on us when we've only been apart a few weeks. Why can't you?"

"I'm pretty busy this summer," Rigel said vaguely, "Potions and stuff, you know."

"We really don't," Blaise pointed out bluntly.

Rigel was silent for a moment, not sure how to explain that she was busy with an internship that wasn't Rigel's. "I'm working on a research project this summer," she said slowly.

"Really? You didn't tell us you were planning something like that," Pansy said.

"It wasn't planned," Rigel said, making up a story as quick as she could, "I guess I was inspired by my cousin. Harry has an internship at the Guild this summer, so she's doing independent research, and it looked like fun, so I decided I would try something similar."

"Oh? Which Guild?" Blaise asked.

"Potions," Rigel said, blinking.

"You've mentioned Miss Potter's interest in brewing before," Pansy said, probably recalling the time Sirius had brought it up in front of them, "Is she on your level?"

"At least," Rigel said, a bit uncomfortable, "I'd say she's better than me, though."

Draco snorted, "No one is better than you."

"Professor Snape is," Rigel said.

"No one our age," Draco returned, frowning slightly.

"Harry is," Rigel insisted, "We've grown up together; I know her skills better than anyone."

"Why didn't you get an internship at the Guild as well, if you're so interested in researching?" Blaise asked.

"I wasn't offered one," Rigel shrugged, "Harry's work was noticed by the Aldermaster, Malcolm Hurst, and he granted her the opportunity based on that."

"She didn't even apply?" Millicent whistled, "Her stuff must be really good."

"It is," Rigel said, smiling a bit proudly.

"She sounds interesting," Theo commented, "You should bring her around sometime."

Rigel raised an eyebrow, "When? To Hogwarts? Or maybe to one of these Dark pureblood gatherings?"

Theo winced, "Yeah, on second thought... maybe not. I forgot she was a halfblood."

Pansy glanced at Rigel's blank face, then shot Theo a narrow look, "More importantly, her family is Light-affiliated. With the Split, she'd never be able to attend."

"Rigel's father is here, though," Millicent said suddenly, "You can see him charming his way through the ranks of elderly matrons from here."

Rigel resisted the urge to turn and look, knowing that Sirius didn't need her checking up on him anymore than she needed him worrying about her. They both knew what they were doing.

"Sirius has changed his affiliation," Rigel said.

Most of her friends gaped at her. Changing one's affiliation was not something done lightly, though Sirius acted as though he was changing hairstyles.

"He's... Dark again?" Pansy asked, clearly taken aback.

"Neutral," Rigel said, not wanting to get anyone's hopes up. Sirius Black was the Lord of a very powerful family, whether he used that power or not.

"So he hadn't really changed his affiliation," Blaise said shrewdly, "He just wants to be able to come to these kind of events, to keep an eye on *you* ."

Rigel smiled at Blaise's insight, "Essentially, yes."

"Won't that be difficult for you?" Millicent said. She grimaced a moment later, as if realizing she shouldn't have said that.

"I don't begrudge his supervision," Rigel said.

"She meant with you pretending to be a different person around him," Theo said helpfully.

Pansy and Draco both grimaced uncomfortably, and Blaise rolled his eyes while Millicent flicked Theo's ear, "Thanks, Theo, that really needed to be clarified *out loud* . Twit."

"It's all right," Rigel said, smiling reassuringly, "It's nice of you all to worry about me. I'm not concerned, though. Sirius sees what he wants to, most of the time."

When Draco narrowed his eyes at her, she realized she'd called Sirius by his name instead of 'Dad.' She mentally berated herself for the slip, knowing she had given in to the illusion that her friends were somehow in on this part of her deception, when in reality they knew very little.

"A-ha!" Theo burst out.

Rigel turned her head to see Theo with his chin jutting stubbornly while Millicent glared at him.

"I'm sure I saw it, this time," Theo told Millicent.

Millicent hissed back, "And I'm telling you that's impossible."

Pansy cleared her throat delicately and Blaise inquired, "Mind letting the rest of us in on your secret conversation?"

Theo opened his mouth but Millicent nudged him into silence, saying, "Nothing. Just Theo being paranoid, as usual."

"There's nothing wrong with paranoia!" Theo said, "But it isn't this time, anyway. Riddle's done it four times already."

"Done what?" Draco asked apprehensively.

"Stared at Rigel," Theo said.

Rigel blinked, "I'm sure you're mistaken, Theo. Mr. Riddle has no cause to stare at me."

"That's what I've been saying," Millicent rolled her eyes, "I told you to keep quiet about your delusions, Theo. You're going to upset people for nothing."

Theo flushed, "I know what I saw, and I'm not ignoring it anymore. Lord Riddle is definitely staring at you, whenever he moves between groups of people."

"Lord Riddle doesn't stare," Pansy said reasonably, "He's too well-bred."

"Well he keeps glancing over like he's checking on Rigel," Theo said defensively, "But Rigel hasn't moved."

Rigel considered this information. She had ended up semi-accidentally eavesdropping on one of Riddle's conversations during

the last garden party. Perhaps he wanted to know where she was at all times, since he couldn't sense her aura. *Or maybe he's heard about the basilisk*, she thought suddenly. It was sort-of-allegedly *his* basilisk that she had chopped up and sold for parts, and the donation of parts to various places hadn't exactly been low profile, despite Snape's delicate handling of the task.

Out loud, she said, "Maybe he's looking at Draco. It's his birthday, after all."

Theo shook his head, "It's definitely you, Rigel. I know how to read a line of sight."

Rigel shrugged, "Okay, I believe you. What should I do?"

"Do?" Millicent looked slightly alarmed, "Don't *do* anything."

"Shouldn't I see what he wants, though?" Rigel asked.

"What? No, Rigel, you can't just-"

"I'll just go ask," Rigel said, standing. She met Draco's worried gaze with an unconcerned smile, "I'll be around for gift-opening, Dray, I promise."

She left the gazebo to the sound of someone muttering, "What is wrong with that boy?"

In truth, Rigel needed an excuse to seek Riddle out in any case, and his 'staring' at her was as good a one as any. There were a few loose ends that needed tying, and a certain leather journal was silently burning a hole in her robe pocket. It should be easy enough to arrange a private conversation with the man-the hard part would be avoiding Sirius' notice as she did so. He'd had enough of a shock already that afternoon, with the life-debt thing sprung on him the way it had been.

She began walking slowly in Riddle's direction, pasting an idle expression on her face, as though she were simply wandering through the crowd, observing. Riddle was talking to the Malfoys, it seemed, and several people Rigel didn't recognize on sight, but whose expressions of simpering adoration made Rigel think they were minor members of the SOW party.

She caught Narcissa's eye as she strolled, smiling politely as Mrs. Malfoy's face softened in recognition. When she neared Riddle's group, the elegant lady turned outwards slightly to address her.

"Rigel, how good it is to see you," Narcissa held her hand out in expectation, and Rigel did not disappoint.

She pressed the hand gently between her own and bowed over it, "My lady. The beauty of your gardens is only surpassed by your own breathtaking splendor this summer's day."

Narcissa smiled and reached up with her other hand to arrange a piece of Rigel's hair almost fondly, "I shall become unforgivably vain, with two Blacks now dripping honey into my ears."

Rigel allowed herself a grin, guessing that Sirius had already paid his respects to his hosts, "Is it vanity, when there is naught but truth in the admiration?"

"Pride, then," Narcissa conceded with a light laugh, "Soon my chin will be higher than my ears, and my feathers as bright as my husband's peacocks'."

"You would look charming in any palette, my lady," Rigel assured her.

"I have often said as much," Lucius Malfoy interjected lowly, glancing sidelong at his wife, "Alas, she still refuses to don chartreuse."

"Green is your color, Darling," Narcissa shrugged artlessly, "I would not dare to usurp it from you."

Indeed, Mr. Malfoy was resplendent in a green so light it was almost silver. Before the discussion of fashion could proceed any further, however, Mr. Riddle made his presence known.

"Rigel Black," he said quietly, and it was a mark of the respect he commanded that all conversation in the vicinity stuttered for a moment, before continuing.

"Lord Riddle," Rigel bowed to the appropriate degree, then tilted her head in a way that conveyed polite interest, "How does the day find you?"

"Alive," Riddle said, his face revealing nothing, "And yourself?"

"Abashed," Rigel said, affecting an apologetic half-smile, "I've been terribly remiss, Lord Riddle, and your patience has extended beyond what I deserve."

"Surely your imagined sin is nothing so irredeemable," Riddle said, amusement playing about his mouth, "Confess it, if you seek atonement in earnest."

"The tome I begged you to lend me in the fall," Rigel said, widening her eyes every-so-slightly as she looked up into his, "When you mailed it to me, your letter mentioned no expected date of return, but that is no excuse for the unconscionable length of time I've kept it. I hoped to remedy its loan today, before it slips my mind again."

It was a simple ploy, but a relatively effective one. By referencing an item or event that was innocuous, yet did not exist, she was silently asking for a private audience, to discuss a matter unsuited for public ears.

Riddle's eyes searched her face for a brief moment, and whatever he saw there did not rekindle his previous amusement, "In truth I had forgotten it myself, Mr. Black. It was not my book, but one of Lucius', you see."

Riddle cast a quick glance toward Mr. Malfoy, who spoke up with smooth surety, "Indeed. If you would simply leave it in the library, I will see it returned to its proper place."

Rigel bowed once again, and bid the three a polite farewell. She understood the message completely. She would go to the library and wait. If they had understood *her* message correctly, either Mr. Riddle or Mr. Malfoy would unobtrusively slip away to meet her.

Slipping away wasn't terribly difficult. Finding the Library... was.

Malfoy Manor was enormous from the outside, and she suspected undetectable extension charms had been used to great effect, as the ceilings seemed impossibly high for there to be multiple stories, and yet the number of staircases she came across insisted their existence. She kept to the main floor, because a family's main library was *always* on the first floor, though it was sometimes supplemented with a more private study library on the upper levels. Eventually, however, it became clear that she wouldn't find it on her own without considerable snooping.

She retraced her steps until she found the Floo Room, where all the guests arrived. There was no one within, as the party was already in full swing, except a single house elf, who seemed to be twisting his ears almost idly as he hovered nervously by the fireplace.

"Excuse me," she said, waiting for the elf to turn around. It did so, and she recognized it as Dobby, the elf usually in charge of greeting guests, apparently.

Dobby bowed low and squeaked, "How is you needing assistance, sir?"

"I was told to meet your Master in the library," Rigel said, "Could you show me where that is?"

Dobby hesitated, looking between her and the grate, "Dobby is watching the floo..."

He looked ready to wring his ears some more, so Rigel quickly said, "I understand. Just directions, then?"

Dobby nodded his head fiercely, "You is leaving here and turning away from the patio. You is following the corridor until you is reaching the end, then you is turning left, then right when you is seeing a painting of the Black Sea. You is going straight past the next two corridors, then you is seeing big wooden doors with dragons being carved on them. They is being the library doors. You is remembering, sir?"

Rigel nodded, "Yes, thank you." Dobby's eyes welled up, and Rigel winced. She'd forgotten how sensitive this elf could be.

She smiled in what she hoped was a reassuring way and left the room quickly. The directions were relatively easy to follow, though there were several ocean-themed paintings down the hallway Dobby directed her, and figuring out which one depicted the Black Sea required her to recognize the Port of Varna in the background.

The library itself was magnificent, which Rigel supposed she had expected. It was multi-storied, like the Potter library, but at casual glance there was no obvious system of organization, much like the Black library. There were no ungraceful stacks like the Hogwarts library, with barely enough room for two people to squeeze down an aisle. Instead it was an open concept, shelves of mahogany lining the walls and only broken up by two imposing fireplaces, one on either end of the room. A split-staircase flowered in the far, center wall, allowing access to the upper balconies. There were no windows, and as a result the room felt cloistered and private, despite its large size and impressive chandeliers.

The shelf closest to the left-side door seemed to contain mostly histories, and very old ones at that. The titles were faded and worn, but the spines unbroken and clearly well cared for. Rigel thought she would approve, if anyone had asked her opinion on the state of Malfoy's books. She resisted the urge to pick up volume one of

Chroniques Nationales Françaises, just to see how her French was progressing.

Instead, she chose one of the many high-backed armchairs and settled in to wait.

It was another fifteen minutes before the doors opened, and as Rigel rose from the chair she was surprised to see both Riddle *and* Malfoy step into the room. She wondered that Riddle included Malfoy in the conversation, but it was his business, and Malfoy was certainly involved, if what she had heard at New Year's could be believed.

"Mr. Black," Riddle said, stepping closer as Malfoy closed and warded the doors behind them. Rigel determinately didn't think about how vulnerable that made her feel, "I trust you were not kept waiting long-one never likes to waste another's time, after all." He pierced her with the simplest of looks, "I sincerely hope you haven't arranged to waste mine."

Rigel bowed her head deferentially, "I would merely do as I said-return an item I've no claim to." She pulled the journal from her pocket and offered it, keeping her head steady with an iron will.

Riddle looked down at the little leather-bound book and raised an eyebrow without saying anything.

Rigel realized he wasn't going to admit to anything right away, so she said, "If I am mistaken, then I truly apologize for wasting your time. I was told by a semi-reliable source that this book belonged to you at once point, but perhaps I was misled."

Riddle's eyes searched hers, and though Rigel didn't feel the creeping sensation of a Legilimency attack, she lowered her lids slightly just in case.

"Perhaps if you explained how you acquired this book, Lord Riddle could say with better surety whether it might have been in his

possession at some point," Malfoy suggested, his own expression blank as a board.

Rigel understood then that these two powerful men were nervous-of her. They didn't know which cards she held, or how she intended to use them. That knowledge didn't make her feel powerful or important, however. Instead, she felt more terrified, knowing that she had somewhat unwittingly cornered two predators as dangerous as Riddle and Malfoy surely were. If she wasn't careful, they would lash at her with deadly intent.

She started speaking, twisting facts and events as she went, unalarmed, though slightly ashamed, at how easily lying with the truth had become for her. "This journal appears to be blank," she said calmly, "But it was at one time a powerful magical artifact. It housed a magical construct of impressive complexity, one that seemed to have a personality and life of its own. It called itself Tom Riddle."

"A common name," Malfoy attempted.

"But a name tied to an uncommon collection of character traits," Rigel said smoothly, "The construct claimed to be the creation of a boy with the same name. It was a complete imprint of the boy's personality, it said. The construct wore the robes and badge of a Slytherin prefect, and spoke with the serpent tongue. It would be hard to create a construct with a magical ability the creator himself did not possess, would it not?"

"But not impossible," Riddle said, smirking slightly, "And what makes you think I possess the ability? Parselmouths are so rare."

" *Not that rare*," Rigel hissed challengingly. Riddle's face went blank, giving nothing away, but that reaction alone was enough for Rigel to guess that he'd understood her. That was one mark against him.

Malfoy, on the other hand, looked slightly awed, despite already knowing she was a Parselmouth. Perhaps it was one thing to know

it, and another to hear it.

"You haven't proved anything," Riddle said mildly.

"You aren't being accused of anything yet," Rigel said staidly, "I'm giving my understanding of what happened at Hogwarts this year, with the expectation that with greater understanding we can prevent such a thing from happening again."

Something like surprise flickered in Riddle's gaze, before he smiled politely and gestured for her to continue. "I'm fascinated to hear what you have to impart, Mr. Black."

Rigel took a breath, then said, "The construct's original purpose was quite innocuous, I believe. It claims to have been a kind of safeguard against its creator's... evolution. It essentially captured a moment of extreme hubris and attempted to preserve it for eternity. A kind of immortality-but limited in the way that a child turned vampire would be limited: unable to change, unable to grow or mature."

Riddle's face was darkening, but Rigel hurried on, "Obviously, the boy who created this memory grew up. He became wiser and more worldly, but in the eyes of his creation, he had become deviant and untrustworthy. When the construct found itself out of its creator's immediate control, it betrayed him. The magical construct believed itself to be the superior version, and acted according to its own agenda."

Malfoy cursed softly and Riddle's mouth twisted as though he'd bit into something sour, but neither interrupted her.

"The construct was sent to the school to influence a member of a prominent Light family," Rigel said, fighting to keep disapproval from her voice, "Instead, it designed a more violent agenda. It used its Parseltongue ability to open the Chamber of Secrets and unleash the basilisk within on unsuspecting students."

"Thus the petrifications," Riddle said, as though in dawning understanding.

"What is interesting," Rigel said, "Is that the Chamber of Secrets was opened once before, while one Tom Riddle, whom the construct was fashioned after, attended Hogwarts."

"Along with hundreds of other students," Riddle said unconcernedly, "Any of whom might have assumed I opened it due to my prominent position in Slytherin House, and constructed an artifact that would believe whatever lies it was told about 'its creator Tom Riddle.'"

"That's true," Rigel nodded, "Except that the construct knew how to open the Chamber, which means its creator imparted that knowledge to it. Why would someone else capable of opening the Chamber and controlling the basilisk want to give Tom Riddle the credit?"

"A simple means of foisting blame," Malfoy said stiffly.

Rigel acknowledged the possibility, and continued, "Eventually, petrifying students was not enough for the construct, which had, I believe, gone a bit mad in its years of isolation. It attempted to possess another student, with the intent of permanently taking over their life and magic."

"You," Riddle said, staring down at her, "Once your Parseltongue became common knowledge, you were the perfect vessel."

"That's the very reason the construct gave," Rigel said evenly, silently marking another tick against Lord Riddle's innocence, "It kidnapped me, and took me to the Chamber. Its possession was unsuccessful, in the end, but the construct was so grossly overconfident that it told me everything *before* attempting to kill me." She said this in a mocking tone, knowing that if the construct had been a true representation of Riddle's younger self, such derision would be an affront to him personally.

Sure enough, a muscle jumped in Riddle's cheek before he could control it.

Strike three, she thought, almost disappointed. Now that she was virtually certain Riddle was responsible, she would have to do something about it, and the weight of responsibility sat heavily on her.

"An interesting story," Riddle said after a moment, "Though of course, more serious parties might not find it very pertinent, as no one suffered lasting harm."

"On the contrary," Rigel said, more sharply than she'd meant to, "A young girl was killed fifty years ago by whoever imparted the construct called Tom Riddle with the ability to control the basilisk."

Riddle froze, and his eyes narrowed, "It would be very difficult to reopen a murder that occurred fifty years ago on the word of a raving magical construct."

"It would," Rigel agreed, "I myself don't consider the word of a mad artifact to be convincing testimonial. I don't like to accuse people without proper evidence, which is why the name Tom Riddle never passed my lips when Headmaster Dumbledore asked me what happened in the Chamber. The circumstances *are* rather suspicious, though, all things considered."

There was definite surprise on Riddle's face now, though he masked it quickly with cunning, "Circumstantial evidence will never be enough, Mr. Black. Recent events simply can't be convincingly connected to me, which means ancient history certainly won't be re-examined, dead basilisk or no."

"There is also the fact that Ginny Weasley remembers Lucius Malfoy slipping the artifact into her cauldron before term began," Rigel said, ignoring the guilt she felt as dragging her friend's father into it. He chose to involve himself, after all.

"Polyjuice is easily obtained," Malfoy said stiffly, though his throat muscles clenched restlessly.

"And if someone had witnessed a conversation between yourself and Mr. Malfoy on New Year's Eve that *did* link you to recent events, Lord Riddle?" Rigel was pushing, now, but she needed Riddle to give before the matter could be settled, "Would you claim Polyjuice for that, as well?"

"Excuse me?" Riddle's voice was positively silken, and Malfoy's face had gone completely white, bar two spots of color high on his cheeks.

"Sound carries rather well in the Rosier gardens," Rigel said steadily, "Your conversation beneath the balconies was entirely clear."

"Hearsay," Riddle murmured, leaning forward in a move that was admittedly intimidating, "Not even the muggles consider it enough to convict."

"It is enough to slander a reputation, though, isn't it?" Rigel said quietly.

She saw the moment when Riddle decided she was a threat. Her magic stirred restlessly, but he didn't lash out as she half-expected- instead, his face relaxed, and he leaned back almost casually.

"Very well, Mr. Black. Consider me concerned," he said, lips curling almost pleasantly, "You've not told my political opponents your little tale, so you must have some idea as to how you think this story ought to end."

Rigel inclined her head carefully. He was agreeing to hear her demands, but now was not the time to act arrogant; "I think it would be best if you didn't interfere at Hogwarts anymore, Lord Riddle. All the evidence is loose-fitting, as you say, but combined with the Sleeping Sickness last year, and the current anti-Dumbledore agenda the SOW party is pushing... well, some might think it a little

convenient," Rigel took a breath, "If you became disinterested in Hogwarts affairs, I'm sure people's suspicions would be alleviated. After all, no one really wants to believe a great wizard like you would use schoolchildren as pawns in his political schemes."

"I'm sure no one will have any more cause to think such a thing," Riddle said, a politician's smile on his handsome face, "Was that your only concern?"

Rigel let her face fall into a serious expression, "I will be frank with you for a brief moment, Lord Riddle. I think you created the construct that lived in this book, and that you were every bit as arrogant and cruel as it was. I think you killed Myrtle, whether by accident or by choice, but I also think you felt remorse for it. The boy who created that construct wanted to destroy the world. I don't think that's who you are anymore, but I also don't think anyone should be able to cause the death of another without paying for it in some way. I'm not a judge, Lord Riddle. I'm not going to hand you a sentence and demand it be carried out. In any case, Myrtle's parents are both deceased, so I can't think of anyone who would benefit from a re-hashing of her story now. All I ask is for you to never forget the crime. Remember the mistakes of the past with shame, so that you never repeat them. You're a powerful man, Lord Riddle-too powerful to be playing games with innocents. Please leave Hogwarts out of your plans in the future, no matter how provoked you feel by Albus Dumbledore."

Riddle considered her for a long moment, no longer smiling. "Hogwarts is my political enemy's seat of power," he said. At her darkening expression, he held up a hand, "I say that so you will understand the weight of what you ask. It seems a simple thing to you, I daresay, to leave children out of political maneuverings, but Hogwarts is implicated by Dumbledore's involvement-it was he who put children on the front lines of our war, and now you ask that I ignore them. I will do so-but I require reassurances of my own."

Rigel tensed. She should have expected him to add terms, but she couldn't imagine what she had that he'd *want* . "What reassurances

are those?" she asked.

"First, the assurance that the particularities of the events you've described today will live on in our memories only-that you will spread the name Tom Riddle in connection with the basilisk no further," Riddle said, his tone brooking no disagreement on that ground.

"You have it," Rigel said. That demand was easily met, as long as Riddle kept his plots out of the school from now on, and as long as he *did* keep the lesson in his memory, "As a gesture of good faith, I will also tell you that Ginny Weasley is the only other who knows anything beyond the public story, and she will not speak of what she knows to anyone."

"You would trust a Weasley to-" Malfoy began.

Rigel cut him off rudely, because he had been rude himself to question her assurance, "She owes me a life debt-this is the price I've asked of her. She will not speak of it, and she has dedicated herself to learning Occlumency already, so no one will take it from her mind, either."

Malfoy inclined his head in silent, though graceless, concession.

"There is one other thing I require," Riddle said softly, "I would know what happened in the Chamber. I would know how the basilisk died. How you escaped. How the construct was... defeated."

Rigel hesitated, "We've been absent from the party a long time already, and the story isn't pleasant."

Riddle smiled thinly, "I care not for another of your stories. I would have the memory."

She blinked in plain surprise. He wanted her to give him her memory of that night? That was... potentially dangerous. "I'm not sure I feel comfortable doing that," she said slowly, her mind racing. What could be gleaned from a memory? It would be from her perspective, but

outside of her body-he wouldn't see what happened in her mind, which meant her thoughts and emotions during the event wouldn't be revealed. Was it safe? Could it give her away?

"I'm afraid I must insist," Riddle said coldly, "It is not so much to ask, in return for respecting Hogwarts' neutrality from this point forward."

Rigel took as long as she thought she needed to think it over, before saying, "Do you have a pensive, Mr. Malfoy? I don't want to give you the memory, but I will let you view it, with the understanding it be returned to me before I leave today."

Riddle inclined his head regally, and Malfoy led them through his manor to a small, private study, where he unlocked a panel in the wall to reveal an elaborately carved pensive. He lowered it to the desk, and gestured with his wand questioningly. Rigel nodded her permission, knowing that she probably wouldn't be able to remove the memory herself, having never tried it before.

She cleared her mind, and brought forth the memory of that night. She examined it carefully from all angles, reassuring herself that Riddle would learn nothing from it that she didn't want him to. It was a risk, letting him view it, but Ginny had essentially entrusted Rigel with the responsibility of Riddle's involvement. If this was what it took to see that involvement neutralized where Hogwarts was concerned, she would do it.

Malfoy gently touched his wand to her temple, and a silver strand of memory was drawn slowly out. Looking at it as it settled into the basin, she could almost imagine it was a happy memory, shiny and ethereal, like the liquid mercury of Pansy's mental core.

She felt she should explain, "Part of it will be very uninteresting. Some of the struggle between the construct and myself was mental, so you won't be able to see that part."

"What happened?" Malfoy asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I kept it distracted in my mind while I freed Ginny from its possession-you'll see her wake up suddenly," Rigel explained succinctly, "Once it was cut off from her magic, it was easily banished from my own mind. The rest..." She still shuddered when she thought of the reanimated basilisk corpse, but she was interested to note that without the memory in her head any longer, the idea of it was softer, and more abstract. Some compassionate impulse made her warn, "It isn't pretty. The basilisk met a rather... sticky end, I'm afraid."

Something unfathomable flashed in Riddle's eyes, but he merely inclined his head, contemplating the innocuous-looking memory silently.

Knowing it would take a few hours for Riddle to view the memory, Rigel said, "I should get back-if I'm not there when Draco opens his gifts, he'll be very cross."

"I will accompany you back," Malfoy said, likely for the same reasons-it was his party, after all. "Lord Riddle," Malfoy bowed deeply to Riddle. Rigel thought he was a bit too deferential to Riddle, for all that he was Malfoy's boss, and hoped that the megalomaniacal child wasn't still living inside the politician, buried deep.

Riddle glanced at her as they made to leave, "You will find these memories in your possession before you leave, Mr. Black, and our business will be concluded to our mutual satisfaction, will it not?"

Rigel nodded, though she did offer Riddle the journal once more.

"Keep it," he said, his voice disinterested, "May it remind you that the folly of one's youth is not easily purged."

She could not tell if he meant her folly or his own, but she decided in that moment that she would keep it. Not as a reminder of youthful arrogance, but as a warning against setting into motion forces you couldn't control.

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Lucius Malfoy was not sure what to make of Rigel Black. A year ago he would have called him a curiosity, made important only because of the friendship he shared with his son, and the life debt that hung between them. Curing the sickness his first year may have been a fluke. Slaying a basilisk, however...

It bore contemplation, at the least.

He turned a sidelong glance on the child as they walked slowly through the manor. Black was at the awkward stage of adolescence that offered no clue as to what sort of man he might become. All elbows and knees even under the finely-cut robes, the boy walked cautiously, as though he were ever-fearful of drawing attention to himself.

If he did wish to avoid attention, Lucius noted, he was doing a phenomenally bad job of it. Killing a basilisk-had ever there been a feat more attention-grabbing? And donating the parts to *charity*. It was disgustingly selfless, almost as if the boy had a point to prove. Everything he did curried favor with someone, it seemed. The boy was a Parselmouth, yet he killed a basilisk. He was an unassuming academic, yet he carried life debts from several prominent members of wizarding society. He was the child of Sirius Black, perhaps the least subtle wizard in Britain, yet he *successfully blackmailed* Lord Riddle himself. He seemed to be everywhere, yet no one knew anything about him. He was Draco's best friend, Severus' protégé, on good terms with seemingly all of the prominent pureblood Heirs in his House, and yet everyone who knew him described him as quiet, non-confrontational, politically unambitious, and socially stifled to boot.

These reports simply did not mesh with one another. There had been no sign of the bookish introvert a few minutes ago as Black stared down one of the most powerful political figures of the age. There was also no sign of that coolly calculating young man when the boy was anywhere near his father's purview. The only thing constant about him, it seemed, was the unreliability of the information about him.

"Draco doesn't know," the boy said suddenly, glancing up at him in a way that didn't suit his current pushed-back hairstyle, but which would have been perfectly unassuming through bangs.

Lucius tilted his head in a prompting gesture, willing Black to elaborate.

"He suspects that you were involved in things this year, but I haven't confirmed it-he doesn't know you gave Ginny the book," the boy clarified, "I thought he shouldn't have to. It hurts him, to think that his father might gamble with his life, however good the odds seem."

Lucius suddenly had difficulty swallowing through the remorse that rose up in his throat. He beat it back, as he always did, because it was unnecessary. Draco's life wasn't in any danger-wouldn't have been, if things had gone to plan. No one could have foreseen the madness that book would cause. Not even Lord Riddle could have anticipated such a deviance. That true danger had come to the school, twice, was an accident. Unfortunate, but not preventable.

Still, it was good that Draco be kept unaware of his part in these accidents.

"I would thank you, Rigel," he said, deliberately using the boy's first name, "Both for your discretion, and for your... negotiation with Mr. Riddle. I will always support my party leader, but in light of certain accidents, it is not unwelcome to know that such mistakes will not be repeated."

The boy hid his surprise well, but not well enough that Lucius didn't catch it.

"Think nothing of it," Rigel said, ever cautious, "Draco is my family. Anyone would do as I have, to protect their family."

Lucius took a moment to attempt to dissect the meaning in those words. Was he intimating that Lucius himself had not done enough to protect his family? No, Lucius chided himself. He was reading too much into a simple statement. Perhaps this was part of the deception of Rigel Black-people made much of him, when underneath there was a simpler, less threatening explanation for all he was.

Although, Lucius thought darkly, There aren't many non-threatening explanations for why a twelve-year-old boy was able to slay a basilisk.

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Rigel parted ways with Mr. Malfoy when they reached the patio, neither acknowledging that it was anything other than a coincidence they exited the manor at the same time. She wandered through the crowd, pausing to refuse a drink from a nymph every now and then, and eventually found herself back at the gazebo, where Draco was getting ready to open his gifts.

She sidled up next to Sirius to watch, and her uncle looked down at her with an easy smile, seeming to have forgotten their awkward parting earlier, "Wondered where you'd got to."

He didn't make it a question or an accusation, just a simple statement that he'd been wondering. That was one of the nice things about Sirius-he rarely entertained suspicions about people he cared about, simply accepting at face value that he didn't always know everything about them.

Because he didn't ask, Rigel said, "I was in the house," and because someone might have overheard her initial conversation with Riddle, she added, "I had to return a book I borrowed to the Malfoy Library."

"They had a book the Black Library didn't?" Sirius asked, a bit incredulous.

"It was an old family journal, actually," Rigel shrugged, "Written by a Malfoy Healer some centuries ago. It was interesting, but didn't contain anything groundbreaking."

"Ah," Sirius said unconcernedly, "We have a few of those, too, but I suppose you've read them all by now."

"Most likely," Rigel agreed.

They watched Draco smile brightly as he ripped the paper off a pair of seeker's gloves. Even though Rigel knew for a fact that Draco owned about six pairs already, the blonde boy still expressed his heartfelt thanks to the giver.

"Not a bad actor, your friend," Sirius muttered with amusement.

"I'm not sure he's acting," Rigel admitted quietly, "He's probably *genuinely delighted* to get another pair of Quidditch gloves."

"I don't think I've ever seen a Malfoy smile so much," Sirius said thoughtfully, still speaking just loud enough for Rigel to hear, "Is he always like this?"

"Not always," Rigel said, thinking of the times Draco became put-out or smug for one reason or another, "A lot of the time, though... yes. He's a generally pleasant person."

"Generally spoiled, maybe," Sirius chuckled, eyeing the huge stack of gifts Draco was still tearing through.

"Because you wouldn't know anything about spoiling kids," Rigel said archly, "What was that you gave Addy the other day? Was it a gold

spoon, perchance?"

"Platinum," Sirius said, utterly unrepentant, "With her name engraved on the handle."

"Q.E.D.," Rigel muttered.

"The Blacks have always spoiled our children," Sirius said proudly.

"Is that why you turned out so well?" Rigel asked.

"Results don't lie," Sirius said, "Just look at your friend, Draco-that's a product of Black upbringing if ever I saw one. Confident, outgoing, happy. What could be wrong with that? Cissy's done right by him."

Rigel just shook her head, well aware that she had no room to debate the merits and drawbacks to spoiling children, having been rather blessed in her own upbringing.

Draco, as it turned out, did receive *both* a customized wand holster and the newest model of racing broom from his parents. He positively cooed over the Firebolt as he set it reverently to one side, and strapped the Malfoy-crest-engraved leather into place over his forearm with no small amount of pride.

Mr. Malfoy and Narcissa looked on indulgently, content in their son's obvious enjoyment.

Draco soon came to a silver-wrapped gift that Rigel recognized as the one Sirius brought. She stole a glance at her uncle and caught him grinning with restrained anticipation.

Please don't let it explode, she thought nervously.

It didn't. Draco opened the little square-shaped box and pulled out a perfectly spherical piece of crystal. It was smooth, and fit comfortably in Draco's hands as he turned it this way and that to examine it.

Narcissa, who had been standing off to the side with her husband, inhaled sharply and moved to look over Draco's shoulder, "Is that...?" the blonde woman looked up and found Sirius in the small crowd of onlookers. She smiled beautifully at Sirius, who tipped his head in pleased acknowledgement.

"What is it, Mother?" Draco asked curiously.

"This is a gift traditionally given to children of Black blood on their thirteenth birthday," Narcissa said, "It is called a Star Light, and it shines only for the star-born, those named in the light of the stars. You were named for the constellation Draco, and this, if I am not mistaken, is the light of Eltanin, its brightest star." Narcissa said, a fierce light of pride in her eyes as she gazed at her son.

"It's light?" Draco's eyebrows rose and he cradled the crystal sphere more carefully, "That's what makes it glow?"

"It glows only to your eyes, Draco," Narcissa said, somewhat wistfully, "It will light your path, no matter what dark trails you travel. Keep it with you, for it is said that when starlight guides a son of Black, he will never lose his way."

Draco clutched the little orb close to him, and pocketed it carefully. He made a deep bow to Sirius, saying, "Thank you, Lord Black. I am honored to be considered a child of your House."

Sirius inclined his head almost regally, Rigel thought wonderingly. She couldn't believe he'd given Draco something so thoughtful and generous, and she felt a little bit of shame for thinking he would do something to embarrass him instead.

"You are more than worthy of the House of Black, Draco Malfoy," Sirius said, smiling, "Use it well-or use it to raise hell, if you'd rather."

The moment of solemnity was effectively broken, and many of those watching tittered and chuckled at Sirius' irreverent suggestion. There

was a certain grace to her uncle's personality, Rigel realized. It worked, for all of its eccentricity.

Draco moved on to other presents, and they settled back into watching him ooh and ahh quite convincingly. Rigel wondered where her present had gone to, but figured it had been separated from Sirius' when the house elves moved the gifts to the gazebo.

"That was a fitting gift, Brother," Regulus had found them once again.

"I did take a second to think about it," Sirius said, grinning lazily, "You don't mind, do you? So many of those orbs are just sitting around in the main vault, without anyone named for their stars to use them, and it will likely be returned upon the boy's death, as no one else will get any use from it."

Regulus smiled slightly, "I don't begrudge the boy his Star Light, Sirius. I still keep my own around, so I know how useful they can be."

"How are they made?" Rigel asked, curious. She didn't think Archie had ever mentioned anything like it before, but it might not be something he'd think to talk about.

"You'll get one when you're thirteen, don't worry," Sirius said, ruffling her hair affectionately, "The Arcturus Star Light, naturally. We all have them-Regulus, Bellatrix, Andromeda, and me. They're made by capturing the light of a specific star on certain equinoxes. The rituals have been lost, now, but our ancestors created a star light for every star they could, and bound them to shine only for those Black descendents named in the light of their stars, or a constellation containing them. When left alone, they go dormant, but they awaken when held and form an attachment to their first holder until he or she dies, at which point the light goes dormant again until the next holder."

"Does Lady Malfoy have one?" Rigel asked, frowning slightly. Narcissa hadn't been named for a star, as far as Rigel knew.

Sirius looked sad for a moment, "No, she never received one. She was born blonde, remember, and before her father came to his wits and decided she must be his after all, he refused to name her as a Black. Even after he acknowledged her, it didn't matter. She wasn't named in the light of a star, so the Star Lights won't shine for her."

Rigel thought that was rather sad, and she could see that it would mean all the more for Narcissa that Draco could receive such a gift.

The last of the gifts were opened and exclaimed over, and still no sign of the one Rigel had brought. Troubled, she walked with Sirius and Regulus in tow to where Draco was happily thanking his parents yet again for organizing the party in general.

Draco turned when he caught sight of them and smiled brightly up at Sirius, "I really like the Star Light, Mr. Black-that wasn't just posturing for the crowd. It's one of my favorite gifts this year."

"You're very welcome," Sirius said, reaching out to ruffle Draco's hair in a gesture that seemed entirely unthinking. He froze, hand on Draco's head, and snatched it back sheepishly, "Sorry."

"That's okay," Draco said automatically, seeming a bit taken aback himself. He patted his hair back into place, and Rigel took the opportunity to speak up.

"Draco," she said hesitantly, "I really did bring you a present, but it seems to have been misplaced-"

"Oh!" Draco chuckled and began fishing in his robe pockets. He pulled out a slightly rumpled green package and grinned at Rigel apologetically, "Sorry, I forgot I'd done that."

Rigel tilted her head sideways, "You don't want to open it?"

Draco laughed unrestrainedly, "Of course I'm opening it. I didn't see you at the beginning when I started unwrapping, so I put your gift to the side to wait until you showed up. Last year you weren't there when I opened your gift, and I felt just horrible that you didn't have a chance to see my grateful expression."

Rigel fought a grimace, suspecting that Draco knew exactly how uncomfortable people's gratitude tended to make her.

"Open it now, Draco," Narcissa chided gently.

Draco carefully peeled back the paper, likely guessing that the gift was fragile. He was grinning happily, but with a complete lack of surprise, when he held up a vial of potion almost triumphantly, "What does this one do? Will it make me fly again?"

Rigel felt a smile tug at her lips as she shook her head, "Read the label."

"*Potentialis*," Draco read. He frowned for a moment, clearly trying to remember if he'd heard of it somewhere.

"It's supposed to reveal your magical potential," Rigel explained, still smiling slightly, "You can only take it after you turn thirteen, when your core finishes maturing. It will tell you your affinities, strengths, any gifts you might be able to unlock, that sort of thing."

"Really?" Draco peered interestedly at the little vial, "Can I take it now?"

Rigel shook her head, "There's no telling how the magic will manifest, so it's best to take it alone, or with one of your parents there to help you interpret the results."

Draco looked pleadingly to his father, who smiled indulgently, "I will assist you with taking it tonight, if you wish."

"Thank you!" Draco handed the vial of potion ceremoniously to his mother, then turned and launched himself at Rigel. He stopped short just before actually touching her, and grasped both her hands tightly instead, smiling directly into her face and saying, "Thank you, Rigel," very quietly.

Rigel wasn't sure what to do with such intense gratitude and admiration directly right at her. She blinked a bit, and squeezed Draco's hands back helplessly. "It's nothing," she said, her tongue feeling a bit thick. Draco stepped back after a moment and Rigel gave herself a mental shake. Her friend had a smile like a sunbeam, she decided, unmistakably warm, but blinding at times, as well.

Theo came to ask Draco to show him his Firebolt just then, and Draco, with one last smile at Rigel, went off to do just that.

Rigel looked around to see Sirius staring at her with raised eyebrows. For some reason, she felt her cheeks grow warm, but she pushed the feeling down and raised her chin in silent question. Sirius just shook his head slowly, his face melting into a secretive smirk.

Mr. Malfoy drew both of their attention when he said, "The House of Black has been generous and thoughtful in its gifting today. Draco is fortunate in his friendship with your Heir."

"It is the House of Black that benefits from Malfoy hospitality," Regulus returned smoothly.

"And I am the fortunate one in my friendship to Draco," Rigel added, meaning every word. Draco had been a very good friend to her, almost from the moment they'd met, and she was constantly aware of how paltry her contribution to their relationship had been in return. After all her lies and artifice, nothing she did would ever repay the gift of Draco's friendship, or Pansy's either, for that matter.

Narcissa seemed about to say something, but she caught sight of someone headed their way and smiled welcomingly instead,

"Severus, there you are. We thought you weren't gracing us with your presence this day."

Snape strode to Lucius' side, pulling out a small package and handing it to Narcissa as he did so, "Even I am not so remiss a godparent as to neglect my charge's birthday, Narcissa."

Narcissa received the gift gracefully, "I was rather expecting an owl, in fact."

Regulus and Lucius let out low chuckles at Snape's expense, but the Potions Master didn't seem ruffled by the gentle teasing, "An owl couldn't do it justice."

"Oh?" Lucius looked intrigued, "What have you made my son, Severus?"

Snape merely smirked, "Have him open it in private."

Seeing that he would say no more about it, Narcissa excused herself to stow the present in the manor somewhere. Sirius squeezed Rigel's shoulder tightly, then slipped away without even a word to their hosts. It was rather rude of him, but Rigel thought it a monumental success that Sirius hadn't immediately set to insulting Snape on sight, and silently thanked her uncle for his discretion, however graceless. It was a step in the right direction, and she certainly appreciated it.

"Mr. Black," Snape acknowledged her only *after* Sirius had left, which probably served some subtle purpose that Rigel didn't even try to guess, "I trust your summer has been uneventful."

"Productive as usual, Professor Snape," Rigel said evenly, ignoring the doubtful look in her professor's eyes-he seemed to always think her up to something.

"Productive in what way?" It was Regulus who asked, his eyes flicking between Snape and Rigel with veiled curiosity.

Rigel tilted her head to look at Regulus, saying, "Academically. I generally spend my summers studying or researching."

"Potions?" Regulus clarified, glancing again at Snape.

Rigel nodded, "Professor Snape is kind enough to guide my studies, when my interest alone does not drive me toward a topic."

"You must have made quite an impression, for Severus to go out of his way to assist you," Regulus mused aloud.

"It is he who assists me, in fact," Snape said smoothly, his eyes glinting at Regulus, "Your nephew has made himself indispensable to my current research."

Rigel couldn't help but flush at such exaggerated praise. She was certainly *not* indispensable in any way. "Professor Snape is too generous with his praise. He humors my assistance, for which I am very grateful."

"Ever humble, is he not?" Mr. Malfoy said, his voice not revealing whether that was a compliment or an insult.

"Don't sell your gifts so cheaply," Regulus said sharply, "A Black must always be conscious on his own worth."

"I am too conscious of it," Rigel said, "Which is why I could not let Professor Snape's hyperbolic comment go unqualified."

Snape's expression was positively challenging as he replied, "You think I embellish my words, Mr. Black? The last time you assisted me, how many variants of Aconite Alleviation did we brew?"

Rigel thought back carefully, "Four, Professor."

Snape smirked as both Regulus and Mr. Malfoy stiffened slightly.

"*Four?*" Malfoy pinned Snape with a glare, "You assured me that your unaccountable mania over this project would not lead to

unconscionable risks. For all your pride, you haven't the magic to afford brewing that more than twice in a-

"I did not," Snape interrupted, his expression unmistakably smug, "Mr. Black supplied the magic."

Malfoy reared back from his diatribe and narrowed his eyes at her, "Did he indeed?"

"As I said," Snape looked down at her with subtle triumph, "Indispensable. The experimentation stage proceeded exponentially quicker with Mr. Black assisting me."

Rigel swallowed, but did not protest this time. She had known Aconite Alleviation was draining, but it wasn't *that* dangerous to brew consecutively, was it?

Regulus was looking down at her with undeniable calculation in his gaze, but Rigel wasn't sure how to respond. Every time she thought she understood her own power-levels, something happened to make her realize she hadn't quite grasped them yet. She would have to do something about that. Perhaps a detecting potion would do the trick.

"Have you made any progress this summer?" Rigel asked, both genuinely curious and hoping to steer the conversation away from herself.

Snape smirked, "I have. No doubt you'll hear something about it soon."

"I'll keep an eye on the journals," Rigel promised, burning with a mix of intrigue and hope-it could mean great things for Remus, if Snape had made an improvement on the Wolfsbane potion. She thought of something else she wanted to ask Snape, while she had him there, and said, "Professor, have you heard of a Potions Master named Thomas? I can't remember reading any of his papers, but he belongs to the English Guild."

Snape raised an eyebrow at her, "I know him, yes. He rarely publishes, and when he does it generally isn't in English. Where did you come across his name?"

"He is overseeing my cousin Harry's internship this summer," Rigel said, "She hadn't heard of him either, so I thought I'd ask if you knew his specialty?"

"Miss *Potter* acquired an internship at the Guild?" Snape's eyes were suddenly piercing, "They don't take on students below NEWT level."

Rigel took the opportunity for shameless self-promotion with alacrity, "Harry is really good. I wouldn't be surprised if she's NEWT-level. The Aldermaster came across some of her work and recommended her. So you *do* know Master Thomas?"

Snape inclined his head, "He studied under Master Liu as well, though removed by several years-he is older than I am. I wasn't aware he was in the habit of mentoring anyone, much less participating in the Guild Internship program."

"Harry said he didn't seem enthusiastic about it," Rigel said thoughtfully, "Perhaps the Guild pressed him into it."

"Likely," Snape said wryly, "Thomas was never one to involve himself in Guild activities more than absolutely necessary. He is brilliant, but his specialties are as obscure as they are occult. It will be interesting to see what Miss Potter learns from his tutelage."

Rigel wasn't sure how she felt about that answer. Obscure and occult? What did that mean in relation to Potions? "I'll let her know," Rigel said.

From there the conversation moved to other things, and once the men started talking about people Rigel didn't recognize, she excused herself to go find her friends once more.

She whiled away the next couple of hours in good cheer, chatting with her friends about whatever caught their attention. She ate too much of Draco's succulent birthday cake, but usually when she came by cake Archie ate it for her, so she didn't realize she'd over-indulged until she sat down again and groaned, much to her friends' amusement.

"Who knew Rigel was a closet glutton?" Millicent teased.

"I didn't realize how much I was eating," Rigel said weakly, slumping slightly in her seat, "Why didn't someone stop me?"

"We assumed you knew what you were doing," Pansy sighed, eyeing Rigel sympathetically.

"In the future, assume I have no concept of proportion when it comes to cake," Rigel said.

"Do you want me to get you a stomach soothing potion?" Draco asked, not bothering to hide his amusement at her expense.

"You mean *the* Rigel Black doesn't carry every potion known to man on his person?" Theo joked.

"Not to parties," Rigel huffed. As her stomach cramped again, she grimaced.

"That's it, I'm getting you a potion," Draco said, making to rise.

Rigel's stomach didn't hurt that badly, but she realized this was an opportunity to go collect her memory from Riddle, so she waved her friend back down, "I can get it. Will Dobby get one for me if I ask?"

"Who?" Blaise asked, unable to let any reference to anything he didn't know pass by, apparently.

"Draco's house elf," Rigel answered.

"You know Draco's house elf by name?" Millicent snorted, "You've been here what, twice?"

"If something has a name, you should use it," Rigel shrugged, "How else will you differentiate things?"

They laughed at her idea of good manners, but Draco did confirm that Dobby would fetch a potion if asked. Now she would have to actually ask him for one, of course, in case Draco inquired, but taking an unnecessary stomach soother wouldn't hurt her.

She wandered back into the manor, and, after getting the potion from Dobby, made her way through the halls to where she thought she remembered Malfoy's study to be.

When she reached the door, her magic hummed under her skin the moment her hand brushed the doorknob. Wards, she realized, powerful enough to set her teeth vibrating, but not designed to react to physical contact, thankfully. Of course Riddle would have put wards up while he watched her memory-entering a pensive always put the physical body at risk.

She thought he would be done viewing the memory soon, if he wasn't already, so Rigel decided to simply wait. There was a portrait of a graceful lady in blue silk directly across from the Study door, and she eyed Rigel somewhat distrustfully as she leaned against the wall uncomfortably. Rigel smiled, and the lady sniffed.

"What are you doing in this part of the manor unescorted?" she finally asked, her voice haughty.

Rigel shrugged, "I'm waiting for Mr. Riddle. He hasn't left the study, has he?"

"What business is that of yours, boy?" the portrait sniffed, "Lord Riddle is a frequent, honored guest here at Malfoy Manor, and you are merely-"

She was interrupted by the muffled sound of a small explosion, and Rigel looked around and stared as though the door to the study would suddenly become transparent and allow her to see what was going on within. A moment later, more sounds of muffled destruction came through the wood, followed by the unmistakable hiss of angry Parseltongue.

If Rigel had been uncertain that Riddle possessed the gift, that settled it rather succinctly.

She wondered if she should do something, and when the sound of something else being blown up reached her ears, she cleared her throat and knocked thrice on the wards, feeling the vibrations echo deep in her skull. The sounds of destruction immediately ceased, but it was a good minute before the wards dropped abruptly and the door opened.

Riddle's face was black with a rage so thick Rigel thought she could feel it in the air around him. She fought the temptation to step back, and instead looked up into Riddle's forbidding expression, wondering which part of her memory had made him so incredibly angry.

"Black," Riddle snapped, "You should return in twenty minutes."

He made to shut the door, but Rigel stepped forward just enough that he would have to shut it on her foot. Riddle's hand clenched the doorframe in a way that suggested he was sorely tempted to do just that.

"If I could get my memory back now, I'll be out of your hair right away," Rigel said, "The party is winding down, so I need to get it before Sirius suggests we go."

So intimidated was she by his menacing stare, she didn't notice she'd called her 'father' by his name again until it had slipped out, but as angry as Riddle appeared, he probably didn't notice.

Riddle jerked away from the doorway and stalked back into the room. Rigel followed quickly, strangely relieved to see the memory still swimming in the pensive innocuously. She'd been half-afraid the pensive might have been one of the things smashed. Several of the bookcases had not been so spared, by the looks of things.

"Can you put it back in?" Rigel asked, "I'm not sure how..."

Riddle made an impatient noise that was almost a growl, and drew his wand briskly. As he turned it toward the memory, however, his hand trembled too much to draw it from the basin. The man cursed eloquently, in English this time, and turned from the pensive to pace the length of the room and back, "I require a moment-just sit, Black."

Rigel looked around her, but both chairs that had once occupied the office were now smoldering piles of ash, so she remained standing. "Was it the memory?" she asked, "I tried to warn you-the basilisk-"

"It had clearly gone mad over the years," Riddle made a dismissive gesture with his hand, "Its end was... regrettable, but would have been necessary in any case. Severus intimated the parts would be used for research?"

Rigel nodded, "It seemed the best way to make sense of its death."

"I quite agree," Riddle drew a slow breath, and pinned Rigel with a fierce look, "You don't know what you've spared the world, Mr. Black, by doing away with that construct. It would have..." Riddle broke off to flick his wand toward another bookcase, which promptly burst into flames, twisting and writhing under the spell before exploding into splinters and torn scraps of parchment. At Rigel's mildly reproachful look, Riddle actually barked out a short laugh, "Don't worry about the books-Lucius doesn't keep anything interesting in *this* study."

Rigel gave the man a moment to collect himself further-she hadn't anticipated the effect seeing his own sixteen-year-old self (albeit a half-mad, raving version) attempt to murder someone might have on Riddle himself. She had to ask, though, "Mr. Riddle? Do you think

the construct was destroyed? At the end, it said 'this isn't over' or something to that effect. Could it have survived without a host?"

Riddle's face was white as he replied, "I do not know. It would have had to find one immediately, but the Chamber is not far removed from the Forbidden Forest, which teems with inhabitable creatures. It is unlikely the construct survived, but the whole scenario was unlikely to begin with. That its purpose could have become so deluded..."

He cut himself off with a defensive glare in her direction, but Rigel merely shrugged, "I heard you curse in Parseltongue, earlier. I'm pretty convinced it was your construct, now, but our earlier deal stands."

Riddle narrowed his eyes at her, and with a sharp gesture the door to the study slammed closed and wards sprang up once more over the doorway. Rigel *did* step back this time, and drew her wand from her waist pocket quickly. Had Riddle decided she was too much of a risk? Surely he knew Sirius would miss her, if she disappeared, not to mention Draco and her other friends. Perhaps he didn't care?

He seemed almost amused at her defensive actions, and waved his hand lazily toward the two piles of smoldering chair-ashes. They reformed themselves into two very comfortable looking armchairs, and Riddle took a seat in one, waving her toward the other.

Rigel sheathed her wand, and sat, because, really, what else could she do? Try and tear down Lord Riddle's wards?

"I was a foolish adolescent, Mr. Black," Riddle said suddenly, his hands clenched on his armrests and a bitter twist pulling at his mouth, "I grew past that foolishness, but not without learning hard lessons. Have you ever learned a hard lesson, Mr. Black?" he didn't wait for her to answer, continuing, "Pray you never have cause to. I killed a girl, fifty years ago. I could claim it was an accident-how could I know she was loitering just outside she entrance?-but at the time I truly didn't care if someone died by the basilisk's gaze. Silence

a girl to protect my secrets? I thought nothing of such an act... until it happened. I felt a part of my soul tearing that night, Mr. Black. Literally, I perceived my soul cracking, and I was tempted, for a moment, to let a piece of it go forever-to sacrifice that piece of myself, for power."

He didn't look ashamed, or angry at his past self, more... disgusted. There was a sneer in his voice, as though he held the memory in such contempt that he almost couldn't bear to give voice to it.

"But you didn't," Rigel said, "You didn't walk down that path, in the end."

Riddle inclined his head slowly, "It would have been easy to complete the ritual I had planned, to let that death fracture my soul irreparably. I hesitated, however. I realized in that moment that I wasn't just sacrificing another to my ambitions, but myself as well. Give up a piece of my soul? My very essence? I could not bear the thought, in that instant, and I *regretted* that I had come to it. The pain of true remorse-you cannot fathom. It nearly killed *me* to reabsorb that fracturing piece of my soul, but I did it. I closed the Chamber permanently, stopped writing in that ridiculous book, which I had come to see was just homage paid to a misguided ideal, to ego, the kind of pettiness I had thought myself beyond, pathetically enough."

Rigel had no idea why Riddle was telling her all this-perhaps he'd never told anyone, and figured she was a safe outlet, since she'd already agreed to keep quiet about the Chamber and Riddle's connection to it. Maybe he'd forgotten she was there, and was talking to himself now. Or maybe he simply wanted her to understand, to learn from his past even as he had, or to offer him some kind of forgiveness that he couldn't give himself.

"I might have known my youth would catch me up one day," Riddle said bitterly, "Yet I had forgotten how fanatic I was back then-even when Lucius told me of the petrifications, I never dreamed how far things had spiraled out of control. Mad, you called it-but not all of that insanity was magic degeneration. I was nearly crazed, then, only it

has been so long... the mind plays tricks, dulls the distasteful parts of memory, makes reasonable the irrationality of the past."

"You aren't that person anymore," Rigel said, though she wasn't sure if she was reassuring Riddle or herself, "You chose a different future. The past doesn't matter anymore."

"Doesn't it?" Riddle raised sardonic eyes to hers, "You yourself expressed concerns that the construct may not be destroyed completely. If it finds a willing host-worse, if it gains a body of its own-"

"We'll be ready," Rigel said firmly, "You'll keep watch for such a thing, and Mr. Malfoy, too. And me."

"You?" Riddle's mouth twitched slightly.

"Yes, me," Rigel said, brows drawing together, "I am its enemy, now. It will come after me once it gains a body, if for no other reason than because I know its plans, now. I can be on guard, and between the three of us, we'll be able to stop it if it does come back. In any case, it may be already destroyed, withered from lack of host."

"Fate is not so kind, I fear," Riddle said knowingly. Rigel felt a shiver go down her spine, and earnestly hoped they were both simply paranoid.

Rigel glanced toward the pensive, and said, "I need to go."

"An oath first, I think," Riddle said, not moving from his chair.

Rigel froze, "What sort of an oath?"

"One that insures anything learned in this room is not passed on," Riddle said, his eyes stern once more, "You inspire trust, Mr. Black-but I am not a fool."

"Very well," Rigel said, keeping her voice from shaking with an effort, "You will take one as well, of course. I want nothing you may have

gleaned from my memory being spread around."

Riddle agreed, and they both pulled out their wands. The oath Riddle asked for was different from the one she'd made with Flint. That one simply insured that Flint couldn't speak of her deception. The one she and Riddle swore would warn her if she got too close to revealing something she shouldn't, but it would let her reveal it, if she insisted. Doing so had consequences, however. If she revealed something she shouldn't, the oath's magic would immediately inform the other party, in this case Riddle, and her life would be forfeit to him, if he chose to take it. The same could be said of Riddle, of course, if he revealed something of their conversation, or her memory.

At last, Riddle carefully transferred Rigel's memory back into her head. Her breath caught as the full horror of that night settled once again in her mind, and she had to blink back startled tears as her brain re-processed it at hyper-speed.

She swallowed, and thanked Mr. Riddle.

"Thank *you*, Mr. Black," Riddle said, stowing his wand, "It had been an enlightening afternoon."

"It has been interesting," she agreed, mouth dry, "I'll be looking forward to a boring summer, after this."

"Somehow I doubt your life is ever boring, Mr. Black," Riddle said, a hint of a smirk crossing his lips.

"One dares to dream, Mr. Riddle."

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[end of chapter three].

A/N: Yes, the star light thing was kind of taken from LOTR, and then crossed with the Hand of Glory, which as we know is right up Draco's alley. I admit I'm worried about Riddle and Rigel's interaction in this chapter. I tried to make Riddle more comprehensible, without killing his character's larger-than-life vibe, but Riddle is hard for me to write. Some of you guessed he wouldn't be the main bad guy in the series, and all I can say is... it's important for you to understand where he stands, and how he differs from canon Voldemort (as well as how the construct-Voldemort Jr. differs from canon Voldemort).

One thing some readers seemed confused on: at the end of SS, when the construct is in Harry's mind, it doesn't actually open her inner door with parseltongue, it just assumes that's why it opens just then because it is extremely arrogant. In actuality, that just happens to be the exact moment Harry opens it from the other side to confront him-that's why the construct is so taken off guard to see her there.

And finally, sorry this took so long. The next chapter is coming out immediately after this one (as per reader request I've tried to divide the 35,000 words I had done into two manageable chunks). Don't bother reviewing this chapter-just go straight to chapter four to leave comments ^^.

All the best

-Violet

Chapter 4

A/N: Here's the other half of this update-again, sorry for the wait. I just suck sometimes. I hope you didn't review chapter four-just lump it all into five's reviews, if you please, lovely readers. And thank you for all the reviews and encouragement thus far-I remain ever unworthy.

The Ambiguous Artifice:

Chapter Four:

On Monday morning Harry knocked with trepidation on the door to Lab thirty-three. There was a long pause before it opened slowly and Master Thompson blinked down at her.

"It's ten, Sir," she said, wondering if he'd forgotten he was mentoring her, "I'm Harry Potter."

There was a flash of amusement in his eyes, but it vanished as he stepped back and waved her in, "I said the door would be unlocked."

"I thought it polite to knock, in any case," Harry said.

"You'll find I don't care much for niceties-tedious, and time consuming. That will be the first thing I train you out of," Thompson sat down at a modestly-sized desk, situated on the opposite side of the Lab from the brewing stations, and waved her into the lone chair facing him.

Harry sat, feeling off-balance, but determined to make the most of this opportunity.

Thompson stared at her for a beat, then said, "Well? Have you a research topic?"

Harry blinked, and said, "I've thought of several possibilities, but I wanted to discuss them with you before finalizing one."

"And?" Thompson prompted lazily when she paused.

"I'm very interested in Transformative potions," she began, "Polyjuice and Wolfsbane being two I'm most fascinated-"

"No," Thompson said bluntly.

"No?" Harry frowned. Perhaps he thought her too young or inexperienced to tackle such high-level potions.

"No," Thompson agreed, "Those potions are too complex to make significant experimental progress on in the few short months of this internship. Choose a project you can finish."

Harry privately thought that you couldn't *finish* a project in only a few months, but wracked her brain for a different topic, "I'm also interested in Healing potions. Perhaps I could research the effects of modifications to one of them."

"No," Thompson sighed, "How would you conduct such research? By experimenting on sick people, perhaps? You don't have time to organize such a study, so unless you plan to infect people you know with a disease first, it's worthless."

Harry bit her lip, but couldn't refute the point. What could she do? "I don't have any other ideas," she admitted, "Do you?"

"You want me to come up with your research topic?" he drawled.

She flushed lightly, "No, Sir. Could I ask you about your own specialty to get ideas? I heard you studied under Master Liu-"

"Where did you hear that?" Thompson snapped, his eyes turning sharp in an instant, "It is far from common knowledge."

Harry frowned, "My cousin heard it from Master Snape, who also studied under Master Liu. My cousin told me because he knew you were mentoring me."

Thompson's eyebrows rose, "Snape? Haven't seen him in ages. Heard he has a new paper in the works, though-you know anything about that?"

Harry kept her face politely neutral, "If he does, I'm sure it will be brilliant, as usual."

Thompson hummed, but didn't press, "So you want to know my specialty? It won't be much use to you, I daresay."

"All branches of knowledge are useful," Harry said, "Some are just lesser known."

"Truer words," Thompson muttered, his face relaxing into a bored expression once more, "Very well. My primary realm of inquiry is noningestibles. Potions whose effects are visited on the environment, not people."

"Like cleaning potions?" Harry hazarded. She hadn't studied many potions that weren't meant to be drunk or applied to humans, though she knew of their existence in household products.

"Not exactly," Thompson smirked lazily, "I wouldn't worry about it. The point is, my field is rather limited and specialized-you'll want to do something else."

She took in his lazy expression-almost too perfect to be sincere-his evasive answers and the lack of general knowledge she had about him, and several things clicked into place at once, "You study Battle Potions!" she blurted. It made so much sense.

Thompson blinked at her, seeming genuinely surprised, then his face twisted into a wary frown, "How on Earth did you come to that conclusion?"

"It's obvious," Harry said, smiling slightly, "I wondered why I've never read one of your papers-you don't publish any, because your research is protected by the Guild as dangerous information."

"It is, as a matter of fact," Thompson scowled slightly at her, "My subject of research is, itself, rather confidential. Common knowledge will reveal only that I have an interest in 'occult' branches of our art, which usually keeps the generalist snobs from poking around my research. You will *not* tell anyone your conclusions."

Harry nodded in agreement, but said, "You ought to publish a paper about something occult, then, at least once. In English, too, as that is your mother tongue. The noticeable lack of publications makes you suspicious."

"No one else seems to think so," Thompson said dryly.

"Maybe they just haven't said it to your face," Harry suggested innocently.

Thompson favored her with a droll look, "Aren't you supposed to be picking a topic?"

"Can I do Battle Potions?" Harry asked, very interested in a subject she'd never studied.

"No," Thompson said, leaning his head back against his chair with an expression of annoyance, "Why can't you pick something easy? Study... I don't know, the effects of different soil compositions on limbus grass or something."

Harry scrunched up her nose, "Everyone knows the effect of soil compositions on limbus grass. DeBlanc did an extensive survey on the subject a few decades ago."

"No one expects you to come up with original research," Thompson said, "It's an internship. You just have to do something not-wrong,

and the Guild will publish your project in the newsletter, and the PR will be good all around. Your actual topic doesn't matter that much."

"It matters to me," Harry said, more sharply than she'd intended, "I'm not here to waste my time."

"Just mine, apparently," Thompson muttered.

Harry drew in a breath, then let it out slowly, "Forgive me, Master Thompson. It wasn't my intention to detain you. I'll return when I have a research plan."

She got up and made for the door. Thompson sighed, but didn't say anything as she let herself out and carefully shut the door behind her. She made her way through the Guild, silently fuming. How could he expect so little of her? Of course she wanted to do something meaningful. And she did have several ideas, all of which Thompson had rejected without even hearing them out. The least he could do was offer a direction or subject or-or- *anything* .

She was walking up the stairs when she heard brisk footsteps mounting the stairs behind her, so she moved to one side, but the person fell into place beside her. She looked over to see Lestrangle's smirking face and groaned out loud.

"What do you want?" she asked ungraciously, not in the mood to be polite.

"So cold," Lestrangle laughed cruelly, "What's wrong, ugly duckling? Master what's-his-name not all you hoped for? Master Whitaker is wonderful. He spent all morning going over ideas for my project with me-we settled on Wolfsbane."

Harry's head jerked involuntarily at that, which only made Lestrangle laugh again.

"Jealous? It is a rather prestigious topic. Cutting edge. What've you decided on? Going to develop a new prank potion?" Lestrangle's too-

pretty face was absolutely horrid in its mocking amusement.

"If I do, I hope you'll volunteer as a test subject," Harry bit out, "Good day, Lestrangle."

They had reached the entry hall, and Harry sped up as much as she dared to put some distance between them. *Wolfsbane* . Apparently Master Whitaker didn't think it too much of a challenge for an internship topic. She'd bet her favorite cauldron that Montmorency would let Casillas (she was not going to call him by his first name after he'd sabotaged her) research some sort of Healing Potion, too. Was she going to be the only intern with a dull-or worse, useless-topic?

She wound her way through the alleys toward Kyprioth Court, even though it was not quite lunchtime yet. She needed a friend to talk to, and Leo was currently closer than Archie.

Strangely, the common area in the Dancing Phoenix was completely empty, save for a lone mop, called Ben by the regulars for no discernable reason, twirling lazily in the corner. She was early for lunch, but she'd never been to the Phoenix when there was no one at all around. Even Solom was nowhere to be seen.

She was about to leave when she heard a muted cheer and turned around, curious. It was coming from the kitchen, she thought, so she ducked behind the curtain that separated the serving staff from the customer's domain. There were a couple of lads tending to lunch preparations, but the majority of the kitchen staff were crowded around another door, which led to a back courtyard Harry hadn't known was there.

They sent her curious looks as she wandered over, but obligingly made room for her. She looked out into the courtyard to see Leo and Marek faced off against one another, settled into semi-crouches and each brandishing weapons at the other. It was only the jeering grin on Marek's face that stopped Harry from pushing her way through

the large crowd watching to try and put a stop to it. The fight wasn't serious, then. A practice bout?

Interested, she shifted slightly to get a better view.

"Go on out," one of the cooks chuckled, pushing her toward the door, "You don't have to watch the soup like us."

Harry smiled sheepishly, but made her way out into the private courtyard to watch the show. Both men were dressed in short breeches and nothing else, their tanned skin sweating slightly in the midday heat. Marek carried his wand in one hand and a long knife in the other, while Leo held a shorter knife that seemed to be made of crystal in addition to his own wand.

They circled one another carefully, not breaking eye contact for a second. In a sudden movement, Leo darted forward. Marek didn't react, and Harry thought he was caught off guard until Leo aborted the movement just as quickly. It was a feint, though Harry didn't know how Marek had guessed it would be. Leo feinted several more times before turning mid-feint and lashing a kick toward Marek's left knee. Marek swung his left leg out of the way and up toward Leo's stomach, causing Leo to lean back slightly as his left hand stabbed his knife at Marek's calf. Marek's knife came up to meet it, in a strange grating of steel against crystal, and Leo took the kick to the stomach with a soft grunt. He held his ground, however, and brought his own right leg up to lock around Marek's retreating left foot, using momentum to hurl them both to the ground.

Leo landed atop Marek, who jerked his wand toward Leo's chest, but Leo jabbed his elbow into the older man's throat, choking him before he could utter the words. He twisted instead, angling his knife at Leo's side, so that Leo was forced to disengage and roll away, unable to block across his body in such close quarters.

Leo was on his feet in no time, flinging a spell that would have caught Marek in the shoulder had he not ducked at that moment, returning with a red jet that looked like *Stupify* a moment later. Spells

were traded so quickly that Harry had trouble keeping track of them all. Leo and Marek never stood more than five feet apart, it seemed, so shielding was largely out of the question. Instead, they dived and dodged and twisted around each other's spells with reflexes that could not have been natural. Intertwined with the spells were kicks, punches, and knife swipes, and Harry was amazed at how adeptly Leo and Marek avoided it all-neither one had been scratched, so far as she could tell.

The heat grew stifling as they fought on, never giving their bodies a moment's break. Harry watched, hypnotized at the sheer athleticism involved in this-freedueling, it must be. The crowd gasped when Leo actually threw his knife toward Marek's throat, but Marek dived sideways, twisting his wand in Leo's direction as he fell. The knife sailed harmlessly over Marek's shoulder, but Leo was caught in the arm with a petrification charm, and froze, hand still outstretched in a parody of a knife-throw. Marek's chest heaved with exertion as he rose shakily to his knees, but he was grinning even as he gasped for air.

He didn't notice the knife, now behind him, change direction just before it reached the ground. It swung around and buried itself in Marek's shoulder. The crowd cheered, but all Harry could do was stare in horror as Marek collapsed forward into the dirt with a pained groan.

Leo was released by a helpful spectator's counter-charm, and he grinned widely, accepting congratulations leisurely, seemingly indifferent to the man lying prostrate in the dirt. Harry pushed through the crowd to Marek's side, and knelt down to check his pulse.

"Harry! What are you doing here, lad?" Solom clasped her shoulder jovially, and Harry looked up at him in disbelief.

"Help me, Solom," she said frantically, "We've got to get this knife out-"

Solom and several others nearby laughed gaily at her suggestion.

"Now Harry, stop your fussin' over the lad," Rispah appeared and knelt down beside Harry to knock on Marek's head, "Swift! You still in there? Stop worrying people."

Marek groaned again, "Get Leo's thrice cursed knife out o' me back, then, Risp."

Harry blinked, and felt her pulse begin to calm a bit, "He's okay?"

"Course he is," Solom said, shaking his head, "His Majesty doesn't kill his subjects-no matter how hard-headed and foolhardy they are."

"My head has to be hard to survive my King's underhanded treachery," Marek grumbled, hoisting himself up onto his knees.

"You didn't think I was above stabbing my subjects in the back, did you, Swift?" Leo made his way over to examine the wound, almost dispassionately, "Not too deep. Next time I'll do better." His hand swooped down and quickly removed the crystal knife, then took out his wand and cast a cleaning charm on it, polishing it against his breeches for good measure.

Harry couldn't believe how casual they were all being about Marek's wound, which was now bleeding down his back. Were injuries so common in their daily life?

She dug around in her bag until she found one of the bloodreplenishers she kept in her potions bag. She uncorked it, and held it out to Marek to drink. He blinked at her in mild bewilderment, but drank it without complaint. Harry pulled out her wand, hesitant, but reasonably sure no one here would report her for underage use of magic.

"Do you want me to heal it?" she asked.

"Let him go see my ma," Leo said, shaking his head.

"That's several blocks," Harry pointed out.

"Maybe the pain will teach him not to challenge Leo again," Rispah rolled her painted eyes, "What is this, the eighth loss this year?"

"Seventh," Marek grunted, "That one in March was definitely a tie." He reached back to finger the wound and grimaced at the blood that coated his fingers.

"Let me heal it," Harry asked again, unable to stand the sight of her friend hurting when she knew how to fix it.

Marek shrugged, then winced, "Go ahead. Please."

Harry moved to crouch behind him and let her left hand hover just over the wound, keeping her wand pointed steadily at it with her right hand. She stretched out her magic and forged the connection between her core and the wound carefully. She directed her magic into the wound, coaxing it gently in the cajoling way she found worked best when she practiced Healing. She encouraged the flesh and nerve endings to knit together seamlessly, sending soothing waves of calming magic through the surrounding muscles simultaneously, so that Marek's shoulders relaxed completely under her hands.

A minute later, the wound was healed, and Harry stowed her wand again.

"Nice work," Rispah said admiringly, "Very neat. Not even a scar."

"What?" Marek craned his neck over his shoulder in dismay, "No scar?"

"You wanted a memento for your latest loss?" Solom guffawed.

Marek sighed, "I supposed not. Thanks, Harry."

Harry smiled and followed the crowd back through the kitchen and into the dining area for lunch.

Leo snagged a seat between Rispah and Harry and threw his right arm around Harry's shoulder, "So? Now that you're done nursing my fallen enemies, tell me what you thought. Was I great?"

Harry rolled her eyes, "You're getting sweat on my brewing robes."

"It's the juice of victory," Leo insisted, wrapping his hand around her right bicep and pulling her into his side.

Harry pushed away from Leo's playful hold, wondering at the boisterous mood he was in. Perhaps a result of the adrenaline left over from the fight?

"So Marek challenged you for the Kingship?" Harry asked as Solom served up a meaty stew, "If he'd won, would he be King?"

Leo nodded, seeming unconcerned, "It's a monstrously unsatisfying system, for the King at least. If he wins, he gets my position, but if I win, I get nothing for my troubles."

"You get to stay King," Harry said.

"I'd get that if Marek didn't challenge me," Leo said, "For a lot less trouble." He glanced sidelong at Harry with a teasing grin, "In the past, freedueling tournament winners would receive a kiss."

He didn't seem to notice Rispah choking delicately on her drink behind him. Harry widened her eyes innocently and said, "How interesting."

"Shame the practice fell by the wayside," Leo said, still smiling down at her.

"Maybe people decided sweaty, bloody tourney winners kissing twelve-year-olds didn't make an appealing sight," Harry deadpanned.

Leo winced, "Are you still twelve? That's... disconcerting. Grow up already, won't you?"

"So you can do what, exactly?" Rispah poked her cousin with her fork, "Stop playing the rake, Leo-it doesn't suit you, and it makes your subjects uneasy."

"Everything makes my subjects uneasy," Leo shrugged, though he did stop angling glances at Harry as he ate.

"How did your knife change direction like that?" Harry asked a moment later.

Leo smirked, "Summoning charm."

"You can do that while petrified?" Harry asked.

"Petrificus Totalus is a physical spell," Leo explained, "It doesn't affect your magic. That's why Aurors will always go for the stunning spell over the petrification, though the petrification works well enough usually. It's hard for most people to cast wordlessly and without moving their wands in the right patterns."

"Hard?" Rispah snorted, "Impossible, you mean. Never seen anyone pull a trick like that before."

"How did you do it?" Harry asked, "Practice? Or was it more of a in-the-moment desperation?"

Leo looked thoughtful, "I just let my magic do what it wanted."

Rispah laughed lowly, "That again. Leo gets ideas about his magic-thinks it's smarter than he is."

"It is," Leo said easily, "Pretending otherwise won't make me feel better, and magic doesn't like to be ignored or belittled."

Rispah just shook her head, but Harry found herself drawn by Leo's account of his magic. How often had she said something similar about her own?

"I believe you," she told him, "I think magic is more aware than people recognize. You say listening to it helps control it?"

Leo tilted his head at her, "Can't say for anyone else, but listening works for me."

Perhaps she would try that. It seemed there was a lot she could learn from Leo-not just about magic, either. She could still see he and Marek dancing around death in her mind's eye. If she could have moved like that, the basilisk never would have even caught her. She would see Remus about taking her training up a notch.

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She spent the rest of the afternoon coming up with possible research topics, and by dinnertime she thought she'd found a decently interesting one. Dinner was at Godric's Hollow that night, and it was once again Harry's turn to feed Addy.

By the time she got Addy settled and stopped her squealing with a bottle, everyone else was well into their supper. She piled her plate, but didn't start eating yet, toying with her fork instead. She was slightly nervous, but she took a breath and said, "Dad? Sirius? Remus? I have kind of a favor to ask."

The men paused in their eating and eyed her curiously.

"This is rare," Remus said, "What do you need?"

"I've found an idea for my potions project," she said, "For this internship at the Guild. It's sort of based on one of your Marauder products, though, so I wanted to clear the idea with you. If it's successful, it might pose competition for your product."

Sirius looked intrigued, while James looked simply bemused.

"I can't imagine we'll be upset," James said, "Which product inspired you?"

"The Barrier Button," Harry said. "I'm interested in the idea of making a charm or spell more permanent, like the way the buttons are a kind of shield-spell that was attached to an object. I want to look into imbuing spells like that into potions."

"Like the gift you helped me make for Draco last year?" Archie piped up, "The one that made him fly?"

"Fly?" Lily echoed, seeming startled out of her exhaustion for the first time all evening, "You invented a potion for flight, Harry?"

"Not really," Harry said quickly, "It's more like a variation on the weightless draft that gives you a controlled hover-charm centered on the drinker. It wouldn't be good for long distance travel, because it only lasts an hour reliably."

"Even so, that's very impressive," Lily said.

"Sounds like fun, too," Sirius said, "You should sell it-we'll buy the rights from you, if you like."

"Sure," Harry shook her head at their enthusiasm, "But what do you think of my project idea? Is it okay to create a potion-version of the Barrier Button?"

"Go ahead," James said after sending conferring looks toward the others, "Sounds like a great project. Good luck with it."

Harry smiled, "Thanks." Now all she had to do was propose the topic to Thompson.

After dinner she walked with Remus to the fireplace.

"Were you going to ask me something, or just hover anxiously until I floo away?" He finally asked, holding the jar of floo powder in one hand.

Harry said, "I was wondering if you could teach me something new this week-if I was ready to start really learning to defend myself yet."

"Did something happen to you?" her uncle asked with gentle concern.

"No," she shook her head to emphasize her words, "I saw a duel recently, and I was impressed by how well the participants controlled themselves and their magic. I thought, if I learned to defend myself better, maybe my magic would be easier to control."

"Well, there's a thought," Remus said, consideringly, "I wonder if there's a correlation between wizards' training in the dueling arts and the level of control they have over their magic."

"Could you start teaching me? For real?" she pressed, feeling in her gut that this was something she needed to do.

Remus thought it over, but in the end smiled down at her, "You're in good enough shape, I suppose. The rest of the necessary muscles will only come with practice. Sure, Harry. Come by... Thursday evening, and we'll get started."

Harry thanked him, and headed down to her lab to finalize the outline her research project would take.

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The next day she knocked on Thompson's door at eight in the morning, surprising an incredulous look on his face when she then proceeded to open the door without waiting for his permission and let herself in.

"Back so soon," he said lazily, the sarcasm positively dripping from his lips.

"I've got my research topic," Harry said, "It's a really good idea, and you're not going to talk me out of it."

"Is that so?" Thompson leaned back in his chair, "Do tell."

Harry took a deep breath, then launched into her explanation, "I want to combine the idea you gave me for area-effect potions with a type of potions I've already experimented in a bit, namely imbuing shaped magic into potions. My actual goal will be to invent a new potion entirely, but the focus of the research paper I write will be on the benefits of using shaped magic for imbuing, and how it can expand the uses of already known potions as well as give rise to new ones."

Thompson frowned slowly at her, "I've never heard of anything like that."

"That's why I think it's an important topic," Harry said, "I've never read anything that seemed to refer to it, either. But it seems to be an extremely useful aspect of conscious imbuing, so I want to do research to find out why it's not more commonly discussed. If my research pans out, I'll work on creating a new potion. Something useful, but not too complicated."

"Sounds interesting," Thompson said shrugging slightly, "I'm not sure 'imbuing shaped magic' is a thing, but feel free to give it a go. At least it's original."

Harry smiled brightly, "Thank you, Sir. I won't let you down."

"Just don't make up your results, and we'll call it a win," Thompson shrugged, "So... do you really need my help for anything, or did you just come in here to brag?"

Harry held in a sigh, "I actually have a related question. How does one go about getting a new potion vetted by the Guild, to make sure it's safe to distribute?"

"That's a little premature, don't you think?" Thompson said.

"I'd like to know now if imbuing shaped magic into potions could be dangerous-I assumed it wasn't, in the past, and I've taken such potions myself without any noticeable side effects, but I thought it would be good to go through official channels, just in case," Harry said. She hadn't considered the flight potion she gave Draco to be a *new* potion, so she hadn't had it checked out other than a few personal tests, but what if the magic was somehow dangerous? She needed to be sure.

"You've been *taking* experimental potions?" Thompson said exasperatedly.

"I didn't consider them experimental at the time," Harry said, a bit sheepishly.

Thompson heaved a long-suffering sigh, "If you give a copy of the potion and the recipe to me, I'll pass it along with the correct paperwork to the Guild's safety division." Harry reached into her bag to rummage through the various pockets, eventually pulling out the doses of the modified Weightless Draught she'd brewed late last night just in case Thompson wanted to look at them. "Of course you have them with you," he sighed. He picked one up, tilted it toward the light, skimmed over the recipe, then said, "This is a Weightless Draught."

"It's *like* a Weightless Draught," Harry said, "Except the kind of magic imbued is different. It should be a good indicator as to whether the magic itself will be dangerous due to its changed nature, since, yes, the rest of the potion is just a Weightless Draught."

Thompson raised an eyebrow, "Does it... do anything a Weightless Draught doesn't?"

Harry rolled her eyes, "Of course it does. I'm not trying to plagiarize known potions, Sir. This one makes you fly."

"Fly," Thompson deadpanned.

"Controlled hover," Harry allowed, "It's like the Weightless Draught, but you actually leave the ground, and you can control your movements with your mind."

"Really?" Thompson looked speculatively at the little vial, "What's it called?"

"The... Modified Weightless Draught," Harry said.

Thompson snorted, "I can't tell if this is all a big cosmic joke, or if you're a figment of my imagination."

"Do you think your imagination is that good?" Harry asked.

"I think that's enough for today," Thompson said wearily, "I'll pass this... modified whatever along, and you get started on your ridiculously esoteric research project." When Harry hesitated, he pinned her with a look, "Unless there was anything *else* ?"

"Is Thompson your real name?" she blurted.

"I beg your pardon?"

"It's just... I thought maybe Thompson was a cover, since you were trying to keep your research low-key," Harry explained. "It's almost suspiciously ordinary, so I thought maybe you'd published papers under your real name at some point in time, and if so I wanted to read a few-"

"Get out, Potter," Master Thompson (if that was his name) groaned, "Just... go."

"That's not a no..."

The door to the lab banged noisily open, which Harry figured was her cue to go. She waved goodbye to her mentor, who made a great show of burying his head in his hands.

I think he's starting to like me, she thought, suppressing a grin.

It was still fairly early in the morning, so she decided to visit the Serpent's Storeroom. She hadn't been to see Krait in a while, being busy with her internship, so she at least ought to make sure he wasn't replacing her with a new brewer.

The alleys were busy, as they always were in the summer months, but she made her way easily onto Knockturn, weaving deftly around old ladies selling fingernails and various unsavory types in moth-eaten overcoats. She ducked into the dim apothecary, looking around for the owner, and instead froze at the sight of an elegant man in rich robes and long, blonde hair standing at the counter.

What in Merlin's name was Mr. Malfoy doing in the Serpent's Storeroom?

A moment later, she mentally winced. What does any well-known figure in society go to an out-of-the way, semi-shady apothecary for? Something illegal, dangerous, or both. She pushed the door behind her open slowly, intending to creep back out and pretend she hadn't seen anything, but Mr. Malfoy happened to glance up from the paper he was bent over, and he caught sight of her shadow on the wall.

He looked over sharply at her, and drew himself up to his full height, "Why are you loitering there, boy?"

He couldn't see her, she realized, with the sun glaring behind her. "No reason, Sir. Sorry to bother you. I'll be going-"

"Harry?" Krait had recognized her well enough, but, she supposed, he had good reason to think a kid coming in would be her, not anyone else. Mr. Malfoy had no such reason to think Rigel Black would be there. "Come in, come in. I'll be with you in a shake."

She ducked her head as she entered the shop, but from Malfoy's sharp, indrawn breath, it hadn't been enough.

"Rigel? What are you doing here?" he said urgently, looking swiftly through the dirty shop window, "What is your father thinking, letting

you wander this far south of the main alley?"

She affected a confused but disinterested expression and cocked her head at the Malfoy patriarch, "Who?"

"Rigel-" Malfoy stopped, peered at her eyes, and stepped closer, "You look remarkably similar to another boy I know, about your age."

"That's interesting," Harry said, though her tone intimated it was anything but, "Who're you?"

"That is none of your concern," Mr. Malfoy said, raising his chin haughtily.

"Then I guess it's none of your concern who I look like," Harry said bluntly. She knew she was being rude, but the point was to seem un-Rigel-like.

"Harry," Krait said exasperatedly, "Sorry, Sir. Harry's a good employee, but sometimes the tongue runs away with a kid's manners."

"And sometimes kids have more manners than adults," Harry rolled her eyes for good measure, "Least we don't talk about someone who's right there."

"Why don't you go wait in the storeroom, Harry?" Krait said, exasperated.

Harry shrugged and did just that. A few minutes later Mr. Malfoy left the shop, and Krait came into the backroom with raised eyebrows.

"Want to tell me why you were so rude to that customer?" Krait asked, "It's never too late to fire you, you know."

"What did Mr. Malfoy want?" Harry asked directly.

Krait blinked, "You know him?"

"Everyone knows who Mr. Malfoy is," Harry said, "My cousin goes to school with his son. What did he want?"

Krait scratched his neck and held out a roll of parchment. Harry took it, then skimmed it over as Krait explained, "He wanted to know if I could brew that, as soon as possible."

"It's some kind of power-suppressor," Harry mused, looking over the ingredients and steps, "Looks a bit like the potion Aurors use to suppress the magic of short-term prisoners, but milder. What did you tell him?"

"I told him I'd ask my brewers," Krait said dryly, "So? Got time for it?"

Harry looked thoughtfully at the recipe. It didn't seem any more complicated than Snowhit, and the ingredients were common ones. Why didn't Mr. Malfoy get Snape to brew it for him? Was it illegal? No, it was too mild to be really dangerous-a wizard would probably be able to break its effects, if he had to. It was more like something you'd give a child to soothe accidental magic. So what did Malfoy want with it? Draco was long past his accidental magic incidents, as far as Harry knew.

Should she do it? She couldn't see any real harm in it. Maybe Malfoy simply didn't want to bother Snape with a potion he could get elsewhere? Snape was probably rather busy, if he was in the process of publishing his latest finds on Wolfsbane.

"I can brew this," Harry said, "I'll go do it now, in fact. Owl Mr. Malfoy that he can pick it up this afternoon."

Krait nodded slowly, "Very well. He'll pay a good sum for it, I'd wager."

"Don't overcharge him, Krait," Harry said, "He's... a friend."

"He didn't seem aware of that," Krait said.

"Still, I'd appreciate it. And, hopefully this goes without saying, but keep my name out of it, please," Harry said.

"Whatever you say," Krait said, putting his hands up in a sign of defeat, "You brew 'em, I just sell 'em, lad-er, lass."

"'Lad' is fine," Harry said distractedly, "I don't care."

Krait grimaced, "Not sure that's a good thing."

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Harry was as good as her word, brewing and delivering the potion by early afternoon. She made two batches, unsure what quantity would be appropriate, and Krait assured her later that Malfoy had bought every dose. She put the oddity of Mr. Malfoy's purchase to the back of her mind, however, and continued to do research for her project for the rest of the week, occasionally checking in to meet with (read: annoy) her mentor. It served him right, really, for being so faux-lazy, unhelpful, and secretive.

On Thursday evening she flooed to Remus' house before dinner and found he and Sirius warming up in the downstairs gym, on the mats that made up the sparring floor.

"Hello, Sirius," Harry said, "Are you here to help Remus teach me?"

"We're going to show you a practice duel," Sirius said, looking excited, "So you know generally what the art's about before you start."

"Thanks a lot, Uncle Sirius," Harry said genuinely. Then she grinned a bit, "I promise not to think less of you if you lose."

Sirius spluttered and Remus laughed heartily.

"This just goes to show that children clearly know nothing about anything," Sirius sniffed, "I happen to be an amazing duelist. .ING."

"I hear Remus is better," Harry shrugged, not sincere in the slightest. It was nice just joking around with her uncles, sometimes.

"You must have heard that from Remus," Sirius pouted, "Just you watch. I'll be the one laughing in the end."

Harry made a show of looking upwards, "I think you just gave Fate an engraved invitation to your own undoing, Uncle Sirius. Good luck, though."

Remus couldn't contain a snort of agreement as he set up the dueling barrier that would protect their surroundings from any stray spells.

Sirius and Remus squared off on the sparring mats, a good ten paces from one another, and bowed formally. Harry watched with interest as they sized each other up, both standing with knees slightly bent, but nowhere near the half-crouch that Leo and Marek had fought in.

Remus began the duel with a quick stunner, which Sirius easily countered, but from there the curses got a lot more... interesting. She recognized a jelly-leg jinx and a curse that turned the victim's hair pink for twelve days, but most of the curses were said too quietly for her to hear, and blocked too quickly for her to see their effects. The exchange was rapid, but Harry was struck by just how much of it was an exchange. They almost seemed to take it in turns, casting and blocking, then casting and blocking again. She wondered if this was some kind of dueling etiquette, or for her benefit, so she could see each move clearly.

She also noticed that the two kept the distance of ten or so paces between them about constant throughout the duel. When one gained a bit of ground, the other gave it, and vice versa. They never came close enough for physical contact, so none of the spells were ever

fired point-blank. Perhaps because of this, there wasn't much dodging going on. As one cast a curse, the other would cast something else to block it-a shield or a counter-curse. As the hexes and jinxes got more elaborate, their methods of counter became more specialized, too, and most of the magic being performed was stuff she'd never seen before, as opposed to Marek and Leo's fight, where she'd recognized almost every spell thrown.

Remus cast a mirror shield at one point, which bounced Sirius' own curse back at him, forcing him to deal with it *and* the hex Remus sent right after it. He caught the first, but the second got him square in the chest. He immediately began laughing, bent double and gasping for breath. It was short word for Remus to summon his wand, as Sirius couldn't stop laughing long enough to even protest, much less negate the spell.

Remus undid both his hex and the barrier spell, and Harry walked over to join them as they drank deeply from water bottles on the side of the mats.

"So?" Remus asked, wiping his brow, "What did you think?"

"I think Sirius was right," Harry said, nudging him with her knee as she sat, "He really did have the last laugh."

"Ha. Ha. That's clever, Harry. I suppose Remus cast that last one on purpose, too," Sirius shook his head in mock betrayal.

"Guilty," Remus grinned, "But what did you think of the formal dueling style?"

"It seemed sort of... showy," Harry said honestly, "You won because you didn't wait for him to deal with a hex before casting another one, but why weren't you both doing that from the start?"

Remus and Sirius both nodded.

"It was an exhibition duel," Remus said, "So the point was to see the exchange of spells clearly. In true battle, it would have been just as you described."

"We'd move around more, too," Sirius said, "Avoid more curses than we countered, at least if we had a clear battleground-when you're fighting in a group, it becomes more important to negate spells than to let them hit one of your comrades. A good duelist can think up a range of creative responses to any given spell-and in the moment, too."

Harry nodded in thought. Traditional dueling had its advantages, too, then. She wondered if there wasn't a way to combine formal dueling with freedueling, to defend in a way that was both quick and appropriate to the situation, to respond creatively to a threat, but also unexpectedly, as with a knife or a fist.

"I want to learn," she decided.

"Then I hope you're fast, little niece," Sirius grinned, "Because lesson number one is don't get hit."

She looked trepidatiously at him, but Remus shook his head.

"We'll start lesson one tomorrow night," he promised, "For now-dinner."

They all flooded back to Godric's Hollow, where Lily promptly sent Sirius and Remus back to their respective houses to "shower, for Merlin's sake." Harry began to set the table as Lily and James finished up preparations, and Lily said, "Harry, are you busy this weekend?"

Harry shook her head, "I don't think so. Do you need me?"

Lily nodded, "I promised Alice I'd meet her for tea on Saturday, but your father told Sirius they could go to Zonko's to renegotiate a few

terms of their contract that afternoon. Can you watch Addy for us for a few hours?"

Harry was tempted to say no, but, really, how could she? "Of course, Mum," she said, trying not to imagine what a few hours of constant crying was going to be like. Could babies even cry that long without stopping? Probably Addy could, from what Harry had seen.

"It'll be fine, Harry," Lily said, sensing her hesitance, "Addy just needs to get used to you."

"You're probably right," Harry said, though inwardly she did not think it was going to be fine. Not at all.

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Friday morning found her making use of the Guild Library to search for references and precursors to her project.

Unfortunately, she wasn't the only one.

Lestrangle, who had been sending her gloating looks whenever they passed in the Guild halls, was also in the Library researching. The trouble was, he didn't seem to be at all focused on his own research. Every five minutes or so she felt eyes on her as she worked, and though she did her best to ignore him, being silently watched grated on her nerves the longer it went on.

When he finally said, "Potter," her patience was already worn thin.

"What?" she snapped, re-shelving a book she'd been perusing in a single, sharp gesture.

Lestrangle's face morphed into a sneer so fast, you'd think it was his default setting, "You know a werewolf."

Harry's eyelid twitched, "Is that an accusation?" She'd already known he knew about Remus' condition-his words at the New Year Gala had made that clear enough. Why would he want to rub it in now?

"I need information on specific werewolves," Lestrangle gritted out, "For my research."

That didn't do anything to help Harry's mood. She'd *almost* forgotten he'd been allowed to study Wolfsbane when she wasn't. She scowled harder, "Good for you."

He smirked as though he knew exactly why she was irritated, "Don't be jealous-it's not my fault your Master doesn't have much confidence in your abilities. It's a shame, really-Master Whitaker has been so accommodating to my own ambitions."

She focused all her willpower on convincing her magic that no matter how angry she was, Lestrangle was not a threat. *Not-a-threat not-a-threat...* Merlin, but she *hated* that look on his face.

"Anyway, I need data," Lestrangle went on blithely, "Subject's age, sex, date infected, severity of transformations, years spent taking Wolfsbane, if any, noticeable side effects on the body, but most importantly on the subject's magical-"

Harry wasn't getting her magic under control. It was boiling and hissing in her veins, and she literally couldn't stand listening to him go on about his project for one more second. She tucked the book she was borrowing into her bag and strode toward the doors.

"-and-hey, *wait* !" Lestrangle called.

She left the library, thinking it would about serve Lestrangle right if he couldn't get the information he needed to complete his project. Smug jerk.

The book she'd taken from the Guild Library was a rare tome on the use of stones in potion making. Her theory was that imbuing shaped

magic was quite similar to using different kinds of stones in potions, in that the kind of magic added wasn't precisely 'free' magic. She was curious to see how far potioners had experimented with stones, and whether anyone had connected the practice of using stones to shape the magic added to a potion with actively shaping the magic the potioner imbued himself. Surely the two methods couldn't be so different.

She wanted to know how stones had been used to expand the uses of known potions, for surely she was not the first to think of adding properties to the magic of a potion itself, rather than adding ingredients that changed the properties of the potion indirectly. Her working hypothesis was that adding stones with symbiotic magic would enhance a potion's effects, but she wondered what adding a stone with properties that didn't complement the potion would do. Would there be mixed effects, or would the potion's effects be tempered or even negated?

She also wanted to know if anyone had created a potion that didn't have any properties, specifically for use with stones or other kinds of imbued magic. If not, she would have to invent that herself, though in theory it wouldn't be too difficult, because she wouldn't be trying to get the potion to do anything-just the opposite. It certainly bore more in-depth research.

By the time she left the Guild, she had almost forgotten the smug, gloating look on Lestrangle's face. Well, let him go. Her project was going to be just as interesting-and a good deal more original-by the time she was through.

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Harry dove out of the way just as a stinging hex hit the mat where she'd been standing a moment before.

"That was way below the belt, Uncle Remus," Harry complained, pushing to her knees only to roll to the side as yet another hex whooshed toward her ear.

"Tired already, Harry? This was your idea," Remus said, forcing her to abort her roll and twist to the side to prevent herself from colliding with a cleverly aimed hex.

She managed to stand up before Remus cast again, and dodged three more stinging hexes by weaving on her feet. Then Remus' eyes moved one way and his wand moved another, Harry hesitated too long in picking a direction, and Remus' hex hit her thigh before she leapt away.

"Ow," she hissed.

"What's that?" Remus called mockingly from across the practice arena.

"I said 'wow,' Uncle Remus," Harry said, panting slightly, "I think your stinging hexes are getting better with all the practice."

"Maybe I'll be able to do it nonverbally by the end of the night," Remus said cheerfully, before sending another hex her way.

She was learning how to dodge, or else Remus was a closet sadist. It was hard, frustrating work, trying to train her reflexes into something workable, instead of panicked reactions that did more harm than good. Twice already she had dived into a hex instead of away from it. It seemed obvious-move away from the painful magic-and yet her body didn't listen to her brain on the few occasions when her brain had enough time to formulate a message for it to hear.

"You're over thinking it again," Remus scolded her and Harry wavered and second-guessed herself once more, "Just move."

Harry tried to empty her mind, to relax her muscles and just do what felt right, but her mind felt scattered. Maybe it was the enclosed

space, maybe it was that she felt foolish jumping around like a grasshopper as Remus lazily tossed hexes her way, or maybe it was that half of her attention was spent on making sure her magic *didn't* react and her body *did* . It wanted to defend her, or to attack the source of her difficulties, but the point of the exercise was to hone her body, not her magic, to help her practice avoiding danger instead of simply reacting to it. Magic, Remus had explained, didn't always need to be wasted on minor threats. Dodging was efficient and effective, and so dodging she would learn.

But it was so frustrating.

"We're picking up the pace a bit," Remus warned, "Don't think, just react."

Harry chanted it to herself as she began moving faster. Don't think. Just react. The spells came closer together, not letting her get very far at all before forcing her to change directions. She pivoted, ducked, jumped, and spun in a dizzying, exhausting dance. Her muscles protested, her lungs felt close to revolting, and her vision narrowed to Remus, his hexes, and her body. She couldn't even hear him casting as her focus zeroed in. Don't think. Just react. The sweat was dripping down her spine, her stomach cramping as she used her abdominal muscles again and again to arrest her momentum and redirect it.

She leapt over a hex aimed at her feet, but when she touched down she slipped on a sweaty spot and went down hard on the mat. She snapped her head up in time to see one last stinging hex come barreling down toward her face, and flinched, bracing herself for the sharp pain, knowing she didn't have time to scramble aside this time.

The sting never came. She opened her eyes to see the too-familiar red of the Despaco Shield coloring the air before her face. Through it, she saw Remus frowning as he lowered his wand.

"Harry?" he asked, approaching her slowly.

"Sorry," she gasped, forcing her shaking limbs to move until she was on her knees, at least, "One second." She reached for her magic in between pants, asking it to stand down, to stop powering the shield. *That's what happens when I really act without thinking*, she thought dejectedly. Was she never going to be able to control this?

"Was that a Despaco Shield, Harry?" Remus was still frowning as he helped her to her feet and over to the containers of water on the sidelines, "How did you cast it silently? Didn't you leave your wand with your shoes?"

"Yes, sorry," Harry said, very embarrassed, "I swear I didn't mean to. My magic just does that sometimes. I mean, not just *any* time, obviously. When it thinks I'm being threatened. I did try to control it, Remus. I'll do better next time."

Remus shook his head slowly, "That's a dangerous shield. Where did you learn it?"

"Nowhere," Harry said, wincing, "My magic just takes on that form when it thinks I'm in danger. I didn't even know what it was, until Professor-" she bit her tongue before saying 'Dumbledore.' "Well, anyway, I didn't really learn it," she finished awkwardly.

Her uncle looked very troubled, "If you didn't have a wand, it must have been accidental magic. You're almost thirteen, though... usually that sort of thing stops long before a wizard's core finishes maturing."

"Are you sure you never saw anyone using that spell?" he pressed, "Did Lily show it to you?"

"Mum?" Harry shook her head bewilderedly, "Never. Why would she?"

Remus hesitated, but said, "I think you should talk to your mother about the problems you've been having with your magic. She might be able to help."

Harry thought that was odd-surely James would be a better help, with his Auror training, but she told Remus that she would.

"Very well," Remus said bracingly, "You did just fine today, Harry, just fine. If we do this often enough, your body will learn to move without you telling it to."

"How often is that?" Harry joked, stretching her sore limbs carefully.

"As often as it takes," Remus said, amused, "Once you can dodge my fastest spell-casting, we'll get your father down here to have a go-if you think I'm quick, it's nothing to what a decade's field work as an Auror will produce."

They parted to shower and get changed before dinner, Harry turning over Remus' suggestion in her head. Why would her mother be able to help her with her magic more than Remus could? She was a talented witch, but not an expert in accidental magic, as far as Harry knew.

When she looked at her mother's tired, determinedly upbeat expression at dinner that night, however, she couldn't bring herself to bring it up. Why bother Lily with her own troubles when her mother already had so much on her plate between Addy and work and everything else? She'd bring it up some other time, when Lily didn't look so worn out.

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Saturday found Harry walking up the stairs from her basement lab like one mounting the executioner's platform. It was nearing one in the afternoon, which meant Lily would be leaving for tea with Lady Longbottom soon. Addy would be staying with Harry.

Harry found her mother burping a gurgling Addy in the kitchen.

"There you are," Lily smiled, "I was just going to call you. She's just had a bottle, so you shouldn't have to feed her before I get back. If she gets fussy-" Harry silently thought that to be a distinct possibility, "-check to see if she's soiled herself. The fresh nappies are in the cupboard-"

"I know, Mum," Harry said, smiling slightly, "Just because Addy doesn't like me, doesn't mean I don't pay attention. I'll change her if she gets soggy, and I won't let her play with knives. Don't worry."

Lily shrugged self-deprecatingly, "I'm not worried, I just don't want to forget anything. Well, if you have trouble I'm just a floo call away."

She transferred Addy to Harry's tentatively waiting arms and pecked both Addy and Harry on the cheek before she made a silly face in Addy's general direction and said, "Buh-bye, darling. Sissy's going to take good care of you. See you soon."

Lily flooed to the Longbottom's, and Harry held Addy up in front of her face consideringly.

"Hi," she said, "You don't know me very well, but I'm your big sister, Harry."

Addy's face slowly screwed up into a heart-breakingly upset expression, tiny tears bursting from the corner of her eyes without warning as her little vocal chords started emitting distressed whimpers.

Harry hurriedly clasped Addy to her chest, rocking in place as she'd seen James do over and over to soothe the child. "Shh, it's okay, don't cry... please."

Addy began to wail, a thin, gasping sound that wracked her tiny frame alarmingly. It built up into a stronger cry even as Harry patted her back and hummed a frantic lullaby under her breath. Soon Addy was outright screaming, and Harry could only think this was the worst idea her mother had ever had.

She took Addy into the nursery and quickly set her down into a baby-sized chair that had a colorful mobile attached to the top of it. Harry buckled Addy in for good measure, then stepped back, tilting her head to consider the crying child.

Addy's screams had decreased in intensity, but she was still sniffing pathetically, and Harry didn't know how to make that stop. She'd already been fed, so she couldn't just stick a bottle in her mouth. She tapped the mobile to activate the revolving charm, and was gratified to note that Addy paused in her crying to stare curiously at the moving bees and flowers hovering over her head.

Harry settled into a criss-cross position across from Addy's chair, watching the baby watch the spinning toys, not sure what she would do if Addy started crying again. She noticed one of Addy's little socks had come off, but when she looked around she didn't see it lying around. Maybe it had fallen in the kitchen? She probably shouldn't leave Addy alone to go look for it, but what if her foot got cold?

She debated with herself for a moment, then reached out to cup her hand over Addy's pink, wrinkly foot. She asked her magic for a gentle warming charm, and felt the soft heat flow easily into Addy's skin.

When she looked up, Addy's eyes were fixed unblinkingly on her. Harry took her hand away, and Addy's eyes scrunched unhappily. She put her hand back on Addy's foot, but her sister didn't look any more pleased, and started sniffing again. Cautiously, Harry sent another gentle warming charm up Addy's leg.

Addy sneezed, then gurgled happily. Her blue eyes looked at Harry almost adoringly, and her mouth parted in a big, toothless grin. Harry felt her own mouth part in complete astonishment. "Addy?" she said, moving her hand up to stroke the baby's soft cheek. She let a warming charm float across the baby's skin, and was rewarded with another happy giggle. "So you like magic, huh?" Harry smiled down at the infant, "That makes one of us. Want to see some more?"

Taking Addy's rapt gaze to be a kind of assent, Harry summoned a small ball from the nursery's toybox. She held it up for Addy to see, then turned it blue with a tug at her magical core. She turned it green, red, and yellow, but Addy didn't smile, merely watched it happen, a bit perplexed. Defeated, Harry looked down at the ball in confusion. Wasn't it her magic that made Addy happy?

The truth hit her suddenly-it wasn't just magic, it was the *feeling* she liked.

Harry tugged Addy's hand forward to rest on top of the ball, and asked her magic to warm the ball with her other hand. When the ball heated up, Addy hit it excitedly with her hand. Harry turned it cold a moment later, and Addy shrieked with laughter, smacking at the ball until Harry made it warm again, then giggling again.

Harry kept at it, laughing herself every time Addy did something particularly adorable. She could see why people liked babies so much, now-they were *cute*, when they weren't screaming, and it felt *good* to make them happy.

An hour later, with only a small interruption in their game to change Addy's soiled nappy, Lily found them in the same position, both staring at the little ball and smiling delightedly.

"She likes you!" Lily exclaimed, clapping her hands at the sight.

Harry turned and beamed up at her mom, "She does-well, not *me*, really. She likes my magic."

A look of discomfiture flitted briefly across Lily's face, and Harry hastened to reassure her, "I didn't do anything dangerous around her. I've just been using warming and cooling charms on this ball over and over again. She thinks it's a blast."

Lily smiled, "Yes, babies are often soothed by the feeling of magic. It's why mothers are encouraged to hold their newborns as much as possible; the mother's aura is instinctively soothing to the child,

because some of the mother's magic goes into forming the baby's magical core in the womb, so the baby recognizes it. Eventually, the infant comes to recognize other auras as well, the father's, of course, and other people who are around often enough. I knew she'd get used to you eventually, Harry."

Harry stared at Lily, a sudden suspicion hitting her. She didn't have an aura-it was suppressed, according to Snape. Was that why Addy didn't like Harry? Because she couldn't sense her in the same way she sensed others? But that didn't explain why she didn't like Remus... or did it? Could his own aura be different, because of his condition? Would it feel different to Addy?

Feeling her respect for her little sister's perception abilities raise slightly, Harry vowed to research infant care when she got the chance. Maybe there were other ways she could convince Addy there wasn't anything strange or frightening about her.

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Monday she didn't go to the Guild, as she had enough to keep her busy researching the use of stones in potions, but she did stop by the Dancing Phoenix for lunch, just to get out of her lab for a while. Lily was sure she wasn't getting enough sunshine, but she didn't know about Harry's frequent excursions around the alleys during the day.

She had found out after asking that although Marek only seriously challenged Leo every few months or so, they and others from the alleys could often be found practice-dueling in the courtyard behind the Phoenix. They practiced there because, despite looking as though it were open to the air, it was actually a heavily warded section of the inn itself, built into wizardspace during the construction, and accessible only through the inn's kitchen. Free dueling wasn't technically illegal, as long as it wasn't part of an

official tournament, but it was heavily frowned upon, and so the denizens of the alleys took care to keep it away from disapproving eyes.

Harry had taken to stopping by an hour or so before lunch, just so she could watch. It was fascinating, and frankly impressive, to see magic used in high-speed, creative combination with physical defense.

That morning she found 'Will' the curse-breaker, to her surprise, in a practice bout against Aled Flint. The redhead was once again wearing his scarf pulled up over his nose, but from the way his blue eyes were curved in amusement, she would guess he was grinning as he sent spell after spell at Aled's shields.

Aled laughed, and spat out a stream of Latin, wiggling his wand at his shields, strengthening them, it seemed, with a different layer of magic that blended seamlessly with the first. Will sent another spell at the shield, a twisting yellow light that looked at though it was trying to burrow its way through the layers. Just as the shield seemed to give for a moment, it sprang back outward, tossing the drilling spell aside and into the dirt.

"Give up, boy," Aled grinned fiercely, "Nothing gets through my shields."

Will shook his head, "We'll see, won't we?" He moved his wand in two sharp flicks to either side of his body, and two jets of orange magic streaked in wide curves away from him. They turned at the peak of their sideways arcs and impacted both sides of Aled's shield at once. Violent tremors spread from each impact point, and sparks of bright orange shot out from where the vibrations caused by the two spells met. Aled cried out and averted his eyes from the blinding sparks that probably lit up his vision, and Will sent a stunning hex, thick with the power behind it, into the middle of the shield.

The shield burst apart around the stunner, which sailed right through to knock Aled several meters backwards. When the dust cleared,

Aled was sprawled on the dirt, and Will hurried over to revive him.

"What in Kyprioth's name was that?" Aled coughed, standing up once more, "Felt like lightning exploded in my face."

Will smiled, "It's a good spell for breaking layered wards. It creates two opposing currents, and where they meet, the power keeping the layers of shields meshed is disrupted, causing the different spells within the ward to collide and destabilize. After that, one good-powered spell will bust it wide open."

Aled brushed the seat of his pants off, and peered at the redhead consideringly, "How does one defend against it?"

Will smirked, "That would be telling."

Aled scoffed at Will's sudden reticence, but clapped him on the shoulder good naturedly, "Good bout, Will."

"Indeed it was," Will agreed, "But I'm famished-join me for lunch, Master Flint?"

Aled laughed, "You're a mouthful of manners, Master Will." He affected a high instep to his walk and said, in a snotty voice that didn't suit his low baritone at all, "I'd be just delighted."

Will laughed, "And our little watcher must come too," he waved Harry over with an broad gesture, "Come, Harry, won't you grace our party for lunch?"

"I wouldn't dare intrude on such lofty company," Harry said airily, playing along even as she stood and walked over to them, "A poor player like myself would never do it justice."

"But a mite like yourself wouldn't dare refuse our gracious invitation, surely," Will tugged her along by the sleeve in a casual gesture that belied his stuffy words.

"Well, if my lord insists," Harry grinned, shrugging, "Then my lord won't be adverse to paying."

Will shot her a disgruntled look, but snorted agreeably, "That'll teach me to play games with tricksters."

Harry's only response was an innocent look that said, 'who, me?'

Will was quite friendly once he stopped being careful, she discovered, and he chatted easily with she and Aled as they waited for Solom to get lunch going.

"Didn't you say you'd be out of the country for a while?" Harry asked eventually, "What brings you back so soon?"

He grimaced, "In truth I haven't left yet. The job I was going to do keeps getting postponed, so I'm hanging around here to pick up work until I get the go ahead."

Harry tilted her head, curious to know if this was the same job she'd heard about at the Burrow earlier in the summer (for she was about as certain as she could be that Will was Bill Weasley, considering she'd only met the elder Weasley brother once). "What country will you be working in?"

"Egypt," Will said slowly, "I do a lot of work there-most curse-breakers do, actually, as the oldest and most interesting curses are all found in Egypt, India, and China."

"Is that why you dress this way?" Harry gestured to his desert-style clothing, the light, loose pants and tunic.

"That, and it's comfortable," Will said, shrugging. Then he grinned, "Plus it makes me look exotic-the ladies love it."

Harry raised an eyebrow "Your red hair kind of kills that effect, don't you think? You just look like an Englishman in costume."

Will looked affronted, "I do not-I look *adventurous*, and interesting. Women get all excited if you have a dangerous job. That's why they love Aurors and Quidditch players so much." He spoke as if he was imparting deep words of wisdom to her, and Harry wondered if he actually believed such nonsense about girls.

"Aurors and Quidditch players get their names in the paper a lot," Harry pointed out, deciding she would be ridiculous if he was, "Maybe it's the fame, not the danger, that attracts people. Curse-breakers don't get very famous, though, do they?"

"We're well enough known," Will said defensively, "Our work is very important, and highly specialized."

Harry put on her best 'musing' expression, "I don't think I can name any curse-breakers off the top of my head."

Will narrowed his eyes at her, but said, "It's better if we aren't famous. It would be dangerous if everyone knew who the gifted ward-breakers were."

"A lot more jobs would probably come your way, though," Harry said, unable to suppress a grin.

"That's-" Will sighed at the amused look on her face, "You're having me on, kid."

"I'm not a kid," Harry frowned.

Will sized her up, "You look about eleven. Have you even got a wand yet?"

"I'm almost thirteen," Harry said.

"Still a kid, then," Will smirked, "You're not a real wizard until your core is fully developed."

Harry didn't agree, "Anyone who holds a wand is a real wizard. An eleven-year-old can kill with one as easily as a thirteen-year-old

can."

"Killed many wizards, have you?" Aled put in gruffly, clearly dismissive.

"I'm not saying I have," Harry said, "I just think magic is powerful, and shouldn't be dismissed just because of the age of its bearer."

Will looked at her consideringly, then nodded his head slowly, "Perhaps you're right. You have to admit there's a big difference between a wizard before his thirteenth birthday, and one after, though."

Harry only shrugged, "I haven't had my thirteenth birthday, so I wouldn't know. I respect my magic, though, no matter that it isn't considered 'fully matured' yet."

"Enough word-mincing," Aled said, "I want to know that lightning-spell you used on me."

Will grinned again, "I really shouldn't. You could put me out of business if I taught you all my tricks."

Seeing he wasn't outright refusing, and quite curious herself, Harry chimed in, "It's just one trick-it looks hard, anyway. We might not even be able to reproduce it, we just want to see it explained." She wasn't being entirely truthful. If she could, she absolutely wanted to learn that spell-it looked dead useful. From the look in Aled's eyes, he agreed.

"And we're not going in to curse-breaking any time soon, are we, Harry?" Aled said easily.

Harry shook her head, "Better money in potion brewing-more fame, too," she added, just to see Will grimace.

He didn't grimace, though, but looked interestedly at her, "You want to be a potioneer?"

"He *is* a potioneer," Aled laughed shortly, "Haven't you heard what Harry does around here? He works for Krait."

"He's twelve," Will blinked.

"I'm right here," Harry reminded him.

"You're twelve," Will told her, "Not old enough to work."

"Technically there is no legal age requirement for work in magical Britain," Harry informed him, "People hire based on skill, not age. I could take aging potions every day if I wanted to, and it wouldn't change my skill or experience."

Will looked unconvinced, but shrugged, "I suppose if it's what you want. You still go to school, don't you?"

Harry smiled, "Of course. I'm not going to work for Krait forever. But you've changed the subject-are you going to show us the spell or not?"

The redhead sighed, "After lunch?"

They agreed, and even Will seemed to be looking forward to it once he'd given in. Harry thought he seemed the type to enjoy sharing knowledge with others, a bit like Blaise Zabini in that respect.

Leo dropped in by the time lunch was served, as he usually did, though he didn't join their table until they'd almost finished. He spent a while talking to a pair of women at a corner table first, then spoke to a man who came in carrying a dirty toddler, before eventually sitting down at their table and calling for a bowl of soup.

He snagged Harry's cup and said, "Do you mind? I'm parched," before gulping at its contents thirstily. A moment later he made a face and peered into it, "This is milk."

"It's good for you," Harry said, rolling her eyes, "And you'd have known it was milk if you asked."

"Sorry," Leo said, seeming genuinely apologetic as he looked from her to her cup, "I'll get you a new one."

"I was done anyway," Harry shrugged. In the alleys she didn't want to be treated like she was a high-class lady, unable to drink after a man-but at the same time, she didn't really want to drink after Leo.

Leo shrugged, and finished the beverage with equanimity, "Thanks. So, how's your internship going?"

"Well," Harry said, "I'm still in the research phase, but I think the final project will be interesting."

"What's your topic?" Leo asked.

"Experimental methods of imbuing," Harry said, "I think it has a lot of potential for innovation in the field."

"You weren't kidding about being a brewer," Will said, laughing self-deprecatingly, "What is the world coming to when twelve-year-olds are the innovators in their field?"

"Makes you feel old, don't it?" Aled chuckled, "Our Harry's going to change the world."

Harry grinned, flushing slightly with pleasure. It was nice to have people believe in you, even if they were poking fun at you, too.

"The world needs changing," Leo said, glancing at Harry out of the corner of his eye, "Harry, at least, will change it for the better, I think."

"Not many try to change the world for the worse, Leo," Harry said, thinking of Mr. Riddle.

"As long as you try," Leo shrugged, "If everyone is trying, the result should be somewhere in the middle, right?"

Harry was struck by how true that was, and merely nodded in response to his inquisitive look. Will and Aled were finished, so Harry

pushed her plate away and started digging in her pockets for her purse.

"My treat, remember?" Will said, flashing her a grin.

Harry shook her head, "I was kidding. I wouldn't make you pay."

"A kid like you shouldn't be paying for his meals anyway," Will said stubbornly, pulling out the coins for both of their meals and placing them gently on the table.

If nothing else had told her Will didn't have money to waste, the serious way he treated even the few coins he spent on lunch would have made it clear. Harry felt doubly guilty for accidentally freeloading off of him, and promised silently to pay him back when he wasn't looking.

"I told you, I'm not a kid," Harry said, standing from the table, "Next time, I'll pay."

Leo shot her a hard-to-read look as he slowly stirred his soup, "Where are you off to now, Harry?"

"Will's going to teach Aled and me a spell," Harry said, smiling slightly with anticipation.

Leo cocked his head and stood as Aled did, picking up his bowl so he could keep eating as he followed them out to the courtyard, "What kind of a spell?"

"A ward-breaker," Aled spoke up, anticipation clear, "What's it called, Will?"

"It's referred to officially as the Double Current Spell," Will said, "But most of us call it the Pincer."

"It turned my shields against one another," Aled told Leo, "Disrupted all the meshing I'd done to weave them together until they destabilized."

Will patted his pockets down and came up with a worn, white handkerchief. He placed it on the ground, and then proceeded to erect a basic ward around it. Harry watched carefully as Will moved his wand in a circle around the handkerchief, once, twice, then a third time. Faint indents in the dirt around the handkerchief showed that the ward had been erected, and with another twist of his wand, Will turned it red, so they could see the shield clearly.

"The incantation is *fulgur flumen*," he said, repeating it twice more while Aled and Harry tried to imitate his inflection. "The wand movement is two quick sweeps at chest height to either side of your body, like so. Not too broad." He demonstrated by moving his wand quickly back and forth before his chest.

Harry pulled out her wand and imitated the back and forth flick several times before trying to combine it with the words. She said them a few times, moving her wand back and forth until she felt the movement was in synch with the incantation. At this point she paused, and took a moment to wrap her will around what she wanted to accomplish. She envisioned the twin arcs of orange light she remembered, the way they would turn and bore into the sides of the shield. *I want to disrupt it*, she thought to her magic, *Help me cast this spell to disrupt that shield?*

She felt the magic stir, a bit impatiently. Perhaps it didn't enjoy languishing so much during the summer months. Harry bound her will to her magic, and moved her wand sharply, saying the words aloud, this time with *intention* .

At the end of each sweep-flick, a jet of orange flew from her wand. She noticed Aled taking a startled step back as it came toward him, but he needn't have worried. Before it got very far, the orange light moving in his direction curved, mirroring the movement of its twin, and both collided into the sides of the shield. It held valiantly for a moment, but orange sparks licked their way across it and it wavered visibly.

Sensing victory, Harry shot a color-changing charm at it, and the wriggling ray of magic burst through the failing ward easily. An instant later, the handkerchief was a spectacularly bright green, and Harry laughed in triumph.

"Sorry about your handkerchief, Will," Harry said, turning to grin at him, "I can change it back, if you like."

Will just stared at her, "How did you do that?"

Harry's smile faltered, "You just showed us. Thank you, by the way. That's a really interesting spell. It's sort of fun, too. It tingles, going through your veins, doesn't it?"

Will let out a weak laugh, looking uncertain, "I haven't noticed. You... haven't learned that before, have you? Only, you picked it up pretty quickly."

She shrugged a bit, not sure what to say. She always picked up spells quickly, but it would seem like bragging to say so. She also didn't think she could take credit for it-her magic just liked being used, and when she asked nicely, it was always eager to help her.

"It wasn't that difficult," she said, shifting uncomfortably, "Aled can do it too, I bet."

Aled just shook his head, "I'll give it a go, of course, but, *blimey* . You've got a knack for ward-breaking, lad."

Will kept shaking his head with bemusement, but shrugged it off a moment later as Aled asked to see the wand-movement again.

Harry chanced a glance at Leo, who was observing her calmly from where he leaned against the wall. There was no sign of his bowl, so presumably one of the kitchen boys had come to collect it while she'd been distracted learning. She walked over to join him as Will began constructing the basic ward once more, this time around a lime-green handkerchief.

"Don't you want to learn the spell?" she asked, settling in to watch Aled's first few attempts.

"I know the Pincer already," Leo said, smiling a bit, "Though the man who taught me called it the Lightning Jaw. It's come in handy, a time or two. Wizards who layer their wards think they're so clever, but you'd be surprised how many of them aren't clever enough to include failsafe buffers between the layers, in case their elegant meshing spells are disrupted."

"The spell doesn't just work on meshing spells, though, does it?" Harry asked, "The ward Will constructed for us is just a basic, unlayered shield, isn't it?"

"The Pincer's usefulness is that it creates a weakness to exploit, even if the shield is all one piece," Leo explained, "The currents produced by the two sides jar the magic they encounter, shaking it briefly out of the patterns that keep it stable. The weaker the magic, the more easily it's shaken. If there was just one point of contact, the shaking wouldn't matter, because the magic would just settle right back into its patterns, but with two opposing currents, the magic gets jostled out of its patterns and into other bits of magic that have also been jolted briefly from their shape. Everywhere the currents meet, magic clashes. When there's one spell, it simply collapses, but when there are multiple layers, the currents cause them to collide and destabilize one another. It can get pretty messy, depending on how many layers they are, and how dangerous they are to one another."

Harry raised her eyebrows, "Will used it on Aled's shields while he was behind them-is that dangerous?"

"For you and me, probably," Leo acknowledged, "But Will's an expert. He probably knew what shields he was dealing with, and how they'd interact with the spell, before he cast it."

Harry's esteem for Will rose a bit more, hearing that. He may have an alter ego, but at least he was responsible with his magic.

"So why the sudden interest in ward-breaking?" Leo asked, "Thought nothing could tear you from a cauldron for so long."

Harry smiled in acknowledgement of the friendly ribbing, "There's nothing about this spell in particular. Will just happened to be willing to show us this one. I was watching them duel, earlier."

He must have heard the wistful tone that slipped into her voice, for he said slyly, "So you're interested in dueling. Ever thought about learning?"

Harry shrugged, "I've been learning a bit of self-defense from my uncle, but it's nothing like what you guys do here. Freedueling is fascinating. Is it okay that I come here to watch when people use the practice yard?"

"Of course," Leo said, smiling, "You could join in, if you want to learn."

Harry frowned uncomfortably, "I'm not good enough to learn anything yet. I'd just be in the way, I think."

Leo considered her for a moment, "You sure about that? I think you'd be handy in a duel, with magic like yours."

She wasn't sure what he meant about 'magic like hers,' but she pointed out, "Freedueling doesn't only test magic. It's the physical stuff I'd have trouble with."

Leo eyed her gangly frame with a grin, "Because you're... *small* for your age?"

Harry rolled her eyes, suspecting he was ribbing her about being a girl, "Because I don't know how to fight physically, and I don't fancy learning on the fly."

"I could teach you the basics," Leo said, his tone changing from teasing to coaxing in an instant, "No offense to you're uncle, but I

can show you a few tricks you won't see in any formal duel."

Harry rather thought he could, at that, but... "You've got enough to do around here," Harry said, a bit regretful, but unwilling to encroach on his free time, which was rather limited from what she gathered.

"You can never have too much to do," Leo said easily, "Come on, Harry. Let me teach you how to throw a punch, at least."

Harry snorted softly, "I know how to throw a punch." James had seen to that, practically the moment he'd noticed her hair getting long. "I'd rather learn how to avoid one."

"I can teach you that, too," Leo said, "You might as well, if you're going to show up here anyway to watch."

"I really don't want to impose on our friendship," Harry said again, "You do so much for me already. It feels unequal."

"What do I do for you?" Leo raised an eyebrow, "You don't brew much for Krait these days, so I can't help with the crates."

"You helped me get furnishings for my place," Harry said lowly, glancing over to make sure Will and Aled were still preoccupied.

"That was in payment for a debt of stupidity I owed you," Leo grimaced, not liking the reminder, apparently, "Tell you what, you want to trade?"

"Yes," Harry nodded. She felt good about trading favors. Maybe she'd spent too much time in Slytherin House, but it felt more comfortable and straightforward than letting Leo one-sidedly help her until she found a way to pay him back for things.

Leo took a moment to think, then grinned, "Come with me to see my ma this weekend."

"Mrs. Hurst?" Harry tilted her head, "I'd love to. How would that be a favor to you, though?"

"She interrogates me about you *all the time*," Leo huffed a laugh, "If I bring you home with me, she'll have to lay off me for a night."

Harry blinked, "You want me to come to your house? I could just swing by the clinic, couldn't I?"

Leo's eyelids lowered as he considered her, "You don't want to have dinner with my family and me?"

"I don't want to intrude," Harry said carefully, "And... I'm sort of interning at your father's Guild, in case you've forgotten. If anyone finds out he had me over to dinner, it'll look even more like he played favorites to get me a spot."

"Don't let anyone know," Leo shrugged, "Are you really worried about what anyone else thinks? Once they see your work, the doubters will either quiet down or risk looking like fools."

Harry nodded slowly, "All right. If it's agreeable to your parents, I tentatively accept-I have to ask my parents too, but I don't think they'll mind."

"I forget you have parents, sometimes," Leo said thoughtfully, "They can come too, if they want."

Harry blanched, "That's not funny."

"Who's joking?" Leo said seriously, "My parents will probably extend the invitation to them anyway, now that I think about it."

"Maybe this isn't a good idea," Harry said, trying not to imagine her parents and Mrs. Hurst and Leo all in one room. What if they traded information about her?

"Relax," Leo said, reaching over to ruffle her hair, as if to physically brush the worry off of her, "I'll warn my parents not to bring up your job at Krait, or anything about the time you spend in the alleys. Everything will be fine. It's just dinner."

Harry silently wished people would stop telling her things would be fine, but then... babysitting Addy hadn't been as bad as all that. Perhaps she was over-reacting. It's not like her parents would be having dinner with the *Malfoys*. The Hursts couldn't reveal anything too dangerous. They didn't even know about Rigel Black.

"Ask them, then," Harry sighed, hoping she wasn't making a big mistake, "I'll ask my parents when yours give the okay."

Leo grinned, "Cheer up, Harry. It'll be fun."

Harry smiled back gamely, "I'm sure you're right."

"And come here tomorrow morning," Leo added, "We'll work on not getting punched."

"Can't wait," Harry said, her smile a little more genuine this time. An awkward dinner would be worth it, if she got more defense lessons out of it. How much could go wrong, really, between appetizers and dessert?

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She threw herself into research for the rest of the afternoon, taking a break for exercise, defense instruction with Remus, and dinner before diving back in until the short hours of the night. When the words on the page she was reading began to blur, she realized the fire in the library grate was running low. Judging by the headache she could feel pulsing behind her eyelids, she'd been squinting without realizing it for some time.

She yawned, scribbled out a few notes on what she'd been thinking, then shut the book on a thin bookmark and stood, stretching. She was learning a lot about the use of stones in potions, but she'd found no recognizable references to imbuing shaped magic. She knew it

existed-she'd done it! So why wasn't there any theory? Perhaps there was a technical name for it, and she was overlooking the references or simply not looking in the right categories of research? Tomorrow, she would have to ask Master Thompson for his guidance. If he was unwilling to help, then maybe she could start with the practical part of her research, and backtrack to the theoretical in retrospect.

Wondering about the professional implications of reverse-engineering ones own potion, she crept along the dark hallway toward her bedroom.

Her room wasn't terribly interesting, with plain walls barely visible behind the many bookcases, the contents of which were mostly journals, not books, and were numbered in order of publication. It was one of her indulgences, keeping old potion journals, and she was quite proud of her collection. She even had a few noteworthy editions that had been published before she was born, containing the most exciting and controversial of breakthroughs in the field.

Beyond that... she could admit her room was a bit sparse, with just a bed and doors leading to the closet and bathroom. She'd had a bedside table once, she vaguely remembered, but had gotten rid of it to squeeze another bookcase in. The austereness didn't bother her, since she didn't spend much time there, but it sometimes felt a little barren in the middle of the night, without anything to even throw interesting shadows on the wall.

She set the tome she was reading at the foot of her bed, where she could find it easily when she woke, and quickly changed into her pajamas. Most people would find it odd how much she enjoyed turning back the covers and slipping between them, dressed only in a short nightgown, but in September she would be back to sleeping fully dressed, on top of the covers, so she shamelessly enjoyed the decadence of sleeping normally, for now.

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Eight-o'clock found Harry striding determinedly into a glowering Master Thompson's office.

"I need help with my research," she told him, not bothering to sit down, "Are you busy?"

"I'm always busy," Thompson huffed, casting a quick obscuring charm over his desk's surface so she couldn't see what he was working on.

"So now's as good a time as any?" Harry asked, smiling sweetly, "Great. I can't find any references to shaped imbuing, and I need to know if it might be catalogued under a more specific designation."

Thompson sighed, and reached into one of his drawers to pull out a packet of papers, "I told you, I've never heard of what you're trying to research. What would it even mean to imbue magic that wasn't unshaped, at least without casting a spell at the cauldron, which wouldn't in fact be adding anything to the potion?"

Harry started to answer, but Thompson held up a hand.

"While we're on the subject of things no one understands, the safety division sent your potion back to me last night," Thompson said, passing the paperwork over, "This is their preliminary evaluation, but they want you to make three more doses so they can do additional testing."

Harry glanced over the report, "It says it's 'tentatively approved for magical human consumption.' That's good, isn't it?"

"Read the rest of it," Thompson snorted.

"They request an additional copy of the recipe," Harry said, puzzled, "What was wrong with the first one?"

"They think it was miscopied," Thompson said plainly, "The recipe you gave them was for a weightless draught."

"The potion *is* a weightless draught," Harry frowned, "I explained that. All the ingredients and steps are the same-only the kind of magic imbued is different."

"No one understands what that means," Thompson sighed, "Potter, you seem to have hit on *something* -the report agrees the potion acts like you claim, as a self-controlled hover charm. It's your methods that don't make any sense. You can't change the nature of magic you imbue, without changing the nature of whatever's doing the imbuing. If you use a different kind of stone to add the magic, it would make sense. Your recipe doesn't reflect that, though."

Harry could feel herself getting frustrated, and bit her lip to stop herself from snapping. How else could she explain it? "When you cast a spell, you aren't releasing raw magic into the air," she said, "You shape it first, and then it gets released as a spell. Usually when you imbue, you just channel raw magic into the potion, but you don't have to do it that way. You could shape the magic first, then imbue *that* into the potion."

Thompson frowned at her, clearly not following.

"Imagine you cast a hover charm at a potion," Harry said, "But instead of pointing your wand at it and letting the magic manifest as a hover charm and then travel the distance to the potion, you shape the magic without releasing it, then channel the shaped, unreleased magic directly into the potion, so it doesn't manifest as a spell in the air, but as an effect of the potion once the potion is drunk."

"Casting a spell on most potions would make them explode," Thompson said.

"You're not casting it *on* the potion, you're incorporating it as part *of* the potion," Harry said, "It probably wouldn't work to imbue a spell that had opposite effects of the potion you put it into, but for the

hover charm and the weightless draught, it works just fine. I'm not sure, because I can't find any actual theory, but I think the imbued magic gets trapped by the structure of the potion's magic, and works symbiotically with it—just like when you use stones to imbue kinds of magic into potions. It's more specific and useful than stones, though, because their properties are so general and vague."

Thompson sucked in his cheeks and seemed to chew on them for a moment, "Theoretically, I understand the point you're making. If you could imbue something as complex as a spell like you can imbue the passively shaped magic of stones, it would be an enormous asset to manipulating the effects of potions." Harry nodded, but Thompson shook his head ruefully, "But you *can't* just do that. Physically, you can't shape magic without releasing it. The shaping happens too close to the releasing."

Now Harry was the one who didn't understand, and said so.

"Merlin knows I'm no expert in magical theory," Thompson grumbled. He took in her frustrated expression, and sighed, "Okay, it's like this: why do you think you learn incantations and wand movements when you learn to cast a spell?"

Harry blinked, "Because, that's how you cast spells?"

Thompson favored her with a condescending look, "Do you really think you're pulling some mysterious lever in the universe when you speak an incantation? The ability to shape magic doesn't come from the universe, it comes from you. You exert will over your magic, and a spell is the result. The incantations and wand movements help you shape the magic. The magic is channeled through the wand, and as it moves through the wand, the movements you make create a familiar pattern for the magic to follow. Wand movements are worked out based on which patterns best coax the magic into the right shape for the spell's effects."

"So the wand movement helps with the physical shaping," Harry repeated slowly, "What about the incantations?"

"An incantation helps you mentally," Thompson said, "It provides a mental trigger, or pathway, to help you shape your will along. The incantation can be dispensed with, if you perform a spell often or if your will is phenomenally strong, which is why silent magic is possible."

"Wandless magic is possible, too," Harry said, frowning, "You can shape magic without the wand movements *and* without incantations."

"But the point is that incantations and wand movements shape the magic as you're already channeling it," Thompson said, obviously trying to explain something he wasn't entirely sure about, "It's a simultaneous process, external to simply drawing on your magic. You can't shape magic without releasing it, because it's shaped as you release it, usually *through* the wand itself. When you imbue a potion, the magic goes straight from your core to the potion, unmanipulated."

"But it doesn't have to be," Harry said, feeling like she was repeating herself, "If you can do silent, wandless magic, why can't you shape it without releasing it, too?"

"You just can't," Thompson exhaled sharply, "All right, clearly one of us is missing something." His tone made it fairly clear which one of them he thought that was, "Why don't you show me? Show me what you're doing, exactly, and I'll try and explain it after the fact."

"Now?"

Thompson pushed his chair back and stood, running a hand over his face tiredly, "Might as well. We'll use the student lab."

Harry followed him down the hall gamely, more than tired of arguing about it abstractly. When he saw it for himself, he wouldn't be able to say it was impossible, right?

The lab was empty when they arrived, and Thompson, rather than taking a seat and watching, began setting up a cauldron at one of the stations. Harry quickly went to the storeroom to collect the ingredients needed for the Weightless Draught, and when she came back Thompson had everything ready for them to begin.

With the two of them working together, the potion was prepared in no time. Harry found herself thinking how convenient it was, working alongside someone who didn't need to see a recipe any more than she did, and who was always ready with the next step even as she completed the last.

When it came to the imbuing stage, Harry connected her core to the potion. On impulse, she reached out a rope of her magic to Thompson's magical core, too, and sent a pulse along that cord, saying, "Can you focus on the connection? Watch what I do."

Thompson grunted, but she saw him close his eyes and assumed he was sending his awareness along the connection she'd made and toward the channel between her core and the potion. She closed her own eyes, and concentrated on the feeling of casting a hover charm. She asked her magic to shape itself like it would shape a hover charm, waiting until she felt a ball of shaped magic coalesce in her gut, before asking her magic to send that magic down the connection to the potion. It was getting easier, she noticed, the more times she did it.

When she opened her eyes and broke the connection, it was to see Thompson staring at her as though she had grown an additional head.

"What was that?" Thompson breathed, looking between her and the potion, "Never mind, don't try and explain it to me again. Potter, can you perform wandless magic?"

Harry nodded cautiously, well aware that her magic's propensity to act without her wand's direction at times was unusual.

Thompson took a deep breath, let it out, and pinned her with a weighty gaze, "Okay, here's what we're going to do. I'll stall the safety division for the time being. You keep working on this project of yours. Don't worry about finding theory to back up your claims-I can almost guarantee you won't find it in any resources you have access to. I'll take a look around myself, but you need to focus on experimentation. You said you want to create a potion?"

Harry nodded, "I want to create a sort of neutral base, a potion that by itself doesn't do anything except act as a receptor for shaped magic. That way, it would be versatile. My goal was then to try to imbue a shield charm into potion form."

"To act as a continuous shield when drunk?" Thompson asked, "That could be interesting, though it might cause a few problems, depending on whether it could be taken down or if you'd have to wait for it to wear off."

"Actually," Harry said, "I thought it would make a good area-effect potion. Like a portable ward."

Thompson's eyebrows rose, "Yes... yes, I see. All right. Get to work, and report to me the moment you think you've made significant progress. I'll help you with composing the base potion, of course. It should be simple, but elegant..." He began ladling the Modified Weightless Draught into beakers, lost in thought. When he was done, he leveled a serious look at her, "Tell no one of this, understand?"

Harry nodded, taken aback, "I've already told my parents a bit, though."

"No one else," Thompson said, "This is important, Potter. I still don't know what you've done, but it was *something*, and the potential is..." he shook his head, "We must act carefully. Quickly, but carefully. I'll speak to Master Hurst myself." He grinned, suddenly, and Harry felt deeply gratified that he no longer looked bored with her, at least, "This is going to be a very interesting summer."

Harry, taken in by the excitement Master Thompson was exuding, found herself in cautiously hopeful agreement.

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Her theoretical research put on hold, the research for the experimentation portion of the project proceeded at once. The first step was to come up with a potion that would act as a neutral base, a potion whose effect was essentially to prolong the effects of the input variable. She thought she might use amber in it, for its permanence properties, but other than that she wasn't sure.

She fell into a routine easily over the next week: wake up, research until she went to the Phoenix to learn self-defense with Leo, lunch, then more researching. Training with Remus before dinner, then back to her lab to try out different combinations until she caught herself yawning.

Come Saturday, Harry took a break from experimentation to spend the day with Archie, who it seemed she'd hardly seen all summer, despite eating dinner with him every night. She flooded to Grimmauld Place and wandered about until she found Archie flipping idly through a medical journal in the front parlor. Draped around his shoulders, flicking its tongue at Archie's cheek repeatedly, was one of Sirius' little snakes.

" *Thissss isss boring*," the snake hissed at Archie's face, " *Feed me* ."

Harry couldn't suppress a snort, which bloomed into a grin as both Archie and the snake turned their heads toward the doorway in identical expressions of mild curiosity.

"Harry," Archie smiled, "Please say you've come to entertain me. I'm so bored."

Harry chuckled, "So is that snake-by the looks of it," she added, in case Sirius was around to hear, "Want to hang out today?"

Archie tossed the periodical aside immediately, "Flying? We'd have to floo back to your place, but it's a nice day outside."

Harry agreed, and they split up to change clothes and grab their brooms.

Potter Place in Godric's Hollow had a decent-sized backyard. It was warded against muggle eyes, as the community was a mixture of wizards and muggle relations of wizards, who might have unsuspecting muggle visitors over at times.

With only the two of them, they couldn't play a proper game, but they could race. They flew in laps, playing follow the leader and improvising obstacle courses as they went. Harry grinned as Archie barrel-rolled over her head, and swiftly rolled after him. They twirled around one another in a dizzying whirl of speed, over and under, one leading until the other raced ahead, both laughing and calling out care-free taunts.

No matter how close they got, they never collided. She and Archie were completely different in terms of personality and interests, but they'd been flying together since they were four. Something just clicked when they were in the air together, and Harry honestly thought she and Archie could give the Weasley twins a run for their money in terms of synchronicity.

Archie sent her a grin, and dropped into a vertical dive. Harry was after him in a heartbeat, the wind blasting her hair back from her face as she chased Archie's tail. She pushed forward and drew level with him, laughing a challenge when he glanced over. They had been quite high in the air, but the ground was closing fast. She could see the dandelions among the slightly overgrown grass now, and still neither of them flinched. She saw Archie stretch out his hand from the corner of her eye, as though he were reaching for an invisible snitch. With a grin, Harry stretched out her own, and, as one, they

jerked their brooms sharply upwards in the nick of time. Archie glided to a stop, hopping his broom and cheekily presenting Harry with a grubby handful of dandelions he'd picked just before pulling up.

Harry accepted them with a makeshift curtsy, then held out her closed fist with a smirk. Archie cupped his hands, raising an eyebrow, and Harry dropped the butterbeer bottle cap she'd nicked from the grass at the end of her own aborted dive.

Archie flipped it up with his thumb and caught it again, whistling appreciatively, "Nice, Harry. I think you win this one."

"The flowers are prettier, though," Harry said slyly, "More useful in a potion, too."

Archie rubbed his chin, "I don't know, I think this bottle cap has a lot of potential. You could start a whole new branch of potions using old bits of scrap."

"What would we call it?" Harry asked, "Garbage Goo?"

"Secondhand Sludge."

"Mishmashed Muck."

"Broken Brews."

"Salvaged Slop."

"Junkyard Juice."

"Recycled-"Harry floundered, "Uh... Recycled... Runny Stuff."

Archie laughed, "I totally win this one! So we're even."

"For now," Harry smiled teasingly, "Let's go again." She got back on her broom, waiting for Archie to mount up as well.

"Want to see who can fly the highest before passing out?" Archie joked.

"Whoever didn't pass out would have to dive pretty quick to catch the one who did," Harry said thoughtfully, eyeing Archie, "You're looking a little heavier than I remember you being. I'm not sure I could compensate for your weight."

"We could take Weightless Draughts first," Archie laughed.

Harry blinked, a slow grin spreading across her face.

"Oh, no, what have I said?" Archie chuckled, not looking at all alarmed. He never really objected to her wild ideas. That's what made Archie so great. Looking into his equally mischievous expression, she could almost pretend they were kids again, daring one another to sneak into Grimmauld Place's attic.

"I have this potion I've been meaning to test..." Harry said, smiling innocently, "When you mentioned the Weightless Draught, you reminded me about it."

"You want me to be your guinea pig?" Archie said, shaking his head, "I hope you intend to pay me."

"I'll compensate you if something goes wrong," Harry said, smiling widely, "Unless you're too scared."

Archie gave her an unimpressed look.

"Come on, Archiieee," Harry said, stretching out his name like she used to when they were very young, "Don't you trust me?"

"Not a lick," Archie said, "But Aunt Lily would kill me if I let you try it alone."

That was always his excuse for agreeing, but Harry didn't mind. "Whatever you need to tell yourself," she grinned, "Come, we can leave our brooms in the shed for now."

They stored them quickly, and, still riding the high of flying so daringly, traipsed into the house. Lily and James caught sight of them as they passed through, and Lily sighed loudly, "What are you two up to?"

"Up to?" Archie's guileless grin was positively flawless.

"Up to?" Harry echoed innocently, employing The Look on her parents with a complete lack of shame.

She could see James melting a bit in appreciation of their facetiousness, but Lily, Addy cradled in one practiced arm, frowned, "I know those excited grins. Whatever you're about to do it dangerous and unnecessary."

"And fun," Archie added helpfully.

"You had the same air of excitement right before my grandmother's Persian rug was found, charred beyond recognition, in the backyard," Lily said distrustfully.

Harry remembered vividly the day she and Archie had tried to create their own magic carpet, so they could fly to Diagon Alley and buy themselves an ice cream. At the time, their brooms still had charms on them to keep them from leaving the backyard.

"I'm pretty sure you never proved conclusively that that was us, and not Uncle James," Archie said.

"One of these days I will petition the Ministry to allow parents the right to use Veritaserum on their children," Lily muttered darkly, stalking into the kitchen in defeat.

"Don't blow yourselves up," James said, probably only half-kidding.

Archie and Harry just grinned at one another, and disappeared into Harry's basement lab.

Harry started setting up a cauldron, smiling as she did so, "I've been working on a base with Master Thompson. We finally came up with a good recipe yesterday, but I haven't tested it yet."

"Are you supposed to be testing it on humans?" Archie asked nervously.

"Well it's not made for muggles," Harry said thoughtfully, "I'm not sure what it would do to someone without a magical core to interact with. Maybe nothing. You're a wizard, though, so you'll probably be fine."

"I'm going to look for a bezor," Archie said, "But try not to make it poisonous."

Harry shook her head-as if she'd give anyone something that could be poisonous, no matter how excited she was. Still... "Third cabinet on the right." Better safe than sorry.

The beauty of the recipe she and Thompson had come up with was that it embodied simplicity. Most of the ingredients were neutral, and the rest were perfectly balanced by other ingredients, so that the result was a potion that acted much like an impression mold, almost completely featureless until the imbued magic made its 'impression' on it. At least, in theory.

It took less than fifteen minutes to complete. She spent a moment considering what to imbue in it, and decided a simple, harmless spell would be the best way to test its efficacy. She asked her magic to shape a simple hair-changing charm, and imbued that into the potion carefully.

The potion turned blue. It changed gradually from the murky-white color that it had been before she imbued, and by the time she finished it was a steady cerulean. The hair-changing charm would have been blue if she'd cast it with a wand, she noted, so the color change could be related to that. She hypothesized that the color of magic was related to its pattern and shape, not necessarily its

manifestation, and it carried the color even when it wasn't released from a wand. Perhaps this would help in reading auras? The levitation charm was clear in color, so perhaps that was why she hadn't noticed its effect on the Weightless Draught.

Harry cleared away her workstation, while Archie examined the dose curiously, "Looks cheerful. Bet it tastes like sludge."

Harry smiled. That was one of the things she'd argued with Master Thompson about. The potion didn't have to do much, so there was no reason not to make it taste okay. She'd also insisted they limit themselves to inexpensive ingredients. Thompson had grumbled, but mostly attempted to comply with her requirements. There were still a few ingredients Harry wanted to look into substituting for cheaper ones, but on the whole the recipe had turned out well.

"Bottoms up," Harry said, eager to see if it worked. She was curious to know if the magic would be affected at all by its inclusion in a potion that wasn't designed with complimentary effects in mind, as the Modified Weightless Draught was.

Archie saluted her, keeping the bezor clutched in one hand, and tipped the vial into his mouth with the other. He smacked his lips thoughtfully, "Tastes like vanilla." He paused for a moment, then jerked his head in an odd half-twitch, "Tingles. Is my hair growing?"

Harry grinned as Archie's hair bled blue. Then she frowned. It was a sort of light brownish-blue, not the bright cobalt blue that the color-change spell itself should have produced. Had the effects been muted through the potion?

"What's wrong? Am I bald?" He reached up and patted his hair, looking relieved as he ran his finger through it.

"Let's go find a mirror," Harry said, leading the way upstairs.

They clustered into the main-floor bathroom, peering at Archie's hair from every angle. "Looks more like a muggle dye than a charm,"

Archie noted curiously, "Do you think it's permanent?"

Harry tilted her head, "Maybe. The charm isn't permanent-it wears off after a few hours, right? I'm not sure what a potion-form would do, though. The base potion doesn't have a temporal component, unlike the Weightless Draught, so... I don't know."

"That fills me with confidence," Archie drawled.

Harry shrugged, "That's why it's an experiment-I'm pretty sure it's safe, but I don't know exactly how the magic will interact with the potion base yet."

Archie laughed, "Still, it's pretty cool. Maybe there's a way to intensify the color? Or you could imbue two different versions of the charm and end up with a multi-color effect."

Harry blinked, turning it over in her head, "That's a great idea, Arch. Multiple imbued spells... I wonder if that would be sufficiently stable. Usually magic is the stabilizing agent in potions when ingredients clash. If the magic itself was unstable... it bears looking into."

"What are you two-" Lily peered into the bathroom, then groaned, "You aren't supposed to be doing magic over the holidays. No, not even a color charm Arcturus Rigel Black."

Archie held up his hands, "Harry did this to me, and it wasn't a spell."

Lily looked uneasy, "I've told James not to test experimental products on you two."

"We tested it on ourselves," Archie said proudly.

Lily sighed, "I'm not sure that's any better." She pulled out her wand and flicked it toward Archie's hair. It stayed blue. Frowning, Lily performed the wand-movements more accurately, and said "Finite Incantatum" out loud for good measure. Still, Archie's hair remained blue. "What on earth...?"

Harry and Archie broke into identical grins.

"Told you it wasn't a spell," Archie said happily, admiring his reflection.

"Muggle dye?" Lily raised an eyebrow, "You'd better hope it washes out."

"A potion," Harry said, "We sort of invented it. You can't cancel it with a spell."

Lily looked impressed, "Do your fathers know about this? It would really take pranking to a new level. Not to mention the potential for espionage... I assume it's easier to brew than Polyjuice?"

"And cheaper," Harry said, a bit smug, "And you don't have to look like someone else."

"Could you modify it?" Lily asked, thinking, "To change more than hair color?"

Harry shrugged, "Maybe. It's still in the experimental stage, but it seems like you can do a lot with it."

"Keep me posted on your progress," Lily said, eyeing Archie's hair seriously, "I think you're onto something big, Harry."

"You and Dad can come to the open house at the Potions Guild," Harry said, smiling. The interest in her mother's voice was gratifying, to say the least, "All the interns will present their projects."

"We'd love to," Lily assured her, "When you know the date, put it on our calendar."

Harry agreed, and she and Archie hurried back down to the basement so that she could record a few notes in her research journal. As she wrote, Archie absently poked about her lab, inspecting anything that had changed or moved since the last time he'd been down, and tossing questions at her over his shoulder.

"Why can't you cancel it with Finite?" Archie asked.

"It's not a spell," Harry said, "Spells that affect people's appearance are cast *on* people, like a piece of clothing that hangs on a person's body or aura, altering the way others see them. A potion isn't cast on you, it runs through you. Because it's in your physical system, spells cast to negate external magic won't work on it. That's why you can't *Finite* poison that's been ingested, and why potions like Polyjuice are so difficult to catch. Usually, you have to wait until a potion has run its course, or administer a counter-potion to the drinker's system."

"So that's why there are spells that dissolve glamours, but not any that negate Polyjuice," Archie said thoughtfully.

"There is a potion that undoes the effects of Polyjuice before it wears off," Harry said, "I've heard rumors that the goblins use it as a waterfall to protect the deeper vaults. I've never seen a recipe for it, though, and I'm not sure how a potion applied externally would be able to affect the Polyjuice in someone's system... maybe it's related to a person's aura? I think that can reflect the magical effects a person is under, sometimes."

"What?" Archie stared at Harry, alarm in his voice, "Someone could know I'm under Polyjuice by looking at my aura?"

Harry paused in writing, "Theoretically... yes." Why hadn't she considered that before? It was no problem for her, because she didn't have an aura, but Archie...

"That's bad, isn't it?" Archie said, looking pale.

"Not necessarily," Harry hastened to reassure him, "Most people can't see auras, and most of the people who can see auras can't read more than the strength of someone's magic. Even if you met someone who could read the nuances of your aura, I think it would still be difficult to tell exactly what was affecting you. No one knows about Modified Polyjuice, so even if they thought it looked like you

were taking Polyjuice, if they saw you for more than an hour they'd know you couldn't be."

"Still, that could be dangerous," Archie said uneasily, "You never know who has skills like that."

"Mr. Riddle," Harry admitted, "And Professor Snape. Possibly the Weasley Twins, though I think they mostly read one another's."

Archie didn't look reassured, "You've met four people personally who can read auras? And you didn't think to mention that they could detect the use of Polyjuice?"

Harry frowned, "I don't have an aura, remember? They can't learn anything from me."

"Oh, yeah," Archie sighed, "But that's tricky, too, right? What are the odds that Rigel Black and Harry Potter *both* don't have an aura?"

"I know," Harry said, "There's supposed to be a way to manipulate your own aura. I've been studying, but I haven't got the hang of it yet."

"Well that sounds more important than you learning Healing, at the moment," Archie said, "So use the hours I've been tutoring you to work on aura manipulation as well. After everything we've been through, it would sure chafe to get called out on something so obscure."

Harry nodded, "I will. I've been meaning to look into it more, anyway. I think my lack of aura is why Addy doesn't like me."

Archie smiled, "You sure you can blame that on your aura? Maybe she's just discerning."

Harry maintained that Addy's unease wasn't personal, while Archie made disbelieving noises until they agreed to go to the Potter Library to settle the debate.

They dragged out various books on magical parenting and childcare, and set to work skimming through them.

"Look, this one says, 'magical children at times seem to have an instinctual awareness of those around them most likely to be dangerous to them,'" Archie skimmed further down the page, "It cites a case where a child refused to go on an outing with a family friend, and then it turns out later the guy was part of a rogue werewolf gang wanted for 'wanton destruction of property and bodily endangerment.'"

"That doesn't mean children can sense dangerous people-it just means they can sense werewolves," Harry pointed out, "We already knew that from Addy. She doesn't like Remus any more than she likes me, and Remus would never wantonly destroy anyone's property."

"Well here's one that says, 'magical children are superb judges of character.' Apparently very young babies were used to judge a person's worth back in the Dark Ages," Archie said, skimming his finger down the page, "They-oh, wait. It looks like they were actually being used to test for squibs. That's just wrong."

Harry blinked, "No, that's right."

Archie's face screwed up into a disturbed frown, "Harry, if you think using babies as squib-detectors is all right, you've definitely twisted something in your left frontal lobe. That's the part of the brain that makes moral judgments," he added after a moment.

Harry rolled her eyes, "I know. What part of 'I read your Healing textbooks' is confusing to you?"

"The part where you have time for that between curing incurable diseases and slaying basilisks," Archie said drolly.

"I told you I didn't slay anything," Harry said, mildly irritated, "I don't like insinuations that I kill things."

"Get used to them," Archie said, "Because the official story on the rumor mill in that you slayed that basilisk and then personally hacked it up for potion ingredients. And when I say you, and mean I, the real Arcturus Black. If anything, I should be annoyed at you for making me into some sort of ruthless demigod. I'll never be able to live up to my own reputation."

"You'll just have to do something so amazing that people forget all the things I did while I was you," Harry laughed, "Good luck with that, Arch."

"Thanks ever so," Archie said, a bit ruefully, "Back to our research, though. I still think Addy's Aversion (which I did just come up with all by myself) is indicative of your inferior moral character."

"And I say it's my magic," Harry said, "Here, look at this one. It's references by the author of the book you were just reading, and it talks about various theories for the deep, abiding prejudice that most wizards hold toward non-wizards."

"What does that have to do with children?" Archie asked, his interest clearly piqued.

"Everything," Harry murmured, still reading the rest of the passage herself, "This guy basically thinks wizards hate muggles because of an instinct that is carried over from childhood, rather than because of a cultural prejudice they learn later."

"That sounds like hippogriff dung," Archie said frankly.

"Yes, but listen to this," Harry cleared her throat and read aloud, "'magical children are able to sense the auras of those around them, an ability they normally lose by the time they are two years of age. It is theorized that the child develops this ability in the womb, as a way of recognizing the mother's magical core as distinct from the child's own developing core. Without the ability to differentiate between the two, the magic might meld together. There are also reports of

expecting mothers who, for a short period of time during their pregnancy, develop the aura-sensing ability as well."

"That's why babies can tell wizards from muggles," Archie said slowly, "Because they can sense a magical aura-or lack thereof."

"And apparently they are comforted by the feeling of another magical core nearby," Harry said, gesturing to the page she was looking at, "The author argues that magical babies associate the feeling of an aura with the feeling of safety, because they think it means their parents or guardians are nearby to protect them. If they see someone their other senses tell them is humanoid like them, but they don't sense a magical aura, it confuses them. So Addy's just confused, because I don't have a magical aura."

"And she doesn't like Remus because there's something unsettling about a werewolf's aura?" Archie asked.

"I don't think it would have to be unsettling, necessarily," Harry said thoughtfully, "Just different. If the baby saw a human but felt something different from a normal wizard's aura, it would account for the same kind of confusion that muggles cause-at least according to this guy. He thinks wizards hate muggles because of that instinctual confusion and unsettlement a magical child feels around aura-less people. He thinks it carries over unconsciously into adulthood."

"That sort of makes sense," Archie said, "Except for the fact that rational human beings have the ability to act in ways that don't conform to blind instincts. You can't use biology to excuse conscious prejudice-you just can't!"

Harry shrugged, "I agree, but I could see how it could be a contributing factor. I wonder if the prejudice works both ways-are muggles unconsciously suspicious and uncomfortable around magical people? Can they feel something different, or would they not have that ability, not being able to sense magic in the first place? Do you think muggleborn children feel it too? Do you think they know instinctively that they are different from those around them?"

Archie cocked his head, "You know, Hermione said something the first time we stepped foot in AIM. She said she felt like she'd come home. I thought she meant it reminded her of her house of something-her parents are pretty well off for muggles, I think. Maybe she meant the feel of the magic, though."

"You should ask her," Harry said, "I'd be interested to know if that's the case."

"It would be rather heartbreaking, if it were," Archie said, rubbing his jaw slowly. He looked a bit silly doing it, but Harry didn't say so. "I mean, imagine feeling lost all your life and not knowing why. What if she cried and cried as a baby, instinctively searching for the comfort of magic that simply wasn't there? Or what about Halfblood children-what if one parent was magical and the other was a muggle, and the non-magical parent never had as close a connection with their child, just because they didn't have an aura? Or what if-"

"Archie," Harry put a hand on her cousin's shoulder gently, "Stop. You'll make yourself sick."

"It's just so unfair," Archie said, biting his lip.

"We don't know if it's true, though," Harry reasoned, "Ask Hermione. From what I hear, she seems to get along just fine with her parents, doesn't she? I don't think an instinct like this, even if it exists, can matter as much as actual love and care in the long run."

Archie sniffed, "You're right. Sorry. Anyway, I guess this means you won the debate."

"Forget the debate," Harry said, "Let's go steal some ice cream from the kitchen."

Archie smiled slightly, "Don't you have a dinner at your boyfriend's house later?"

"He's not-" Harry bit off what would have been seen as encouragement to Archie's teasing and affected a shrug, "I was going to steal the ice cream for *you*, Arch, but if you don't want any..."

Archie grinned, "I want you to know that I am in no way fooled or manipulated by you. That said, I would love some ice cream, Harry."

They laughed and started putting away the books.

"You are looking into this aura thing, though, right?" Archie asked, seeming genuinely concerned as he peered at Harry's calm expression.

"Of course," Harry said, "I know it's important for our rouse. I'd also like to hold my little sister before she turns two, come to that."

"I think you'll find the novelty wears off rather quickly," Archie said, shaking his head, "Babies are surprisingly heavy. And they spit."

"I bet they smell better than camels, though," Harry said.

"Not always," Archie said ominously as they closed up the Library and made their way to the kitchens.

Archie did indeed help himself to a bowl of ice cream. Harry was vaguely tempted, once she saw it in front of her, but she reminded herself that it would be impolite to show up at Leo's house and not eat anything, so she settled for writing up a few more notes on the potion they'd made. Archie's hair was still a dull blue, much to Harry's satisfaction. She didn't think it would wash out, either, so it would be interesting to see when it wore off, and whether it was a sudden or gradual fade.

She was of mixed feelings about the dinner at the Hursts' house. On the one hand, she was rather good friends with Leo by now, and he'd invited her specifically-not as part of a group, but a real, one-on-one invitation. Harry couldn't remember ever having received a personal

invitation to someone's house before. It was both flattering and a bit overwhelming, and she did enjoy the company of both Healer Hurst and Aldermaster Hurst.

On the other hand... it smacked of favoritism, as Master Snape would say. Lestrangle would have an absolute field day if he found out she had attended a private dinner at the Aldermaster's house. It also represented a danger that one or more of her secrets would be revealed. The only comforting thing about the situation was that the Hursts, at least, all knew that her job at Krait's and her familiarity with the Lower Alleys were secrets, and might at least attempt to help her steer the conversation away from more dangerous topics.

Lily and James were both ready to go by the time Harry changed into the only semi-formal dress robes she owned and joined them at the floo grate.

"You look marvelous, Harry," Lily said, hugging her spontaneously.

Harry looked down at the elegantly draped robes that didn't quite hide her gangly limbs, despite their rich fabric and beautiful burgundy tone. She thought she looked rather odd, but then she was used to wearing male-cut dress robes, and never felt quite at home without her brewing boots in any case. The delicate embroidered slippers just didn't feel secure on her feet.

"Thanks, Mom," she said, shrugging a bit uncomfortably. Taking in Lily's subtle silver-blue robes, which made her fiery hair look like bursting firecrackers around her face, Harry smiled more genuinely, and said, "You look beautiful."

"What, no sweet words for your dear old dad?" James asked, pouting playfully.

Harry eyes his sharp navy robes critically. He was the perfect foil to Lily's lighter blue ensemble, but Harry simply shrugged, saying, "You look the same as you always do."

James affected a blow to the heart, stumbling back dramatically, "Can it be? Is all my primping for naught?"

"Hang on," Harry's eyes widened, "I do see something different." Just as James' eyes widened hopefully, Harry shook her head, "No, my mistake. I thought your abs looked flabbier, but I'm sure that was just a trick of the light."

Lily laughed, and helpfully retrained James while Harry made a quick getaway via floo.

She landed gracelessly on the other side, and looked up to see Leo grinning down at her in trim dress robes of forest green, which brought out the flecks of green in his bright hazel eyes. As he reached a hand down toward her, she realized she was sprawled on her bum still, and accepted the hand gratefully. She stood just in time to avoid colliding with her parents, who flooded in together.

They made a sickeningly cute couple, arms wrapped around one another and in matching dress robes, laughing as they dusted the ash from one another's clothes. Harry appreciated their closeness, but felt a bit apart from the picture they made, at times. She wasn't relaxed enough or likable enough, she sometimes supposed, to really complete the picture. Archie was, but Archie was Sirius', and Harry knew from experience that she didn't fill *that* spot any better.

"Lord Potter," Leo held out his hand toward James, his smile turned up to its most charming, "Lionel Hurst. It's a pleasure to finally meet you."

James' smile was lazily friendly, "Just James is fine," he said, "This is my wife, Lily. We're delighted to say the least to finally make the acquaintance of the only male friend Harry's ever had." He finished his statement with a shark-like grin in Leo's direction, which prompted Leo to grin back appreciatively.

Harry half-groaned, "Is that really necessary, Dad?"

"Necessary? No. It's fun," James said ruffling Harry's hair irrepressibly.

Leo led them into a drawing room done in rose and white, where his parents were waiting by the wide window. "Mother, Father, may I present Lord and Lady Potter? And of course you know Harry."

"It is wonderful to meet the parents of such a bright and engaging young woman," Mrs. Hurst stepped forward in robes of lilac silk, clasping Lily's hand between her own and encompassing both she and James in a smile that was warm and familiar.

"She's pretty remarkable," James agreed, smiling proudly, "We couldn't believe she'd gotten the internship-I suppose we have you to thank for that, Master Hurst."

Aldermaster Hurst waved his hand artlessly, "Harry has only herself to thank. Her natural talent is remarkably well honed for a student her age."

"The Aldermaster is too kind," Harry assured her parents, "I'd never have been offered the internship if not for him."

"The man who discovers a gem cannot take credit for its color and shine-that must go to the ones who molded it," Master Hurst inclined his head in a mock-bow to Lily and James, "To you, I give heartfelt thanks for the obvious care that has been put toward her raising. Facts and theories I can teach, but drive and initiative come from a good upbringing."

Harry could feel her face flushing at the bold praise, and even her parents seemed unsure what to say to such a blatant compliment. Leo didn't hesitate to add his knut, though, saying in a lazy drawl, "Some of it must be natural, Father, else I'd have turned out as fine as Harry did."

Master Hurst laughed, and the others joined in just after, "True enough, my son, true enough. Merlin knows I tried."

He eyed Leo with a mock-disappointed look that was obviously meant to be amusing, but Harry felt compelled to defend her friend nonetheless, "Leo turned out just fine. He's a highly responsible and driven young man."

"That's odd," Master Hurst raised an eyebrow, "I was *certain* you'd met my son."

As Harry bit her tongue to keep from saying that she probably knew Leo better than he did, Mrs. Hurst said hastily, "Let's leave our poor children alone, shall we? Goodness knows we can critique them enough on our own time. We're all here for dinner, are we not?"

"I hope so," Lily said, smiling, "If that's what I'm smelling, it promises to be divine."

She and Mrs. Hurst began comparing recipes, and Harry freely admitted to tuning out the entire conversation. She wasn't interested in cooking, unless it was done with potion ingredients. Leo engaged James in a conversation about one of the Marauder joke products he'd seen used in a particularly creative way, and Aldermaster Hurst sidled over to speak to Harry.

"How's your project coming along, Harry?"

"Well, Master Hurst," Harry said, "I'm in the experimental stage. Has Master Thompson spoken with you about it yet?"

"He has given me a general overview," Hurst acknowledged, "But I admit I did not entirely comprehend the explanation."

"One of the difficulties I'm having is relating it to known theories," Harry admitted, "But I've hope that more experimentation will reveal something about the processes at work."

"Hmm," Hurst peered thoughtfully at her, "Well, let me know if you hit any snags. Thompson seems to think the project has real potential- I'm inclined to trust his judgment, knowing what I do about you."

"Please stop praising me, sir," Harry said, gazing seriously up at the man for a moment, "I really haven't earned it yet."

" Yet, is it? That's why I like you, Miss Potter," Hurst laughed, "You've a nice thirst to prove yourself, but you won't take handouts."

Harry gave up trying to mentally squirm away from the uncomfortable feeling of flattered guilt that was welling up in her. She didn't deserve such high esteem. Most of what she learned in the last two years came from Snape, who would never get credit for his teaching of her. Apart from not deserving it, she also just wasn't used to it. Snape was a brilliant Master, but he didn't exactly dole out praise with any amount of liberalness.

They moved into the dining room and Leo dutifully carried the platters of food out from the kitchen while the rest of them sat down. Harry's seat was next to Leo, with her parents on the opposite side and the Hursts' at either end of the rectangular table.

"So I expect we'll be seeing you again at the Open House for the student showcase," Master Hurst said as they all dug into the meal.

"We'd love to come," Lily agreed, "We're all very excited to see how Harry's project turns out."

"So are those of us at the Guild who've heard about it," Hurst said, shooting Harry an amused smile, "I don't think we ever seen anything quite like it in one of our intern's projects. Usually they all want to study the Big Five-Amortentia, Wolfsbane, Polyjuice, Draught of Living Death, and Felix Felicis. Those are the potions that fascinate and draw people to our field. Speaking of-Harry, has Mr. Lestrage approached you about the information he needs? I told him you were a good source for that sort of data, and I know how keen you are to see the potion improved."

Harry felt slightly sick all of a sudden, and it had nothing to do with the delicious bowl of soup she was eating. *Hurst* had sent Lestrage her way asking for data on werewolves? What would the Master

think if he found out she'd snubbed the older boy-a fellow potioneer no matter how inflammatory his speech-simply because she was jealous?

She was saved from answering immediately by James, who said, "Lestrangle?" with a polite frown on his face, "What information could Harry provide to one of them?"

"The Lestrangle Heir is a fellow intern," Harry told her father, ignoring the mildly surprised look on Master Hurst's face as he realized she hadn't filled her parents in on much of what she'd been doing at the Guild, "He's studying Wolfsbane, and asked if I could get a few statistics from Uncle Remus for his research." Harry silently vowed that she would get the information from Remus and give it to Lestrangle on Monday. As the sick feeling she got at possibly disappointing the Aldermaster, to whom she owed her internship, began to fade, another feeling welled up in its place.

Shame thickened the back of her throat as she took a hard look at what she'd actually done by brushing off a fellow potioneer's request. She couldn't believe she'd been so petty. Lestrangle was a *researcher*, for all that he was obnoxious. What if he *did* make a breakthrough? Remus would be the one to benefit. As a researcher, and as Remus' friend, she couldn't, in good conscience, stand in the way of that.

"Is he likely to make any new finds?" Lily asked, interested, "We've heard rumors around the office that there's a new breakthrough in Wolfsbane about to be published."

"That'll be Master Snape," Hurst beamed widely, "Brilliant man. I can't tell you the details of *his* work, though-he's devilishly tight-lipped about his research."

Lily and James both looked uncomfortable at the mention of Professor Snape, but when Lily hesitated too long in responding, Leo continued the conversation smoothly.

"Lestrangle may still make some progress," he pointed out, "Wolfsbane is such a complicated brew, we need as many minds as possible working on it. What's the third intern researching, Harry?"

"Renaldo Casillas?" Harry frowned, "I'm not sure. His mentor specializes in Healing potions, so perhaps something in that field."

"I think it was the Draught of Peace," Master Hurst said, "Something about trying to make it more susceptible to preserving charms."

Harry privately thought that the Draught of Peace didn't need to be preserved for long periods of time, because it wasn't an emergency-use potion like a Blood Replenisher; you could brew it in twenty-five minutes if you really wanted to, and if you needed to feel peaceful right away, you could just take a Calming Draught.

Still, she murmured something that sounded interested, to be polite. She supposed there was always room for improvement, even if there were other potions in the field that needed it more.

The conversation moved on, and it was surprisingly lively. Lily's conviviality, Master Hurst's engaging banter, James' sense of boyish humor, Leo's good-natured charm, and Mrs. Hurst's calm amusement all blended extremely well together over the mouth-watering smells of dinner and the many things they all had in common despite the variety of their professions and interests.

Harry found herself relaxing into the warm atmosphere, and was somewhat taken by surprise when James eyed Leo, not unkindly, and said, "So where did you kids meet, again?"

Harry's mind blanked, before she remembered what she'd told James all those months ago, "Tate's apothecary. We're both in there so often, we were bound to meet eventually."

From the corner of her eye, she saw Leo's lips slowly stretch into a sly smirk, "You make it sound so dull, but as I recall it our first meeting was anything but!"

Harry's eye twitched, but she pasted a relaxed smile on her face, and said, "I doubt our parents would be interested in all the details." She had no idea where he was going with this, but she could guess it wasn't going to be good.

"Nonsense," James grinned, perhaps sensing that Harry didn't want him to press-he had a knack for knowing when people were most prone to being embarrassed about something. It was what made him such a good prankster. He leaned forward with an anticipatory twinkle in his eye, "We're all ears."

"The first time I met Harry, she was eight years old," Leo began, ignoring the raised eyebrows from their parents. Harry wondered how he was possibly going to invent a believable story about her when she was eight, but resigned herself to simply listening. "Harry was a tiny little thing back then, all long, floaty hair and big, green eyes. I walked into Tate's shop, just there to check on an order for my dad, and almost tripped over little Harry on my way to the counter. She looked up at me with the most serious expression I'd ever seen, and this little line of irritation between her brows, as though I should know better than to be so tall."

"That's Harry!" James exclaimed, clearly delighted, "I was always tripping over her around the house at that age-she'd just plop down on the floor somewhere with a book, and give you exactly that expression if you loomed over her accidentally."

Leo smiled, "She was rather adorable, though at the time I couldn't fathom what she was doing in the apothecary."

"She used to sneak out whenever we forgot to ward the floo," Lily said ruefully, "She was so quiet we didn't even notice she'd gone until an hour later when she'd show up, cool as you please, with a bag of potion ingredients."

"I always had my emergency portkey necklace," Harry said, stirring her peas, "It's not as though I was in any danger on Diagon." She had no idea how Leo knew what she'd looked like when she was

younger, but maybe he'd asked around in preparation for just this kind of questioning.

"Go on with the story, Leo," Mrs. Hurst said, smiling, "I want to hear the rest."

Leo leaned forward slightly, lending his tale an earnest quality as he said, "So I stop short of running into Harry, and I look up to see a middle-aged woman with dark, curly hair at the counter in front of us both. I assumed she was Harry's mother, until I saw the basket Harry was carrying. It's full to bursting with ingredients, probably dead heavy, and when Harry stops frowning at me for nearly colliding with her, she goes back to scowling at the lady talking to Tate at the counter, tapping her little foot impatiently, her arms nearly shaking with the effort of holding up her basket."

Master Hurst chuckled as the image Leo painted, and Harry severely hoped her 'adorable impatience' was the extent of the story. Then Leo started talking again.

"I realize pretty quickly that the lady at the counter isn't talking with Tate-she's arguing with him. Waving her hands and gesturing at a pink-tinged potion on the counter between them. 'I'm telling you I did it right,' the lady says, 'it's your ingredients that are the problem.' They argue for a few minutes more, until finally Harry just snaps," Leo smiled in what seemed to be fond remembrance, "She sets down her basket with a little huff, walks up behind the lady, and pokes her on the hip until the lady looks down and goes, 'what, kid?' I could tell by Harry's expression that she did not like being called a kid, but her voice is all polite and sweet when she says, 'Mr. Tate doesn't sell bad ingredients. Are you sure your recipe isn't wrong?'"

"She didn't," Lily groaned into her hands, "Harry, what were you thinking, getting in the middle of an adult conversation like that?"

Harry shrugged, but inside she knew exactly what she had been thinking-she remembered that day, when the rude lady in the blue pencil skirt almost made her late getting home for lunch. She

remembered everything Leo was describing-but how did he know about that? Had he really been there, that day? She vaguely remembered someone being in line behind her. Maybe it had been a young teenager of Leo's coloring, but she wasn't sure. She was sure Leo didn't invent the tale out of thin air, however.

"The lady looks down her nose at Harry," Leo went on, "All puffed up indignation, and says, 'I paid top-galleon for this recipe, and the result looks just like Venus Juice ought to. There's nothing wrong with it except the potency of the ingredients.' Mr. Tate is blushing at this point, and I'm a bit embarrassed myself that this lady is talking openly about trying to brew such a strong lust potion, but Harry picks up the potion from the counter and holds it up to the light like a little expert. She puts it back down and says, 'the consistency is off for Venus Juice, actually. I can't smell the rose oil, either. Only the color is right.'"

Leo paused to take a sip of water, and James took the pause to ask, slightly horrified, "How did you know so much about lust potions at that age?"

"The Guild did a special issue on them that year," Harry said.

"We didn't buy you a subscription to their journals until you were ten," Lily said weakly.

Harry fingered her bangs uncomfortably, "I bought them in Diagon whenever I was there."

"Whenever you snuck out, you mean," Lily sighed, "We must have changed the password on the floo connection twice a month."

"Dad left the passwords in his sock drawer," Harry pointed out.

James choked, "The sock drawer was warded, too!"

"Not as well as the floo," Harry said, smiling at the flummoxed look on his face.

"Wait, what happened with the lady's potion?" Master Hurst protested.

Leo smirked, "Oh, it gets better. The lady gapes for a moment, then digs around in her robes until she comes up with this wrinkled roll of parchment. She unrolls it, then holds it toward Tate so he can take a look, to see if Harry is right about the recipe being wrong. Harry snatches the scroll before Tate even gets a glimpse. She looks over the recipe, which is all gilded and embossed like an invitation to some grand party, and clucks her little tongue disapprovingly. 'This is a recipe for a mild cough suppressant,' Harry says, 'Has your throat been dry since taking it?' The woman splutters and says, 'but it's pink!' Harry just looks up at her like she can't believe anyone so stupid could have learned to breathe air, and says, 'lots of things are pink. That doesn't automatically make it a love potion. There are *pomegranate* seeds in it.'"

Everyone had a good laugh at that, though Harry didn't see what was so funny. It was ridiculous to think a potion was a lust inducer just because it happened to be pink.

"The lady looks like she had no idea what to say to that, but Harry isn't finished yet," Leo smirked at her as he said, "Harry nods her head real seriously, saying, 'you really shouldn't trust a recipe unless its been reviewed by a potioneer first. *Especially* lust potions.' The lady's face goes all red, cause now she's embarrassed, being lectured about lust potions by a little girl. Harry doesn't even notice, just says, helpful as you please, 'the Potions Guild put a warning out in its last news letter about this kind of thing. A lot of people are selling fake recipes for lust potions, and they get away with it because people get placebo effects from drinking the potion, and think their increased lust is because of what they drank, when really they just expect to be lustful, so they are. It's lucky you've got a good mental handle on your bodily reactions, or you might never have noticed.'" Leo laughed a bit himself, then said, "The lady looked ready to crawl into a hole at that point, but Harry *still* wasn't finished."

"Poor woman," Mrs. Hurst murmured, smiling nonetheless.

"Harry says, 'if you want a real lust potion, try the bookstore. There's a perfectly good one in *Potions of the Mind*, but I expect it will be a bit harder to brew than this cough syrup was. Make sure you read the legal warning, too,' Harry adds, gazing seriously up at this poor woman, 'it's fine if you take it yourself, but you should know it's illegal to administer one to someone else, even if they're a willing partner. They have to take it themselves.' The woman just walked out of the shop," Leo said, grinning, "Not even taking the pink potion with her, and Harry shrugs, picks up her basket, and starts unloading it onto the counter-which she can barely reach-like nothing happened."

Everyone dissolved into laughter, except Harry, who was busy wondering how Leo recited all that with such alarming accuracy, and Leo himself, who took the moment everyone was shaking their heads and exclaiming over Harry's precociousness to give Harry a slow wink with one bright, hazel eye.

"I can't believe you were such a sharp-tongued youngling, Harry," Mrs. Hurst said eventually, "You're so soft-spoken, now."

"She was back then, too," Lily sighed, "Except when it came to potions."

James nodded, "She's always been unnaturally serious about the subject. At first we thought it was a laugh-she'd get a hold of Remus' prank recipes for our Marauder line and brew a few now and then. After a while, though, we realized she was in earnest about it. Still takes me aback, sometimes, how much energy she devotes to the subject."

Harry privately wondered if James omitted the part where he'd actively discouraged her from studying potions on purpose, because Master Hurst was there, or if he'd really forgotten how unsupportive he'd been when she was younger. She hadn't snuck out so often to Diagon because she liked the adventure-it wasn't until she was ten that her parents actually started sanctioning the trips, even setting up her school account a year early so she wouldn't use all her chore money on ingredients.

The rest of the dinner went smoothly, and her parents floored back to Godric's Hollow well-fed and amiable to repeating the experience, though Lily mentioned they'd do it at Potter Place next time.

Harry lingered, wanting a word with Leo, and the Hursts magnanimously gave them the room while they began clearing away the dessert plates.

"Were you really there that day?" Harry asked Leo, "I don't remember."

"I was," Leo looked at her with a soft fondness that brought warmth to his bright eyes, "I didn't realize it was you until much later, of course. Only after I found out you were both a girl *and* Krait's brewer did I begin to suspect. The age fit, and your coloring, of course. I asked Tate the other day, just to be sure. I thought it would make a convincing anecdote for dinner, and if your father believes I still think of you as a little kid, maybe he won't glare at me whenever he remembers I'm male."

Harry winced, though she wasn't sure if it was at James' assumptions or at Leo's insinuation that he had to pretend to think of her as a child because he *didn't* .

She realized just then how close he stood to her, so close she could see exactly how the skin at the corner of his mouth twitched as he suppressed a smile, and was abruptly too embarrassed to look up into his eyes again. She huffed a soft cough, and took a few steps backward toward the floo, "Thanks for inviting us, Leo. Dinner was wonderful."

"You're welcome here anytime," Leo said, not seeming bothered by her abrupt retreat, "Floo safely. I'll see you Monday for practice."

Harry nodded, gave an awkward wave, and floored home as fast as she could without choking on soot.

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On Monday morning, Harry wheedled Master Thompson until he told her which lab Lestrangle was using for his research. After ascertaining that she wasn't planning to sabotage his work (and receiving a rather offended look for even suggesting such a thing), he directed her to lab eight.

Harry hovered outside of the door for a long moment to mentally brace herself for the unpleasant chore she was about to undertake. *Do it for potioneers everywhere*, she told herself wryly, before knocking three times.

It took a good minute for the door to open, but when Harry glanced behind Lestrangle's impatient expression she caught sight of a brewing cauldron, so she couldn't be too annoyed.

"What?" Lestrangle snapped, "In case you haven't noticed, I'm a bit busy,"

"Brewing Aconite Alleviation?" Harry asked, sniffing curiously.

"Mind your own business," Lestrangle said, making to shut the door.

"Wait," Harry thrust the rolled-up parchments of information she carried at Lestrangle's torso, "Here."

Lestrangle actually took a step back to stop her hand coming into contact with his clothes before deigning to inspect the parchment. Only after ostentatiously checking it for halfblood cooties did he pinch it gingerly between his fingers and unroll it with a resigned expression on his face, "Is it from Master-" He stopped, and began skimming through the information at a ferocious speed.

"Sorry it took so long," Harry said, slightly sincere, "I had to ask Remus whether he felt comfortable revealing personal information to a stranger." Lestrangle stared at her, something unreadable burning

behind his eyes. Harry went on blithely, "I told him you were a professional, and would of course treat his information as respectfully as a Healer treats the data he gathers on his patients."

"This is very detailed," Lestrangle said, openly suspicious, "I didn't ask you for half of this."

Harry affected a sheepish expression that Rispah had claimed dangerously guileless, and said, "I'm afraid I interrupted you before you told me everything you wanted, so I just included everything Remus and I thought you might need. If there's anything else, just let me know."

Far from looking grateful, Lestrangle scowled at her, "What is this? I suppose Renaldo put you up to this, and after I base all of my experimental data on this information I'll find out it's fake."

Harry suppressed an eye roll with the force of long habit, "Look at the watermark on the paper-it's the same parchment the Guild requires for recording experimental results, so you can't write data that's been knowingly falsified on it."

"Why are you doing this?" Lestrangle burst out, frustrated. Harry peered at his face, which she usually avoided looking at too carefully due to its permanently unpleasant expression. His skin was waxy and his eyes bloodshot. His fingers trembled slightly where they clutched the parchment, and Harry didn't think it was from frustration or rage. He looked exhausted.

"We're on the same side," Harry said slowly, "If you make progress on the Wolfsbane potion, Remus and hundreds of other werewolves will be the ones to benefit. If no one researches it, they'll be the ones to suffer."

"I find your sentimentality disgustingly naïve," Lestrangle sneered, "Of course we're not on the same side. We're competitors."

"We're potioners," Harry corrected. She wondered how she could explain it in terms that Lestrangle would appreciate, or at least understand. "You've heard of Menesthes and Zosimo, right?"

"Of course," Lestrangle sneered, glancing back at his potion with exaggerated impatience, as if Harry couldn't tell he'd used a temporary stasis charm on it, and could therefore afford at least an hour talking to her before the potion became unstable, "What's your point?"

"Only petty people refuse to cooperate with one another because of personal grudges," Harry said flatly, "Didn't you think, when you first heard the story of Menesthes and Zosimos, how incredibly stupid they both were? Their useless rivalry set the invention of the Smallpox Suppressant back nearly forty years. When their apprentices collaborated and published their private notes, and people realized that each Master alone had enough information that together they could have perfected the recipe, it was a mark of shame on all potioners."

"It's a bit premature to compare yourself to Zosimos, don't you think?" Lestrangle drawled, glancing over her head with affected disinterest.

"Probably," Harry agreed, "But my point is that I'm not going to fight with you. Not about potions. You can be in an imaginary competition if you want, but I care more about advancing the field of potions than I ever will about beating you, so if you need anything else for your research, *just ask* ."

Lestrangle looked like he had no idea what to make of that. His mouth twisted several times before he clenched his fist around the roll of parchment he still held and bit out, "You're still a halfblood."

"And you're still a jerk," Harry said, "Good afternoon, Lestrangle."

She turned and walked away, only allowing herself a tiny smile of satisfaction at the huff she heard before the door slammed at her

back.

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The hours she spent at the Dancing Phoenix learning rough and tumble self-defense with Leo compounded heavily with the training she went through in the evening with Remus, but the intensity of her physical routine over the next couple of weeks was nothing compared with the rigor of her mental exertions. Every day she poured over various combinations of imbued magic and brewed ingredients. She and Master Thompson toyed with different ideas for imbued spells-imbued glamours, as an alternative to Polyjuice, was one that Thompson was particularly interested in seeing perfected, while Harry was more interested in imbued protective charms, herself.

Thompson was very helpful as a practical soundboard. He gave advice on which kinds of imbued magic would be favorably received commercially, as well as which would be fascinating academically, and he was invaluable in helping Harry work and rework the base recipe for the potion she wanted to imbue, but theoretically, he was lost.

He grumbled about not understanding what she was talking about half the time she tried to explain the imbuing process, and eventually started muttering that he'd have to find a Potions Master who was better at wandless magic to help work through the theory. Thinking of Masters who were adept at wandless magic only made her think of Professor Snape, and the pressing problem of her aura. What if he appeared at the student showcase during the Guild's Open House? Her complete lack of aura would be suspiciously familiar to him. How easily could he connect Rigel Black to Harry Potter, if he was given even a hint in that direction?

She needed to learn how to fake an aura, but she had no idea how to go about doing so. The book on auras she'd borrowed from the Weasley twins contained some information on aura manipulation, but it required having an aura to manipulate to start with. Nothing she'd found in the Potter and Black Libraries was very helpful, and she was beginning to despair of finding a solution when the answer quite literally landed in her lap.

"Ow," Harry said unconvincingly, looking down at the heavy tomb that had just been plopped atop her crossed legs.

"You haven't anything down there to be injured," Leo reminded her, dropping down beside her in the dirt of the Phoenix's courtyard.

"As far as you know, anyway," Harry said archly, examining the cover. There was no title or author, just an etching of a mirror, draped with a translucent cloth covering.

"You've been spending too much time about Alec and Marek," Leo complained, "You never used to banter so crudely."

"You're the one I spend the most time with around here," Harry pointed out, "If anyone's to blame for my expanding range of humor, it's your bad influence."

"I liked you better when you were withdrawn and uncertain," Leo complained.

"No you didn't," Harry said distractedly, now flipping through the table of contents, "'Glamour and Glimmer'... 'What's in a Name?' What is this book, Leo?"

Leo reached over and leafed through the pages until he found the dedication. It read:

To anyone for whom becoming another is the only way to be oneself.

"It's a book on disguises," Leo said, smiling into her cautious expression, "I picked it up from a guy who owed me a favor. It's a bit Dark, but there's loads of useful little spells in there. I know your birthday isn't for a few more weeks, but I thought you ought to have time to learn the spells you like before going back to school. There's one in there to make a girl's voice sound more masculine, for instance."

"Why..." Harry couldn't finish the question properly, but Leo understood.

"It's to help you keep your secrets," he said.

"You don't approve of my secrets," Harry said, frowning down at the book.

Leo plucked at her chin, raising her eyes to his bright hazel ones, "I want you to be safe. I think your secrets are dangerous, but if you can't give them up, then I want to help you keep them safely."

Harry bit her lip to keep from doing something ridiculous like trembling with the gratitude coursing through her, "Thank you, Leo. This is... *thank you* ."

He probably had no idea what his gift might mean for her, but Harry had caught a glimpse of the possibilities it stored as she glanced through the table of contents. One heading in particular made her itch to get home so she could read it: *Building the Aura: Suppression, Projection, and Re-Construction*.

It was hard not to grin a bit predatorily as she tucked the book into her potions bag, but Rispah's lessons in facial control hadn't been for nothing.

A/N: Next chapter will be the last of the summer chapters, I swear.
All the best. -V

Chapter 5

A/N: So: people dislike Leo's intensity toward Harry-I understand, and please note that it is *not* actually sexual at this point. It's teasing, and it reminds her of her gender for her 'own good' like George from ATL does frequently. Also, in the ATL books there's this 'people get married at 15' thing, so thirteen isn't too young to start thinking ahead. In the wizarding world, too, society is old fashioned. Babies at twenty seems to be the norm, despite the longer lifespans. Yes, I get that the vague references are uncomfortable for some readers. I'm sort of straddling the two canons on this one, while trying to accommodate for my post-modern audience, as well. Sorry for anyone made uncomfortable in the mean time-but trust me, I am not driving this train down *those* particular tracks.

Thank you for all the prolific reviews on the last chapter-I don't deserve them, but they do make me so happy. Sorry for the wait, but I hope you enjoy this one as well!

The Ambiguous Artifice:

Chapter Five:

Her hair was plastered to her forehead with a gel of perspiration. Dust from clouds of kicked-up dirt stung her eyelids. There were areas of her arms and legs that she couldn't even feel anymore, so many times had she blocked punches and kicks with them. Her heart was racing, her muscles shaking, and Harry had never felt so *alive* .

Sparring was exhilarating. It was like running-like flying, even-thrilling her spirit and satisfying a physical instinct to just *move* that she sometimes forgot she had after days cooped up in her lab, but better than running and flying-it was challenging. It wasn't instinctual, and it wasn't automatic. Her mind had to be there, in the fight, every second, striving, pushing, grasping every moment in a vice of concentration and anticipation.

Leo never hesitated, never pulled his strikes when her guard slipped. Her body remembered as well as her mind did what happened when she made mistakes, and it learned how to avoid pain even as her mind figured out how to reconcile strategy with instinct, instead of grappling against it.

She went sprawling across the courtyard when Leo twisted a foot under her guard and into her ribs, and Harry tasted metal where her tongue got caught between her teeth on impact. It was the second time that morning she'd bitten it, and she was seriously considering putting a roll of cotton between her teeth before the next bout.

"That'll do for today, Harry," Leo said, wiping his brow with the bottom of his tunic, "Tomorrow we'll go over low blocks again-you still tend to block higher than necessary when you react without reminding yourself. Good work."

Harry put her fist over her heart in a tired salute to her teacher, then bent over to stretch out her back muscles by reaching toward the dirt and arching. Her flexibility wasn't anything impressive, but she was slowly working her way toward 'limber.'

She turned her mind over the spar, mentally freezing certain moments and acknowledging that Leo was right about the way she blocked. She held her hands high on her chest more often than not, even when the blow was toward her center. Leo was right to correct her, not least because most boys tended toward just the opposite habit-blocking lower than necessary on a purely instinctual basis. Still, Harry felt her mistake was understandable if one considered how sensitive the upper part of her chest was these days. Understandable, but undeniably correctable. Correct it she would.

Her body was growing up that summer, Harry thought ruefully. It wasn't visible, thanks to the modified Polyjuice, which only showed the androgynous body she'd assumed, but Harry felt phantom pain where the changes of her real, presumably more feminine, body would be happening if the potion wasn't suppressing them. She'd read studies that detailed what happened when people with terminal

illnesses polyjuiced into a healthy person in an attempt to escape the reality of their condition. They looked healthy, but their true form was still rotting away somehow, and they experienced the pain of that deterioration, even though the body they wore looked and seemed medically fine. A person's true form was something magic couldn't easily get around-it only hid it away or altered it temporarily, most of the time.

Not all of her aches were from growth spurts, though. Most of them came from plain hard work. She could run nearly five miles in one stretch now, if she pushed it, and she suspected that her increased physical endurance was having a positive effect on the temperament of her magic, which had seemed almost docile in the last few weeks. Perhaps willful magic was a bit like lycanthropy, and being strong in body helped with control? She'd have to look into it.

When she and Leo had finished their cool-down stretches, they adjourned to the Phoenix for lunch. She found that she got along even better with Leo now that they'd started sparring. They were still friends, but there was a teacher-student element to their relationship now that added a layer of respect and *deliberateness* that had perhaps been missing before. She learned a lot from him about protecting herself, though he didn't think her ready to mix magical and physical sparring just yet. Remus had been drilling her in dueling, though, so she couldn't say her development in that subject was being neglected.

It was just she and Leo sitting at their table until Krait slid into the seat across from Harry and thrust a scroll at her.

"Glad I caught you," the man said, "I've got another express order, if you've the time."

"Always time for potion-brewing," Harry said, shoving her half-eaten soup to the side despite Leo's disapproving gaze and opening the more interesting roll of parchment, "The suppressant potion again? I brewed a ton last time."

"He wants more," Krait shrugged, "An army's worth, it seems like, but I told him it'll keep and keep if the bottles are sealed right, so no reason not to order it all at once."

"And if he decides later he doesn't need so much-well, it's not your fault he already bought it, right?" Leo drawled.

"It's a living," Krait grinned like a shark, "So? How soon can you do it?"

"This much?" Harry did a quick calculation of how much free time she'd have if she cut back some of her research hours temporarily. "Three days," she said eventually, deciding to just get it out of the way so she could concentrate fully on her research once more, "But I'll need a lot of bottles, so I'll make several trips over the next three days until you have the full order."

"I'll tell the customer to expect it then," Krait said. He then pointed to a hastily scribbled addendum at the bottom of the order, "He also wants to know if you can modify a potion for him. I told him I'd ask, but you might need time to work out a substitute for the ingredient he wants taken out."

"For an allergy?" Harry guessed, reading over the request quickly. It was for a fairly standard nutrient potion-not one she'd made before, but common enough that she had a vague idea what it contained. She wondered why Mr. Malfoy was having Krait do the nutrient potion-which wasn't nearly as suspicious as a magic suppressant potion, and could easily be procured at a shop that wasn't in Knockturn. She mentally shrugged a moment later, thinking that maybe it was just convenient to get it from Krait, since he was making such a large order already. Seriously, what was with all these magic suppressant potions?

"What's the ingredient he wants taken out?" Harry asked distractedly, "It doesn't say."

Krait frowned, and summoned a quill from Solom's ledger book to jot a note down in the margin, "Sorry about that. It's acai."

" *Acai* ?" Harry couldn't help but jerk slightly and stare at the neatly noted word, "Are you sure?"

"Yes," Krait said, "Will it be a problem?"

Harry shook her head slowly, "No... no, I'll just use Ginseng." The market for which had mysteriously recovered in recent months, "The two are interchangeable in most cases. I just... it's the same customer as last time, right?"

"Yes..." Krait narrowed his eyes, "What's wrong? If you suspect something shady, I'll tell him to piss off, kid."

Harry shook her head again, "No. Sorry, don't pay me any mind. I'll have the nutrient potion ready with the rest of it. It won't take but thirty minutes itself."

Outwardly she bade Krait a polite good day, and began eating her soup again slowly, but inwardly her mind was churning.

Draco was allergic to acai. The nutrient potion was for Draco, then, to be sure, and maybe it was a coincidence that Malfoy was buying the magic suppressant at the same time he bought a nutrient potion for Draco... but maybe it wasn't.

She hadn't considered, before, that the suppressant might be for Draco. It was a potion for kids-little kids, usually no older than nine-who had extreme bouts of accidental magic. Harry had taken a similar one herself once, when she was seven, and she couldn't remember much but her parents never gave it to her again, so she assumed it hadn't worked very well. It wasn't a strong suppressant-just enough that if the one taking it wasn't actively trying to use magic, the potion would keep the person's magic from being expressed accidentally.

Harry wasn't sure what would happen if a wizard capable of voluntary magic, like Draco, took the suppressant. It probably wouldn't stop him from doing magic if he really wanted to, so it was very unlikely that Malfoy Sr. meant to give the potion to his son, even in such large quantities-an increased dose of this potion did nothing to increase effectiveness, after all.

Still, Harry's brain niggled at her, and a few minutes later she recalled the Potentialis Potion she'd given Draco for his birthday-his thirteenth birthday, when young wizards were known to sometimes come into unexpected magical gifts.

Could it be that Draco had come into a gift? One he couldn't control? The odds were *astronomically* low. The potion almost never revealed anything other than a wizard's basic strengths and weaknesses. If a child inherited a magical gift, chances were that it would manifest naturally by the time he was thirteen-like Harry's Parseltongue had. It could be that the potion had revealed a power Draco hadn't known he possessed, but if its passive effects were enough to need a suppressant to control, then the potion hadn't just pointed out an existing gift, but rather activated a dormant one. Draco would have to have some phenomenally strong recessive magic for that to occur. It simply wasn't likely.

Harry shook her head. She would ask Draco when she saw him on the train back to Hogwarts, but for now she wouldn't worry. After all, Draco didn't have her luck with Fate. The chances of him exhibiting a long-buried trait just because of a potion she gave him were virtually nonexistent. She pushed the traitorous little thought that Draco might be a target of Fate because he was her friend right out of her mind. *No need to get a big head, Harry scolded herself, Not everything is about you.*

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Harry stopped by Mr. Tate's apothecary on her way home from the Phoenix, needing to grab a few ingredients she was running low on, and peered around the familiar shop as she slipped quietly in the door. Mr. Tate was at the counter, his curly hair escaping the confines of its tie as he rang up... Caelum Lestrangle. She held in a sigh. It wasn't enough that she passed him in the Guild hallways several times a week? Why did she have to see him at the apothecary, too?

She tried to step into the isles of ingredients before she was spotted, but Mr. Tate glanced up and paused in his measuring and calculating to call jovially across the shop, "There's my favorite customer! How's brewing lately, Miss Potter?"

Lestrangle turned at the counter to glare at her, and Harry ignored him as best she could, "Hello, Mr. Tate. Everything's been great, thanks to the excellent quality of your ingredients, no doubt."

Tate chuckled and waved a large hand with false modesty, "Well, look around, look around. There's some wonderfully fresh salamander skin just in."

Interested, Harry peeked at the salamander skin for a few minutes before grabbing a basket and picking out the ingredients she knew she was running low on, including a bundle of ginseng. She eventually found everything she needed, and was surprised to see Lestrangle still at the counter when she left the isles.

"Just come down a few sickles," Lestrangle was saying urgently, though quietly, "I can pay thirty."

"And it costs thirty-five," Tate said, apologetic but firm, "Either pay the whole, or pick what you can do without."

"I need it all," Lestrangle snapped, "I'm a researcher, I can't afford to cut corners on costs-give it to me on credit. I'm good for it."

Harry wondered why he didn't use the Guild's research allowance to pay for ingredients, but then realized he'd probably spent it all- Aconite's Alleviation was not cheap to brew, and the allowance only stretched so far. Harry herself had spent her internship's allowance in the first few weeks of experimenting with Master Thompson.

"I'm sorry, Sir, but I can't extend credit to everyone who comes in here and can't pay," Tate shook his head.

Harry waged a fierce internal debate, one side pleading to let Lestrangle go stuff himself and the other reluctantly suggesting a nobler course of action. Her newfound determination to treat Lestrangle solely in terms of his brewing ability stepped in, and she couldn't keep quiet, "I know him, Mr. Tate. He's good for the credit."

Lestrangle whirled, "I don't need your charity, halfblood! Mind your own."

"Now, that's no way to speak to a nice young lady like Miss Potter," Tate reproved.

"It's all right, Mr. Tate," Harry said quietly, even as her brain railed at her with mental *I told you so* 's for helping the ungrateful git, "Mr. Lestrangle likes to poke fun at my parentage when he feels embarrassed-it's sort of an inside joke between the two of us."

"Stop interfering," Lestrangle hissed.

"No need to be so proud, *Caelum*," Harry said, smirking slightly, "Mr. Tate, you really should extend him the credit. He's doing research for the Potions Guild. I'm sure one day when he's a famous brewer he won't forget which apothecary showed him a kindness."

Mr. Tate coughed uncomfortably, but did ring the purchases up at thirty sickles. Lestrangle took them with ill grace, but his sneer was missing some of its usual heat as he left the shop.

"Tough nut, that one," Tate said, huffing, as Harry piled her items onto the counter.

She shrugged, "He's a bit unpleasant, but not a half-bad brewer."

"And that's all that matters to you, I suppose," Tate chuckled. He added everything up in short order, "That'll be sixteen sickles, and three knuts. Shall I put it on your school account as usual, Miss Potter?"

"Yes, thank you," she said. She dug in her purse for five sickles and pushed them across the counter as well, "In case he doesn't pay you back the credit."

"Oh, no," Tate said quickly, "I couldn't, Miss Potter."

"If he pays you back, you can credit them toward my next purchase," Harry said, "And if he doesn't, then it's my fault for recommending him. Good day, Mr. Tate."

"You as well, Miss Potter. Don't let Krait overwork you, now."

"I never do, Mr. Tate."

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The next day when Harry stepped into the Guild she was startled by the amount of people milling about the lobby. Upon closer inspection, all the strangers seemed to be reporters, armed with dicto-quills and pushy cameramen. Harry wondered what had happened to draw so much attention so early in the morning. Judging by the different languages some of the reporters were rapidly swapping confidences in, the news was big enough to garner international attention.

Harry slipped around the multitudes and trotted down to Thompson's lab. When she walked in, Thompson looked up from reading what looked like one of the Guild's journals, except she could see Professor Snape's striking features on the cover, and he hadn't been on the cover of a journal in several years. Was Thompson reading back issues for research? Unless...

"Is that it?" Harry asked, suddenly excited, "Master Snape's breakthrough on the Wolfsbane?"

"Just published this morning," Thompson said, grinning a bit, "Special edition and everything."

Harry eyed the periodical longingly. Special edition bulletins were only printed for the biggest of potion breakthroughs. She wondered if Thompson would mind if she read over his shoulder, then wondered if she could take the morning off of research to hunt down a copy for herself.

Seeing Harry's torn expression, Thompson laughed and held the journal toward her, "Go on, then. I've read it twice already. Brilliant stuff."

"It's Snape, of course it's brilliant," Harry said distractedly, holding the thin magazine like it was made of fairy wings. She groped blindly for a chair to sit, her eyes already scanning the front page.

Taming the Wolf, the headline of the edition read. Harry snorted at the melodramatic title, and skimmed down to where Snape's actual article title was quoted. "Argument for a New Modification of the Wolfsbane Potion," it was called. That sounded more like Snape-clear and informative.

She settled in to read, and noted with no small amount of pleasure that some of the information in the article she already knew from working on Aconite Alleviation with Snape those months ago. The article essentially outlined the methods and results of Snape's prolonged experimentation with both Aconite Alleviation and

Wolfsbane itself. It detailed the exact effect each proposed change in the recipe would produce, and concluded with an analysis of the modification's usefulness and viability.

Some of the modifications called for more expensive ingredients, but that was balanced by the decreased amount of imbued magic necessary to bond the potion in the final stages, so cost-wise the improved version was approximate to the original. Snape had managed to reduce the brewing time by a full fifteen minutes, and provided several alternate instructions for ingredient preparation- Harry was especially interested to find out why heating the fire slugs before mashing them resulted in significantly higher potency in the final product.

More important than the aesthetic improvements, though, were the effects the modified potion would have once ingested. According to Snape, his version of the potion, if taken before the sun set on the first night of the full moon, would remain potent for *all three* nights of potential transformation. Such a thing was unimaginable before, but Snape had essentially decreased the probability of a werewolf forgetting his potion during the full moon by 2/3rds. Instead of remembering to take it three nights in a row, and paying for three doses of the potion, the werewolf would only need it once a month.

That wasn't even the best of it.

In addition to only needing to be taken once a month, the modified recipe lessened the pain of transformations by an average of sixty percent, and in the few trials performed thus far resulted in significantly decreased reports of tiredness, nausea, and irritability in the days following the transformation as well. Snape had used the full moon to his advantage, incorporating ingredients that were influenced by its cycle, meaning that they activated when the full moon rose and deactivated when it set. It made the side-effects of taking Wolfsbane stronger during the night and weaker during the day.

There were drawbacks, of course, which Snape detailed carefully toward the end of his report. The modified potion acted as a sedative on the transformed wolf. While the human was unaffected during the day, the wolf became extremely docile and sleepy once transformed. While this would seem like an advantage to many-docile werewolves meant fewer attacks, surely-Snape cautioned potential drinkers to secure their resting place carefully before transforming, as the werewolf's ability to defend itself if threatened would be drastically reduced.

Even with the minor drawbacks, the new modifications were more than Harry had expected-more than anyone could have anticipated. Snape had single-handedly changed the way werewolves would manage their illness. A once-a-month potion was the same way most women handled the effects of their menstrual cycles, and from the sound of things the werewolf transformation under this potion wouldn't be much more painful or tiring than severe lower-abdominal cramps could sometimes be. It would still be a struggle for some to afford it, but with the monthly cost a third of what it had been, the new recipe would go a long way toward helping those who had never had reliable access to it before.

On the last page, the New Wolfsbane recipe was detailed in all its complex glory. Harry had to sternly remind herself, as she read it, that she had promised Professor Snape she wouldn't attempt to brew Wolfsbane without a licensed Master to assist her. Her fingers itched to gather the listed ingredients and find out right now how difficult this new recipe was, but she forced herself to calm her excitement and re-read the entire recipe twice so that she would remember most of the major modifications. She couldn't wait to get back to Hogwarts and discuss it with her mentor.

She was about to put the article down when a footnote on the very last page caught her eye. She read it with growing disbelief, and then read it again, just in case she'd been hallucinating.

" Credit for the timely release of this modification must be given in part to my occasional assistant, Arcturus Rigel Black ."

Severus Snape had mentioned her in his breakthrough article on New Wolfsbane. Master Snape, the greatest potions master in England and possibly the world, had given her partial credit for his success. It might say Archie's name, and it might only be a footnote, but it was there in black-and-white, and *she* would always know what it meant. Even if nothing else came of her years of study at Hogwarts, even if everything fell to ruin and her reputation as a potioneer was forever tarnished by a discovered deception, no matter what, she'd still have *this* feeling of complete perfection.

"You look awfully pleased," Thompson said, "Are you secretly a werewolf or something?"

Harry shook her head but couldn't suppress the smile on her face, "This is an astonishing accomplishment, that's all. Every academic in the world should be pleased today."

She went to hand the periodical back to Thompson, but he waved a hand, "Keep it. They'll be sold out most places by now, and you collect them, don't you?"

Harry blinked, "How did you know?"

Thompson favored her with a bland look, "All aspiring Masters collect the Guild's journals. I had quite a collection myself, until I gained complete access to the Guild's archives and had no need to hoard second-hand copies of ancient articles any longer."

Harry smiled a bit embarrassedly, but didn't hesitate to tuck the special edition safely away in her bag. It had *her name* in it... sort of. She'd probably frame it, after she made Archie read it, of course. If he was getting credit for being part of the process, she'd have to make sure he understood all the pertinent parts of the modification, in case anyone else noticed the footnote and asked him about it.

Although she had drilled Archie on the Wolfsbane potion for over an hour that afternoon, neither of them was expecting the subject to come up as quickly as it did. Lily brought a copy of the article home from work with her, however, and pointed out the footnote with obvious curiosity and puzzlement over dinner.

"I had no idea you were assisting Se-Potions Master Snape," Lily said, "You must be very talented, Archie, for him to single you out among all his students."

"I learned it all from Harry," Archie said, chuckling a bit self-deprecatingly, "But I guess I am pretty good at potions, compared to a lot of people our age."

"But *Snape* ?" Sirius couldn't seem to wrap his head around it, "How long have you been assisting him?"

"It's an on-and-off thing," Archie shrugged, "I didn't mention it because it didn't seem like a big deal."

"He mentions you by name in a high-profile publication," Lily protested, "That sort of press is hard for a journeyman to get. For a Hogwarts student to receive the honor... it sort of *is* a big deal, Archie."

"Why would Snape make *you* his assistant?" James blurted out.

Remus shot his friend a slightly admonishing glance and said, "What James means is that Professor Snape must have passed over a lot of older students in favor of your assistance. Do you know what persuaded him?"

Archie looked uncomfortable, so Harry decided she ought to jump in.

"He did it for me," she said, casting a grateful look at Archie across the table, "I love AIM, but first year I was a bit disappointed not to be

going to Hogwarts, if you remember. I felt like I would be missing out on invaluable potion instruction by not studying under Master Snape. In exchange for me sending him information about the Healing tract at AIM, Archie approached Snape for extra potions lessons."

"Yeah," Archie chimed in before the adults could comment on the odd exchange of knowledge, "At first he would just give me extra work, but it turns out he needs an assistant sometimes, and he was tired of retraining the NEWT students every time one graduated, I think. He decided just to use me, since I wasn't busy with exam prep, and I wasn't going anywhere for a while."

"Well," Lily said, looking nonplussed, "It's still very impressive that you assisted him with such difficult experimentation."

"It was completely safe," Archie hastened to assure them, "I helped mostly with fetching ingredients and other auxiliary stuff. I'm certainly not allowed to brew Wolfsbane on my own. Honestly, I didn't do much. The footnote was just a courtesy, I think. It was nice of him to remember my involvement, though."

"Nice? Snape?" Sirius sighed, "The world's gone all wonky these last few years."

"Old people always say that when they don't like the way society develops," Archie said archly, "Soon you'll be bitter and judgmental, too, and in a hundred years your great-grandson will roll his eyes at your portrait for being so stuffy and old-fashioned."

"Why you-" Sirius promptly dumped the kale salad over Archie's head, "I'll show you stuffy!"

"Not the vegetables..." Lily sighed, "Why did you have to ruin the only healthy thing on the table?"

"Addy's still eating healthy," James pointed out helpfully.

They all looked at Addy, who gurgled at them around her bottle when she noticed.

Lily sighed, "Hurry and grow up, Adriana. I need more people on my side."

"You assume Addy will be on *your* side," Archie said, grinning, "But every time she comes over to my house I let her listen to the Weird Sisters. She's going to be on my side, if anyone's."

"But I'm the one who feeds her chocolate," Remus said innocently, "I really think she'll be partial to me by the time she gets old enough to figure out how awful vegetables are."

"Rock music and sweets?" Sirius scoffed, "That's not the way to a lady's heart. I take Addy shoe shopping."

He puffed out his chest proudly, and Lily narrowed her eyes at him. "Were you the one who charmed her shoes to hiss like tiny snakes when she bounces them?"

Sirius's face was too innocent not to be guilty, "Me? I thought you did that, Lily."

Lily raised an eyebrow, "Why would I?"

"So she doesn't get eaten by my courtyard snakes when she comes over to play, of course," Sirius said cheerfully, "They think she's one of them now. They love peering their little faces into her basket while she's sunning."

"Sunning?" This was apparently too much for Lily, "Merlin help you if my baby gets freckles, Sirius. I'll have your snakes for skins, and then we'll see who has a new pair of shoes."

James and Remus couldn't hold their laughter in any longer, and their loud guffaws set off the rest of them. Even Lily rolled her eyes eventually and picked Addy up to cradle her in her arms, "Please be

sane when you learn to talk, little one. I can't take much more of this nonsense."

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Harry cursed as the handwriting charm slipped and smudged the label she was spelling until it was unreadable. She didn't want to spare the time to redo it, but she also didn't want one of the Malfoys to recognize Rigel's writing. She wiped the label clean and reapplied the charm with more concentration, then hurriedly stowed it in the crate with the others. It was the last batch of suppressants she'd been working on for Malfoy, and she was almost past her deadline. She'd said she would have the rest by three that afternoon, and it was twenty minutes till by the time she cleared away her lab station and headed for the floo.

She couldn't move quickly with the crate of potions in her hand, and the alleys were busy with afternoon shoppers, so it was another fifteen minutes before she reached the Serpent's Storeroom.

She nudged the door open with her foot, saying, "Sorry, Mr. Krait. I lost track of time at the Guild this morning."

"Not at all, you're right on time, kid," Krait said, taking the crates from her and setting them in a pile with the other crates, which were waiting by the register. It was then Harry caught sight of Mr. Malfoy sitting behind the counter, looking unreasonably poised in Krait's dingy shop. "Here's the last of them, sir." Krait said proudly, "Quality guaranteed."

"By who?" Mr. Malfoy drawled, "Your little errand boy?"

Harry bristled, but didn't say anything other than, "See you around, Krait."

"One moment, boy," Malfoy said imperiously, "I require a word about the brewer who employs you."

"Krait employs me," Harry said shortly, not interested in letting Malfoy get to know Harry the way he knew Rigel.

Malfoy frowned down at her closed expression, "The brewer who gave you those potions, then."

"What do you want to know?"

"Do you watch him brew the potions?" Malfoy asked.

"Sure," Harry said, shrugging dismissively.

"Is he sober? In control? How many cauldrons does he attempt to brew at once?" Malfoy fired questions at her without giving Harry a chance to answer, "Are the ingredients fresh? Stored properly? Does he-"

"Here now, my brewer is perfectly competent," Krait protested.

"You'll excuse me if I don't simply take your word for that, Mr. Krait," Malfoy sneered.

Harry recognized the sharp edge in Malfoy's eyes, and if she hadn't been convinced at least some of the potions were for Draco before, she was now certain. "Mr. Malfoy," she said carefully, "These potions are perfectly safe. I can assure you that they were brewed responsibly and with proper attention to Guild-recommended safety regulations."

Malfoy shot Krait a rather dark look, "Complete anonymity indeed."

Realizing she'd said Malfoy's name out loud, Harry quickly said, "Don't blame Krait-you're not exactly low-profile, Mr. Malfoy. A picture of you at your garden party was in the society pages just a few weeks ago."

"You read the society pages?" Malfoy sneered skeptically.

"Doesn't everyone?" Harry said, a bit sarcastically.

Malfoy was looking faintly amused now, though he still raised an eyebrow imperiously when he asked, "If you read the article you'll know who did our catering for the party, won't you?"

Harry raised an eyebrow right back. She hadn't read any such article, of course, but there was only one wizarding entertainment company that hired nonhuman waiters and waitresses, and they were quite well-known for it.

"Mystique Event Management," Harry said airily in the face of Krait's nonplussed look, "Usually known for their cutting-edge taste, but I hear the nymphs at your party were rather tackily overdone."

"You insolent little-" Malfoy visibly gathered himself, then said, "Dobby."

Harry was confused for half an instant, and then Dobby the elf popped into the shop.

"Master's crates is being ready?" Dobby asked, half looking up at Mr. Malfoy, half cringing away.

"This stack," Malfoy gestured at the crates, "You know where to take them."

Dobby bowed hastily, and with a snap of his fingers, he and the crates both vanished.

"Good day, Mr. Krait," Malfoy said, inclining his head an infinitesimal amount toward the shopkeeper, "And as for you..." he turned to Harry with a threatening gleam in his eyes, "Since you so earnestly insured these potions' quality, you won't mind if I take any imperfections out of your impertinent hide."

It was not a question. Harry had always known this dangerous, pitiless predator lay beneath Lord Malfoy's socialite exterior, and the only surprise she felt at his threat was that he should bother intimidating a street kid like her, who should rightfully mean nothing to the rich lord.

"Good luck finding any," she said, false sweetness in every note.

He turned on his heel and left the shop without acknowledging her further.

"You've got to stop being rude to my customers," Krait sighed.

"Only that one," Harry said, "And he came back for more, didn't he?"

"It's just not like you," Krait pointed out.

"How well do you really know me, Mr. Krait?" Harry asked, somewhat rhetorically.

"Well enough to know that no matter how rude you are to Mr. Malfoy, he's not going to forget you any faster," Krait said knowingly.

Harry cleared her throat uncomfortably, "Any other orders come in?"

"None that my other brewers can't handle," Krait said, scratching his head as though wondering when Harry had become not one of his brewers, but his *best* brewer.

"See you around, then," Harry said, waving a bit before slipping out of the shop.

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She spent most of that evening researching and practicing the shield spell she would use in her final project, but the last hour before bed

was reserved for perusing the Dark Disguise book, as she'd taken to calling it. Since she'd received the book from Leo, she'd mastered the voice-changing spell, along with a spell to thicken her hair-it worked on everything, from the hair on her head to her eyebrows, leg, and arm hair, but unfortunately it only worked on hair that already grew, so it wouldn't help her grow facial hair.

In between learning useful little spells like that, she'd been studying auras. Interestingly, the majority of the chapter on auras was about how to suppress your aura so others couldn't recognize it. Suppressing was supposed to be the difficult part, and projection was only explained briefly as a reversal of suppression. In theory Harry could learn how to project her aura, but it involved undoing the suppression, which seemed like a waste when suppressing was supposed to be so difficult to achieve. Luckily, there was another option. The rest of the chapter covered constructing auras. After suppressing one's own aura, one could apparently learn to project a false aura that, while rudimentary, would fool most aura-sensors.

The Dark Disguise book helpfully broke down the process mentally, and while much of the explanation seemed overly metaphorical, Harry could see how it might work. It wasn't something she'd thought to try, but it made a certain amount of sense. It would require meditation, and she wouldn't know if it worked unless she found someone who could read auras to test it against, but it was definitely doable.

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"Miss," Remus said, flicking his wand to send another disk into the air.

Harry took aim and shot a stunner at it. The disk sailed gracefully through the air like a swan, and the stunner impacted against the wall behind it with a sad little fizzle.

"Miss," Remus commented cheerfully, sending another disk flying.

"I can tell when I miss," Harry huffed, taking aim again and watching the disk serenely reflect the light of the stunner as it passed.

"But you can't talk and shoot at the same time, apparently," Remus said, flicking up another disk.

"I can't shoot regardless," Harry said, missing once again.

"You're over-thinking it," Remus said.

"I really don't think I am," Harry said wryly. Take aim, shoot. Not that complicated a concept, really. The disks were just so small, and the jet of light coming out of her wand was even smaller. It wasn't exactly like aiming bludgers at people-sized targets. More like aiming a needle at a poker chip.

"I suppose you could take a step forward," Remus said, faux generousness oozing from his amused expression.

Harry was too much a Slytherin to turn her nose up at the handicap, so she took a step forward and tried a few more times. All misses.

"I think that one was closer," Remus said supportively.

"I think you're making fun of me," Harry said, raising an eyebrow as Remus simply flicked another disk into the air.

Harry tracked its arc the way she might predict a bludger's movements. She'd watched enough disks fly across the room by now that she had a pretty good idea of their speed and weight, even though she'd never picked one up. When she was fairly sure where it would start descending, she shot three stunners in a row. The first two missed, but the third one was timed just right. The disk turned green and dropped to the floor.

Harry smirked, and Remus sighed.

"That's cheating."

"If it was an enemy, he'd be down for the count," Harry said, "How is it cheating if I win?"

"What do they teach you in America?" Remus muttered. He looked down at the disks, and shrugged, "All right, try this on for size, my little opportunist."

He flicked three disks into the air, and although Harry fired as fast as she could, she only knocked one out of the air.

"So it seems a 33% success rate is only a problem when there are multiple enemies," Remus said thoughtfully. He shrugged artfully, "Ah, well, that probably won't happen."

Harry sighed, "Point taken. Let it fly, Remus."

Remus launched another one, and practice went on.

After aiming practice was dodging practice, and then they cooled down with a couple bottles of water.

"Thanks for the practice, Remus," Harry said.

"You don't have to thank me every time," Remus said, smiling, "You're a good student."

"You're a good teacher," Harry said honestly.

Remus looked hesitant for a moment, then said, "You really think so?"

"Of course," Harry said, surprised that he was uncertain, "You know exactly how to make the lesson stick, without frustrating me or getting frustrated yourself."

Remus's smile widened, "And you know exactly what to say to people. You get that from your mom, I guess."

Harry smiled. It seemed like anytime someone recognized something good in her, they inevitably suggested she'd gotten it from one of her parents. Even at school, she heard teachers wondering whether it was Sirius or Diana who contributed to Rigel's talent for transfiguration or polite disposition. As if children didn't have any light of their own, only reflecting their parents' rays.

"I've been offered a job," Remus said suddenly.

Harry looked over at him with interest, "A paying job? Is it an independent company?"

The ministry had laws against employing dark creatures, but there were some corporations that got special dispensations, provided they didn't employ them the week of the full moon.

"Something like that," Remus said. He looked hesitatingly at Harry from the corner of his eye, "It's... Hogwarts, actually."

Harry couldn't stop the jerk she made in surprise, and to her dismay Remus misinterpreted it immediately, "I know how badly you wanted to go when you were younger. I don't want you to feel like I'm rubbing it in, or-"

"Remus," Harry said quickly, "Don't. I'm not-I'm *happy* for you, Remus. I'm *amazed*, actually. How did this happen?"

Remus ran a hand through his hair and shrugged, "The New Wolfsbane. If it does all Snape says it does, Dumbledore feels there's no reason not to hire me."

"Is the ministry reconsidering the anti-werewolf laws because of Snape's potion?" Harry asked excitedly.

"Not yet," Remus said, "But Dumbledore controls personnel at Hogwarts, so they can't stop him unless, well, unless I give them a reason to."

Harry's eyes widened, "Remus, this is huge. I mean, this is landmark. The first high-profile werewolf hiring in a decade, a live test of Snape's new recipe... if nothing goes wrong, it will show everyone how ridiculous the prejudices against werewolves are!"

"If nothing goes wrong," Remus said bitterly, "And if something does... it could ruin the pro-werewolf campaigns for years to come."

"You have to try," Harry said, gazing worriedly at her pseudo-uncle.

"I do, don't I?" Remus sighed.

Harry leaned her head on Remus's shoulder, ignoring the sweat, "You'll make a brilliant teacher, Remus. Nothing will go wrong." She would be there to make sure of it, somehow.

Remus huffed out a laugh, "I hope Archie feels the same. I haven't told him I'll be coming to Hogwarts yet."

"I'm sure he'll be as excited for you as I am," Harry said.

"Excited?" Remus sounded skeptical, "I can't think of many teenagers who'd be excited their uncle was going to be tagging along to their boarding school."

"Archie isn't like that," Harry said automatically, the rest of her mind busy catching up to what a huge *problem* it was going to be for the ruse if Remus came to Hogwarts.

"You're right," Remus said, bucking up again, "You're always right, Harry. I'll tell everyone tonight at dinner."

He did.

Archie spouted effusively about how great it would be to have a real Marauder back at Hogwarts to witness his 'work,' all the while shooting discreetly panicking looks in Harry's direction. Harry eyed him steadily over her peas and silently conveyed calm acceptance.

This was unforeseen, she told him with her eyes, *but not unmanageable* .

Archie settled down, and managed to keep the conversation lively until they were both excused from the table.

They met up in Harry's room, and Archie rolled his eyes as he moved several stacks of books off one side of the bed so they could both sit.

"Where do you sleep?" Archie asked playfully.

"On the other side," Harry said, "Obviously."

"How do you pull back the covers?"

Harry opened her mouth, then shut it again, thinking. When was the last time she'd slept under the covers? She was so excited at the prospect at the beginning of the summer, but sometime over the last few weeks, she'd just... stopped.

"I don't," she said eventually, "Got used to sleeping on the spread, I guess."

"That's sad," Archie commented.

"What's sad is your acting abilities, cousin," Harry said, "I think Sirius noticed you had mixed feelings down there."

Archie shrugged uncomfortably, "I'll play up the forlorn prankster angle-I want to spend more time with my uncle, but I don't want my friends to think I'd rat them out to a teacher, and I don't want anyone to think I get special treatment, etc. Dad will comfort me, and I'll agree with him, summon up a cheerful smile, and then he'll feel better, and *useful* as a parent, and forget I ever acted strangely."

"All right," Harry said, pretending it didn't make her sad that someone as innocent and earnest as Archie was becoming so manipulative, "I

can work that angle at school, too. Avoid Remus for the most part, pretend to be uncomfortable-but apologetic about it, of course."

"What about in classes?" Archie asked, "If this new potion does all it says, Remus will be teaching the week of the full moon. His senses won't miss that you don't sound or smell like me."

"Sound I can fix," Harry said, taking out her wand and pointing it at her own throat, " *Mutare Vocem* ."

"What's that do?"

"What's that do?" Harry mimicked. The sound was virtually identical.

"That's pretty good," Archie laughed, "Say something else."

"I don't take orders from slimy Slytherins," Harry drawled.

"Oh, very nice," Archie said, "It's not perfect, though. Remus would be able to tell the difference."

"If he heard them next to one another," Harry agreed, "But I'll try to go as long as possible without speaking to him once school starts. That way, his memory of what you sound like will be a little dull."

Archie nodded, "I'll minimize the words I say to him in the weeks before school starts. He'll second-guess himself before he guesses the truth. And he'll be on that new potion-he might attribute the change in his senses to a side effect."

Harry nodded, "That will help with smell, too, but I'm still going to need several vials of your sweat."

Archie stared at her for a beat, "You're kidding."

"I'm not," Harry said, blinking. Wasn't the solution obvious? "I'll distill your scent and make a musk out of it. I'll just spray it on my clothes before I go to Defense class."

"You're going to make a perfume... out of my body odor?" Archie looked torn between laughing and gagging.

"Have any better ideas?" Harry asked.

"Well... no," Archie said, "But do you have to make me the smelly kid?"

"It's only one class," Harry said, exasperatedly, "And it probably won't be strong enough for anyone but a werewolf to smell."

"Won't Remus wonder why you're so sweaty?" Archie asked, clearly not thrilled with the idea.

"I'm going through puberty," Harry said sweetly, "A growing boy. It's not my fault my hormones are out of control."

"Okay, just stop," Archie stuck out his tongue, then let his face relax tiredly, "So you really think this is going to work?"

"If it doesn't we'll need to start collecting blackmail material on Remus," Harry said, a slight smirk on her face.

"I can't tell if you're joking," Archie said, "And that worries me."

"Me too, Archie" Harry said, no longer smiling, "Me too."

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When Harry walked into the Guild Library, her fellow interns were both already there, feverishly paging through various manuals and journals, searching for theories and experiments that would lace their work with the credible tint of authority.

Harry joined them, pulling out a few instruction booklets on advanced brewing techniques to try and find ones that were similar to imbuing

shaped magic. She thought there ought to be a few wandless brewing techniques, like the one Snape had shown her while brewing Aconite Alleviation, that would be comparable.

She'd only been reading for twenty minutes when Master Hurst came into the Library and beamed at finding them all there.

"All hard at work, I see," Hurst said lightly, "Very good. I've come to see how many tickets you'll be needing for the Open House. The caterers need to have an estimate for the buffet, and I think there's been talk of seating charts, though considering we don't own any chairs, Merlin knows how they'll work *that* out."

"I require three," Casillas said at once, "My parents and my elder brother will all be attending."

"All right," Hurst said, noting the number down, "Miss Potter, I assume your parents are both still planning to attend?"

"Yes," Harry said, "And could I have three additional tickets for my cousin and uncles?" There was no need to get a ticket for Addy, as Lily had arranged for Alice Longbottom to watch her that day.

"Certainly," Hurst said, smiling, "Mr. Lupin will be excited to see Mr. Lestrangle's project as well, I imagine."

"I daresay he will," Harry agreed.

Lestrangle had a bored look on his face, "At least one person will be seeing it then. I don't require any tickets, Master Hurst."

"None?" Hurst looked taken aback, "Well. If you're sure. You can always change your mind later, Mr. Lestrangle."

"Thank you, Master Hurst," Lestrangle inclined his head, and went back to his reading.

Harry wondered why his parents wouldn't be coming to the event. Maybe they had a prior engagement? She shook her head and

reoriented herself in the materials she was looking through. It really wasn't any of her business.

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It was Saturday morning, two weeks before the Open House, and although Harry had planned to spend the morning experimenting, Archie had other plans.

"Your birthday is in sixteen days," Archie reminded her as he bounced around her room, picking up various things and placing them on her bed, "And I don't have a present for you yet."

"That sounds like your problem," Harry noted, "I have work to do."

"You always have work to do, so that's not an excuse," Archie said, tossing her shoes on her bed next, followed by her coin purse.

"Always being true actually makes it a very reliable excuse-"

"You have to come with me to Diagon Alley to pick out your birthday present!" Archie insisted.

"Won't it ruin the surprise?" Harry said absently, thumbing through the copy of Snape's article that Thompson had given her. She'd read it several times, but she hadn't memorized it yet, so it was still interesting.

"Surprise is less important than enjoyment," Archie said, "You can be surprised by other people's gifts-I want you to *like* mine."

Harry raised an eyebrow, and thought it over, "If I have to pick out mine, you have to pick out your birthday present, too."

"Deal," Archie said, grinning, "Now put your ugly shoes on, and let's go."

"They're serviceable," Harry said, pulling on her fire-proof, acid-proof, water-proof boots.

"They're inappropriate for summer," Archie said, "But it's your feet that have to suffer."

"Anti-sweating charms," Harry said.

"Too much information," Archie drawled.

They told their parents where they were headed-or rather, Archie told them, and Harry didn't protest-and emerged from the Leaky Cauldron floo into a veritable herd of people milling around the pub.

"What a crowd," Archie said, tugging Harry along toward the alleys, "Is it always like this on Saturdays?"

"No," Harry said, frowning, "There must be some kind of event going on."

"You think Lockhart's signing books again?" Archie wagged his eyebrows.

"If he is, you won't be getting a book for your birthday," Harry said, wrinkling her nose at the thought of wading through people to get to the shelves.

"Who wants books for their birthday?" Archie asked incredulously.

Harry raised an eyebrow.

"Oh, no," Archie shook his head, "You're getting something fun this year-and don't say 'learning is fun' or something like that."

"Let's get your present first, then," Harry said, "It'll give me time to come up with something."

"Quality Quidditch it is," Archie grinned, "Come on!"

He led her through the throngs of people, as though she didn't walk through the alley every day. She could probably find all the shops on the alley blindfolded, by now. They slipped into the shop, but the press of bodies inside made it even harder to maneuver.

"Is there a sale?" Archie wondered, looking around, "I don't see any signs."

Harry shrugged, "I'm not sure what's going on, but let's find something quickly."

"I already know what I want," Archie grinned, "Check this out, Harry."

He moved over to a brightly lit display, where a sleek new broom model was proudly advertised as 'the fastest on the market.'

Harry looked it over, impressed by the stats quoted on a plaque at the base, "The Firebolt?" she said curiously, "This is new."

"Just released," Archie said, "I hear it's going to be the official broom of the World Cup."

"That's not until next year," Harry said, "It's that advanced?"

Archie nodded, "Nothing's going to top it in at least two years. They've got patents for miles on the spellwork designs."

"It's beautiful, Arch," Harry said softly, "But I don't think I can afford one for you."

Archie laughed, "You're not buying me a broom, Harry. I asked Dad for it, anyway."

"Of course you did," Harry smiled, "What do you want from me, then?"

Archie pulled a bright yellow piece of paper from behind his back and handed it to her somewhat bashfully.

"A subscription form?" Harry said, reading it over.

"It's for a year's subscription to *Quidditch Weekly*," Archie said excitedly, "See, if *you* fill it out with all your schooling information, it'll come to *me* at AIM all year."

Harry smiled, "Clever. What will I say when our parents ask what I got you? A subscription for myself?"

Archie laughed, "Yeah, you always were the selfish one."

"Careful," Harry said archly, "Or I'll sign up for a subscription to *Witch Weekly* as well."

"I'd just say I got it for Hermione, and she'd sigh over my misguided, well-meaning generosity," Archie said, unrepentant.

"Give it here," Harry said, shaking her head with amusement, "Do you have a quill?"

"There's one at the front desk," Archie said, craning his neck to see over the heads of those around them, "You can fill it out while you pay."

"Let's get in line, then," Harry said, "And get out of this madhouse."

They wove through the crowd, and were almost at the registers when Harry heard someone saying, "Rigel, Rigel!" over the noise around them.

She froze for half a second, then said, "Archie get out of here."

"What?" Archie said, "No, I can wait with you."

"Archie, someone who knows Rigel is here," Harry said, "You have to go."

"Can't we just switch places?" Archie said, alarmed, "I'll be you and-"

"Our eyes are the *wrong color*," Harry hissed, "Make for the door, I'll meet you at Fortescue's when I'm done here."

"Okay," Archie shot her a worried look before he melted into the crowd and disappeared.

Harry kept her face impassive, shifting in a show of casual impatience as she shuffled forward in line, even as she heard, "Rigel!" more pressingly behind her.

"Rigel?" The last came with a hand on her shoulder.

Harry affected a start of surprise as she glanced over her shoulder with a politely inquiring expression, "Yes?"

Theo's face blinked at her as he took a step back, "Uh... sorry. I think-you look like someone I know."

"Oh?" Harry let her face relax into a smile, "That's the second time someone's said that this week, actually. You mistook me for my cousin Rigel, didn't you?"

"I did," Theo's expression melted with relief, "Thought I was crazy, but you do look like him."

"Yes, it's uncanny, I'm told," Harry said, adding in a low laugh for good measure.

"So," Theo said embarrassedly, "I'm Theodore Nott, a friend of Rigel's at school."

"He's talked about you," Harry said, still smiling in a friendly way Rigel wouldn't usually bother with, "You room with him, right?"

"Yes, that's right, uh..." He trailed off, looking a bit uncertain.

"Harry Potter," Harry offered her hand for him to shake.

He looked at it for a moment, "Potter..."

Harry offered her best self-deprecating grin, "I know, I don't look like a girl. It's the hair, I think."

"Not at all," Theo said, clasping her hand gently, "Very pleased to meet you, Heiress Potter."

"Just Harry," Harry said with an artless shrug. She thought she was doing rather well at portraying a relaxed, confident girl who wouldn't remind anyone too much of Rigel's reserved, stiflingly polite manner.

"Then call me Theo," Theo said, moving up with her as the line crawled forward, "Forgive me for saying so, but I didn't think your family supported the SOW Party."

"What?" Harry tilted her head curiously, "Why would you think they did?"

Theo looked incredulous, then tossed his head in a gesture that encompassed the crowd milling around them, "This is an SOW fundraising event. Why did you think all these people were here?"

Harry blinked, "Oh. I just figured Lockhart was doing another book signing."

Theo laughed, "Really? You know we had him at Hogwarts last year- utter idiot."

"No kidding," Harry said, "So what's the event? Is there a booth somewhere?"

Theo grinned at her, "A booth? Funny. Lord Riddle's arranged it so that a percentage of all the sales in Diagon Alley today go toward the Party's campaign fund."

"What kind of incentives do the shopkeepers get for participating?" Harry asked, intrigued.

"I'm not sure," Theo shrugged, "Probably guarantees that the Party members will advertise their services or something to that effect."

Plus a lot more business than they'd get otherwise."

"Interesting fundraising strategy," Harry said, "Does it only apply to Diagon Alley, or are Knockturn and the Lower Alleys participating as well?"

Theo raised an eyebrow, "Why? Going to take your business to Knockturn if it's not participating?"

Harry laughed a little, "I doubt my paltry patronage will make much of a difference in the Party's proceeds today. I just wondered if I should expect large crowds over there as well."

"Well I think it's just Diagon," Theo said. He jerked his head a moment later, saying, "Looks like you're up."

"It was nice to finally meet one of Rigel's friends," Harry said.

"Likewise," Theo said, inclining his head to the correct degree with an ironic grin, "Enjoy your day-try not to spend too much money."

"I'll do my best to resist the urge," Harry laughed easily, giving a little wave before hurrying over to the counter to pay for her subscription.

She finished getting Archie's present squared away, and she surreptitiously glanced around the alley as she left the shop. She spotted a couple of Leo's folk hanging about, keeping an eye on the swarm of people, but didn't see Theo anywhere. Figuring it was safe, she made a beeline to the ice cream shop and spotted Archie at a corner table with his head down.

She slipped into a seat across from him and sighed, "That was too close, Arch."

Archie grimaced, "I know. What are the odds one of your friends was here at the same time as us?"

"It's apparently a Party fundraising event," Harry said.

"Oh," Archie glanced about, "That explains why half the people here look too stuck up to shop in the alleys."

Harry snorted, "And it means there are probably other people here who know me. We should go."

"But your present..." Archie looked very disappointed, "I really wanted to get you something good, and I know you won't have time next weekend, because you'll be preparing for the presentation."

Harry hesitated, not really wanting to take more time for shopping that day, but the look in Archie's eyes made her say, "Why don't we floo to Hogsmede?"

Archie brightened immediately, "You mean it?"

"If everyone supporting the Party is here today, it's the perfect time to go," Harry said.

"I bet it'll be empty," Archie said excitedly, "Great idea, Harry! Let's go."

They moved quickly through the waves of bustling witches and wizards, and before long joined the cue for the outgoing floo.

"See you there," Archie said, tossing powder into the grate, "Three Broomsticks!"

Harry stepped up to the clay jar, measuring out the necessary floo powder carefully. She tossed the powder into the flames, turning around so that she would be facing outward when she arrived. Just as she opened her mouth, she looked up, and her eyes caught those of Master Snape, who had just stepped out of the incoming floo beside her.

"Three Broomsticks," Harry managed to say through numb lips, and before Snape's eyes could do more than narrow at her, she was whisked away through space.

She stumbled out of the floo like a drunkard, but Archie, who knew only too well how clumsily she floo-traveled, was there to catch her and drag her out of the pub.

"So I was thinking we could go to Zonko's, because you can always find something good there, and-Harry? What's wrong?" Archie stopped watching

"Nothing," Harry shook her head, "I mean, Professor Snape walked into the pub just as I was flooing out. It was a close call."

Archie paled, "Too close. You haven't figured out the aura thing, have you?"

"I'm working on it," Harry said, "But no... not yet."

"Okay," Archie said, "Well, the room was crowded. There's no way he recognized you."

"Right," Harry said, "Okay, so, Zonko's?"

They headed down the street, which was virtuously empty compared to Diagon. Zonko's was well stocked with fun new products for the school year coming up, and Archie had a blast suggesting various things Harry might like for her birthday.

"How about this one?" Archie said, holding up a handkerchief that would turn its user's nose blue.

"No one would fall for it," Harry said, smiling slyly, "The Black Heir with a handkerchief that wasn't monogrammed? Unlikely."

Archie rolled his eyes, "I'll give you that one, but I'll have you know that monogrammed handkerchiefs are very useful when you hand them out to crying girls as often as I do."

"I don't think Hermione is going to forget who gave her all those handkerchiefs," Harry teased.

Archie sniffed, "I give other girls handkerchiefs."

"Really?" Harry affected a hurt expression, "But you've never given *me* a handkerchief, Arch."

"You never cry," Archie pointed out.

"Plus, I have my own monogrammed handkerchiefs," Harry smirked.

Archie laughed, and picked up a different product, "How about this one? It's called a teacher-tracker. Hmm, looks useful, actually."

Harry looked it over. The package contained three small, black disks. They were all extremely thin, and about the size of Harry's smallest fingernail.

"It says you put the disk on a teacher's robe, and activate the sticking charm with the pass-code in the box. That piece of paper in there is connected to the disks somehow-maybe a modified Protean charm?" Archie shrugged, and kept reading, "Once the sticking charm is activated, the map shows you where it is in relation to itself- so if you're holding the map, it will tell you how far, and in what direction the teacher you stuck it to is."

"How would you stick it to a teacher without them noticing?" Harry asked, "They're small, but the teacher would see it eventually and just un-stick it."

Archie nodded, "Yeah, I wouldn't use it for teachers, though. You could track your friends with it-or your enemies."

"I have the Marauder's Map for that at Hogwarts," Harry said.

"But it doesn't show everything," Archie said, "If you'd gotten one of these on the basilisk last year, you could have tracked it."

"Yes, Archie, why didn't I think of putting a tracking device on the *basilisk* ?" Harry scoffed, then paused, "Actually, it could be useful

outside of Hogwarts. We could put one on Addy when she gets older."

"Planning on losing her?" Archie asked.

"You never know," Harry said wryly. Then, a little more cheerfully, "I could put one on Leo. If I put it on his shoes, it might take him weeks to figure it out. He's always popping up behind me-let's see how he likes it."

Archie grinned at her sidelong, "You've been hanging out with this Leo bloke a lot. He's older than you, isn't he?"

"A few years, yeah," Harry said, tucking the teacher-tracker package under her arm.

"And pretty good looking, if I recall correctly," Archie said lightly.

"Not as good looking as you, Archie," Harry said, rolling her eyes at his lack of subtlety.

"Oh, come on," Archie wheedled, "You *liiiiike* him, don't you?"

"He's my friend," Harry said dismissively.

"He's your boy friend," Archie said.

"I have a lot of male friends," Harry said.

"Most of them don't know you're a girl," Archie returned.

"Leo doesn't care that I'm a girl-he thinks I'm funnier as a boy, actually," Harry laughed, "Give up, Archie. There's nothing there to tease me about-now you and Hermione on the other hand..."

"Oi!" Archie backpedaled quickly, "Hermione is completely sexless to me."

Harry winced, "Don't ever tell her that, if you want to keep your face the way it is."

Archie blinked slowly, "Yeah... maybe forget I said that."

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Sunday morning she ate a big breakfast, asked her parents not to disturb her until dinner, and settled into a comfortable position on her bed to meditate. It was time to get this aura thing straightened out.

She entered her mindscape. It was odd how satisfying she found it that every time she came back it was just the way she'd left it. Like her own private world that no one else had access to. She entered the hidden cave, and wondered, as always, what she was going to do with the manikin boy who just sat in one of the armchairs by the fire, waiting for a mental intruder who would hopefully never come.

In the space room, she got to work. She'd always sort of taken for granted the floating orbs that represented various aspects of her mind-memories, personality traits, ambitions, fears. All the Occlumency books said every mind was different, and not to be surprised by what you found in your mindscape. She hadn't thought her ice mountain was odd, but the fact that when she'd found her mindscape her mental manifestations of self-the orbs-were already inside the mountain was, according to the Disguise book, very unusual.

Most people started Occlumency with their manifestations out in the open, and it took a lot of time and effort to gain the mental flexibility to develop safeguards for them. The process of hiding the manifestations behind a layer of mental defenses, was, in fact, the art of suppressing one's aura. The reason Harry had never had an aura was because her manifestations naturally existed behind barriers. Through Occlumency, Harry had simply elaborated on and

complicated the defenses her mind had already unconsciously developed.

Projecting the aura was apparently as simple as removing the protections on the mental manifestations one wanted to let project. Harry thought this would be a waste, however, since her mind was already fairly secure. It was also apparently very difficult to move pieces of your mind around, or to drastically change the landscape in order to shield them, so it would be easiest to simply leave the orbs where they were.

That, and it felt wrong to even imagine exposing the bits of her mind like that after keeping them cloistered for so long.

Instead, she could learn to construct an aura of her own design. She was in the space room to learn to identify all the important mental manifestations, so she could create her own, fake manifestations and allow them to project the facets of her new aura.

It was a tedious task, examining all the orbs of a decent size and trying to first figure out what they were, then, if they were one of the facets the book said most people could recognize in an aura, making a credible facsimile of the thing.

She created copies of the orbs that designated her age, various bits of her personality that she liked-her patience, drive, and determination, to name a few-and some of the obvious features she and Archie shared-dark hair, fair skin, relative health and fitness. It was amazing how many things that represented her had a mentally represented equivalent in the orbs. When she came to the orb that embodied her femininity, she hesitated, but in the end reproduced it faithfully. Harry Potter would have an aura, and it should be female. She could always pick through Archie's mindscape to figure out how to make it male later, if she really needed to.

The only thing she didn't reproduce faithfully, which the book said would be very obvious if omitted to anyone who could read auras, was her magical power level. If her magical core was shielded, her

power level wouldn't manifest in her aura. The books that said a person's aura was a combination of physical and mental magical energy were correct, but they didn't explain that the physical energy got transferred through the mental manifestation of the magical core. Because her core's manifestation was contained deep within her ice mountain, it didn't get projected.

She couldn't have an aura without any magic being projected-that would be suspicious, and obviously contrived. She also couldn't just move her sun out into the first level of her mindscape-it would be vulnerable, and it would tell everyone who *could* sense auras exactly how much magic she was capable of producing. Rather than have her enemies know her exact strength, she would make them underestimate her.

She held out a hand toward her sun, and curled her fingers coaxingly, "Come on. Just a little, please."

A small stream of fire drifted into her palm and wrapped itself into a ball of flame that danced between her fingers. She carried it before her like one of the Black's starlights, and the copied orbs she'd been creating trailed after her like a bizarre, ghostly parade of burning souls.

She stepped out onto the mountainside, but despite the raging storm, her train of lights didn't flicker. She spent the next little while setting the orbs up in a parameter around the mountain. When she'd willed them all into the sky they formed a circle around the mountain, but well away from the mists that enclosed the edges of her mind. With an effort of will, she set the false orbs in motion, orbiting the mountainside at a steady, almost mesmerizing pace.

Alone with her handful of flames, she climbed the mountainside to the very top.

At the summit, she shaped the rock upwards into a thin protrusion that ended in an upwards-grasping claw. Amused at her own sense of drama, Harry deposited the small ball of flame into the clawed

torchbearer, and watched it rotate in place for a moment, as though the magic were getting comfortable in its new home.

As she waited to make sure it would stay, the flame settled, then slowly began to expand. By the time it seemed to be done expanding, it was a little bigger than Harry's head, and could be seen no matter where she stood on the mountainside.

Finally satisfied, Harry left her mindscape, and woke to sweeping pins and needles throughout her limbs. She groaned and moved her body very, very slowly, blinking as she stretched her neck and back.

She wandered downstairs, wondering what time it was. She was starving, so it must be almost dinnertime.

The house seemed unusually quiet until Harry realized that it must be so late that Addy was already asleep. The kitchen light was on, but the rest of the house was dark and still.

"I guess I missed dinner," Harry said softly, padding through the kitchen toward the pantry. She half-hoped that Lily had left something under a warming charm for her, but the counters were clear. Her mother probably assumed Harry could fend for herself-and she wasn't incorrect. It was the work of a minute to put together a peanut butter sandwich and a glass of milk.

She shut the lights out on her way back upstairs, and flopped on the bed, nudging aside the spines of books where they poked her in the side. She had trouble falling asleep, whether because her body had been essentially resting all day or because her mind was restless without exhaustion brought on by a day of hard work and research to distract it.

Two weeks until the Open House. Two weeks until she stood in front of everyone she'd ever respected and admired and tried to make them see why she was important, to convince them that someday she would be worthy of respect and admiration. Even though she was a woman. Even though she was twelve years old. Even though

she was trying to explain methodological theory that apparently didn't even exist.

Harry groaned into her pillow and tried not to imagine all the things that could go wrong.

Two weeks until it was all over, at least.

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"Stop pacing," Thompson said, his eyes tracking her movements across the lab.

"I can't," Harry said absently, mind racing and palms sweating.

"You'll be fine," Thompson said, unusually reassuring, "Better than fine-your project is going to blow them away. You just need to calm down."

"What if no one gets it?" Harry asked, "What if the demonstration doesn't work?"

"You don't think your potion works?" Thompson asked.

"Of course it works," Harry scowled, "But what if-"

"Miss Potter, sit down," Thompson snapped.

Harry sat. "Thank you," she said.

She was down in Thompson's lab, because she couldn't bear to be up in the Guild's event room, watching the assistants setting up chairs and twitching every time someone glanced at her presentation materials. The Open House started at four, and Harry thought it was sheer torture on Aldermaster Hurst's part to make the interns arrive over two hours early. It had taken Harry under twenty minutes to set

up her materials to her satisfaction, and the rest of the time had been spent reading and rereading her speech, and then driving Thompson up the wall with her pacing.

"Don't let yourself get riled up," Thompson said, his tone soothing, as though she were a wild beast, "When we go up, most of the Masters will already be present. These are very busy people, and they don't like to waste their time. Keep your remarks short and to the point. The demonstration will speak louder than anything you say, and most of them would rather peruse the theory at their own leisure—that's what the paper you'll write in the next two weeks is for."

"Okay," Harry said, starting to psych herself up, "I'll just introduce the concept, then demonstrate. Results are more important than theories."

"Exactly," Thompson said, "Your paper will be picked over for the exact methodology and theory later, but for now the buzzards just want to see what your project can do."

Harry nodded, "I can do this."

"You can," Thompson agreed, "If you don't panic."

"Easier said," Harry muttered, "This is only my future career on the line."

"Go ahead and panic, then," Thompson shrugged, "But don't you dare show it. No one likes a nervous potioneer. Nervous people make mistakes, try too hard, and usually get someone killed. Present a calm, dignified façade. You know what your project is worth—make sure they know it, too."

Harry took a deep breath and summoned up the calmest mask she could find. Her muscles settled into smooth planes, and her eyelids shuttered the dilated wildness of her pupils. "What's the presentation order, again?" Harry asked, voice even.

Thompson's eyebrows rose, "That's eerie. You ever thought of becoming a player?"

Harry shrugged fluidly, "Who has the time? The presentation order?"

"You're last," Thompson said, "I expect the Aldermaster arranged it that way-he's quite excited to see the results of your project."

"I'll try not to disappoint him," Harry said. Her breathing had slowed, and rising up over the panic came a steely determination that she was completely familiar with. This was her day. She deserved this moment, and she would make the most of it.

With those thoughts in mind, Harry was utterly poised by the time Thompson led her upstairs.

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Severus Snape despised social events, but a man in his position could not afford to ignore politics, be they Party or otherwise. That said, the Guild's annual Open House was perhaps the most odious event of the summer season. Every year three unfortunate adolescents were paraded before the Masters of their field and made to feel as though, somehow, the project they'd worked on for a couple of lazy summer months *mattered* to the potions community at large.

Inevitably, the would-be potioneers chose ambitious and impractical topics, spurred on by their softhearted mentors and deluded with visions of intellectual renown. They presented their hasty research on notorious potions their immature brains could not possibly comprehend, and the Masters clapped and smiled as though they'd *learned* something listening to snot-nosed upstarts lecturing them on the subtleties of their own art.

It was sickening, but the press adored the spectacle, and Aldermaster Hurst could have been given a Mastery of Manipulation for the way he played on the imagination of the masses. The Potions Guild was so *supportive* of today's youth, furthering intellectual horizons everywhere. It was enough to turn his stomach.

The decorations were as drab as ever, and no doubt the catering would be somehow worse than last year's slop, but there was one thing Severus admitted to anticipating at this particular Open House. This year James Potter's whelp was one of the upstart brewers, and it would be deliciously amusing to watch the child stutter and blush her way through an embarrassingly patronizing and tedious presentation. Miss Potter would be unlikely to appreciate the mortifying irony of the spectacle, but that didn't mean Severus couldn't privately revel in the pathetically inane speech his rival's offspring would no doubt attempt to deliver.

"Severus!" there was Hurst in all his press-mongering glory, "So pleased you found the time."

"How could I miss the opportunity to witness the next generation of potioneers on the rise?" Severus drawled. He doubted the member of the press corps currently drooling over the Aldermaster's shoulder caught his sarcasm, but Hurst's eyes flashed with amusement.

"You won't be disappointed," he said, smirking in a way that said he knew exactly how low Severus' expectations were, "We've found particularly innovative interns this year."

"I'm sure," Severus said, holding back a sneer, "What potions did they attempt to improve this time? Polyjuice, again?"

"No, not exactly," Hurst smiled in rueful acknowledgment of Severus' unspoken critique, "One young man did attempt to improve the shelf life of the Draught of Peace."

"Really?" Severus murmured, when what he dearly wanted to ask was *why* ? Who would bother storing a Draught of Peace long-term,

in case it was suddenly needed one day? That's what Calming Draughts were for.

"Mmm," Hurst said, still smiling slightly, "And another one of our interns researched the effects of Wolfsbane on long-term users. No doubt you'll be interested in that."

As if there was something a child could discover in two months that Severus hadn't learned in his *decade* of research on the subject.

"That would be Potter, I assume?" Snape did sneer a bit this time. No doubt the girl had used Lupin as her test subject. Only a spawn of James Potter could choose so arrogant and presumptuous a topic for their first project.

"No," Hurst looked slightly surprised, "Mr. Lestrangle did the work on Wolfsbane, actually. You are acquainted with Miss Potter, though? Wonderful girl-bright young mind, and such drive-"

"Please excuse me, Aldermaster Hurst," Severus cut in, semi-politely, "I've just seen someone I must catch up with." He could not listen to the drivel coming out of Hurst's mouth another second. He would speak to the man later, when he was not performing for the cameras.

Most years he could easily fade into the background at such an event, but this year his breakthrough on the New Wolfsbane, as it was being called, was too fresh, too sensational. Some of the congratulations and proclamations of esteem came from those he considered something like friends at the Guild. Most came from people eager to learn his story, the *secret* to the success he enjoyed in the community. As though hard work and mind-numbing perseverance were somehow mysterious forces for fame and glory.

Because he had not arrived earlier than absolutely necessary, he did not have to bear the weight of attention for long.

At precisely four o'clock, Hurst claimed the stage at the front of the event hall and addressed them all through a Sonorus Charm.

"Welcome friends, family, and potioneers young and old to this year's student showcase," Hurst said, smiling rather grandly. There was a brief round of applause, which Severus somewhat reluctantly participated in. He could already tell it would be a long afternoon.

"For those of you new to our Open House, the format will be as follows," Hurst said, finally getting to the point, "Each intern will present his or her project, after which he or she will take questions from the crowd-try not to be too hard on them!"

Severus was disgusted by the number of people who laughed at that. So much for peer review. He also noted that Hurst was taking much too great a pleasure in adding 'or she' to the end of everything he said, as though having a female intern were really something so novel. He wouldn't be surprised if Potter's chit had gotten her internship on sheer novelty alone. Who'd ever heard of a thirteen-year-old intern? If Severus had known the Guild was so desperate for interns, he'd have nominated Rigel Black in a heartbeat. At least the boy had talent, for all his youth made him a bit volatile.

"After the presentations there will be a chance to mingle," Hurst said, still smiling in a way the press no doubt found charming, "Really get to know these youngsters-they are the potioneers of tomorrow, the artisans of future progress, and the vessels of our field's longevity."

Severus mentally resigned himself to seeing that quoted in every sensationalist media outlet the next day.

"First up is Renaldo Casillas," Hurst began the applause as he exited the stage, and a young man that appeared to have no idea how useless his topic was began to wax poetic about the importance of extending shelf-life of potions, presumably so that potioneers could grow lazy in never replacing the ones that went sour.

After the first mind-numbing presentation came Caelum Lestrangle, Bellatrix and Rodolphus' boy. In some ways, the Lestrangle Heir's speech was less mind-numbing than his predecessor's-there were a few conclusions that would have required at least a modicum of intelligence to come to. In other ways, however, it was more annoying, because as the leading expert on Wolfsbane in the field, Severus was required to maintain a facade of polite engagement despite his growing boredom.

There was also the political fallout to be dealt with should Severus publicly snub the Lestrangle Heir, and with that in mind Severus found himself doing the unthinkable as Lestrangle finished his self-important presentation. He asked a question.

A moment after asking it he'd already forgotten what puerile utterance he'd probably undermined his own credibility to give voice to, and he didn't bother to acknowledge the answer beyond a faux-solemn nod, but the gesture had done its duty. The Lestrangle boy was puffed up with satisfaction, and the Aldermaster sent Severus a grateful smile. He would collect that debt at a later date.

He toyed with simply leaving after that. He'd done his part to make the event a success. Whatever the third intern's project was, he doubted it would have anything to do with *his* specialties. He'd been seen and heard, and he doubted anyone would notice if he slipped out between speakers.

He hesitated, though. He could admit that some small part of him was... curious. This Potter girl was Rigel's pseudo cousin. Rigel spoke rather highly of the girl, likely due to residual affection left over from mutual childhood bonds. Rigel's estimation of the girl was likely to be exaggerated because of his biased opinion of her, but all the same the boy may be... disappointed to learn that Severus had opted not to remain and hear his cousin's presentation out. In fact, the boy may be here now, come to support his cousin's first foray into the potions community. He really ought to stay, if only so that after the presentations he could seek Rigel out and discern how his summer assignments were progressing.

When Harriet Potter stepped on stage, it was not immediately apparent that she was the female Hurst was so proud to have appropriated for the Guild's good press. Her hair was as short as any boy's, her bearing relaxed and unselfconscious-very unlike the demure, half-cringing nature of most adolescent females who roamed the halls of Hogwarts.

There was something annoyingly familiar about her. Beyond the Potter hair and chin, of course. Severus sharpened his senses and examined her aura, but it was utterly unfamiliar to him-not to mention vague and rudimentary. She looked to be barely above squib-levels. He took slight amusement in the knowledge that the girl's magical power was somehow stunted. No child of Lily's should be so mundane, but that was the price for procreating with an idiot like Potter, wasn't it? Though now that Lily was in his thoughts...

Those eyes. Severus hated himself for recognizing something in them. They were duller than the ones in his mind's eye, but they burned him all the same. He begged Merlin to make her presentation even slightly engaging. Anything to distract his mind from the dark paths it wanted to travel.

In this, at least, his wishes were granted.

"My name is Harry Potter," the girl began, "For my project I invented a new way of conscious imbuing."

An inventor? Severus raised an amused brow. The field could certainly use a little genuine innovation, but a new imbuing method? The one they used worked just fine. Unnecessary innovation was almost as bad as no innovation-worse, if you counted time and materials wasted.

"I know," the Potter girl smiled wryly, "Why a new method of imbuing when the one we have is perfectly adequate to our needs? Simply, our needs are not the reflection of our reach. This new method of imbuing broadens the very definition of what a potion is, and

expands the possibilities of what a potion can do beyond the currently accepted limits."

She certainly had a way with words, he reflected sardonically, but he would wait for substance before he deigned to be intrigued.

"I call it Shaped Imbuing," Potter said, her speech cadence quickening as though she knew how tedious the crowd would find her explanations, "It is essentially the imbuing of already shaped magic into a neutral base."

What? Severus sharpened his attention without consciously recognizing that he was doing so. Surely he had misheard.

"This is not like casting a spell on a potion," Potter said, anticipating the objections many were mentally making, "Nor is it the same as imbuing free magic into a potion. It is a wandless brewing technique that necessitates great control over one's magic, but which yields many and varied results. Imbuing a potion with shaped magic has advantages over both potions and spells-the results are more specific than potions alone can sometimes achieve, while also being cheaper and simpler in some ways to create. In addition, the results last longer than a spell, and are not dependent upon their castor. The method will be explained thoroughly in the paper released through the Guild's newsletter, so for now I will conclude with a demonstration."

Many in the crowd perked up at those words-demonstrations were rare, and generally more attention grabbing than dry speeches. Severus was still attempting to comprehend what the girl had just proclaimed. Imbuing shaped magic? Was such a thing even possible? He eyed the young intern as she collected the materials she would use from a stand at the back of the stage. No doubt the demonstration would be rather ordinary, achieving something she would claim came from her 'new' imbuing method, but in reality was probably effected some other way.

Potter placed a small, glass figurine on the floor of the stage, and with a quiet spell enlarged the glass doll until it was almost waist high. "This unfortunate fellow, call him Stan, is many things. He is a toddler who tends to wander at night. He is a wizard caught outside collecting herbs on a full moon. He is-well, you get the idea."

Several people *chuckled* at the girl. What imbeciles. Could they not see what an outlandish claim she was about to make?

"A mother could cast a barrier charm around the child while he sleeps, but the charm would fall as soon as the mother fell asleep herself," Potter said, pacing the stage slowly, "She could set wards around him, but she would spend an hour every evening setting them up, and longer each morning to dismantle them. Or," Potter held up a vial of clear liquid for all to see, "She could pour this around his crib."

She poured the liquid in a steady stream around the child, connecting one end to the other to form a complete circle. She set the vial down at the back of the stage, then without warning brandished her wand and said, "*Stupefy*," and fired a stunning charm at the glass figurine.

Many people close to the stage ducked, but the glass didn't break. A shimmering, ward-like projection intercepted the light where it tried to cross the circle of potion, and it fizzled out harmlessly. There were a few impressed claps, but most people waited for the explanation.

"This potion has had a Fortis Shield imbued inside it through the use of Shaped Imbuing," Potter said, smiling a bit proudly, "It doesn't cause damage to anything that touches it, but neither will it allow anything to pass through it. This includes both magic and physical objects, as those of you familiar with the Fortis Shield might have guessed. The toddler can't wander, and neither can he be abducted or attacked until the shield dissipates, or the antidote is applied."

She took out a knife and attempted to penetrate the barrier physically, showing how the shield snapped into place everywhere

the circle was approached, all the while speaking clearly and confidently, "If Stan is caught out on the full moon, he can cast the potion on the ground around him, and stay safely ensconced in the shield for up to twelve hours-much longer than most wizards and witches could ever hope to hold a Fortis Shield. It will hold against Vampires until the sun rises. You can take it camping to protect your food from wild animals, or use it in your dormitory to keep your roommates out of your things."

More laughter. The girl knew how to work a crowd-though he supposed that wasn't surprising. James Potter had always been a blowhard. More importantly, her potion appeared to *work*. A mobile, ready-made ward? It was remarkable to say the least, particularly if it really would hold for half a day.

"There are several obvious drawbacks," Potter acknowledged, carrying another vial over to the circle, "The antidote negates the shield immediately, so I would not recommend its use against other wizards, or as a substitute for real, solid wards around one's home. It is designed for temporary use, not permanent, but if the antidote is misplaced, little Stan might be very hungry by the time his mother manages to reach him again."

She poured the second vial, this one orange in color. She poured it across one section of the original circle, and immediately the entire ward wavered under a barrage of orange sparks before flickering out completely. "The antidote is imbued with shaped magic as well," the girl informed them, "A ward-disruptor, this time."

The Lightning Jaw, if Severus didn't miss his guess. All and all it was a very interesting performance. Perhaps Hurst was not wrong to recommend her, despite her young age. He still had doubts that her methodology was all it appeared to be, but he would definitely be reading the full report.

"This is just one example of what Shaped Imbuing can accomplish," Potter concluded, re-shrinking the figurine and vanishing the potion residue on the floor efficiently as she spoke, "I hope that through

relentless experimentation and careful understanding we can push the boundaries of what potions makes possible even further in the coming years. Thank you. I will take any questions you have now."

There were no few inquiries.

"Will you publish the recipe for the base, Miss Potter?"

"Yes, of course. I'm not looking to patent this process."

"Have you experimented with any other special-imbued potions?"

"A few. I've experimented with simple imbued magic, like color-change spells, and even combining Shaped Imbuing with potions that already have an intended purpose. The results were, in general, very successful."

"Are there any noticeable commonalities among different kinds of shaped-imbued magic?" People were clearly fumbling over the new terminology.

"It is generally the case that imbued shaped magic lasts longer, but the effects of some spells may be muted in potion form."

The questions died out once it became clear that they'd have to read the exact theory and methodology in order to gain any in-depth understanding of the process, but the atmosphere was excited as the interns each took a final bow and exited the stage.

It was the first time in a long time that Severus could remember impatiently anticipating another brewer's work. Perhaps true innovation had returned to the English potions community at last. At the very least, Harriet Potter's potions career promised to be *intriguing* .

A halfblood with a modicum of talent *and* original ideas? Severus smirked. Not a bad combination at all.

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Harry's face hurt from suppressing the foolish grin she wanted to release, but she held her poise until the last of the guests had gone. Her family had offered to stay and wait out the crowd with her, but she sent them off with a self-deprecating smile.

"It'll be boring for you," she said earnestly, "I'll just be answering questions for the next hour and smiling with the other interns for the press."

"We'll celebrate properly when you get home," Lily said, fixing Harry's hair absently.

"And we'll eat while you finish up," Sirius said, lowering his voice, "Because the food here stinks."

"Sirius," Remus shook his head, "Never mind. Well done, Harry. Very nice speech."

"Thanks," Harry said, "I practiced for ages."

"She really did," Archie sighed, "This is the fourth time I've heard it, actually. Can we go now?"

The adults shot Archie an exasperated look for his impatience, but Harry knew he was just nervous. If Professor Snape came over to this side of the room, he would have to hightail it out of there. Until Archie learned to suppress his aura, there was no way he could pass as Rigel around Professor Snape.

Harry's aura, on the other hand, seemed to be working perfectly. She'd seen Snape in the audience watching the presentations, and while he didn't look as riveted as her ego would appreciate, he didn't look suspiciously at her, either. There was no obvious recognition in his eyes, only quiet evaluation.

All and all, Harry thought her first debut into the potions community had gone rather well. She felt invigorated long after the event hall was cleared and her presentation materials were all safely relocated in Thompson's lab.

"Well done," Thompson said, sinking down into the chair behind his desk when it was all over, "Very well done. You sparked just the right amount of curiosity and speculation. The next two weeks will be spent drafting and editing the final paper, but I expect you won't need much of my help for that. Essentially, your internship ends here."

"You're not going to cry, are you?" Harry asked, smirking a bit.

"Brat," Thompson sighed, "I'm well rid of you."

"Oh, you'll see me around," Harry promised, "My uncles are going to sell some of the more harmless potions I made with Shaped Imbuing in their prank line, and I'll need the Guild's safety division to approve them."

"And you'll need someone to help name them," Thompson chuckled.

"I am perfectly capable of naming my potions," Harry said.

"What was it again? The 'Modified Weightless Draught?'" Thompson grinned, "What are you going to call the Shield Potion?"

"The Ward Maker," Harry said, "Rolls off the tongue, doesn't it?"

"But it's got no flair," Thompson shook his head, "How about, 'Potter's Portable Protection Potion?'"

"That's awful," Harry wrinkled her nose, "What a mouthful."

"You've got to put your name in it, though," Thompson said, "Otherwise people will forget who invented it."

"So what?" Harry said, "The name should be descriptive, so it's obvious what it does."

"Potter's Portable Protection Potion is perfectly descriptive," Thompson defended.

"I'll think about it," she said, smiling a bit fondly, "Goodbye, Master Thompson. Thank you for all your help, sir."

"Thank *you*, Miss Potter," Thompson said, "For not wasting my time this summer."

Figuring that was about the highest form of praise she could get from the man, she bowed her thanks, and left the lab.

She saw a light on in a lab down the hall, and as she approached the stairs she realized it was the lab Lestrangle had been using. She started to climb the staircase, but something indefinable slowed her steps to a stop. She stood there, halfway to the landing, and closed her eyes. She should keep walking. She should go home, have dinner with her parents, bask in their approval and pride, and forget she ever saw the light coming from Lestrangle's lab.

But she didn't.

She turned around slowly, mentally berating herself all the way down the stairs and up the hall. She stood outside the door for a long moment. *Am I really doing this?* She knocked. *Apparently so* .

She had a fleeting thought that perhaps someone had simply left a light on, but then the door opened, and Lestrangle's sour expression glared out at her.

"What?"

Harry gave a casual shrug, and nudged the door open with her foot, striding past Lestrangle's irritated huff. "I'm glad I caught you," Harry said, turning back to see Lestrangle still scowling from the door.

"What do you want, Potter?" Lestrangle said, shutting the door with a resigned sigh. He almost sounded tired.

"Just to tell you how much I liked your final presentation," Harry said.

Lestrangle scoffed, "Don't bother-I know no one was actually listening. This showcase was a waste of time. Anyone important will just read the actual reports."

"I was listening," Harry disagreed, "As were many others. You got some good questions at the end."

"I got patronizing questions at the end," Lestrangle sneered, "And you were too busy preparing your own presentation to listen to mine."

"Not so," Harry said, "I thought you made a really insightful point about the connection between long-term survival rate and mental acuity. Too many people overestimate the role of physical fitness in werewolf health. It's important, but not as important as mental agility and sheer willpower. The curse affects the mind of the werewolf even more than it does the body."

Lestrangle narrowed his eyes at her, "Maybe you were listening, then. Doesn't mean anyone else was."

"Even if no one listened, it was a good presentation," Harry said.

Lestrangle seemed to fight himself for a moment, then the word, "Thanks," twisted from his mouth like a live mealworm.

Harry smiled a bit, "You're welcome."

"Is that all?" Lestrangle drawled.

"No," Harry said, "I'm going to grab a bite to eat-"

"Good for you."

"-and I'm inviting you." Harry finished doggedly.

"Notice you didn't claim you'd *like it* if I came along," Lestrangle sneered once again, "Go home, Potter. Go have dinner with your precious little family, so they can all tell you how *proud* they are."

It was eerie how similar his words were to what she'd been thinking just a moment ago. Also unsettling was the slight pang of agreement she felt at his all-too-derisive snort.

"I could," Harry said slowly, "But I'd rather have dinner with someone who understands what I've spent all summer doing, rather than someone who's proud of the *idea* of what I've been doing." As soon as she said it, she realized why it was partially true. She was glad her parents had come and supported her, but at the same time... it was a little annoying, seeing their politely blank expressions as she'd tried to go over some of the finer points of her methodology with them before her presentation.

Lily was *good* at potions, and even she seemed a little lost when Harry started in on imbued magic vs. ingredient magic differentials. She didn't *blame* them for not being potions experts, of course, but she couldn't deny that their praise didn't really mean as much as it might have if they were. She would always be grateful for her family's support-and more so in the face of Lestrangle's family's obvious apathy-but what did abstract, expected platitudes really amount to?

She shook her head. She was being too hard on her parents again. They gave her everything she needed to facilitate her goals, and they showed up to support her when given the chance. It was unfair to ask for more, despite the tiny part of her that craved a real connection to her parents, achievements they could share, rather than ones that went over their heads or that they could never know about.

Lestrangle appeared to think about her offer for a good minute, but in the end he sniffed, "I don't date halfbloods." After a moment's pause, he wrinkled his nose, "Or children, for that matter."

Harry barely suppressed a grimace of disgust, "And I don't date bigots."

"You don't date anyone," Lestrangle guessed shrewdly.

"Neither do you," Harry shot back, confident that it would take more than good looks to keep a love interest with a personality like Lestrangle's. "So I guess it's a good thing it isn't a date. It's just dinner, Lestrangle. Would you rather go home?"

Immediately, she knew it was the wrong thing to say. Lestrangle's face shut down completely, and he said, "I don't need your pity."

"It's not pity," Harry said, lying just a tiny bit. It was pity, mostly. Lestrangle apparently saw through her, and sent her a withering glare. She grimaced, and tried, "I'd like to be friends."

"I don't have friends," Lestrangle scoffed.

"Maybe that's your problem," Harry said lowly. When Lestrangle narrowed his eyes at her, she mentally apologized to Krait and Leo, and offered, "I don't have any friends who brew, either. Wouldn't it be... nice to talk to someone about potions after the internship is over?"

"I am not being friends with a halfblood," Lestrangle said bluntly.

"Pretend I'm a pureblood," Harry rolled her eyes.

Lestrangle actually spluttered, "That's absurd."

"Not really," Harry started to smile, "My kind doesn't look any different than yours, you know. Actually," she was full on grinning now, "I *am* a pureblood. Didn't I tell you? My mother's a descendent of a very respected pureblood family that was thought to have died out a few generations ago. Turns out my great-grandmother was their long-lost squib descendent."

"You can't just make things up like that," Lestrangle snapped.

"It could be true," Harry said, blinking innocently up at the pureblooded boy, "Pureblood families don't keep track of their squib children very well-if they keep track of them at all after putting them on some muggle's doorstep. I might be more pureblooded than you, Lestrangle."

"Just stop," Lestrangle groaned, "You're giving me a headache."

"It's probably a hunger headache," Harry said wisely, "Come on, Lestrangle, we'll get you something to eat."

She started to shoo him toward the door, but the older boy drew himself up sharply, "I am not eating dinner with you."

"Yes, you are," Harry said, "If you don't, I'll tell everyone you did anyway."

"Who would you tell?" Lestrangle drawled, "Even your mudblood friends wouldn't believe you."

"I'll tell my cousin Rigel," Harry said, "He'll tell all his friends at Hogwarts, who will in turn tell their parents, who will ask your parents why you're such good friends with a halfblood, and what will you say? That Lucius Malfoy was lying?"

Lestrangle gaped at her, "You-you really would, wouldn't you? Crazy bitch."

Harry rolled her eyes, "The insults get boring after a while, Lestrangle. Just come eat with me. You might even enjoy having someone to argue with over dinner."

"Why are you so determined to do this?" Lestrangle asked, seeming genuinely confused at this point. Harry counted that as a big step up from openly hostile.

"I don't like having enemies," Harry said after a moment, "The more enemies I can turn into friends, the easier my life will be in the long-

run."

"I'm not going to make your life any easier," Lestrangle argued.

"You might stop making it more difficult eventually, though," Harry reasoned.

"You're just trying to assuage your ridiculously maudlin conscious somehow by pretending to be nice to me," Lestrangle accused.

"So what?" Harry dismissed his objections, "Say you're right-you should still come and get free food out of it."

"I don't need charity," Lestrangle said exasperatedly.

"Never hurts, though, does it?" Harry said cajolingly, "Come on, it won't take long."

She started walking toward the door, and obligingly held it open for Lestrangle to follow.

He stared at her, an unpleasantly torn expression on his face.

"Tell you what," Harry said, "You come eat with me, and if you can convince me by the end of the meal that it was a bad idea, I'll never bother you again."

Lestrangle bit out a harsh laugh, "It *is* a bad idea. You're willingly inviting me to torture you for the rest of the evening."

"I'm inviting you to try," Harry said sweetly.

To both of their surprise, Lestrangle accompanied her out into the alleys without another word.

"Where are we going?" he asked eventually.

"Leaky Cauldron," Harry said, waving absently to the old lady who sold good luck charms and cinnamon twists.

Lestrangle jerked to a halt, "I'm not eating in a muggle establishment."

Harry sighed, "We're not going through, I just have to floo call my house to tell my parents I'm not coming home for dinner."

Lestrangle shot her a dark look, "You lied. You said you were already planning on getting food out."

"Yes, I lied to you," Harry said wryly, "I lie a lot, actually. You should get used to it if we're going to be friends."

"We're not going to be friends," he muttered, trailing after her like a disgruntled ghost who was obliged to haunt someone he hated.

Harry said a quick hello to Tom, who was too busy with the dinner shift to stop and chat. She used the outgoing floo to call home and explained quickly to her mother that one of the other interns had invited her to dinner, and she felt compelled to accept. She excused herself before her father could ask which one-she somehow didn't think he'd appreciate the potential she saw in Lestrangle. In fact, she wasn't sure she could explain it even if she tried.

When she brushed the soot from her hair and looked around the pub, she half-expected Lestrangle to be gone, but he was leaning broodingly against a nearby pillar, and he straightened when she approached.

"What are you hungry for?" Harry asked.

"Nothing," Lestrangle said sourly.

"My choice it is, then," Harry said, smiling slightly, "This way."

She led him back through Diagon Alley, and stoically ignored the incredulous glance he shot her when they turned down Knockturn. She led him along Kyprioth Court, but they didn't take it all the way to the Dancing Phoenix. She didn't really want to introduce Lestrangle

to her friends, since he was certain to be insulting given half a chance.

Instead, she gestured him down a side street, which led to an alley a bit smaller than Knockturn, but much better lit. It was called Aroma Alley, and it boasted more restaurants in a square mile than any other place in London. There were restaurants stacked on top of other restaurants, squished between and behind one another, and the number of signs and arrows trying to direct people to different establishments was frankly overwhelming if you didn't know where you were going.

"What in magic's name *is* this place?" Lestrangle asked, looking around in something like awed incredulity. Harry was pleased to note he was so distracted by their haphazard surroundings that he'd forgotten to sound sarcastic or snide.

"Aroma Alley," Harry said, "But folks around here just call it the Eating Place."

"How quaint."

Ah, there was the snideness she'd been missing.

"Over here," she said, leading Lestrangle into a narrow gap between two Italian restaurants that were always in fierce competition with one another, for all that they were owned by the same family.

There was a red cloth at the end of the little alley they slipped into, and Harry held it aside grandly, sweeping her hand to allow Lestrangle to walk in first.

"If this is a trap, my mother will torture you into insanity," he informed her as he passed.

"Okay," Harry said faintly, wondering just how many layers of issues the older boy was dealing with. Then she remembered what Malfoy

had said the first time she led him through a secret passageway, and decided paranoia might be a pureblooded thing.

She followed Lestrage behind the curtain, and down the set of steep stairs that led down into the restaurant proper. At the end of the stairs, all they could see was a giant, semi-circle fish tank, and Lestrage turned to her with a raised eyebrow. She smiled back at him, and walked through the glass tank wall. It was a funny bit of magic that allowed them to walk through the fish tank. It wasn't as instantaneous as the barrier that protected Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$, so there was a confused moment when all they could see was murky blue matter before they emerged on the other side.

The restaurant was bright and cheerful on the other side of the fish tank, with red and gold decorations on the walls and more fish swimming in bowls that glowed with warm light and floated around the ceiling like watery torches.

"A seafood restaurant?" Lestrage guessed, following her over to a table.

"Actually, it's a Chinese restaurant," Harry said, "Fish are lucky in China."

Actually, fish represented a homophonic pun in the Chinese language that made them symbols of prosperity and excess wealth, but she didn't think Lestrage was the type to appreciate cultural nuances.

"So you can't eat them?" Lestrage asked, eyeing one of the swordfish in the wall-tank with interest.

"No, you can eat them," Harry said, "That's good luck, too."

Lestrage rolled his eyes, but he did order the swordfish when the waiter came over. Harry got pork dumplings. The waiter was a man of few words, and set their tea down with little ceremony.

"We didn't order tea," Lestrangle said.

"It's free," Harry said, "Anyway, what do you care? I'm paying."

Lestrangle sighed, "It's just poor business practice to give things away unprompted."

"Know a lot about business, do you?" Harry asked, amused.

"Of course I do," Lestrangle said, "My father and uncle together own more businesses than the Zabini family."

Harry had heard that somewhere, though she'd also heard the Lestranges didn't manage their businesses half so well.

"Then you know that the principle of reciprocity compels people to feel beholden when given something for nothing, prompting them to be overly generous in return. Because he gives tea for free, he gets better tips, and the restaurant earns more in general," Harry explained.

"But as we are aware of this tactic, it fails," Lestrangle said, "And he gets nothing more than he would have."

"Maybe if you were the one paying," Harry said, smiling, "I quite appreciate the free tea."

"Your Good Samaritan act is making me sick," Lestrangle said, toying with his chopsticks absently.

"I'll eat your fish if you don't feel up to it," Harry offered sympathetically.

"Does it ever get tiresome, being so pointlessly nice all the time?"

"Not really," Harry said, "Why, do you get tired of being such a jerk?"

"I'm not a jerk," Lestrangle said, eyebrows rising.

Harry waited a beat, just to make sure he was serious, "You... sort of are."

Lestrangle actually shrugged, "Only to those who deserve it."

Harry couldn't stop an incredulous snort, "Don't try to justify it like that-like you're mean to people for their own good. You do it to satisfy something inside of yourself."

"So what?" Lestrangle threw her words from earlier back in her face, "Maybe you're right, but that doesn't mean I'm not right, too. Most people do deserve it."

"Including me, I suppose?" Harry asked sarcastically.

"Yes, including you," Lestrangle said, his lip curling, "Someone had to wake you up to reality. Admit it," he leaned in to pin her with a taunting gaze, "You walked into the lab that first day thinking no one would care you were a girl, and a halfblood, and years younger than all the other applicants. If you'd listened to me right off, you'd have suspected Casillas would try and blow up your cauldron."

Harry glared, "If I listened to you, I would have gone home before I started."

"That too," Lestrangle smirked, "No harm in intimidating the competition while I'm doling out life lessons, is there?"

She couldn't help it-she laughed. His audacity was really too much. "I suppose you've never heard what muggles say about living in glass houses?"

"Why would anyone build a house out of something so fragile?" Lestrangle shook his head, "Stupid muggles."

"I just mean, do you really think you're the one best qualified to judge others?" she asked.

"If not me, who?" Lestrangle's face took on a bitter tinge, "Most people are too busy being polite to really take a hard look at the world around them, at the people around them. All the idiots and pigs continue to be so because no one wants to risk unpleasantness just to tell them what's what. I, on the other hand, am perfectly accustomed to unpleasantness. I don't care if everyone hates me, so I'm not afraid to say what I think."

"What if what you think is wrong?" Harry said.

"Then someone else better have the gumption to tell me so," Lestrangle smiled mockingly, "How else will I learn?"

Harry narrowed her eyes at his childishness, "What about Rigel Black?"

Lestrangle scowled immediately, "Brat. What about him?"

"I heard you were horrid to him the very first time you met," Harry said, fighting a scowl herself at the memory, "How can you have judged him so quickly?"

"Rigel Black is an idiot," Lestrangle said, "No-don't interrupt. You asked, and I'm telling you. He showed up at a Dark pureblood event like he wasn't the son of a traitor. Did he really think no one was going to say anything? He didn't belong there, no matter whose kids he goes to school with. His naiveté was sickening. I just did him the courtesy of saying it to his face, while so many others would only whisper behind his back."

"You should get to know Rigel," Harry said, "He's not as naïve as you think."

"Then he's a knowing idiot-how grand," Lestrangle drawled.

Harry sighed, giving up on the subject for now. The sad part was, Lestrangle probably believed everything he was saying. It even made a twisted sort of sense, which Harry hated herself for understanding.

As messed up as Lestrangle's attitude was, there was something about his rudeness that was beginning to grow on her. In a perverse way, his demeanor was a bit like honesty. He reminded her of Ginny, sometimes, who simply didn't see the point in not saying whatever was on her mind.

She didn't think Lestrangle was ready to hear *that* comparison made out loud, however.

Their food came quickly after that, and Harry asked if Lestrangle was going to continue his research on Wolfsbane.

"What's the point?" he said, "Snape's breakthrough is going to change the whole field. My research is already outdated."

"It's not outdated until there's a cure," Harry said.

Lestrangle snorted, "There's never going to be a cure. Your fag uncle is going to be a werewolf forever, so get used to it."

Harry flicked a bit of soy sauce at him, "You don't know that, just like you don't know my uncle is homosexual. This is what I mean-you're not 'telling the truth' now, you're just being ugly."

"I'm too pretty to be ugly," Lestrangle smirked.

"You're really not," Harry muttered around another dumpling.

"Anyway, lots of people assume your uncles are lovers, didn't you know?" Lestrangle commented.

"Remus and Sirius?" Harry shook her head, "Who thinks that?"

"People with too much time on their hands," Lestrangle said, sounding disgusted, "But people whose opinions, unfortunately, mean something. Me repeating them just makes you aware of them, so you can deny them in the open if you want."

"Stop," Harry said, exasperated, "You can't justify meanness. Just admit you can't go an hour without belittling someone."

"I do admit that," Lestrage said, "Nor should I have to. There are so many people in the world to be belittled, and so little time, really. This fish isn't bad," he added thoughtfully.

"Careful, Lestrage," Harry said, "That was almost a complement."

"I'm perfectly capable of complements," Lestrage said.

"Do another one," Harry prompted.

"One's my daily limit," Lestrage rolled his eyes.

"I don't believe you," Harry said, grinning, "There's no way you give a compliment every day."

"You'll never know," Lestrage sniffed, "I don't compliment halfbloods."

"I'm secretly a pureblood, remember?" Harry reminded him.

"You're secretly annoying," Lestrage said.

"I grow on people," Harry said.

"I bet people just tell you that, so you'll go away."

Harry thought about that, "I guess I won't know until *you* say it-you'd never lie to me, would you, Lestrage?"

"Everybody lies," Lestrage said.

Harry shrugged. She couldn't very well argue with that.

"What? Goodie girl actually agrees with me?" Lestrage gazed speculatively at her, "Well, well, what are *you* lying about, then?"

"It's not really lucky to eat fish in China," she lied.

Lestrangle smiled-really smiled-and shook his head, "Maybe you do grow on people. Brat."

Harry wondered if brat could be considered a step up from halfblood. It was probably about the same, she concluded, but the heat seemed to have gone out of his insults.

"So why are you really here with me, and not at home?" Lestrangle asked, "As far as I can see, your parents adore you-did you see them there today, smiling like fools while you presented? Bet they're so *proud* of you. Bet they think you're so *perfect* . So why are you sitting here, perfect girl?"

"They are proud of me," Harry acknowledged, "No matter what I do. In some ways, they don't really care what I do-they'd be proud either way."

"Lucky you," Lestrangle muttered, stabbing at his fish with his chopsticks, "Your parents pay for your potions *indulgence*, then?"

"Yeah. Yours don't?" Harry said, guessing by the way he said 'indulgence' that his parents had thrown his expenses in his face more than once.

"I get what I ask for," Lestrangle shrugged, a bitter twist to his mouth.

Harry understood immediately. The feeling of always asking for things wasn't a pleasant one. She hated asking favors of people-to have to ask for every ingredient and material would be stifling. How many projects would she let fall by the wayside simply because she felt their cost to be an encumbrance once she was made constantly aware of it?

"So what do you do when you aren't brewing?" Harry asked eventually.

"None of your business," Lestrage said, "Why, what do you do?"

Harry laughed, "I don't do anything besides brew."

"Really." Lestrage looked skeptical.

"What else is there?" Harry asked.

"What else indeed."

They weren't friends when they left the alleys behind, but Harry thought they weren't quite enemies, either. That, or Lestrage really had just come along for the free food.

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Harry's thirteenth birthday started very quietly, and ended... not so quietly.

Archie kept nagging her to take a PotentialisPotion, but Harry didn't see the point. All it did was reveal the magical potential in a person, and Harry already knew where her strengths lay-in potions. She didn't need her path laid out for her, or even a nudge in one direction or another, like she'd thought Draco could have used. Her future was clear, no matter what the potion indicated she ought to concentrate on. She would make it for Archie on his birthday if he wanted, of course, but Harry knew it wasn't for her.

For breakfast, Lily and James made all her favorites. It was rare that they ate breakfast together, just the three of them-four if you counted Addy, though Harry wasn't sure she was big enough to count yet.

It was nice, but curiously, Lily kept shooting her strangely wary looks when she thought Harry couldn't see her. What Lily didn't know was that Harry's vision was perfect while under the influence of the

Modified Polyjuice, and so even though she still wore her 'glasses,' her peripheral vision was crystal clear, unlike James, who couldn't see anything out of the corner of his eye. She didn't know why Lily looked so concerned, but she assumed her mother would tell her when it became important.

Sirius and Remus baked her a cake, and it didn't blow up when they ate it that night, though it did keep singing the happy birthday song even as they devoured it, its voice becoming more and more frantically high-pitched as it was slowly consumed.

Her parents gave her their present after dinner, and to Harry's utter astonishment it was a *Firebolt* .

"I can't..." Harry just shook her head, a slow smile blooming across her face, "How-I'm not even on a house team, like Archie. Are you sure?"

"Sure?" James ruffled her hair, "You're holding it, Harry! Do you like it?"

"It's amazing," Harry breathed, "It's the broom of the world cup next year, Dad, I mean- *thank you* ."

She hugged James, then hugged Lily too, careful not to squish Addy while she was at it, "Can I try it tonight?"

"In the dark?" Lily laughed, "Surely tomorrow will be soon enough?"

"Oh, I see," Archie grinned, "They waited until now to give it to you because they knew you'd never come in for dinner if you had it this afternoon."

"We wanted to see our girl on her birthday," Lily said, one arm around Harry, the other holding Addy to her shoulder. Her words were sweet, but there was something almost falsely chipper in her tone. Harry wasn't sure what was making Lily so on edge that day,

but she hoped it resolved itself soon. Maybe there was trouble at work.

She went to bed that night thinking about what a nice day it had been, just she and her family hanging out quietly at home. She really should have known it was too good to be true.

It was darker than the darkest place she'd ever imagined. She knew she was there, but she couldn't see any part of her-not her feet or limbs or even the tip of her nose. The blackness was too complete for sight. There were other senses, though. It was cold, and quiet, and even though she couldn't see her torso, there was an aching in her gut that she couldn't explain.

Slowly, a light appeared. At first, she didn't notice the lightening landscape, so great had the pain in her stomach become. After a few moments, though, she began to blink against the growing brightness. It was coming from her middle, spilling out through the fingers she had pressed over her gut, and it was warm.

No, not warm-hot. Flames licked at her stomach, burning, scorching her insides. The light spilled out of her to illuminate the pressing blackness, but she barely saw the stars answering in the distance before a white-hot pain consumed her.

She woke to a scream, and it took several confused moments of pain and disorientation before she realized it was her own. The world seemed to be shaking itself apart around her, and as she doubled over in agony she heard books falling from their shelves all around her. Her headboard rattled against the wall, and her gut screamed at her in pain, and she screamed back until her throat closed up in protest. She'd never felt such pain before, and she barely registered her bedroom door flying open and her worried parents rushing in half-dressed.

"Harry? Baby? *Harry!* " her mother's voice was frantic with worry, and it drew Harry back from the world of pain she'd been inhabiting.

"Mom," she choked out, eyes blurring with the tears streaming down her face, "It hurts. I think my insides are burning up."

" *Merlin*," James drew her into his arms, his voice helpless as he said, "It's going to be okay, Harry, I promise it'll be okay."

"No," Harry said, "I think something is killing me." There could be no other explanation for all the pain.

"Harry, sweetie, it's your birthday," Lily said, stroking her sweaty hair back from her face, "Your magical core is expanding. I thought it might not happen, but-oh, Harry, I'm *sorry* . This is all my fault. It's going to hurt, baby, but it will pass, I promise."

Harry wanted to believe her, but all she could focus on was pain. She dimly heard James say, "I'm putting her out," before his wand poked her in her ribs, and she knew no more.

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She dreamed of fire and pain, and when she woke up some hours later, she was drenched in sweat. Her mother was humming some mindless tune, holding her hand in her own. Harry smiled a bit in relief when she realized the pain was almost receded. Her stomach felt oddly stretched, as though she'd eaten too much for dinner, but it wasn't on fire anymore.

"You don't have to sing anymore, Mum," Harry said tiredly.

Lily immediately called for James and cupped Harry's face in her hands, "Harry, honey, I'm so sorry you had to go through that. How do you feel now?"

"Bloated," Harry said, frowning a bit, "Like I swallowed a watermelon. Does that happen to everyone on their thirteenth birthday? You'd

think they'd warn us."

Lily let out a choked laugh, "Oh, sweetie, no. Most people get mild stomach cramps at the most. Many sleep right through it. I had hoped... well, I'm afraid I misjudged your magical potential, Harry."

"How so?" Harry asked.

"Your core is fully matured now," Lily said softly, not looking terribly happy about it, "The pain you felt was the influx of magic filling the expanded space. Your core was working hard to produce so much magic in a short period of time."

"Is that why I feel top-heavy?" Harry asked, trying to sit up, "Because I'm full of more magic than I'm used to?"

"Yes," Lily said, frowning, "You shouldn't be feeling that way anymore, though. Is it bad?"

"Not unmanageable," Harry said honestly, "I'll get my equilibrium back soon, I suppose. So it should have gone away by now?"

Lily bit her lip, then moved her fingers up Harry's wrist to stroke a beautiful golden bracelet that circled her forearm. It was a bracelet Harry had seen many times before, but it was not hers.

"Mom?" she asked, confused as to why she was wearing the bracelet James had given Lily the day Harry was born. If she twisted it, she could even see the name engraved on the inside of the band. It said simply, *Harriet* .

"Harry!" James came running in and took Harry's shoulders in his hands, staring into her eyes worriedly, "Are you all right, little fawn?"

"I'm fine, Dad," Harry said, summoning a smile, "Sorry I worried you."

" I'm sorry we didn't think this might happen," James said, looking remorseful, "Your mother went through something similar, but mine

wasn't so bad, so we hoped... well, we should have said something, but we didn't want to worry you."

"At least now I know why mom kept sending me anxious looks all day," Harry said bemusedly.

"Dear," Lily said softly, "I think Harry and I need to have a talk."

James looked from his wife to his daughter, and nodded slowly, "All right. I'll go make breakfast. Somehow I don't think we'll be getting any sleep after this."

He left after kissing her forehead gently, and Harry turned her gaze to her mother. She had conjured a stool by Harry's bed, but Harry scooted over to make room for her on the mattress, "What's wrong, Mom?"

Lily slid in next to her and breathed slowly in and out. Then, she began to speak.

"When I was a little girl, my parents thought I was possessed by the devil," her voice shook only slightly, but Harry clutched her mother's hand tightly between her own, shocked at what she was hearing. "They didn't know what magic was, but strange things were always happening around me-dangerous things. Some kids have three or four major accidental magic incidents when they're young. I had an incident at least once a month. They home schooled me until the letter from America came." Lily took a deep breath, and let it out on a sad little laugh, "They were so relieved when they realized there were others like me, who would deal with me. They showered me with attention when I was home, to make up for their fear and guilt, I think, neither of which ever really went away."

Harry hadn't realized why they never visited Lily's muggle relatives very often, even though she had a cousin her age. Perhaps Lily's sister was as afraid of her as her parents were?

"Did you know that muggleborn witches and wizards generally fall into one of two categories?" Lily asked. Harry shook her head silently. "The majority of muggleborns-about eighty-five percent-are magically below average. There's a stereotype that muggleborns have low stores of magic, but high control of the magic they do have. That's true for many, like your friend Hermione, I suspect. The other fifteen percent, however, are born with vastly overpowered stores of magic, and very little control. I was one of the later."

"Fifteen percent is still a lot," Harry said slowly, "Why don't we hear about more muggleborn Mage or Lord-level witches and wizards?"

"The high levels of magic aren't tempered by generations of refinement as they are in the old pureblood families," Lily said softly, "By the time I got to school, my magic was nearly beyond my control. I almost had to repeat my first year, because I couldn't get my magic to do any of the spells right. It was wild, like an animal that refused to be trained."

Harry couldn't believe how eerily familiar her mother's words were. Hadn't she felt like that? Like she had a monster inside of her at times? Except Harry could control hers sometimes-controlled it too well, sometimes.

"My temper didn't help," Lily admitted, "My emotions were all over the place during puberty, and my magic responded to the slightest ire. It was the worst right after my thirteenth birthday. I dunked my best friend in the duck pond behind our houses one day. He nearly drowned. To this day I believe Severus still hates deep bodies of water," she added regretfully.

"Master Snape?" Harry asked incredulously, "You dunked Master Snape in a duck pond?"

Lily smiled, "Oh, don't tell him I told you that, if you ever do meet the man. We were the best of friends, before... well, before James and I became the best of friends."

There was an uncomfortable silence, and Harry moved to change the subject, "So when did you get control over your magic? Will it take long for me to adjust to it?"

Lily looked miserably down at her, "I didn't, Harry. I thought I did-I was sure I had, by the time I left school, but..." she took a sharp breath, and began speaking faster, "You have to understand, Harry, one of the reasons I married your father is how *in control* I felt around him. The Potters have always been known for their magical precision-declared Light for as long as anyone can remember. Their family magic is just too controlled to be anything else. When I was with James, I didn't have violent outbursts. Sometimes my magic lashed out at him if I was really annoyed, but it never hurt anyone. It-it lashed out in a *controlled* way, if that makes sense."

It made perfect sense, to Harry. She recalled Remus' story of a young Lily sending James hurtling through a crowded train station and locking him in a compartment without a scratch. She also remembered her outburst at the SOW Party's New Year's gala, where she had so precisely moved Lestrage backwards in her anger. It sounded like a nightmare, though, living with that uncertainty for so many years. Was that her future, too?

"We married, and my magic settled down even further once it was bound to James', and I thought everything was fine," Lily said. She swallowed and stroked Harry's hair, "Then I got pregnant."

"With me," Harry prompted, when Lily paused to collect her thoughts.

"Yes, with you. Harry, Remus tells me you know the Despaco shield," Lily said tentatively.

"Yes," Harry said, grimacing, "I'm not sure where I picked it up, but my magic... likes it." She waited for Lily to dismiss her explanation of ridiculous, but instead, her mother started to cry. Big, slow tears welled up and trailed sadly down her cheeks. "Don't cry, Mum, please. What's wrong?"

Harry rubbed Lily's hands fretfully, not sure what else to do.

"I'm afraid that's my fault as well," Lily said, hiccupping through her tears, "I learned that spell in my seventh year, and my magic took to it instantly. I don't know what you know about the shield, but despite its power, it has a very simple magical pattern. It takes a lot of energy to keep it going, but it's one of the fastest defensive spells around, because the magic takes almost no time at all to assemble. When I was pregnant with you, I lost count of the number of times I used it accidentally. I was a little paranoid that something would bump my stomach and hurt you, and my magic took that worry to a dangerous level. In the last three months, it was on a hair trigger, Harry. James was wary about even *touching* my stomach. It was... it was not a good time, for us."

Harry tried to imagine loving someone, and not being able to get close to them for fear of their magic. She couldn't, but she *could* imagine being the person no one could get close to. She had never sympathized with her mother more. She wrapped her arms around Lily's waist and leaned in. It took a moment before Lily started talking again.

"The night you were born, my magic went wild," Lily's voice was almost a whisper. "It flared up as soon as I went into labor. The Mediwitch wasn't sure what would happen if I attempted magical transportation like the floo, and apparition was out of the question, so the Mediwitch came here and delivered you in our guest bedroom."

"I didn't know I was born in this house," Harry said, surprised and a little grossed out.

Lily nodded, "You wouldn't have recognized it then. We had to redo most of the bedroom after the birth. I had no control over my magic that night. It rained from the ceiling for over an hour, nearly flooding the place, and when the water cleared there were huge tangles of vines growing over everything, even the bed frame. At one point I nearly passed out from the pain, and when the blackness started creeping in the edges of my vision, I panicked. My magic flared, and

a light so bright came out of me that James, who was standing closest, was blinded." Lily sobbed a bit, "I didn't mean to, but he screamed so loudly I thought I'd killed him. The Mediwitch took him away, floored him to St. Mungo's, and she told me he'd be fine, but I didn't know if she was lying to me to keep calm or not at that point. When you were finally born, the Mediwitch didn't even stay to clean you up. She was so frightened, I think. She said she'd send someone to check on you, but no one ever came."

Harry had never realized the circumstances of her birth were so unusual, "Did Dad get his eyes fixed that night?"

"He did," Lily said, "But it took a long while. I gather the hospital was very busy that night. It was the full moon, so Remus wasn't there. Sirius took Diana and left when things started getting out of control- she was due any day as well, you know, and the Mediwitch didn't want her exposed to the magic being thrown around."

"So it was just you and me there?" Harry asked, disturbed, "What if you'd gotten sick?"

"The Mediwitch did check to make sure we were healthy before she left," Lily said, smiling slightly. "I barely noticed her poking and prodding. All I could see was you. I held you, and stroked your curly little hair. You looked like James right from the start. His hair, his chin, and... his eyes."

Harry blinked. That wasn't right.

Lily sighed, "Beautiful little blue eyes. The nurse forgot to put the eye drops in, and you just looked and looked at me, like you'd never look away. It was so hard, that labor. James was gone, and the Mediwitch was gone, and I was so tired, and I wished, just for a moment, that you had something of *mine*, Harry. Something that proved I had helped create you."

Harry could see where this was going, and she went very still.

"My magic-it was all around us," Lily said shakily, "As soon as I had the thought, it acted. It was a fleeting wish, Harry-you were perfect and beautiful and I didn't really want to change a thing, but..."

"The magic ran with it," Harry said.

Lily nodded, clinging to Harry hard, "Before I even realized what was happening, your eyes were green. The brightest, clearest green I'd ever seen. I tried to undo it-to change them back, but the magic wouldn't *listen* to me."

Harry wondered if that was the case, or if, deep down, Lily didn't really want the color to change back.

"I waited for weeks for them to turn back, for the magic to fade, but it never did," Lily said, "Haven't you ever wondered why your eyes were so unnaturally bright as a child? They've faded the last couple of years, I've noticed. I suppose the magic might finally be wearing off. Maybe they'll be back to blue in a few more years."

But it wasn't wearing off, Harry knew. She and Archie had simply been wearing green contacts the last year or so, and no contact could match the eerie brightness of her actual eyes. They'd thought they'd been so clever, avoiding eye contact with their parents while wearing them, not knowing their parents had attributed the change to something else entirely.

"When we found out you needed glasses, I was devastated," Lily said, sniffing, "I thought I'd damaged your eyes somehow. James assured me that poor eyesight runs in his family, but I've never been sure-what if you'd had my good vision, and I'd ruined it? The point is I *could have* damaged you. My magic *changed* you, on a *whim*. That's when I had this bracelet made." She fingered the bracelet now clasping Harry's forearm.

"I thought Dad got this for you," Harry said, "To commemorate your first child together. It has my name on it."

Lily shook her head, "It's not just a piece of jewelry. It's a magic suppressor-a powerful one. I put it on a few days after you were born, and I've never taken it off until now. I didn't want to take the chance that anything like that would ever happen again. Your name is engraved on it to remind me why it's necessary. So that I never forget what I did to you, to my baby."

Harry didn't know what to say. It wasn't as though she minded having green eyes instead of blue-it didn't matter either way to her. Lily was obviously still distraught over it, however, even after all these years. She never imagined her mother was living under this kind of guilt and pressure.

"Even with the bracelet," Lily said, "My magic is too strong. I have to use it almost constantly, just to keep it under control."

"I thought you just liked using magic," Harry said, feeling stupid. She'd honestly assumed Lily simply *appreciated* magic, not that she *had* to use it in order to control it.

"I do," Lily said earnestly, "I'm not trying to scare you, Harry, magic is *wonderful* . It's different for you, Harry, and for Addy. You don't have to worry about the kind of things I did. With your father's blood in you, you won't lose control like I did. You can control your magic, Harry, it's just going to take a little time."

Was that true? Harry wasn't sure. The combination of Lily's wild magical reserves and the Potters' magical control might result in the strange presence and lapse of control in Harry's magic, but she didn't think the explanation was that simple. Could her magic *really* have imprinted the Despaco shield from the womb? Would her eyes stay green or fade eventually back to blue? Could she cope with an even greater amount of magic in her core than she was used to? She just wasn't sure.

She wasn't sure of a lot of things, anymore.

Once she'd calmed down, Harry had to give the magic sealer back to Lily, and start re-learning to control her own magic. It was much harder than it had been the first time, and much more frustrating. Several weeks later, she was no closer to managing her swelled reserves, and she was at her wits end.

Her parents thought she was doing wonderfully-and Harry supposed by Lily's standards, she was. There were no violent outbursts after the first night, no outward manifestation of her magic. It was relatively containable, until she tried to use it. The trouble was, she couldn't let a little bit out without letting a firestorm out. She tried a levitation charm, and no matter how gently she directed the magic, whatever she was lifting slammed into the ceiling. The more powerful spells she tried were, if anything, worse. She got trapped inside her own shield charm for half a day, too afraid to try a ward-disruptor from the inside.

She was lucky she'd finished her mail-order schooling before her birthday, or she'd be way behind on the practical work. As it was, she was dreading the coming school year. What would she say when she suddenly couldn't perform any of the magic they'd learned last year?

But the worst of it, the absolute worst, was that she could no longer consciously imbue. When she tried, she overloaded the potions with so much magic the ingredients actually started spontaneously transforming into other things. It was a mess, and she melted four cauldrons before she gave up. It nearly broke her heart to have to tell Krait she was taking an indefinite leave of absence as one of his brewers, but she couldn't brew anything more complicated than a sleeping draught if she couldn't imbue. She had her summer work done, and more than enough to cover the rent on the apartment in the lower alleys for another year, but without brewing she had nothing to do except brood until school started up once more.

She went flying a lot with her new Firebolt, and her new broom was admittedly brilliant, but even that couldn't quite dim the sense of utter uselessness she felt at having wasted weeks of potential brewing time.

The final paper for her internship had gone as well as could be expected. She explained the process as clearly as possible, but as she could no longer demonstrate the process herself, she was worried experimentation in shaped imbuing would be stalled for the foreseeable future. She had been very careful to omit any references to her own gender from either the intern profile or the paper itself, both of which would be published by the Guild. There was a small chance the Potions Master at AIM would read it, and Archie had to be able to pretend it was his.

Addy had gone back to ambivalence around Harry, who couldn't perform the fun little magic tricks with her anymore, for fear of hurting her. Remus was preparing for his new teaching position, Sirius and Archie were spending as much time together as possible before he went back to school, and although Lily and James asked after her magic-controlling progress every day at dinner, Harry was left largely to her own devices for the month of August.

Since magic was beyond her capacity at the moment, Harry turned to non-magical pastimes to keep her busy, primarily self-defense training with Leo. She spent her days in the lower alleys, careful to avoid hanging around Diagon Alley while all the kids going back to Hogwarts were school-supply shopping. She didn't want another run in with someone she wasn't supposed to know.

Her lower blocks were getting stronger, as her body learned to forget that it was female and simply react appropriately to the threat coming her way. She was tanner than she'd ever been in her life, traipsing around outside all day, and she had a sneaking suspicion that the courtyard behind the phoenix was somehow lit with real sunlight, despite the open air being an illusion. She had actually gone so far as to make Archie sunbathe whenever he had free time, just so that their skin tones wouldn't be too different when they switched places.

"Higher," Leo said, catching her foot easily as it tried to connect with his shoulder. He held it there, keeping her off-balance as he lectured-he often did that, claiming the uncomfortable position would make her remember better. "See where I blocked your foot? It's at my shoulder, so my arm is across my chest, still in a good position in case you follow up with a punch or elbow. If you kick higher, aiming for my face, you force my block higher, leaving my torso open to counter attack. Also, many inexperienced fighters instinctually panic when something comes toward their face, so you have a greater chance of catching them off guard."

He released her foot, and Harry shook her leg out before getting back into the guard position. "What if I'm fighting someone much taller than me, and my foot won't reach his face without putting *me* off balance?"

Leo tilted his head, "You could jump, but you'd be better off going for his feet at that point. Tall people are often naturally unstable."

Harry couldn't tell if he was joking about that last bit, but before she could ask Leo's fist was coming toward her solar plexus.

At the end of their session, they ate lunch in the Phoenix, for once just the two of them. Harry supposed everyone else was out and about.

"You're headed back to America soon," Leo commented, "Excited?"

Harry shrugged, "I would be, but my magic is all wonky still."

Leo frowned, "It shouldn't take more than a couple of weeks to settle after your thirteenth. Have you seen a Healer?"

Harry shook her head, "I'm within the range of normal for my family, unfortunately."

"What are you doing to adjust? Just practicing magic all the time?" Leo asked.

"I'm not supposed to use magic over the summer," Harry said, smiling slightly.

"Funny," Leo said, "Really, though, are you working on it?"

"Every day," Harry sighed, "But it doesn't seem to help. Every spell gets overloaded and goes haywire."

Leo grimaced, "It's a shame-you were so good with your magic just a few weeks ago. Have you tried exhausting yourself and then trying a few simple spells?"

Harry nodded, "I can't spend the magic fast enough to deplete it before it replenishes itself."

"That's a problem many would kill to have," Leo said quietly, laughing a bit.

"Doesn't do me much good, since I can't actually use any of the magic without blowing myself up," Harry said, a bit disheartened by the whole situation. She had worked so hard to get comfortable with using her magic, and just when she seemed to really be getting the hang of things, she was back at square one.

"How does your family usually deal with it?" Leo asked.

"My mother wears a band that suppresses her magic to a manageable level," Harry said. She bit the inside of her cheek thoughtfully, "Do you think that would work for me?"

Leo looked hesitant, "I don't think that would be a good long-term solution, no. If you become too dependent on it, you'll never be able to handle the full capacity of your magic."

Harry thought about that, "Do I really need to? I mean, just having access to normal levels of magic would be perfect for me. I just want to be able to brew again-it's driving me mad, Leo. I can't even bring an Allergy Relief Potion up to par anymore."

"Don't you want to realize your full potential?" Leo asked, peering curiously at her.

"In some areas, yes," Harry said slowly, "But in other areas... not if they make me a danger to myself and others."

"You're only a danger if you're out of control," Leo said, "But if you really want a sealer, I know a guy who can help. Be sure, Harry. I think you're old enough to make your own decisions, but you need to decide if short-term relief is worth it, in this case."

Harry closed her eyes and imagined her life moving down two paths. On one of the paths, she got the sealer, and became for all intents and purposes a perfectly average member of the wizarding community. On the other path, she worked at controlling her magic for months, maybe years, with no guarantee that she would ever obtain full control. On the second path, she accidentally hurt people sometimes. They forgave her, probably, but they didn't get so close the next time. On that path, she became a wild card. People noticed her, expected great things from her, and people like Sirius began asking questions when everyone said Rigel had powerful magic, but Archie never exhibited any such signs.

The choice was easy, really. There was only one path that would contribute to her future goals. The other may well destroy them.

"I'd like to get the sealer, Leo," Harry said firmly. She opened her eyes and pinned her friend with her most determined look, "I'd rather be an ordinary wizard, if it means I can be an extraordinary potions brewer."

"I won't pretend to understand why you can't be both," Leo said, "But I'll respect your decision." He waggled his eyebrows a bit after saying that, as though wanting her to notice how *especially* considerate he was being of her choices.

Harry rolled her eyes, "Thanks, Leo. I've never had a friend like you."

"You sound more sincere when you say that in my dreams," Leo mourned.

Harry just shook her head, "Can we see that guy you know today?"

Leo thought about that, "I've got time. He should be open until three o'clock today, at least."

He led her deeper into the alleys, toward his mother's clinic, but they veered off a side street before they got that far. The doorway they stopped in front of had a simple sign hanging from a nail that said, "Custom Metalwork and Repairs."

"This chap can fix anything," Leo confided as they opened the door, "From Goblin-made armor to Fairy-forged silver, but he specializes in custom jewelry."

"Singing my praises?" came an upbeat voice from the back of the tiny shop. Every wall was lined with shelves, which were filled with the kind of containers you might use to sort beads in. Each tiny drawer was labeled with symbols that didn't make much sense to Harry, but which seemed to be meticulously organized.

The man who stepped out through a shadowed doorway behind the counter was middle-aged and very short. His red hair could barely be seen over the register when he passed behind it, but he seemed not at all perturbed that he only came up to their waists. On the contrary, he beamed happily up at them. "What can I do for you today?" he asked, "Looking for a new holster, Leo? Or maybe a nice pair of boot buckles for your young friend?"

"We need a sealer," Leo said, smiling down at the man, "Harry, this is Frein. Frein, my friend, Harry."

"A pleasure to meet you," Frein said, bowing low.

"The pleasure is mine," Harry said, bowing back.

"I like this one, Leo," Frein said, "Most of your friends aren't so polite. A sealer, you say? What level?"

Leo looked at Harry, who shrugged slightly in confusion. There were levels?

"We'll need to have you tested, then," Frein said, stepping back a bit and sort of squinting at Harry, "Just hold still, I'll read your aura in a jiff."

"My aura?" Harry said nervously.

"It won't hurt," Frein said absently. That wasn't exactly what Harry was worried about. "Oh! I'm terribly sorry for assuming you were male, Miss."

Harry waved it off, "Everyone does."

"All the same..." The little shopkeeper frowned, peering intently at her, then said, "Are you sure you need a sealer? No offense, friend of Leo's, but I can't see anything in your aura to indicate either an excess of magic or a new, uncontrolled gift."

Harry grimaced apologetically, "I'm afraid my aura may not be entirely reliable on this matter. Is there another way you can test my levels?"

"Oh-ho!" Frein smiled mischievously, "Got yours recalibrated, eh? Don't see that much these days, but a very good habit to get into, Miss."

Harry supposed by 'recalibrated' he meant she was projecting a false one, and nodded a bit embarrassedly. She'd only had her new aura for a month or so-she never expected to be called out on it so soon. Leo was giving her amused, sidelong glances, which she ignored with the ease of long practice, but she could tell he was filing away the information for a later day.

"Not to worry," Frein said, still cheerful, "We'll just do it the old-fashioned way. Over here, child."

He gestured her toward the counter and ducked behind it to retrieve a device that looked like a long, crystal tube that was fused to a metal sphere on one end. Frein held it up and said, "Put your wand hand on the end of the cylinder, and channel you magic through it-do you know how to do that?"

Harry nodded hesitantly. She imagined it was just like imbuing, but... "What if I break it?"

Frein chuckled, "Not even dragonfire could crack this beauty. The tricky part is to keep channeling your magic through the tube for as long as you can. The sphere at the end of the tube will absorb the magic, measuring the speed and strength of the flow, as well as the endurance of your reserves. I must warn you-the process can be extremely draining, as you will not get the magic you spend back until it replenishes itself naturally. You'll probably feel woozy for a few hours, and weakened for up to a week."

Harry blinked, but nodded, "I understand." It wasn't as though she had anything much to do that week, magically speaking. She didn't go back to Hogwarts for another ten days.

"Whenever you're ready, then," Frein said, handing her the strange object.

She clasped the crystal end in her right hand and held it upright, so that the metal ball was pointing toward the ceiling. It was a bit like holding a very thick, improperly balanced wand. Harry didn't need to concentrate very hard to start the flow of magic-she was good at imbuing by now-but she did need to hold on tightly. The force of the magic shooting through her fingers was like a flash flood, sudden and overwhelming. Harry held on and poured as much of her magic into the measuring device as she could, as fast as she was able.

After a minute, she began to lose the strangely bloated feeling she was still getting used to. She felt almost normal, and began to smile as she pushed more and more magic into the tube. It was *relieving*, she noticed with delight. Like taking the lid off of a cauldron just before it boiled over.

The crystal was beginning to vibrate in her hand, but she clenched her fist tighter, and kept pouring out her magic. There was no control to the process, no finesse. It was as simple as tipping a giant bucket upside down, and as satisfying as squeezing the jelly out of a fireslug.

She could have kept going, but Frein cleared his throat loudly and said, "I think that's quite enough, Miss."

Harry reigned in the stream with an ease that surprised her. She gaped at her own hand for a moment, then pulled out her wand excitedly. "Lumos," she said, bracing herself in case the blinding light of a thousand suns suddenly appeared. Instead, a small ball lit the end of the wand, and Harry laughed out loud, "It works! My magic works, Leo."

Leo had an odd look on his face, but he summoned a smile for her, "That's wonderful, Harry. I suppose you've so little of it left that it's easy to control, now."

Harry turned her senses inward to get a feel for her magical core. It was much smaller than it had been in months. "You're right," Harry said, "I suppose it was as simple as draining the excess off after all-I just have to do it fast enough. Do I still need the sealer?"

"Unless you'd like to be throwing that much magic around all the time, missy," Frein said, "I think you might consider one."

Harry nodded thoughtfully, "I suppose it would be hard to use that much magic all the time. It would probably alarm some people, in fact."

"That's certainly true," Frein said, looking at the measuring device with something akin to awe.

It was a brilliant purple color that she'd never seen metal turn.

"What does the color mean?" Harry asked.

"The device is charmed to portray the level at which a wizard's core registers as a color on the light spectrum," Frein explained, scratching his head as he looked at the violet orb, "Red is near-Squib level, yellow-green is about average, light blue is a solid Mage-level registry, and anything above indigo is... Lord level."

Harry blinked. She'd heard the term before, but she didn't have a good grasp of what it meant. All the most famous powerful witches and wizards were said to be Lords or Ladies of Magic, but Harry didn't know if that was based on their magical ability or their political resources combined with magical potential, or if there were other indicators entirely. "How common is purple as a magical register?" she asked.

Frein shrugged, "I saw a light lavender color once, many years ago. It was a muggleborn boy about your age, one of the powerful ones that crops up every now and then. Other than that, you're the first I've seen. Are you muggleborn, too?"

"My mother was," Harry said, "I get it from her, as far as I can tell."

"You're lucky," Frein said seriously, "The lavender boy was emitting magic like crazy when he showed up. Rattled half the things in here off their shelves. For someone without a sealer yet, you've managed fairly well."

Harry smiled self deprecatingly, "I can clamp down on it fine, but once I've suppressed it, I can't use a little bit of it without letting all of it out in an uncontrolled stream. I'm hoping the sealer can lock enough of it away that I can work with whatever is left."

"Ah," Frein looked excited once more, "A partial-suppressant, then? And a powerful one at that. Very tricky... might need to be custom-made. Can you wait a few more days?"

"I go back to school in ten," Harry said.

"That's plenty of time," Frein said, "What specifically were you looking for? Bracelet? Necklace? If you want a pendant, you can choose the stone yourself."

Harry considered it, "Could you make it small, like a ring?"

Frein nodded slowly, "I could. You wouldn't lose it?"

"Don't you take your rings off for potion-brewing, Harry?" Leo asked, frowning.

Harry shook her head, "I never take this one off," she held up her hand with the basilisk ring on it, "It's spelled to never slip off. I'll do the same to the sealer."

"What sort of spell?" Frein asked interestedly.

Harry shrugged, "It's house elf magic, so I'm not sure. I'll ask one of the elves at school if they'll spell the sealer as well, though."

"Know many house elves?" Frein asked, amused.

"A few," Harry said honestly, "I find them nicer than most folk."

Frein scratched his red hair again, "Never thought of it like that, Miss. So what material did you have in mind? I could make it to match the ring you've already got. Is it polished jade...?"

"Basilisk scale," Harry mumbled, "Jade would be fine, though."

"Ah..." Frein peered interestedly at the ring, "Scale, you say?" He grinned a bit mischievously, "I've got just the thing."

He climbed up one of the many stools and rummaged around on a nearby shelf, pulling open drawers and shutting them with a tut here and there. Eventually he descended the stool with a triumphant expression, waving around something clutched in his little fist.

"How's this one?" he asked, holding it up for them to see, "Not the same shade of green, but not too different-just enough that they'll look like a matched set, but you'll be able to tell them apart."

It was a green scale, deeper in color than the basilisk's, but a little smaller. "Dragon?" she guessed, admiring its sheen.

"Welsh green," Frein agreed, "Will it do?"

"It's perfect," Harry said.

He took her left hand and measured the space above where the basilisk ring rested. There was room enough that a second slender ring would sit comfortably below the knuckle.

They left the shop, promising to return in three days. Harry felt light for the first time in weeks, free of the weight of extra magic swimming in her gut, free of the worry of wondering if she'd be able to learn anything at all that year, and free to resume brewing, at least until her magic replenished itself later that day.

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[end of chapter five].

A/N: Next chapter it's back to Hogwarts! I hope you enjoyed this modest installment (27,300 words). Thank you for reading. And in case anyone cares, my birthday is tomorrow! So I'm not saying your reviews would be the best birthday present ever, but... they would

mean more to me than the stars. I hope everyone is having a fantastic summer.

All the best,

-Violet Matter

Chapter 6

The Ambiguous Artifice:

Chapter Six:

Rigel dodged yet another clump of absent-minded students gunking up the platform as they wandered aimlessly with their trunks, searching for the friends they'd left there the year before. Rigel's, or rather Archie's, trunk was safely ensconced in her robe pocket, and as she'd already said goodbye to Sirius at the platform gate, she walked with purpose through the throng toward the train. It was early yet, and most of the compartments she passed on the way to the bathroom were empty. There was no one at all in the lavatory, presumably because there were nicer bathrooms on the platform itself if anyone really couldn't hold it.

Rigel hung her satchel on the inside of the stall she ducked into and pulled out the dose of Modified Polyjuice she'd prepared. Sending up a quick prayer that she and Archie hadn't grown much over the summer, she knocked it back with a grimace. When the snakes in her stomach had settled into a more comfortable position, she abandoned the stall and sought the mirror above the sink. Comparing the face in the glass to the one Archie had worn all summer was difficult, because they were so similar, but there was definitely a sharpness around the nose and jaw that she thought had been rounder before.

She pushed her hair back off her brow into the more severe style she'd worn to Draco's birthday party. She still hated how exposed her face felt without proper bangs, but Archie assured her the style highlighted her eyes and forehead, drawing attention away from her changing lower facial features, which Archie's masculinity was beginning to noticeably re-shape with each dose of Polyjuice. She reckoned she'd only have to wear her hair pushed back for a day or

two before her friends got used to her new face, at which point she'd go back to leaving it to fall over her forehead in cropped curls.

She bent to collect her bag from the floor and noticed with mixed feelings that the hem of her robes was an inch too short, now. While being taller would lend credence to her artifice, ill-fitting robes would not. If she were Harry, or even just Rigel, no one would notice too-short robes. Her friends in Slytherin would assume she simply gave her wardrobe the usual lack of attention that characterized her interaction with everything not-potion-related. Remus, however, might know that Sirius had just sent Archie's robes for re-tailoring not two weeks ago. In fact, Archie had secretly had them re-re-fitted to fit Harry's form, but in retrospect they should have anticipated some possible growth with the next dose of Polyjuice and left them.

She slouched experimentally in the mirror. It made her look a bit mopey, but it hid the shortness of her hem reasonably well. She didn't have to fake a tired expression to go with the slouch, at least-she'd started her monthlies that morning, and was already exhausted. Once she'd found a potion that let her regulate her cycles, she'd gotten in the habit of fixing them to start on the first of the month. It was a pain that she'd be dealing with the onset on the train again, but better to have them at an inopportune time than to forget when they were coming. With any luck she could get a nap in before they reached Hogwarts.

Satisfied that she looked sufficiently Rigel-like, she pointed her wand at her throat and cast the voice-altering spell, practicing a few lines until she felt reasonably sure her voice could pass as Archie's boyish tenor.

She left the lavatory and headed toward the compartment her year mates generally took for their own. It was still early, so she didn't expect to see anyone within, but Draco was sitting quietly in a window seat, elbow propped against the sill, fingers digging into the muscles of his bent neck. He looked over with a wince when the door opened, but relaxed somewhat when she stepped inside and closed it.

"Draco," she smiled a bit, looking him over subtly, "How are you?"

Her blonde friend bristled at the simple question, "What's that supposed to mean? How are *you*?"

Rigel shrugged, a bit taken aback, "Same as ever."

"Why shouldn't I be as well, then?" Draco said sourly.

"Are you?" Rigel asked, allowing genuine concern to leak into her voice for a moment, "Forgive me, Draco, but you seem... on edge. Has something happened?" Perhaps she was reading too much into her friend's behavior because of the vague worry that had been niggling at her mind since Mr. Malfoy had been to Krait's shop. Draco *did* look as tired as she felt, though, and she somehow doubted he was suffering something similar to what ailed her that day.

Draco looked incredulously at her, "I seem just fine." He sat up straighter and tilted his chin challengingly to emphasize this statement, but she could see the strain behind the façade. When she continued to peer worriedly at him, he muttered something about all-knowing, inhumanly observant friends, and sighed, "It's private."

Rigel frowned for a moment, but then nodded slowly. It wasn't like she could lecture him about keeping secrets. She took the seat next to him and pretended she wasn't worried, instead of pressing him, "How was the rest of your summer?"

Draco grimaced, "Long."

Sensing that much of his summer must have been bound up in whatever had strung out his nerves so completely, and wondering how much, if any, was related to the potion Mr. Malfoy had ordered from Krait, she dutifully changed the subject again.

"Who do you think made Head Boy and Girl this year?" Rigel asked, "Anyone in Slytherin?"

Draco considered it for a moment. "Head Boy will probably go to Weasley," he said reluctantly.

"Not Flint?" Rigel affected surprised dismay, "I thought the professors really started to warm to him last year."

Draco smiled wryly, though even that was slow coming, "Flint. I wonder if he'll even come back this year."

Rigel's eyebrows rose, "Why wouldn't he? It's NEWT year for him."

"Think he cares?" Draco shook his head, "He had to do fifth year twice, right? So he's of age now, or he will be soon. He's not stuck here anymore. He can get a job, start his life."

She considered this. There were some jobs you needed to be seventeen for, she supposed. Not everyone could work as a freelance brewer in Knockturn Alley. "He'd be better off with NEWT's, though, especially if he's looking for career-type work."

Draco snorted, "Flint's not cut out for the kind of jobs that require NEWT's."

Rigel frowned at his easy dismissal, "He's pretty smart, you know."

"It's not about smart," Draco said, rubbing his head like the conversation pained him, "It's a question of character. Stop feeling defensive over him, Rigel. Just because he was our captain doesn't mean we're obligated to overlook his flaws."

Rigel let amusement wash away her indignation, "Was? You seem pretty sure he's not coming back. Care to make a bet?"

Draco looked surprised, but no longer annoyed, at least, "Saint Rigel is going to gamble?"

"Is it gambling if you win?" Rigel asked philosophically.

Draco shook his head with amusement, "Yes. And you're not going to win. Stakes?"

Rigel tilted her head, "If Flint comes back to school this year, you come running with me every morning for two weeks."

Draco huffed, "You still do that? Fine, but when he doesn't return you have to fact check all my potions essays for two weeks."

"Deal," Rigel said, pretty sure Draco was wrong about Flint. She had a stack of summer assignments that said Flint had at least been planning to return as of a few months ago.

She reached out her hand to shake on it, and she didn't think she imagined the slight grimace in Draco's expression when he clasped it briefly.

Theo joined them shortly, looking tan and very self-assured after his summer in the south of Italy. His voice had deepened over the summer, and Rigel took that as a sign that she'd been right to start using the voice-altering spell this year.

Millicent and Pansy arrived together, and although Millicent looked about the same, Pansy's hair had grown astoundingly in just a few months. It was several inches past her collarbones, now, with highlights that spoke of too much time out of doors in the heat.

Blaise was the last to arrive, claiming the seat next to Rigel just as the whistle began to blow.

The first topic of conversation was, of course, the new Defense professor.

"Do you think they got anyone to take it after Lockhart?" Millicent shook her head, "It's not a tough act to follow by any means, but getting petrified probably doesn't appeal to many."

"The curse hasn't done anything that nasty to a someone in a while," Theo remarked, "Maybe it only reacts that badly to *really* incompetent professors."

Rigel smiled at that, "Then this year should be uneventful-my uncle Remus is taking the job."

"Seriously?" Theo blurted, "I mean... that's great."

"I was under the impression that your uncle was *medically* prevented from holding a job," Blaise commented delicately.

"He is," Rigel said easily, "But Dumbledore is a law unto himself. Apparently the Headmaster has complete hiring and firing privileges at Hogwarts, ministry sanctions notwithstanding."

"That's true," Draco said, his eyes tight despite the casualness of his tone, "Dumbledore could hire an escaped Azkaban criminal if he wanted. Father's always complaining about how consolidated his power-base is at Hogwarts."

"Well if anyone ever actually escapes from Azkaban, we'll know where to find them," Millicent said with dark humor.

"Will he be taking Professor Snape's New Wolfsbane Potion?" Pansy asked. Somehow Rigel had forgotten how shrewd Pansy could be.

"Yes," Rigel said, "The breakthrough in Wolfsbane was what prompted Dumbledore to consider Remus for the job." It also struck her privately that Dumbledore wanting Remus for the Defense position could explain why Snape had been so motivated to make that breakthrough in the first place.

"What's he like, as a professor?" Blaise asked curiously, "I don't think I've ever heard much about the man beyond rumors of his... condition."

"He's very knowledgeable on a variety of subjects," Rigel said honestly, "He's an accomplished dueler, and something of an expert in magical creatures. Personality wise, he is notoriously even-tempered, and he has a wicked sense of humor, but I'm not sure he'll show that in class."

"You're so obviously fond of him," Pansy said, her eyes soft, "I'm sure we'll quite enjoy his classes."

"Anything's better than Lockhart," Millicent shuddered, "Will it be hard to treat him like an authority figure now, though?"

Rigel smiled, "I doubt our relationship will change much. It's hard *not* to respect Remus."

Her uncle seemed to be working on distancing himself already, in fact. When Sirius suggested Remus escort Archie to the station, Remus was adamant that it would set an uncomfortable precedent. No doubt he anticipated accusations of favoritism, and his fair nature compelled him to nip the suspicion in the bud. Rigel wasn't going to complain-anything that would make the deception easier.

The conversation moved on to how everyone's summers had been. Theo was remarkably tight-lipped about his exploits in Italy, though he did waggle his eyebrows at Blaise when he thought Pansy and Millicent weren't looking.

He glanced at Rigel and abruptly snapped his fingers, saying, "I almost forgot, I met your cousin, Rigel."

Rigel had forgotten about that, too. "Really?" She feigned a mild interest, "Where? She was terribly busy this summer-I hardly saw her, and our families dine together most nights."

"Diagon Alley," Theo said, "She was shopping at Quality Quidditch. Does she play?"

"Beater," Rigel nodded, "She doesn't get the chance to practice much at AIM, though."

"What's she like?" Pansy asked, curious as ever about anyone she didn't know well.

"Very cool," Theo said earnestly.

"Is she pretty, your cousin?" Millicent asked slyly, eyeing the approving glint in Theo's eye.

"Not particularly," Rigel shrugged.

There was a moment of silence, after which Pansy sighed, "You're not supposed to say that about a Lady, Rigel, how many times must I tell you that?"

"Harry wouldn't mind me saying so," Rigel said, only a bit ironically, "She appreciates honesty."

"Well you've known her too long, obviously," Theo said, shaking his head at the others, "She looks a lot like Rigel, only... I don't know; not plain, though. Lovely eyes. She has a very casual air, but it's weirdly captivating, too. It's hard to explain. She looked at me like she knew things about me-but not in a creepy way. As if we were old friends, only we've never met. She's much friendlier than Rigel is. Funny, too."

Draco snorted gracelessly, "It sounds like you're in love, Theo."

Theo flushed, "Just wait until you meet her-you'll see what I mean."

"You're romanticizing her, because you don't know her very well," Rigel shook her head bemusedly, "Harry's not anything special."

"That's a perfectly awful thing to say about your cousin," Pansy said.

Rigel sighed, "I didn't mean she isn't worth knowing, just that there's nothing that unusual about her. She's just Harry."

"Like you're 'just Rigel,' you mean?" Blaise had a sardonic tilt to his mouth.

Rigel shrugged, not at all sure what to say to that.

Conversation lulled, the train rocked along, and Rigel didn't realize she'd fallen asleep until she woke to the sound of high-pitched yipping noises and several surprised curses.

She opened her eyes and rubbed at them absently as she glanced around the compartment. The door was open and Theo was standing in the middle of the compartment, balancing on one leg as he tried to avoid stepping on something jumping in circles beneath him.

It looked like a baby crup, no bigger than a small rabbit, with curly brown fur and a simple ribbon collar in black and gold.

Millicent had one hand pressed to her mouth, chortling, and Pansy was shaking her head with exasperation. Blaise and Draco just watched Theo dance around the little animal in resigned amusement.

"Found a new friend, Theo?" Rigel asked after a moment.

"It followed me in here when I went out to buy a snack," Theo said irritably, "Every time I try to shoo it out it just circles around behind me." With a sigh of annoyance, he swung his foot back slightly, as though he would give the pup a little kick in the direction of the door.

"No!" Pansy protested, but it was Blaise who reached down suddenly and scooped the crup out of harm's way.

"What?" Theo said defensively, "It's just some Hufflepuff's pet."

"It's a living creature," Pansy said staunchly, leaning over to pat the curly-haired crup apologetically on the head. "Thank you, Blaise."

Blaise shrugged unconcernedly, then frowned. He lifted the crup higher toward his face and sniffed at it. A moment later his expression stiffened and he moved from holding the animal by its scruff to cradling it in his arms.

"Aren't you going to take it to the prefect's compartment?" Millicent asked.

Blaise shook his head slowly, "His owner will come looking for him soon enough."

"All the more reason," Draco muttered, "Don't need more people in here."

Blaise didn't respond, but settled the pet rather decisively in his lap.

Theo rolled his eyes, but sat back down, "At least it's quiet now."

It was another twenty minutes before anyone came knocking on the compartment door, but it was indeed a pair of Hufflepuffs who stuck their heads in a moment later.

"Has anyone seen-oh!" Hannah Abbot rushed into the compartment and bent down in front of Blaise until she was eye-level with the crup, aiming a bright smile into its face, "He's here, Ernie. Hi there, little guy. Did you miss me?"

The crup yipped up at the yellow-haired girl cheerfully, but didn't squirm to get free of Blaise's hold.

"Thank you so much for watching..." Abbot trailed off as she looked up and caught Blaise's gaze. Their dark-skinned friend was staring very intently at the girl from under his lids. After an awkward moment in which the Hufflepuff cleared her throat, she continued, "Well, thanks. Um, I'm Hannah. I mean, we've met, but not really... well."

Abruptly she seemed to realize she was bent awkwardly over Blaise's lap, and straightened with a blush. She looked around the

compartment uncertainly, smiling nervously as her gaze flitted from face to face.

"Anyway, thanks for looking after him," she said with an awkward smile, "I just got him this summer from my aunt, and he's not very well trained, and I'm really sorry if he bothered you..."

Seeing that no one else was going to say anything, Rigel put on a kind smile, "It was no trouble, right guys?"

Pansy took that as her cue to incline her head graciously, and Theo mumbled something semi-agreeable under his breath.

Abbot fingered one of her pigtails nervously, "Thanks, Rigel. I... owe you one?"

It was clear she assumed that's what one was supposed to say to Slytherins when they helped you, but also clear she had no idea what she was really offering.

"Are you kidding?" Rigel affected an embarrassed expression, "I still owe you for saving me in first year. Anyway, it's Blaise you should thank. Blaise Zabini, in case you haven't been introduced formally."

"I, ah, I've seen you around," she offered, giving Blaise a friendly head-tilt, "Hannah Abbot." She held out her hand to shake.

"He knows," Draco muttered quietly. Rigel elbowed him discretely as Blaise reached out slowly to clasp her hand.

He held it still, without shaking it, and said, "It is a pleasure and honor to make your formal acquaintance, Miss Abbot."

The girl's pigtails quivered as she glanced up at Blaise's face, down to their clasped hands, then back up in quick, nervous succession, "Likewise."

Ernie Macmillan, who was standing in the doorway with his arms crossed, cleared his throat pointedly, "Hannah. Let's go."

Abbot smiled again and tugged her hand out of Blaise's grasp gently. She reached toward the cup in his lap, and Blaise obligingly handed him over carefully. "Thanks, again," she said with a little self-deprecating chuckle, "See you all in class."

"Goodbye, Miss Abbot," Blaise said with a slow smile.

The Hufflepuff girl positively tripped her way back out into the corridor, and when the door slid closed once more Theo and Millicent both let out snorts they'd apparently been repressing.

"Smooth," Millicent laughed.

"Thank you," Blaise said, unconcernedly brushing a bit of stray fur from his robes.

"So you're going for it this year?" Theo asked suggestively. It seems Rigel wasn't the only one who'd noticed Blaise's unusual... fixation on Abbot.

"Don't be crass," Pansy said mildly.

"We'll see," Blaise said evenly. Despite Theo's needling, that was all he'd say on the subject.

The train pulled into the station just after dark. They piled out like a wave across the platform, Theo, Millicent, and Blaise splitting off in silent agreement to find their own carriage. The crowd of students was thick, but it was still a complete surprise when Draco suddenly clutched at Rigel's arm and leaned his weight on her.

She looked over to see him grasping Pansy's forearm with a slightly gentler grip as well. Pansy frowned and subtly stepped closer to support their friend without calling attention to his apparent weakness.

Rigel leaned her head in and asked lowly, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Draco gritted out, despite the fact that his face was paler than parchment and he was fighting full-body tremors as they moved through the crowd. Several times she saw him flinch away from the people around him.

Rigel exchanged a glance with Pansy, and in tacit agreement they propelled Draco toward the carriages as quickly as they were able to without causing a scene.

They half-hoisted their friend into the first one they came across. There was already a small girl sitting alone within, but they ignored her in favor of making sure Draco wasn't going to collapse or go into a seizure or something.

"I'm fine," Draco snapped, curling his arms around his narrow torso and turning his head out of the carriage window as it began to move forward.

Rigel and Pansy both backed off, settling back into their seats without pressing Draco further. The fourth member of their compartment didn't seem to be paying any attention to the mini-drama; in fact, she appeared to have sunk into herself psychologically. Rigel frowned as she took in the girl's drawn features and tense posture. Instead of moving with the rocking carriage, she sat so stiffly that it jarred her with every bump.

Just as Rigel was going to ask what was wrong with her, Draco sighed sharply and turned to glare at the girl. "For Salazar's sake, girl, they aren't that frightening. Stop sniveling."

Pansy frowned, "Draco-"

"What?" he turned his irritated glare on Pansy, "She's going to be taking the carriages for the next six years, so she might as well get over it now."

Pansy gaped a bit, taken aback by Draco's inexplicable vehemence.

"H-how did you know?" the petit girl gasped out.

Draco's features closed down abruptly, "It's obvious by how tense you are that you're scared. It didn't start after we got here, so you're frightened by something about the carriage. If you can get on a train, you aren't afraid of moving vehicles, which leaves the thestrals."

"Why do the horses have to be invisible?" the girl whispered, shuddering a bit, "It's like being driven by a ghost."

"Be grateful you can't see them," Draco said darkly, "They're even more hellish when visible, I hear."

" *Draco*," Pansy said, exasperated. She turned to the other girl with a soft expression, "There's nothing to be afraid of."

"How do you know?" the girl said, looking at Pansy very solemnly through wide, baby blue eyes. She would be incredibly beautiful, Rigel realized, when her features weren't cramped with misery.

Pansy faltered under the serious question, but Draco blew out a long sigh and said, "They let them pull the carriages-do you think the professors here would let dangerous things near the students unsupervised?"

The girl blinked slowly, her shoulders relaxing slightly, "I suppose not. What if the teachers don't know-"

"You think you know more than the professors?" Draco said pointedly.

"No," she flushed, ducking her chin so that her ringlets fell across her cheeks with little bounces.

"Then stop being afraid," Draco said. He eyed her robes with a slight sneer, "You're a Slytherin. So act like one."

Pansy suddenly seemed to place the girl in her memory, and straightened up in her seat, "You're Astoria Greengrass, aren't you?"

Daphne's younger sister?"

The girl, Greengrass, nodded shyly, "You're Pansy Parkinson. My sister says you look like a pug."

Pansy blinked, and Greengrass clapped a hand over her mouth in horror.

"I didn't mean-you don't!" she flushed, "You're very pretty, Miss Parkinson."

Pansy's lips tilted in a wry smile, "Thank you. Just Pansy, is fine. May I call you Astoria?"

"Of course," Greengrass junior smiled, and Rigel noted that she'd been correct-the girl was perfectly lovely.

"These are my friends, Draco Malfoy and Rigel Black," Pansy said, gesturing toward each of them in turn.

Rigel smiled and executed a parody of a gallant bow sitting down, which came out ridiculous looking and made Greengrass giggle, just as she'd intended, "Pleasure to meet you, Miss Greengrass."

The second-year girl looked vaguely familiar if she thought back to the group of firsties from the year before, who'd always seemed to move in a small herd, but Rigel was fairly sure she hadn't known Daphne Greengrass even had a sister, much less one at Hogwarts. Then again, she didn't converse with the elder Greengrass sister terribly often.

"You as well," the girl said, and only her bright eyes kept her tone from being simpering. She turned to Draco and flushed a bit, saying, "Thank you, Mr. Malfoy, for your advice. I don't feel so afraid anymore."

"Thank Merlin for that," Draco mumbled, with the barest nod of courtesy in the girl's direction.

Greengrass didn't seem offended, though. She beamed as though Draco had said something perfectly chivalrous, and settled herself more comfortably in her seat for the remainder of the trip.

They swarmed into the Great Hall like so many locusts, hungry and buzzing with impatient anticipation. The sight of the house tables all lined up and bedecked with plates and goblets brought a clenched feeling to Rigel's stomach and to her horror she felt her eyes watering in a way that had nothing to do with the thousands of floating candles shedding light down on the returning students.

I missed this place, she realized with faint surprise, *not just as a place to learn and see my friends, but for the place itself*. She wondered if that was part of the magic of the castle, to make it seem like home no matter how many homes a person already had.

She blinked away the strangely warm nostalgia welling up and cast her glance toward the head table. She spotted Remus immediately, sitting cheerfully beside a dour Professor Snape, and no doubt at least part of the reason the Potions Master looked even more disgruntled than usual to be presiding over the welcoming feast. She smiled when she saw Remus skimming the Slytherin table idly and gave a discrete nod in greeting when he finally picked her out of the crowd. She tried not to betray any anxiety over his presence in her mannerisms, instead affecting the relaxed, confident air that many of her fellow third years seemed to have adopted since she last saw them.

She supposed it was hard not to feel a bit superior when the second-years were looking so uncomfortably awkward at being seated during the welcoming ceremony for the first time. When McGonagall led in a line of trembling first-years the amused, smug grins on her classmates' faces only widened.

Rigel put on a friendly expression, in case any of the firsties' apprehensive glances around the hall should happen to fall in her direction, and waited in silence with the rest of the hall as the Sorting Hat was brought out and began to sing:

"It's been a merry thousand years
since this old hat was sewn.
But every moment since then
I have called this castle home.
The dungeons and the library,
the kitchens and the lawns,
The students running here and there,
their laughter and their yawns.
All of this and more I hold
close to my ragged brim.
But lately something worries me
and leaves me feeling grim.
For though I sit here every year
and sort you one and all,
And though I've said that doing so
will help you to stand tall,
I wonder if dividing you
by idealistic traits
Might overplay your differences
and chain you to four fates.

Though Gryffindor once told me
I was made to see the heart
It seems to me that naming it
thus chokes it from the start.
If one child is called clever
does that mean he couldn't dare?
Rowena used her wisdom
to defend those in her care.
Is courage so commendable
when work ethic is lacking?
Never once did Godric say
that chivalry meant slacking.
Does caring for your friends mean
wanting nothing for your own?
Sweet Helga had ambition
and the strength to see it sown.
And can the child with dreams
fulfill them only through deceit?
Salazar oft said success
comes not to those who cheat.

I see the ravens scorn the puffs
and lions fight the snakes,
And everyone thinks far too much
of ancestors' mistakes.

I can't help feel my time grows short,
my purpose all but gone.

The past must bow to present needs
or reap a future wrong.

So this time when I call a House
and send you on your way,
Listen close for all the things
I didn't get to say.

For each of you is special
in a way that can't be named.

One word cannot define you
though that's what I've always claimed.

So come up here and try me on,
I'll give you my critique

But know that fractured strength
cannot disguise that which is weak.

Your house is not your destiny,

although it is your home

The world is made of every house,

and not just one alone."

The applause came slowly, interspersed with murmurs.

"It barely mentioned the House traits-"

"I never heard that Ravenclaw knew battle magic-"

A stern throat clearing by McGonagall eventually cut the whispered speculations short, and the Sorting proceeded without major incident. Dumbledore, ever conscientious of his student's impatient bellies, did not wait long after the last student scrambled over to the Gryffindor table to let the feast begin.

"I've never heard it criticize students so openly," Rosier, who was sitting a few seats down and across from Rigel, said idly as they began to serve themselves. It took a moment for Rigel to realize he was talking about the Sorting Hat, but she observed several other older students nodding their heads in silent agreement.

"How does it know the Gryffindors are slacking, anyway?" Avery laughed, glancing over his shoulder at the red-and-gold-plated table behind him.

"They're always slacking," someone else said dismissively, "That's what happens when you have no ambition, no work ethic, *and* no smarts."

Several other people laughed, and the conversation moved on.

"Don't seem to have absorbed the Hat's message much, do they?" Rigel asked in quiet amusement, turning her head toward Draco as she speared a potato on her fork. The teasing grin dropped from her

lips as she took in his absolutely haunted expression. He was white-faced and tight lipped, his hands clenched in his lap, not even bothering to pretend like he was eating.

Rigel immediately began surreptitiously sliding food onto his plate in between serving herself. An empty plate would attract obvious attention, once people started looking up from their food. She leaned her shoulder gently into Draco's, and he flinched violently at first, then began to sag into her side. She stiffened her muscles as much as she could to act as an unobtrusive prop, and after a few moments she felt Draco take a deep, steadying breath.

"All right?" she asked mildly, knowing that a concerned or suspicious tone would only attract the notice of those around them.

"Fine," Draco said, and somehow his voice came out with casually controlled ease, despite the slight quaking that passed from his wobbly frame to her solid one.

He began to slowly eat with his left hand while his right side leaned into her. It wasn't obvious that she was supporting him, thanks to how crowded the tables were, and she was impressed with the level of relaxation he managed to inject into his movements, despite also being painfully aware of how little strength he seemed to have. Her left shoulder and side began to ache after a while, but she said nothing, keeping as still as possible, and idly wondering if she had known Draco was ambidextrous and forgotten, or if he'd merely hidden the skill extremely well until now. His left hand didn't so much as hesitate in guiding food gracefully from plate to palate.

Even Pansy didn't seem to notice Draco's weakness, though Rigel reflected that if their blonde friend *had* noticed she likely would not have made any outward sign of her knowledge in deference to her friend's pride.

The feast seemed to go on much longer than usual, and it was with relief that Rigel saw Dumbledore finally stand and command the Hall's attention with a genial smile.

"Welcome all to a new term at Hogwarts," he said with a little bow in the students' general direction. The movement caused his hat to slip forward into his eyes and many laughed good-naturedly as the Headmaster straightened it with an embarrassed little grin. "So many new faces I see tonight, a few of which sit at this very table," Dumbledore gestured to his left and right. "As you may have heard, our esteemed Professor Lockhart found that teaching was not his calling after all and decided to continue his battle against the dark forces in a more active fashion. In his place, I am pleased to welcome Professor Remus Lupin, accomplished duelist and expert in the art of magical defense."

The Hall clapped politely while Remus stood and gave a brief smile and wave.

"Alas, dear Professor Lockhart was not the only one of our family to leave us this summer," Dumbledore continued, "Our good friend Professor Kettleburn has, at long last, retired. Our new Care of Magic Creatures professor is not present at the moment, but I'm sure--"

The door behind the staff table banged open loudly and a short man in a long brown coat came scurrying through, "I'm here," a small voice coughed apologetically, "Here, Headmaster. Sorry. Trouble with the thestrals..."

"Ah, your timing is most appropriate, Professor Pettigrew," Dumbledore said with a friendly wave, "Come and introduce yourself to the students."

Rigel started involuntarily at the name 'Pettigrew' and felt Draco jerk as though in echo of her surprise. "Sorry," she muttered distractedly, eyes fixed on the head table.

Pettigrew was the fourth Marauder, the one who'd broken ties with her father and uncle after declaring allegiance to the SOW party. He was to teach here, the same year that Remus happened to be

teaching? That was a rather large coincidence, she thought with a tendril of suspicion.

As Pettigrew stammered through a brief, "Hello," to the Hall, Rigel looked toward Remus and surprised a look of utter bewilderment on his face. So her uncle had not known about Pettigrew's arrival at Hogwarts, either.

The start-of-term announcements continued after Pettigrew took a seat beside Hagrid, but Rigel was not really listening. She was thinking. Someone had to fill Kettleburn's place, of course, but for it to be a member of Riddle's party, even a junior member... was it really a coincidence? Riddle had *promised* to stop meddling at Hogwarts. Was he already going back on his word?

Rigel shook the suspicion away with difficulty. Lots of people were members of the SOW party, probably. Maybe even some of the other teachers were, too. She realized she didn't actually know all her professors' allegiances, and reassured herself that if Dumbledore had hired him, he was bound to be okay. Then she remembered that Dumbledore had hired Lockhart, too, and Quirrell before him.

He was friends with Sirius, James, and Remus, once, she told herself, he can't be as bad as all that.

He seemed familiar, too. Like a face she'd seen in a crowd once, or printed in the newspaper, perhaps. On top of all that, he was so... unassuming. He stumbled through his introduction, but not in the contrived, stuttering way that Quirrell once had. Pettigrew seemed genuinely flustered at all the attention, and his face turned a cherry red as he slinked away to his seat. She could almost feel sorry for the man-and probably would, if she hadn't know how the loss of his friendship had hurt the other three Marauders for many years after.

Dumbledore wrapped up his speech quickly and sent them off to bed. Rigel took a risk and casually slipped an arm under Draco's outer cloak and around his waist as they stood. Supporting him, she

lingered at the edges of the Slytherin crowd as it headed down into the dungeons.

When they reached the common room, Rigel skirted the room with Draco and slipped unobtrusively down the hallway to their dorm room. Everyone else would be congregating for the start-of-term house meeting with Professor Snape, but Rigel thought her Head of House would forgive her for being more concerned with Draco's health, even if the meeting was supposed to be mandatory.

Maybe he won't notice we're missing, she thought, wryly optimistic.

When she nudged the door closed behind them, Draco immediately pulled away from her and slid to the floor by the foot of his bed, where his trunk was sitting. He opened it, and, thinking he meant to unpack before resting (as was the fastidious boy's usual habit), Rigel moved closer to help.

Draco snapped his head up at her with a scowl, "Going to watch me undress?" he asked snidely.

Rigel stopped and turned with a shrug toward her own bed, which was once again next to Draco's. She fished in her trunk for her pajamas and heard the rustling sound of shifting fabric that told of Draco doing the same.

Then she heard the tell tale snick-pop of a small cork being pulled from a vial. She turned her head slightly to see Draco shoving something underneath the top layer of clothing quickly, a grimace on his face, no doubt from the aftertaste of what he'd just gulped down. She politely ignored the slight smell of suppressant potion that permeated the air, but she did wonder how stupid Draco thought her to be, exactly.

She dawdled until Draco climbed into bed and closed his curtains, then let her face melt from its serene expression into a thoughtful moue. The potions were definitely meant for Draco, then, and he was taking them willingly. All clues pointed to a magical gift recently

acquired, but what could Draco have unlocked that would be so draining that it required suppressant potions to-apparently unsuccessfully-subdue? Most magical abilities did not negatively affect the user, even when out of control. It had to be a gift that caused the environment to influence Draco, instead of the other way around. He could be a magic-sensor, she supposed, which would certainly explain why he was overwhelmed by Hogwarts even with the suppressant potion dampening his sensing abilities. He could also be some sort of elemental mage-the ambient magic around Hogwarts would definitely give Draco one monster of a headache before he learned to control it were that the case.

Rigel shook her head as she quietly began unpacking her things. There was no way of knowing for sure until Draco told her. Whatever his gift was, he wasn't in full control of it, and it was unlikely to pose a real threat until he was, and maybe not even then. She hadn't learned Occlumency for nothing, after all.

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Severus strode quickly from the Slytherin dorms, not because he was in a particular hurry, but because only the disgustingly young thought time could ever afford to be wasted. His start of term speech had gone smoothly, though he noted the absence of two particular third-years with little surprise. Lucius had of course informed Severus of his godson's recently acquired... ailment. That Rigel Black had already noticed and responded to his friend's condition was inevitable, and a testament to the boy's suitability as an asset to the Malfoy family, besides.

He arrived at the too-familiar stone gargoyle in a timely fashion, and only after affixing an appropriately disgusted sneer to his features did he utter the phrase "Jumping Jellies" in its general direction.

Albus had already donned a dizzying nightshirt that appeared to portray a patchwork of meaningless symbols, all of which orbited the headmaster's torso exuberantly at a speed unsuited to any sort of sleepwear, much less that of a venerable wizard of Albus' age and power.

Worse than the garment he wore was the old coot's twinkling, knowing gaze.

"Has it arrived?" Severus asked tersely.

"Of course, of course," Albus smiled infuriatingly, "You'll be giving it to him tomorrow morning, I suppose?"

"That is when the students receive their schedules, is it not?" Snape bit out, resigned to the knowledge that the old wizard was not simply going to hand it over without pausing to savor the moment first.

"It is so good to see you finally taking such personal interest in a student, Severus," Albus commented with a satisfied little hum, "It's about time you took a prodigy of your own. All the other professors have had at least two-Filius has personally trained *seven* bright young minds, if I recall correctly."

"As you say," Severus said, holding a hand out impatiently, "If it has indeed arrived, I will take it now."

Albus chuckled as he reached into a drawer and pulled out a golden drawstring pouch, "Always in such a hurry, Severus. Let us hope your apprentice shares your... respect for time-management, eh?"

Severus took the pouch expressionlessly, mentally grumbling about wizards who took too much amusement in the sensibleness of others.

"Good evening, Albus," he said once he had secured the little bag at his belt.

"I daresay it has been," the headmaster said, twiddling his thumbs as Severus made for the door.

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Rigel woke earlier than her roommates, as was her habit, and collected her running clothes before heading into the bathroom she shared with Draco, Theo and Blaise having unofficially claimed the other as their own.

Once she'd stripped down to her underwear, she quickly Evanescoped the evidence of her monthly bleeding and performed a bleaching spell on her underwear just to be thorough before tossing it down the laundry shoot. She wondered vaguely if Archie ever considered exactly what his clothing was going through, being lent to her, then decided that for his sake she hoped he hadn't worked out the exact logistics.

Her magic was under her complete control once more, thanks to a few days work getting used to the suppressant ring. From what she'd deduced, it worked something like a dam on her magical core, holding all but a thin trickle back when she tried to use her magic. She'd done all sorts of experimenting in the days leading up to her return to Hogwarts, and generally the results had left her quite satisfied.

Most of the spells she knew worked perfectly normally. Sometimes when she imbued a potion it took much longer than normal, because while she could direct the magic to the potion she couldn't widen the 'hole,' so to speak, so there was only so much magic she could use within a certain amount of time.

She couldn't cast the Despaco shield at all. It simply required more magic at a faster rate than she had access to with the dampener on.

She dressed quickly, making sure that the tiny bit of non-flatness that distorted the otherwise masculine line of her chest was invisible even while bouncing due to the tight elastic undershirt she wore beneath the baggier, sweat-stained outer one.

Lastly, she drew on a pair of thin, plain black gloves that nevertheless sat smoothly over the two rings on her left middle finger. There was no need for anyone to know she wore a dampener, particularly if it was one Harriet Potter might be seen wearing in the future, and there was the very slight chance that Remus had noticed Harry wearing the basilisk ring that summer.

She stopped at her trunk to pull out her trainers, and saw Draco poke his head out from behind his curtains as she shut the lid.

"Going running?" he asked, sleep thickening his voice.

Rigel nodded, "Want to come?"

Draco began to shake his head tiredly then stopped, looking thoughtful. "Yes..." he said slowly, "May I?"

"Of course," she said, a bit surprised. Draco was not a morning person, and usually grumbled about coming running with her, though he did every so often.

Draco had a determined cast to his features as he padded quickly to his trunk and rummaged for comfortable clothing. Rigel looked away as he began to change unselfconsciously into loose breeches, and didn't look back until he nudged her with the toe of his shoe and a soft chuckle.

"Still so easily flustered, Rye?"

It was the first time he'd used her nickname since coming back to Hogwarts, and Rigel couldn't help the warm feeling it gave her insides. She had begun to think her friend would be perpetually

grumpy, at least until he adjusted to whatever magical gift was affecting him.

"It turns my stomach to see naked people so early in the morning," she drawled softly, a curl of disgust on her lips.

"Sure it does," Draco huffed, grabbing his wand and fitting it into the holster on his arm with casual grace. She wondered wryly how many times he'd practiced that motion since getting the wand-holder for his birthday. "Just admit you're a prude," he said as they slipped out of the room and into the hallway.

"As soon as you admit you're an exhibitionist," Rigel tossed back.

"I prefer to think of it as a form of community service," Draco said archly, "The world would be a drab little place without my beauty to brighten it."

"That's what women are for," said an amused voice by the common room door.

They looked over to see Pansy waiting for them casually at the entrance wall, dressed in loose-fitting clothing, her medium-length hair pulled back into a no-nonsense bun. At their surprised looks, Pansy laughed and shook her head mockingly, "You didn't think I'd let you boys have all the fun, did you?"

Rigel felt even warmer still as the three of them traipsed out to the castle lawn and down toward the lake where she preferred to jog. She had *missed* her friends over the summer. She loved her family dearly, but she never felt less alone than she did with Draco and Pansy by her side.

"I hope you kept in shape this summer," she said, a bit of cheek in her voice, "I'd hate to have to run circles around you."

"Not all of us were distracted with what was no doubt untoward amounts of potions brewing, Rigel," Pansy said slyly, "You just try to

keep up."

The blonde girl took off at a brisk pace, her muscles making no unnecessary movements as her feet propelled her across the ground.

"You heard the lady," Draco said, a smile on his lips. They took off at a reasonable jog of their own and Rigel couldn't help but notice Draco noticing Pansy's admittedly trim figure as she glided just ahead of them.

When did we start getting old enough for that ? She wondered idly. Not that she disapproved. It could only be a good thing if Pansy and Draco became... *interested* in one another. They were a good match-friendly with one another, both Heirs to prominent families... and if their attention was on one another, well, how much time could they spend wondering about their other friend Rigel's enigmatic life?

Those were thoughts for the future, though, so Rigel let her mind wander to other things as they made good time on the rest of their run.

Draco was noticeably more tired than either Pansy or Rigel by the time they reached their starting point, but it was he who, in between pants, asked, "What... next?"

Rigel led the stretching routine, then the strengthening exercises, lending her friends her hand weights when they sheepishly replied they had forgotten to bring theirs along. Rigel had long since stopped wearing weights constantly in an effort to bulk up-the amount of physical exercise she had been getting over the summer meant her arms and legs were whip-chord tight now-but she kept the hand weights in the pockets of her workout attire, since the exercises Remus prescribed her still required them.

They arrived at breakfast just in time to see Professor Snape handing out the schedules for the new term. This would be the first

year they were permitted to choose extracurriculars, and their year mates were already beginning to excitedly compare their schedules.

Draco and Pansy received theirs eagerly, examining them with pleased expressions, but when the time came for Rigel to get hers, Snape fixed her with a level stare and said, "There were issues accommodating the classes you opted for, Mr. Black. Come to my office after your meal and we will discuss possible revisions."

Rigel quietly agreed, fighting a frown. Draco, who was looking much improved from the night before despite the way he continued to twitch unprovoked every so often, raised an eyebrow at Rigel's empty hands. "Tell me you didn't try to sign up for *all* of the optional classes."

Rigel suppressed a flush, "Of course not. Maybe one of the classes they put me in was cancelled, or something."

"What did you want to take?" Pansy asked curiously, "I've got Care of Magical Creatures, Arithmancy, and Divination."

"Divination?" Draco wrinkled his nose, "Why?"

Pansy shrugged, "I thought it would pair well with Arithmancy."

Draco didn't seem convinced, but he said, "I'm taking International Studies, Ancient Runes, and Dueling. I applied for the Healing course, but I suppose my Charms work wasn't up to snuff."

They looked expectantly at Rigel, so she shrugged uncomfortably and admitted, "I just picked whatever seemed interesting. Arithmancy, Ancient Runes, Magical Theory, Healing, Dueling, Alchemy... I knew it was too many, but I thought they'd just put me in whichever ones were convenient, providing I even got into all of them."

Draco rolled his eyes, "Did you even prioritize them on your form?"

She smiled a bit sheepishly, "I'm not too picky. Anything besides Potions is secondary, Professor Snape knows that. I didn't want to take a spot in a popular class that someone else really wanted when I'd be happy with anything."

Her friends shook their heads good-naturedly, but otherwise went back to exchanging schedules with the others.

She entered Snape's office at his beckoning and sat in the plain chair he'd provided her. She couldn't remember at what point the Potions Master began transfiguring a seat for her when they met in his office, but she felt no small amount of pride at the thought that she'd risen enough in his esteem to merit it.

Snape favored her with a long, penetrating stare before he spoke; "There are not many students in this institution who truly appreciate its purpose, Mr. Black. Many of your peers are here because our laws require a witch or wizard to earn a minimum of four OWLs in order to retain his or her wand. There are some, however, like yourself, who are here to actively pursue an education. Among those students, those who show genuine promise are even fewer. Of those with potential, fewer still demonstrate the dedication and level-headedness necessary to earn the unanimous esteem of their professors. These latter students, Mr. Black, are therefore awarded certain... opportunities."

Rigel just blinked, unsure where Snape was going with this. Would they allow her to take more than the recommended three electives after all?

"As such opportunities are not available to the majority of students, it is necessary that they be handled with a particular attention to discretion." Snape's gaze became, if possible, more serious, "What I am about to discuss with you will remain a secret. You will not tell Miss Parkinson and you will not even hint at it within Mr. Malfoy's hearing. Is that completely understood?"

"Yes, Sir," Rigel said, a bit alarmed. What in regards to her schedule could possibly warrant such secrecy?

Snape nodded in a satisfied way, reached into his desk drawer, and withdrew a thin, golden chain, at the end of which hung a sturdy-looking hourglass filled with golden sand and encased in a circular shell.

"This is a time-turner," Snape said, sliding the necklace carefully across the desk. "It allows its wearer to travel backwards in time, not to change time, but to re-live periods of it. With this model, one can travel a maximum of seven days into the past, but you will never need to use it to travel more than 12 hours back. You will never tell anyone you have access to this device. Some professors have already been informed, of course, but the other students must not know."

Rigel stared at the tiny device in patent disbelief, "You're giving me a *time-turner* ?"

"The Ministry is *loaning* a time-turner to a very promising young student who has already demonstrated exceptional moral fiber in the face of adversity. It is to be used only for the purposes of academic enrichment. The moment its use is suspected to be flagrant in any manner, it will be removed from your possession forthwith."

Rigel nodded slowly, still coming to grips with the fact that Snape was giving her a time-turner. "So..." She cleared her throat and tried again, "What classes am I taking, then?"

Snape wordlessly handed her a very complicated-looking schedule. There were thirteen classes in total, she counted, seven core classes and six electives. Except... "I don't have Potions with the other third years?"

"You are beyond any material covered in third-year Potions," Snape said frankly, "It would be a waste of your time and an unfair level of

competition for your classmates. You will have private lessons three times a week with me instead."

She inclined her head, not about to turn down personal lessons with Master Snape, even if it did mean one less class with her friends. "I didn't expect to be accepted into all of these," she commented faintly, scanning the extracurriculars. Arithmancy, Ancient Runes, and Magical Theory were open to all students, as none required a strong background in any particular subject, but Healing, Alchemy, and Dueling all required recommendations from the Charms, Potions, and Defense professors respectively. She supposed they must just look at a student's record for Defense, since professors were so inconsistent.

"You've already been taking Healing lessons with Madam Pomfrey once a month," Snape pointed out, "Now you will have them two hours a week. Your scores on the Defense Against the Dark Arts end of term exams have been above average both times. As for Alchemy, there is no question that you have both the Herbology and Potions experience necessary to attempt the art. The Headmaster is very busy, however, which is why you have only one double lesson a week in that subject."

Blowing out a slow breath at the idea of studying Alchemy under Professor Dumbledore himself, Rigel said, "If it's all right, professor, I would like to drop the Dueling class completely. I'm grateful to be accepted, but I believe even with the time-turner twelve classes will be more than enough."

In truth, she would have loved to take Dueling, but when she'd applied for it she hadn't known Remus would be teaching it. The less time she spent with her uncle, the better.

Snape regarded her thoughtfully, then smiled ever so slightly, "Very well. It is exactly this kind of prudence that afforded you this opportunity, Mr. Black."

Rigel swallowed the sick feeling of guilt in her stomach, and smiled back.

"If everything else is in order, I will explain how this time-turner works, and you will use it to go back one hour and arrive at your first class on time." Snape went through the mechanics of the time-turner quickly, and Rigel was surprised by how simple it was. She merely had to turn the shell 1/2 turn for every hour she wanted to go back. "I recommend you limit yourself to turning only an hour or two at any one time, then turning again later that day if you've need. Once you begin repeating whole days at once, it becomes more and more difficult to remember where and when you are supposed to be."

Rigel nodded. That made sense. "I'll be awake more than the recommended 16 hours a day with this," she commented, "Should I sleep more to compensate?"

"Yes," Snape replied, "You'll want to sleep an extra hour a night at least, depending on how many hours you turn that day. On the back of your schedule there is a recipe for a potion that will lengthen your sleep cycle an average of five hours a day. Although you shouldn't need to repeat more than two hours a day to attend all your classes, you will need the extra time to complete homework assignments for your additional workload. You are responsible for brewing the potion yourself and taking it once a week."

She nodded to show she was listening, looking over the schedule. "On Tuesdays I have Magical Theory at the same time as Alchemy and Defense. So I can redo the same hour more than twice?"

Her brain was beginning to catch up to the possibilities the time-turner represented, and she was having trouble suppressing her growing excitement.

"You can be present in the same time no more than six times at the very most, which is more than you will ever require," Snape said curtly, "Too many identical cores in close proximity can cause

extremely unnerving magical resonance that has been known to disrupt or damage a wizard's magical core indefinitely."

Rigel made a mental note not to repeat any hour more than five times, just in case. "Will it age me?"

"It will," Snape allowed, "But no more than a few months unless you use it excessively." He eyed her sternly as though he knew exactly what she was thinking. "This is an enormous responsibility, Mr. Black. You will be psychologically evaluated at random intervals throughout the year and if at any point I find you are using this device unwisely, I will be unspeakably aggravated."

Rigel put on her best reassuring smile, "Academic pursuits only, Sir. I understand. Thank you. I won't make you regret giving me this chance." She was going to take twelve classes. Twelve! And she would never not have enough time for something again! Occlumency, Healing, Flint's assignments (provided he ever showed up to claim them), even brewing for Krait would be no problem now.

"There are a few more conditions," Snape cautioned, "People with registered time-turners are not allowed to participate in competitive sports, in case they use their advantage to view the game before participating in it, so you will be forced to withdraw from the Slytherin House Quidditch team if you decide to accept this."

Rigel grimaced, but nodded her understanding.

"You must never take the time-turner off. Not when you shower, not when you sleep. Change clothing in a way that will not reveal it to anyone, though it is spelled with a subtle notice-me-not that should suffice unless you call deliberate attention to it. You must remember when you are at all times; do not cross paths with yourself, do not be seen by two different people at the same time if they are likely to mention it to one another. Most of your classes are organized such that the regular third-year classes only overlap with classes you will take one-on-one, like Healing and Alchemy, but this is not always the case. Do nothing memorable in class, nothing that will be talked

about. When your friends ask which classes you're taking tell them only the ones that cannot be kept private. This," he pulled out a second schedule, much simpler than the first, "Is the schedule your friends will see. You are taking Ancient Runes, Arithmancy, and Magical Theory only once a week. Your private lessons with me are during your third-year Transfiguration classes, so say only that you are self-studying Potions according to an advanced syllabus of my devising. Any questions?"

It was a lot to take in. She thought for a long moment, but the only thing she could think to say was, "Thank you."

"You are due in Charms," was all he said in reply.

She stepped into a small alcove and turned her time-turner back an hour, then checked the wrist watch she used to time potions in lieu of the pocket watch Archie gave her (being that she still couldn't open that one) and realized it still showed the time being an hour later.

Of course, she mentally sighed, her watch was moving linearly like she was; it didn't care that she'd traveled backwards in time. Its cogs just kept ticking along. She got out a small notebook and noted the date and time she'd used her time-turner discretely on a blank page toward the back. She suspected this was going to get complicated.

In a burst of curiosity, she pulled out the Marauder's Map and looked for a dot bearing her name. There were two, she realized with a small smile, one up in the Great Hall and one in the alcove in the dungeons. That was certainly going to be useful. If she ever forgot where one of her was at a given time, she could just check the Map to make sure she didn't run into... her? Herself? Shaking her head, she put the Map away and used her wand to cast a spell that showed the actual time.

She still had twenty minutes before she would even leave breakfast for Snape's office. A little unnerved by the idea that there was another, slightly younger version of herself sitting upstairs in the Great Hall in complete ignorance of her existence, Rigel pulled out

her invisibility cloak and put it on. Classes wouldn't start until fifteen minutes after breakfast, so she had half an hour to do with as she liked, and she wasn't going to waste one minute of it.

She pulled out the Dark Disguise book and settled in to read. There was a fascinating section on skin-changing charms that she'd probably never use, but which she thought had a similar methodology to certain skin-related Healing charms, particularly those that vanished potentially cancerous freckles.

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She arrived in Charms right on time, slipping into a seat between her friends a moment before Professor Flitwick bounced through the door.

"That didn't take long," Pansy said, her voice low, "Did you get your schedule worked out?"

"Professor Snape just had to give me my potions syllabus," she said casually, feeling the time-turner under her robes shift as she turned her head, "I'm not taking Potions with you guys this year."

Before Draco could say more than "What?" Professor Flitwick started class. When it became clear that their first lessons was to be a review of the previous year, Pansy began taking rapid notes, even though she'd barely missed a week of actual classes last term, and Draco tuned out entirely in favor of demanding to see Rigel's schedule.

She passed over the modified schedule Snape had given her and watched Draco frown as he read it over.

"You're not in any Potions class."

"Professor Snape thinks I would benefit more from self-study at this point," Rigel said, a small amount of pride leaking into her voice, "So I can move at my own pace, I suspect."

"Will it be like that from now on?" Draco asked, still frowning, "Can you take the OWL in a couple years if you aren't in the fifth-year class?"

"Yes," Pansy murmured distractedly, eyes still on the board as her quill flew across the parchment, "Marcus took the Care of Magical Creatures OWL without attending a single class."

"Oh," Draco scanned the parchment again, "Why are you taking Magical Theory? It's a dry class. No practical work, ever. Only squibs take Magical Theory."

"Anthony Goldstein is taking Magical Theory," Pansy said, still bent over her notes.

"Squibs and Ravenclaws, then," Draco drawled.

"And me," Rigel said sweetly, "I think it sounds interesting."

"Why didn't you get into Dueling?" Draco asked, "I thought you said you were applying for it last term. No way you didn't get in."

"I got in," she admitted, "But I had to choose three, and I decided I could practice dueling on my own."

"I'll practice with you," Draco said decisively, "It's an important skill to have, so I'll teach you and Pansy what I learn in the mornings after we run."

Rigel grinned in genuine thanks. Now she could get the benefits of Remus' continued instruction without actually having to spend a lot of time with him.

Her schedule was passed around to the other third-year Slytherins during class, and it seemed she would share some of her electives

with her other friends.

She had Ancient Runes with Blaise, Theo, and Draco. Only Pansy would be in her Arithmancy class. Millicent shared International Studies with Draco, and was also taking Muggle Studies with Theo. Theo alone was in the Magical Languages elective, but Millicent shared Dueling with Draco. Tracy and Daphne were apparently in Divination and Care of Magical Creatures with Pansy, much to their blonde friend's unspoken annoyance.

After Charms, the third years had Transfiguration with the Ravenclaws. Rigel also had her first lesson with Professor Snape at this time, and she was nervous sitting in Transfiguration, knowing that her future self was on the way to the dungeons, presumably under the invisibility cloak. Draco must have caught on to her nervousness, because he peered at her suspiciously, then said, "What's wrong?"

Rigel shrugged, trying not to let her discomfort show, "Nothing."

Draco rubbed his forehead irritably, "You-you look guilty, Rigel. What's going on?"

Rigel flushed. She thought she'd been perfectly casual. She cast around for something to say, then settled on "I'm not trying out for the Quidditch team this year."

This, it seemed, was more than sufficient distraction.

"What? Why not?" Draco looked a bit betrayed, which only increased the guilt she felt. "Stop feeling sorry," Draco snapped, "Just tell me *why*."

"I think I should focus on my studies," Rigel said softly, apologetically, "With the extra classes and all, I just don't think I'll have the time."

"I have extra classes, too," Draco argued quietly as McGonagall took roll, "Just work a little harder."

"Rigel already works very hard," Pansy pointed out diplomatically, "He studies other things, in addition to classes, and he'll be self-studying Potions this semester, too, which is bound to be time-consuming."

Draco looked frustrated, but he nodded shortly and turned back to the board, rubbing his temples once more.

After Transfiguration, Rigel told her friends she had to run to the bathroom, feeling a guilty thrill as they went on without her.

She ducked into the nearest boy's bathroom and glanced around. There was no one present, so she quickly pulled her invisibility cloak from the expanded compartment in her bag and swung it on. She very carefully did not wonder if the future her was also in the bathroom, under the same cloak, waiting to take her place in real time while she turned back two hours to ten o'clock for her first lesson with Snape.

She didn't take off the cloak until she was outside of Lab One, which had been written on her schedule in lieu of a classroom number, at precisely ten o'clock.

"Right on time, Mr. Black," Snape said as the door opened and she slipped inside. She couldn't tell if he was joking, but she opted not to laugh. The time-turner was just too terrifying in its potential to be amusing.

"What are we brewing?" Rigel asked, peering into the single cauldron set out on the workspace, inwardly delighted that she wouldn't be sitting through a one-on-one lecture. There wasn't a base in the cauldron yet, but the inside had been recently treated with an oil of some kind.

"You are brewing Pensive Potion," Snape informed her, sliding a recipe (on non-flammable parchment, of course) toward her.

Rigel could hardly believe she'd heard correctly, but the recipe in front of her was one she vaguely recognized, having researched it for one of Flint's essays at some point. "It's beyond NEWT level," she said, smiling with burgeoning excitement as she read the obscenely complicated instructions, "I've heard there are some countries that require their potioners to obtain a special license to brew this."

"There are countries that require a license for Pepper-up," Snape said derisively, "It's just an excuse to collect licensing fees. Nevertheless, the potion is indeed complex, and as such you will not attempt to brew it on your own until I deem you capable of it." Snape said firmly, "You will brew many extremely difficult potions this year. The purposes of these lessons is not to give you a grounding in the theoretical-your background in that is more than sufficient for now, and your homework assignments will help fill in the gaps. In our lessons, you will gain hands-on experience with challenging brews, becoming familiar with their rhythms and sensitive to their subtleties."

Snape eyed her sternly as he outlined the course objectives, "We will brew each potion at least twice. The first time through I will give instructions, help you keep pace with the recipe, and assist if necessary. The second time you will do it on your own. When you make errors-and you will-you will write a substantial explanation of what went wrong and how you will avoid the problem in the future. Then we will brew it again, until you get it right."

Rigel grinned widely up at the Professor, who frowned repressively at her display of enthusiasm. "When do we begin?"

"After you study the recipe," he said, a wry smirk twisting his mouth, "This is not free-brewing, Mr. Black. You will put nothing into that cauldron until you know why it is going in there and what it will do to the concoction."

"Yes, sir," Rigel tucked her smile into her cheek and bent over the Pensive Potion recipe with due attention. This year was going to be *wonderful* .

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She snuck into the bathroom just a minute or two after her past self should have disappeared and took the cloak off, stowing it quickly. She ducked into a stall to use the facilities, just so it wouldn't be suspicious if she had to use them again too soon, and then headed off to lunch, feeling a bit smug knowing that her first real use of the time-turner had been a complete, unqualified success.

She slid into the seat Draco and Pansy had saved for her and leaned across Draco slightly to snag a roll from the serving plate.

Draco's nose wrinkled and he turned a raised eyebrow on her, "You smell like sewage, Rigel."

Rigel's brain froze for half a moment before re-starting and nudging her mouth into saying, "I think someone set off a dung bomb in the bathroom just before I got there. Is it awful? I can change before Herbology."

"It's fine," Draco said dismissively, "No worse than when you've been in your lab all evening. You'll get dirty during Herbology anyway."

Rigel hadn't realized that brewing potions made her smell so badly. It made sense-some of the ingredients were a bit noxious, objectively speaking. She'd grown used to it, over the years, but her friends, apparently, hadn't. She felt her earlier smugness recede slowly as she made a mental note not to time-turn back to her Potions lessons until after lunch. If she showed up directly to Herbology smelly, people were less likely to notice, since the greenhouses all smelled

like soil in any case. It also meant she'd eat lunch at a reasonable time, instead of what felt like two o'clock.

On the bright side, if her friends were accustomed to her being smelly, they might not notice when she put on her Archie-sweat-musk-perfume before Defense lessons the next morning.

Herbology was with the Gryffindors that year, and Rigel sidled over to the red-and-gold cluster of students to say hi to Neville and Ron before Professor Sprout came and unlocked the greenhouses.

To her surprise, Ron, who had an arm around a very shaken-looking Neville, shot her a less-than-welcoming look as she approached.

"Hi," she said, "How was your summer break?"

"Fine," Ron said shortly.

"Oh," Rigel paused, unsure, "That's good."

"Yeah," Ron said, "Look, if you don't mind-"

"Stop, Ron," Neville said quietly, "It's not Rigel's fault."

"What's not Rigel's fault?" Draco had come up on her left side, presumably attracted by the unpleasant look on Ron's face.

Ron clamped his mouth shut, but Neville spoke up with a determined look on his face, "I just had a bad Defense lesson, that's all."

Rigel couldn't stop the slight frown of dismay from forming on her face, "What happened?"

"That uncle of yours is a piece of work," Ron said.

"Remus?" Rigel couldn't imagine what her uncle might have done to upset a class of third-year Gryffindors, but from the uneasy agreement on many faces, it wasn't just Neville who had been affected.

"What happened?" Draco asked with a frown of his own, "Wasn't it just review? You all look... scared."

Ron bristled, "See how you fair tomorrow. Come on, Neville."

He dragged Neville toward the doors, which Sprout was just unlocking from the inside, and the other Gryffindors followed suit.

"Melodramatic," Draco rolled his eyes.

Rigel hoped he was right. Remus' employment at the school caused all sort of problems for her plans, but she still wanted it to go well for her uncle. A lot in the werewolf community was riding on the success of his year, after all. She supposed they'd find out tomorrow morning.

After Herbology, they walked down to the dungeons and headed to their group's usual low-backed couch by one of the fires.

Pansy raised a delicate eyebrow at Rigel when she sat down amongst them. "Are you going to socialize with us, Rigel?"

"Why shouldn't I?" Rigel asked, nonplussed, "Did you want to talk about me or something?"

Pansy laughed, "No, I just assumed you'd have something you needed to be doing."

"It's the first day," Rigel said, "We don't have any homework."

"Not schoolwork," Pansy said patiently, "One of your other projects. I thought you'd want to use the time we have without assignments to make progress on other things."

"I spend time with you guys," Rigel said, a bit defensive, "... don't I?"

"Yes, Rigel, but generally while we're doing homework," Pansy said, "Or when we drag you away from something else."

Rigel swallowed. Was she so negligent? Draco and Pansy demanded so little of her in their friendship. Had she been taking advantage even more than she realized?

"You're making him feel guilty," Draco said, sighing.

Pansy looked abruptly regretful, "I'm sorry, Rigel. I didn't mean to imply you were in any way at fault. I was only teasing you about being so dedicated to your pursuits."

Rigel smiled softly at the girl, "I know, Pan. How about from now on I try to make my friends one of the pursuits I'm so dedicated to?"

Pansy had a look of pleased hope in her eyes, but it was tempered by caution, "We don't want to impose on your schedule, Rigel."

"You aren't-you won't be," Rigel said, feeling that this was a promise she-for once-was going to be able to keep. "I'm going to make more time for you guys this year. I promise." With the time-turner, she'd have no trouble making that statement a reality. Her friends deserved better from her, and she was finally in a position where she could show them that.

"But not for Quidditch," Draco huffed.

Rigel started to apologize, but stopped at the understanding smirk on Draco's face.

"I get it, Rye," he said, waving off her guilty expression, "I did sort of push you into participating, last year. I shouldn't be surprised when it's not your top priority."

"Thanks for understanding, Draco," Rigel said.

"Speaking of understanding," Draco said, pulling a face, "I can't make heads or tails of the first chapter in our Ancient Runes textbook."

"We don't have that until Wednesday," Rigel said, "And I don't think the professor will expect you to know anything on the first day."

"Just because other people have low expectations doesn't mean I should comport myself to their standards," Draco plucked an imaginary piece of lint from his robes, "I refuse to step foot into any classroom without having at least some idea as to what's going on."

"You should ask Blaise," Rigel suggested, "He's really good at explaining the basics."

"Blaise has been acting weird lately," Draco complained, "He's all love-sick or something. It's driving me mad."

"Why should you care if he is?" Pansy asked, shaking her head, "He turned thirteen this summer, too. It's probably just that his inheritance hasn't settled yet."

"Inheritance?" Rigel repeated, "You mean the expansion of his magical core?"

Pansy and Draco exchanged looks that went over Rigel's head.

"No, the core growth happens overnight, and it usually only takes a day or two to get used to," Pansy said slowly, "I mean... Blaise's *inheritance* ."

Rigel shook her head in quiet bewilderment, "I'm sorry, Pan, but I don't know what that means. Is it a-" she stopped herself before she could say 'pureblood thing' out loud. "Does a gift run in his family, or something?"

Draco scoffed, "Where in Salazar's name have you been, Rigel? Blaise is part creature. His father was a shifter of some kind, which means Blaise came into his side of the inheritance at the same time that his core developed. Why do you think he has amber eyes all of a sudden?"

"Does he?" Rigel asked, startled. She hadn't noticed that, but as Blaise's eyes had been brown to begin with... well, she didn't exactly go staring into other people's eyes all the time, did she?

"Yes, he does," Pansy laughed, "Rigel, you're hopeless. Suffice to say that everyone knows Blaise is half-creature. If the changes in his behavior are any indication, he's inherited the full set of traits from his father's side this summer. It wasn't really a surprise-he's always had incredible hearing and eyesight, not to mention his... fascination with a certain Hufflepuff who only ever wears her hair in one style. I suppose that's what has you so annoyed, Drake?"

"He positively moons, now," Draco lamented.

"It can't be that bad if Rigel hasn't even noticed," Pansy said, amused.

Draco grumbled half-heartedly, "He moons on the inside. It's annoying how he pretends he's not, but every now and then forgets he's pretending and gets this stupid wistful look on his face... he should just mate with her and have done with."

"Draco!" Pansy sounded shocked, "She's thirteen years old. I don't care how much shifter blood runs in the Abbott family-she's never shown any sign that she's inherited the abilities and even if she was a full-blooded creature it would still be much too early for them to form any sort of life-bond."

"I know, I know," Draco groaned, "It's just so annoying to watch him pine."

Rigel was quickly coming to realize that she really didn't know her friends at all. Blaise was half-shifter? His father must have been from a family of pureblooded shifters, too, or he wouldn't be able to attend Hogwarts. She wondered what animal Blaise could turn into, then remembered that shifters bonded for life, often forming instinctual attachments as young as eight years old to their intended, and subsequently realized that she was an idiot for not putting the very

obvious pieces together. Certainly all of his interactions with Hannah Abbott made more sense. Rigel then wondered how much Hannah knew of Blaise's genetic traits, and if the Hufflepuff girl even guessed at what kind of regard Blaise must hold her in, whether he wanted to or not.

It was a bit scary to realize that there were people in the world with lives at least as complicated and awkward to navigate as her own.

They went to dinner when the others in the common room started trickling out in that direction, and as they claimed their seats Draco was quick to point out that Flint was still no where to be seen.

"Face it," he said archly, "You were wrong about him. He's not coming back this year."

"He's already back, actually."

They both looked up at Rosier as he slid into a place across the table, Rookwood a beat behind him and a seat beside him.

"I haven't seen him," Draco said, "Don't tell me he's too busy planning how to make Wood's life hell to come to meals."

Rosier's face didn't have its usual twist of levity to it, and he didn't smile at Draco's jibe. "He's in the hospital wing."

Pansy dropped her fork to the table with a dull clang, "What happened? Is he going to be all right?"

"He had an accident before term started," Rosier said, face studiously giving no expression away, "He couldn't make the train, so our Head of House collected him late last night. One of the twins overheard McGonagall asking the Head Boy to collect Flint's homework assignments this morning at breakfast."

To Rigel's surprise, Rosier gestured not to the Weasley twins as he said it, but to the little second-year Slytherin brothers who as far as

Rigel had seen only ever talked to one another.

"Marcus had better make a swift recovery," Pansy said, looking extremely upset, "If he thinks he can get away with just-"

She broke off with a very un-Pansy-like scowl. Somehow, Rigel didn't think it was Flint that Pansy's anger was directed toward. It seemed like forever ago that Percy had intimated a less than ideal home life was partly responsible for the anger Flint often exhibited at the beginning of the school year. Could an unhappy situation have escalated?

Rigel knew it wasn't any of her business, but she couldn't help but worry. Flint may be a blackmailing jerk, but he was her friend, too, in a weird way. Then she realized that as long as Flint was in the Hospital Wing, his assignments were going to start piling up. She hoped he got better soon-for both their sakes. Maybe there was a way she could get the assignments from Percy without seeming suspicious. It would certainly be more manageable for her to work on them as they came, instead of trying to do them all at once.

As Rigel was lost in plans, Pansy was becoming more and more upset on Draco's other side.

"Marcus is the last person who deserves to have to put up with such-such an-ignorant, hateful, disgusting excuse for a-" she cut herself off with a visible effort and stood, sweeping her robes behind her as she turned from the table, "I've lost my appetite. I'm going to visit Marcus in the Hospital Wing."

She strode from the hall, angrier than Rigel had ever imagined her sweet-tempered friend could become.

As Pansy exited, Draco seemed to droop into Rigel's side. Rigel stiffened and leaned against the weight automatically, looking over in time to catch a look of unconcealed relief on Draco's face. When his eyes darted over to hers, he grimaced, "Pansy's anger is a bit... overwhelming, isn't it? I haven't seen her like that since we were very

young. I think she yelled at me once for eating the last cinnamon cookie when her mother brought her to tea. I'd forgotten she had it in her, honestly."

Rigel silently accepted this explanation for his unusually acute relief at Pansy's exit, but added another tally to the 'strange things Draco does now' chalkboard in her head.

They ate in relatively subdued silence, even the usually resilient Rosier seeming content to let the meal pass without an effort at conversation. Neither she nor Draco brought up the bet again, and Rigel felt a little sick to think that she'd been making a joke out of someone else's problems.

After dinner she and Draco started toward the Hospital Wing, but halfway there Draco stopped and muttered a half-hearted curse. "We should have gotten her something to eat," he sighed.

"The kitchens are still open," Rigel shrugged, "They're bound to have leftovers."

They made a detour to the basement and pushed open the portrait entrance slowly, mindful of the house elves scurrying every which way.

A young female elf with her familiar necklace of champagne corks ran over and flung herself at Rigel with all the exuberance of a long-lost friend. Rigel caught the little elf on reflex and spun her in a circle with the momentum from her launch. She set Binny down, laughing, and said, "I missed you too, Binny. How was your summer? Did you spend it at Madame Touraine's again?"

"Oh, yes, Binny's summer is being very nice," the house elf beamed up at her, "There is being five new foals in Madame Touraine's herd this summer, and I is playing with all of them when I is being done working."

"That sounds wonderful," Rigel said, smiling, "Did you meet any attractive elves in the stables?" She wagged her eyebrows at the elf, who had confided to her last year that she was quickly reaching an age at which most elves were expected to marry."

Binny gave her a scandalized look, before dissolving into giggles, "I is not telling. *And you is being very rude for asking,*" she added in French with a little grin.

" *Is it rude to ask a friend a simple question?* " Rigel grinned back, her French undeniably rusty, but comprehensible all the same.

"You speak French?"

Rigel winced inwardly and looked a bit guiltily at Draco, who she'd momentarily forgotten. He had both eyebrows raised and was looking between Binny and Rigel with amused disbelief.

She shrugged casually, deciding she could use this situation as long as she did so carefully. "Binny helps me stay in practice," she said lightly, "I'm really not that good."

"You is being very good," Binny contradicted with a waggling finger, "*Saying otherwise is being insulting to your teacher.*"

"If you say so, Binny," Rigel said, affecting an embarrassed smile. She could see Draco glancing suspiciously at her out of the corner of his eye, which was perfect for her purposes. He wouldn't know how good at French she was, nor why she was staying in practice, but if she ever had to use the back-up cover story of being a poor pureblood from the continent he could easily interpret her speaking French with a house elf as a clue to her true identity.

"What is you needing?" Binny asked after a beat of awkward silence.

"Our friend Pansy missed dinner tonight," Draco explained, "Could we get a basket of food to take to her?"

Instantly several nearby house elves were diverted from other tasks to gather a parcel of leftovers. In no time at all they were bidding Binny and the others good night.

They strolled into the Hospital Wing to see Madam Pomfrey leaning over a bed on the far end of the room, Pansy seated quietly to one side. The mediwitch tutted a bit as she took Flint's vitals, then sighed as she jotted the results onto a clipboard and walked back to her office after a stern warning look to Draco and Rigel. She didn't have to say anything-everyone knew the only rule in the Hospital Wing was *do not disturb the patients* .

Draco dropped the basket of food in Pansy's lap and Rigel pulled a couple of chairs away from nearby beds for them.

Pansy picked at the food pensively, chewing and swallowing mechanically whenever her hand made its way to her mouth. Eventually she stopped pretending to eat and just stared at Marcus' sleeping face.

The Quidditch captain didn't look any worse for wear, but after a day in Madam Pomfrey's care, that didn't say much about his original injuries-she could heal surface damage in a matter of minutes. That he was still unconscious spoke volumes about the extent of his internal trauma.

"I'm sure I seem more than a little dramatic to you two," Pansy said quietly after a while, "Rigel, you've known Marcus longer than I have, and Draco, you've spent the most time with him on the Quidditch team, but... Marcus is a very dear friend to me all the same. First year, I didn't have the same network of friends that I do now."

Rigel and Draco started to protest, but Pansy held up a hand solemnly, "No, it's true. Rigel, you were always disappearing to study or brew and Draco had Quidditch practice all the time, and the other girls resented me immediately for making friends with the Malfoy and Black Heirs right off the bat-Davis and Greengrass barely deigned to talk to me, and Millicent seemed so unapproachable back then. I had

upperclassmen friends, but they had their own group, and were busy with schoolwork besides. So I took to coming with Draco to Quidditch practices just to give myself something to think about besides my own insecurities."

Draco and Rigel exchanged a look. Neither could picture confident, poised Pansy as insecure.

She laughed softly at their expressions, "You don't believe me? Of course I was insecure. I worried a lot in the beginning that you two were only humoring me-that eventually you'd get tired of being friends with a *girl* and I'd be left with no friends at all. Who'd want to be seen with the girl the Black and Malfoy Heirs had snubbed? I went to watch your practices, Draco, because I didn't want to sit all alone in the common room waiting for you to get back."

"You never did care much for Quidditch," Draco said ruefully, "I'm sorry, Pans, I didn't realize you thought our friendship was one-sided."

"It wasn't your fault," Pansy said with a self-deprecating smile, "I certainly never advertised my uncertainty. The point of this is that I got to know Marcus at those practices. He almost always spent a good portion of practice in the stands, watching the maneuvers he'd designed from afar as you all ran through them, so one day I started sitting beside him. Sometimes I would talk to him, just prattling, really, about what I'd done that day or what classes were like. Eventually I started telling him all kinds of things. It was cathartic, I guess, just saying it all out loud like that, and I didn't think he was even listening, except then one day he talked back."

Rigel looked from Pansy to Flint and tried to imagine what her friend was telling her. She'd seen Pansy sitting by Flint in the stands plenty of times during practice last year, but she'd never have imagined they were having some sort of... heart to heart.

"Did you know Marcus' mother is a squib?" Pansy asked suddenly. She swallowed, then continued in a shaking voice, "That's why no

one ever sees her out in society. She's from a good family, and they covered up her lack of magical gifts by claiming to be homeschooling her. They betrothed her to Marcus' father, and both sides considered it a good match. After they married, however, she couldn't keep up the pretense in such close quarters. Marcus' father was furious when he found out, and he's hated his wife ever since. The poor woman."

Draco nodded with an expression of rueful distaste, and Rigel realized that many people must be aware of Flint's familial problems. Why did everyone turn a blind eye? To save themselves the embarrassment of acknowledging the situation? Perhaps they were ashamed that their elitist pureblood culture produced exactly this kind of duplicity and hatred when mixed with the wrong sort of tragic circumstances.

"It caused a scandal when the Flint Family's main branch found out, of course. Marcus' father was disgraced, and his mother became a social pariah," Pansy went on, her voice thick with dissatisfaction, "Marcus was born into a home of rage and betrayal. To his parents' credit, they did attempt to keep Marcus out of their marital difficulties. Each tried to cultivate a relationship with Marcus apart from the other, but as Marcus grew older he found it more and more difficult to turn the other way when his parents fought. He started to intervene, to try and stop the violence when it escalated to spells, which of course left his mother distinctly vulnerable. He could never get them to stop, though. He spends all summer in that house, all of them shouting and bickering at one another, and more and more he finds himself standing between his mother and his father's wand. I just know that's how this happened," Pansy was openly crying now, not seeming to even notice what she was saying, "He must have gotten mixed up in another one of their fights, only this time his father didn't back down."

She wiped her tears angrily on a handkerchief she pulled from her pocket and glared at Flint's unconscious form, "If I ever get my hands on his parents I'm going to give them a piece of my mind. And then I'm going to give them a taste of their own medicine. To raise a

child in that kind of environment-and one as intelligent and driven as Marcus-it's just *criminal* ."

Pansy tucked her handkerchief away, and the fight seemed to drain out of her all of a sudden, "I told him not to go back this summer," she whispered, "He's seventeen, he didn't have to..."

"It's not easy to walk away from your family," Draco said, a troubled look on his face. He was rubbing his forehead again, Rigel noticed. When had he picked up that habit? And how had Narcissa Malfoy let him get away with it? "Even when you know they're poison."

Rigel nodded, thinking of Lestrage, who bitterly resented his parent's lack of attention yet clung to his mother's apron strings all the same. Even Rosier, who was openly dismissive of his parents' social agenda, played the model Heir for them in public.

"And for the record, Pans," Draco added a moment later, "Rigel and I will never get tired of being friends with you. Even if you *are* a girl."

He wrinkled his nose in such a comically uncouth way that Pansy couldn't hold back a watery laugh.

Draco winked at Rigel and Rigel smiled back gratefully. She hated to see Pansy upset. It was like seeing Archie upset-there was just something fundamentally wrong with it, like a wrinkle in the fabric of reality.

They walked back to the common room a short time later, each lost in their own thoughts. She wanted to spend time with Pansy and Draco that night, both of whom were obviously disturbed in one way or another by seeing Flint in the Hospital Wing, but she also needed to brew the potion that would adjust her sleep cycle to be proportionate to the number of hours she spent waking in a row.

She was already getting a little tired, since for her it felt like it was 10:30, not 7:30. She could take a Pepper-up Potion for an extra hour or two of energy to get the brewing done though.

Rigel debated what to do, and in the end decided that it would be easiest to ensure a seamless turn if she ducked into a bathroom now and went back a few hours, then snuck into the bathroom when time caught up and walked back out a few minutes after her friends saw her go in. Otherwise she'd be sneaking out of the common room before bed, which would be much more difficult.

It was a perfect plan, until Draco shrugged and said he'd go with her to the bathroom as long as they were waiting on her.

Rigel hid a frown as they both entered the boy's bathroom and she ducked into a stall, going about emptying her not-very-full bladder with only a modicum of self-consciousness. She was mostly over this kind of embarrassment, as it wasn't anything new, sharing a dorm as they did; she was more concerned with how she was going to make this work.

In the end, she decided staying put was her best bet, as awkward as that was. Draco was washing his hands now, and Rigel just sat there in the stall and twiddled her thumbs.

After waiting a few minutes, Draco said, "Rigel?" with a small amount of confusion.

"You go ahead," Rigel said, affecting embarrassment, "I'll just be a minute or two."

"Oh," She could practically hear her friend awkwardly grimacing, "I'll just-yeah."

The door opened and closed, and Rigel breathed a sigh of relief. She checked the time and dutifully noted it down in her notebook, which she had taken to keeping shrunk in her breast pocket, then pulled out her time-turner.

She realized just in time that turning while in a bathroom stall might not be a good idea in case someone else had been using it three hours previously. She pulled on her cloak instead and stepped out

into the bathroom proper, into a corner, and twisted the hourglass three full turns. When she opened her eyes, she almost jumped when she saw a boy fiddling with his hair in the mirror.

Instead, she froze, not daring to breathe until the older boy gave his reflection a satisfied grin and sauntered out of the bathroom.

She pulled out the map and checked it. The other Harriet Potter was in the common room with her friends, and would be until she went to dinner. There were plenty of students wandering about, though, so she kept the cloak on and made her way stealthily through the school, down through the dungeon corridors, until she reached her lab. She unlocked it with the key Snape had given her after it had been broken into last year, and pulled off the cloak as she shut the door behind her.

It smelled a little dusty, and one of the torches needed replacing soon, but Rigel smiled as she looked around the small lab. It was hers. She was home again.

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The sleep-adjustment potion turned out to be tricky, but not terribly time-consuming. She finished it in an hour, so with two additional hours to spare, she pulled out the list of potions she was always free to brew for Krait and tried to remember which ones she hadn't supplied in the last month.

Deciding that Krait could never have too many muscle-relaxants, she began a batch, leisurely slicing and dicing the ingredients at a slow pace. She hadn't taken the time to really enjoy brewing in too long, she thought with regret. She hadn't forgotten the beauty of the art, of course-how could she, when there were nights she dreamt of brewing potions so delicate their contents were like spun spider silk

as they poured out? And yet, it was true that she had perhaps been less appreciative of her passion than usual these last busy months.

Still, she thought with a smile, she wouldn't have to worry about that any more. She finally had all the time in the world.

When seven thirty crept closer, she packed up her lab into her portable potions kit and put on her cloak once more. It was extremely surreal to watch herself and Draco enter the bathroom and go about their business, and then to watch herself disappear under the cloak in the opposite corner from where she stood under the same exact cloak.

She stowed the cloak and left the bathroom, falling into step beside Draco as they headed for the common room.

Her friend gave her an odd look as they walked, and she didn't know if he was wondering what had taken her so long, wondering why she smelled like a cauldron, or wondering if the former had to do with the latter. Whatever he was thinking, it would be best if she pretended not to notice, she decided.

By the time they reached the common room, her eyes were drooping. She couldn't take the potion until she woke up the following morning, as it was supposed to be begun at the beginning of a sleep cycle, but if this was how she would feel every day without it she could only thank Snape for thinking of it. She had been awake for nearly 21 hours, and she could feel it psychologically as well as physically. She was more than ready for her bed.

She held out for forty-five minutes, but eventually she couldn't keep her eyes open, no matter how much she wanted to stay up with her friends a little longer.

"I'm for bed," she said, rising from the couch between Pansy and Draco with a graceless yawn.

"Now?" Draco raised an eyebrow, "It's not even nine-o'clock."

"I know," Rigel said apologetically, "I'm knackered, though. I'd be poor company anyway at this point."

"Goodnight, Rigel," Pansy said, looking amused, "Sleep well, and don't worry about waking up tomorrow-Draco and I will can always go running without you."

"Do you know the way?" Rigel asked, a dubious frown on her face, "I was under the impression that Draco, at least, sleepwalked behind me unconscious most of the first lap."

"Well I'm not the one who looks like he's sleepwalking right now," Draco retorted, "Go to bed, Rigel, you're clearly dead on your feet-didn't you sleep last night?"

"Not very well," Rigel lied, "Night, guys."

Pansy cleared her throat pointedly.

"Good night, *ladies*," she amended with a grin.

Draco grumbled, but waved her off without further protest.

Rigel veritably collapsed into bed, and knew nothing more until early the next morning when her alarm spell poked her in the cheek.

She felt reasonably well rested, and quickly downed the sleep-adjusting potion before Draco woke up to join her for their morning run. She was both looking forward to and dreading the rest of the morning, since she would have her first Defense, Alchemy, and Magical Theory classes-all at once.

Then there was Arithmancy that afternoon. It would be nice to finally get an introduction to that course, as for the past two years she'd been copying the examples in the book to solve the problems in Flint's assignments, all without really understanding why the numbers could be manipulated that way or what the answers even meant in real terms.

With Remus' werewolf nose in mind, she showered thoroughly after their workout with strong-smelling soap, then layered on Archie's sweat-distilled perfume under her clothes as she dressed. Between that and the voice-altering spell that she'd been keeping up since she stepped on the train, any discrepancies in her appearance would likely go unnoticed. Remus would be nervous for his first week, anyway, she reassured herself. By the time he settled into Hogwarts and noticed her, he'd be used to the way she looked now.

Rigel got some reading done while Draco showered, and she pretended not to notice him slip a suppressant potion into his pocket while collecting a pair of socks from his trunk.

Breakfast passed too quickly, and soon Rigel was lined up with the other students outside the Defense classroom, trying not to sweat from nervousness and ruin the odor she'd been cultivating. When the clock struck eight, the door to the classroom creaked open, and the first few students stepped nervously inside.

It was dark in the big, empty room. There were no tables or chairs, not even a teacher's desk. The shutters were closed, but only a few of the lamps had been lit, so they made their way slowly into the room. To one side stood a large screen, the kind a person might have dressed behind a century ago, except it had been enlarged so that it reached almost to the ceiling.

Out from behind this screen, Remus stepped slowly toward them. His gait was stiff, and a bit menacing as he loomed toward them. The students watched his approach with nervous anticipation, on edge at the strange scene. When Remus moved lightning-fast toward the nearest boy, drawing his wand as he did so, several people screamed. The boy, Gregory Goyle, stumbled backwards, tripped over his pantleg and fell to the ground with a terrified expression on his face.

"You are dead," Remus commented mildly, straightening from the dueler's lunge he had sunk into and lowering his wand.

Goyle blinked, and slowly climbed to his feet once more, "You surprised me."

"Ah, yes," Remus smiled, "Surprise can be a nasty thing-but you shouldn't expect a vampire to warn you before he attacks."

"That wasn't fair, though, Professor," Tracy Davis spoke up in their year mate's defense, "We weren't expecting an attack from a teacher-we shouldn't have to be on guard at school."

"You don't think so?" Remus looked up at the ceiling as though thinking her statement over, "I heard there was a basilisk roaming the halls just a few months ago-were you on guard then?"

"Once we knew about it," Davis flushed slightly, but kept her head up defiantly.

Remus nodded gravely, "It is good to be wary of a known threat, but being wary of an unknown threat is never bad, either. Today I was the unknown threat. Tomorrow-well, you just never know, do you?"

Rigel thought he was laying on the ominousness a bit thick, but looking around at the foreboded expressions on everyone's faces, she supposed it must be working. She had a hard time taking him seriously, but only because she knew him so well, apparently.

Remus lifted his wand toward the ceiling and the rest of the lamps blared to life, brightening the room considerably. "Atmosphere is an interesting thing," Remus said, his tone as light as if he were discussing tea cakes, "The right setting can set a person at ease-or fill him with anxiety. The mind responds to certain elements instinctively-darkness, silence, surprise, uncertainty. All these things elicit fear from a person, and it is that instinctive, uncontrolled fear that will be your greatest enemy, no matter what you do in life. This class is called Defense Against the Dark Arts, but the defender who is controlled by fear is as much a danger as the thing he or she is defending against. Before I teach you how to combat the Dark Arts, then, I am going to teach you how to overcome fear. Only when you

can act in the face of terror, in the midst of surprise and uncertainty, only then can you defend yourself against anything, much less the darkest of our magical arts."

There was complete silence as Remus paused to survey them all with his quietly powerful gaze. After a moment, Remus pointed at Blaise and said, "Do you know what you are most afraid of, Mr...?"

"Zabini," Blaise said, frowning, "No, professor, I... don't know for sure."

"That's all right, almost no one does," Remus said, smiling slightly, "Most people try not to think about things that scare them, and fear is often unquantifiable, so that it is hard to say objectively if you fear drowning more than being stabbed in a dark alley."

A couple of people flinched at the blunt wording, and Rigel could feel the blood drain from her face unwittingly, a flash of a man in a blue vest skittering across her memory.

"All fear is similar, however, in the way it affects the body-and in the way a person copes with it," Remus continued. "Does anyone know what a boggart is?" Pansy gasped quietly, causing Remus to glance in her direction, "Yes? You know, Miss..."

"Parkinson," Pansy said, her face grim with the knowledge of something, "A boggart is a dark creature, Professor. It is said to take the shape of whatever the person it comes across is very afraid of. It uses a kind of fear-based Legilimency magic that even Occlumency can't block out entirely to become something terrible enough to frighten its prey into a terrified stupor, so it can consume them."

"Correct, Miss Parkinson," Remus said, "Five points to Slytherin. A boggart will confront you with the thing you fear most in the entire world-usually it is a fear that you have not acknowledged even to yourself, because that's the kind of fear that will most effectively immobilize or destabilize its victims. Behind that screen," he gestured behind him, "Is a boggart I found in the staff room cloak

cupboard. Today you will each face it, one at a time, and learn your greatest fear, whatever it may be."

Rigel was not the only one who looked disbelievingly at Remus as he said that. They were to face a boggart? Without any preparation or training, just to see what they were most afraid of? That sounded frankly awful. If this is what the third-year Gryffindors had to do, it was no wonder they seemed a bit leery of Remus as a professor.

Still, he was her uncle, and if he thought it was a good idea, he surely had a reason. With that in mind, Rigel raised her hand, even though she had promised she wouldn't cause attention to herself in this class.

"Yes, Mr. Black?" Remus asked politely, not a hint that he was talking to a child whose diapers he'd changed showing on his face.

"What does one do when faced with a boggart?" she asked, trying to imitate Archie's casually up-beat tone, "Once we know what our fear is, I mean. Do we just try very hard not to be afraid of that thing?"

"Interesting question," Remus said, "Apart from it being very difficult to stop being afraid of something in the first place, if you overcome your fear of one thing, the boggart can always find something else you are afraid of, and change into it instead. There is a spell that I will teach you called *Riddikulus*, which uses the imagination of the castor to force the boggart to take the shape of something that is utterly non-frightening. This works because the moment the boggart senses you are not afraid of it, it will retreat instinctively. We will learn that spell the next time we face the boggart, however-today the objective is not to defeat the boggart, but rather to learn a bit about ourselves."

He pinned them all with a very serious look, "I know it is unpleasant to think about facing your worst fear, but that is the point. It is important to know how your mind and body respond to fear-how it feels to be very, very afraid. Usually when we are scared, we are too surprised or distracted to analyze the feeling, so today is all about

paying attention to how fear feels. Focus entirely on your own reaction to the boggart; do your hands shake? Does your skin feel clammy and cold? Do you feel like screaming, crying, or freezing in place? This is important information to have for when you are faced with a real crisis. I will worry about defending against the boggart, and I assure you that no harm will come to any of you while I am here. I know this is not how you imagined your first lesson going, but I promise you will be better off knowing fear now than being surprised by it in a life-or-death situation later."

Rigel thought Remus might be a genius. How often had she gotten into trouble and felt paralyzed by fear in a critical moment. Maybe if she'd been taught to cope with fear instead of succumbing to it, events like that night in the lower alleys might have turned out differently.

"I must ask for your patience as well, today," Remus said, smiling a bit sheepishly in the first relaxed expression he had given them thus far, "You will face the boggart one at a time, behind this sound-proof screen, which means most of the lesson will be spent waiting for your classmates to take their turns. I trust that as busy third-years you can all find something quiet to occupy your time with while you are not with me behind the screen, yes?"

There were scattered nods, but most of the class seemed to be trying to accept the idea that their teacher was going to scare them out of their wits on purpose in order to teach them a lesson.

"Any volunteers?"

Rigel hesitated. She wanted to show that she supported Remus in his first class, but she couldn't figure out what she was most afraid of. It might be something incriminating-what if she was most afraid of failing her potions mastery? Or being found out as a girl? That would be an odd fear for Archie to have.

Before she could decide if it would be better to blend into the middle of the group or not, Theo said determinedly, "I'll go first."

They all turned surprised and impressed eyes on the sandy-haired boy.

Theo shrugged at their questioning looks, "I want to know what I'm afraid of."

"But do you want him to know what you're afraid of?" Davis muttered, looking shrewdly in Remus' direction. The implication that as an ex-Gryffindor halfblood Remus was the enemy didn't go unnoticed.

"There are of course confidentiality wards in place behind the screen," Remus said to no one in particular. Rigel wondered how many of her classmates had suddenly remembered Remus's heightened hearing abilities.

Rigel wondered if those wards would apply to her, too. It reassured her that at least if the boggart revealed a very Harry-Potter-like fear, Remus would be unable to pass on his suspicions to anyone else.

"Bring it on," Theo said confidently. He strode over to the screen, Remus on his heels.

They disappeared behind the barrier and for several long minutes nothing more was heard. Just as people had begun to exchange relatively concerned looks, Theo came stumbling back around the divider, pale and sweating. He walked right past them all and to the other end of the room, where Rigel noticed a sideboard set up with big glasses of water and juice and plates of various sweets. Chocolate seemed to be a prominent theme. Rigel smiled nostalgically. Remus had always had a huge sweet tooth, especially when it came to chocolate.

After he gasped down half a glass of pumpkin juice, Theo said, "The next person can go in whenever. It's... it's not so bad."

No one seemed terribly convinced by that statement, belied as it was by Theo's shaky hands and damp brow.

"I'll go," Rigel said after a moment, "If no one else wants to."

"I'll go after you," Draco said immediately, chin up.

"Then me," Pansy added, smiling gratefully at Rigel and Draco, "Might as well get it done with, right?"

Others began to add their name to the growing list, even going so far as to arrange themselves in order, but Rigel was already walking toward the screened-off area.

She rounded the corner to see Remus leaning casually against a closed wardrobe. He straightened as she appeared and sent her a warm smile.

"I thought perhaps no one else wanted to have a go," Remus said. His tone was light, but she could tell he'd been a bit genuinely worried for a moment.

"We were just arguing over the order," Rigel said, grinning playfully, "I got first because Draco lost sprite-dragon-thestral to me."

Remus smiled back, but she could see in his eyes he knew the others had been too wary to readily volunteer. "Well, I'm going to open this door and whatever comes out is your boggart. No matter what it is, I won't let it harm you."

"I read once that boggarts can mimic the powers of the species they imitate," Rigel said, trying to get the right note of nonchalant consideration that Archie was so good at.

"That's true," Remus said, tilting his head curiously.

"If a basilisk comes out, could it petrify me?" Rigel asked. She didn't think she was most afraid of basilisks, but it was certainly a possibility.

Remus paused, "I don't believe so, no. You may feel as though you've been petrified, but it will be merely an illusion, a suggestion in

your own mind. That is how boggarts mimic the effects of other creatures-they don't acquire those powers, but they can make their victim feel as though they have. It goes back to the fear-based Legilimency they are so adept at."

"So if it turns into a mandrake I would feel like its cry was killing me, but it wouldn't actually be fatal," Rigel clarified.

Remus' mouth quirked up a bit at the edges, "No to trivialize your fears, Archie, but... a mandrake? Really?"

"Just an educational example," Rigel shrugged with a boyish grin, "The sort of thing you might see on an OWL question, you know."

Remus full-out smiled, "Indeed. Well, to answer your question-exactly. There have been cases where an elderly or weak-bodied person has been so convinced of their own death that they in fact induced a heart-attack or stroke, but barring any medical anomalies you should be fine, Ar-Mr. Black."

"Okay, Professor," Rigel said gamely, "I'm ready."

She didn't feel quite as blasé as she pretended, but she wasn't entirely freaked out, either. She honestly couldn't think of anything she was absolutely, mind-numbingly terrified of. The basilisk had been scary, and so had Lee Jordan's mechanical spider back in first year, and certainly the night the Dancing Dragon went up in flames had been frightening, but she honestly thought she could handle being faced with any of those things again. She had gotten through them once, after all. A cheap imitation wouldn't be *more* terrifying, surely.

The door to the wardrobe sprung open, and a dark mist came pouring out. She had enough time to wonder whether the mist was some sort of initial defense mechanism to hide the boggart until it got a lock on its victim before she was face to face with... herself?

No, not exactly. It was herself as she might have been-hair long and just barely curling at the ends, eyes wide, brilliant green, spectacles resting on a pert nose dusted with freckles. This was the real Harry Potter, the girl she would never really be again.

The other Harry looked straight at her, and tilted her head in a quizzical way. "Who are you?" It asked. Rigel frowned, not sure what was going on. She snuck a quick look at Remus, but he looked equal parts puzzled and curious, while also trying-and failing-to seem respectfully disinterested.

The shape in front of her changed with an abrupt crack, and it was her mother staring down at her, Addy ducking into her skirts. "Who are you?" her mother asked in a politely puzzled tone.

Rigel's heart started to clench, and then the boggart was James, frowning suspiciously at her like he had the night she came home after curfew, "Who are *you* ?" he asked pointedly.

Crack. It was Sirius, shaking his head bemusedly, "Sorry but, do I know you?"

Crack. It was Remus himself, a curl to his lip that she had never seen in real life, "Just who are you supposed to be?"

Crack. Draco and Pansy looked her slowly up and down, then turned their backs as one and walked away, "Who was that?" "No idea."

Crack. Professor Snape looked down his nose at her, "What are you doing here?"

"I belong here," Rigel didn't realize she'd said the words out loud until the boggart-Snape replied.

"You? Who *are* you?"

Crack. Riddle Sr. stepped toward her and Rigel couldn't help but take a stumbling step backwards. She could feel her breath hitch,

and she tried to calm down, but there was a pit of dread, like ice, in her gut that was slowly spreading, turning her numb.

"Who are you?" Riddle asked, his voice as silky as it was mocking, "Well? Don't you know?"

"It's me, Rigel," she felt the words dragged from her, and wondered if it wasn't the boggart drawing the most pathetic possible responses from her mind.

"Who?" Riddle shook his head, "Never mind. It doesn't really matter. You don't matter. You never did. All of this was just an illusion. All your selfishness, all your ambition, and for what? No one knows you. No one cares. Even you don't care..."

Crack. The boggart was her again, the real Harry, and she stared at Rigel with the most profound disappointment, a bitter twist to her lips and lines of disgust around her eyes. "It's your fault, you know. How many lives are you going to ruin, how many people are you going to alienate, just to chase a futile dream? You'll never be anything, and the more you fight, the more people you hurt in the process of figuring that out."

"That's not true," Rigel said shakily, her fists clenching.

"You know it is," the other Harry started to smile, and the smile got wider and wider as an aura began to grow around her. It was her magic, swirling in violent patterns around her, whipping her long hair around her face in a wild tangle. "There was only one thing special about you-and you threw it away." The magic grew up around the other Harry and then surged forward in a tidal wave of power, sending Rigel to her knees at the force of it. "Do you feel special now? Do you feel anything now? Who are you? WHO ARE-" the voice was cut off without warning as Remus stepped between Rigel and the boggart.

Crack. It was the full moon, hanging peacefully among the black mist. Even as she struggled to pull her mind back from the dark

place she had been, she felt a pang of sympathy for Remus-even after all these years, there was nothing he feared more than transformations?

The moon seemed to pop like a balloon, and the boggart's mist retreated into the wardrobe once more without a fuss.

It seemed terribly anticlimactic to Rigel, who was still numb and very, very disturbed. That was her greatest fear? That her ambition would take her to a place where no one, even close friends and family, recognized her anymore? Where she didn't recognize *herself* ? That would be horrible, she realized. The more she considered the possibility, the more panicked she became. Was that her fate? Was she already headed down a road that alienated her from everyone that meant anything to her? Would she live her life alone and unrecognized, even after *everything* she and Archie had been through?

"Can boggarts tell the future?" she blurted out, unthinking.

Remus' warm hand landed on her shoulder, bracing her against the numbness and the fear that seemed to echo in all the empty places inside of her, even as it faded away. "Not in the slightest," Remus said softly, "They prey on the fears that sit most deeply rooted in a person's mind, but these fears are rarely a reflection of reality. In fact, often what people fear is precisely the thing they try their hardest to avoid. It is because you fear losing the esteem of those closest to you, Archie, that I know you never will. Don't take it to heart. Just remember what that feeling of fear did to you psychologically. Spend the rest of the lesson considering your response objectively-don't feel ashamed of it, and don't worry about overcoming it yet. I'll help you with that. All that matters is that you recognize the existence of that fear; that is the first step toward fighting it."

Rigel nodded slowly, just focusing on not letting the depth of her psychological upset show on her face. There was no need to alarm her classmates, not matter how disturbed she had been by the

boggart's ability to breathe life into a fear she hadn't even identified herself. At least Remus had misinterpreted it.

"And eat some chocolate," Remus added, a kind smile on his face.

Rigel felt alive enough to roll her eyes, at least, "Chocolate doesn't cure everything, Professor."

"You'd be surprised," Remus said, mild as ever.

Rigel went back to the main room, giving Draco a reassuring smile that she didn't feel at all as he stepped forward to take her place. Like Theo, she bypassed her classmates in favor of taking a long drink of water and chewing on a chocolate frog. She needed a moment to herself to process what the boggart had revealed.

When she wandered back to the group, Millicent asked, nervously, "Was it bad? You look a little shaken, Rigel."

"I'm fine," Rigel said, a small smile fighting its way onto her lips, "I was just lost in thought."

"Let him be, Millie," Theo said quietly, "I told you, Professor Lupin told us to analyze our reactions to fear while it was still fresh in our minds."

Their friends accepted that, especially as Draco, then Pansy, then Greengrass all came out from the curtain withdrawn and thoughtful.

Most of those who went first seemed to be recovered by the end of the class. Rigel herself felt marginally better after consuming three chocolate frogs. She did notice that Draco, on the other hand, looked much more strung out by the end of the lesson than he had just after facing the boggart. Toward the end of the class he excused himself and stepped into the hallway for a moment. He wasn't gone long enough to have walked all the way to the bathroom and back, but he looked marginally more relaxed. Rigel assumed he'd taken a

suppressant potion, then wondered if that was his first for the day or his second.

Not that she could blame him, if it helped calm him down. She could use a Calming Draught herself after that class.

Remus called them all together after the last student, a confused-looking Goyle, had helped himself to a handful of chocolate.

"Excellent work today, everyone. I'm extremely proud of how well you all handled yourself even in the face of extreme psychological stress. There are many young adults your age who would not be so composed."

There was a bit of bitterness in the set looks on a few faces, and Rigel thought the others knew exactly why they were able to function better than average under pressure-they'd lived and worked under months of psychological uncertainty and fear during the sleeping sickness and in the wake of basilisk attacks. It would accustom anyone to being afraid, to a certain extent.

"Next class we will begin to dismantle the fear you felt today," Remus said, "You will learn how to function in opposition to something that frightens you, how to overcome the physical effects of fear. Once you can act despite your fear, you can do anything from defending yourself against an acromantula to giving a presentation in front of your most respected peers."

A few people laughed, but mostly the third-years just looked and felt exhausted. Remus let them go with a cheerful, "No homework this week," and they filed out into the hall.

Their next class was History of Magic, but first Rigel had Magical Theory and a block of Alchemy to get through. Lunch suddenly seemed a very long way off. She slipped away to a secluded bathroom to turn back to eight-o'clock, hoping that her new electives wouldn't be nearly as trying as Defense Against the Dark Arts had been.

In this, at least, she got her wish.

Magical Theory was just what everyone had said it would be. The textbook was dry, slow-paced, and even the introduction was written in intensely meticulous language, with the author seemingly focused on articulating every point as exactly as possible, without being either too detailed or too interesting.

Rigel sort of loved it. Sometimes the theory portions of her textbooks seemed generalized and overly simple-not so with the Magical Theory text. The professor explained that they would be giving a thorough grounding in the technical theory behind all major branches of magic, from Transfiguration to Herbology, Creature magic to Elemental magic, and everything in between before the end of the year.

She left the class feeling very optimistic about her new electives. If Alchemy, Arithmancy, and Ancient Runes went half as well, she was going to have a fascinating term.

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When she turned back to eight o'clock for the second time that day (making it her third time in that time so far), she checked her schedule and wondered if it had been written correctly. Under Alchemy was Headmaster Dumbledore's name, along with 'Headmaster's Office-Floo Chews' in loopy cursive. It took her a moment to work out that Floo Chews would be the password to his office.

She kept her cloak on until she'd mounted the stairs behind the stone gargoyle, then stowed it quickly before she reached the top. Dumbledore probably knew the Marauders had had an invisibility cloak-she gathered her father had been less than discrete in its use at school-but there was no reason for him to know that *she* had it.

The Headmaster's office was distracting, to say the least. There were whirling and gyrating gizmos on every available surface, and Rigel wondered how she was going to be able to concentrate at all. As she closed the door behind her, however, Dumbledore stood up from his desk and gestured to the wall behind him, which was covered floor-to-ceiling in shelves of books.

"We'll have class in my workroom, if you don't mind," the wizened man said, skimming his fingers across a shelf until he settled them on a book covered in deep purple dragon-hide. He winked at her, then pulled the top of the book away from the wall, activating a set of noiseless hinges that swung an entire section of the shelving inward.

Rigel tried not to look too amused, but she did ask, "Did you install that yourself?"

Dumbledore twinkled at her proudly, "That honor was not mine, though I did recover the lever-book in purple." He waited for a beat, then added, "It's my favorite color."

"Oh," she said. He was still looking at her expectantly, so she offered, "I don't really have a favorite."

"It's always important to be open-minded," Dumbledore nodded sagely, "Especially when approaching a new field of academia."

With that, he led the way through the bookcase and into a small, circular room with no windows. It was lit by a sphere of purest white light that hovered where the ceiling peaked in the center. There were no chalkboards filled with riddling equations or laboratory stations strewn with experiments or anything that would indicate the workroom of a powerful, genius-level wizard. There was just a table with a few chairs around it and lots of spare bits of parchment lying atop it.

Rigel took a seat and pulled out her note-taking materials while Dumbledore went back into the main room. He came back with a nondescript leather journal and placed it on the desk before her. It

was only the fact that she knew *that* diary was safely locked away at the bottom of her trunk that kept her from flinching. Instead, she frowned down at the book before turning her gaze to Dumbledore's and saying, "For taking notes in?"

"I've saved you the trouble," Dumbledore smiled, "This will be your textbook for the first semester."

Rigel curiously flipped through the first few pages and couldn't stop her eyebrows from rising as she recognized the loopy script that filled them. Dumbledore had written her a textbook? By *hand* ? No, she realized after skimming a few paragraphs, it wasn't written like a textbook at all. It was rather stream-of-consciousness, actually-or maybe white-water-rafting-of-consciousness. There were diagrams with arrows pointing all over the place, whole pages of equations further into the notebook that looked a bit like the basic ratio-balancing equations sometimes published in potions journals, only she didn't recognize any of the denotative symbols.

"Are there chapters?" she asked, wondering how he would assign readings in such a text.

"I find there's no need for macro-level progress indicators in my one-on-one classes," Dumbledore said lightly, "As we discuss the concepts and work on practice problems together, your learning curve will become quite clear. Just read as much as interests you in the week between our lessons, and after you've summarized your understanding each week, I'll fill in the gaps and arrange an experiment to help demonstrate the ideas."

Rigel nodded to show she understood, but inwardly she was frowning. She was to set the pace of the course? Was it a test of her academic dedication? Was he going to be disappointed if she progressed too slowly, or disapproving if she pushed ahead too quickly? She wasn't worried about self-motivating-if there was one thing she could do, it was work at a good pace without prompting. She did worry what Dumbledore meant by letting her do so, however.

"For today, I'll introduce the topic briefly, assuming you know nothing about Alchemy," Dumbledore said, starting to slowly walk around the table in a circle, "Alchemy is about changing one thing into something else. It's a subject not many learn, and even fewer delve deeply into, usually because if a wizard wants to effect such a change he uses transfiguration. Alchemy is related to transfiguration, but in much the same way that potions is related to cooking. One is a science and the other more like an art. This is not to diminish the difficulty and exactness required of Transfiguration, of course, but in general transfigurations one does not usually break the first object into its constituent parts, measure them, calculate the lowest possible input of energy to effect the desired changes, and *then* perform the transformation. In Alchemy, however, this is precisely what is required."

Rigel was scribbling down notes as fast as she could while still trying to soak in everything Dumbledore was saying.

"In the beginning, we will focus on transmuting raw elements into compounds, working our way up to more challenging combinations throughout the year. Only very advanced students are able to transmute whole objects into other whole objects, and it requires a level of Arithmancy that I suspect you've not been exposed to yet, in any case," Dumbledore went on, "Do you know why calculations are so important in Alchemy while in Transfiguration willpower is enough to effect exact changes?"

"Because in Transfiguration the wizard is guiding the magic consciously," Rigel guessed based on what she'd heard about Alchemy and knew about shaping magic, "Alchemical transmutations are shaped by runic patterns that describe the changes desired, but the magic the wizard puts into the reaction is raw, so the equations controlling the transformation have to be exact enough to produce the right result without the wizard's will."

"Just so," Dumbledore smiled, "Because of this, Alchemy is one of the few advanced forms of magic that wizards with very little magical power can excel at. Because the calculations and runes to all the

'work' the raw magic required in an alchemical transformation is many times less than the magic necessary to perform a transfiguration of equivalent complexity."

Rigel had never heard that before-in fact, all the famous alchemists she'd ever heard of were known to be powerful wizards, not the other way around. She said as much, and Dumbledore chuckled.

"The efficiency advantages of Alchemy become apparent exponentially, I'm afraid," he explained, "In the beginning, the differences between alchemical and transfigurative energy inputs will not seem all that incredible, and Alchemy will still be far more complicated-almost unnecessarily so, it will seem in the basic reactions. It is only as one progresses through the science-not without considerable time and mental strain, I may attest-that the effort of calculation begins to pay dividends in efficiency, and even then the results of one Alchemy transmutation can take many weeks to plan and execute, while transfiguration can be done at a moment's notice."

"And if you consider that Alchemy essentially magnifies a wizard's power through extreme efficiency," Rigel said slowly, "Then the more powerful wizards will get the most out of Alchemy-like Nicholas Flamel. Alchemy is what made something as incredible as the Philosopher's Stone possible, but I'm guessing a squib couldn't do that, no matter how efficient his equations were."

Dumbledore inclined his head gravely, "You are correct. Alchemy can elevate a near-powerless wizard to feats that ordinary-leveled wizards enjoy, but efficiency does indeed only go so far."

Rigel nodded along as she took notes. It sounded like Alchemy was Arithmancy, Potions, Runes, and Transfiguration all boiled down to their most exacting and effective states. She tried not to get ahead of herself, but it was hard not to try applying the efficiency theory of reactions to potions theory in her head as she wrote. After all, so many basic potions were essentially chemical reactions in a solvent...

Dumbledore didn't keep her the whole two-period block, so she headed down the gargoy-staircase at 11:15 with a peanut butter sandwich kindly provided by the Headmaster as she packed up her things. She doubted he'd made it himself, but it was thoughtful of him to give her a snack to tide her over through History of Magic, all the same.

In an alcove down the hallway she scarfed down the last bit of crust, slipped on her cloak, and turned back one and a half turns to nine forty-five. She snuck into the bathroom between the Defense and History classrooms and waited patiently for her past self to come inside and disappear. Draco and Pansy had saved her a seat, and she tried not to look as though she hadn't seen them in hours, since they'd seen her just a few minutes ago.

At first she wondered why everyone looked so subdued, but then she recalled that for them the overwhelming events of Defense Against the Dark Arts had only just happened. She adjusted her own expression to be suitably introspective and took out her History textbook to pass the time while Binns droned on about a goblin rebellion so miniscule that most history books from the Middle Ages didn't even mention it.

"How are you so calm?" Draco muttered a few minutes into the lecture.

Rigel glanced questioningly at her friend, raising her book up a bit so that even if the ghostly professor looked up from his podium he wouldn't see her lips moving, "What do you mean?"

"Everyone else is silently freaking out about learning their greatest fear, but you're just casually reading a book," Draco whispered, "You were upset in Defense-did you take a Calming Draught in the bathroom?"

Rigel blinked, "So what if I did?"

"Well..." Draco frowned, "Nothing, I guess. Got any more?"

Rigel frowned herself, "No, sorry." She did, of course, have Calming Draughts in her bag, but she didn't think they ought to be mixed with suppressant potions, especially if Draco was taking as many doses as she thought he was.

Draco's frowned deepened, and he looked like he would say something to contradict her claim for a moment, but then he shrugged a shoulder and turned back to his notes in silence.

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The afternoon flew by, and although Rigel enjoyed Arithmancy immensely-it was so satisfying to hear the subject introduced by an experienced professor instead of reading proofs in a textbook-she was also quite looking forward to being able to relax later that evening. Nearly twelve hours of class in one day was a lot, after all, even if the day was stretched long enough to accommodate them comfortably.

She was not the only one digging into dinner with gusto-Millicent positively moaned around her beef stew, complaining, "This year is going to be so awful. It's like all the professors decided we haven't been working hard enough."

"Maybe we haven't," Blaise said, "Less free time isn't necessarily a bad thing."

"Not all of us want to use our brains every second of every day," Millicent argued, "We need some time to relax."

"It won't be as bad as you think," Pansy said reasonably, "If they took away all of our free time now, how could they take away *more* when we start NEWT classes?"

"That's so reassuring, Pans," Draco huffed.

Rigel blinked as the smell of suppressant potion drifted across her nose. She frowned inwardly-hadn't she seen Draco take a dose just a few hours earlier? How many had that been today? She was distracted from this concerned train of thought when Theo tentatively broached the subject of their first Defense lesson.

"So... your uncle seems... intense, Rigel," he said, not looking at her as he salted his potatoes.

"He's usually very even-keeled," Rigel shrugged, "But I suppose he'd have to put on a strong front to win over student respect."

And in immediate hindsight she wondered if perhaps she shouldn't be undermining his effort to do so by saying such a thing out loud. With a mental wince, she attempted a quick retraction.

"He's always taken learning very serious though, now that I think on it. I'm sure he's in earnest about imparting something useful," she tried not to think the silent 'while he can' that went through her head when she remembered the curse on the position. If anyone could beat such a curse, it was Remus.

"Did he tutor you when you were younger?" Pansy asked curiously.

Rigel considered the question carefully, "He did give me a lot of his old potions notes when I first started studying the subject, and he's always there to answer any questions I have. Harry and I didn't have formal tutoring, though, unless you could do the basic reading, writing, and figuring Aunt Lily taught us."

Her friends seemed surprised to hear this. She knew they'd all had specific tutors as children in history, basic spell-casting, rudimentary herbal lore, and so on. She also thought they knew she hadn't, but perhaps they'd forgotten she wasn't a 'typical' pureblood.

Not a pureblood at all, the voice that she'd had more trouble than usual keeping quiet since encountering the boggart whispered. She shook her head and clenched her jaw with renewed determination.

She wasn't going to let such petty fears prey on her reality. If her friends noticed she was a bit more conversationally engaged than usual that night they didn't comment on it, and Rigel refused to admit that she was compensating for her feelings of guilt and displacement.

After dinner no one seemed to feel much like studying, so they settled into a cluster of low-backed chairs in the common room and just relaxed, conversing as they worked on a personal project or participated in a card game, as was their pleasure.

Rigel was halfway through a chapter on muscular dystrophy in one of Archie's healing textbooks when it was plucked from her hands by a very indolent-expressioed Aldon Rosier.

"Healing?" he asked, casually removing Draco's book bag from the seat beside Rigel and flopping down in its place between the two third years. The look he earned from Draco was annoyed, but also unusually edgy, even given his previously expressed dislike of Rosier. "Did you get into the OWL class, then?"

"Not especially," Rigel said with carefully doled casualness, "I have lessons with Madam Pomfrey in my free time sometimes, but mostly I'll be studying on my own, still."

"What classes are you taking, then?" the golden-eyed boy asked.

Wordlessly, Rigel swapped her 'official' schedule for the Healing book, proceeding to ignore Rosier in favor of reading while he perused it.

"You dropped potions?" the upperclassman asked, plucking the book from her fingers once more-or at least he attempted to. She'd tightened her fingers on the pages and tugged it back toward her with a miffed sort of scowl.

"I'm taking it as independent study this year," Rigel said, "Professor Snape was kind enough to create a syllabus more tailored to my

interests."

"To your abilities, you mean," Rosier said, a knowing grin on his face, "Congratulations, Rigel. Professor Snape doesn't excuse just anyone from classes. Your studies must really be progressing."

"Thanks," she blinked, surprised by the honest compliment from the usually enigmatic Slytherin, "I just got a lot of studying done over the summer, so I'm a bit ahead, I suppose."

Rosier laughed, sounding more like the playful charmer she was used to, "There comes a point where modesty is simply a lie, you know."

"Does Rigel strike you as someone adverse to telling lies, Rosier?" Draco asked rather pointedly.

The upperclassman turned to look at Draco with a gleam in his eyes that could only mean trouble, "Does he strike *you* as someone who needs you to defend him, Malfoy?"

Rigel, flustered and a bit annoyed at her two friends, tried to change the subject, "Where's Rookwood?"

"Edmund?" Rosier turned back to Rigel almost reluctantly, "Moping, I suppose. He's ever so depressing with Alice out in the wide world."

"They have a strong bond," Rigel said neutrally, "I'm sure anyone would feel the same."

"Yes, attachments do seem to... complicate life, don't they?" Rosier said absently, "Not altogether a bad thing, of course..."

"When the attachment goes both ways, at least," Draco drawled, "One-sided obsession gets rather tiresome, though, doesn't it?"

Rosier's head turned back to Draco with an eagerness that spoke of someone looking for an argument, "With too much time, perhaps, but

you must admit it's better than the milky, pathetic feeling of ambivalent attentions such as-

"I think you boys have had enough polite conversation for one night, don't you?" Pansy rose abruptly and held out her hand to Rosier, who rose and bowed over it almost automatically. "I'd like a quick stroll before turning in, if you wouldn't mind obliging me? I feel we haven't caught up properly in ages, Aldon."

Rosier took Pansy's hand on his arm with a subservient, if ironic, tilt to his head, "I am ever at your service, Pansy. Good evening," he added with a smile to the rest of them as Pansy drew him toward the common room entrance.

Draco blew out a slow breath, then stood. "I'm tired," he said, packing up his things, "See you all in the morning."

Rigel stood as well, tucking her healing book under her arm. With a quick good night to everyone she hurried after her disgruntled friend, wondering what had prompted him to be so openly hostile with so little provocation.

Draco was at his trunk when she walked in a few seconds behind him, and from the slightly guilty expression on his face she presumed he'd been about to take another suppressant potion. She narrowed her eyes-one at dinner and one before bed? He shouldn't need that many doses a day, surely.

She considered moving into the bathroom to brush her teeth, giving him the space to take his potions discretely without any questions, but, she thought, that was what she would have done last year. She was determined to be a better friend this year, as she had ample time to be such, and she was starting to see that friends didn't politely ignore each others' problems. They confronted them, and then helped fix them.

With that thought in mind, she walked slowly around Draco to her bed and sat down on the end of it, not taking her eyes off her friend

the whole way. She waited expectantly, her gaze steady, and she had the satisfaction of seeing Draco twitch visibly before he steeled himself and stood, shutting the lid of his trunk with preoccupied precision.

"Going to lecture me about being rude to Rosier?" he asked sourly.

"Have I ever lectured you about anything?" she asked, surprised.

He frowned, then slowly moved to sit across from her on his own bed, "Guess not. Well, then?"

"I was going to ask if you wanted to talk about it," Rigel said.

"About what?" Draco said, "Rosier's a jerk. He was trying to provoke me."

"You don't usually make it that easy," Rigel said, "You've been irritable since the train ride."

"So?" Draco studied one of the knobs on his four-poster rather than look at her.

"Just making an observation," Rigel said, "In case you wanted to explain."

"And if I don't?" Draco asked.

Rigel shrugged, "Then don't. But be aware that if I've noticed, everyone's noticed, so if it's not something you want to talk about, you'd better take steps to address the problem, whatever it is."

"I am," Draco pressed his lips together, "This isn't something that just goes away, Rigel."

"So you're going to be a grumpy git forever?" Rigel said, her tone devastatingly deadpan.

He threw his pillow at her. She caught it, then made a show of looking it over carefully. Smiling, she drew a short, pale strand from the underside and held it up to the light, "Oh, good. I used the last of your hair making the Potentials Potion." She didn't think it was just her imagination that he tensed when she mentioned the potion, which only cemented her idea that he'd come into a magical gift he was having difficulty managing. Ignoring his suspicious and slightly panicky look, she slid off the bed and rummaged in her bag for her potions kit with one hand, the other still dramatically holding the hair up between two fingers.

"What are you doing?" Draco said, his voice incredulous.

Rigel blinked exaggeratedly at him, "Cataloguing this for safekeeping. You never know when you might need to Polyjuice into the scion of a powerful pureblood family, after all. I bet I could get a pretty penny for it on the black market, in fact."

Draco let out a disbelieving laugh and lunged toward her from the bed, "Give that back."

"Why should I?" Rigel asked, dancing away, "You discarded it."

"Not so you could have it!"

"You threw it to me, remember?" Rigel said, grinning openly now as she circled around Blaise's trunk.

"That doesn't count," Draco was grinning reluctantly now, "Seriously, give it here-do you know how long my father lectured me when Severus asked how you'd gotten my hair to do the potion for my birthday?"

"I warned you," Rigel said archly, her snooty tone of voice completely belied as she scrambled inelegantly over Blaise's bed and onto hers. Draco followed right after her, and Rigel wondered how long Lucius Malfoy would lecture his son if he could see him clambering over his

dorm mates' beds like a juvenile blonde monkey. "I told you not to leave your DNA lying about so carelessly many times."

"I shouldn't have to watch out for *you*, Rigel," Draco dove for the hand with his hair in it but missed as she leapt across his bed and threw the hangings shut behind her in his face. "Should I put a ward on my hairbrush, too?" he added as he dodged around the foot of his bed to block her way to the door.

She skidded to a halt and tried to change directions, but she only managed to trip on one of Theo's shoes and land with a complete lack of dignity on the floor instead.

Draco leaned down and trapped her wrist between his palms with an expression that was much more entertained-and much less defensive and crabby-than it had been a few minutes before. "Let it go," he said, smirking.

She sighed with false regret, and let the hair slip through her fingers, "You win this round-but I'll get one soon enough, Draco. You shed like a dog."

"I what?" he positively yelped in indignation, and Rigel couldn't help the laugh that escaped her. Draco rolled his eyes and turned around to flop down onto his bedcovers, "You're a complete child."

"Yes," Rigel said solemnly, reclaiming her own bed as well, "I wish I could be as mature as you, Draco, but I just don't have the aplomb to jump so coolly across mattresses like that. If only your mother could see you now."

"You will never mention this incident to anyone, or I'll find one of *your* hairs and Polyjuice as you for revenge," Draco warned, chuckling.

Rigel sat up straight, abruptly alarmed, "You wouldn't do that, would you, Draco?"

"What?" Draco laughed a bit before catching the serious-and, she realized belatedly, too-wary-expression on her face, "No... why would I?"

Rigel thought quickly and affected a down-turned expression of worry, "My Uncle James has told me all sorts of awful stories about people who use Polyjuice for ill ends, and they almost always meet a sticky end. It's such an unreliable brew-you can never be sure it's made correctly, and won't turn you into some kind of creature-human-hybrid for the rest of your life."

She was purely exaggerating now, but Draco didn't have to know that.

"Merlin, really?" Draco shuddered, "Who'd want to be someone else, anyway? I mean, I'm perfect the way I am-you'd be a huge step down, Rigel."

She laughed, because she knew he was making a joke, but her insides felt strangely hollow. Of course Draco would never imagine a life as someone else. After a moment she decided this was a good thing, not something to resent him for. Better that Draco never feel the ache that came from knowing that your destiny was choked by chains not of your own forging.

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The rest of the week flew by, an incandescent whirl of new classes and old friends and more free time than she'd ever had in her life. The only specter casting a shadow over those days was one Marcus Flint, absentee Quidditch captain and coma-patient extraordinaire.

Friday afternoon found Rigel with Pansy and Draco in the Hospital Wing visiting Flint's inert form. Her friends didn't know that this was actually Rigel's second trip to the Wing that day, having been there

earlier for her Healing class at the same time that she was in Magical Theory and Herbology. Madam Pomfrey had been a little *too* blasé in greeting Rigel, but she didn't think her friends were likely to notice or suspect a bit of overacting on the nurse's part.

They were about to leave when the Hospital Wing door opened and Percy Weasley strolled briskly in, his face awash in the kind of determination generally seen in one who has been entrusted with a very important mission. He paused at seeing them there, then smiled politely at Draco and Pansy while inclining his head to Rigel. The Head Boy had a thick stack of parchments in his hand, which he arranged on Flint's bedside table carefully.

"His assignments for the week," Percy explained, "If... when he wakes, he won't want to be behind."

"The professors can't make allowances for him?" Pansy asked, a troubled frown creasing her brow.

Percy shrugged helplessly, "He can plead his case when he's better, I suppose. At least he'll have the notes..."

"Did you take notes for him?" Pansy asked, "That was very kind of you, Mr. Weasley."

"Ah, just Percy," the older boy said, flushing a bit, "I didn't take all of them. The other seventh-year prefects pitched in, too. Imagine missing the first week of NEWT-prep," Percy shuddered in what was apparently horrified sympathy, "None of us envy him that."

"Thank the others as well for me, please?" Pansy said, smiling sadly, "I wish there was more I could do for him."

"I'm sure your presence is comfort enough," Percy said, a bit pompously, "Well, I'd best be off. Will I see you this weekend, Rigel? We're learning some very interesting theory on bi-part transfigurations this week."

"Most likely," Rigel nodded, "If you aren't too busy with Head Boy duties."

"Never too busy for *learning*, Rigel," Percy smiled as though she'd said something very silly.

He took his leave and Draco let loose a snort he must have been containing for some time, "He's quite full of himself-see how he swelled when you mentioned 'Head Boy duties?'"

"He should be proud of his achievements," Rigel shrugged. She was thinking about Flint's assignments and the most devious idea had come into her head.

"It is possible to be proud without becoming a blowhard," Draco said.

"Oh yes," Pansy agreed, her voice deceptively mild, "No one likes a showboat. Remind me again who it was showing off the wrist holster he got for his birthday at the lunch table the other day?"

The tips of Draco's ears turned a delicate shade of pink, "Theo asked to see it, and I was only wearing it because of Dueling lessons-"

"Speaking of," Rigel interrupted, hiding a smile, "Draco has promised to teach us all his illustrious new-found wisdom on the subject, has he not, Pansy?"

"Why, that's right!" Pansy's smile had points, "Perhaps we can put that holster to good use-it was looking a little, well, new. How long do you think it will take to break in? Does it irritate your skin when you wear it too long?"

Draco huffed, "It is made of the finest leather galleons can buy, so no it does not require breaking in, thank you very much, and *of course* it still looks new; I wear it under my sleeves, so it's not as though it gets exposed to the elements. You're just jealous my parents love me so much."

Pansy couldn't keep the laughter from escaping her mouth, "If only your father's love could buy you talent, Drake."

"I don't need to buy talent," Draco squawked.

"I'm afraid you'll have to prove that, Dray," Rigel said, grinning.

"That's it!" Draco laughed, shaking his head, "You two are coming with me right now so I can defend my much-maligned brilliance."

"Brilliance, he says," Rigel raised her eyebrows, "I sure hope he can live up to that, Pan."

"I know what you mean," Pansy sighed, "He is such a boar to live with when he's been utterly humiliated."

"Up!" Draco said, exasperated, actually going so far as to wave them to their feet impatiently, "I won't stand for this kind of treatment, especially from my so-called friends."

"As your friends, it's our solemn duty to give your enormous ego a healthy dose of reality," Pansy informed him, linking her elbow around his affectionately.

"Or at least to trick you into giving us free dueling lessons," Rigel amended.

"Should have been a Ravenclaw," Draco grumbled, "I bet their friends don't torment them for sport."

They continued on that way as they left the Hospital Wing, but only half of Rigel's mind was on the friendly banter. The other half was carefully noting the time, and noticing that the hallways outside the wing were deserted, and very carefully not noticing any glimmer of invisibility cloak material that might have tugged at the corner of her eye as they wandered off.

A few hours later, or no time later at all, depending on how you looked at it, Rigel would sneak into the Hospital Wing under her

cloak, copy down all of Flint's assignments, and leave just as quietly, a ghost on a mission of her own.

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On Saturday morning she was meditating in the common room while Draco poured over his dueling handbook and Pansy worked on an assignment for her Care of Magical Creatures class. Rigel was also in her potions lab brewing watered-down sleeping draughts for the new 'child-friendly' line of potions Krait wanted to try marketing, and she was also in the kitchens with Binny, chatting away in what the elf assured her was increasingly intelligible French, but that was beside the point.

Her mindscape was strange, of late. She missed the golden balls of light that represented her constructed aura floating about the summit of her mountain, lighting up the wintry atmosphere. They were stored comfortably in her potions lab, now, laying about on various shelves, but it wasn't their addition to the inner-levels of her mind that made it seem... changed. The usually warm, welcoming lab felt small and cramped, as though the walls were closing in around her consciousness. She had to force herself to move through the tunnels, which seemed narrower and more confusing than she remembered, and an absolute chill went down her spine when she reached the door to her space room. It was as though there was an ominous presence, malevolently judging her from the room beyond, and it took all of her willpower to choke out the password and open the door.

The celestial objects within, usually whirling and dancing in orbit around the sun that represented her magical core, were unnaturally still and dimly lit. She squinted through the darkness toward the center, unable to fathom why it should be so difficult to see all of a sudden.

When she caught sight of her sun, she flinched involuntarily. It was no brighter than a bundle of glowworms, and it spun sluggishly on a half-hearted axis. It looked ill, as though it had been wasting away without her noticing.

It wasn't like that last time I was here... was it? She wondered, disturbed.

She frowned deeper when she realized that the last time she'd meditated she'd been rushed for time. It was just as she and Archie were to switch places the morning they returned to school, and she'd belatedly remembered she needed to de-construct her aura before leaving for the station. She'd barely entered her mindscape before sending the orbiting spheres of energy whooshing back into the secondary layer of her mind with a powerfully worded thought. She hadn't actually entered the space room 'physically' since...

Before she started wearing the suppresser.

Well, that would explain the drastic change. She tilted her head at the diseased-looking sun. Was it a problem? It didn't look healthy, but there wasn't actually anything wrong with her magic. Quite the opposite-she had no trouble at all wielding spells appropriate to her age group, and she was even learning spells at a normal rate now, taking most of class to figure out how to cast a new spell, instead of freakishly performing them instantly the way she had before.

Uneasy, but not as wary as she had been before figuring out the reason for her mindscape's unusual atmosphere, she left her sun to its lazy rotations and returned her thoughts to the puppet-boy sitting above her in the cave-lab.

She had run into a wall with its development last year, but this year she was determined to improve upon the design until it constituted a working line of defense.

She had tried the complex command route, relying on intricately worded orders to get the puppet to behave with a semblance of

awareness, and although it had worked for a while against Riddle Jr., the construct had been half-mad and completely overconfident at the time. A more careful intruder would not have been fooled.

She'd been thinking a lot about magical constructs, Riddle Jr. included, as she tried to work out a way to imitate life. What really got her thinking, however, was her little sister Addy. A child's magical core started developing in the womb, provided its physical template was expressed in its genes, with the original DNA from the parents determining the shape of its development to some extent.

The magical core didn't spontaneously create itself out of raw power-there was a design that it followed, taken from the mother and father's genetic material. She couldn't push unformed magic into something and expect it to take on a life of its own. The magic had to have a pattern to follow. In the case of sentience, this pattern was obviously very complicated, but when parents created a child they didn't design one from scratch-their bodies already had the pattern built in, they just had to... assemble the pieces.

In theory, she didn't have to design sentience from scratch; she just had to duplicate the pattern that already existed. *She* already had sentient magic, after all. Her magic had a will that was independent from, though still somehow related to, her own will. She imagined the trick would be getting a piece of willful magic inside the puppet, like imbuing shaped magic with a design into a potion instead of raw magic, and hadn't she already learned how to move pieces of the very essence of her magic around her mind?

When she projected her aura consciously, she broke off a piece of her original core from the heart of her mind and moved it to the edges. In theory, all she had to do now was put that piece in the puppet, and the puppet should be imbued with the will of her magic, able to follow directions efficiently and creatively, the way her magic could do things she herself didn't painstakingly supervise.

Satisfied that her theory was sound, and wondering why no one had bothered to write this kind of thing down in a book for people, she

reached toward her sun and pulled coaxingly at it, asking for a handful of magic. Immediately she felt pain wash through her in a petulant backlash. Her vision went dark, and when she groggily recovered her sight she was sprawled at the foot of the couch, Pansy bending over her concernedly.

"Are you all right, Rigel?"

She shook her head to clear it, then nearly passed out again at the vertigo that produced. She sat up shakily, stifling a groan at the painful ache in her gut. Pressing a hand to her stomach, she hefted herself back onto the couch.

"I'm fine," she said slowly, trying to work out what just happened, "I tried to do something that... didn't work. Must have been knocked out of my trance improperly."

"Are you messing around with dangerous Occlumency techniques?" Draco asked, sounding annoyed, "You could make yourself brain-dead doing that."

"It was something I've tried before," Rigel said, shaking her head, "I don't know exactly what went wrong, but I won't try it again until I figure it out."

She thought she might have an idea, actually. The resistance she'd felt before the pain meant that something was preventing her from taking the magic from her core. Best guess-the suppresser ring. It must have blocked her access to such a large portion of her magic that there wasn't enough left to remove a piece without damaging the integrity of the core... maybe. She supposed next time she tried she could use the piece she'd already broken away from her magical core, the one she used to mimic her core when she projected her aura. It was sitting on a shelf in her mental lab with all the other duplicate orbs. Then again, she ought to save that piece for the next time she needed to project her aura, shouldn't she?

To distract herself from the headache that was forming, she glanced at what her friends were up to.

"How's the schoolwork going?" she asked, stretching the kink in her neck out.

"It's..." Pansy hesitated, then sighed, "It doesn't make a lot of sense, actually. Professor Pettigrew's assignments are a little vague."

"The man's a mouse," Draco said dismissively, "He cringes at everything; how could he possibly manage a class full of students *and* a bunch of magical creatures at once?"

"He's quite good with the creatures, actually," Pansy said, frowning, "It's uncanny how well they take to him. In that aspect he's very gifted, but as an instructor... he doesn't seem very *knowledgeable* . I mean, everything he's told us about the creatures we're studying has been taken directly from our textbook, and when someone asks a question he sometimes assigns it as homework instead of answering it."

"Maybe he's trying to make you learn to help yourselves?" Rigel suggested.

"Maybe," Pansy said, looking unconvinced, "Except when he grades our assignments he doesn't really correct anything, just checks it for completion. I suppose it's still just the first month, so maybe he's keeping it simple for now, but learning everything from books seems like a waste of a class."

"You get to see the creatures up close, though," Rigel said, trying to cheer Pansy up. She was pretty sure it was too late to switch classes until next year.

"That's true," Pansy said, tilting her head considering, "It is making me a better researcher."

"Even though the teacher doesn't even check your facts?" Draco shook his head, "I bet most people make up their answers. You should include something blatantly wrong next time, just to see if he's even reading them."

Pansy laughed, "Then how would I pass my OWL in a few years? I'm pretty sure those examiners *do* check your answers."

"The head examiner owes me a favor," Rigel said casually, "I could put in a good word."

Draco and Pansy both stared at her.

"Joke," Rigel said, blinking.

"Who are you?" Draco laughed, "Rigel Black doesn't joke about life debts."

"I'm an imposter," Rigel said, as deadpan as she could, "I've hidden the real Rigel Black in a closet and taken over his life."

"And how is that going so far?" Pansy asked wryly.

"It's not as fun as I thought it would be," Rigel said mournfully, "Rigel apparently just studies all the time, and his friends are kind of boring."

"Boring?" Draco raised an eyebrow, "Is that a challenge, Imposter Rigel?"

"I prefer Rigel the Second," she said archly, "The new and improved version."

"What new features should we expect?" Pansy asked, a smile around her eyes.

"Less reading, more relaxing," Rigel said, lounging backwards on the couch with pronounced indolence, "And this whole self-study potions thing? I'm thinking not."

They both laughed incredulously.

"I'd like to see Snape's face when you tell him that," Draco said between laughs.

"I think I could keep him off my trail until at least until Christmas," she said, grinning a bit now.

"Now you're just deluding yourself," Pansy said, "No one could pull the wool over Professor Snape's eyes for more than a month, at the absolute most."

Rigel allowed that this was probably the case, but inside she felt rather cynical. Snape wasn't nearly as infallible as her housemates thought. Adults rarely were, in her experience. They made a good show of omnipotence, but Rigel had learned at a young age that even people who were good at seeing deception when they looked for it simply didn't look for it most of the time. When they *were* looking for deception, their own imagination often got in the way of objectivity, so all one had to do was reveal a 'truth' that matched with what they expected the truth to be. 'Tell people what they want to hear' was the first and most important rule of getting away with things, in her experience.

She remembered a time when Lily had caught her sneaking upstairs to her room in the middle of the night. She wasn't being as quiet as she had been sneaking downstairs to her mother's potions lab, and Lily, who had apparently got up to use the bathroom, heard her soft 'ow' of surprise as she stubbed her toe on the top stair.

Her mother's forbidding expression was still mildly alarming to her, at that age, and she knew if Lily found out she'd been brewing without asking again she'd be in big trouble, so she blurted, "I only had one!" with as much childish petulance as she could muster.

"One what?" Lily had asked, managing to look every inch a stern matriarch even with her hair sleep-mussed and her bathrobe on inside out.

"Nothing," she mumbled, looking away as though she were hiding something. She clasped her hands behind her back as well, in a belated effort to hide the bandage on her little finger, the souvenir of a clumsy knife stroke.

" *Harriet*," Lily only used her full name when she wanted answers.

She affected the most adorably guilt-filled expression she could come up with, widening her eyes and pinching her brows together the way she'd seen Archie do when he accidentally broke his mother's favorite teacup.

"I was hungry," she said sadly, sniffing a bit for effect, "But I didn't *want* any vegetables."

She could see the moment when her mother's imagination seized on the most likely explanation and ran with it, "Did you break into the biscuit tin again? You *know* you're not allowed sweets between meals, Harry."

She silently resented the 'again' comment, as it had been Archie who broke into the biscuit tin last time, but she lowered her face to the ground as if ashamed, hoping the angle would hide her annoyance. She heard Lily sigh, and when she felt arms wrap around her shoulders she relaxed into them, biting her lip on a triumphant smile.

"Next time you get hungry at night try a glass of milk, okay?" Lily said, stroking her long hair gently, "It's not good for your stomach to digest things while you sleep."

"Uncle Remus says it'll give you weird dreams," she said into Lily's hip, "If I have a nightmare, can I come sleep with you and Dad?"

"Of course you can, darling," her mother said, "But if you think of nice things before you fall asleep your dreams will all be sweet."

She remembered taking her mother's advice as she drifted off to sleep that night, thinking of the vials of hair-growth potion she'd

tucked into her slippers and imagining all the places she could put it when she went over to Archie's house the next day.

Looking back, Rigel wondered if she'd been born with a natural tendency to shrug off authority or if it had come from having Sirius and James for examples of adult behavior.

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She spent the rest of the morning with her friends, and after lunch she trekked up to Gryffindor tower to study advanced transfigurations with Percy.

Percy wasn't there to let her in when she reached the portrait of the pink lady, but a cheerful Oliver Wood was on his way out, broom tucked under one arm.

"Afternoon, Black," Wood said, holding the portrait for her, "Great weather today, eh?"

"I hadn't noticed," she said, blinking at the non sequitur.

"Ah, yes, the price of living in the dungeons I suppose," he looked vaguely disturbed.

"They do let us out occasionally," she said, smiling.

"It would certainly make the season duller if they didn't," he grinned.

It was only because it was Wood talking that she made the connection to the Quidditch season and realized he meant there'd be less competition for his team without the Slytherins there. Thanking him for the round-a-bout compliment, she watched bemusedly as he took off down the hallway with a whistle.

She climbed through the portrait hole and surprised a prefect who'd come over to investigate the open entrance.

It was Angelina Johnson, and she gave a friendly smile as she said, "Looking for the twins? They're about to head out to the pitch with the rest of us."

Rigel noticed she was dressed for the outdoors, and figured Gryffindor must have Quidditch practice on Saturday afternoons. "I'm meeting Percy, actually," she said, "Is he around?"

"Haven't seen him," the older girl said, shrugging, "He doesn't spend much time in his room since he's Head Boy now-likes to be seen with his badge on, we reckon," she pulled a face as she thought, "Saw him leave early from lunch with the Head Girl."

Rigel wasn't actually sure who the Head Girl was this year, but she shrugged to show she understood, "I'll wait then, if it's okay."

"Of course," Angelina said, patting her on the back, "I can go get one of the younger Weasleys to entertain you, if you like."

"That's all right," she said, embarrassed at the idea of having to be entertained like a guest, "No need to bother anyone. I'm sure they have better things to do on a Saturday than babysit their Slytherin friend."

"If you're sure," the prefect shrugged, "See you later, then. Fred! George! Get a move on!"

Rigel privately noted that no one ever shouted so loudly in the Slytherin common room.

Twin tornados of red blurred past her, both pausing just long enough to mess up her hair before continuing at their reckless pace through the portrait hole.

Rigel chose a conspicuously placed chair near the center of the common room, took a Healing textbook out of her bag, and settled in to wait for Percy.

He showed up not fifteen minutes later, his expression moving from clearly pleased with something to dismayed when he caught sight of Rigel.

"I forgot!" he blurted, walking quickly over, "Rigel, I'm terribly sorry. I know you only told me this morning what time, but I was meeting with Penelope and we-I just-it slipped my mind completely."

A rosy flush was creeping up from beneath his collar, so Rigel stopped him before he could trip over his words anymore. "It's all right, Percy," she said, putting away her book, "I haven't been here long, and it gave me a chance to catch up on some reading, anyway."

"Still..." Percy looked completely mortified, and Rigel suspected it wasn't just being late that was making him embarrassed.

"I'm sure your meeting was very interesting," Rigel said, suppressing a smile, "I couldn't very well begrudge you a bit of extra time with our Head Girl when you're spending it so industriously on we students' behalf."

There was definitely a pink tinge to the tips of his ears, now, and he muttered a quick, "I'll just go get my things," before hightailing it to his dorm to regroup.

Rigel sternly told herself not to tease the older boy any more when he got back, if only because she relied on his good graces to wade through theoretical transfigurations.

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It was late Saturday night when Flint came prowling back into the common room. The whole Quidditch team jumped up from various tables and congregated around the upperclassman, who scowled forbiddingly but nevertheless seemed slightly embarrassed by all the fuss.

Pansy beamed as she set aside her notes and went to welcome the Quidditch captain back, Draco and Rigel trailing after her.

"It's so good to see you," Pansy said, clasping the burly boy's hand in earnest as the other well-wishers dispersed.

"From what I hear, you've been seeing me all week," his tone was beleaguered but his face had softened a tad at Pansy's smile.

"Someone had to check up on you," Pansy said.

"That's what mediwitches are for," Flint rolled his eyes.

"But will a mediwitch record all your fevered confessions?" Draco asked. At Flint's black look Draco widened his eyes innocently, "Didn't know you talk in your sleep?"

"Except I wasn't sleeping," Flint grunted.

They all four sobered at the reminder.

"Saw the Gryffindors practicing today," Draco said casually, "Looking in pretty good condition, considering they haven't practiced together in three months."

"Did you take notes?" Flint asked, frowning.

"Of course," Draco smirked, "Snuck into the locker rooms and copied Wood's new plays, too."

Flint barked out a laugh, "Not like Wood to leave them lying around-reckon he thought he didn't have to worry with me indisposed."

"He'll be surprised when we shove his new formations back down his throat," Draco agreed, looking unusually predatory.

Flint nodded, grinning like a shark faced with an unsuspecting meal, "You all better be in top condition. Practice tomorrow morning, eight sharp."

"I'll tell the others," Draco said.

He went off to do just that, and Pansy gave Flint a brief pat on the arm before taking her leave as well. She raised a questioning brow to Rigel, but Rigel waved her friend on. "I have to talk to him about this season," she said.

Flint cocked his head expectantly as Pansy headed back to their couch.

"I can't try out this year," Rigel said, stalling until Pansy was out of hearing range, "I'm going to focus on my academics instead."

Flint shrugged unconcernedly, "I'll replace you with somebody meaner. What do you really want?"

Rigel glanced around them casually, then said, "Expect an owl at breakfast tomorrow."

"The summer work? Good," Flint said, "I've a handful of stuff from this week already-"

"Did those too," she said, "I took the liberty while you were out."

Flint looked gratified, "I won't bother asking for an extension, then."

"You might want to," Rigel said, "To make it more believable."

"I'm not giving them an excuse to hold me back again," he said firmly.

Rigel shrugged, figuring it was his choice, and wandered back to her friends. In truth, she hadn't technically finished the assignments yet—at least, her present self hadn't. She assumed that in a few hours she would turn the day back again and get to work on them, however, so there was probably a version of herself that had finished the assignments by this time, or there would be, or... she mentally shook herself. In any case, the assignments would get to Flint by tomorrow morning.

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On Tuesday morning she received a mysterious note at breakfast with 'everlasting gobstoppers' written on it, so she dutifully tucked it away until later (or earlier, depending on which version of herself she was thinking about) when she made the journey up to the Headmaster's Office for her Alchemy lesson.

She had made good headway in her 'textbook,' but instead of jumping right into the theory when she sat down, Dumbledore brought out a familiar-looking device. It was a long crystal cylinder with a metal ball attached to one end.

"Because Alchemy reactions require a very exact calculation of all input materials, including magic, it is necessary to calculate the rate of one's magical output before attempting any reactions," Dumbledore explained cheerfully, "This device will measure your average rate of magic expenditure. The results are relayed as a color on the light spectrum, then converted via conventional charts to a relative expression of energy over time that Alchemists call a person's magic constant. This constant will be used in equations to calculate the amount of time a specific witch or wizard needs to feed magic into a reaction in order to reach the required amount of power. Questions?"

"How accurate is an average rate as far as consistency?" Rigel asked, "Will the average rate fluctuate day-to-day, or change as a person ages?"

"Generally a wizard's core is stable once it fully matures," Dumbledore explained, "A stable core will have a near-constant rate of unconscious expenditure. With training, one can learn how to alter the rate at which one spends magic, either slowing it down or speeding it up, but directly affecting the speed at which your core produces and emits magic is extremely challenging, even for wizards with excellent control. At times illness or pregnancy can disrupt the flow of magic from a person's core, but the symptoms would be obvious enough to account for, in those cases."

Rigel nodded in understanding, then held her hand out to the device. Dumbledore added, "It's much like conscious imbuing," to which she smiled in thanks as though she hadn't known that already.

It was both similar to last time she'd done this, and very different. The process was the same, but instead of feeling like she was tipping over a bucket of water, it felt like she was pouring it from a bottle with a much smaller neck, or perhaps like letting water from a hose. Only so much could flow out at once, and it did so at a very constant rate, as Dumbledore had said. It didn't take long before she was tired, however, and the Headmaster told her to stop.

The metal ball was a bright green color, like grass that had only recently grown in. Dumbledore seemed to be eyeing her curiously, but he said nothing as he pulled out a chart and began comparing the shades depicted to the shade of the device.

Eventually he settled on the color green he thought the closest-Rigel was amazed to see how many slightly different shades of green alone were represented in the charts. Dumbledore asked her to copy down the figures listed next to her shade, and Rigel did so carefully.

"Your constant is 4.2," Dumbledore said, "Every time you see this symbol," he wrote down what looked like a capital 'S' with an extra

curl at the end, "You plug in your constant and multiply it by whatever the equation's constant-the number that indicates how much magic is necessary for a reaction-is."

Rigel nodded, noting that the magic constants seemed to run from 1 to 8 and be inversely proportionate to the color scale, assuming Red was low and Violet was high. So less powerful shades had higher constants, presumably because it would require them to imbue for a longer amount of time in order to produce the same amount of magic as someone with a more powerful flow.

"As cores increase in power, the speed of magical output increases by a constant amount?" she asked, double-checking the relationship between colors and constants on the chart.

"Precisely," Dumbledore said, beaming at her, "This principle was first discovered by the sage Havodan, in the middle of the second century..." he went on to explain how the modern system of color-based magical evaluation had been rooted in the ancient use of crystals as channeling devices back before wand lore had developed into a powerful branch of magic in its own right.

Rigel listened with rapt attention. It seemed Dumbledore was always teaching her things she'd never heard anywhere else, and she took a moment to send a heartfelt, if silent, thanks to Professor Snape for recommending her for this class before scrambling to take notes.

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By Wednesday afternoon Rigel was beginning to feel that she had settled into a strange sort of time-twisted routine. She supposed the sense of contentment should have warned her that something was about to go wrong.

She was on her way to the Library when Percy Weasley caught up with her in the hall.

"Rigel," the older boy uncharacteristically placed a hand on her arm to anchor her attention as he pulled her aside.

"Hi Percy," Rigel said. After looking up at him she frowned, "What's wrong?"

The prefect's face was drawn tight with tension and his voice had none of its usual pomp as he said, "I need to talk to you. Are you busy now?"

"No," Rigel said, but before she could ask why he was so intensely serious he began towing her gently but firmly toward an empty classroom a few doors down.

Percy shut the door behind them and took a deep, slow breath. He seemed calm when he turned around, but it was the sort of calm that Leo sometimes exhibited before a fight; it wasn't relaxed, but braced.

"Rigel, I have to ask you something and I need you to be honest with me," Percy said, his voice no louder than it needed to be.

Rigel could feel her heart beat faster, but outwardly she remained blank, "Sure, Percy. What is it?" What could he have discovered? Had Bill told his brother about an alley boy who looked suspiciously like Rigel Black? Had Percy somehow caught sight of her somewhere when she should have been somewhere else? Professor Snape would be very displeased if she had revealed the existence of her time-turner in just a few short weeks.

"On Friday you were there with Malfoy and Parkinson when I delivered Flint's assignments to the Hospital Wing," Percy began.

Rigel nodded slowly, wracking her brain to try and remember if she'd been anywhere else conspicuous at the same time that day.

"I need to know if you saw anyone-even someone who seemed like they had a good reason to-looking through the assignments I left," Percy said, voice deadly serious.

Rigel blinked, completely taken aback-this was about Flint's coursework?

Percy must have taken her surprise for reticence, because he said, "I know it goes against the Slytherin honor code to rat out a fellow snake. I understand that you don't want to say anything that might get one of your housemates in trouble, but... Rigel, it's *important*."

"Why?" she asked faintly, both to stall and because she was genuinely confused as to why Percy seemed so worked up over this. Even if Flint's deception *had* finally been uncovered by the professors, what did Percy care?

Percy clenched a fist and looked incredibly angry for a split second before his face smoothed out once more and he blew out a hard sigh, "They think *I'm* doing it."

"What?" Rigel couldn't stop the complete disbelief that crossed her face at that. Percy? He should be the very last person anyone suspected of anything even remotely underhanded. "They think you're-um, what, exactly? Tampering with assignments?"

"Cheating," Percy spat the word like it was filthy, "The professors think someone's been doing Flint's work for him. He turned in the assignments he missed on Monday, and considering he'd only had Sunday to complete them... well, you can see why they're suspicious. Since I was the one who was in charge of collecting them, I'm at the top of the suspect list."

"That doesn't make any sense," Rigel said, more than a bit upset at the idea that Percy might get in trouble for something she'd done, "Anyone in Flint's classes would know what his assignments were, and you don't have any reason to help someone else cheat."

"That's what I said," Percy fumed, "I would never condone such a thing. McGonagall said they couldn't ignore it any longer, though. She said Flint's assignments sometimes seem a little too similar to mine, but how can that be my fault? I'm not even in most of Flint's classes with him."

Rigel felt the burn of guilt crawling up her throat, "They can't do anything-I mean, you won't *really* be in trouble without some kind of proof, right?"

"I don't know," Percy said grimly, "If they take it to the school board and they decide to launch an official inquiry... well, even if I'm cleared that kind of blemish stays on a person's record. I have to clear my name, Rigel. Please, if you know anything..."

"I..." Rigel trailed off. She wished, not unironically, that she had more time to make this decision. What should she do? If she told Percy she was the one doing the assignments, she and Flint would probably both be expelled. Flint would no longer be obligated to keep her secret, as the oath would be broken on her end. Flint might go to the authorities and have her arrested for blood-impersonation in revenge. Archie could get dragged into it, too, and their parents would of course fall under suspicion as well...

"No one's going to hire a barrister they think is dishonest," Percy pressed.

She hated that his blatant guilt-trip was working so effectively. She did have a responsibility to fix this. Should she confess? Was there another way to solve the problem? She hated making decisions under pressure, but Percy would only become more suspicious the longer she waited. It was almost unbelievable that he didn't already suspect her, since she was the one he'd been sharing his understanding of Transfigurations with. Likely he had made the connection and dismissed it, she thought with yet another stab of guilt. Percy wasn't the type to think the worst of his friends.

"I didn't see anything that night," she said at last, "But... I'll put my ear to the ground in the Slytherin common room."

She could see the disappointment on his face, but he nodded wearily, "I understand. It was a long shot, but... I had to try. This is my *future*, Rigel."

"We'll find whoever it is," Rigel said firmly, "I promise, Percy, you won't be blamed for this if I have anything to say about it."

Percy summoned up a grateful smile, though she could see he wasn't convinced that she could do anything.

"I'll let you know as soon as I hear something," Rigel said, as earnestly as she could with guilt eating her up inside. She had to fix this, but she didn't know how... yet. "How long do you think the professors will wait before doing something?"

"Friday is the start-of-term staff meeting for the Heads of Houses," Percy said morosely, "I'm sure McGonagall will bring up her suspicions then."

"Three days is plenty of time to find the real culprit," Rigel said, more to reassure herself than Percy at this point, "We'll fix this. You'll see."

"I hope you're right," Percy said.

Me too, she thought with no small amount of panic.

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That evening, Rigel was walking through the dungeons toward the Slytherin common room when someone stepped out of the shadows of an alcove and into her path. She hopped backwards defensively

on instinct, putting a few feet between them, but relaxed when she recognized Flint's unhappy expression.

"We have a problem-" the seventh-year began.

"I know," Rigel said, quiet but firm, "I already have a solution."

She had spent an afternoon of time-folded hours since she ran into Percy going through plan after plan for how she was going to deal with this disaster. She was still fine-tuning the details, but she thought the course of action she'd decided on was going to work.

"Do tell," Flint drawled, one eyebrow raised in scornful disbelief. "Wait," he pulled out a wand and cast a muffling charm around them, "Damn corridors echo."

Rigel nodded in thanks, then began, "The only way to clear Percy's name is to-"

"What? Percy Weasley? What's he got... to..." Flint trailed off into dark chuckles, "Oh, that's rich."

"You didn't know the professors suspect him of doing your assignments?" Rigel asked, confused, "Then what did you think the problem was?"

Flint stopped laughing and scowled, "McGonagall cornered me after breakfast. Said she knows I haven't been doing my assignments and knows who had been, too. I honestly thought she might have figured it out." He gave another short laugh, "If they think it's

Weasley they're just grasping at straws."

"Well, either way we still have to do something about it," Rigel said, shaking her head to get back on track.

"No, we don't," Flint snorted, "Let them think it's Weasley. Because it's not, they'll never get proof, and it'll go away."

"Not before it ruins Percy's good name," Rigel protested, "I can't let someone else get in trouble for what I did."

"I can," Flint said, starting to turn away.

Rigel darted forward and caught his arm, "Flint, we *are* going to fix this."

Flint's expression was positively menacing as he turned his gaze slowly toward her hand on his arm. She released him, trying not to gulp, but kept her expression stubborn.

"If we confess, not only will we both be kicked out," Flint growled, "But your prettily-worded oath of silence will no longer be enforceable. Are you ready to go to prison for your precious Weasley, *Rigel* ?"

He said her name tauntingly, but she only gritted her teeth before lifting her chin and saying, "That outcome presumes quite a bit. It assumes you would turn me in after everything-"

"I would."

"And that I'm even talking about implicating us in the first place," Rigel finished, flashing her eyes in aggravation, "Just listen for a second, will you?"

Flint adopted an incredibly insolent expression that Rigel was sure drove his professors up the wall, but he did fold his arms expectantly.

"There's a way to clear Percy's name and protect ourselves *and* avoid throwing anyone else into suspicion," she added when he looked ready to interject, "All we have to do is show the professors they're wrong about you cheating in the first place."

"But they're not wrong," Flint said, rolling his eyes, "They'll never believe it."

"They'll have to, when they see it for themselves," Rigel said, smiling slyly.

"First of all-they won't believe I've been doing my own assignments just because I start doing them now where they can see," Flint said, "And second-the point of this is that I don't do my own assignments."

"You won't have to," Rigel said, still smiling a bit. It really was a brilliant plan. "The professors are going to decide what to do about this situation on Friday evening, so Friday in your Transfiguration class you have to prove to McGonagall that you were the one doing all those assignments. I'll get ahold of the assignment she's going to give out that day, complete it, then give it to you before class. You pretend like you're working on it during class, then hand it in when the bell rings. When McGonagall reads it she'll have no choice but to think you are capable of working incredibly fast and accurately, thus supporting the idea that you completed a week's worth of make-up assignments on Sunday afternoon alone."

Flint mulled this over for a moment, "It'll be in the writing-style my other assignments were, too, since you'll be the one completing the assignment. It might stretch the imagination that I could finish an assignment in the last fifteen minutes of class, but that's the point, isn't it?"

Rigel nodded. She had been relying on McGonagall's practice of giving the students free time at the end of class to ask questions and work on individual projects and assignments being the same for the upper years as it was for Rigel's class. Relieved that this was the case, Rigel tilted her head, "So? Will you do it? It will get McGonagall and the other professors off your back for good, if it works."

"One problem," Flint said, "How are you going to get the assignment before my class? McGonagall gives different prompts to different sections, precisely so someone can't get the assignment from an earlier section and think it's okay to skip their own class. The

Hufflepuff-Ravenclaw class on Thursday won't have the same work, even if the lesson is the same."

Rigel smiled unconcernedly, "Let me worry about that. Just meet me in the corridor parallel to the Transfiguration classroom five minutes before your class on Friday. I'll do the rest."

"If you get caught breaking into McGonagall's office..." Flint didn't seem convinced that she could pull this off.

"I just wanted to peek at her grade book and see how Draco was doing in class," Rigel said, widening her eyes innocently and biting a corner of her lip in chagrin, "He's been distant lately-I'm worried he's struggling but afraid to ask for help."

Flint grimaced, "You're gonna make me sick."

"I'm going to make you innocent," Rigel corrected, falling back into a serious expression, "If we're agreed, that is?"

"No wax off my broom," Flint shrugged one shoulder sharply, cracking his neck in the process. Rigel took that as eager agreement.

"See you Friday, then," Rigel said, moving past the older boy toward the common room. She had a lot to do in the next two days, but she wasn't as worried as she could have been. Problems didn't seem so difficult to solve, when you had a near-infinite amount of time in which to solve them.

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On Thursday they faced the boggart again. Remus had been coaching them through various fear-managing strategies in the last

couple of classes, and even his biggest doubters had to admit his methods were effective.

Rigel herself could see marked improvement in her mind's ability to process information and react appropriately under psychological stress. Each time she faced the boggart, she felt a little less afraid, less prone to giving credence to the insidious fears the creature reflected back at her. It was almost a form of therapy, in addition to being a good defense-related self-learning experience, and Rigel wondered where on earth Remus had come up with the idea.

The only one who didn't seem to be doing any better against the boggart was Draco. He still came out from behind the screen pale and extremely shaky after his third experience with the dark creature. While most of their classmates seemed drained but stable after the first couple times, Draco looked increasingly haggard, strained, and upset after each occurrence.

Rigel wanted to ask what was upsetting her friend so much, and she could tell Pansy, who was just as good if not better at seeing behind Draco's stoic masks, wished she could say something as well, but they both kept silent. There was an unspoken rule amongst their Defense class that no one asked what someone else's fear was, and Rigel and Pansy both knew their friend would be too proud to give voice to his weakness, in any case.

When it was Draco's turn to go behind the screen once more, they watched him go in silent concern.

When he reemerged, Rigel could only wish they hadn't stayed silent, because Draco looked very close to having a mental breakdown. There were too many curious eyes on their friend, whose trembling was easily visible despite his attempts to clench his fists against the shivers, so Rigel didn't dare do anything comforting, even though she really wanted to put an arm around her friend's shoulders and pull him along to the Hospital Wing.

Pansy pressed a bar of chocolate into Draco's hand, eventually convincing him without words to unclench it and take a bite of the sweet mechanically. As he chewed, they positioned themselves around him in such a way as to block most of their classmates' stares, patiently waiting for Draco to come back to himself.

It took too long for comfort, but eventually Draco gathered himself enough to say, "If that thing is on the final exam-" he cut himself off abruptly with a shudder that looked like it had forced its way down his spine. After a frustrated breath, he said, "Bugger this class," and stalked toward to exit without another word.

Rigel and Pansy stared after him, then looked at one another in united helplessness.

"I suppose he would prefer to be alone," Pansy said quietly.

Rigel nodded shortly, a frown pinching her brow, "I wish-"

She didn't bother finishing that thought aloud, because Pansy knew very well what Rigel wished. She could see that her kind-hearted friend wished it too. It didn't matter though. There was nothing they could do for Draco until he allowed them to help. Until then, they would do what they could from afar. Neither had to tell the other that what they could do wasn't nearly enough.

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On Friday morning, the time until Flint's Transfiguration class crawled. She went through her Magical Theory and Herbology classes first, then turned back to attend her Healing lesson with Madam Pomfrey, and finally turned back a third time to slip into the Transfiguration classroom fifteen minutes before Flint's lesson was scheduled to start. She had her invisibility cloak wrapped around her, and she found a spot at the back of the classroom well away from

the student desks where she could stand, unnoticed, for the entirety of the lesson.

Her plan was simple, but somewhat elegant, even if she said so herself.

She'd wait through Flint's class until McGonagall handed out the assignment, copy it down discretely, sneak into the Library to finish working on it, then time-turn back to the beginning of the class and hand the completed assignment to Flint to turn in before the class was over.

She anticipated a boring couple of hours of standing still and breathing quietly, but when McGonagall started lecturing Rigel found herself unexpectedly drawn into the lesson. It was so *interesting* to hear advanced transfigurations theory from a real professor like McGonagall. Percy's second-hand explanations were sometimes hard to follow, and he didn't exactly have a way with words. The actual lecture was fascinating and the examples McGonagall used to illustrate her point were incredible detailed.

She hadn't realized how much Percy was leaving out of their study-sessions. Had he been dumbing it down for her? She grumbled a bit internally, but then decided she couldn't be too offended-she *had* been only a first year when he started tutoring her.

Seeing the actual transfiguration performed was exciting, too, she discovered. Most of the time Percy was reluctant to practice magic outside of class, and so Rigel never got to see the magic she was researching. By the end of the lesson Rigel found she had a much better grasp of the topic than she usually did with NEWT-level transfigurations.

Maybe I should sneak into seventh-year classes more often, she thought with a small amount of humor.

That amusement vanished when she caught Percy giving Flint a cold state from across the classroom as McGonagall went around to

monitor the students' attempts to duplicate the practical portion of the lesson. Rigel sobered at the reminder of why she was there in the first place, and guiltily tried not to enjoy the rest of the lesson too much.

When McGonagall wrote out the assignment on the board, Rigel hurriedly copied it down onto a small piece of parchment she'd stuffed in her pocket.

She tried not to pay too much attention to what Flint was doing in class, aware that she was skirting the line of how much people with time-turners were supposed to interact with their past selves, but she couldn't help but notice when the Slytherin Quidditch captain pulled out his wand and put it to a roll of parchment on his desk. He held it there for a good ten minutes, moving it over the page as though casting a spell on the rolled-up scroll.

Near the end of class, McGonagall got around to Flint's desk and looked down at him disapprovingly as he casually tucked the rolled-up scroll into his book bag.

"And what are you working on, Mr. Flint?" she asked tersely.

Flint shrugged insolently, "The assignment, Professor."

At McGonagall's openly skeptical expression, Flint scowled as though offended and jerked his hand into his book bag once more, emerging with a scroll clenched in his fist.

"In fact, you can have it now, Professor McGonagall," Flint sneered, dropping the scroll, which Rigel would bet anything was a different scroll from the one he'd been 'spelling,' onto the desk in front of him.

With several classmates, including Percy, curiously looking on, McGonagall picked up the scroll and opened it, then scanned it quickly. She narrowed her eyes, unrolled it further, then a little more, seeming more and more confused the further the scroll unrolled.

"What is this, Mr. Flint?" she said at last, brandishing the scroll.

"The assignment, Professor," Flint repeated slowly, as though talking to someone dimwitted.

"You could not have written this so quickly," she said sharply.

"I didn't write it," Flint said dismissively, "I dictated it mentally. It's faster than writing it out by hand."

He was laying it on a bit thick, Rigel thought, but it probably suited Flint's personality to openly taunt a teacher in such a way.

"What spell did you use?" McGonagall demanded.

"The Psychic Transcription Charm," Flint said, "It's not against the rules to transcribe one's homework, is it?"

McGonagall looked fit to be tied as she managed a, "Not yet, Mr. Flint," and stalked back to her desk.

Rigel had time to see Percy's completely flummoxed expression before class was dismissed and the seventh years filed out of the classroom.

Rigel snuck out once McGonagall had left, making a beeline for the Library. She had what appeared to be a rather long essay to write before she could time-turn back and join her friends for lunch.

The essay took her three hours to research and write. It wasn't as difficult as Flint's Transfiguration essays usually were, since the lecture McGonagall had unwittingly given her had been very informative, but she spent extra time making sure it was absolutely faultless. Feeling a bit mischievous, she even quoted McGonagall's exact words from one part of the lesson for good measure.

Good luck disputing this, she thought, allowing a satisfied smile to slip onto her face, though no one could see it underneath the invisibility cloak.

She turned back to ten in the morning and waited for Flint in the corridor next to the Transfiguration classroom. At exactly five minutes till ten, Flint strolled casually around the corner. Rigel handed him the rolled-up assignment, saying, "Don't forget the handwriting charm."

Flint snorted, but took out his wand to perform the charm anyway, "This better work."

"It will," she said, and her confidence wasn't even bravado-she'd seen it work, after all.

"This is long," he frowned, unrolling it to have a look, "She's never going to believe I physically wrote this in ten minutes."

Rigel paused, then said, "Pretend to use the Psychic Transcription Charm."

Flint raised an eyebrow, "How do you even know about that spell?"

"I looked it up in the Library this morning," she said. She firmly told herself that she *would* be time-turning back to earlier that morning yet again and looking up the charm technically before she told Flint about it temporally. That way it wouldn't be a lie, and she could stop feeling like she'd caused a time-paradox accidentally. The whole situation was really starting to freak her out, and she was trying not to think about what would have happened if she didn't tell Flint to use the charm that she'd witnessed him pretending to use later... she barely suppressed a shudder.

Flint narrowed his eyes at her, "And you're sure this is the topic she'll assign?"

"Absolutely," Rigel said. She realized that sounded a bit too sure, so she added, "If not, I'll think of something else."

The older boy looked skeptical, but put the scroll in his bag nonetheless, "All this for a Weasley."

Rigel allowed herself a cynical smile, "Don't kid yourself, Flint. I'm doing this for myself. If all I wanted to do was protect Percy, I'd turn the both of us in. Lucky for you, I'm completely selfish."

She wondered silently whether she'd always been such a ruthless person, or if the more she sacrificed for her ambition the harder she'd become. She was afraid that the further she took this charade, the less willing she would be to throw it all away, even if someone else got hurt along the way. How would she know when to cut her losses? At what point would it be too late to turn back?

"You're not completely selfish," Flint said gruffly, "Or you'd let Weasley take the fall to protect yourself. Just because you don't recklessly sacrifice yourself for another doesn't mean you're evil; it means you're smart. You found a way for everyone to win."

Rigel thought that sounded like an excuse to do the wrong thing, but all she said was, "You should be getting to class."

Flint gave her a long look, but eventually turned and did just that.

When Rigel was sure he'd gone, she took out her cloak and grasped her time-turner once more. She mentally checked to make sure she wasn't pushing the limits, but if she went back one last time to look up the Psychic Transcription Charm there would still only be four versions of her at one time. Her last thought before the whirl of time whisked her away was that if things like this kept coming up she'd be aging a lot faster than Snape had anticipated. Luckily, the Modified Polyjuice meant that no one would notice a thing.

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It had been a very satisfying week for Severus Snape. One of his more talented sixth years had caught the eye of a notable Australian Potions Master over the summer and Severus had taken great

pleasure in drafting a suitable letter of recommendation for his apprenticeship. Not a single Slytherin had been given detention, and several miscreant Gryffindors had unwittingly volunteered to clean all of his cauldrons on Thursday evening, leaving him free to complete all of the week's marking ahead of schedule.

He was looking forward to a guilt-free evening of quiet solitude before a weekend of lesson preparation and inventory stocking, and the only thing standing in the way of that was the dreaded Heads of House meeting on this third Friday in September.

As he made his way to the staff room, he wondered what drivel his colleagues would bring to the table this year. No doubt Flint's mysteriously efficient method of assignment completion would be brought to the fore yet again. Minerva had been hinting all week that she was rearing to finally do something about the situation, but Severus was skeptical that she would establish the proof necessary to see it so. Severus was of the opinion that the situation didn't warrant interference-Flint was graduating this spring, so the problem would resolve itself before long. Whoever was doing Flint's assignments probably benefitted from the extra studying more than Flint would, in any case.

Pomona greeted him cheerfully as he claimed his preferred chair; Severus summoned an appropriately disinterested response, wary of tempting his loquacious coworker into attempting to start a conversation. He knew from long experience that the Head of Hufflepuff would take any politeness as friendly encouragement.

Dumbledore arrived before long, and the meeting commenced with a discussion of the newest additions to the staff.

"I had a few distraught reports the first week of classes," Pomona said hesitantly, "But recently favor for the new Defense professor has been on the rise."

"The boggart was an inspired idea," Filius said, smiling approvingly, "I've already seen an increase in confidence among a few of my

more timid Ravenclaws."

Severus sneered, "Traumatize the students to make them stronger-why ever hadn't we thought of such methods sooner?"

"They haven't been traumatized, Severus," Minerva shook her head, "Overcoming one's fears is an excellent lesson for any child to learn."

Any child that *could* overcome one's fears, Severus thought darkly. And for those who couldn't, those children whose fears were too dark or upsetting for them to handle? Their psychological upset was worth the boost of confidence in their peers, apparently. The number of Calming Draughts the Hospital Wing had gone through in the first week alone... Severus scowled. How like a Gryffindor to encourage the strong and forget the unable.

"Mr. Pettigrew seems to be fairing well with his classes as well," Pomona said tentatively, "I wouldn't have guessed his interest in educating, but I peeked over at one of his lessons while I was tending the outdoor gardens, and I have to say he certainly had good control over the lyrebirds he was showing them."

Severus had no interest in the ex-Marauder's teaching ability. He kept one ear half-trained on the conversation while the rest of his attention went to listing the ingredients his personal lab was running low on. Eventually, the meeting moved back to a topic he had vested interest in. To his surprise, it wasn't Minerva who brought up Marcus Flint, but Filius.

"No idea *how* he did it, but he turned in the assignment first thing Monday morning!" the diminutive professor exclaimed, "I saw him myself on the Quidditch pitch Sunday morning, and Pomona says he turned in her assignments on Monday as well. Even if he *is* having another student do his work, they'd have to have been in the Library all day. I asked Madam Pince if she saw anyone, but-"

"Don't bother," Minerva said wearily.

Even Severus couldn't help but raise an eyebrow at her.

"I know how he's been doing it," the Gryffindor Head said, her mouth twisting bitterly, "He all but flaunted his method during class this morning."

"It was not another student, then?" Dumbledore asked, looking intrigued.

"No, assuredly not," McGonagall said, sounding more than a little bitter.

Severus felt suspicion stir in his mind. Flint would not be ostentatious with his methods unless it gained him something. "Unusually accommodating of Flint to show you his method, Minerva. Did you *accuse* my student of something without proof?"

Minerva flinched, but said stoutly, "I thought I had proof. Percy Weasley was charged with collecting Flint's homework assignments while he was in the Hospital Wing, and then the assignments were turned in complete Monday morning-no one else had access to those assignments. I even changed the Transfiguration prompt so that it differed from the one his section received."

"You set him up?" Severus could not believe what he was hearing. She'd arranged for Weasley to pick up Flint's assignments as a *test* .

"Gryffindor or not, the rules are very clear," McGonagall said, "It was the only way to know Mr. Weasley's guilt or innocence for certain and resolve this problem once and for all."

"Except it failed," Severus said, smirking just to provoke her, "You somehow interpreted the results as a false positive and implicated your own student just to get at mine."

"I was not trying to 'get at' Mr. Flint," Minerva protested, "I was merely-"

"Did you tell Mr. Weasley you suspected him?" Severus was being cruel, now, but Minerva deserved to be reprimanded in this case, "Did you give him a chance to defend himself?"

The Gryffindor Head of House pressed her lips together, which was all the answer Severus needed.

"Was he terribly shocked and hurt that his Head of House would accuse him of such a thing?" he asked silkily, "I do hope you apologized-to *both* our students."

"Of course I did," Minerva said stiffly, "I can admit when I'm wrong." The unspoken *unlike some people* did not go unnoticed.

"How is he doing it, then?" Filius asked, bursting with curiosity as usual.

"The Psychic Transcription Charm," Minerva said.

"That's very advanced," Pomona frowned, "It takes incredible mental agility to dictate a coherent stream of thought at a fast enough pace for the charm to be useful."

"It explains everything, though!" Filius beamed, "The style would obviously be different from Flint's actual writing style, as most people formulate their thoughts differently from how they'd speak or write. It would be phenomenally quicker than writing an assignment by hand, as well. His assignments are so well-informed, though... I knew he was hiding a brilliant mind, but this is far beyond my expectations."

Severus *quite* agreed. If Flint were really using that transcription spell to complete his assignments, he'd happily eat bat wings. The very fact that Flint had 'proven' his innocence so conveniently on the eve of his indictment meant he'd merely found a way to cover his tracks.

Minerva spotted the amusement on his face, for she said, "I know what you're thinking, Severus, but it wasn't a trick. I saw him do it,

not ten minutes after I'd given the assignment. It wasn't the same assignment as the earlier section, and it wasn't vaguely-worded as though he'd guessed at the topic ahead of time. He quoted something I'd said in class an hour earlier, for Merlin's sake."

Severus could not help the curl of amusement he felt at the older woman's disgruntled expression. He didn't know how Flint had managed that, but for the boy's sake Severus was pleased it had his colleagues convinced to let the problem go at last.

"All's well that ends well," Dumbledore said, smiling benignly, "And speaking of students who surpass expectations, what has become of young Mr. Black?"

Severus wondered if there would be a staff meeting in the next four years that did not bring up the enigmatic Rigel Black.

"He seems distracted," Filius commented, "While the practical work used to come seemingly effortlessly, now he struggles as the other students do to learn a new spell, casting many times without success before succeeding."

"Coursework is significantly more difficult for third years as they start OWL preparation," Minerva said, "I'm sure Mr. Black is simply falling into the normal learning curve at last."

Severus frowned. Nothing about Rigel should be considered 'normal.' The boy had more magic than he knew what to do with, a problem that should only have exacerbated after his core fully matured. He'd expected to hear reports of uncontrolled spellwork, violent accidental magic, and more in response to the boy's awakened core. To hear that he'd somehow managed to become *average* over the summer disturbed him far more than hearing that the boy had accidentally blown something up ever could have.

The Headmaster, too, seemed concerned, "I tested his output coefficient during our lessons this week and found him at a 4.2,

much higher than I expected, considering how powerful I assumed him to be. Is it possible we misjudged his potential two years ago?"

Severus shook his head sharply, "At the end of last term the boy was capable of imbuing four Aconite Alleviations in a row. That was several months before his core would have fully matured. He has the magic. That it is neither uncontrolled nor manifesting under scrutiny is... surprising."

"Are you suggesting he fooled the calibrating device?" Pomona asked carefully.

"If he has, it will be obvious when we begin Alchemy in earnest-it would take an incredible amount of control to be able to maintain the same average rate of expenditure artificially," Albus said, characteristically reasonable, "Mr. Black has above average control, as we have seen, but it takes more than natural skill to be able to measure one's own power consistently."

"Perhaps we are jumping at shadows," Filius suggested, "It may be the child's core simply settled later than most. If his core was unstable, its maturation could have stabilized his magic, rather than upsetting it. There have been cases of such happening before."

Severus resisted the impulse to roll his eyes. In magically incompetent children, the maturation of the core sometimes had an equalizing effect, but Rigel's core was not unstable-it was powerful. The boy's unconscious suppression of his core was what made it unstable. There was something else going on, and the next time he saw his most troublesome student he would figure out what it was. Then he would put a stop to it.

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[end of chapter six].

A/N: So here we are, a million years too late, and all I have to say is I'm coming home from China next month, and then all will be well again if I have anything to say about it. I know this story seemed abandoned and I don't blame anyone for being upset or confused about what was going on. I'm so sorry, which is a common theme in my author's notes, and I can only say I'm trying to do better. All the best you guys, and I'll have the next chapter up in a month or less or I'll let my sister box my ears (which she has been threatening to do for a while now whenever we are able to get in touch).

Chapter 7

The Ambiguous Artifice:

Chapter 7:

[AbAbAb]

Archie had never really considered blue to be his color. He'd been told many-a-time that he looked dashing in shades of red and positively shone in golden hues, but as Sirius had been the one telling him this it was no wonder that he'd never realized how blue brought out the silver in his eyes until he'd begun donning the career tract robes at AIM. They swished around him as he walked, as though teased by an invisible breeze.

Hermione often said the cut of their school robes was ridiculous, usually while huffily stumbling over the extra fabric at the bottom, and Archie hummed agreeably, not sure his friend would appreciate a lecture on traditional wizarding fashion, nor lessons in how to make the fabric flair appropriately while walking. It was a shame, though, for Archie suspected Hermione would be utterly intimidating with the right kind of *strut* .

He was contemplatively comparing their respective strides as they walked through the halls toward the cafeteria for an afternoon snack, but before he could decide if Hermione was more of a lilting gait or a careless stroll, an oily hand came down on his shoulder from behind.

"Mr. Potter, a word, if you aren't currently engaged?"

Archie stifled a groan at the too-familiar voice. The last person he wanted to give a word to was Master Tallum, head potioneer at AIM. His expression when he turned to face the venerable man was, however, entirely expectant, "Yes, sir? Is it about my last homework assignment? Cause I know it was a little off topic, but you have to

admit the question of whether hummingflies are sentient is more important than how their wings can be used in cough syrups. I mean, imagine the implications-"

"Er, no," Tallum cleared his throat in a clumsy ad hoc conversational maneuver that Archie had been trained out of before he was five, "Actually I was hoping you'd come by my office this week to answer a few questions about your internship this summer. I just received the newsletter with the summer's research reports in it, and I must say I was surprised to see 'Harry Potter' in the by-line! The English Guild is notoriously picky in its interns, you know."

"Oh, are they?" Archie struggled to keep a relaxed expression on his face. Harry had gone over her work with him, but he wasn't sure he could answer detailed questions from a Potions Master about it.

"Yes, indeed! To think such talent lay under my very nose-why aren't you in the Potions Mastery tract, young man?" Tallum demanded.

"I want to be a Healer," Archie shrugged apologetically, "I love potions, but I want to use my talent in the field to come up with cures to rare illnesses. I took the internship in part because it was such a rare opportunity and in part to compensate for not being able to join the Potions tract here at AIM."

"Your research at the English Guild doesn't seem to be closely related to Healing Potions," Tallum frowned.

"I knew I wasn't ready to pursue anything so complex, especially in the short time-frame," Archie said, definitely reaching now, "So I chose a topic that I thought the Guild would be interested in, since they were funding my research."

"I see," Tallum still looked mildly confused.

"I'm a little busy this week," Archie invented suddenly, "But what if I give you my notes from this summer? I'll have to find them, but they should be able to explain things in much better detail than we could

go over in a conversation. I'm really terrible at oral explanations, anyway." He rubbed his neck sheepishly, and was pleased to see Tallum looking giving him an appeased nod.

"See that you do," the older man said, "The possibilities are certainly intriguing..."

He strode off down the hallway, and when Archie made to take up walking again Hermione stayed him with a firm hand on his arm.

"What's going on, Harry?" she asked, her hair bouncing a bit as she tilted her head expectantly.

"What ever could you mean?" Archie smiled, attempting to diffuse the tense atmosphere.

"You are exceptionally good at oral explanations," Hermione said, her voice more accusing than complementary, "And we certainly aren't all that busy this week."

"I could have other stuff to..." he trailed off with a sigh at her disbelieving expression. He wondered what Hermione would say if she did know just how many side-projects he worked on when he was 'goofing off in his room all weekend.' There was *one* project in particular that was taking a huge amount of his time and energy to work through, but he knew his friend wouldn't believe that-he'd cultivated his care-free personality so effectively, after all. Instead, he said, "I just didn't want to talk about my internship with Master Tallum."

"You've been avoiding the subject with me, too," Hermione said, frowning, "You were so excited about the internship last term, and I even ordered that edition of the English Guild's periodical so I could read your work, but whenever I ask you to explain what you meant by most of it you brush me off. Are you getting it copyrighted first, or something?"

Archie shook his head, a bit taken aback by Hermione's persistence. "I just..." he affected a pouty expression, "I don't like all the attention. It was just a bit of fun! I thought I could do some off-beat experimenting over the summer, just to keep me busy; I had no idea everyone would take it so seriously!"

"It seemed like important work, though," Hermione said, brow still furrowed, "How can you not be proud of something you spent so much energy on? I'd be glad if people were paying attention to something I'd done-how many thirteen-year-olds can say they've made an academic breakthrough in *any* field?"

Archie shuffled uncomfortably, "I don't like people having such high expectations of me, especially since if I decide to get a Potions Mastery I'll use it for Healing, not this kind of methodology research."

Hermione hesitated, but eventually said, "I understand that you want to have control of your career, but at some point you might have to weigh your right to follow your dreams against the responsibility you have to natural talent. If a musical genius decided he'd rather become a mediocre anthropologist than a peerless composer, it's his right, but... is it really for the best?"

Archie could not stand one more second of Hermione's melancholy expression, so he clapped a hand over his heart in a heavy swoon, "Are you calling me a mediocre Healer?! I'll have you recall we *tied* in the last Craniofacial Alterations exam."

"Of course not!" Hermione looked absolutely appalled-for half a second. Then her sharp brown eyes caught his playful grin and she blew out the incensed breath she'd sucked in with an exasperated eye-roll, "You know I respect your Healing ability," she said, "Why can't you take anything seriously, Harry?"

"Because I have you to do that for me," Archie smiled, taking Hermione's hand and leading her toward the mess hall once more. He was a little disappointed to notice that Hermione hardly blushed at all-it was becoming much more difficult to tease her as their

friendship progressed. Clearly he'd have to become even more charming somehow.

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The afternoon found Archie and Hermione underneath their favorite tree, both enjoying the silence of the other's company while they each read whichever textbook they were currently engrossed in. For Archie, it was actually a medical periodical from the late eighties. He'd finished his schoolwork for the week and while he should probably be catching up on the syllabi Harry had sent over for the new semester, he was dreading the thought of it. Harry was taking Magical Theory, Arithmancy, and Ancient Runes this year, on top of the usual subjects, and her potions work was getting even more advanced, apparently. He didn't know how he was going to keep up, seeing as he had extra electives starting this term as well. Harry didn't seem worried about the extra work, but she never worried about anything, as far as he could tell.

So he was putting off the overwhelmed feeling he just knew was creeping up on him by relaxing. At least, he was until a page dressed in the school colors came jogging over to them. He wondered if he'd forgotten to return a library book, until he caught sight of the patch on the front of the boy's robes that signified the wearer worked in the owlry. The boy produced a letter from a messenger bag over his shoulder and said, "Potter, right?"

Archie nodded, standing up to take the letter with a smile and a quick, "Thanks."

Harriett Potter was written in fancy script on the outside of the envelope. When Archie had first arrived, the poor professors had all been terribly confused as to why he had shown up when they were expecting a girl called Harriett Potter. He set them straight quick

enough, and now the majority of the staff and students were laboring under the impression that his parents had a very poor sense of humor.

"Is your father still addressing your letters as if you're a girl?" Hermione said, her eyes narrowed in indignation on his behalf as he sat back down beside her.

"It's still pretty funny," Archie said, shrugging, "And he's not one to let go of a joke until it's breathed its last."

"It's a wonder you didn't turn out worse," Hermione sniffed. After a moment, she sent him an apologetic glance, "I mean, I'm sure your relatives mean well. Not that I've ever met them. *Am* I ever going to meet them?"

Archie pretended to think about that for all of three seconds, "Sure. Someday."

Hermione sighed, "I don't know why you're so reluctant. I'm perfectly nice."

"It's not *you*, 'Mione," Archie laughed, "I don't want to expose your ethereal self to the plebeians that make up my beloved family, that's all."

"They can't be that bad," Hermione said, a smile tugging at her mouth, "You said your father was an Auror, for goodness sake. And your mother's a researcher for a very private company, right?"

"And yet they still address my letters to 'Harriett,'" Archie said.

"Yes, well," Hermione frowned down at her book, deflated. "You've met my parents," she tried.

"And now I know from whence your loveliness springs," Archie said automatically, distracted by the letter he was unfolding. As he glanced down at the signature he couldn't help but blanch in

surprise. Quickly, he tucked the letter back into its envelope and stowed it in the pages of his periodical with a movement he knew was less than casual, but couldn't help.

"What is it?" Hermione, observant as ever, asked, "Bad news?"

"Sort of," Archie shrugged uncomfortably, "Nothing too important, though."

Seeing that he would say no more, Hermione went back to her book, but not before saying, "You've been holding a lot of things back, lately."

Archie wasn't sure how to respond to that. He had been, after all. He just wished Hermione could understand that it was for her own good that he did.

The letter burned at the back of his mind. Why would the British Ministry of Magic send Harry a letter? Did they know? Were they coming for them? Was he going to be detained and Harry shipped off to Azkaban? He calmed himself with deep, slow breaths, only the knowledge that surely James would have sent a warning if Harry was in trouble with the government keeping him from tearing the letter open right there, Hermione's curiosity be damned.

When he got a moment to himself later that afternoon he ripped into it with shaking hands. His heartbeat slowed nominally when he saw that it was from the Department of Mysteries, not the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, but only enough that he could hear his own frantic thoughts over its pounding.

Harry, what have you done?

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In the aftermath of clearing Percy's name and settling the question of Flint's assignments in the professors' minds once and for all, Rigel couldn't help but let her guard down the tiniest bit, thinking that surely she'd solved all foreseeable problems for the time being.

That was when the letter, addressed in screaming red ink, came from AIM. She froze only an instant before collecting herself enough to detach it from the owl and stow it in her book bag.

"News from home?" Pansy asked, face slightly eager. Ever since Lily had sent Rigel a picture of little Addy gurgling happily in her pram, Pansy had kept a curious eye on Rigel's post, clearly hoping for another picture. Rigel would have to write to her parents requesting additional prints.

For the moment, she shook her head, trying to conceal the feeling of dread the sight of the letter had given her. Archie had only been back a month-what could have gone wrong? "It's just from Harry," she said, faking a disinterested shrug.

"What's wrong?" Draco asked from the seat beside her.

She silently cursed whatever was giving her friend his newfound perceptiveness, "I'm sure it's nothing. I just wasn't expecting to hear from her so soon. It's odd."

"So you think something's happened?" Draco frowned, "You should check-better than walking around with it hanging over your head."

Rigel shook her head, "I'll read it later. I don't want to be distracted during classes today."

"If you don't trust us not to look over your shoulder, just say so," Draco snorted, turning back to his food.

Pansy offered Rigel a sympathetic smile, "Rigel is entitled to protect his cousin's privacy-or were you *not* going to read over his shoulder?"

Draco glanced at Rigel sidelong, "Of course I was. If Rigel wants me not to, he should just say so, instead of making up an excuse."

"Rigel's too polite for that," Pansy said, seeming a bit exasperated, "And just when, exactly, did *you* become the rude one in our group, Draco? What is going on with you lately?"

"None of your business," Draco said, smiling slightly to soften the words, "See, Rigel? It's that easy."

Rigel and Pansy shared a long-suffering look, but Pansy dropped the subject in any case.

For Rigel's part, she was still going to wait to read Archie's letter. Even if Draco didn't read the letter itself, there was no telling what her suddenly observant friend would be able to tell from her face as she read it.

It was a Wednesday, which meant the only class she was doubled up on was Transfigurations, at which time she also had a Potions lesson with Snape. She figured she could read the letter after lunch. Whatever trouble Archie was having, it would keep until that afternoon.

The morning passed quickly, and after stopping by the kitchens for a quick snack to tide her over, Rigel turned back to ten o'clock and ghosted through the dungeons under her invisibility cloak.

Snape seemed to be perusing a publication of some kind when she arrived in their usual lab, and Rigel was surprised to note that no cauldron had been prepared for their lesson that day.

"Good morning, Professor," she said politely as she shut the door behind her, "Are we having a theoretical lesson today?"

"In a manner of speaking," Snape looked up and gestured for her to take the periodical he'd been reading.

Upon glancing at the cover, Rigel immediately recognized it as the issue of the Guild's newsletter containing her summer research. "The Guild's internship reports?" she asked, curious as to why Snape would bring them to her attention.

"What do you know about this 'shaped imbuing' your... cousin claims to have come up with?" Snape asked, eyeing her shrewdly.

"Just what she's told me," Rigel shrugged, "It's a bit difficult to explain, I gather, though she said she did her best in the word limit the Guild allowed her."

"It is intriguing," Snape said, not seeming terribly pleased at the words leaving his mouth, "Such an expansion of the field bears looking into." Rigel looked up, hardly daring to believe her ears. "If I were to undertake such research, however, I would need much more detailed information on the subject."

Rigel tried very hard not to let the giddy feeling of flattered disbelief show on her face. Master Snape wanted to expand on *her* research for his next project? "I could ask my cousin for more extended notes on her project," Rigel said after a moment of inwardly beaming to herself, "I'm sure she'd be delighted to send you any information you need-she's an avid follower of your work, Professor."

"So you've said," he didn't seem to be able to quell his slight sneer of disbelief, "Can you recreate her methodology?"

Rigel grimaced, "No, I don't think so. It requires a level of magic manipulation I don't have the control for. I'm sure you'd be able to do it, Professor. It's based on wandless magic to hear Harry describe it."

"You have wandless capabilities as well," Snape pointed out sharply, "And unless I miss my guess the method is not unlike the potion you created for Draco's birthday last year."

Rigel carefully affected a look of slight guilt, "I, ah, may have had Harry's help with my gift that year," she tried to look sheepish, "I

didn't want Draco to think I hadn't put effort into his gift, but in truth Harry helped me come up with the idea and imbue it. That's where she started developing the theory for her eventual research project, actually."

Snape's face only darkened, "If I find that you have been involved in helping your cousin plagiarize your own research, I will-"

"I haven't!" Rigel burst out, offended and appalled that Snape had jumped to that conclusion. Surely Rigel having access to some of Harry's methods hadn't been that suspicious... had it? "Sorry, Professor," she added quickly, "I just meant we haven't done anything like that. Harry's research is completely her own-she would never take that kind of help. Her integrity means a lot to her."

Snape did not look entirely convinced. After a moment of consideration, he said, "You are still *passing along* much of what I teach you, are you not?"

Rigel nodded carefully, hoping Snape hadn't changed his mind about being okay with that arrangement. "She'd be happy to give you credit if-"

This time Snape interrupted her, "Don't be ridiculous. It is time I met this girl, however. I want to be certain my teachings are not enabling an imbecile." At Rigel's offended look, the Potions Master smirked, "I'm afraid I cannot take your word in this case, Mr. Black. I know how biased your opinions of your own family often are."

She frowned, but inclined her head in understanding, "I could arrange a meeting next summer, then."

"What is wrong with the winter holiday?" Snape asked, brows arching, "Does your cousin not return home for Yule?"

Rigel blinked. That was a bit soon, but... she supposed she could make it work. As long as Snape didn't suggest she be there as well. There was simply no way Archie could play either Harry or Rigel

convincingly around Professor Snape. His potions knowledge was good, but not *that* good.

"All right," Rigel said, "I'll write her about it. I'm sure she'd be honored to meet you, sir."

Snape inclined his head, only the mocking glint in his eye betraying his thoughts on her statement, "Be sure to request those notes, as well, Mr. Black. In the meantime, why don't we start on today's lesson?"

To her mild confusion, he led her across the lab to a sideboard, on which stood a cauldron full of what appeared to be an already-completed potion.

"I brewed this earlier," Snape said, so casually that Rigel immediately felt wary, "It's under a stasis charm. I want to see how your instincts are developing. When I lift the stasis charm, you will imbue whatever amount of magic you deem sufficient for its cohesion, and while you imbue you will apply your senses to the potion and determine its purpose."

Rigel grinned a bit-she did enjoy a challenge, and Snape never failed to deliver in that regard.

Linking her core to the potion was second nature by now, so the imbuing process began swiftly. It continued a little too swiftly, however, and it wasn't long before Rigel felt her brow break out in a light sweat. Whatever this potion was, it would be powerful-she could feel her core expending magic at a worrying rate. She tried to ignore the drained feeling that was beginning to set in, but it sapped her focus even as she tried to concentrate on the potion itself.

She could feel the familiar, satisfied feeling that meant all the ingredients were balanced according to their properties, but the mental 'taste' of the potion was unlike anything she'd experienced before. It definitely wasn't a love potion, as those had a distinct sense of headiness about them. It lacked the aggressiveness of a

transformative potion, and she didn't think it could be any sort of externally applied potion simply because it was the wrong consistency. It looked as though it was definitely made to be drunk. As much magic as she was putting in it, the potion would have to effect some extraordinary change, as well. But what? It felt closest to some kind of healing potion, but at the same time it felt completely wrong. Dangerous.

When the potion finally felt 'full' to her extended senses, Rigel wearily withdrew the connection and caught herself on the lab bench before her knees gave out.

"What... was that?" she panted, wiping a hand across her forehead to push back her sweaty bangs.

"You tell me," Snape said, a displeased frown in his voice.

"A... healing draught?" she guessed, "For someone extremely close to death, given how much magic is involved."

"I doubt it's ever been considered a medical potion before," Snape said with dark amusement, "This brew is one of the components in raising inferi from the grave."

Rigel couldn't help but recoil from the cauldron reflexively, "Isn't it illegal?"

"I have a research brewing license," he said, "Only selling it would violate my oath. It is not my intention to instruct you in its preparation, in any case. I chose it for this exercise because I was fairly certain you would not have come across its kind before now. It is important for a brewer to be able to recognize the darker concoctions, even if he never attempts them himself."

She nodded her understanding. No wonder it had seemed so alien and wrong to her senses-it was a potion that would enact the most challenging of magic, to force re-animation where true life had already fled. It reminded her enough of Riddle Jr.'s possession of the

basilisk to make her glad she wouldn't be studying the draught, no matter how interesting the theory itself would likely prove.

"I wonder that you had so much trouble with the imbuing," Snape said, voice casual once again.

"It is a powerful potion," Rigel said slowly.

"Not so much more so than Aconite Alleviation," her professor said, brows descending, "Have you been using magic excessively this morning?"

"No," Rigel said, mentally grimacing as she realized where this conversation was heading, "I... don't have as much magic as I used to."

"Explain," his tone was positively forbidding.

"I had my thirteenth birthday over the summer," she began, unsure how to explain, "So my core changed significantly."

"It doesn't work that way," Snape said, "Magic only increases with age, unless you were in a severe magical accident over the summer, and simply didn't see fit to inform your Head of House."

"Ah-no, I wasn't," Rigel said. She debated for a moment, then realized there wasn't any way to hide her lack of stamina if indeed her power levels had changed so much. "Will you keep what I tell you in confidence?" she asked, knowing it was an insulting question, but needing to make sure the knowledge that Rigel Black was magically powerful wouldn't reach anyone who knew that Archie was only moderately above average.

As expected, Snape favored her with an especially annoyed expression as he said, "You are a Slytherin." Apparently that was reassurance enough.

"My magic got out of hand after my birthday," she said, "It was completely unusable that way, so I fixed it. But now I have less magic than before."

She'd never seen someone as pale as Snape blanche before, but she didn't have time to wonder at the impossibility of such a thing before Snape was shaking her by the shoulders urgently. "What did you *do*?" he snarled, "You foolish boy, what kind of ritual did you attempt?"

"I didn't!" Rigel said, wondering why she was always having to protest her own innocence, but sure that she didn't want Snape thinking she'd tried to sacrifice part of her magic permanently in a dark ritual-she knew better what sorts of evil a wizard's magic could wreak once freed of his will. "I didn't get rid of it, I just... repressed it to manageable levels."

Snape's eyes narrowed to angry slits, "How?"

Rigel held back a sigh as she fingered the black gloves she wore to hide her rings from casual appraisal. If she would be keeping them as Harry, she didn't want too many people knowing what they looked like. "I found a jeweler who could make suppressors and commissioned a ring that reduces my usable magic to reasonable levels."

"Take it off," Snape said.

She frowned, "It's the only thing keeping my magic in check. I don't want to endanger either of us."

"Remove. The. Ring." Snape seemed very insistent, but Rigel had asked Binny to spell her rings irremovable for a reason.

"I won't," Rigel said, quiet but firm. "I'm sorry I won't be able to imbue as many high-level potions in a row, Professor, but this is for the best."

"You are too young to know what is best for anyone, especially yourself," Snape snapped, "You cannot become dependent on a dampener, or you will never be capable of wielding the full power of your magic."

"I know," she said, shrugging slightly, "I don't mind. I don't need that much magic." *No one needs that much magic*, she added silently.

"Never could I have imagined such laziness and waste would take residence in your person, Rigel Black," Snape's stare was heavy with disbelief and disgust, "You are dismissing potential that every other wizard in Britain would-and have-killed for."

"Exactly," Rigel muttered. For the first time she thought maybe it was better that *she* had such magic, if the alternative was that someone like Lucius Malfoy might have actually tried to use it to its fullest, most dangerous potential.

Snape turned away to pace quickly across the lab and back, and she thought she actually heard a growl in his voice as he said, "You cannot possibly expect that ignoring this problem will in any way work. Magic does not fade away when it is repressed-it grows stronger. You of all people should know *that* ."

Rigel winced, realizing that he had a point. One of the reasons her magic had been so unwieldy first year was because of how successfully she'd repressed it as a child. Still... "It isn't the same situation," Rigel said, "I'm not relying on myself, but on an external stabilizer."

"Stabilizer?" Snape let out a vicious sneer, "It is *crippling* you, boy."

"It's protecting me, and everyone around me," she bristled, tired of being reprimanded for making the responsible decision regarding her magic, "You would have me selfishly grasp at the power I could wield, wrestling with it for years and years, apologizing every time it lashes out at those around me, praying it doesn't maim anyone when I get upset, just so-what? So I can say I'm the most magically

powerful Potions Master to ever live? I don't *care* about the power. It's useless to me. I just want to brew potions, and do you know what happens when I take off my ring and try to imbue anything? It explodes in my face!"

"That's because you cannot control it yet-"

"No one can control it, Professor," Rigel said, her voice rising, "Don't you think I thought about that possibility before I decided to permanently affix a piece of powerful magic to my finger?"

"Where did you even get such a ridiculous idea?" Snape growled.

Rigel blinked, taken aback at the slightly tangential question, "My aunt Lily."

Her Professor froze, "What?"

"Aunt Lily has a bracelet that she wears for the same reason," Rigel said.

"She certainly does not," Snape sounded very sure of that.

"She does," Rigel disagreed, "She started wearing it after Harry was born, when it became clear that no matter how many years she tried to control it, her magic would always be too powerful to be safe." She hoped her mother didn't mind her telling Snape about her bracelet, but from how awkward their meeting at the hospital was last year, she didn't think she had to worry about them talking to one another ever again.

Snape was very quiet for a moment. He still looked furious, but she had the feeling some of his anger had been redirected for some reason. When he spoke again, it was quieter, if just as severe, "Your aunt is muggleborn. She does not have generations of control bred into her family line-as a pureblood you have no such disadvantage. There is no excuse for your refusal to control your magic."

Rigel could feel herself growing angrier the longer Snape dismissed her concerns and belittled her efforts to control her own life. She was tempted for a moment to give into the anger, to shout at him that he didn't understand the fear and anxiety that came with carrying a loaded weapon everywhere she went. She didn't, though. Just because she wore a suppressor didn't mean she was suddenly free to give reign to her emotions whenever she pleased. Even without the danger of a magical accident, letting her frustrations crowd her mind was a terrible habit to indulge.

So she took a deep breath, then said, "Respectfully, it is my decision to make, Professor."

"And I am to accommodate your new handicap in determining our lessons, I suppose?" he sneered. She winced, but said nothing. If Snape refused to teach her because she was less powerful, well, it would be awful, and probably mean the end of her purpose in coming to Hogwarts, but not the end of everything. The last two years hadn't been a waste, after all. Some things were still more important than her own ambitions.

At her impassive expression, Snape seemed to deflate. His face looked positively aged as he shook his head slowly, a bitter twist to his mouth. "Far be it from me to prevent you wallowing in mediocrity, Mr. Black."

"Thank you for respecting my choice, Professor," she said softly.

A snide look was the only response as Snape swept off to the cabinets and began pulling out ingredients and piling them on the counter in a brisk manner. When she cautiously joined him at one of the lab stations, he said flatly, "If you are determined to languish magically, at the least I will force your potions ability to its maximum extent."

After that, Professor Snape proceeded with the morning's lesson as though the entire incident had not occurred, aside from being slightly more demanding than usual in his instruction.

Rigel was relieved that they'd worked through the matter, though she wasn't so optimistic as to think the issue settled entirely. Likely Snape was merely waiting for an opportunity to change her mind.

Sure enough, as she packed up her things at the end of the lesson, Snape said, "I would not have expected a braggart like Sirius Black to so easily acquiesce to his son's magic being effectively sealed."

There was something in his voice that made her think he was fishing for information-did he hope to use her sense of familial duty to sway her opinion? Or was he looking for someone other than Rigel to blame for her decision? Either way, there was a chance she could use this to forestall the possible complication that was Snape's knowledge.

She looked up at Snape through her bangs, a plea that Rispa would have been proud of in her eyes, "You won't tell him, will you?"

Snape's lip curled, but something almost satisfied flashed in his eyes before he sneered, "How can he not already be aware of your foolishness?"

"My core matured in the night," Rigel said, biting a lip. "After the initial stage, the increased power didn't manifest outwardly. It only acted up when I tried using it, and since we aren't allowed to do magic over the summer I didn't try around my family, so Father didn't see any change."

"You did not go to him when you realized your magic was beyond your control?" Snape was definitely deriving some sort of pleasure from this, she thought, but she had committed to the story and would stick with it. She doubted Sirius cared either way about Snape's opinion of him, in any case.

"I don't need other people to solve my problems for me," she said, tilting her chin stubbornly so that she appeared as a prideful child.

"Clearly," Snape's sarcasm could not possibly bite any deeper.

"I don't," she insisted, "My family doesn't need to be bothered with things I can take care of myself." At the last bit, she allowed her lower lip to tremble ever so slightly.

It was enough to make Snape pause. A suspicious look overcame his face once more, and he asked, "Do you fear their reaction?"

Rigel swallowed, "I... no." She didn't even try to sound convincing.

"You foolish child, they would only be proud of your gifts," Snape hissed fiercely, "And *enraged* to see you squandering them."

"Pride only flows to a certain point before it turns to fear," Rigel said, allowing her eyes to flash, "A child who gets straight O's is something you brag about, but a child whose magic can kill with a thought? Being dangerous is not something to be proud of, Professor."

"You are wrong about that, boy, though you are too naïve to realize it yet," Snape said, "Even so, your father is many ignoble things, but afraid of powerful magic he is not. Your argument holds no water."

"Many people are not afraid of the idea of something until they are confronted with the thing itself," Rigel said darkly, "My aunt's family had no idea what magic was, but when it showed up in their daughter they learned to fear it fast enough."

"Your aunt's family are *muggles*," Snape said, clearly exasperated, "Ignorant about magic in every way. Of course they fear what they do not understand."

"They were people confronted with something they were supposed to love, *did* love, but couldn't control," Rigel returned, not realizing until she said it out loud that she believed it. Blowing out a half-hearted sigh, she added, "Wizards aren't so different from muggles when it comes to how they react to fear. My uncle Remus never talks about his father, and I don't think it's because he's dead."

In fact, she was pretty sure Remus had once said that he'd been bitten as a child in an act of revenge against his father, who had said some inflammatory things about werewolves in the presence of one Fenrir Greyback. She wasn't sure gaining a son as a werewolf had changed his opinion overmuch.

Snape did not, apparently, have anything to say to that.

Just to sink the point home, she added in a small voice, "I just don't want them to be afraid of me all the time. And I don't want to hurt any of them. My father and the other adults could protect themselves, but what about Harry? What about Addy? I have to know I'm not a danger to anyone, Professor. Being pretty sure isn't good enough, and that's all my control would amount to."

"You don't know that," Snape said after a moment, "You could benefit the world in so many ways, Rigel."

At the use of her first name, she had to blink back an awkward surge of moisture in her eyes. She hated disappointing this man, her mentor in so many ways, but pleasing him had become less important than protecting her secret. No one could know that Rigel Black had powerful magic. Snape had to agree to keep it to himself, and the best way to do that was to make him see that it didn't matter as long as she refused to use it.

"I've weighed the risks and made my decision," she said, the words coming out rushed as she hiked her bag over her shoulder and backed toward the door, "I'll see you next class, Professor. I've got-I'm late for lunch."

She left before he could point out that with the time-turner under her shirt she couldn't be late for anything.

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She stopped her half-run a few corridors away, ducking into an alcove to regain a bit of her composure. Of all the people she lied to, Snape was one of the most difficult, second only to Draco in terms of the wracking amount of guilt that assaulted her gut afterwards.

To distract herself, she took out the letter from her cousin and began to read it by the meager torchlight. By the end, she felt so sick she had to sit down on the floor and pull her knees to her chest. She knew it wasn't going to be good, but a letter from the *Ministry* ?

Archie had included the letter in his missive, and after scanning it once Rigel saw it for the politely worded demand that it was. The Department of Mysteries was intrigued by her proposed new brewing technique, and 'requested' several samples be sent to their offices by owl at her earliest convenience. She didn't know how long they would wait before reiterating their request, but considering the amount of time it took to get a letter from AIM to Hogwarts, she should probably start working on them yesterday.

In fact... a smile slowly started to spread across her face. That's exactly what she would do.

She flipped to a blank page in her notebook and wrote down the exact time and date. After a moment of thought, she scratched out the time and wrote 11:45am, so she would be sure to make it back to lunch before her friends missed her.

Then she took out her time-turner and steeled herself. She'd never turned more than a few hours at a time, but this time she wouldn't have to worry about making it to certain places at certain times. With her invisibility cloak, she would just disappear. Ignoring the little voice in her head that told her she was running from her problems, she began to turn the hourglass, spinning it and spinning it, past the twenty-four-hour mark and on and on until the world bled and she closed her eyes and fell back into reality with an odd whirring motion.

She cast the tempus charm, and was pleased to see that she had traveled exactly two days into the past. She figured she could brew

the samples for the Ministry, write up all her notes on shaped imbuing for Snape, Tallum, and anyone else who requested information in the future, and still send them off to Archie before the Ministry found a reason to harass her for noncompliance.

In theory she could just mail the potions directly to the Ministry herself, but who knew what sort of tracing charms the Department of Mysteries might employ on any packages sent there. Better to have it all come from Archie, just in case.

She started toward her lab, then stopped as her stomach growled. Right, she thought, food would evidently have to come before brewing.

She turned toward the kitchens instead and slipped her cloak off just before ducking inside. It was a little past lunch time, so most of the elves were washing dishes, but Binny didn't hesitate to toss the goblet she was drying to a friend and skip over to the pantries at the sight of Rigel's embarrassed grin.

"You is being hungry already?" Binny asked in French with a little laugh, "Lunch is being not long ago."

"I'm a growing boy," Rigel said in the same language after a pause to get her tense straight.

"You is growing in the wrong direction if you isn't exercising," Binny said, and Rigel marveled at how much more natural the accented language sounded when the house elf spoke.

"I'll run all the way to class," she promised.

"You is still being late," Binny pointed out, a mock-stern expression crossing her small face briefly.

"You won't tell on me, will you?" Rigel asked, accepting the plate of chicken with only a small grimace. She was getting used to eating meat, though she doubted she'd ever enjoy the taste.

"Binny is only telling if Dumbledore is asking," there was a twinkle in the elf's big eyes that made Rigel think that was rather unlikely to happen.

She was learning words related to travel that month, so she and Binny chatted for a bit about an imaginary trip to Lithuania they would one day take, and when she'd cleared her plate, she got up to go. As she told the house elf she'd see her that night for dinner as well, Rigel stopped, realizing suddenly that she had no where to sleep that night, since her bed would be occupied by herself already.

"Binny," she said slowly, "Is there... anywhere besides the dorms I could find a bed lying around?" As far as she knew there weren't any unoccupied rooms in the dorms themselves, at least not in the Slytherin dorms, where students always spread out to fill any vacancies.

Binny blinked before saying, almost automatically, "Students isn't allowed out of the dorms after curfew."

"But if I wanted to take a nap during the day," Rigel said innocently, "In between classes, you know."

Binny fixed her with a rather suspicious look for a house elf, "You isn't getting up to any hanky-panky is you?"

Rigel could not stop the laugh that sprung from her lips, "Definitely not!" She leaned closer to Binny and said, conspiratorially, "Girls have cooties, you know."

"I isn't knowing anything about it," Binny sniffed, "And neither is you, apparently."

Rigel laughed again, "So, barring hanky-panky, is there a place students can nap?"

"There is being the Hospital Wing..." Binny said slowly, "But if you is not being sick... there is being one other place that is having beds. It

isn't a place students is going."

The house elf was frowning, but it sounded like a promising place to Rigel if other people wouldn't be going there. "Are students not allowed there?" She hoped it wasn't something like the staff room.

Binny thought for a long moment before saying, "There is being no rule against it. I is showing you?"

Rigel smiled wide in relieved thanks, "If you're not too busy, I'd really appreciate it, Binny."

"Binny is never being too busy for her friends," Binny said brightly.

"I'm honored to be counted among them," Rigel said, quite sincerely.

Binny held out her hand, and Rigel took it with care. She wasn't sure, but she suspected her human muscles were much stronger proportionately to a house elf, as they used magic to augment almost everything they did.

With a noticeable crack, they teleported, and when Rigel looked around she saw an unfamiliar corridor with a painting of... dancing trolls on a nearby wall.

"Where are we?" she asked, wondering why she'd never been down this hallway before.

"Seventh floor," Binny said, "This is being the entrance to the come and go room."

"The what?" she had never heard of such a room; she was sure she'd have remembered such an odd name.

"The room where things is coming and going," Binny said earnestly, "The Room of Lost Things."

A memory sparked, and Rigel struggled to capture it, "You... told me about this room once, didn't you?"

"You is remembering!" Binny clapped her hands happily, "Yes, I is telling you the first time we is meeting. I is telling you about the place lost things go."

"So it's around here?" Rigel grinned, "Do people lose beds very often at Hogwarts?"

At the least she could curl up on a pile of old robes, she figured.

"People is losing everything at Hogwarts," Binny giggled, "You is seeing. Come."

She started walking down the corridor, but when she reached the other side of the troll tapestry she turned about and went back the way they'd came. Rigel followed her, thinking she'd gotten confused, until Binny turned around again and paced back the way they'd been going originally.

Before she could even ask what was going on, a door appeared on the opposite wall.

Aware that her mouth was slightly open, Rigel wordlessly followed Binny inside. Her first thought was that she'd never seen so much clutter before, even in the attic at Grimmauld Place. There were stacks of things everywhere, all sorts of things that Rigel could not for the life of her imagine anyone losing. Books, sure, and the occasional sock, but chandeliers? Coat racks taller than her and broomsticks that didn't even look broken and-was that a garden gnome?

"This is all stuff people have lost at Hogwarts?" she asked, slightly awed. She knew Hogwarts had been around a while, but it was one thing to know it and another to see something like this just laying about.

"Or is not wanting to be finding," Binny said, nodding so fast her ears flapped. "This room is having everything; you is only needing to ask."

"Ask the room?" she said, a bit confused, "Can it hear us?" The idea of a sentient room was a tad alarming, but not outside the realm of possibilities, given that it was Hogwarts.

"It is not hearing, but it is knowing," Binny said, frowning as she tried to explain, "You are thinking very hard, thinking thrice, and the room is finding."

"I think what I need three times?" at Binny's nod, Rigel sucked in a deep breath and 'shouted' *I need a bed* in her head. *I need a bed I need a bed I need a -*

She nearly fell over as the room transformed itself around her. The stacks of things were gone, and the room looked considerably smaller. It was completely bare, in fact, save for a single twin-sized bed that looked a lot like the one in her dorm. In fact... "Is this my pillowcase?" she touched the material carefully, "But I didn't lose it... will it be in here from now on?"

If the room worked by pulling things from elsewhere in the castle, she'd have to be careful what she asked for.

"It is not taking," Binny shook her head with a smile, "It is providing. Only things in the Room of Lost Things are staying in the come and go room forever."

It was confusing to think that there were multiple different rooms inside the same room, but Rigel told herself not to be surprised. Magic was like that, after all.

"Can it provide anything?" Rigel asked, stunned that this kind of resource was available and no one even used it.

"It isn't providing food," Binny said, looking a bit defiant, as though Rigel were considering replacing her services in the kitchen with the come and go room.

"I'll definitely see you for dinner then," Rigel said, smiling reassuringly at the elf.

Binny nodded seriously, then said, a bit sadly, "I is needed in the kitchens. I is seeing you!" She waved, curtsied, and popped out of the room with a crack.

For one worried moment Rigel looked around in search of an exit-it would be just her luck to get trapped in a room that half the time didn't even exist. As she thought about needing to get out, however, a door appeared on the far wall.

She smiled, and it was not innocent. The door disappeared, and a few moments later the pewter cauldron she'd been imagining materialized on the floor beside her.

"This is going to be fun," she said, setting her school bag on the bed. She doubted the room could produce ingredients, as perishables likely counted as food as far as the laws of conjuring were concerned, but she had more than enough supplies for a couple days of intense brewing. She hadn't brewed straight through the night in a long time, not since coming to Hogwarts and finding so many other things to spend time learning and doing besides potions. She found herself quite looking forward to it.

Her enthusiasm lasted approximately twenty minutes, at which point she attempted to imbue the base of her Portable Protection Potion and discovered, to her utter dismay, that she couldn't shape the magic into the correct shield charm. She tried several times, and in each instance the magic slipped away from her grasp and dissipated as unshaped raw power that did nothing but give the potion an iridescent shimmer after a while.

She vanished the potion and sat down on the bed, thinking hard. With trepidation, she tried several everyday spells and found nothing overtly wrong with their execution. Puzzled, she tried more advanced charms, but they worked just fine, too. Why couldn't she imbue

shaped magic? She hadn't had a problem imbuing since she started wearing the-

Oh, no. Rigel scowled down at the glove protecting the forest green suppressant ring from her glare. It had locked a good portion of her magic away, and while what was left was more than enough for everyday magic and imbuing, what if it had compromised her wandless magic capabilities as well? It wasn't something she would have anticipated, as the point of the suppressant was to increase the control she had over her power, but if wandless magic depended in part on the user's *strength* of magic... she had definitely shot herself in the foot.

She ran a hand through her short hair and scowled at the air. Nothing could ever be simple, could it? In donning the suppressor she regained her regular imbuing ability, but apparently sacrificed her shaped imbuing. She couldn't just remove the suppressor, because then she'd lose all control and not be able to imbue anything. And she only had a few days before the Ministry would start expecting samples and possibly investigating the delay. Imagining Archie trying to explain to British Ministry personnel why, exactly, Harriett Potter was a boy made her shudder. It would be the undoing of everything they had worked for.

What are the odds that the Ministry will accept a polite refusal? she thought morosely. Maybe she could sneak into the Library and look for books on wandless magic. Wizards without a lot of magic could learn to use it wandlessly, couldn't they? Maybe she could learn the old-fashioned way instead of relying on the power behind her core to control the magic without a wand.

As she was thinking it, a book appeared quite suddenly on the bed next to her. Unbelieving she could be so lucky, Rigel picked up the thin tome and read the faded lettering on the spine. *A Treatise on the Wielding of Wandless Power*, it said. She smiled grimly and whispered a "thanks" to the room at large before settling into the bed cushions and flipping to the first page.

The book was rather old, and the language antiquated, but it introduced the theory behind wandless magic in a way Rigel had never come across. The author, whose name was too faded to make out on the spine, argued that without a wand to give form and structure to magic, a wizard had to condense his magic so compactly that its shape would hold up de facto once it was released. This, the author noted, required two major factors. The first was an immensely focused will on the wizard's behalf, as his mental directions became the pressure necessary to compress the free-flowing magic of a wizard's core into a stable form. The second factor was magical power. According to the book, it took much more magic to perform a spell wandlessly than it did with a wand because the magic had to be densely packed into the shape of a spell, rather than merely flowing through the pattern created by a wand.

It was the difference, the writer explained, between making ice with a mold and making a snowball by hand. If you have a mold, you can fill it half with water and the water will naturally expand to fill the rest of the mold when it freezes. If you start with snow, however, and attempt to make the same sized ball of ice, you have to pack the snow very tightly together to get it to hold its shape, and you end up with a denser, heavier ball than the ice made with a mold. For wand magic, the wand movements provided a mold for your magic to fill and spread out in naturally. Wandless magic meant packing magic so closely that it would hold a shape without the 'walls' of a mold to keep it in place while the magic 'set.'

Rigel no longer had enough magic to pack a high-level shield charm densely enough to hold its shape without a wand to manifest through. On the other hand, if she took off her suppressant it would be akin to trying to make a snowball in the midst of an avalanche, she thought wryly.

The solution seemed to be recalibrating the suppressant band. She needed it to leave her with the same amount of magic she'd had before her thirteenth birthday. She could talk to Frein when she got back to the Lower Allies over the winter break, but what to do until

then? How could she adjust the amount of magic she had access to by herself?

Unbidden, a memory of that day in Frein's shop came back to her. After expending most of her energy in measuring the strength of her core, she'd been able to brew normally for the rest of the day. She wasn't sure, but she thought she remembered making one more shaped-imbued prank-potion that afternoon for curiosity's sake. If she could expend energy fast enough, then, she would have a temporary window in which she could shaped-imbue... in theory. The trick would be in not expending too much. She wasn't sure if she even remembered how her magic felt before her birthday, but she had to try.

An idea struck her, and though she was half-afraid it was too good to work, she thought at the come and go room, *I need a... magic measuring device*. That was as specific as she could get, she realized, as she didn't know what it was actually called, but she pictured the device as clearly as she could, hoping that if the room could provide a copy of an actual book it would be able to provide an actual magical device despite its complex nature.

It wasn't instantaneous, but when a long crystal tube attached to a metal sphere appeared in her lap, a grin threatened to tickle her ears it was so wide.

"Yes," she breathed, clutching the tube like a lifeline. She would be in Binny's debt forever, she decided, and would have to make it one of her life's projects to make sure the elf never wanted for anything.

Trepidatiously, she slipped off her gloves and removed the suppressant ring very carefully. It was difficult to get off, despite her sweaty fingers, because Binny had helped her spell it so that it could never fall off on accident or be removed by anyone but herself back in early September when she'd reached the castle. She had to bend her will to removing it, but once off it lay cool in her palm like any other ring. She set it aside carefully, and took a few steps away from the bed before focusing on the measuring device.

It was harder than she remembered to get her magic to start flowing through the tube. She had to coax it a bit, as though it had fallen asleep or become dormant. Once the flow began, however, it was like a dam bursting. She struggled to keep the device from shaking around as power coursed through her hand and bathed the crystal tube with light. The sphere on the end went through rapid color changes from red through orange, yellow, and green, only beginning to slow slightly when it reached blue. She poured more and more magic into the device, trying to feel her core at the same time and decide when it was back to barely-manageable levels. The sphere continued to darken from indigo to violet, and by the time she was able to get a hold on the flow and reign it back, the device was a brilliant purple.

She eyed it with some trepidation-was it a shade darker than it had been in August? Ignoring the worrying implications of that possibility for the moment, she placed the device back on the bed and stretched out her magical senses, prodding her core experimentally.

It arched like a cat under her examination, and Rigel was sure that if it were able, her magic would have *purred*. A little bit disturbed, she focused her intent and asked her magic to bring one of the pillows on the bed to her. With barely a breath of pause, the pillow flew neatly into her arms, despite her wand still being in her pocket. Smiling, Rigel tossed it back to the bed. She sent a politely worded request to the come and go room, and tossed up a "thank you" when two more standard cauldrons appeared beside the first.

Now she could start brewing.

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It was a little over two days later that Rigel felt ready to rejoin the time stream. She lost count of how many batches of Portable Protection Potion she'd brewed, all she knew was that she'd

completely filled the remaining spaces in her undetectably-extended brewer's bag, and that was quite a feat if she did say so herself. After the brewing was finished (well, after her magic had regenerated to the point that she felt uncomfortable working without the suppressant ring on), she'd turned her attention to writing up official notes on her process.

She tried to make them as detailed as possible, and with the help from the book on wandless magic she thought she was able to explain the theory much more clearly than she had in the Guild's report. She finally had terminology to express a lot of the magic manipulation that went on in shaped brewing, and since she wasn't limited to a couple pages like in her research report, she felt free to explain every aspect of the brewing process to the point of near-redundancy.

She made three copies of the notes-two to send to Archie along with two dozen bottles of protection potion, and one to give to Professor Snape after enough time had passed that having had her cousin mail the notes to her would be a plausible story. All three copies had been written with dicto-quills, as she was taking no chances with handwriting charms where the Department of Mysteries and Professor Snape were concerned.

The original notes she would keep for herself, as well as all the extra vials of protection potion. The next time someone requested information or samples from she or Archie, Rigel wouldn't be caught flat-footed.

It was late afternoon and she was quite hungry, but even though she'd been taking all of her meals with Binny in the kitchens (sometimes at very odd hours of the day in order to avoid other versions of herself who were also eating in the kitchens), she decided to wait to eat until rejoining the time she thought of as 'present,' which was actually several hours earlier than the time she was in currently.

When she turned back to 11:45 that Wednesday, she'd be just in time to join Pansy and Draco for lunch.

It was a bit surreal stepping out of the first floor bathroom without the invisibility cloak on and catching up to her friends in the Great Hall. She hadn't talked to anyone but Binny for the last few days, and most of that was in French.

As soon as she sat down, Draco turned to her and said, "Rigel, what did McGonagall say about the alternative method for animate to inanimate transfigurations again?"

Rigel blinked. "I... don't remember," she said honestly. That lesson seemed like a lifetime ago.

"It was ten minutes ago," Draco raised an eyebrow.

"You don't remember either," she attempted weakly.

"I wasn't paying attention," Draco waved a hand dismissively, "I'm sure you were taking notes, though."

Rigel shrugged, poking at her potatoes, "Well, you're welcome to take a look at them."

Her friend seemed to drop the subject, but later that night when she was catching up on homework in the common room with the others she caught him staring at her from his seat next to her on the couch.

"What?" she asked, covering her mouth to hide a yawn a moment later. It was only seven in the evening, but as the last few days caught up to her it felt like midnight.

"Why are you tired?" Draco demanded, looking her over closely.

"Didn't sleep well," she said automatically.

Draco huffed, "You slept ten hours last night, just like you've done every other night since the beginning of term. Are you ill, Rigel?" A

concerned look passed over his face, and he lowered his voice to keep the others from overhearing, "Is your... condition getting worse?"

The worried expression in his eyes kept Rigel from dismissing his questions. She felt guilt try and climb up from her stomach but she swallowed against it and gave what she hoped was a reassuring smile, "I've been taking a new medication," she said quietly, "It makes me sleep longer." She told herself she wasn't lying, if you counted the sleep-cycle-extending potion as a form of medication.

Draco looked both relieved and sympathetic, so Rigel smiled and nudged him in the ribs, "What's your excuse, hmm? Why weren't you paying attention in Transfiguration today?"

Draco abruptly scowled, "Blaise was distracting me."

"I didn't see him doing anything," Rigel said slowly, trying to remember if anything about that particular Transfiguration lesson stuck out in her mind. It was ordinary in every way as far as she could recall.

"He doesn't have to do anything," Draco said petulantly, "He annoys me just *being* these days."

"Okay," Rigel said, accepting that Draco was in another of the weird moods he was prone to this semester, "Have you asked him to stop... being however it is that annoys you?"

Draco sighed, twirling his quill between his fingers morosely, "It's not his fault. But that doesn't mean it's not aggravating."

"Whatever you say, Draco," Rigel said, smiling a bit. Her friend would explain himself eventually, she was sure. Until then, she had more than enough on her own plate to deal with.

September bled into October, and one crisp autumn morning Draco said he had something new to show them in their unofficial Dueling lessons on the lawn. Up until then they'd been learning footwork-drills and spending a lot of time on aim-and-dodge exercises.

"It's a new exercise Professor Lupin has been teaching us all," Draco said, still panting a bit from their warm-up run. "First you have to learn the color charm."

"The one that turns its victim a bright color where it hits?" Rigel smiled, "My dad and uncles use it all the time. The incantation is *colouris*, right?"

Draco nodded, "The wand movement is two quick flourishes, but it's pretty easy to cut the wand movement short once you get the hang of the spell. You have to focus on the color you want very carefully, though."

"Let's see it," Pansy said, pulling out her wand in anticipation of imitating Draco's movements.

When Draco playfully aimed his wand at Rigel's leg, she gave it a taunting wiggle. " *Colouris* !" he said, brandishing his wand in an exaggerated double flourish for their sake. A jet a neon yellow light shot from his wand in a straight line to Rigel's shin. Her lower leg turned completely yellow, like someone had colored it in with a highlighter.

"The color erasing charm is just a broad swiping motion, with the incantation *eradere*," Draco said, jogging over to Rigel to demonstrate that one as well. Her leg resumed normal coloring, and Rigel shook it out reflexively, despite feeling no effects whatsoever from the spell.

"So what's the exercise?" Pansy asked while trying out the wand motions a few times.

"It's like battle simulation," Draco said, "The attacker gets three colors of light to work with-red, orange, and yellow. The defender has to alter his response depending on what type of light comes at him."

Rigel nodded to show she was listening, all the while thinking it sounded a lot like some of Flint's practice drills from last year.

"Red light means a spell you either don't know the counter for or can't counter, like an Unforgivable," Draco shivered a bit, "Orange is a spell with effects you have to counter, like Jelly-legs. You either dodge or, if it hits you, cast the color erasing charm before you're allowed to move or cast anything else. Yellow is a spell you can shield against, so you can dodge or cast a Protego if you see a yellow light coming. If you get hit with either a red or yellow light, you lose."

"Interesting," Pansy said. Her face closed into a mask of concentration, and she said, " *Colouris!* " fiercely while brandishing her wand in Draco's direction.

It caught him in the arm, and while the color was weak, it was recognizably orange. Grinning, Draco cancelled the color with his erasing charm and said, "Good one. Picture the color more intently in your mind. It's supposed to simulate the amount of concentration you'd have to use to cast a spell on the fly."

Rigel tried the spell herself on a patch of ground not far from the trio, smiling in satisfaction when the blades seemed to have been painted red a moment later. "This sounds fun. Does one person attack at a time, or is it like a real duel?"

"We started with one attacking and the other defending in class," Draco smirked, "But I think a free-for-all sounds much more entertaining."

With matching grins of anticipation, the three Slytherins spread out by mutual accord.

"Anyone who gets more than fifty feet from the others forfeits," Rigel suggested.

"And the last one standing gets the other two's notes in History," Pansy added, flashing a positively wicked smile.

Rigel privately reflected that perhaps the radical increase in competitive activity had brought out a previously-dormant side of their usually-prim friend, but Draco was calling, "Let the duel begin!" before she could dwell on the matter. She certainly didn't mind this new side of Pansy. *Even if she does cheat*, she thought with surprise as Pansy fired her first red-colored spell before Draco had even finished speaking.

Rigel had never faced two opponents at once before, so even though her summer lessons with Leo and Remus had given her plenty of practice dodging, she realized immediately that knowing what to dodge wasn't as easy as seeing the spells coming, though keeping track of both her friends long enough to do even that was hard enough.

It took a lot of split-second decision making to be able to decide immediately how to respond to the red, orange, or yellow lights. They weren't moving at the actual speed light moved at, obviously, but spells still cut through the air pretty quickly. You couldn't just dodge everything indiscriminately, because you risked tiring yourself out, and constant dodging meant no chance for offensive maneuvers.

Their first round didn't last long. Rigel ganged up with Pansy on Draco, one of them tricking him into countering a yellow spell while the other used his distraction with the shield to come at him from the side and stick him with a red light to the leg. After that, Pansy got Rigel by firing three orange spells in a row—one to her chest and one on either side of her—to force her into taking one of them. Unfortunately for Rigel, she got caught in her wand arm while trying to dodge, and wasn't fast enough figuring out how to un-color herself with her left hand before Pansy shot a yellow spell neatly into her shoulder.

Pansy patted down an imaginary stray hair as she struck a carefree pose, "Up for another one, boys?"

Draco and Rigel shared an evil grin. Pansy's confident smile faltered only for a moment before she grinned back, "Bring it on, *gentleman*."

Needless to say, they were all three disheveled and flush-cheeked by the time they hurried back to their common room to shower and change. Rigel had won the second round rather cunningly, but Draco had beaten them both soundly in rounds three and four. Apparently the blonde boy had been holding back some of his skills to give them a chance. It was only fair, Draco had said, since they were new to the exercise and he'd been practicing in class. Rigel and Pansy both vowed to seek revenge in the name of their pride the next morning.

As they entered the common room, Blaise was stepping out into the hallway. He eyed the three of them with raised eyebrows.

"What are you doing out so early?" Draco asked the dark-skinned boy.

Blaise smirked, "I would ask you the same, but by your stench and appearance it's obvious that you've just lost a fight against a mountain troll."

"We might have won," Rigel said reasonably.

"Yeah, maybe we're as good at dodging clubs as you are at dodging questions," Draco added.

"So blunt lately, Draco," Blaise said admonishingly, "You'll catch more flies with honey than vinegar-and more with traps than obvious bait."

With that, their friend slipped off into the dungeons, leaving the three of them to hurry back to their rooms before the rest of the House started waking up as well.

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The first time Rigel caught Draco struggling with his transfigurations, she didn't realize what was wrong. Their course material was steadily growing more difficult, and it made sense that even Draco, who was rather talented at transfigurations, would have a bit of trouble with them.

It wasn't until she saw him wrestle with the engorgement charm, a spell they'd learned in their second year, that she realized what the problem was. The engorgement charm wasn't technically challenging, but the power behind the charm had to be proportionate to the thing you were trying to engorge. Draco was attempting to enlarge one of the bushes near the lake to use as mock cover for their dueling practice that morning, but the bush barely quivered under his annoyed gaze.

Rigel took over wordlessly, but at that point she decided she'd waited long enough. It was one thing not to pry into her friend's private business, but watching him harm himself was a different matter.

She waited until they were alone in their dorm room later that day, Draco sprawled face down on his bedspread, writing a letter to his mother. Rigel pretended to be looking over the recipe for a potion Snape had her learning while she worked up her nerve. It felt wrong to confront Draco so bluntly about his problems, but... well, he'd do the same for her, she supposed.

"You've been taking too much suppressant potion," she said finally.

It took Draco a second to register what she'd said, and when he did, a frown crossed over his face, "What are you talking about?"

"The suppressant potion you take," Rigel said patiently, "You've been miscalculating the dosage."

"And if I said I don't know what you're talking about?" Draco said slowly, setting down his quill.

"I'd have to ask if you think I'm stupid, Draco. The suppressant potion has a distinctive smell, first of all, and even if I hadn't seen you take it when you think no one's looking, I can see the effect it's having on your magic," Rigel said, "It's starting to mess with your conscious magic as well as your unconscious magic because you are taking it too often."

Draco let out a slow breath, propping his head up in his hands and looking at Rigel sidelong, "I know. I have to keep taking it, though."

"Take less," Rigel said, trying to be firm without sounding like she was mothering him, "The teachers are going to notice soon."

"I can't," Draco said, grimacing, "It's not working as well as it used to, so I have to take more."

"You've been taking it since this summer," Rigel said, trying to make it sound like a guess, though she already knew the answer.

He nodded, looking downcast, "Yeah. I hoped it would get better with time, but... it's getting worse. I-Rigel-"

Her friend looked so torn. She could see there was a part of him that wanted to confide in her, but there was also a nervous reluctance that Rigel had seen often enough in the mirror to recognize as fear of acceptance. "You can tell me," she said, as supportive as she could, "You don't have to, but you can. It won't change how I see you."

Draco laughed a little, the sound bitter, "Do you know what I see when I face the boggart?"

Rigel blinked at the non sequitur, but shook her head mutely, turning so that she was facing Draco's bed more fully, giving him her undivided attention.

"It's me," Draco said. His voice shook just a tiny bit before he cleared his throat and firmed it, "The boggart is myself, only... I'm mad."

By the look on his face, she could tell he didn't mean angry.

Draco went on in a kind of daze, as though once he'd begun the words just slipped out of their own accord, "It just screams and laughs and screams and laughs. Sometimes I can get it to change, to sound more like a little kid laughing, but more often it stops laughing, and then it starts whispering... awful, mad things." Draco rolled over so that he was looking up at the ceiling, and Rigel felt absurdly like a muggle therapist as he went on, "I'm half Black, you know. You understand better than anyone about the madness that runs in the family, especially through the branch lines. Aunt Bella is a bit unhinged already."

Rigel nodded, though Draco didn't see it. The Black's were near-infamous for the madness that plagued their family tree. The sane members were incredibly talented, highly functional witches and wizards, the insane ones, however... well, it wasn't only their wealth and power that had kept the Black name feared throughout the ages.

"I suppose you've figured out I came into a gift over the summer," Draco said, resignation colored with relief in his voice, "I think I'm losing my mind, sometimes."

"You aren't," Rigel said fiercely.

"Not yet, maybe," Draco's face was screwed up in an expression of despair, "It's only a matter of time. I'm going to lose my mind, and with it everything I've ever wanted. The Malfoy Heir can't be insane, Rigel. My father will be forced to sire another son, and if my mother can't bear any more children he'll have to-to- *divorce* her, and we'll both be sent to the French countryside to live out the rest of our lives in shame and it'll be *all my fault*."

She couldn't believe her ears. She'd known Draco was struggling with whatever his new gift was, but she had no idea he was working

under such a dire estimation of his predicament. She slid off her bed and climbed onto Draco's, waiting while he sighed and sat up to make room.

"You are not going to go insane, Draco Malfoy," she said, trying to project as much confidence as she could in her voice, "For one thing, I won't stand for it."

He snorted, "Because you have so much say in it."

"I do," she said, sniffing haughtily, "I saved your mind from the sleeping sickness, remember? In doing so I claimed it as conquered territory. If any madness tried to trespass, I'll break back in and show it what's what."

Draco laughed softly, "I'm not sure my father would appreciate an heir controlled by the Black family any more than a mad one."

"Both better than a magicless one, though," Rigel said, affecting a stern expression, "You are going to be more careful with those potions, aren't you, Dray?"

"My father is the one who bought these potions for me," Draco said, frowning.

She barely restrained herself from saying 'I know' and instead said, "They aren't meant to be a long-term solution." She couldn't help the slightly guilty thought that she was being a complete hypocrite by cautioning Draco against suppressors, but ignored it. Their situations weren't the same.

Draco looked sharply at her, "You don't even mean that."

Rigel blinked, "Yes I do. You need to wean yourself off of them or you won't reach your full potential." Now she definitely felt like a hypocrite.

"Why do you look so unconvinced of your own words, then?" Draco demanded, an angry scowl in place.

Rigel was surprised-she didn't think she'd shown anything but earnestness on her face just then.

"Oh, don't act so surprised," Draco said, rolling his eyes, "You aren't nearly as mysterious as you think."

She narrowed her eyes and considered everything she had been ignoring about Draco's behavior since September.

"What?" he asked defensively, "I'm not the one acting suspiciously."

Rigel's frown deepened, and a sinking fear began to creep over her, "Draco... does your gift tell you things about other people? You've been quite good at guessing what I'm thinking, lately, and forgive me, but usually Pansy is the observant one."

Draco flinched minutely, but it was enough to fill Rigel with dread.

"Are you some kind of natural telepath?" she asked, trying not to panic. How much might he have already learned from her if that were the case? She thought her Occlumency shields were good enough that she would at least detect an attempt at reading her mind, but a natural gift for Legilimency might be able to bypass such defenses without effort.

"I wish," Draco said darkly, "Voices I could handle. It's... *feelings*," he said the word with utter distain.

"Empathy?" she tried to disguise the gratitude she felt for the universe in that moment by sounding nonchalant.

"Don't bother," Draco said, "Even with the suppressant muting everything I can feel your relief. Don't worry, I won't be reading your mind any time soon-not that I don't want to. Your emotions never make *any* sense."

Choosing to ignore that can of worms, Rigel said, "That's a very rare gift. I didn't realize it ran in the Malfoy family."

"It doesn't," Draco glared half-heartedly at her, "It's your fault I have it."

Rigel raised an incredulous eyebrow, "What do you mean?"

"Your potion," Draco said, "The one you gave me this summer. That's what brought this on."

"That's not how it works," Rigel disagreed, "The Potentialis Potion only reveals gifts that are already there. You came into it naturally as your core matured."

"No," Draco said, shaking his head, "I was thirteen weeks before the party, remember? The empathy started after I took your potion."

"Maybe it just helped you notice it," Rigel said weakly. Inwardly she was panicking. It couldn't be true, could it? The Potentialis Potion wasn't described as doing what Draco claimed it had-unlocking a latent or unexpressed gift that would otherwise have stayed part of the wizard's recessive traits, but then again... it wouldn't be the first time her magic had done something unusual.

Draco looked more weary than angry at her, "I would have noticed debilitating headaches and mental breakdowns without help, I think. It was *hell*, Rigel. I didn't even know what was going on at first. Every time one of my parents became even the slightest bit upset or concerned I'd fly off the handle, screaming and wailing uncontrollably. I thought I'd been *possessed*."

Rigel could feel her face losing color, but she didn't interrupt. If what Draco said was true, she deserved to hear this.

"I was bedridden by the third day, couldn't eat, couldn't sleep, just lay there slowly losing my mind. They had to force nutrient potions down my throat. I'm lucky my parents are as levelheaded as they are. We

had to dismiss one of the house elves, even. He'd always been a bit odd, but his line has been with the Malfoy family for hundreds of years. In letting him go we separated him from his mother and brothers for the rest of his life, but we had to because every time he got near me his mental illness made me feel like I was crazy, too. It took me weeks to even sort out what was me and what was other people, and even then if someone's emotions were strong enough they changed mine, making me sad or angry or scared or-or-" Draco let out a shaky breath, running his hand through his hair agitatedly, "At least with the potion I just get headaches when the emotions around me are too strong."

Rigel swallowed, feeling wretched for many things, but mostly for not noticing that Draco's problem was so serious. "Don't you get the good emotions, too, though?" she asked, tentative.

"Good feelings aren't as powerful as negative ones, and they don't last as long," Draco said matter-of-factly, "But even so they can overwhelm me if it's concentrated enough. You saw me at the welcoming feast, Rigel, and that was with the potion still in my system. That much excitement in one place felt like a hammer pounding away at me. Most of the time I don't get any good emotions, though. Proportionately there are apparently many more unhappy people than happy in the world. And teenagers are the worst," he added, burying his head in his hands with a groan, "I see what Uncle Sev meant now, nothing but angst and jealousy and pettiness and-and-I *hate* it."

"I'm so sorry, Draco," Rigel said, wondering if she should pat his shoulder comfortingly.

"I know," Draco laughed hollowly, "Your guilt is one emotion I've got an excellent handle on, you feel it so often."

"What?" she asked, taken aback.

"The other day you felt guilty about leaving to go to the bathroom," Draco said, rolling his eyes a bit, "It's a little ridiculous how often you

fall back on that emotion."

Rigel hid a wince, realizing Draco must have been picking up on her guilt about using the time-turner without telling him and Pansy for weeks.

"And now you're feeling guilty about feeling guilty," Draco said, exasperated, "Just stop."

Rigel calmed herself with a force of will, and felt satisfied with the knowledge that at least Draco would not be able to tell the reason for her emotions without serious guesswork on his part. She felt secure enough in her ability to misdirect him in regards to her secrets.

How was she going to help Draco, though? She could offer to make a weaker dose of the potion to start weaning him off of it, but if the gift was as overwhelming as he said, Hogwarts would be a terrible place to try and learn to control it.

"Have you thought about learning Occlumency?" she asked after a moment of thought, "Perhaps Snape could teach you."

"He's been trying, but he doesn't have a lot of free time now that school's started again, and he was busy with important research this summer so father didn't want to demand too much of him," Draco said dispiritedly.

That explained why Mr. Malfoy had commissioned the potions instead of having Snape make them, at least. That, and it was probably easier for Malfoy to pay for the work of an anonymous stranger than to ask a close friend for a delicate favor.

"We'll just have to figure it out ourselves, then," Rigel said, smiling grimly.

"We?" Draco looked so hopeful she couldn't help but give him a quick hug.

"Of course, Dray. We're in this together now. I'll lend you the books that were the most helpful when I started Occlumency. We'll have meditation time before bed every night, and once you can access your mindscape on your own, I'll come in and help you design something to help control your gift, okay?" Rigel wasn't entirely sure that would work, but it was the most logical first step, "Meanwhile you should practice letting the potion wear off in a controlled environment when you can. Just focus on one or two other people, try to differentiate their emotions from yours, pay attention to when you can feel their emotions trying to interact with your own."

Draco nodded slowly, "Yes... I can do that." He looked more than a little relieved, and Rigel thought perhaps shouldering the problem by himself had contributed greatly to the despair he had shown earlier.

"You might talk to Remus-Professor Lupin, I mean-about sitting out the rest of the boggart unit, too," Rigel said, "I'm sure he'd allow you to complete some sort of alternative assignment if you asked."

"Everyone will think I'm a coward," Draco shook his head, "I'm not going to refuse to face the boggart when Greengrass can handle it."

"No one would have to know," Rigel tried to reason, "Professor Lupin would help you keep up appearances, I think."

"I would know," Draco said shortly, "I'll figure it out eventually."

"All right," Rigel shrugged. Then she asked, "Are you going to tell Pansy?"

To her surprise, Draco didn't look hesitant so much as uneasy at the mention of Pansy's name, "I'm... not sure. Does Pansy seem different this year to you?"

Rigel blinked, "Not particularly. She's a bit taller, I suppose."

Draco shook his head, "It's just... sometimes I get these emotions from her that don't make any sense. They aren't the kind of emotions

I'd ever expect from Pansy, of all people. Then again," he sighed, "It's probably just me. I don't fully understand everything my gift tells me, especially when I use the suppressant potion. I suppose I should tell her. I think I'll wait until we know if Occlumency is going to get me anywhere, though. I want to have a plan when I tell her, so she doesn't worry too much."

Rigel nodded her agreement. She went to slip off the bed, but Draco's hand on her shoulder stopped her.

"Thanks, Rigel," he said, a sober look of sincerity on his face, "I know I've been a prat about this whole thing. I'm going to try and get this under control, like you said, and I want you to know that I'm grateful to have a friend who tells me what I need to hear. I don't blame you for the Potentialis Potion, either," he added.

Rigel thanked him for his understanding, but there was a specter of dread lurking in the back of her mind all the same. Draco wasn't the only one she'd made that potion for. Her cousin had begged her and pestered her about making him one once he turned thirteen, and Rigel, once she had her brewing abilities back under control, had done so.

Archie would have told me if something weird had happened though... wouldn't he?

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As the weeks went on, Rigel found that time-turned life strangely suited her. It hadn't taken her long, she ruefully reflected, to begin spending mind-boggling amounts of folded time each day studying anything and everything that she could justify as 'academic,' which was, she silently argued to herself at times, the purpose of the time-turner in the first place. She rationalized that the hours of time she spent with her friends each day were hours that other students who

didn't have so many classes and academic pursuits would have anyway, so even when she used the time-turner to live those hours, she wasn't using the time-turner non-academically. It was making up for the hours from each actual day that she spent in learning. If some of the things she learned were technically extra-curricular... well, it was still academic to study Occlumency and practice brewing potions, wasn't it?

She half-expected to burn out after a couple months, figuring that the stress of living so many days each week would eventually catch up to her and cause some sort of mental fatigue that required her to take a break from such enthusiastic use of the device. As the end of October neared, however, her mind and body showed no signs of slowing down. With the time-turner, in fact, she felt better than she ever had. She had time to eat, sleep, and exercise as much as she wanted, and the time she spent with her friends more than offset the extra study time crammed into each day.

It was even becoming easier to hide its use from her friends as she got the hang of her schedule. She was never either too consistent or too irregular in the times and places she slipped away and rejoined them. Even Draco, with his slowly improving grip on the emotions of those around him, hadn't seemed to notice.

Speaking of Draco's gift, Rigel almost wished she hadn't offered to help him harness it. It wasn't that she liked the idea of her friend in constant discomfort-quite the opposite, she'd do almost anything to keep Draco from pain-but for some reason when she'd pictured teaching Draco to control his gift, she'd imagined finding a more effective way of preventing the effect it had on his everyday life.

Draco, it turned out, had a different interpretation on what controlling his ability meant. After giving Rigel a very strange look the first time she'd wondered aloud if they might construct a containment field of some sort in Draco's mind once his Occlumency was good enough, her friend had explained very patiently that he didn't want make his empathy go away-he wanted to make it *useful* .

In retrospect Rigel supposed that of course Draco would want to harness the natural advantage his empathy could afford him socially and politically, considering who his father was and what kind of work the young scion would eventually go into. She just hadn't anticipated that Draco would take to the idea of practicing his gift so... enthusiastically.

"Stop worrying, Pans," Draco said. He was ensconced in a low-backed armchair with a book on meditation and focusing techniques, but he lowered it for a moment to look at Pansy over its top, "You're going to do fine on that test."

He had become positively *imperious* about the emotions of others, Rigel noticed. Once he identified what someone was feeling, Draco had developed a tendency of telling them quite bluntly not to feel it, particularly if the emotion was one he himself didn't want to be feeling. Rigel hoped quietly that this habit would go away once Draco learned to ignore the emotions around him, but in light of her friend's sometimes domineering personality, her hopes weren't particularly *high* .

Pansy, who was pouring over her Care of Magical Creatures notes on the couch next to Rigel, looked up distractedly. "What an unhelpful prediction, Draco," she sighed, "No one is going to do fine on this test, because we haven't been taught anything comprehensive. The study guides Professor Pettigrew handed out are just gibberish."

"You should ask Rookwood what the tests were like in his third year," Rigel said, "Since Pettigrew is new this year, he'll probably rely on the last teacher's notes and exams, at least to help him determine appropriate content."

"Brilliant," Pansy snapped her book shut, ignoring the roll of parchment that got smashed between the pages, "Thanks, Rye."

She got up and wove her way across the common room, presumably looking for the upperclassman in question.

"I'm telling you there's something different about Pansy lately," Draco muttered.

Rigel ignored him, mostly because he'd said the same thing so many times in the past few weeks that she no longer had any novel reply to give. Instead, she focused on trying to understand the emergent patterns of late-stage lung diseases as related to age and vitality of the victim. *Patient*, she mentally corrected herself, *not victim*. Archie had some rather pointed things to say about her callous discussion of sick people in their last letter exchange. In her defense, she didn't actually treat any real people the way Archie did whenever his class had volunteer duty at the local hospital. All Rigel did was learn the theory, which sometimes made it difficult to humanize the subjects.

Before Draco could espouse his latest theory as to what, exactly, was different about Pansy this year, the girl in question returned, Rookwood in tow. Rigel obligingly moved to a different couch so that the two creature specialists could spread out Pansy's notes between them, and wasn't terribly surprised when Rosier wandered over a few minutes later and dropped gracefully into the cushion beside her.

"Evening, Rosier," she said, quickly finishing the paragraph she was reading. The odds of Rosier not starting a conversation were slim, after all.

"And what are you reading tonight, Rigel?" the golden-eyed boy asked through half-mast eyelids, "Another anatomy textbook?"

"Treatise on airborne pathogens," Rigel said, lifting the cover in case for some reason he was interested in noting the title.

"Got into the Healing class this year, then?" he guessed.

"Not really," Rigel said vaguely, "I still have the occasional lesson in my free time, but I didn't have room in my schedule to be in the regular class."

"What did you take in its place?" Rosier asked, visibly surprised, "Besides Potions, Healing is all you seem to study in your free time."

"I opted to take Arithmancy and Ancient Runes," Rigel said, not bothering to mention Magical Theory, for which she only officially attended the lab section. "Since my cousin Harry takes Healing classes in America, I can learn enough through correspondence with her that making room for a whole class here seemed unnecessary. Arithmancy and Runes would be much harder for me to self-study."

"Interesting criteria," Rosier said slowly, "Most people take the classes they're good at or interested in pursuing a career in, if only so that they might take the OWL's and NEWT's that will qualify them for future employment in the field. Why study Healing if you'll have no credentials to apply for an internship when you finish Hogwarts?"

Rigel shrugged, "I haven't decided what I want to do for sure yet. I'd prefer to concentrate on maximizing my learning now, and worrying about the future later. I can always take the Healing NEWT if I want to, even without taking more lessons with Madam Pomfrey. It's so rare for students from Hogwarts to have a Healing NEWT in any case, because the program here is so small, so even major hospitals like St. Mungo's will interview candidates without credentials if they show an aptitude."

All of which was technically true. She disliked spouting such long-winded lies, but when she and Archie switched back one day, she didn't want someone she'd gone to school with to think it odd if they happened to hear that Rigel Black had become a Mediwizard. She felt a momentary pang at the thought that she would have to cut ties with all of the friends she had here when she graduated. She shied away from the implications with the ease of practice, however. She didn't have to worry about that, at least, for a while yet.

"For entry-level positions," Rosier said, "Do you plan on cleaning bed-pans for six months when you turn seventeen?"

"If they need cleaning," Rigel shrugged, unconcerned with so unlikely a future.

Rosier laughed. "Big words. Are you really so unconcerned with your own future?" he asked, unconsciously mimicking her thoughts.

Rigel considered this; "I find that making too many plans for the future can undermine one's ability to appreciate the present."

"Or maybe you're just confident in your ability to secure a worthy position regardless of academic credentials," Rosier mused, "I wonder, is it a faith in your own abilities, or the ability to trade on your family connections?"

Rigel felt herself still for a moment before slowly closing her book and setting it deliberately aside. "I don't understand," she said.

The upperclassman considered her with sharp interest, "Your father is very well-liked at St. Mungo's. Aside from volunteering, he heads a committee for organizing fundraising events and personally donates an embarrassing amount of galleons every Yule. That kind of clout is very useful for someone seeking employment in a competitive field."

She couldn't quite believe he had actually insinuated what she thought he had. After peering into his expression for a moment and receiving nothing but impassive amusement, she took a breath and let it out slowly, deciding what to say. Eventually she said, "My father invests so much time and money into St. Mungo's for the same reason I want to learn about Healing for its own sake, not for a mark or job prospects."

"And what reason is-"

She could see the exact moment the realization hit him, regret flashing across his face and trepidation replacing smooth aloofness in his eyes. Before he could talk his way backwards she added, quiet enough to be chiding, "She passed in the winter, close to Yule."

"Rigel, I didn't mean-"

"Yes he did."

They both turned to see that Draco had been following their entire conversation, his face set in an angry glare.

"I'm certain Rosier spoke in ignorance, not malice," Rigel said, not feeling particularly sympathetic as Rosier winced. She would be generous because Rosier was a friend, but she wished she knew what he'd hoped to accomplish with such tactless inquiry. "My mother passed a long time ago, and there's no reason he would remember the details of her illness when he was so young at the time."

"And *I'm* certain he did that on purpose," Draco said, shooting Rigel a meaningful look that told her he'd been using his rudimentary grasp of empathy to read Rosier's emotions during the conversation. "He was positively *pleased* as he said it."

Rosier frowned, looking indignant, but also unsure whether he was allowed to defend himself after his thoughtless blunder.

"He didn't realize his mistake until the words were out," Rigel said, sighing. That much was obvious, even without a gift in empathy. "He's perfectly sorry now."

"Now that you called him on it," Draco growled, "Rigel, when are you going to see that he *enjoys* tormenting people?"

"I *don't*," Rosier bit out. His face was pale and he seemed, for the first time since Rigel had met him, at a loss for what to say. "I don't torment people," he said again, clenching one fist ineffectually.

"You do," Draco argued, "What else do you call purposely making people uncomfortable and asking inappropriate questions just to see them squirm? It's impermissible, and yet no one says anything because your Father has bought up half the businesses in Diagon

Alley. You're just like him, bullying people into doing what you want for a bit of amusement-"

"Do *not* compare me to that man," Rosier spat so venomously that Draco actually leaned back a few inches, a shocked expression on his face. If Rigel had to guess, she'd say he just got a huge backlash of emotion he'd been unprepared for. Personally she thought it served him right for using his gift to try and outmaneuver someone he didn't get along with.

Rigel glanced around the common room and noticed they were drawing attention from nearby groups. "Maybe we should talk about something else," she suggested.

"No, I think Draco and I need to settle whatever this is now, before it festers any longer," Rosier said, uncommonly stiff.

"Agreed," Draco sniffed, standing with exaggerated ceremony, "After you, Rosier."

Before Rigel could say that this had all been a misunderstanding, both boys had left their group of couches and made their way into a private study room, closing the door resolutely behind themselves.

She looked over at Pansy helplessly, wondering how she'd managed to make such a mess of a quiet evening, but Pansy had nothing to say besides "boys."

After a moment of private consideration, Rigel decided that pretty much summed up the situation.

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Draco considered himself very contained, in most situations. He did not stomp his feet or shout when things failed to go his way, but that

didn't mean he sat idly by and watched while something he found personally reprehensible was going on before his eyes, either. Rosier's little mind game had been going on long enough, and it was past time that somebody put a stop to it. That somebody was clearly not going to be Rigel Black,

Rosier shut the door to the study room behind them, and they each claimed a seat on opposite sides of the small wooden table. The older scion seemed to have some of his usual equilibrium back as he lounged indolently and favored Draco with a displeased expression, but Draco could tell, if he concentrated for a moment, that Rosier was actually feeling off-balance and uneasy.

"What is it that you thought you were doing just now?" Draco asked bluntly. In a ballroom with the eyes of one's peers all around, a man had to be circumspect. In a private conversation from one pureblood to another, however, directness was always preferred.

"I was holding a conversation," Rosier said smoothly.

"Usually you're much better at not swallowing your foot while you talk," Draco pointed out.

He had the pleasure of seeing the older Slytherin grimace, "I misspoke, yes, and I'll apologize to Rigel for my lapse in memory, but I fail to see why *you* need to take me to task for a question I already regret asking. Rather, I'd like to know why it is that every time I have a conversation with Rigel you become personally offended, Draco."

Draco scowled openly-the use of his personal name was an obvious ploy, but it didn't stop it from rankling. "Perhaps it is because every time you have a conversation with Rigel you upset him, and he's too polite to be offended on his own behalf."

Rosier visibly checked himself from scowling back, and Draco took the moment to lay a mental brush over the part of his magic he was coming to recognize as his empathic senses. It told him in vague impressions that Rosier felt defensive but not overtly guilty. Draco

supposed that meant Rosier thought his actions justified in some way; he withheld a snort, but couldn't crush the spark of curiosity that had him wondering what the older boy's motives in antagonizing Rigel could possibly be.

"As difficult as I know it is for you to believe, you are not the only one with Rigel's best interests at heart," Rosier said quietly, "Yes, I provoke the boy sometimes, but Rigel is exactly the type of person who needs to be provoked. You've known him as long as I have; don't pretend you don't know his character. He avoids everything that makes him uncomfortable, including other people more often than not. Do you think that's a habit his friends should encourage?"

"Rigel doesn't avoid us," Draco said, "He's been around all the time, lately."

"Around, yes, but engaged?" Rosier asked, his voice pointed, "He sits among you all and reads, but how often does he volunteer information about how his life is going? Or initiate casual contact?"

"That's none of your business," Draco said, more sharply than he'd intended. Really, though, where did Rosier get off thinking he could decide what was and wasn't good for Rigel? He didn't know what he was talking about.

Rosier's eyes narrowed and his emotions became suspicious. Draco groaned internally as he realized he'd given something away with his vehement protest. "You know something," the older boy said.

"Just leave Rigel alone," Draco said.

"You really want Rigel to end up alone?" Rosier asked, a mocking note back in his voice, "Because that's where he's headed. He'll never seek out friendship or companionship of his own volition."

"He's not required to," Draco tried.

"But he *wants* to, can't you see that?" Rosier argued, leaning forward and giving off an earnest vibe Draco had a hard time disregarding, "Rigel soaks up friendship and affection like a sponge when he lets his guard down, but left to his own devices he pulls away. He needs people to pull him back in again."

Draco wasn't convinced, "Rigel has secrets. There are things you don't understand-and things I don't understand, too-and making him too uncomfortable is only going to push him away."

"Is it?" Rosier asked, "It hasn't yet."

Draco opened his mouth to argue and then stopped, thinking. Rosier, the sick bastard, was right. Every time Draco had urged Rigel to get angry and say something in response to Rosier's prodding, his friend had effectively shrugged it off and decided it wasn't worth getting upset over.

"Rigel says he has strict boundaries, maybe even believes it, but every time someone crosses one he forgives them," Rosier said knowingly, "Rigel wants to be close to people; deep down, he wants to drop his mask, which is all I want him to do. I want him to relax around his friends, to tell us uncomfortable truths he keeps to himself, to realize that no matter what he says or does we've already got his back, and to understand that getting close to someone doesn't have to be scary or confusing. Right now he pretends to trust us, to believe that we care, but in reality he shoulders everything himself and doesn't trust us to want to help him, or to forgive him any imperfections. That's unhealthy, and it isn't fair to us, either."

Draco couldn't believe he was even considering Rosier's arguments, but... some of it made sense. Rosier didn't know about Rigel's medical condition that made it uncomfortable for him to touch people too much-come to that he didn't know much about it, either-but before Rigel had confessed to it he remembered wondering if Rigel had been mistreated or traumatized somehow. He was just so unnaturally cautious and spatially aware of his surroundings.

Still... "It's not our place to confront Rigel about his issues," Draco had to point out, "We're his peers, not his parents."

"If not his friends, then who?" Rosier countered, "His father, who doesn't seem to see Rigel even when he's looking right at him? Professor Snape, who couldn't nourish emotional bonds in a child if it was his own, much less the son of his hated rival? Perhaps we should leave it to his cousin, off living in America most of the year and by all accounts more antisocial than Rigel is?"

Draco had nothing to say to that.

"Or maybe you think Rigel will work it out for himself, given time?" Rosier's expression was positively sardonic now, "Do you think Rigel will leave his self-imposed comfort zone on his own? No. He'll nurture what he sees as one-sided friendships, always willing to help others but never accepting any help in return, smiling and making small talk while whatever secrets he's keeping slowly eat away at him from the inside out. You've seen the contradictions embedded in the life he leads, Draco. You know it can't last. Isn't it better to show him now that getting closer to people doesn't mean facing rejection when something less than perfect shows through that veneer of his?"

Draco held up a hand so that Rosier would stop talking for a moment. He needed to think. Everything Rosier was saying sounded so overbearing and presumptuous, but... *is he wrong?*

Hadn't Draco thought similar things, at different times in the past? Rigel was his best friend, who he'd do anything for, but... did Rigel understand that? He knew Rigel took his side of the friendship very seriously, but he never expected anything of Draco, even after Draco had repeatedly asked Rigel to let him help with anything he could. Was Rosier right in suggesting that a more demonstrative show of trust and affection was necessary to get through to Rigel? Draco grimaced. Rosier still didn't know about Rigel's condition, and it really wasn't his place to tell the older boy, no matter how genuine his concern felt to Draco's rudimentary empathic understanding.

"I understand where you're coming from," Draco said slowly, "But I have to strongly advise you that even though things like sitting closer to Rigel or touching his hair seem casual to you, they aren't to Rigel. He takes physical contact extremely seriously, and that part really does make him uncomfortable and confused, and I don't think you can acclimate him to it, no matter how often you try."

Rosier considered Draco's words carefully. "He hasn't had a strong adverse reaction yet," he said after a moment, "It can't be that strong of a psychological barrier. It seems to me that he keeps a distance on purpose, but not out of fear or extreme paranoia. It's more like he thinks he ought to."

Draco could feel Rosier's confusion as he tried to figure it out, and felt a deep sympathy that he was pretty sure came from himself-he certainly knew how it felt to be utterly perplexed by Rigel Black. "Just trust me on this one thing," Draco said eventually, "Don't try to use physical contact to break through Rigel's social barriers-he'll be too polite to tell you so, but there are reasons you don't understand for why it upsets him."

"All right," Rosier shrugged, "I'll try a different approach." He winced, "Although, I was trying that tonight and rather botched it, I fear. I thought if I caught him off-guard with a pointed question he might reveal something more than his usual vague answers to queries about his goals and ambitions."

Draco sat back, satisfied with that concession. He could have left then, but something compelled him to ask, "How do you really feel about Rigel, Rosier?"

He didn't listen to Rosier's answer-the words weren't important. He listened to his empathy instead. When Rosier talked about Rigel he didn't give off any of the strange, sadistic excitement Draco had been expecting. Rosier felt *fond* of Rigel; he felt concerned, intrigued, and something warm that felt a little like kinship but more *active*, for lack of a better descriptive. There was a pleased sort of curiosity

underlying it all, and just a tiny bit of possessiveness that Draco really wasn't surprised by at all.

Draco wasn't entirely pleased with this vague assessment, but he felt much better than he had going into the conversation. Maybe Rosier wasn't as obnoxious as Draco had originally assumed. Scarily enough, he found himself agreeing with the upperclassman more than not. He still thought Rosier was an overbearing ponce, but maybe-just maybe-the other Slytherin had a point when it came to Rigel Black.

When they rejoined the common room, Rigel looked each of them over warily, as though searching for signs that they'd been brawling like muggles. Honestly.

Rosier reclaimed his seat next to Rigel and very earnestly said, "I'm sorry for the insinuations I made earlier, Rigel. I went too far with my speech, and I can only hope you'll forgive me. I was only trying to gauge your reaction, but that's no excuse for my rudeness."

Rigel, to no one's surprise, only tilted his head and said, "It is already forgotten. Only-why were you trying to get a reaction?"

"Just wondering what's under that mask you always wear," Rosier said, actually winking his ridiculously orange eye at the other boy.

Predictably, Rigel frowned at that, "People are entitled to their masks, Rosier."

"Are they?" Draco said mildly. He knew it was cruel, but he just couldn't resist seeing the look on Rigel's face when he realized that Draco was agreeing with Rosier, "Sometimes provoking people is the only way to get an honest reaction out of them, isn't it, Aldon?"

The brief but acute horror on Rigel's face as the boy glanced between the two of them proved that point quite nicely, Draco thought. He tried not to smirk too obviously as he retook his own seat and settled back in to read. Things would be more interesting

from now on. He'd been a passive friend to Rigel for a while, now. Perhaps it was time to change that.

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[end of chapter eight].

A/N: So... it's a little late. But just a little! And nearly 20,000 words . You'll be happy to know that my sister did whack me upside my head when she realized I missed my self-imposed deadline. She also stood over me making imaginary whipping motions as I put the final touches on this today. Sorry it's a little wordier than usual in places. The next chapter is where things start picking up-Halloween, you know-so if this one seems fillery, it is, which is one of the reasons I didn't want you all to wait too long for it.

So many of my brilliant readers accurately guessed Draco's gift, and I can't decide if I'm more proud or embarrassed. At least the hints weren't ambiguous, I suppose. I might make them a little more veiled in the future, though... stay clever, faithful readers. Happy Summer!

Chapter 8

A/N: So... I'm told the explanations of magic and theory are interesting to a lot of readers. Here's hoping you still think so after *this* beast of an exposition.

The Ambiguous Artifice:

Chapter 8:

[RIRIRI]

Remus Lupin had wanted to teach since he was a lonely eleven-year-old watching prefects tutor the younger students in the Gryffindor common room. At the time, he'd been too nervous to ask for help himself, even though his potions marks could probably have used the boost, but although he didn't partake of the upperclassmen's services, he still admired their patience and generosity from his seat in a dimly-lit corner.

Even after he'd-somehow, miraculously-made friends with the kind of kids who sat in oversized armchairs in the center of the bright firelight, Remus often found his gaze drawn to the prefects and their charges. He'd known it was a foolish wish at the time-what were the odds that the Ministry would allow him to open a school for werewolves, after all?-but he found himself jotting down ideas in a small notebook whenever he heard a particularly well-phrased explanation, or whenever one of his professors gave them an especially creative project or activity.

A couple decades later, and that little green book sat proudly on the shelf behind a desk he'd never, even in his most fanciful imaginings, imagined he'd one day lay claim to.

The desk itself was piled high with parchment and notebooks of varying sizes and colors. The stacks were arranged somewhat

haphazardly, though Remus knew about where everything was. None of the papers were homework assignments, in which Remus put rather little stock, having witnessed the half-baked and entirely dishonest way in which most of his own housemates had completed their assignments in school. Rather, the notes were his own, compiled on each student he taught, in all seven years, and all four houses. He kept tabs on which students answered questions correctly, which students helped their year mates by whispering answers to them in a tone they (mistakenly) assumed Remus couldn't hear, which students could rapidly cast shields, which students were reluctant to use offensive spells, and so on. He liked to think a good teacher would know his students well, from their strengths and weaknesses to their character traits and ambitions.

He tried to take time before and after classes to talk to students, ask them questions, solicit their opinions on how his classes and assignments were received, and address any concerns they had about their own performance in his class. He also made sure to keep a friendly expression on his face throughout mealtimes and in the hallways. Remus knew better than anyone how scary the dark arts could be, and he didn't want any of his students to be too scared of *him* to get the education they needed to protect themselves.

This was easier said, of course, with his furry little problem being common knowledge these days, but Remus could only do so much to mitigate others' prejudice. He had some reservations about being the poster-boy for werewolf integration in the workforce, but on the other hand, if not him, then who? It wasn't as though everyone he knew didn't already know about his condition-he'd long since stopped being too ashamed to tell people he met about it. And his face, while not as handsome as someone like Sirius' might be, was certainly a good deal more unassuming than that of Fenrir Greyback's, for example.

Imagining Greyback's face on a motivational poster for equal rights, perhaps with the man's abundance of hair neatly combed and

braided, gave him quite a laugh, and Remus paused in outlining his lesson for the next day to savor the image.

Opening his eyes once more, he focused on the columns of names before him. Tomorrow he had the third-year Slytherins, in their last class of boggart-training until the final. He'd separated their names into groups of those students who no longer had any trouble with the boggart, those who needed a brief mental-psyching to get a handle on it, and those exceptionally brave students who, despite having enormous difficulties in grappling with their fears, returned each period to try again anyway.

It was somewhat difficult for him to commit even this basic information onto parchment, due to the confidentiality wards. The magic in the wards bonded to memories as they were created within them. Since they were keyed to Remus, they affected the way he remembered events he'd witnessed, but only when he attempted to use the information in some way. If he were just recalling a memory, it was perfectly clear. As soon as he attempted to convey information about the event in any way, even to himself, the recollection became vague. It was clear enough to sort the students into three simple categories, though.

He told himself not to feel surprised that Draco Malfoy's name, which had recently been moved to the middle group of students, had for a long time resided firmly in the latter column. *If Archie likes him, he can't be much like his father*, he told himself. He ignored the voice that suggested Archie's judgment of character might have been heavily influenced by his sorting. *If I assume all Slytherins are pompous gits without the right to fears and uncertainties, I'm no better than Sirius* .

He hadn't seen Archie very often since coming to Hogwarts, which he supposed was for the best, at least until the end of term. He had, however, seen him often in the company of his two best friends, Miss Parkinson and Mr. Malfoy. Miss Parkinson was a thoroughly brilliant witch, in Remus' estimation, and as charming as any pureblood heiress ought to be. Remus could easily see why her soothing

temperament and playful wit had endeared her to Archie. Sirius' son had grown up around smart, even-tempered females, after all. His friendship with the Malfoy scion was... more puzzling.

It wasn't that the younger Malfoy wasn't perfectly polite. There were no hidden flinches or sneers when Remus called on him in class, which was more than Remus could say about many of his students. He was also quite intelligent, from what Remus could tell. He didn't run his mouth as young boys his age were want to do, and, when pressed, always had something insightful to say on a given subject.

Remus sighed, tapping his quill absently against the inkwell as he turned the problem of Draco Malfoy over in his mind. The boy was arrogant, of course, and not afraid to dismiss and scorn those around him when he felt their behavior warranted correction. He didn't know how Archie could stand such a high-handed friend, but he couldn't deny that Draco was a friend to Archie. He'd seen the proof himself, after all.

His mind took him back to the week before, the last time his third year Slytherins had faced the boggart, and the first time Draco Malfoy had beaten the creature on his own.

Remus couldn't help the slight grimace he gave when young Mr. Malfoy walked behind the screen. While boggarts were meant to be terrifying and upsetting to the victim, Malfoy's boggart was one of the few that disturbed *Remus* when he saw it. Most children feared the sort of monsters they'd heard about in bedtime stories, though a few of the more worldly students sometimes had a vague fear of violent criminals or losing loved ones or even simply failing important examinations. Mr. Malfoy's greatest fear, however, from what Remus could tell, appeared to be madness.

Remus was all too familiar with true madness: the utter loss of mental facilities so debilitating that one cannot even appreciate the horror except in retrospect, or, in the case of Draco's boggart, from an outside perspective. Why the otherwise confident and poised young man should fear such a thing, it was not his place to guess.

His only concern was the difficulty Malfoy had in attempting to overcome his fear psychologically.

As the boggart assumed its now-usual image of Draco's doppelganger laughing and crying with hysteria, Remus readied himself to interfere if it, once again, proved too much for the young pureblood.

This time, something was different, however. Mr. Malfoy didn't flinch at the sight of his afflicted counterpart. He stood straight, his wand brandished with a sense of confidence that had been missing in his previous session. Remus began to relax, sensing, somehow, that he would not be needed this time.

"Riddikulus!" Malfoy snapped, silver eyes intent with concentration.

For a moment, Remus wasn't sure it had worked. The blonde boy on the floor didn't stop laughing or rocking himself insanely. Then something else stepped out of the shadows behind the boy and Remus tensed, surprised.

It was Archie. The image of his nephew wasn't perfect, but it was at least as solid as the boggart, and as Remus watched, the image of Archie came around next to the madly muttering Malfoy and sat down beside him. Archie put both arms around the other boy, and the rocking abruptly stopped. Slowly, the look of madness faded from the boggart-boy's eyes, and he looked over at the image of Archie that the real Malfoy had apparently conjured. Both boys on the ground smiled at one another, and the real Mr. Malfoy smiled down at them with a mixture of fondness and relief.

Remus snapped himself out of his surprise quickly. By the time the young scion looked over, Remus was smiling genially, as though nothing interesting had occurred. "Well done, Mr. Malfoy," he said, "Ten points to Slytherin for creative thinking. Get yourself some chocolate, and send the next student in, please."

The boy bowed his head in polite acknowledgment and turned on his heel without a word.

Remus banished the boggart back into its temporary home, wondering at what he'd seen. He had studied boggarts extensively before he decided to use them in his classes, and he'd never once heard of someone using the idea of another sentient being to affect their own fear. People always changed something about the boggart itself in order to make it less frightening. Changing the environment sometimes worked, too, but he'd never thought to introduce a new variable entirely to interact with a boggart. Remus was very impressed that Malfoy had come up with such a solution, and more than a little intrigued by the meaning of his choice.

Archie had a more devoted friend than he realized, Remus suspected. What sort of devotion that friendship would turn into, given enough time... well, he supposed that wasn't really any of his business.

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If anyone had told Rigel at the beginning of the school year that she'd find one of her electives as interesting as Potions, she might have given an indulgent smile to hide her dismay that someone could ever be so fundamentally misguided about the universe.

That was before she started Alchemy lessons with Albus Dumbledore. She wouldn't say it was *more* interesting than Potions—such a thing would be sacrilegious, at the least—but it had quickly become a very close second.

Alchemy was fascinating. Much like Potions, it was an exacting science that required an extensive range of knowledge about myriad, interlocking fields of magic. Alchemy at its most basic level involved small amounts of actual magic and raw ingredients, very precise

Runic arrays to shape that magic, and Arithmancy equations to calculate and describe the amount and direction of the magic and ingredients involved. It drew on her understanding of Herbology and Magical Creature parts, which she had a vast repertoire of knowledge about from her Potions studies, as well as a comprehension of Runes, Arithmancy, Transfiguration, and even Astronomy in those alchemical reactions that were intensified or nullified according to the positions of celestial bodies at the time.

She found herself constantly surprised at the way one subject could be at once frustratingly complicated and yet beautifully simple. Input always equaled output in Alchemy, and with enough understanding of the values different ingredients and magical processes equated to, one could design a runic array that would enable almost any alchemical transformation one could imagine. Dumbledore never tried to make her memorize tried and true arrays, either; rather, he encouraged her to design her own rune circles and equations without a biased idea of what types of magic or ingredients should go into it. Often times her ideas were wildly inefficient or off the mark, but Dumbledore's Socratic style of inquiry-based learning, while slow, always made the eventual answer seem rooted in her mind like a truth that she'd always known, but hadn't noticed before.

The efficacy of his teaching methods more than made up for the Headmaster's other... oddities.

As she carefully copied down the rune sequence Dumbledore was etching with chalk onto the table, Rigel wondered what her friends would say if they knew she was taking private lessons from a Master of Alchemy in the same subject. Her friends, while often vocally disapproving of the Headmaster's muggle-loving ways, were still rather unsubtly in awe of the great wizard.

She also wondered wryly what they'd say if they knew he had an incredibly cliché secret passage in his office. Or that he sometimes curled his beard with his wand when he lectured.

She studied the carefully separated piles of ingredients lying in the center of the circle. Someday, Dumbledore assured her, she would know instinctively how much of this or that was necessary to effect a certain reaction, but for beginners it was better to clearly separate and triple-check the quantities of ingredients before attempting to 'jump-start' an array with the appropriate amount of raw input magic.

The reaction Dumbledore was demonstrating was relatively simple, in that it involved only raw materials that would be transformed into a compound material, with no left over raw ingredients at the end. Specifically, it was an array that would transform proportional amounts of wood and metal into a cubic wooden box. It was similar to an array they'd studied last week, but with pine instead of cypress.

"The magic coefficient on the pine is higher than the cypress coefficient was," she commented after a moment.

Every substance used in alchemical equations, from elements to organic compounds, had been given by wizards a magic coefficient that described the amount of magic needed to transform one unit of a given ingredient in an array with an order of complexity of one. Wood was fairly easy to transform, given its high level of innate magic to assist and its susceptibility to what Dumbledore called 'the idea of change' and which Rigel had renamed an ingredient's flexibility factor. Arrays were categorized according to levels of complexity, with each increase in complexity corresponding to an increase in factor of the magic involved in the change.

If you wanted to change one unit of wood into a wooden flute, for instance, you calculated the magic needed by multiplying the magic coefficient of the type of wood you used by the magical constant unique to the wizard powering the reaction, then multiplied that number by the factor of complexity, in the case of a flute a 2.5. The result was the number of seconds the wizard should imbue the array with magic in order to initiate the reaction. The actual transformation was all described in the runes that made up the array, and of course when you had varying amounts of varying ingredients the equations got more complicated, and that was without even touching on

second- and third-order arrays that enacted multiple reactions simultaneously. Still, Rigel was new enough to the subject that even something as basic as the differences between magical coefficients was interesting to her.

"What about it?" Dumbledore prompted, reminding her of her question as she recalled herself from her musings.

"Does a higher coefficient mean that pine as an ingredient has less innate magic per unit than cypress? Or does it mean that pine is more resistant to transformation?"

"In this case, it is the latter," the Headmaster said, smiling vaguely, "But the answer is not important as long as you have the proportions correct. Why is that, Mr. Black?"

Rigel thought. "Whether it is more resistant to magic or simply containing less magic, the extra amount of magic on the input side will be distributed in the same way, acting on the material that requires the magic," Rigel said slowly, "So all you need to know is how much magic to add, regardless of why."

"Precisely," Dumbledore said, "It is a sad truth of our times in fact that many burgeoning alchemists do not bother learning the exact whys of various ingredients' magic constants, because that particularly tedious endeavor has already been undertaken by the unlucky wizards who invented the field."

Rigel thought that made a certain amount of sense, even if it seemed an incredibly lazy way to learn a discipline.

"Aren't the coefficients just averages?" Rigel asked, approaching a theory she'd been mulling over for some time, "When I make a potion that calls for eight ounces of beetle wings, I can tell by smelling the fluid they're preserved in how potent they are, and if I should add slightly more or less of any given jar. If you took pine wood that grew near an incredibly potent natural reservoir of magic,

wouldn't its magic coefficient be slightly lower than the average for pine?"

"It certainly would," Dumbledore twinkled happily at her, "It will be many years before you are expected to be able to compensate for your ingredients in such a manner, however. Indeed, most students do not even think to ask such a question until well into their second or third year of study."

Rigel felt her neck grow hot at the indirect praise, and mumbled, "It's just how I would see a potion, so..."

"So there we see why Professor Snape's recommendation, as stingy as he is with them, is a necessary prerequisite for this subject," Dumbledore said agreeably, "At times I think that I wouldn't mind a few more students, but I cannot deny that no student Professor Snape has recommended to me has even fallen short of exceeding my expectations."

"There are other students, though," Rigel hazarded, setting down her quill for a moment, "In other levels, I mean."

Dumbledore smiled, "Just the one, at this moment. Mr. Albright, a sixth year Gryffindor. Are you acquainted?"

Rigel shook her head, "Not that I'm aware."

"Well, he is an *exceptionally* bright boy, and very keen on pursuing a Mastery in Alchemy when he graduates," Dumbledore said, a bit of pride seeping into his voice, "You might introduce yourself, if your paths cross. Although your place in this class is of course a secret, I am sure Mr. Albright would be happy to indulge a fellow... enthusiast, were you to seek his help on some of the more complicated concepts."

"I'll be sure to keep my eyes open for him," Rigel said, wondering if she could ask Percy to introduce her. As Head Boy, he had to know most of the upperclassmen in his House.

The lesson continued with her practicing calculations for different types of woods and metals in varying amounts. Dumbledore waved her off to History of Magic with a sandwich in hand and many interesting things to think about.

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Rigel and the other third-year Slytherins were on their way to the Great Hall for lunch later that day when they heard it.

Thump, stamp, thump, stamp! Boom! Boom! Boom!

"What on earth?" Tracy Davis gasped, echoing Rigel's thoughts exactly.

They all looked upwards reflexively, despite knowing the racket was at least two stories above them.

"Come on!" Theo said, picking up the pace, "Let's check it out."

They sped up to just under what might qualify as a run, and soon reached the staircase leading to the Great Hall, at which point the commotion became exponentially louder. Upon reaching the top of the stairs, they ran into a roadblock in the form of a large crowd of students pressed to either side of the entrance hall. Not tall enough to crane her neck over the tops of the other students, Rigel peered between heads and subtly shifted through the throng until she had a clear view of what was happening.

The Hogwarts suits of armor appeared to be on parade.

Blinking to make sure she hadn't stumbled upon a mass hallucination, Rigel let her eyes sweep the scene. A long line of suits of armor, some of which Rigel realized in retrospect had indeed been missing from their usual stations along the dungeon hallways,

stretched along the Entrance Hall from the doors of the Great Hall to the grand staircase. She could see the cue extending up the stairs, winding about the landings and several *more* staircases before becoming lost somewhere in the upper levels.

The suits of armor were marching to a slow but steady beat of *thump, stamp, thump, stamp! Boom! Boom! Boom!* Every other step was accentuated with the *thump* of a pike or spear against the floor, and every fourth step was followed by resounding *booms* as the suits carrying swords crashed them against their shields as though banging on metal gongs. It made for an unholy racket, but most of the watching students were grinning even as they clutched their hands to their ears.

Rigel began to smile when it became clear, from the cheering students and disgruntled but resigned expressions on the staff members' faces, that this was not supposed to be happening. A prank, then-but how on earth had Fred and George pulled *this* off?

As the procession fed into the Great Hall, students began filtering in alongside them, eager to see what all the suits of armor were going to do next. Rigel followed along, catching sight of Pansy gesturing amusedly to a grimacing but nevertheless impressed-looking Draco just ahead of her. She caught up to them in time to hear Pansy say, "-and look, they've all got the house colors on!"

Rigel looked, and saw that the suits of armor, once through the doors, broke regiment one by one and sat down as though just coming in to eat lunch. As they sat, Rigel could see that each had a colored neckerchief tied to the bottom on their helmets that corresponded to the table he or she sat down at. More and more suits of armor marched in, more and more students pouring in along with them, and by the time the last suit of armor sat down at the Ravenclaw table, nearly every student in the school seemed to be crowded along the edges of the Great Hall, watching.

"Don't suppose they're going to eat our lunch?" Draco drawled into the momentary silence.

Before Rigel had finished smiling at the joke, there was movement once more. A suit of armor from the Hufflepuff table suddenly stood up and waved across the hall. A suit of armor from the Slytherin table, to everyone's surprise, stood and waved back, then gestured in an exaggerated 'come over' motion. The suit of armor from the Hufflepuff table got up, crossed the hall, and the other suits of armor at the Slytherin table scooted over and made room for it, patting it on the back in a welcoming way.

"What is *that* supposed to mean?" she heard one student mutter behind her.

Soon it was clear, however, as more suits of armor began abandoning the tables that corresponded to their neck cloths and sitting with 'friends' from other tables instead. Eventually, all the tables were completely mixed, and then the suits of armor began stomping their feet and pounding their hands on the tables in front of them all at once.

At first it sounded like noise, but slowly Rigel began to hear a pattern emerging. "It's the Hogwarts anthem," she said, smiling in appreciation.

"What?" Draco snorted, "No it isn't."

"He's right, Drake," Pansy said, cocking her head, "Listen... whether we be old and bold..."

"Or young with scabby knees!" several nearby people sang out excitedly.

Before long, everyone was singing along to the beat of the armored band. With a round of hearty laughter and cheers to finish off the final verse, the suits of armor stood as one, bowed, and then began an orderly evacuation of the hall, presumably back to their posts throughout the school.

As the clamor died down and students finally started to take their seats for lunch, a young voice cried out loudly, "I'm sitting with the Ravensclaws today!"

"Well I'm eating with the Hufflepuffs!" another voice answered.

Two small boys in Slytherin ties, who Rigel recognized as the second-year twins with the perpetually-sly expressions, darted from the crowd and raced to the tables they'd claimed without further consideration or ado.

"Oh, no," Draco muttered sourly. Rigel supposed it was rather obvious where this was going to go next.

A second later the Weasley twins separated themselves from the other side of the hall with matching grins and sat down firmly at the Ravensclaw table with innocent expressions. After that it was organized chaos as students from all Houses plopped down at whichever table suited their fancy, giggling and waving to friends across the hall all the while.

Draco headed determinedly toward the Slytherin table, but Rigel said lightly, "I think I'll go visit with some of my Gryffindor friends today."

"Not you, too!" Draco groaned, rubbing his head agitatedly, "What a mockery."

"It's supposed to be fun, Draco," Rigel said, shaking her head with amusement. "I suppose it's a good idea for some of us to sit at the Slytherin table, though-have to make the new additions feel welcome, right?"

Draco rolled his eyes and turned his back on her without another word. She did notice him smiling tightly at a nervous-looking Ravensclaw who'd taken his usual seat, though, so she guessed he wasn't as annoyed as he let on. In fact, she mused, weaving through the swarm of students, it was probably a lot of work for him to feel anything but excitement and enjoyment at the moment, with so many

happy people about. She supposed she ought to be impressed at his tenacity, if nothing else. *The headache probably helps, though*, she allowed mentally.

When she passed the Weasley twins on her way to the Gryffindor table, she slowed down to give them a congratulatory grin. To her surprise, however, they both shook their heads at her in bemused defeat. Raising her eyebrows, she wondered who was responsible for this enormous prank if not the Weasley twins. Her mind went back to the incident at last year's going away feast. Fred and George had denied that one, too.

If there was a new group of pranksters in the school, they certainly knew how to put on a show.

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On Thursday evening, Rigel found herself with free time before her Astronomy lesson, and, since the weather permitted a walk, packed up her Healing notes and stopped by the kitchens to beg a mouse from Binny before heading out to the edge of the Forbidden Forest.

She had been devoting more time than usual to her Healing studies, and Rigel thought her extra attention was paying off nicely. It was much harder for her to Heal while she wore her suppressant ring, but she found the challenge engaging rather than frustrating, and the end result more satisfying when she had to work for it magically as well as mentally.

Archie was getting regular practice on humans at AIM, and while she couldn't match that kind of experience without turning all of her friends into guinea pigs, she could and did put her growing skills to use out in the forest. If Madam Pomfrey wondered how she practiced when she only had one class on theory a week with the Healer, she hadn't yet asked. Rigel didn't think practicing on animals was

unethical-there were all kinds of injured animals in the forest, and if she didn't at least attempt to heal them, they'd likely be preyed upon by stronger creatures in the wood. In any case, one of the perks of magical Healing, unlike muggle medicine, was that as long as it was actual *Healing*, not potions, the magic worked just as well on animals as on humans.

When she reached the tree line, she began to walk along it. She preferred not to go far into the forest proper, seeing as it was technically forbidden, and usually there was no need to. Sure as clockwork, within ten minutes of her traversing the fringes of the forest a soft hissing voice caught her ear.

" *Ssspeaker! Come thisss way!* "

Following the familiar croon, Rigel soon came upon her frequent companion of the forest, Treeslider. He was getting quicker at scenting her out, she noted, or perhaps he had recently moved his nest closer to the forest's edge. The boomslang snake was a bit difficult to see in the setting light of the approaching sunset, but he wiggled in place until her eyes caught sight of his thin, green form. His eyes were disproportionately big on his head, and they seemed to gleam excitedly when she knelt down next to him.

" *You have come again, ssspeaker,*" the snake swung his head back and forth approvingly, " *You come with giftsss?* "

" *Of coursse,*" Rigel said softly, fishing in her bag for the mouse she carried. She set the cloth-covered bundle gently on the ground and uncovered the rodent with a little flourish.

" *It isss sssso sssmall,*" Treeslider complained, poking the mouse morosely with his tail.

" *You alwaysss sssay that,*" Rigel smiled with amusement, " *Thisss wasss the biggesst one they had in the kitchensss.* "

" *That iss because your cassle hass too many moussse-killersss insside,*" the snake bemoaned. Rigel had discovered that Treeslider had a generally poor opinion of any animal he might have to compete against in mice-catching, cats and owls included.

" *If the moussse is sso sssub-par perhapsss I ssshouldn't bother sssupplying them,*" Rigel said wistfully.

" *That lacksss ssenssse, Ssspeaker,*" Treeslider assured her quickly, " *You sssimply need more practicce at sssupplying.* "

" *Practicce ?*" Rigel asked, " *What am I to be practiccing for?* "

" *For your future nessesstlingsss,*" the snake hissed out a laugh. " *But of courssse you musst firsst tempt a mate, yesss?* "

" *Definitely no,*" Rigel rolled her eyes, " *To matessss and nessesstlingsss both .*"

Treeslider hissed disapprovingly, " *Life iss nothing without thosssse thingsss, sssilly Ssspeaker .*"

" *I have other thingsss in my life,*" Rigel said, " *Sssuch as my reassson for coming. Have you any newsss?* "

" *Of sssick and dying creaturesss?* " Treeslider curled and uncurled unhappily, " *I sssuposse I know of one. But I do not think you ssshould be helping thisss one, Ssspeaker. It ssswiped at me ass I ssslid by earlier.*"

" *I'm sssure it was merely jealous of your ssstunning ssscales,*" Rigel cajoled, " *Have you been sssunning yourssself recccently?* "

" *You noticcced!* " the boomslang snake positively preened, stretching his body and turning his scales until they appeared to the best advantage, " *A pity all creaturesss do not possssesssss ssscales.* "

" I'm sssure the other creaturessss agree," Rigel said, ever-amazed by the vanity of snakes. " Can you take me to thisss poor, sssscaleless, injured creature? "

" I ssshall," Treeslider poked his nose against the mouse once more, " You will hold thisss sssnack while we ssslither. I will eat it onccce you have sssettled ."

Rigel gamely picked up the dead mouse once more and followed the snake through the undergrowth. Treeslider led her somewhat deeper into the forest than she was comfortable with, but Rigel knew from experience that her friend would be willing to show her the way out once he was finished eating, so she wasn't afraid of losing her way.

A few minutes later, she could hear a pitiful whining noise coming through the trees. As they rounded a particularly large trunk, Rigel caught sight of a huddled lump of fur shivering in the leaves. Suppressing the urge to coo at the wretched thing, Rigel approached the animal slowly, saying, "Hey there, little one." Its head snapped up and Rigel had to smile at the mournful look it gave her from its big puppy eyes. It was a baby crup, and when Rigel squinted at its neck, her suspicion was confirmed; a tattered yellow ribbon marked the crup as Hannah Abbott's.

"How'd you get all the way out here?" she murmured, reaching out her fingers for it to sniff sadly at. She sat down beside the little pup, and when it tried to stand and move toward her, she saw its left forepaw collapse beneath it. Before it could finish yelping, Rigel scooped it up gently and deposited it on its back in her lap.

" How long hasss it been sssitting here, Treessslider? " Rigel asked, wondering if Hannah was looking for it.

" Not ssso long, assss it hasssn't been sssnacked on yet," the snake said, a bit unkindly. " It isss ssstupid for wandering thisss way. Ssso many ssstupid animalsss in your cassstle, more and more wandering thisss way of late."

Ignoring the grumbling snake, Rigel got her wand out of her pocket and whispered a 'Lumos' to give herself some more light. The dying sun didn't penetrate the thick leaves very well in this part of the forest. She carefully extracted the crup's injured paw and examined it. There was sticky red blood covering the soft pad, and Rigel suspected the pup had simply stepped on something sharp. Still, she examined the joint and bones of its leg just for the sake of professionalism.

Once assured that the only injury was a flesh wound, Rigel began softly cleaning the blood away to look for the source. The crup whined as she revealed a fairly large gash between two of its toes. Shushing it absently, Rigel bent her mind to the task of Healing. As she ran her wand along the cut, she imbued her magic into the area around it. The flesh knit together under her watchful gaze, first into a bloody scab, then fading to light pink scar tissue before smoothing out into soft, unblemished skin. She debated trying her hand at re-growing the fur there, but decided she wasn't confident enough with that spell just yet. She might overdo it and end up making the poor pup look like a miniature wolf.

The crup attempted to lick her face happily as she stood up with it in her arms, but Rigel avoided its slobber while turning to see if Treelider had finished his meal. The boomslang snake was nearly comatose with happiness, it seemed, curled around the awkward bulge in its stomach.

" *I sssuppossse you want to ssset off onccce more?* " he hissed, stirring blearily.

" *Thanksss, friend,*" she said, following the sluggish snake toward the edge of the forest.

Before long, she could see the end of the forest up ahead. Night was setting in, with just a deep orange glow to break up the shadows.

" *Sssee you nexxt time, Ssspeaker,*" Treelider said, swaying his way back into the forest contentedly. Rigel smiled after him. He was

an amiable snake, despite how prickly he pretended to be.

As she emerged from the forest, a cracking sound further along the tree line cause her to freeze, listening intently. Anything big enough to make a sizable branch snap was something she should definitely try to avoid. Why would something that big be so close to the castle, though? As far as she knew, the greater denizens of the Forbidden Forest preferred to lurk in the deeper, darker expanses.

After a moment of intense listening, however, she heard a soft whistling noise coming from the same direction. Relaxing, she wondered who was taking a walk so close to dusk. Then she realized the person wasn't whistling a tune, but making the high-pitched noise to call something.

"I guess your owner is looking for you," she told the crup, scratching it behind its ears to keep it from leaping down. It would be better if it stayed off its foot for a day or so. "Over here!" she called out softly, starting toward the whistler.

There came the sound of rustling, and then the whistler rounded a tree just ahead of Rigel. It wasn't Abbott, to her surprise.

"Blaise?" she said, slowing to a stop, "What are you doing out here?"

"Rigel?" her friend sounded completely nonplussed, "I thought you were in your lab tonight."

Rigel shook her head, "I'm not always in there, you know."

"Apparently," Blaise said, a smirk on his dark face, "Searching for potions ingredients?"

"Just taking a walk," she huffed out a laugh, "I heard this one yelping, though, and got a little side-tracked. Were you whistling for it?"

Blaise's teeth flashed white in the growing dark, "Yes, I was. I didn't think I'd actually find it, but..." he trailed off, shrugging sheepishly. "I overheard Hannah crying at dinner. She's worried sick over this thing. Said this is the third time it's run off in the last month, but this time she couldn't find it anywhere in the castle."

"So you thought you'd find it for her?" Rigel asked, smiling slightly, "I guess you two are friends, now?"

"Something like that," Blaise said, frowning, "Is it injured? You said it was yelping."

"Ah, it was," Rigel said, now giving her own sheepish shrug, "I think it stepped on something sharp and tore its paw open. I healed the gash, but the fur will take a little while to grow back in, so you'll have to explain that to Hannah. Tell her to make sure it doesn't run around too much for the next twelve hours, as well."

Blaise accepted the crup gently, inspecting the paw for himself with serious eyes, "I will tell her. Thank you, Rigel. It was very kind of you to care for a lost animal so thoroughly."

"It wasn't any trouble," Rigel said, honestly, "I appreciate the practice for my Healing skills, and I think it would take a real monster to just leave an injured animal-especially someone's pet-alone in the dark."

"Such a thing takes less than you think," Blaise said, voice low. "Let us get back to the castle. It will be night, soon."

They made their way across the lawn toward the castle steps.

"You know," Rigel said tentatively, "You don't have to mention me. To Abbott, I mean. It might sound more impressive if you tell her you found it all on your own."

Blaise chuckled softly, "Do you take me for a liar, Rigel? And how would I explain the healed cut? I am no Mediwizard."

"It's an easy enough spell for anyone to learn," Rigel said, "So you could stretch the truth a little tonight and then learn the spell tomorrow. Don't you want to be her hero?" she added, nudging her friend playfully.

"If I told anyone I was getting love advice from Rigel Black, they'd laugh themselves into a coma," Blaise drawled, "I suppose I would owe you one for supporting the altered story?"

"Of course not, Blaise, we're friends," Rigel said, grinning, "I owe Abbott a debt, too, so it's in my interest to make her happy. Aren't you going to make her happy?"

"I'll try to," Blaise said, looking subdued once more, "It's complicated, though. Our families have been aligned for centuries, but because of something my mother did, there was a falling out between the members of the previous generation. Hannah and I ought to have been close, should have been raised together, really, but we hardly know one another. It is... difficult to vie with my instincts; they get closer to the surface every passing day."

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Rigel asked, worried because Blaise, cool, unflappable Blaise, seemed worried.

"No," he smiled, stopping on the top step in front of the Entrance Hall, "I thank you, but this age is notoriously difficult among my kind. I will come to terms with these things in time. I think... a closer relationship with Hannah will help."

"I'll teach you how to Heal a cut like this tomorrow," Rigel said firmly, "Just imply you learned it in order to have basic first-aid knowledge. It's a good idea, in any case, and a girl likes a guy who thinks ahead."

"What do you know about girls, Rigel?" Blaise raised an eyebrow.

"Well, Pansy once told me that ladies appreciate it when gentlemen think through their actions before taking them," Rigel said lightly, "I

believe she was rebuking Draco for eating so many strawberry tarts that he got sick, but I think the sentiment is sound.

Blaise laughed, "If Pansy thinks something, it must be a golden truth. Her mind is razor sharp."

"It is," Rigel agreed, stepping into the castle and holding the door for Blaise, who somehow managed to look extremely suave cradling the crup, "Most people don't notice how smart she is, for some reason."

"The reason is Pansy is very good at what she does," Blaise snorted. At Rigel's quizzical look, he shook his head wryly, "Never mind, my friend. Thank you again for this. I'll see you back in the dorms later."

At the stairs heading down, they split ways, Rigel continuing down into the dungeons and Blaise making his way toward the Hufflepuff common room. She silently wished him the best of luck, and wondered vaguely if crup hair would be of any use in a potion. She had a goodly amount of the stuff stuck to her robes, now, and there was really no sense letting it go to waste.

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As Fall made headway toward Winter's embrace and the days grew shorter, Rigel found her days, quite contrarily, becoming longer. She tried to resist the temptation to use the time-turner more than she needed to, but there always seemed to *be* a need. Sometimes it was a supplementary book that she felt she really ought to read before the next Arithmancy class, other times it was an extra hour or two spent meditating in the quiet of the library, but whatever the reason it was always educational. At least, that's what she told herself when the guilt became noticeably insistent.

The less academic activities were necessary, too, she argued, to keep her healthy and mentally sound so that she could do well in her

many classes-which was exactly the purpose of the time-turner in the first place, so she wasn't doing anything *wrong* . For instance, when she realized that she was only exercising once every real-time day, she made a point to add at least an hour of physical activity to every additional twenty-four hours of turned-time she lived. It wouldn't do to grow lethargic and weak, after all-that sort of unhealthiness lead to stress. In any case, Dueling was one of the subjects she considered an important part of her education, and staying in shape was critical to her learning in that field.

Sleep was also very important to healthy functioning, she told herself. If she were going to live a day twice, she might as well live the night twice as well, and use the extra turned hours to sleep. In this way, she could, for instance, live all of Thursday normally, sleep the night in her room, then turn back a full 24-hours to Thursday morning, work on brewing or studying in the room of requirement, sleep there overnight, then sneak back into her room in time to 'wake' with Draco for morning exercise on Friday.

All told, it was a very satisfying system. She felt healthy, mentally and physically, she was ahead in many of her classes, her extracurricular pursuits were progressing at a reasonable speed, Flint's assignments were completed in record time (from his point of view, at least), Krait had no complaints about the amount of product she supplied him, and she was closer to her classmates than ever.

There was no reason to feel nervous, she told herself as she approached Professor Snape's office door on Friday night. Snape was only going to assess her mental competency and emotional state. He would have no reason to take the time-turner away. She refused to give him one.

She knocked and waited to be granted entry. This was the first actual psychological evaluation Snape had gotten around to arranging, so she wasn't sure what to expect.

When the sharp bid to come in sounded from inside the office, Rigel entered with her most placid expression, a relaxed poise to her walk

that Rispah herself had deemed 'serene.'

"Sit," Snape said, moving a stack of essays to the side of his desk. As Rigel did so, Snape pulled a folder from a drawer and opened it. Inside was a form that he drew out and placed before her.

At the head was a crest she was familiar with, having seen it on a politely-worded letter addressed to Harriet Potter not long ago. The parchment was from the Department of Mysteries, and it appeared to be an evaluation form specific to those who had access to time-turners. There were places at the top for the subject's name, age before using the time-turner, reasons for use, frequency of use, noticeable side-effects if any (including signs of obvious aging, which was a check-box of its own), and so on.

Rigel filled in the top portion herself, then passed it back to Professor Snape, who she supposed was the 'evaluator' responsible for conducting the psychological interview and reporting in the blanks that made up the latter half of the form.

"To clarify, you have noticed no obvious side effects from your usage of the time-turner, including but not limited to disorientation, dizziness, nausea, loss of memory, or a sense of the surreal?" Snape asked, sounding very much like he was reading from a particularly dull essay on frogsporn.

"None," Rigel said, "It works just as you said it would, Professor."

"Good," Snape scanned the form for a moment, then looked at her piercingly, "You noted that you use the time-turner five hours each day? Including weekends?"

"Approximately," Rigel said, lying through her teeth, "On days like Tuesday, it's closer to nine or ten once I include time spent doing homework and preparing for lessons, but other days, like weekends, I don't need to turn as much to keep up with work."

"Are you adjusting your sleep cycle appropriately to account for the differences in awake hours?" Snape asked, frowning.

"I am," Rigel said, "The sleep-cycle adjusting potion turned out to be very easy to tweak, so I can lengthen or shorten my sleep cycle day-to-day." Not that she needed to on those days she decided to repeat the nights as well.

"Do you find you have difficulty staying awake in classes that you've doubled-up on, or at the end of a very long day of turned-time?" Snape asked.

"Not at all," Rigel said, "Unless you count History of Magic."

At Snape's sharp look, she dropped her small smile and coughed apologetically. It had been a mistake to make a joke, apparently.

"Can you remember what you were doing on Wednesday at eleven in the morning?" Snape asked after ticking another box on the form.

"I was in Transfigurations, taking a quiz on the different methods of animate to inanimate transfiguration," Rigel said, "I was also with you in Lab One, re-brewing a Memory-Restoration Draught for the third time."

"Very good," Snape said, moving his quill down the form, "Is there anyone who might have noticed your use of the time-turner thus far? Anyone asking suspicious questions or making accusations pertaining to your workload or schedule?"

"Not that I know of," Rigel said, "The only class someone might notice a discrepancy in is Magical Theory on Tuesdays. There's only Hannah Abbott and Anthony Goldstein in that section with me, however, and they have no reason to mention me to anyone, much less my housemates."

"Your friends don't notice your disproportionate amount of schoolwork?" Snape asked, one eyebrow raised.

"I'm known amongst my peers for having academic interests beyond classwork," Rigel said carefully, "No one thinks it odd anymore that I study all the time. It helps that they're all busy with elective work, too."

Snape inclined his head and moved on, "Do you feel at all disconnected with reality or tempted to abandon your present life to one of quiet solitude in the folds of time?"

"Excuse me?" Rigel blinked. They couldn't be serious.

"Just answer the question," Snape said, sounding aggrieved, "And in the future expect that anything pertaining to the Department of Mysteries will be cryptic and likely eccentric in nature. Many believe they are intentionally anomalous."

"Ah, no," Rigel said, her lips quirking, "I don't feel at all tempted to retire from reality."

"As you appear to be in good health and of sound mind, I am concluding this interview unless you have anything relevant to add," Snape said, poising his quill above the signature line expectantly.

"Go ahead, sir, I just have one question-purely for curiosity's sake," Rigel said.

Snape finished off the form with an impatient scratch and jerked his head in invitation for her to speak.

"What would happen if I did show signs of obvious aging?" Rigel asked, "Would I take a de-aging potion to compensate?"

Snape tilted his head considering, "Possibly. I'm not sure what the standard procedure is, but you are unlikely to necessitate it. At this point you should be no more than nine or ten days older than your classmates. Unless you greatly speed up your usage, you are unlikely to experience an acceleration in aging significant enough to cause notice."

Rigel nodded, knowing that with the Modified Polyjuice in effect no one would notice even if she aged twice as quickly. She would notice, of course, as her monthly courses came more often than 30 days now, but she had decided that was actually to her advantage. Now the symptoms that came along with her period, like fatigue and stomach aches, wouldn't be noticeably regular. If anyone thought to count the days she was tired or, in the case of someone like Remus, smelled slightly off, it would seem largely random.

It was interesting nevertheless to consider the possibilities; she wondered how common time-turner usage was, that there were procedures in place for all possible contingencies. If she did find out how the Ministry handled accelerated aging, maybe she could make use of their method when the summer came and her Polyjuice needed to be reworked.

Snape dismissed her after asking a few questions about her new electives, and Rigel bade him goodnight as she stepped into the hallway.

A few minutes later for Rigel, she passed through hallways lit by the mid-day sun. She wasn't worried about anyone seeing her on the way to the room of requirement-all her classmates were down in Herbology at the moment. If she hurried, she might finish the rest of the Blood Replenishers for Burke's order before dinner.

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Saturday morning there was a great deal of ruckus in the Great Hall. It was always noisier on the weekends, with everyone more relaxed and optimistic about the day, but Rigel thought she could detect an extra level of exuberance in the air as she stirred raisins into her oatmeal.

"What's all the fuss about?" she asked, addressing the table with a gesture that encompassed all the laughing, shouting kids around them.

"You're kidding, right?" Theo asked, a smile tugging at his cheek.

"You know he isn't," Millicent said, rolling her eyes.

"I appear to have missed something obvious," Rigel said to no one in particular.

"It's the first Hogsmeade weekend!" Theo said, a full grin now stretching his features, "And we're third years, in case you've forgotten. We get to go!"

Rigel *had* known that third-years had Hogsmeade privileges, but she'd somehow never applied that knowledge to herself. She'd been to Hogsmeade before, of course, but she supposed it would be a nice break from the Hogwarts grounds. She could restock at the apothecary, too, which would save her from needing to owl-order supplies before the winter break.

"You *did* get your permission slip signed, right?" Blaise asked, gazing shrewdly at her.

Rigel felt her heart thud as she realized she had no idea whether Sirius had signed it or not. She vaguely remembered Archie commenting on it as they went through one another's school papers on one of the long summer afternoons. She recalled that he'd set it to the side, but... "I think so," she said slowly, "I guess I should look for it."

"Your father probably mailed it in. That was part of the directions," Draco said, chuckling a little. He didn't seem to be feeling the strain of so much excitement around him, though Rigel thought he was merely getting better at hiding the effects his gift had on him at the same rate he was getting better at controlling it.

"Maybe," Rigel said, hoping that was the case. It would be a shame to miss spending the day with her friends because she'd been too absent-minded to ask Archie about a simple form.

"Just ask Professor Snape if he received it," Pansy suggested.

"Right," she said. Catching sight of Snape getting up to leave the hall, Rigel wiped her mouth with a napkin and hurried to stand. "Be right back," she said.

Snape, noticing her approach with his usual inability to miss anything in his sphere of perception, stopped just outside the doors. "Yes, Mr. Black?" he said, "Are you not eager to be away with your friends to Zonko's and its ilk?"

"I am," Rigel smiled, knowing that most of his sardonic tone was affected in this instance, "I came to double-check that you'd received my permission form. Can I infer from your question that I am allowed to go?"

"You may," Snape said, one eyebrow raised aloofly. "Your father didn't tell you he'd sent it in?"

"He probably did," Rigel said, affecting a sheepish shrug, "I must have forgotten. Thanks, Professor Snape."

She left at his nod, returning to her friends. She didn't notice her Professor's puzzled frown following her back to the Slytherin table.

"So you're coming?" Draco asked as she sat back down.

"Apparently," Rigel said, "Where should we go first?"

"Shopping first," Millicent said, looking excited, "Then the Three Broomsticks for lunch. Then more shopping."

"Why are we going again?" Draco asked, nudging Rigel conspiratorially.

"To hold things, apparently," she said, playing along.

"That's what you get for going stag," Theo said, radiating smugness.

"What's that supposed to mean-you've got a date?" Draco demanded. "Is that why you've been acting like a peacock all morning?"

"I haven't!" Theo protested. Seeing Draco's smirk and Rigel's own admittedly curious look, he added, "Blaise has a date, too."

Theo's bid, while clumsy, was certainly effective.

" *Blaise* ?" Draco nearly choked in his surprise. Rigel privately thought he ought to stop relying on his gift to tell him things about the people around him-clearly he was missing more concrete observations if he was caught that flat-footed. Even Rigel could tell Blaise was dressed especially nice that morning. She hadn't put much thought into the information, but Draco would have, if he'd noticed.

"I asked Hannah to meet me at Wizards' Waifs," Blaise said, smiling slightly, "I thought her crup's ribbon looked a little frayed, and offered to replace it with a yellow collar from the shop. It's hardly a date."

Rigel ignored the small puddle that had just formed in her gut, suspecting that if she dwelled on it her face would look something like Millicent's, which was currently doing a silent impression of the word 'awwww.'

"That's very sweet, Blaise," Pansy said, seeming impressed.

"Thank you, Pansy," Blaise said, "It's not nearly as sweet as Theo's date, though. Where were you taking Padma Patil, again? Madam Puddlefluff?"

"Puddifoot's," Theo muttered, looking distinctly less smug. Rigel thought it served him right for trying to throw Blaise to the thestrals

like that.

"I'm sure you'll have a lovely time," Pansy said, not quite stifling a smile.

They finished breakfast and set out toward the carriages with grins all around. Rigel couldn't remember the last time she and her friends had done something novel. She could see why the weekends at Hogsmeade had become such a successful tradition.

Millicent, Draco, Pansy, and Rigel took a carriage together. Millicent and Pansy set about planning which order they should visit shops in, taking into consideration such things as likelihood of crowds at various times, leaving heavier purchases for after lunch, and so on.

Draco insisted they visit Spintwishes Sporting Supply. "Where do you want to go, Rigel?"

"Oh, didn't I tell you?" Rigel said airily, "I actually have a date-"

"Very funny," Draco deadpanned, not looking the least bit impressed.

"It isn't entirely outside the realm of possibility, Draco," Pansy said, a sly smile on her face, "Rigel is quite good looking, and very smart."

Draco snorted, "Like that's the issue."

"I think I'm insulted," Rigel said lightly.

"You aren't either," Draco said. Damn empathy. "Tell me you're interested in someone romantically and I'll eat my tie."

Rigel had to concede that point to her blonde friend. She certainly had no interest in romance of any kind.

When Draco continued to stare at her, she raised a questioning eyebrow at him. He shook his head as though dispelling a ridiculous thought, and said, "You don't care where we go, then?"

"Apothecary," she said quickly.

"We might have guessed," Pansy said, not unkindly.

"Zonko's," she added, knowing Remus might ask what she'd picked up in town when he saw her next. They didn't interact much outside of class, just friendly waves in the hall and the occasional quick exchange between classes. It helped that Remus and Archie had never been as close as Harry and Remus were. It also helped that Remus seemed to be keeping a professional distance in deference to his new position.

"Okay," Millicent said, looking a bit taken aback but jotting it down dutifully, "Let's go there first, then, before the crowd."

Rigel wasn't sure they were entirely successful in beating the crowd, considering how many people were inside of the joke shop when they approached, but there was room enough for the four of them to squeeze through the door, at least.

She didn't really need anything from Zonko's, since the twins supplied their own pranking materials, so she browsed the shelves with an eye toward sending Archie a care package. Her cousin really ought to be rewarded for all his hard work this semester. *He* didn't have a time-turner, after all. Even if he was only learning the classes she was 'officially' taking, he still had a full plate.

She picked up a few tins of colored sneezing powder that turned invisible upon contact with skin—at least until that skin came into contact with water, at which point the powder condensed into a colored goo that was nearly impossibly to scrape off. She also snagged a couple of barrier buttons, remembering how effectively Patil had used one against her last year. After a moment's consideration, she picked up a packet of teacher-trackers as well, recalling that Archie and she had used the packet they'd picked up for her birthday trying to track the neighbor's collection of cats. Archie was convinced they were the ones who ate the miniature pies he and Lily had set on the window ledge to cool. Rigel personally

thought James the more likely culprit, but it had been fun attempting to prove otherwise.

"Rigel, look at this," Millicent said, holding up a bag of sleeping dust with the familiar Marauder logo on it. "Does this stuff work? I have trouble sleeping before big exams, sometimes."

She peered at the dust inside the see-through bag, then smiled ruefully, "It works-a bit too well to use for a good night's sleep, though. Sirius tested that one on m-ah, on my cousin Harry. She slept for two days straight."

"They drugged her?" Pansy asked, looking slightly aghast.

"Not really," Rigel said, shaking her head. "It's not ingestible. You just blow it in someone's face and they fall asleep standing up. It's actually a very complicated stasis spell that my uncles tweaked to look like sleep, though. It doesn't dehydrate you or make you hungry, even. You wake up feeling like no time has passed."

"That's... a bit intense," Millicent said, slowly putting the pouch back on the shelf.

"They probably toned it down before selling it," Rigel said, distractedly. "Most of the things my cousin and I see at home get much tamer before they hit the stores. The two-day version of sleeping powder probably got submitted to the DOML developments division, now that I think about it."

"Your prankster uncles develop weaponizeable wizardtech for the Aurors?" Draco asked quietly.

"Well..." Rigel looked away from the display of trick wands and caught the mildly astonished look on Draco's face. "Is that not a common thing for inventors to do?"

"All wizards who work in experimental magic need a special permit to even attempt projects that might have dangerous uses," Draco said

seriously, "It's extremely difficult to obtain one, though. The hoops the Ministry makes people jump through are ridiculously involved."

"Really?" Rigel hadn't known that. As long as she could remember, experimental magic had been a normal part of her family's everyday life. Her mother tested experimental products and spells that her company was contracted to certify as safe, and her uncles all had a hand in designing and reworking Marauder products. When James and Sirius casually discussed which versions of what products would be safe to mass distribute and which would have potential for Auror development, it seemed natural to her. Was experimentation truly so uncommon in the wider Wizarding world?

"How can you not know that?" Draco asked, frowning. "I suppose it's easy for the Head Auror to get permits for his joke products. Never mind all the witches and wizards whose applications get turned away by the screening board every year simply because of the nature of their magical heritage."

Dark wizards, she realized he meant. She didn't bother pointing out that James, Sirius, and Remus must have obtained permits long before James and Sirius became distinguished Aurors. The Marauder line was well over a decade old, after all. Instead she asked herself: was it true that ancestrally dark witches and wizards would have a more difficult time obtaining permits to experiment with potentially dangerous spells and potions? Probably, she acknowledged mentally. Was that unjustified, though? She didn't know.

I don't know a lot of things, she thought tiredly.

"I'm sorry for speaking so casually about it," Rigel said after a moment of reflection. "It was such a prominent part of my upbringing that I didn't think to question it before now."

"That makes perfect sense, Rigel," Pansy said smoothly, placing a hand on both Draco and Rigel's arms, as though she could physically diffuse the tension between them. "I had noticed that you

never thought it extraordinary that you and your cousin both began experimenting with potions at such a young age."

Rigel blinked, not having thought of that, either. Experimentation always seemed the natural aim of any study of magic, potions included. Why explore a field without the eventual intention to improve it? If you weren't going to contribute anything, why join the dialogue of progress in the first place?

"I suppose," she said, speaking slowly as she tried to work out where the disconnect was, "I must have been too close to the idea to see how unusual it was. As far back as I remember, my cousin and I have read Potions journals and Medical periodicals, and the important articles are always about improvements to the field and newly developing methodologies. All of the adults I grew up with worked in spell development. Even mom, before she passed." Seeing the regretful expressions on her friends' faces, she hurriedly summoned a smile, "So, I really never imagined doing anything else with my life. The more I learn about magic, the more sure I am that everything is connected, that all branches of magic bleed into one another and can be used to advance other fields in surprising ways. I-" she broke off, realizing that she had been speaking a bit too forcefully, saying things she hadn't even known she believed until they spilled out.

"Now I get why you took Magical Theory, at least," Millicent said, smiling bracingly, "Though how you noticed being the only one in there is beyond me."

"There are three people in my class," Rigel said, feeling stupid as she finally woke up to the implication that only three out of about fifty students were even interested in spell-development and the theory of how magic worked across disciplines. And she knew Anthony Goldstein, at least, was only taking the class as a required pre-requisite for the NEWT-level curse-breaking elective.

Draco seemed to thaw a bit at her obviously abashed expression. "Only you could be so entirely oblivious, Rigel."

"Thanks," she said wryly, "I guess that's what I have you guys for."

They left Rigel to pay for her goods with a promise to meet up in Scrivenshaft's in a few minutes. She wasn't yet up to the front of the line when a whirlwind of freckles blew in from behind a large display of fake crystal balls that showed a person's wildest dreams coming true.

"Rigel Black-"

"-as we live and sneeze!"

"The Weasley Twins-in the flesh!" she gasped, affecting a dramatic lurch, "I see the rumors of your early demise were wildly exaggerated."

She was surprised to see a serious grimace exchanged between the two before Fred said, "Not so exaggerated, if you ask some."

"What do you mean?" Rigel asked, shuffling over to make room for them in line, after smiling apologetically to the trio of young Gryffindors in line behind her.

"We're old news," George sighed, leaning his elbow against Rigel's shoulder despondently, "Dried up. Forced into early retirement and replaced by a brighter, younger model."

"But not prettier," Fred said solemnly.

"Right," George sighed, "Probably not prettier."

"You mean the Animators?" Rigel asked, not having to feign a sympathetic grimace. The suit of armor prank had been the talk of the school for at least a week. Somehow a rumor had been started that the group responsible for the prank was called Animators Anonymous, characterized by the trademark of animated objects used in pranks. No one knew whom Animators Anonymous consisted of exactly, but the current running theory supposed them

to be a group of highly talented upperclassmen with some kind of agenda. Their two displays so far did seem a bit grandiose for mere pranks, Rigel had to admit.

"It's not that we can't appreciate talent when we see it," George said, rubbing an ear agitatedly, "But we aren't ready to hang up our hats just yet either, you see?"

"You've got something in the works, then?" Rigel asked, leaning in to keep her voice from being overheard.

"Might have," Fred smiled, eyes twinkling in a way Rigel knew from experience meant trouble. "You interested?"

"If you need the help," Rigel said, smiling back. "I know how difficult it can be to... *execute* in your advanced age."

"Just for that, *you* can be surprised," George said, laughing.

Rigel chuckled uncomfortably, "I was just joking, George. I'd love to help out."

"No, no, we wouldn't want your smart little motor-mouth to rust, hanging out with the geriatric folk like us," Fred cut in, smirking deviously, "In fact, we'll include something extra special just to keep you on your toes, Rigel."

"Oh, there's really no need," Rigel said, falsely ingratiating.

"Anything for our puppy, right Gred?" George simpered, a proprietary hand guiding her forward a step as the line moved.

"Anything but mercy, Forge," Fred said, his arm looping around George's on her other side.

Rigel just sighed, knowing she had walked right into whatever they had cooked up. Once she'd paid for her armful of gags, the twins waved her off with matching maniacal grins. She set out for Scrivenshaft's with a slight specter hanging over her head, resigned

to spending the rest of the week looking over her shoulder. At least she could rest assured they hadn't planned anything for today... probably.

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Although Rigel had been to Hogsmeade many times in her youth, she'd never actually eaten at the Three Broomsticks. It was the most commonly used flooing destination in the village, but she didn't know anyone who frequented the pub for its fare. Her dad and his Auror buddies met up at the Leaky Cauldron every now and then, and she knew from overhearing him talk about his work that seedy folk were known to congress at the Hog's Head. There were also a few music bars that she'd heard of (and been forbidden from setting foot in before she turned seventeen), but as far as she knew the Three Broomsticks wasn't an overly popular destination as far as pubs went. She supposed the largest bulk of the Three Broomsticks' business must come from Hogwarts students.

Not that such a business model was unsustainable, Rigel thought wryly as her friends tried to scout a table around lunchtime. It was a large establishment, and it was barely noon, but the main dining room was already brimming with students-even a few Hogwarts staff members.

Through the sea of black robes came a friendly voice.

"Oi! Silver snakes! Over here!" Adrian Pucey called out from a large table by one of the windows.

"He can't possibly be talking to us," Draco said, looking away in embarrassment.

"Oh he's definitely talking to you three," Millicent said, "Don't you know what people call you behind your backs?"

She started toward the table confidently, leaving Pansy, Draco, and Rigel to exchange looks of mild discomfort in her wake.

"I really thought such an uninspired moniker would have died off by now," Pansy said, her mouth in a moue.

"People are much too impressed with their own incredible lameness," Draco grumbled, "Silver snakes indeed."

Rigel shrugged, "At least it's alliterative."

Apparently her comment wasn't deemed worthy of dignifying, for her companions abandoned her on twin sighs without a backwards glance, leaving Rigel the last to arrive at the round, wooden table. Apart from Pucey and Millicent there were several upperclassmen Rigel recognized, including Rosier and Rookwood, as well as the sixth-years Lucian Bole and Peregrine Derrick. She claimed a seat between Pansy and a dark-haired girl she assumed was Pucey's date, judging by the way his arm was slung around the back of her chair.

Rigel thought the girl looked familiar, once she got a good look at her profile. It was Asian in set, and very pretty. She couldn't put her finger on it, however, until the girl turned to her and said, "It's been a while, Rigel-or is it Reggie?"

"Miss Chang," Rigel said, smiling to hide her embarrassment, "You look exceptionally well, today. It seems this past year has agreed with you."

"Careful, Rigel, that's *my* date," Pucey said, "I'll feel intimidated if you don't explain how you know each other now."

Dismissing the idea that a fifth year like Pucey could ever be intimidated by someone as unassuming as herself, Rigel simply shook her head. "We met in the Library in my first year. It's a credit to Miss Chang's memory that she was generous enough to remember me."

"How could I forget the boy who appeared in my mind to save me from the sleeping sickness?" Chang said, shaking her long hair back with the sort of effortless grace that Rigel had never managed when her own hair had been long.

"I'd forgotten," Pucey said, though his interested glance told Rigel he probably hadn't. "Rigel must know a great many people for similar reasons."

"Not so many," Rigel said sweetly, "Those two weeks blend together after so much time; I almost didn't recognize Miss Chang, even though we'd met outside of a mindscape as well."

"Under circumstances I am forbidden from explicating, if my memory is as good as you say," Chang's voice was even sweeter, and Rigel suppressed a wince as Pucey looked even more curious.

"That was so long ago," Rigel deflected, "How have you been lately, Miss Chang?"

"Just Cho is fine," the fourth-year Ravenclaw smiled, "We are old friends, after all. I've been well, though, as you noted earlier."

"Good," Rigel said, smiling lamely as she glanced around the table for a distraction. The last thing she needed was for someone to press for details surrounding her and Chang's acquaintance. It was embarrassing enough that the Raven knew Rigel had resorted to dressing up as a redheaded Gryffindor in order to gain Library privileges in her first year.

Her eyes met the golden irises of Aldon Rosier across the tabletop and Rigel wasn't sure if she should be relieved or *more* apprehensive. He smiled slowly at her and Rigel groaned internally. Much more apprehensive, then.

"Speaking of the sickness, you never did tell us how you cured it, Rigel," Rosier said, bringing the attention of the rest of the table to rest on her as well.

"Not much to tell," Rigel muttered into her butterbeer, "It wasn't even a real sickness."

"It was real enough to me," Chang said, shuddering, "I still get nightmares about that sludge invading my mind. You shouldn't downplay it, Rigel."

Rigel grimaced apologetically, but it was Rookwood who said, "Rigel is ever reluctant to tout his own accomplishments. Perhaps you would be so kind as to relieve our curiosity, Miss Chang? If the ordeal brings you no pain to speak of, of course."

"Rigel really never explained his methodology to any of you?" Chang seemed quite taken aback, "It was all we talked about in the Ravenclaw common room for weeks. By pooling together information from all the first and second years afflicted we were able to come to a fairly good understanding of the sickness and its cure." She smiled sheepishly, saying, "I suppose that's a Raven for you, though."

"Our first years were reluctant to recount their experiences," Bole said, looking said first-years over with veiled speculation. Derrick placed a hand on Bole's forearm in a subtle admonishment, and, to Rigel's surprise, after glancing at his fellow sixth-year, Bole reduced his gaze to a gentler curiosity.

"It's not anyone's business," Millicent said, crossing her arms and tilting her head in open challenge, "And Rigel obviously didn't want the attention he was getting. Encouraging gossip and speculation would have been beneath us, as his friends."

Draco nodded at Millicent's words and Pansy raised her chin proudly in agreement.

Rigel felt something warm blossom in her stomach at such a staunch defense. Theo and Blaise must have gone along with it as well, if none of the upperclassmen were any more well-informed about the sickness than they had been two years ago. She truly didn't deserve her friends' loyalty. When Draco glanced at her with a knowing smile

tugging at his lips Rigel belatedly tamped down on the feeling as best she could. Having amazing friends was all well and good, of course, but there was no need for them to become smug about it.

"I didn't realize you wanted the cure kept quiet, Rigel," Chang said, apology in every syllable, "None of us would have talked about it if you'd asked-it's the least we owe you."

Now she felt like a churlish villain. "It's all right, Miss-Cho, I mean. I don't talk about it simply because it seems uninteresting to me. I wouldn't deprive the Ravens of satisfying their curiosity-I have learned my lesson on that count, at least."

As she'd intended, the reference to what Chang had told her about the enduring tenacity of a curious Ravenclaw drew a relieved laugh from the older girl.

"Then you no longer intend to deprive the rest of us, either?" Rosier asked smoothly.

Noting that the older Slytherin was rather like a dog with a bone on this subject, Rigel decided to give in as gracefully as she could while backed into a corner. There shouldn't be any harm in telling people now, anyway, over a year after the clamor about the sickness had died down. "What exactly do you wish to know, Rosier?"

He raised a reproving brow at her use of his last name, but still smiled crookedly. "Everything, of course," he said, "But let's start with the ability apparently unique to you that allowed you to, as Miss Chang put it, appear in her mind."

"I can enter people's magical cores," Rigel said bluntly, thinking a simple answer would be less interesting, "That gave me the access needed to bypass the sickness' primary defense. After that, the Mind Healers did the actual curing."

Rosier blinked slowly, "I'm not sure I've ever heard of such a thing. Edmund?"

Rookwood shook his head, "Nothing comes to mind. I'm no expert in the mental arts, however."

"It shouldn't be possible," Bole said, drumming fingers on the table in thought.

Chang leaned forward earnestly, "It's true. Rigel came into my mind through my magical core, and exited the same way. It's the same for all the afflicted students we interviewed. The Mind Healer used the mists to gain entry, we think, but Rigel did something different."

"It isn't possible to enter someone's mind at any point except the mists," Bole argued, sounding certain, "Such a thing would redefine Legilimency completely, undermining the defenses that every Occlumens uses almost without exception."

"I don't know what any of you are talking about," Millicent said flatly, "But Rigel wasn't using Legilimency. That's the point."

"That's incredible," Rosier said, "Is it a natural gift, like your Parseltongue?"

Rigel shook her head, "I don't think so. Maybe. It's not something everyone can do, but I can't just do it without thinking about it, like Parseltongue. It's not that kind of ability."

"It's still very dangerous," Rookwood said, his deep voice rumbling as he lowered it, "It makes sense that you wouldn't casually admit to such a thing."

"Why not?" Chang asked, tilting her head, "It saved us. It could be used in other ways, too, to help people. Rigel's gift should be celebrated, and explored, surely."

Pucey grimaced slightly, "No offense, Cho, but this is why you aren't a Slytherin. The good Rigel did with this ability isn't the point-the problem is the harm he could do."

Chang reared back, looking stung, "Rigel... wouldn't do anything bad with it. Would you?"

"Of course not," Pansy answered for her, sighing, "But the potential for harm will be more important than Rigel's assurances, to some. It's fine if it's just Hogwarts students who talk about it-most have seen the good things Rigel can do with his talents. If it became common knowledge that a dangerous, poorly understood new ability had manifested in a traditionally Dark family tree, though... can you understand why discretion is the wiser choice for Rigel?"

The dark-haired girl nodded slowly, "I didn't think... well, I suppose even though knowledge is inherently innocent, it can sometimes be used for less savory purposes than academic understanding. I won't speak of it so freely in the future, Rigel."

"It's really all right," Rigel said, concerned that her friends were making too much of this, "It's not as dangerous as it sounds. I can't enter a person's core without leaving myself completely vulnerable, mentally and physically. It requires deep meditation, and the transference of my conscious away from my mental defenses. So it's not as though I can just enter someone else's mind on a whim. Learning Legilimency would be more useful, honestly. I think its only purpose would be in Healing, as a matter of fact."

She told herself that its use in bypassing the magical binding Riddle jr. had placed on her was incidental, with circumstances unlikely to reoccur.

"If you think others will see it that way, you are an optimistic fool," Bole said, frowning.

Rigel shrugged, "It's been so long since the sickness, I didn't think others were even thinking about the incident, still."

"Unanswered questions have a way of hanging about," Rosier said, "But this conversation has been ever so demystifying. I find myself less interested in you already, Rigel."

He could not have sounded more insincere, but Rigel smiled gamely at the upperclassman in any case. "Thank you, *Aldon* ."

"Why don't we speak of more entertaining things?" Pansy suggested, drawing the attention away from Rigel, finally. "Does anyone have plans for Samhain?"

"I plan to eat my weight in pumpkin pasties," Millicent said. Everyone chuckled, and the atmosphere around the table relaxed.

"We're having a pumpkin-carving contest in the Ravenclaw tower," Chang said, perking up, "My friend Marietta and I are going to enter our jack-o-lantern. We've been trying to charm it to cackle like a hag, but so far it only chuckles heartily like St. Nickolas."

"You know, I happen to be an expert in Charms," Pucey said, leaning into the girl's space and speaking directly beside her ear, "Maybe I could help you out sometime before Saturday."

"That would be cheating," Chang protested, though Rigel noticed she still smiled shyly at the table.

"Edmund and I have a wager on whether we'll see a prank that night," Rosier said, eyes alight with mischief, "I think the Animators won't miss a chance to give us another show, but Edmund believes the Weasley twins have been biding their time for an answering prank, and will seize on the holiday as an opportune moment."

"Any insider knowledge, Rigel?" Pansy asked, a playful smile in her cheeks, "You're an accessory to many of their pranks, if I'm not mistaken."

"I'm not at liberty to say," Rigel pretended to sniff, "A prank's real value lies in the element of surprise."

"In that case, I'm going to spend Saturday evening making sure Rigel doesn't get into trouble," Draco said, smirking, "He has

abominable luck with Halloween for some reason, and there are certain kinds of surprises I've had quite enough of."

"Last year had nothing to do with me," she argued, feeling cold at the memory of that debris-scattered hallway and Neville's stiff, motionless form.

"Not for lack of your trying," Draco scowled, "This year if something happens I expect you to run away from the trouble, not toward it."

"I wish you hadn't said that," Rigel sighed, "Now Fate is going to make things difficult."

"Poor, star-crossed Rigel Black," Rosier drawled.

That would make a very accurate caption for her life, at times, Rigel thought sourly.

That afternoon, their group left the pub and ambled their way through the rest of the shops on their list. Her friends seemed to have forgotten the serious conversation they had over lunch, but Rigel was having trouble letting the implications fall to the back of her mind. She had thought speculation all but died out concerning the events of her first and even second year. The incidents that had faded to only background importance to Rigel's mind still seemed to merit concentrated interest in others', however. Should she be worried that she was still the object of many people's curiosity? It was natural to wonder, she supposed, and things probably seemed more fascinating to people who didn't understand all the underlying facts, but should she work harder at seeming inconspicuous? It couldn't hurt to try, surely. She didn't know what more she could do, though. Her day-to-day routine was about as boring as she could make it-for someone with a complicated double-life and a time-turner, that is.

On Wednesday morning, Rigel received a packet from Archie with several letters enclosed. She tucked it into her bag to go through later, guessing at least one of them was an order list from Krait. He was due to start transitioning some of his stock to winter-appropriate potions like Cold Cures and Warming Solutions.

When she took a moment after lunch to sift through the packet before time-turning back for her morning potions lesson with Snape, Rigel noticed that in addition to the letter from Krait, there was one from Leo as well, and a very thick envelope with Archie's handwriting on the outside. Inside that envelope was a letter from Archie himself, and a letter that seemed to have come from the Department of Mysteries. Suppressing a groan, Rigel ripped open Archie's letter quickly, wondering what the Ministry could possibly want from her now.

Hiya Cuz!

How's Hogwarts? I bet it's cold already. Just know that while you're bracing yourself for winter's worst up there, Hermione and I will be basking in Fall's gentle embrace for a few more months.

Thanks so much for the notes you sent me-with things so clearly explained, I understand a lot more about that potion I mentioned now. It's really gotten my Potions teacher off my back. Some people are just easily pleased I guess-not everyone, though. Remember that annoying request I got a little while ago? It seems my reply wasn't quite enough to appease them. What do you think I should do now? You know I value your input in these sorts of things-I just hate disappointing people.

I know Halloween is coming up, and all I'll say is be careful ! Your luck is rotten this time of year, so try to do as many boring, harmless things as possible. No broomstick-riding or dragon-baiting for at least two weeks.

Everything is going swell, here. The amount of classwork we have this year is a little amazing. I'm afraid some of my extracurricular studies may not get my full attention until the winter holidays. I've still found time for a little side project though. You can't see it, but I'm winking at you very smugly. Just wait until you see what I've been working on-it's gonna completely change the way you see me. As in, I'll be so awesome you don't even recognize me.

Stay warm! And try to send more letters to your dad, will you? My parents mentioned he seemed kind of distracted, since we left for school.

With love,

Harry

Rigel tucked Archie's letter away with a frown and opened the letter from the Ministry next. To her relief, it wasn't anything threatening. The Department of Mysteries thanked her for the notes and samples she'd sent, and politely requested notes and samples on any similar potions she had been experimenting with. She wondered if they'd gotten wind of the Modified Weightless Draught Harry had given to Thompson during her internship. It was possible the Guild's Safety Division colluded with the Ministry at times. Or perhaps they wanted the counter-potion, she thought wryly.

To be on the safe side, she decided to send samples of the Modified Weightless Draught, the Shield-Disrupting Potion, the Hair-Changing potion she'd been working on with Archie, and the few other shaped-imbuing projects she'd started working on peripherally in between the internship's conclusion and her thirteenth birthday. She thought it was a bit rude to ask for a potioneer's notes and findings on projects that hadn't been vetted and published by the Guild, but for all she knew this sort of thing was common when dealing with experimental fields.

Judging from what Draco had said in Zonko's, Rigel was probably lucky no one had demanded she get licensed for the potions she

experimented with over the summer. It probably helped that the only potions she'd been working on so far weren't dangerous. The Department of Mysteries could have the Modified Weightless Draught and the pranking potions if they really wanted them. Maybe when they saw how juvenile the rest of her work was, they'd stop pestering her and research the subject themselves.

Putting that letter aside as well, all the while mentally setting aside time-turned hours in the Come and Go room to compile her notes yet again and see about re-draining her magic so she could shape-imbue once more. It was going to be a longer week than usual, she thought with only a small amount of irony.

Leo's letter wasn't very long, but the tone was more restless than she was accustomed to receiving from the laidback alleyrat persona he generally adopted.

Harry,

How's school? I hope you're enjoying the warmer weather over there, because it's already turning bitter here in the alleys. Everyone at the Phoenix sends their regards, and my cousin in particular wishes me to tell you how dull she finds the crowd these days. I daresay your good manners have spoiled Rispah for our court's somewhat lackluster refinement. Marek challenged me again this week-I made him regret it this time, though, so he ought to lay low for a while if only to avoid the embarrassment of explaining why his eyebrows have been singed off. I know if you were here you'd have grown them back for him or some such soft-hearted nonsense, so it's probably best for my reputation that you remain so far away.

That's not the only reason I'm glad you're gone, though. We had a real scare the other night, and it wasn't some roughed-up alley dogs looking for trouble like last summer, either. The Ministry conducted a night raid all through the lower alleys-biggest raid we've seen in years, easily. My ears tipped us off ahead of time, naturally, so our people were all well prepared, but the Aurors hit Borgin and Burkes pretty bad. Krait won't tell you this, but his place almost got burned

down in a bout of very sloppy crossfire when one of the local covens didn't take too kindly to an unscheduled Ministry intrusion. He's just fine, and his stock was barely singed, but the fact that the Ministry is desperate enough to provoke the Nightwalkers worries me. Whatever they were looking for must have been ugly, and something tells me they haven't found it yet. Wish I knew what it was, Harry. I'd hand it over just to save the alleys all the hassle.

Everybody's on edge, here, and even the folks over on Diagon and down Craftsman Alley are all riled up like a nest of hornets. With this cold weather coming in, it'll quiet down quick, but the winter brings all kind of other problems, of course.

Look at me, whining about my day to you like some tired old man. I just wrote to say I hope things are going well for you, whatever you're up to now.

Stay safe,

-Leo

Harry folded the letter ponderously, wondering at the serious nature of her friend's correspondence. Harry knew Leo's work in the alleys was complicated and often dangerous, but the older boy didn't usually talk about his troubles with her. He must be more overwhelmed than usual, she supposed. It certainly sounded as though things were getting out of hand. A raid on the entire Lower Alleys? The scope of such a thing would be incredible.

She wondered if her father had been involved. He was the Head of the Auror department, so it would make sense. She privately hoped he hadn't been responsible for the damage to Krait's shop, but she knew that her hopes were irrelevant. Part of having friends in the alleys meant that the people she cared about wouldn't always all be on the same side of certain situations. She consoled herself with the knowledge that at least it wasn't any different than what she was doing at Hogwarts, making friends both with prominent Dark scions and children of Light families, too. And she wasn't the only one

straddling a dangerous line. Archie and Leo led double lives, too, and Bill Weasley come to that. At least she was in good company.

Speaking of good company, she thought sourly, I've stalled long enough .

She definitely hadn't been avoiding Professor Snape. Their interactions outside of classes were entirely civil, and the psych evaluation had gone nicely, she thought. There was just something about their interactions in class that had... changed in the weeks since his discovery and subsequent disapproval of her suppressor ring. It had taken several days for him to give up attempting to dissuade her from its use. Eventually he'd settled for tossing out sarcastic, biting comments whenever a particularly difficult potion gave her dampened magical core a strenuous workout, and even though she thought he would come to accept her right to make the decision she had in the end, she was getting tired of wondering when they'd settle back into the more casual mentorship relationship they'd had before things had gotten so out of sorts.

Steeling herself against the passive vitriol she knew would be coming her way momentarily, Rigel reached into her robes and pulled out the pretty golden chain. She wondered why all the adults she knew were so inclined to assume they knew best for everyone. Maybe if she used the time-turner often enough, that ever-vaulted maturity that supposedly came with age would help her understand. Judging by examples like James and Sirius, however, Rigel suspected that the problem with her lack of comprehension wasn't a difference in age but rather a completely antithetical system of beliefs and experiences.

Resigned to simply viewing the world differently than most people, Rigel turned the hourglass over in her hands, and blurred through space once more.

Halloween morning dawned quietly, but Rigel knew it wouldn't stay that way. Everyone was ecstatic about the upcoming feast, and since it was Saturday they had the whole day to enjoy the festivities. The castle was decorated lavishly, with cobwebs strung up artistically in nearly every available corner, suits of armor charmed to moan eerily if someone got too close, and even transfigured bats that swooped in droves out of nowhere every now and then to scare a group of students silly.

The Great Hall was only modestly decked out at breakfast, but everyone knew it would be a treat to see later that night when the elves got through with it. They ate lightly, anticipating a very heavy meal that evening, and absolutely no one felt like discussing schoolwork, so they laughed and joked and forgot about being students for a while. The mail came and went with little festivity, but long after the owls had left, just as the meal was winding down, a large origami flower fluttered in through the doors on a gentle breeze.

The flower twirled and danced above students' heads, and one by one people tapped their friends curiously on the shoulder, craning their necks to see where it was headed. It looped around the hall twice before making its lazy way toward the Slytherin table. When it began to spin in place above Rigel's head, she tried not to groan aloud. Whatever it was, it was sure to be troublesome.

The paper flower stopped spinning after a moment and softly floated down to land in her lap. Rigel glanced up to see the eyes of the entire Great Hall upon her, several hundred curious students and staff members, and she knew that she couldn't just pretend it had disappeared. She picked the origami construction up gingerly and opened it as the hall held its collective breath.

Inside, in standard dicto-quill writing, were just three words: *Sorry In Advance* . The words were followed by a pair of smiley faces, and Rigel didn't even have time to curse the Weasley twins' good names

before people all over the hall were gasping and pointing in flurried commotion. She looked up and saw several dozen paper flowers fly in through the doors from the Entrance Hall, swirling through the air in a dizzying spectacle. More and more origami flowers floated into the room, filling up the space above their heads.

One by one the other flowers, too, seemed to find a certain recipient and come to a slow spin before stopping and gently falling into the chosen person's lap. Rigel looked around, and couldn't help but be amused at the excitement and confusion on the students' faces as everyone-actually every single person that Rigel could see-eventually received a paper flower.

Murmurs and bits of laughter broke out as students began unfolding their flowers and reading the inside. Rigel leaned over the table and asked, "What do they say?"

"What did yours say?" Millicent asked, looking bewilderedly down at her flower.

"Something ominous," Rigel grimaced, a little worried now.

"Well mine says, 'Your history of magic essays speak eloquently to the problems facing our society, even though everyone knows Binns doesn't even read them. For going beyond expectations, you deserve a... sticker.'" Millicent shook her head, "It's signed 'all the dead famous people' and there actually is a sticker taped in here that says 'excellent effort.'"

"What?" Rigel let out a little laugh in sheer disbelief, "I don't get it."

"Mine says, 'Thank you for re-alphabetizing the biographies section in the library when you noticed they were mixed up, love, Madam Pince,'" Blaise said, looking torn between confusion and unease.

"I don't think she wrote it," Theo said, his cheeks a little pink, "Mine says, ah, 'It takes a true gentleman to sit in Madam Puddifoot's for

three hours and not stare at your date's cleavage even once. Our hats off to you-the gentleman's club. P.S. she's not the one."

"It can't possibly say that," Pansy said, her lips twitching, "A gentleman? You, Theo?"

"I can be," Theo muttered, looking very embarrassed, but also a bit pleased.

"What does yours say, Pans?" Draco asked, an odd expression on his face as he looked down at his flower.

Pansy glanced at Rigel with a quizzical expression, "Mine is from Rigel, supposedly." Rigel blinked at her friend in surprise. "Here, it says, 'your charm and generosity cast a light on all who meet you' and it's signed 'Rigel Black.' Did you write these, Rigel?"

Rigel shook her head slowly as her friends turned to look at her, "No, I didn't. I mean, I agree, Pan, but I'm afraid I didn't write these."

"So you didn't write mine, either, I take it?" Draco asked, still looking at his.

"No," Rigel said, "I had nothing to do with this prank."

"Why, what does yours say, Draco?" Blaise asked, a sly expression on his face.

Draco haughtily folded it up and placed it in his breast pocket, "Wouldn't you like to know."

"Did everyone get one of these?" Millicent asked, awe in her voice, "I mean, there's hundreds of students in Hogwarts, and the staff have got them, too."

"And how do they know these things?" Theo asked, coughing, "I mean, they're right about Padma, but I didn't talk to anyone about that date."

They were not the only ones who seemed perplexed. All around them students seemed to be debating the issue.

"It thanks me for telling off that third year for not washing his hands before leaving the bathroom, and it's signed 'the hygiene police,'" one prefect from the table next to them was saying, "But how could anyone possibly know that? And why would they thank me for something so ridiculous?"

"Mine says 'you're a ray of sunshine in the mornings even on double potions days-'"

"Don't know how they heard about my extra credit assignment for McGonagall-"

"-must have been watching me practice if whoever wrote this saw the improvement in my barrel rolls-"

"-signed the 'kindness elves'-"

And on it went. Rigel couldn't help but be amazed at how much time and detail had gone into the scope of this prank. It had to have been the big one the Weasley Twins had been working on, especially as they made good on their promise to embarrass her by sending her flower in all alone ahead of the rest. She wondered why her flower had said 'sorry in advance' instead of just 'sorry,' though. She'd gotten it after being embarrassed, after all.

She might have continued to wonder, if a Ravenclaw girl with long, scraggly blonde hair and enormous eyes hadn't walked up beside their table and said, "You're Rigel Black, right?"

Rigel turned away from the table to say, "Yes, that's me. Have we met?"

"Not yet," the girl said, smiling vaguely, "I'm Luna. I just came to thank you for the flower."

"The..." Rigel looked down at the paper flower in the girl's hands. Surely they didn't.

"I'm not sure who told you about my search for the Crumple-Horned Snorkack, but your words of encouragement are very touching," the Ravenclaw girl smiled serenely once more, and left.

Rigel turned back to her friends with a sense of dread, "I didn't write that one, either."

"Do you think whoever did this signed your name to any more?" Pansy asked, tentatively.

Rigel didn't have to answer, as not a moment later a group of Hufflepuffs all came giggling to their table and thanked Rigel profusely for "such kind, insightful words" and asked her where she'd come up with "an idea so thoughtful and creative." No amount of protestations convinced them that Rigel wasn't the one responsible, and they left with lilting laughter at her helpless expression.

Nor were they the last. It seemed a very large number of flowers had come with her name attached to them, and for some reason, likely because Fred and George thought it would embarrass her more, it wasn't any of the funny or casual praise that her name appeared after. It was inevitably the most sincere, softhearted messages that were attributed to her, and all throughout the day random people she didn't know smiled at her in the hallways or gave her puzzled but friendly expressions from across a room.

It did not help that her friends were openly amused at her expense as the morning went on.

"It isn't funny," Rigel groaned after she once again failed to convince a pair of sixth-year Gryffindors that she knew nothing about their love lives, despite the apparently touching messages of encouragement they'd received in her name.

"It's pretty funny," Millicent said, leaning back on the blanket they were all sharing. It was chilly out on the grounds, but they all agreed they'd be missing the sun when winter really set in, so the six of them were bundled in scarves, watching some first-year Hufflepuffs trying to rake up a pile of leaves without getting too close to the Whomping Willow.

"The whole school thinks I'm some kind of misty-eyed do-gooder now," Rigel sighed, burying her face in her knees as yet another group of curious students stared at her while crossing the lawn.

"Just think of it this way," Theo grinned, "You could pull any guy or girl in the whole school right now. I heard they're calling you 'Romantic Rigel' already."

"Please tell me you made that up," Rigel closed her eyes against the mortified heat in her face.

"Do I strike you as the creative type, Rigel?" Theo asked.

"Everyone is going to think I'm a crazy stalker, too," she realized, already picturing the suspicious looks. How on earth had the Weasley twins managed to get information on the whole school, anyway? Didn't they have better things to do?

"No one thinks you're a stalker," Pansy said bracingly, "Most of the people smart enough to be wary of whoever knows so much about them are also smart enough to realize that *you* would be too smart to sign your name to the information if you were smart enough to obtain it in the first place."

"Oh yeah, that much is obvious," Theo said, laughing at Pansy as the blonde girl wriggled her nose in response to his teasing.

"It is," Pansy insisted, "So Rigel really only has to worry about all the people who aren't smart enough to figure that out. *Those* are the ones who think you're a great big pile of goo."

"Thanks, Pan," Rigel said, "I feel much better."

"It's not that bad," Draco said, smiling, "Remember when everyone thought you were setting Slytherin's monster on unsuspecting Hufflepuffs? That was worse."

"All attention is bad attention," Rigel grumbled, "Just when people were starting to forget about that mess, too."

"I really hate to break this news to you, Rigel," Blaise said, affecting a mournful expression, "But no one is even close to forgetting about that mess. You should embrace your celebrity status with grace. Use your fame and-well, just fame so far, as you haven't got a fortune yet-to raise awareness for good causes."

"And whatever you do, don't sleep with your manager," Theo drawled.

They all laughed, and Rigel supposed she could see the humor in it-but that didn't mean she was going to take this lying down. The Weasley twins were absolutely going to pay. The only questions were when, where, and how much they would squirm before Rigel was satisfied. It seemed she would be writing to Archie about more than shaped-imbuing this week. She needed his expertise to pull off something truly... appropriate. The punishment should fit the crime, after all.

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Despite the eyes that followed her and the burning need to strangle a couple of redheads, Rigel was relatively relaxed as she entered the Great Hall later that night for the Halloween feast. She'd spent most of the day mortified and exasperated, it's true, but on the other hand, the worst was now over. Her annual Halloween bad luck had

to have been used up on the prank and its aftermath, which meant for once she could enjoy the rest of the holiday in peace.

All right, maybe peace wasn't quite the word to describe the orgy of sugar consumption going on against a backdrop of cheesy horror that was the Halloween Feast, but she was determined to have fun, at least.

She was a little late getting there, as she'd stopped by to check on Remus beforehand, so her friends were probably already seated. She didn't think they'd begrudge her tardiness this year, though. It was the first night of the full moon, and even as Rigel, she couldn't quite quell Harry's need to make sure everything was in order with the Wolfsbane potion. She could tell he was bemused by 'Archie's' newfound interest in the subject, but she credited working with Professor Snape on the modifications last spring to explain it. All thoughts of her uncle faded from her mind, however, as she gazed at the revelry around her.

Thousands of candles hovered above their heads, and yet each was no brighter than a flickering will-o-the-wisp. The semi-darkness added to the excitement and mystery of the event, and everywhere along the house tables various dishes and goblets glowed orange, green, and yellow. The ghosts were enjoying themselves this year, as well; the laughter and chatter were interspersed with the occasional shout of fright as one of those silvery forms suddenly burst up through a table or swooped down from above.

Before sitting down with her friends, however, she made a beeline for the Gryffindor table.

"So there I was, between a river and a very scratchy place, when-Rigel!" Fred laughed nervously as she oh-so-casually dropped into a seat beside him, "What brings you to our humble table tonight? Finally figured out the pumpkin pasties are sweeter over here?"

"They can't be as sweet as that lovely flower I received this morning," Rigel said, "If only I knew who to thank."

"All right, nothing to see here, people," George said loudly, jumping up from his own place next to Fred and taking Rigel's elbow with an insistent flourish. "Let's have a chat, then, eh?"

He and Fred together towed her toward one of the many arched windows that stood in a long row along one side of the hall. When they were sufficiently away from prying ears, Rigel took back her arms and folded them in open displeasure. "Do you know how many people think I'm a sappy, naïve twit right now?" she asked.

"No one thinks that," Fred waved her words aside with an air of supreme unconcern.

"Everyone loved the flowers, Rigel," George added, smiling winningly.

"That's not the point," Rigel said, eyes narrow, "They're associating the flowers with me, which means every time they talk about the prank, they're talking about *me*. You know I hate attention-

"We did apologize for it," George cut in.

"In *advance*, even," Fred nodded sagely.

Rigel huffed out a laugh against her will, "Some advanced notice. Wasn't sending me the first flower bad enough? Why link me to all those notes?"

"Not all of them," George rolled his eyes, "Only the really nice ones. It's a good thing if people think you're nice, Rigel."

"We are your PR team, after all," Fred added, grinning, "You've already won them over with your mysterious healing abilities and your daring monster-slaying nerve. That's Ravenclaw and Gryffindor taken care of already! This is about getting Hufflepuff to your side. Now, you've got the whole school in your corner!"

"Except all the Slytherins wondering how I got so much personal information on them," Rigel groaned.

"Which was not easy, by the way," George sighed.

"Besides... um..." Fred scratched his head, "House loyalty?"

" *Slytherins*," Rigel said.

"Right. Well, we'll win them back with our next prank, then," Fred said brightly, "It'll have to be something really sneaky."

"No more tying me to pranks!" Rigel tried to sound firm, "I'm not running for president of the school."

"Although you would certainly bring a lot of charisma to the job," George said, voice thoughtful.

"Why not take credit for it yourselves?" Rigel sighed, "You put all that effort into it, even getting all the flowers to somehow go to the right people-"

"Modified the spell Ministry officials use to send inter-departmental memos," Fred said.

"Dad was ever so nervous about teaching it to us," George recalled.

"Can't imagine why," Fred shrugged.

"-and all that time spent digging up dirt on people-"

"Not dirt!"

"More like daisies, really."

"-so why put my name on it?" Rigel finished, exasperated.

Fred and George exchanged a long look.

"You're right, it was a lot of work," George said, inspecting his fingernails, "We had to eavesdrop on all the biggest gossipmongers, break into a few teachers' student files, go undercover in various common rooms, follow, ask about, and basically investigate every single person in this entire school. But it was worth it! Did you see people's faces today? No one can believe the amount of work that must have gone into this-everyone is impressed, whether they appreciate pranks or not. Even *Percy* looked vaguely approving today."

"It's so much better than animating a bunch of fruit, anyway," Fred said, sniffing.

"But it's not *us*, Rigel," George said, his voice softer now, "No one takes the Weasley twins seriously. If we'd signed our names, the messages would have been treated as a joke-as something insincere, when they *weren't* . Somewhere in the midst of this prank we actually got to know the entire school, and the notes were supposed to be heartfelt."

"Which no one would believe, coming from us, but which people *might* believe coming from the notoriously serious and soft-spoken Rigel Black," Fred said.

"People are going to figure out I didn't do it pretty soon," Rigel said, frowning.

"But the prank will still be associated with you, like you said," George pointed out. "The name Rigel Black in turn will be associated with kind words, thoughtful notes, etc, don't you see how it's a win-win?"

"It's a lie," Rigel said, still troubled. She didn't want to be known for anything, as Rigel Black.

"Lies aren't always bad," Fred said.

She found that she couldn't argue with that without being a complete hypocrite, so she simply shook her head, "Well, I guess you win this

time. You really got me good," she added with a wry smile.

"No less than you deserve," George said, smiling once more, "Calling us old men like that-the nerve."

At Rigel's disbelieving look, Fred said, "Well, okay, we were going to use your name all along, but after Zonko's we didn't feel as bad about it."

Rigel chuckled softly, "Fair enough. I'll let you get back to the feast, now. Sorry for getting my back up about all this. I ought to know better how to be a good sport, with my family."

"All's forgiven," George said, slinging an arm around her shoulders.

"So this means we've got the green light on the next one, too?" Fred asked, adding his arm on top of George's.

Rigel ducked out and turned to favor them with a droll look, "Sometimes our friendship worries me."

She left to the sound of twin laughs and wove her way back to the Slytherin table to join her friends. From the flickering of the lanterns on the tables, it looked like she'd get a seat just in time to hear Dumbledore's Halloween speech.

"So was it the Weasley twins who wrote those things, Rigel?" Millicent asked as she sat down, apparently having seen her talking to them.

"I asked them, but they denied it," Rigel sighed for good measure, "Who knows?"

"I heard Professor McGonagall's said 'you look hot with your hair down' and was signed 'the bedroom fairy,'" Theo said, waggling his eyebrows.

"That can't possibly be true," Draco scoffed, "McGonagall would still be livid if someone sent her a note like that this morning."

They all turned to look up at the Head Table, noting that Professor McGonagall was looking much too fond of the children beneath her gaze to have been the recipient of such a message. Rigel found her eyes drifting over to Professor Snape, who was seated in between Flitwick and an empty chair that was probably meant for Pettigrew, since he appeared to be the only Professor not yet present. She wondered if Snape had gotten a flower that morning, too, or if the Weasley twins had simply been too sane to attempt to give him one. Rigel closed her eyes for a moment to pray to any gods who might be listening that Samhain that if Snape had received a flower it wasn't one of the ones with her name on it.

When she opened her eyes once more, the Headmaster was standing before them, smiling genially.

"Welcome, everyone, to this year's Halloween Feast!" he said, gesturing to the hall with both hands, "Let's have a cheer for our magnificent house elves, who have put their hearts into the decorations once again."

There was a loud round of approval from the students, although Rigel noticed that most seemed to be applauding the house elves ironically, rather than in any true spirit of gratitude. She made a mental note to visit the kitchens tomorrow and tell Binny what a nice job they'd done.

Dumbledore waved his hands, and said, "Yes, yes, marvelous. This month's jack-o-lantern carving competition was judged this afternoon by our Head Girl, Miss Clearwater, and I hope everyone finds the time to stop by the Library before the weekend is out to see the first prize and runners up on display. Thank you to all who participated, and congratulations to Mr. Oliver Wood, whose Quidditch-inspired design has won him twenty galleons, and ten points extra credit towards his Transfiguration mark."

There was another short round of applause, but before it had a chance to die down, the air was split with a horrible, deafening screech. Students everywhere hunched over in pain as what

sounded like a thousand screaming banshees rent the hall, echoing and filling their heads with white-hot vibrations.

The sound cut off all of a sudden, and Rigel looked up, still slightly stunned, to see Dumbledore brandishing his wand as something like a silvery bubble expanded to encompass the entire hall.

"Students, remain where you are," the Headmaster called over the confused and frightened yelling, "Filius, Severus, with me."

The old wizard, flanked by his Masters of Potions and Charms, strode quickly out of the Great Hall. As the three of them exited the periphery of the silver bubble of magic Dumbledore had cast, they all three cast what Rigel assumed was muffling charms on their ears.

"What could make such a noise?" someone wondered aloud.

"Merfolk," Pansy said quietly. Rigel turned and caught her friend's worried expression, "There would have to be hundreds of them above water-level to make such a sound, though. What could they possibly want?"

"Something desperately," Blaise said, frowning, "It hurts their voices to speak above ground, so if they're clamoring for something so loudly, it's got to be important."

"THE GIANT SQUID'S GONE MAD!"

Everyone spun to look at the small boy who was standing at one of the windows and waving his arms wildly, "IT'S ATTACKING!"

"What in Merlin's name-" Draco got no further as students all around them erupted into panicked screams. The prefects attempted to restore order and McGonagall was shouting something from the Head Table, but everywhere Rigel turned there was mass confusion. Students got up and ran to the windows to see what was happening, Theo and Millicent among them, and before Rigel could figure out

what was going on, Draco collapsed sideways into her, his head in his hands.

"Shit," was all Rigel could think to say as her friend shook uncontrollably against her side. She wrapped one stabilizing arm around Draco and used the other to dig her ever-present bag from under the table and thrust it into Pansy's lap, as hers was currently half-occupied with an armful of slumping Draco.

"What's wrong with him?" Pansy demanded, her fear etching grooves of worry beneath her cheekbones

"Later," Rigel said, already rummaging for her potions kit, "Hold the bag open for me."

Pansy did so without further questions, angling it toward the light of the nearest glow-lamp so Rigel could find what she was looking for. A few moments later, a Calming Draught and a Suppressant Potion she'd taken to carrying around just in case found their way to her fingers and she thrust them at Pansy wordlessly. The blonde girl mechanically uncorked them and, with Rigel's help, they forced the potions down Draco's throat in quick succession.

It took almost half a minute, but soon Draco's eyes were fluttering back open and he was gasping for breath against Rigel's shoulder.

"Can you hear me?" Rigel asked, feeling a bit useless as she rubbed his back the way Lily used to rub hers when she had a stomachache.

Draco nodded, then winced, rubbing his forehead, "Thanks."

"Draco, are you all right?" Pansy asked, her soft tone belied by the sharp concern in her eyes.

"I'll be fine, as soon as we get out of here," Draco said, grimacing as he pulled away from Rigel and sat up, "What's going on?"

"We aren't sure yet," Rigel said, trying to make sense of what everyone was shouting around them.

Blaise appeared out of the mass of hysterical students just then, sliding onto the bench next to Pansy and speaking quickly, "Dumbledore's gone down to the lake with Snape and Flitwick. The Giant Squid looks like it's trying to climb out of the water for some reason, and the merfolk seem to be arguing with the Headmaster over something. No one really knows what's going on, but the Professors look like they've got the squid under control, for now."

"That's good," Pansy said, visibly regaining her composure, "I'm certain this will be resolved in short order. When Professor Dumbledore makes his way back here to release us, we can--"

She was cut off by a cry of, "THE CENTAURS HAVE REVOLTED TOO!"

"That's *it* !" Draco growled amidst renewed shrieks and shouts, "We're going to get over there and see what's going on."

"Good luck," Blaise scoffed, "I barely got back here."

"Rigel, Pansy, V-formation shields on my count," Draco snapped, pushing someone aside so he had room to stand and snapping his wrist to deposit his wand into his hand.

Rigel and Pansy nodded, standing as well with minor difficulty. Rigel shouldered her book bag, just so it wouldn't get lost in the confusion, and palmed her wand as well. With Draco in the point position, they all three cast simultaneous physical shields, with Rigel's and Pansy's angled 45 degrees to either side of Draco's, creating the 'V' the formation was named for. Draco had taught it to them in their dueling lessons the previous week, and Rigel supposed they'd see if it was useful in a crowd.

The three of them, standing tightly together, began slowly pushing their way through the crowd. They had to be careful not to walk too

quickly, as the shields would be doing all of the 'pushing' and they didn't want to hurt anyone, so it took a couple of minutes to displace enough people to carve a path for themselves to the windows, but eventually they reached their goal.

Looking out the window over the moonlit lawn, Rigel almost wished they hadn't.

The Black Lake was in turmoil. Water churned and frothed as a myriad of tentacles swarmed out of the depths and attempted to climb the shore. She could see Professor Snape and Professor Flitwick clearly by the light of their wands as they worked in tandem, sending spell after spell at the giant squid in an effort to contain it. Rigel couldn't imagine why the squid would be trying to get out of the lake, unless there was some sort of danger within. Was that why the merfolk had abandoned their submerged city and come to congregate on the surface as well? She could see Dumbledore shouting at a merman whose pearlescent crown glinted in the moonlight. The merman appeared to be shouting back, along with dozens of other merpeople, who were brandishing their tridents and pointing long, webbed fingers toward the castle.

"Maybe something dangerous has gotten into the lake," Pansy said, squinting through the window between Draco and Rigel.

"That doesn't explain what the centaurs are doing," Draco said, shaking his head.

Rigel turned toward the forest, where a massive herd of the proud four-legged beings swarmed along the edges, clearly agitated. They didn't seem nearly as distressed as the merfolk, but there was something certainly sinister in the way they moved, slowly but steadily, along the tree line toward the castle.

"Where is Peter?" she could hear McGonagall's voice cutting through the panic and looked over to see the older witch standing not far from Rigel and her friends, "Where is our Magical Creatures expert?"

Rigel thought that was a very good question, and sighed at the dramatic irony of Fate when she heard Professor Trelawney's distinctive voice say breathlessly, "He has not emerged from his chambers all day, Minerva. I shall go and seek him out!" She scurried away toward the Entrance Hall, looking quite pleased for an excuse to get away from the commotion.

Professor Sprout squeezed by Draco to reach McGonagall, panting, "Poppy is working in the dungeons tonight, Minerva. She'll need to be notified in case Severus or Filius require medical attention when this is through."

"Go help her ready the infirmary," McGonagall said briskly, "First find Professor Binns and request that he inform the Fat Lady of the trouble and tell her to *stay in her frame* in case we need to evacuate the students."

The Hufflepuff Head of House bustled off with a curt nod, and Rigel couldn't help but wonder at the Deputy Headmistress' forethought. How many such emergencies had she dealt with, exactly? Thinking back over the last two years, Rigel allowed that it had probably been quite a few.

Rigel turned back to watch the merpeople, some of whom were now struggling to get closer to shore, but seemed to be having trouble moving past the writhing tentacles that had once again escaped the professors' control.

"Dumbledore seems confused about what the merfolk want," Pansy noted, "It's not as though they can all actually get out of the lake, after all, so you'd think the Headmaster would be doing something about whatever's bothering them."

"Maybe they don't know what the problem is, either," Draco said, "The odds of the centaurs and the merpeople both becoming agitated at the same time... what are they doing now?"

He was referring to the centaurs, who, without any apparent reason, suddenly split their ranks into two, those in the center galloping toward the edges while those on the fringes of the herd dove quickly out of the way. Then, through the wide path that had emerged in less than a few seconds, came a swarm of stampeding giant spiders headed straight up the lawn toward the castle.

"What the-" Draco broke off with a quiet grunt as the boy next to him panicked, pushing his way backwards from the window violently.

The spiders were advancing quickly-faster than Rigel had seen anything that big ever move. She supposed eight legs gave quite an advantage in speed.

"They're coming this way!" People were screaming all around them.

"Barricade the front doors!" she heard McGonagall shout, her voice magnified over several times. Rigel saw Professor Sinistra, Professor Burbage, and Madam Hooch rushing out of the Great Hall to help bar the Entrance Hall doors, but as she turned back toward the rushing spiders, she had a sinking feeling they weren't going to head for the traditional entryway. They looked too mindless, too rabid.

"The windows," Rigel muttered, seeing those multi-jointed legs and easily picturing them scaling stone walls. She looked around the hall frantically, but to her dismay she could not see a single staff member nearby. McGonagall must have run to assist the others with the entrance doors.

"What?" Draco asked, distracted.

"The *windows*," Rigel said, more forcefully this time, realizing someone needed to take over command inside the hall, "They're going to climb the walls."

The students around her who'd heard all surged backwards away from the glass with varying degrees of horror. Only Pansy and Draco

stayed composed.

"What do we do?" Pansy asked, gripping her wand tightly.

"Barricade them, same as the doors," Rigel said quickly, "Let's use the tables."

"EVERBODY AWAY FROM THE WINDOWS!" Draco bellowed in a way Rigel had never imagined him doing, but it was certainly effective. All along the wall students scurried backwards.

"EVERYONE PUSH THIS TABLE UP AGAINST THE WINDOWS! NOW!" he shouted, motioning for those around the closest table running parallel to the windows to help him push it.

"It's too heavy," Rigel said, seeing the way even a dozen students' straining muscles barely convinced the heavy tables to slide a few feet toward the windows. "Clear everyone out of the way."

Draco and Pansy cast shield charms and carefully expanded them to press all the students packed between the table and the wall toward the ends of the hall and out of the way, even pushing some over the top of the table to the other side, shouting, "MOVE IT! NOW!"

While they worked, Rigel closed her eyes and tapped into her core with urgency. It stirred willingly enough, or at least the part of it she had access to with the suppressor on did. She briefly considered taking the ring off, but then realized any spell she tried with her magic beyond her control would probably blow up in her face.

"Rigel!" Pansy called, drawing her back from her moment of doubt. The space between the long house table and the wall of windows was vacated. It was now or never.

She let the flow of magic consume her, sweeping out from her wand to encompass the entirety of the enormous table in an overpowered levitating charm, and asked, *called* for her magic's help with this task. As she wove the magic, a window on the left side of the hall burst inwards, glass tinkling to the ground as a long, hairy leg

hooked itself through the frame. Amid the screams, Rigel let her magic pulse forward, catapulting the table in one swift movement forward over her own head, turning it mid-leap so that its sturdy wooden top flattened itself against the windows with a deafening crash. Food flew everywhere, covering the floor and her head. She ignored it, pinning the table in place with sheer willpower, checking to see that it was long enough to cover all the windows along the hall. It was, but it wasn't quite *wide* enough, she realized with a grimace. About a foot of space was left between the upright edge of the table and the top of the arching windowpanes.

Window after window cracked and rained glass inwards as a multitude of legs grasped for purchase on the outer wall of the castle. Rigel was starting to sweat with the strain of the magic she wielded, but in the background of her concentration she could hear prefects attempting some form of order now that students were more concerned for their own personal safety than for satisfying their curiosity.

"Younger students toward the back of the hall!" she could hear Percy Weasley shouting. "Those who know 'Evanesco,' get rid of this glass!"

A stunner flew over Rigel's head and impacted one of the furry legs feeling its way around the small opening above the table. The leg curled back immediately, but as other students began similarly stunning the legs they could get a good shot at, Rigel heard a bellowing cry shout, " *No!* Don't hurt 'em!" from behind her.

Hagrid, she realized, and hoped for his sake that the spiders weren't being seriously injured as they dropped off the castle walls to the lawn. She doubted the stunners would keep the spiders down for long, in any case-Acromantula were notoriously spell-resistant. Rigel had other things to worry about, however, as her arm was beginning to shake with the amount of magic running through it to keep the table in place. She could feel her core's available magic beginning to dip below comfortable levels.

"I need help," she called over her shoulder, "Can anyone do a really strong levitating spell? Or a sticking charm?"

Twin voices called out from the crowd loud and clear, "We can do it!"

Rigel glanced behind her, careful not to disrupt the magic keeping the table up, and was more than a little shocked to see two small Slytherin boys break away from the chaos. They rolled up their sleeves and came to either side of her. "We'll make the table take some of the weight," one of them said. His twin nodded seriously, and they both held their bare hands out toward the table.

Rigel wondered what on earth they were going to do without wands. A few moments later, however, she could *feel* the toll that the table had been taking on her magic lesson, then lighten to an easily sustainable level. She looked over to see the young twins rigid with focus. One of them spared her a grin, though, and said, "What, like it's hard?"

"You're the Animators," Rigel said quietly, her lips tilting up in a smile as it clicked, "And you're both actual *animators*, aren't you?"

Animation was quite a rare gift, as she understood it, and unusual to have manifested before their cores had finished developing. They must be either incredibly talented or naturally powerful. Rigel was lucky to have such effective help with the barricade, though she wondered if animation became more difficult the larger the object to be animated or if it took more skill than endurance. She would have to ask when this was all over.

"Mums the word," the one on her left said cheekily, as though he knew what she was thinking, "Literally, though-we get it from our mum's side."

They both laughed before focusing completely on the table once more.

Rigel was beginning to wonder what had happened to all of the professors when McGonagall came tearing up beside them with her

wand out, "Can you hold it, Mr. Black? The Entrance Hall is being pummeled, and we can't spare the staff until it's completely warded. Just our luck the warding expert is outside with Albus," she added in a growl Rigel didn't think she was meant to hear.

"We've got it for now, Professor," Rigel said, panting just a little.

She nodded sharply, then turned to survey the crowd, "Argus! Argus where are-oh!"

Filch appeared a moment later, a shaking kitten in his arms that Rigel had heard he'd taken to calling 'Miss Norrie' in remembrance of his old familiar. "Yes, ma'am," he said, standing at attention.

"All prefects are to prepare their houses for evacuation. The upper levels may not be secure if these spiders climb any higher, so Gryffindor will go with Hufflepuff to the basement common room-no, don't argue! This is no time for house secrecy. The Ravenclaws will bunker in the Slytherin dungeon, as well. Send the Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs first, with the Head Boy, then the other two houses with the Head Girl."

"What about the noise?" Filch scowled, "Not enough staff to stick 'em all with deafening charms quick enough, unless you can do what the Headmaster done in here."

Another window pane crashed inward and McGonagall swore colorfully, "You're right, there isn't time. Too much exposure to the sound will damage their eardrums. And Poppy is still in the Hospital Wing..." More cursing. Rigel saw the twin to her right fighting a grin as he, like her, eavesdropped shamelessly. "All right. Here's what we do," McGonagall decided, "When the barricade is finished in the Entrance Hall, we'll-"

She broke off as a hysterical Professor Trelawney rocketed out of the crowd and collapsed in the Deputy Headmistress' arms.

"Sybill, what on earth are you doing?" McGonagall demanded, "Where is Professor Pettigrew?"

"Couldn't-not-trapped-" Trelawney broke off with a huge gasp of air and then slumped dramatically, "It's the *werewolf*, Minerva-he's *loose*."

"What!?" McGonagall lowered her voice to a near-hiss.

"The beast has trapped Pettigrew in his rooms, pacing outside the door and *howling*, Minerva. I barely escaped with my life. If only I'd had time to do a second tea reading this morning, I might have been able to prevent-"

"Yes, yes," McGonagall thrust the woman away from her impatiently. "That's all we need. If Remus has lost his mind to the wolf, then moving students in the hallways is out of the question, even in the lower levels. There's no way to track him quickly enough if he moves."

"Can't you send Hagrid to put him down or-"

At Trelawney's words, Rigel's focus slipped completely in blind panic. Put Remus down? They *couldn't* -

The table slipped two inches toward the floor as both boys beside her gave out surprised grunts. She struggled to get the magic back under control, but she was too numb with fear and helplessness at the mere thought of what might happen to Remus. A rogue werewolf was completely fair game, as far as the Ministry was concerned. He could be murdered, and it wouldn't even be considered a crime. And if he hurt someone defending himself, then his life would be forfeit anyway by default.

The table was vibrating now. "Hey," one of the twins glared at her, "Settle it down, Black!"

"Mr. Black!" McGonagall brandished her wand at the table and it stopped shaking immediately, pinned by fresher, stronger magic than what Rigel had been working. The two younger Slytherins slumped and stretched their arms out with relief.

"I'll take it from here, boys," McGonagall said, her mouth thin, "Thirty points to Slytherin. Now move toward the back of the hall, where it's safer."

The other two scurried off toward where the rest of the students were congregating, as far from the windows as possible, but Rigel stayed put. "You can't hurt Remus, Professor. I know he took his potion tonight-I watched him!"

"In case you haven't noticed, Mr. Black, the creatures of this school have gone feral tonight, regardless of their previous sanity, apparently," McGonagall snapped, stress in every line of her face. At Rigel's despairing look, she softened minutely, "I'll do my best to see he isn't harmed, Mr. Black."

Rigel nodded slowly, but in her mind she wondered how McGonagall could see to Remus' safety, when she was worried over the safety of all the students at the same time.

"Argus, when the barricade is finished I will send a patronus to Poppy telling them to ward off the Hospital Wing and remain there until further notice. They'll be safe enough," she said, half to herself, "If the students are to remain in here, however, we need to take more proactive measures. When the others are done at the front doors, we will set up a protective barrier around one half of the Great Hall. Keep the students behind it, then create a small opening and send Hooch and Sinistra out on brooms to attack from the air. By then Albus should have been able to do something about those thrice-cursed seamen..."

Rigel didn't think she needed to hear whatever McGonagall had planned after that. She had her own plan to execute.

Filch and Trelawney began herding all the remaining students into close quarters toward the back of the hall, opposite the doors to the Entrance Hall, clustered around the Head Table. Rigel saw a pair of pale-headed students bobbing toward her through the crowd, and slipped as casually as she could out of their line of sight. Draco and Pansy were not going to approve of what she did next.

She hunkered down behind the staff table, pulling out the Marauder's Map and searching frantically for Remus. Her uncle's dot was moving erratically back and forth outside of a door in the staff quarters, beyond which sat a dot labeled Peter Pettigrew. Rigel traced a shortcut with her finger that could take her from the first floor to that part of the castle in just a few minutes. All she had to do was slip through the door behind the Head Table and into the trophy room it connected to without anyone seeing her.

She worked her way surreptitiously through the crowd, and had just reached the small enclave containing the door when a large hand grasped her elbow and spun her around.

It was Rookwood, and he had a very forbidding expression on his face. "Your friends are looking for you," he said, voice tinged with disapproval, "Now would be a bad time to run off."

"I have to go, Rookwood," Rigel said, tugging on her elbow, "Remus is in trouble. He needs help."

"How can you help a werewolf?" Rookwood said lowly, "It's not safe."

"I have to protect him from himself," Rigel said fiercely, "If anyone else comes across him, they'll kill him, or he'll kill them, but I can help him. Let me go."

Rookwood looked torn, but his hand didn't release her.

"He's family, Rookwood," Rigel said, as imploring as she could, "What if it was Rosier? Or Selwyn? You'd do the same."

"At least let me accompany you," Rookwood bit out, obviously displeased with his capitulation.

"No, you need to stay here," Rigel said. At the upperclassman's warning growl she held up her other hand, "Pansy and Draco will try to follow me if they find out I'm gone. You have to be here to keep them from coming after me."

"You once again take risks that you yourself forbid others from taking," Rookwood said, shaking his head.

"Yes. I do," Rigel said. It was the truth, after all. She didn't have time to analyze it, however, "Keep Pansy safe, Rookwood."

He let her go with a sigh, "Keep yourself safe, Rigel."

Rigel nodded her thanks, then slipped through the door quickly, and left the older Slytherin behind.

Horrid, awful wailing greeted her ears as she left the protective barrier of Dumbledore's magic. Swearing silently to herself, she palmed her wand and called on her magic to deafen her ears as she ran through the gold-bedecked room. She rummaged in her bag as she ran, pulling out her ever-present invisibility cloak from its undetectably expanded pocket, then paused to carefully retrieve two bottles from her potions kit. One she uncorked and winced at before pouring all over the outside of her cloak. It was peppermint oil, undiluted, and while it was one of the strongest-smelling things in her kit, she also thought it would be one of the most disinteresting, at least as far as a werewolf's nose was concerned.

The other bottle she shoved in her pocket, along with a packet sealed tight with preservation charms that had an apothecary's logo stamped across the front. Barely remembering to vanish the food that had settled in her hair, she threw the cloak over herself, took out the Map once more, and followed it toward Remus' restless dot with steely determination.

When she reached the parallel corridor, she slowed, then crept forward, keeping to the shadows as she rounded the corner and caught sight of the wolf at the other end. It prowled back and forth before the door, snapping its jaws and scratching at the wood with a desperate fervor. This behavior was coupled with frequent flinches and shakes of the head. If Rigel weren't deaf, she suspected she'd hear the werewolf whining and yelping, so obvious was its pain.

Rigel pulled the bottle from her pocket and uncorked it quietly, silently praying that her research lived up to her expectations. Otherwise she would likely be wolf food before the hour was out.

Shying away from that mental image, she began to carefully pour the protection potion in as wide a circle as she could manage within the walls of the corridor. She held the bottle as close to the ground as possible so as to minimize the sound the liquid created as it hit the floor. She cast the circle clockwise, holding her breath as she walked closer to Remus and only relaxing minutely when she made it back to where she'd begun. She left a small opening between the start of the circle and the end, just big enough to keep the magic from connecting.

Her hand shaking slightly, she balanced what was left of the protection potion in her pocket while taking out the packet quietly. As she ripped the seal, she could see the werewolf's ears twitch in her direction, but after a brief glance, the creature turned back to the doorway it was stalking. She pulled one perfectly preserved bullfrog from its wrappings and set it down in the center of the circle before backing away swiftly.

The wolf bared its teeth in a challenge as it whirled, obviously having heard something that time, though how with all the merpeople's racket going on she didn't know. It hunched its forelegs menacingly. Rigel, from within the relative safety of the cloak, jerked her wand at the frog, making it flop wildly into the air and back down to the floor with a wet smack. The werewolf charged. She grabbed for the rest of the potion and waited breathlessly until its loping run carried the werewolf soaring past the potion line. She completed the circle just

as the beast closed its jaw on the now-limp bullfrog, watching with acute relief as the barrier shone into place around the werewolf with seamless grace.

The wolf flung itself at the barrier, only to be pushed backwards into the center with gentle finality. Grinning, she removed her cloak and stuffed it out of sight as she quickly skirted around the protected circle and stopped, breathing deeply, in front of Pettigrew's door. There was a moment in which she could not tear herself away from the glowing eyes of the wolf, which shone with such hate and hunger as she had never imagined coming from a living thing. Then it passed, and she remembered her purpose, and threw her fists against the door violently.

"Professor! It's safe to come out! Hurry, Professor, they need you in the Great Hall!" she hollered and banged and scrabbled at the knob, but to her frustration received no response. She checked the map frantically, but he was definitely still inside. Perhaps the door was soundproofed? Or maybe the professor had been rendered unconscious by prolonged exposure to the merpeople's screaming.

In either case, she would have to open it herself. She could feel her magic running dangerously low, but all she needed was enough to overpower whatever locking charm Pettigrew used. She prodded at her core once again, feeling it stretch in a way that had become familiar to her after exhausting her magic so often in Professor Snape's lessons. With whatever juice she had left, she willed the door in front of her to *open* .

The wooden door flung itself inwards and slammed into the stone wall of the room beyond with a crash she could feel vibrating in the floor as she rushed inside. Whatever she was expecting, it wasn't for Professor Pettigrew to be sitting in a meditative pose on the floor, eyes closed in concentration and hands clenched tightly in his lap. She didn't have to say anything-the moment the door opened he jerked into awareness, grabbing his ears in a cowering flinch and causing whatever he had been holding to drop onto the floor and roll away under a chair.

He gazed around wildly, his beady eyes bulging as he took in her standing there. He began fumbling to stand, gesturing wildly and shouting something angrily.

"I can't hear you!" Rigel shouted, realized that even with that the professor likely wouldn't hear her over the merfolk. She gestured to her ears with a confused expression for emphasis, but received an even more confused look in response. "I deafened myself because of the... shrieking..." She stopped shouting and faltered at the impatient and uncomprehending look in his eyes. He wasn't holding his ears any longer, she realized, and he didn't appear to be in any pain, despite not having cast any muffling spell that she had seen.

Cautiously, she allowed the magic around her ears to dissolve away and smiled when she heard nothing but a bit of static that was probably a residual effect of the temporary deafness. "It's gone," she breathed out a relieved sigh.

"What is?" Pettigrew demanded, "What in Merlin's name are you doing, young man, barging into my rooms like-"

"There's an emergency, Professor!" Rigel cut him off, remembering the urgency of the situation once more. "The creatures on the grounds have gone mad. There are spiders attacking and the centaurs are amassing and-well, they need you in the Great Hall right away."

Pettigrew paled dramatically, staggering backwards a step and patting himself down frantically.

"Your wand is on the floor," Rigel said, gesturing to where he must have laid it while meditating.

"Wand... yes..." Pettigrew seemed incredibly out of sorts, but Rigel didn't think they had time for him to collect himself properly.

"Come on, Professor, you need to get to the Great Hall," she said insistently, picking up his wand, shoving it into his hand, and leading

him as politely as she could out the door.

When he caught sight of the werewolf lying just up the hall, Pettigrew squeaked and dug his heels in with a lurch. "What is-Remus isn't suppose to be-"

"He's not going to hurt you," Rigel said, steering the plump professor around the protected circle firmly, "I'm taking him to the Hospital Wing so don't worry about Remus, just get going."

"I-you-it's not safe..." Pettigrew trailed off.

Rigel wasn't sure if he was talking about Remus or the walk back to the Great Hall, but she smiled reassuringly and prodded the professor gently in any case. "I'll be fine, just go."

Pettigrew whimpered a bit pitifully, but then bit his lip and nodded, "Yes, I'll... I'd better go." He hurried off at a shaky run, and Rigel turned back to the werewolf.

She circled the creature slowly, looking for any sign of sanity. It already looked calmer, and she wondered if it had been the merpeople's screeching that drove it so insane. If the pain was awful to a human, she couldn't imagine what it would be like for a werewolf's sensitive ears. It was the reason she thought he ought to go to the Hospital Wing, instead of staying in the corridor all night. She knew from Archie's books that eardrums were extremely delicate, and an injury there could easily become permanent and debilitating if not treated in a timely manner.

"Remus, are you in there?" Rigel asked, kneeling down outside of the barrier to look the werewolf in the eyes, "Can you understand me, now?"

The wolf looked at her, calm and steady, but made no motion of understanding or even acknowledgement. After a moment of doubt, Rigel rolled her eyes. If his eardrums had been damaged by

prolonged exposure to mermish wailing he probably couldn't hear anything she said.

Rigel got down on all fours and looked at the wolf very seriously. She then tucked her body to the side and executed a clumsy roll along the floor. She got back up and looked at the wolf expectantly. It cocked its head at her. She rolled again, then gestured at the werewolf insistently. The creature lolled its tongue at her, then rolled gracefully inside the circle.

Either Remus had his mind back, or Rigel was the first person in history to teach a werewolf to do a trick. Weighing the odds in her head, she smiled and dug in her satchel for the bottle of ward-disrupter potion that would render the protection potion inert. Pouring it across one of the lines, she broke through the ward to wrap Remus in a tight hug. He was shaking and clearly exhausted, but he licked her cheek affectionately in response.

Rigel stood and, with Remus at her side, set out at a light jog for the Hospital Wing. She didn't know whether the rest of the castle was safe or not yet, so she figured she'd just take shelter behind the wards there as well until things died down.

The doors were sealed tight, so Rigel kicked on the wards in a parody of a knock until a voice on the other side called, "Minerva? Is that you?"

"It's Rigel Black, Professor!" she called back, "I've got a patient for you!"

"Mr. Black!" that voice was definitely Madam Pomfrey, "What on earth did they send you up here for?"

The wards parted and the nurse's stern visage poked through the open door. As the sight of Remus, however, she reared back with a gasp, "Mr. Black, get away from-"

"He's fine, Madam Pomfrey!" Rigel assured her quickly, "He's in his right mind, just hurt from all that noise before."

Concern for Remus quickly replaced any worry the woman harbored for Rigel's safety, and she waved them both in with a brisk arm before closing up the wards once more and shutting the door behind them.

Remus trotted rather calmly over to one of the beds and leapt up on it before anyone could direct him. Clucking to her self, Madam Pomfrey began running a scan over his head. Professor Sprout pulled Rigel aside while this was going on and said, "What's happening out there, Mr. Black?"

"The merfolk have stopped screeching," Rigel said, assuming that the Hospital Wing would be warded against noises as a matter of patient comfort and guessing they wouldn't have noticed the change. "The spiders from the forest were scaling the walls when I was last in the Great Hall, but Professor Pettigrew is on his way there now, so perhaps he can help them deal with that. I think the Headmaster and Professors Snape and Flitwick were still outside at the lake last I saw them. They've boarded up the Great Hall and the entryway, though, so I'm not sure anyone knows what's happening outside the castle yet."

"The students?" Sprout pressed, her faced lined with anxiety.

"All safe last I knew," Rigel said, "McGonagall seemed to have their protection well in hand."

"Thank you, Mr. Black," Sprout sighed, flexing her fingers agitatedly, "I just *hate* waiting here while my house is in trouble."

"Remus isn't a danger anymore," Rigel said, "You could make your way to the Great Hall, if you were careful."

The stout woman smiled, but shook her head, "Minerva has posted me here, so I'll remain until the all clear. Running about on my own

without anyone knowing where I'd gone would just making the situation more chaotic."

Rigel tried not to wince, but had to wonder if Sprout had guessed she wasn't supposed to be 'escorting' Remus to the Hospital Wing, as it were. "At least send a patronus so Professor McGonagall knows Remus is here, and safe," she suggested, "I think his presence in the hallways was deterring her from evacuating the students underground."

Professor Sprout stepped away to do just that, and Rigel went back to Remus's bedside to watch as Pomfrey finished healing his ears.

"I'll have to do another diagnostic when he's transformed back," she said as Rigel took a seat beside her uncle, "But he should recover full use of his hearing once I'm finished."

"Good," Rigel said, finally allowing her body to relax. She ached everywhere from the strain she'd put on her magic, and as the adrenaline drained away she felt empty and stretched, like a sponge that had been wrung out too many times.

"You did well, Rigel," Pomfrey said, looking away from Remus briefly to give her an approving smile, "Other times I would scold you for what I suspect is another of your impulsive inclinations toward irresponsibility, but in this case... it's a good thing you got him here when you did. I don't like to think how debilitating this kind of injury might have been if it had gone unchecked even another few hours. The eardrums are troublesome enough, but the nerves that pass information to his auditory cortex are even more fragile than a human's. The overload put such a strain on his temporal lobe. Much longer and it might have resulted in permanent damage to that section of the brain. So, good job, Mr. Black." She fixed Rigel with a stern look, "But don't do it again."

Rigel ducked her head in a nod that was part acknowledgement, part avoidance. If she had to do it again, she absolutely would, in this case.

Some time later, Rigel was dozing, curled up in a chair by Remus' bed, where the werewolf was sleeping peacefully in the semi-darkness created by the curtain drawn around them. Rigel lifted her head when she heard a knocking against the Hospital Wing wards. McGonagall's voice came clearly through the curtain a moment later.

"All's well, Pomona," the Deputy Headmistress sounded tired, but satisfied, "Albus is repairing the damage done to the outside of the castle as we speak."

"What happened?" Madam Pomfrey asked, "What caused all this?"

"We don't yet know," McGonagall said, "The official story is that the ambient magic around the castle interacted with the wild magic of Samhain tonight and created a dark energy that upset the creatures around the castle, causing them to react strongly against the castle itself."

"That sounds a bit far-fetched," Pomona sighed, "Think the Daily Prophet will swallow it?"

"I do, as a matter of fact," McGonagall sounded as though she wished to roll her eyes, "I'm more concerned about some of the more perceptive students. They witnessed the ferocity of this incident, and aren't like to believe it was a simple accidental intermingling of strong magics that upset the creatures. The spiders, perhaps, even the merfolk, but the centaurs? They are intelligent beings, not prone to panic, and yet their chief claims there is a dark force within the castle that is agitating Fate itself. What are we to make of such a statement? There could be any number of old artifacts hidden around the school, but none of them have caused this sort of upset in the past. Why now?"

"There, there, Minerva," Pomona said consolingly, "Albus will sort it out. In the meantime we ought to focus on moving the school past this. I'm sure we'll have our hands full with night terrors and panicky parents before the weekend is out. How long do you think it'll be

before Lucius Malfoy pays us a little visit?" This last was added with a distinctive bite.

"Not long enough," McGonagall sighed. "Well, I just came to inform you of the resolution and check on Remus. How is he? Did he regain his mind with the rest of the creatures?"

"We don't know," Pomona said, "What happened at the end? How did Albus get them to regain control?"

"It wasn't Albus," McGonagall said, "One moment the squid was thrashing, the spiders were climbing, and all hell was reigning, and then... they stopped."

"Just like that?" Pomfrey sounded skeptical.

"Yes," McGonagall said, "I've never seen the like. The spiders seemed to shake themselves, then they retreated into the forest, calm as anything. The squid settled right down, and the merfolk stopped screeching all at once, disappearing back into the depths. Albus tried to talk to the Mer-King, but he was no clearer than the centaurs, apparently."

"Well, what of Peter?" Pomona asked, "Does our resident expert have any explanation for this phenomenon?"

McGonagall scoffed quietly, "He came running in a few minutes after it was all over, mumbling something about Samhain and the full moon and tumultuous energies. I'd accuse him of hiding out the storm in his chambers, but I gather he was detained by Remus' presence in the hallway outside his room. Thank the gods no one was hurt in this mess."

"All students are accounted for, then?" Pomona asked, sounding relieved.

"All but one," McGonagall said, now with an annoyed edge to her voice, "In your patronus you intimated Rigel Black was here. For his

sake I sincerely hope he has remained so."

Rigel figured that was her cue. She stood from the chair and stepped out from behind the curtain. "I'm here, Professor."

"Would you like to explain yourself, Mr. Black, or shall I guess?" McGonagall's eyes were tired, but very sharp.

"I saw that you had your hands full in the Great Hall, so I thought I'd better take care of Remus myself," Rigel said. At McGonagall's darkening look, she said quickly, "It's not that I don't think you could handle him. Just that... he's family, and other people might not be as gentle with a rogue werewolf. I couldn't let anything happen to him or anyone else because of whatever was making the creatures go crazy."

"It is not your responsibility to go running after werewolves, Mr. Black, even if they are your uncles," McGonagall snapped.

"In times of difficulty, anyone with the ability to effect positive change also has the responsibility to do so," Rigel said, tilting her head, "Godric Gryffindor said that. I had the ability to help Remus, and the opportunity, so I did. I didn't hurt myself or anyone else. And Madam Pomfrey said it was a good thing that I did. Remus was injured when I found him, and might not have gone to the Hospital Wing without prompting. With all due respect, Professor, I'd do it again."

McGonagall pursed her lips, but Professor Sprout burst into chuckles. "Ever thought you'd hear a Slytherin quoting Godric Gryffindor at you to get out of trouble, Minerva?"

The older matron suddenly smiled, making Rigel extremely nervous. "You're right, Mr. Black. It would be an affront to my house to do anything but give you twenty points to Slytherin for bravery and selfless nerve." Rigel smiled hesitantly, then gulped when McGonagall continued, "While I may not punish students for having courage in a crisis, however, you can bet that Severus Snape will see your little adventure in an entirely different light."

Rigel grimaced, realizing she would be lucky to break even on house points by the time Snape got through with her. He had a very poor opinion of her 'reckless stupidity' and all actions and inclinations thusly associated. "I should get back to my common room, then," she said, moving back to Remus' bedside to collect her bag, "Is it safe to return?"

"The students should all be heading to bed now, yes," McGonagall said, "And Mr. Black?"

Rigel turned at the door with a polite expression, "Yes, Professor?"

"Good luck."

Wondering how a woman of her age had time for a sense of humor after such an exhausting evening, Rigel pasted on her fakest smile and left the Wing. She passed a multitude of students heading toward their common rooms on her way back to hers. None of them took much notice of her, and Rigel thought wryly that if one good thing came from all this, at least no one was talking about the prank anymore. And she had thought her bad luck used up that morning. Ha.

She reached the common room just as the last Slytherins were filing in, and she barely made it three steps toward the dorms when a now-familiar hand gripped her elbow and re-directed her. "This is becoming a habit," she told Rookwood as he led her across the room.

"The habit is yours," Rookwood said, "They aren't happy with you."

"I know," Rigel sighed.

"I advise you to sound contrite," Rookwood said.

"I'm not," Rigel frowned, though some part of her wondered if she should be.

"Pretend," Rookwood suggested, "Or it's going to be a long night."

Rigel nodded, "Fair enough. They're okay though, right?"

"See for yourself," the upperclassman said, releasing her when they reached the group of chairs and couches by their usual fire.

Pansy was the first to react, rising from the couch and bringing Rigel into a gentle hug.

"Hi, Pansy," Rigel said, "I'll glad you're all right."

Pansy released Rigel and gave her a steady look, then turned and reclaimed her seat without speaking. Rigel turned awkwardly to Draco, who took Pansy's hand when she sat back down, and didn't acknowledge Rigel's presence at all.

"Draco," Rigel said. No reaction. She turned to Theo and Millicent, who were frowning, but didn't seem quite as angry. Blaise showed no signs of upset, even smiling at her when she met his gaze, but Rosier leveled her with a glare. For some reason, this response surprised her more than the others. What did Rosier have to be so angry at her about?

"You seem to be in one piece," Rosier said, raking her with his eyes, "Wasn't the werewolf hungry tonight?"

"Don't talk about him like that," Rigel snapped, forgetting that she was supposed to be contrite. It was exactly the sort of careless thing people said all the time about werewolves, and it enraged her to hear it, bringing back the fear and anger she'd felt when Trelawney had casually suggested killing Remus to protect everyone else.

"Like what? Like a rampaging beast?" Rosier stood from his seat and towered over her. He kept his voice low, in minute deference to her sensibilities, she supposed, but his words belied the kindness, "That's what he was tonight, Rigel. Not your uncle, not your friend. *Dangerous* . If you can't tell the difference between man and wolf

then you need a serious reality check. When Edmund told me where he'd let you run off to I wanted to strangle him, but after thinking about it I realized it's not Edmund's fault. It's yours, Rigel. You chose to place yourself in danger, knowingly abandoning your friends and allies to run off after an incredibly deadly magical creature without so much as a thought about how the rest of us would feel if you got eaten by a bloodthirsty beast-

"Are you finished yet?" Rigel said, more coldly than she'd meant to. She just couldn't stomach Rosier's words at the moment.

"I am not-

"I think you must be, because you're starting to repeat yourself," Rigel said, her face as blank as a wall, "Or didn't you notice you'd called my uncle, your Defense professor and one of the nicest, most intelligent men I've ever known, a *beast*, Rosier?"

"He may be all of those things most of the time, but tonight he was *dangerous*," Rosier said, gritting his teeth, "Edmund, what class is a werewolf?"

"It's a 5-X creature by classification," Rookwood said promptly.

"Why is that, Edmund?" Rosier asked.

"It rivals the Nundu for speed, the Manticore for strength, and the Lethifold in its appetite for human flesh," Rookwood said, unflinching.

"I know that," Rigel said, glaring at the two of them, "You think I'm some excitable first-year who's read about werewolves in books and thought, gee, wouldn't it be swell to get a real good look at one up close? I *know* what werewolves are. Better than you two, I daresay. I've also known Remus my whole life, so I know that if he isn't in his right mind it's because something is *wrong*, and he's in trouble, and when my family is in trouble I *help* them."

"You can't run off every time someone you know is in trouble," Rosier said, running a hand through his hair in frustration, "All it does is put you in trouble along with them."

"Better than doing nothing," Rigel argued, "And besides, I had a plan to help Remus; I didn't go tearing off in a panic without any way to actually help. I don't fling myself into situations I can't handle, contrary to popular belief. I'm careful. I wasn't in any danger tonight, Rosier. I took every precaution."

"Like what?" Rosier bit out, eyes narrow.

"I turned myself invisible. I doused myself with peppermint oil, too," she said, "He couldn't see or smell me."

"Is that why you smell like a candy-cane?" Blaise asked, chin propped against the armrest of his chair in casual indolence.

"Yes," Rigel sighed, realizing that some of the oil must have seeped through the cloak, "And Remus couldn't hear me, either, because the merfolk's screaming had already *ruptured* his eardrums. He had also taken the New Wolfsbane potion tonight, which means he was significantly weaker than a true rogue werewolf would have been. When I found him, he was hurt and confused and not dangerous to anyone." That was a bit of a stretch, but Rigel wasn't above lying to protect her loved ones.

She could see the hesitation in Rosier's gaze, so she pressed forward, her eyes imploring him to understand, "My cousin invented a potion this summer that can safely contain a werewolf. I have several vials of it. I didn't rush off without a plan, Rosier."

"I don't like it when you do dangerous things, Rigel," he finally said, blowing out a defeated breath, "None of us do."

"I don't like it when people I care about are in danger, either," Rigel said, smiling a bit, "If you could have stopped me going, or had some

way of contributing something to help, you would have come after me, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," Rosier said, grimacing.

"Then you already know why I couldn't have stayed in that hall and done nothing," Rigel said. Rosier gave her one long-suffering look, then shook his head despairingly. He wrapped her in an unceremonious hug, which Rigel returned after only a moment's confusion. "Thanks, Aldon," she said, "I'm sorry I worried you."

"You aren't either," he sighed, stepping back.

Rigel stepped forward, standing in front of the couch that Pansy and Draco sat on. "Do either of you have anything to say to me?"

Draco glanced at her. "Would you listen, if we did?"

Her gaze softened without her impetus, "Of course. You're my best friends."

"You use that word, Rigel, but you don't live up to the equal relationship it implies," Pansy said, still not looking directly at Rigel.

"You mean when I do things on my own without consulting you?" Rigel clarified.

"It's not your independence that's the issue," Draco shook his head. "The fact that you told Rookwood, in advance of your leaving, to *stop us* from coming after you, implies something important. Do you know what?"

"Tell me," Rigel said, frowning.

"It means you didn't just not tell us what you were doing," Pansy said, "You knew us well enough that you anticipated what our actions would be when we found out, and then took that choice away from us by telling Rookwood to stun us to keep us from coming to your aid."

"I didn't tell him to-"

"You know that's how he deals with people he doesn't know how to deal with, though," Rosier pointed out, smiling now, "Remember the New Years Gala?"

She did, at that, though she didn't appreciate him bringing that up in front of so many curious ears.

"The point is this: If you have the right to protect Remus from danger, then we have the right to protect you from danger, Rigel. You telling us we can't help you is just the same as us telling you that you can't help other people." Pansy was looking directly at her now, "Don't you see that?"

Rigel thought for a moment. "Except you would have stopped me from helping Remus," Rigel said, "You would prioritize my protection over his, whereas I prioritize his over mine. We can't agree on a course of action when we want different things. In such a case, aren't I justified in seeking my own goals by circumventing yours? Why should I prioritize your ends over my own?"

"Because we're friends?" Draco suggested, more than a bit sarcastically.

"Because," Pansy said, giving Draco a disapproving look, "We exist outside of models in your mind, Rigel. You assumed that we would be a detriment to your goals, instead of entertaining the possibility that we could be an asset to you. By treating us as an automatic hindrance, you insult us as well as our friendship with you."

"I don't think you're hindrances," Rigel said, knowing she was explaining it wrong but unable to make the right words come out, "I only wanted to protect you *and* Remus."

"You only get to protect people who consent to be protected," Draco said, rolling his eyes, "If you try to force someone into a position of

weakness, it's just demeaning. Insulting. Patronizing. Take your pick."

Rigel rather thought some people might just see it as someone caring about them, but she also had to admit she saw her friends' point. "I hear you, and I understand where you're coming from, but can't you also understand how completely wretched I would feel if anything happened to either of you because of something I felt I had to do? Risking a certain amount of danger to myself is my choice, but bringing you guys into danger by default because of an obligation of friendship-I couldn't justify that. It would be the height of selfishness and carelessness if I did. What would I say to your parents if anything happened? I promised to be a good friend to you. That means not making your association with me hazardous to your lives. If I did what you asked, invited you into trouble with me... how can I live with that kind of guilt? What kind of person would that make me?"

"A normal one," Theo said bluntly, "No offense, Rigel, but Draco and Pansy are right on this one. Yeah, it feels awful when your friends get hurt or into trouble because of something you did, but that feeling is part of what is supposed to deter you from being reckless. You're the kind of person who doesn't see consequences to yourself as a bad thing, so it's exactly right of Draco and Pansy to try and make you see the weight of your actions by involving themselves. If it's something you wouldn't want Draco and Pansy doing, it's something you shouldn't be doing, right? Unless you think you're better than or different from them."

There was a beat of complete silence as the group stared at Theo with varying levels of surprise.

"What?" the sandy-haired boy scowled, "I can be deep."

Rigel had to laugh at that, a low chuckle that brought her back from desperate hypotheticals and to a more even-keeled focus. "Okay, I guess I'm wrong about at least some of this," she said, rubbing her hair a bit sheepishly, then grimacing at the oil that stuck to her

hands, "If I say the situation wasn't dangerous, I should have been willing to at least give you the chance of offering your help."

"Yes, you should," Pansy said.

"I'm sorry I took your choice away like an imperious prat," she added, willing to let the matter rest, at that point.

"And you're sorry you forgot the conversation we've already had about how our friendship means that your problems are our problems and your responsibilities are our responsibilities and vice versa," Draco said, folding his arms as he looked up at her.

Rigel winced, "And I'm sorry for that, too." She really would have to remember these things before she got herself into messes like this in the future. "When I'm in crisis mode, I react to things very quickly and coldly. I forget about people's feelings. I'll work on that, all right?"

"And we will work on not losing you in crowds right as crises are occurring," Pansy sighed.

"You should put a teacher-tracker in one of his shoes," Millicent said helpfully.

"Go ahead," Rigel sighed, "But can we be done fighting? I'm exhausted and I smell like a breath mint. I just want to shower and sleep."

"Rest up," Rosier said, smirking, "You'll need your strength in the morning when Professor Snape has *his* words with you. The only reason he's not here waiting for you is because he has, and I quote, 'more important things to do than waste my breath lecturing a deaf imbecile... for now' end quote."

She feared Rosier was, if anything, understating the good professor's ire. Their relationship knew only the veneer of amiability of late. Her acting in a way he would undoubtedly categorize as reckless and foolhardy would only worsen his disappointment. It

saddened her that recently she had somehow become used to upsetting and disappointing people, when for so many years she had worked hard to please them. She wanted to repair the rift in her relationship with Professor Snape, but at the same time... harsh words would still be nothing in comparison with Remus' safety.

She couldn't call herself a hero in her own mind, though. Rigel hadn't been completely honest with her friends. She'd made it sound like the only reason she was worried about Remus was because he was family, and that did indeed play the major role in inspiring her to act. She couldn't deny that there was a cold, ruthless part of her that saw Remus' importance in terms of the greater whole, however. An incident in which Remus was injured or injured another could prove disastrous for werewolves everywhere. All eyes were on Hogwarts right now in the arena of creature rights.

A werewolf incident at Hogwarts meant other things, too. A blow to Dumbledore's credibility, for instance, and therefore to the platforms he put forth and all the causes he championed in their world, muggleborn and halfblood rights included. Innocent people everywhere would have their lives impacted by such a thing. She couldn't deny that all of these things and more had also been going through her mind as she raced to stop Remus from breaking down Pettigrew's door. She thanked magic for Professor Snape's New Wolfsbane potion. It was probably the only reason the werewolf hadn't been able to shred through that barrier like tissue paper.

One of her last thoughts before going to bed that night, once she washed herself thoroughly and made a mental note to ask Binny if she knew a good way to get oil out of invisibility cloaks, was that she'd really have to do a trial with a full-strength werewolf before she marketed her potion for such protective uses. Still, she thought with a yawn, it had certainly been a preliminary success, all things considered.

The whole day had been a tentative success, in fact. She'd have to phrase it that way, at least, when she wrote to tell Archie what had happened. She certainly did have a lot of people worrying about her,

for someone who had started out at eleven with the intention to remain completely unnoticed. Perhaps it was time to accept, as so many people kept saying, that anonymity was simply beyond her grasp.

For now, anyway.

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[end of chapter eight].

A/N: Soo that one was a doozy, eh? Nearly 30,000 words this time, whoooo! Sorry it's a few days late. I swear that last scene just would not end. It makes up nearly a third of the whole chapter, actually. Sorry if it's a bit overwhelming in places. A big, heartfelt thanks to everyone who's still reading, and especially to you reviewers-I do read them! Even if long after you write them and move on with your life.

Also, there's apparently an honest-to-blog actual FORUM about Rigel! I don't know how such a thing is even possible, but if you want to discuss the characters, plot, future of the fic, etc, feel free to check it out, and a huge kudos to the fans who made that happen! I'm so amazed ^^.

And one final note, a lot of people ask if it's okay if they write stories or make art about Rigel and this series, and I say YES to every single one of you. If you have an idea for a spin off, a future take, prequel, sequel, picture, video, *anything*, please please do it! And post info about it in the forum or comments so everyone can read it (including me :D)!

Whew, sorry in addition for this epic author's note.

All the best,

-Violet

Chapter 9

A/N: This is much overdo, for which I apologize! I'm working toward a much shorter wait on the next chapter. I also deeply apologize to anyone who likes cats. It's... yeah. Sorry.

The Ambiguous Artifice:

Chapter Nine:

Draco thought Rigel must be either very brave or very stupid. When he and Pansy had offered to escort their friend to Professor Snape's office that morning, they expected to witness a dressing down of epic proportions; what they hadn't expected was their soft-spoken friend's vehement, unequivocal resistance.

"-stupid, *arrogant* boy-"

"You forgot reckless," Rigel's disgruntled tone made Draco wince just imagining the look it must have inspired on their Head of House's face.

"I'm only working up to it, you *impetuous fool* !"

Pansy gave a sigh of exasperation from the other side of Snape's closed office door. Even the thick, insular wood couldn't muffle their professor's ire. Draco hoped no one happened down this hallway before Snape and Rigel were finished... talking. It was one thing for Pansy and him to overhear such an argument-they were Rigel's friends. Other people were not meant to witness Rigel's belligerence, however; it was a side he only showed to people he *trusted* . Just as well they were there to guard the door, really.

"He could at least try not to antagonize the professor," Pansy said quietly.

"He's become noticeably more self-asserting of late," Draco huffed, sotto voce, "Not yet sure if it's a good thing or not."

"I think not, at least from Professor Snape's perspective," Pansy commented, leaning shamelessly toward the office door as the voices within dipped in volume.

"It wasn't impetuous or reckless, Professor," Rigel argued, sounding perfectly reasonable in a way Draco knew drove his godfather mad. His father used such a tone on Uncle Severus to embarrassing effect, after all. "Please give me a little credit. I did take a moment to come up with a plan before rushing into danger."

"Exactly: *rushing into danger*," Snape snarled, "With no thought for your own wellbeing or anything except your insatiable need to involve yourself in affairs far above your pay-grade."

"I just told you I *did* think before I went after Remus," Rigel said, ever patient. Draco personally thought he'd get further with their Head of House by apologizing profusely and claiming to not have been thinking clearly. Telling Snape he'd purposely done something stupid wasn't exactly a good defense.

"And what thoughts, pray tell, did your puny, prepubescent brain come up with that justified so foolhardy and ill-advised a course of action, Mr. Black?"

"He's getting sarcastic with his rhetorical questions," Pansy noted.

"Not a good sign," Draco agreed.

"I thought that any perceived danger to my own person was greatly outweighed in this case by the potential danger to every other inhabitant of this castle should Remus truly have become lost to the wolf." Rigel's voice was definitely getting testier. "And I thought that the danger to my fellow students and professors was even then greatly outweighed by the potential catastrophe for creature rights that any incident involving Remus attacking Hogwarts personnel was

sure to provoke. You act like my actions were unnecessary, Professor, but they weren't. The alternative to someone stopping Remus from biting Professor Pettigrew is unthinkable."

There was a short pause, in which Draco and Pansy exchanged raised eyebrows. That wasn't exactly the argument Rigel had given them the night before. Did their friend really care so much about the politics of creature rights? Or was he playing up the bigger-picture angle in an appeal to Snape's mercenary, objective nature? Draco thought he'd missed the mark, were that the case. There was nothing objective about the way his godfather favored Rigel.

"Even if you disregard all that," Rigel went on, "Even if you tell me that other people's safety and wellbeing somehow shouldn't matter as much to me as my own, it still makes sense for me to have done what I did."

"Is that so." Snape didn't sound at all curious.

"Remus means enough to me personally that any injury to him would be an injury to me," Rigel said. This was the argument Draco recognized. He wondered if it would be so compelling the second time. "I won't argue that my intervention might have saved Remus his hearing, since I admittedly didn't know that when I decided to help. I know Remus, though, and I know that if he'd even scratched someone in that uncontrolled state he would never forgive himself. It would kill him to have harmed another person, no matter that it wasn't his fault. He would feel that him being here in a school full of innocents at this time of the month was culpable enough."

"And he'd be *right*," Snape growled. Pansy silently put her hand to her head in dismay. Draco had to concur, that was *not* the right thing to say to Rigel.

"You don't mean that," Rigel said, sounding shocked.

"Don't tell me what I mean, boy," Snape spat.

"But you... your Wolfsbane is the reason Remus is here. It's because of your breakthrough that we *know* he's not dangerous at the full moon," Rigel said, "It's why I was able to confront and contain him so easily, even though I'm just a third-year. Sir... you can't think that your potion failed last night. It didn't! Something else just overrode it for a little while and confused Remus! Please, Professor, if you don't believe in its effectiveness, how are other people to trust its effects?"

"Why should I care?" Draco could picture Snape flinging his hand dismissively as he said that.

"Because it's your name on the line too, you know," Rigel snapped, seemingly fed up, "If people distrust the New Wolfsbane and think it doesn't do what you said it does, your credibility will be shot to pieces. It will throw your entire body of work into question in the eyes of some. Surely you care about the effect a werewolf incident at Hogwarts would have on your career, since you obviously don't care about anyone else who could have been hurt last night." The last was said with a tone bordering on disapproval.

"I care about how *you* could have been hurt last night, you stupid child!" Snape was roaring now, and Draco couldn't help but flinch back from the door a bit at the sudden shout. "Everyone else can go to hell as far as I'm concerned. You're the one I put two and a half years of time and attention into! You're the one who begged to be taken under my wing! The one I gave advanced potions lessons to far before most Masters would have given a student the time of day. The one I agreed to make my apprentice in January at only thirteen years of age-or had you forgotten that the trial period we agreed on would be up in just a few short months? I must say your latest behavior does not give me much reassurance in the matter of your good sense, Mr. Black. Perhaps I've wasted my time, after all, and you'd prefer to throw your life away at the first opportunity instead of dedicating it to any work of true import."

"I-you-that's not fair," Rigel got out, but it was clear the heat was entirely extinguished from his voice. "Of course I still want to be your

apprentice. I just-you can't make me choose potions over everything else. I would choose it over most things, you know that, but... when someone I care about is in trouble I can't refuse to help them by claiming to be saving my own life to help other people later on. That's nonsensical."

"It certainly isn't-

"You're saying that if someone you cared about was in danger- Draco, say he was kidnapped by ransomers-and for some reason Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy were unable to do anything, you would just, what? Shrug your shoulders? Ask someone who wasn't as good at potions as you are to risk their life to save Draco?"

"I am a grown wizard, Rigel," Snape said. He sounded weary all of a sudden. "When I need to enter a dangerous situation I do so fully prepared to handle whatever lies ahead."

"Why can't you see that I was prepared to handle this?" Rigel asked, "Potions isn't the only thing I'm good for, you know."

Draco was startled to hear Snape let out a bitter laugh, "What I would have given to hear you say that at any other time."

"I live to aggravate, Sir," Rigel said, a wryly amused tone entering his voice as well.

"I hope you give equal amounts of frustration to everyone you know, Mr. Black," Snape shot back, "I should be highly put out to discover that you'd reserved an uneven share of it for me."

"Ask Draco sometime how often I drive him to gritted teeth, Professor," Rigel said, a bit of sheepishness in his voice.

"Perhaps I shall ask him now-if he and Miss Parkinson are finished eavesdropping at the door, that is."

Draco and Pansy both winced, but caught was caught. There'd be no sneaking off surreptitiously now.

The door swung open and Draco hoped he looked perfectly at ease as he sauntered into the small office. "Finished if you are, Sir," he said, grinning up at his godfather in the same impish way he'd used to great effect at a much younger age.

"You guys waited for me?" Rigel looked utterly surprised to see them still there.

"Just in case we needed to rush in and silence you before you said something really idiotic, Rigel," Pansy said, smiling in a helpful way.

"In that case, you missed your cue, Miss Parkinson," Snape snorted, "Several times."

"My apologies, Professor Snape." Pansy dipped a small curtsy that Draco was sure none of the other girls their age could pull off so thoughtlessly. "It's so difficult to hear anything through antique oak."

"Salazar Slytherin designed the acoustics in the adjacent hallway specifically so that students awaiting their punishment would be able to hear clearly the cries of the student being disciplined before them," Snape informed her.

"How interesting," Pansy murmured, face full of guile.

"Are you going to give me detention?" Rigel asked suddenly.

Draco tried valiantly not to gape. What kind of idiot tempted their Head of House so blatantly? Why was he cursed with such embarrassingly unsubtle friends?

"What I'm going to give you is a chance to convince me that these past two years have not been in vain," Snape sneered. "There are six weeks until the end of term. That is how long you have to assure

me that you've the proper temperament for the responsibilities and expectations any apprentice of mine must meet."

Draco mentally groaned. He could tell by the fervent determination that was suddenly radiating on his empathic radar that his friend was planning to barricade himself in his lab until winter break.

"I won't let you down, Sir," Rigel said, his calm, assured expression betraying none of the desperate conviction that was bubbling underneath. It amazed Draco sometimes that other people thought Rigel cold.

"He won't be starting until tomorrow, unfortunately," Draco cut in, placing his hand on Rigel's shoulder proprietarily, "Today Rigel's atonement allotment had been booked by his friends in payment for scaring the life out of us yesterday."

"Oh, has it?" Rigel asked, amused.

"Certainly," Pansy sniffed, "You apologized to us first, after all, so our vengeance... ah. penance, that is, must come before Professor Snape's."

"What will we be doing today?" Rigel asked, looking with trepidation between Draco and Pansy, seeming to have forgotten Snape was still standing there. Good, Draco thought with a smirk, let him recognize who he should really be paying attention to.

"Dueling," Draco said, crossing his arms, "If you think you're up for it, that is. I know a real wizard is leagues beyond your usual prey-I promise, we won't be as easy to take down as some old werewolf."

His friend affected a fearful expression, glancing up at Professor Snape with nervous hesitation. "I really shouldn't just rush into danger like that, Draco. My life is more important than a duel with you and Pansy, after all-"

"Get out," Snape scowled, sweeping his robes around him imperiously, "I don't want to see any of you until the school week resumes."

"Yes, Professor," they chorused, hurrying out the door without further delay.

"Are we really going to duel?" Rigel asked once they'd traversed a far enough difference from Snape's office, "Or did you just say that to diffuse the tension?"

"Are you accusing us of lying to a teacher?" Pansy asked, pressing a hand to her heart in dismay.

"Never." Rigel shook his head. "Don't know what I was thinking. Shall we go and change, then?"

They turned toward the Slytherin common room at the next intersection. Upon reaching the dorms, Pansy peeled off into the room she shared with Millicent, and Rigel and Draco continued on to their own.

When they entered, Draco immediately bit back a curse. A cloying, insistent emotion was battering at his empathy, and he wanted nothing to do with it. He hastily tried muting his sense with the Occlumency he'd been practicing, but he wasn't yet good enough to block it out completely. Resigning himself to feeling slightly nauseated, Draco hurried toward his trunk as quickly and quietly as he could.

He grabbed his loose training attire and began changing as swiftly as he was able, pointedly not looking in the direction of his roommate's hangings. After he shrugged on his lightweight tunic he realized Rigel, the blessed idiot, was taking his sweet time gathering up his clothing and looked to be planning on changing in the bathroom.

Draco threw a pair of socks at Rigel with impeccable aim. As they bounced off his friend's head, Rigel whipped around and frowned at

him like *he* was the idiot.

"What?" Rigel said, standing.

Draco motioned frantically at the four-poster bed across the room, where the hangings were drawn shut rather pointedly.

"Oh, is Theo sleeping?" Rigel whispered, looking and feeling apologetic.

"Sleep-" Draco bit back a groan of disbelief. Only Rigel. Shaking his head, Draco left the room posthaste, unable to stand another moment of the clenching, twisting sweetness that was trying to invade his head.

It was a few long minutes before his friend joined him in the hallway. Rigel's raised eyebrow as he asked why Draco hadn't gone ahead to the common room was the straw that did it.

"Because I didn't want Pansy to hear me tell you what a complete idiot you are!" Draco whisper-shouted as he glanced about to make sure no one would overhear them.

"What have I done now?" Rigel asked, genuinely nonplussed.

"Rigel, when a bloke has his hangings drawn in the middle of the day, what do you think that means?" Draco said, rubbing his forehead.

Rigel actually blinked in confusion. "I... thought he was napping. You think he was studying or something? I wasn't making that much... noise... oh. It-he-oh."

Draco sighed. At least he didn't have to spell it out.

"Really?" Rigel wrinkled his nose as though completely put-off by the very idea.

Draco snorted. As though Rigel had never-he cut the thought off. It was... no. Just no.

"I've never noticed him-I mean-" It was almost amusing to see his stoic friend so flustered. "He didn't used to do that, did he?"

What did Rigel want, a timeline? Embarrassed, Draco shrugged. "Guess he discovered himself this summer. Can we not talk about it anymore? Just... be more aware, okay?"

Rigel nodded seriously, every plane of his face a study in carefully disguised horror. It was have been hilarious, if it weren't so odd. Surely Rigel had-no, no, still not going there.

Draco shook his head to clear it. Maybe his empathy was getting stronger if he was still getting echoes of a strange curiosity all the way in the hall.

"Pansy must be waiting," he muttered, turning to lead the way out into the common room before things got any more weird.

Is was a bit surreal, meeting in the middle of the day all dressed in their running clothes. The common room was bustling with students attempting to rush through their Sunday homework, and it was several moments before they spotted Pansy being clucked over by two upperclassmen Draco definitely could have gone without seeing.

"But it doesn't suit you at all, Pansy," Rosier was saying mournfully, "The color is positively drab, my dear."

"It's built for functionality, not appearance, Aldon," Pansy said chidingly, "And there, you see? Draco and Rigel are wearing just the same."

Rosier turned to eye their plain, somewhat worn attire with equal parts confusion and distaste. Before he could issue whatever scathing comment Draco could see floating behind his sharp, oddly-

colored eyes, Rookwood, with his usual aptitude for blunting his friend's razor wit, cut in. "Are you going to play Quidditch, then?"

"They could play Quidditch in *sensible* clothing," Rosier sniffed. No doubt his definition of 'sensible' was uncannily close to the actual definition of 'flattering.'

"We're exercising, I already told you," Pansy sighed, "It would be entirely wasteful to muck about in the dirt in my dress robes, don't you agree?"

"I'm sure I wouldn't know," Rosier frowned, "What sort of exercise involves getting dirty, anyway? Are you gardening for Professor Sprout, or something?"

Draco could feel the disbelief coming from Rigel, who was gazing at Rosier is something like wonderment, but the sad truth was that Rosier likely couldn't fathom any appropriate physical activity that involved soiling one's clothing. His idea of exercise was likely limited to Quidditch, abraxan-riding, and indoor stage dueling. Draco doubted he'd ever even seen someone doing sit-ups or push-ups, much less the wide variety of calisthenics and stretches that Rigel had somewhat sadistically incorporated into their daily regimen. The only people Draco knew who did any sort of exercise, in fact, were all members of their House Quidditch teams.

"We're going running," Draco said, restraining the eye-roll he could feel building up only because before Draco made Flint's team roster he hadn't done any actual exercise, either.

"Then we stretch and build our muscle groups before practicing our footwork, then our wandwork," Pansy added, smiling.

"I knew you enjoyed the outdoors, Pansy, but I admit I didn't realize the three of you were such... enthusiasts," Rosier said, still looking a bit confused, but also radiating more interest by the second. Draco sighed inwardly. The worst thing about Rosier was his damnable curiosity.

"Oh yes, though we usually go out much earlier," Pansy said, a bit of pride showing through her smile, "It's remarkably refreshing, and energizing, as counterintuitive as it sounds. It was difficult at first, but I'd say Draco and I have come a long way since we started, haven't we?"

Draco smiled back, nodding in agreement. They weren't quite caught up to Rigel's level in terms of the strength or speed of their repetitions, but they were leaps from where they'd begun.

"Has Rigel not improved, then?" Rookwood asked, a curious light to his expression. This was why he and Rosier made such good friends, Draco decided.

Pansy laughed lightly, but Draco could feel the edge of a more pointed emotion than amusement as she said, "Rigel is leagues ahead of the two of us, I'm afraid-he's been at it much longer, after all."

As Rosier and Rookwood gazed with interest at Rigel, who was doing his best impression of an embarrassed clam, Draco tried to figure out what emotion he was getting from Pansy, exactly. It wasn't anything like jealousy or dislike. It was more like the feeling of sharp satisfaction you'd get if you were doing well at a game you particularly enjoyed playing. He didn't know why revealing that Rigel was good at exercising should bring Pansy so much enjoyment, but there it was.

He'd been getting similar feelings from Pansy all year, and he wasn't quite sure what to do about it. He'd always known Pansy was smart and good at reading people, but lately she seemed more... manipulative, almost. She gave off flashes of dark amusement when her face showed polite concern, or sometimes Draco would sense a deep, scornful boredom that clashed jarringly with her earnestly fascinated expression as she listened to an upperclassman's anecdote. Before this year, Draco would have said Pansy was like a particularly quick-witted flower: amusing but soft. Was she growing

into something sharper? Or had this facet of her character always been there, and he was only now becoming aware of her thorns?

Rosier suddenly clapped his hands together. "This is so fascinating. Can we watch?"

Now Pansy was definitely feeling smug, but her words were perfectly demure. "It won't be very exciting to see. Surely you have more important things to occupy your time?"

"What could be more important than broadening our horizons?" Rosier asked, spreading his arms grandly, "We're ever so curious about this sort of exertion. Aren't we, Rookwood? And who knows? With you three fine, upcoming scions promoting it, I'm sure it'll be all the rage in no time."

"Perhaps you should participate," Rigel suggested. Draco had to hold back a laugh at the innocent expression on his friend's face. "It's a lot of fun, once you get used to sweating."

Rosier could not stop the curl that tugged his lip upwards in instinctive disgust. "Ah, no thank you, Rigel. I'm sure we'll be content to watch."

"But perhaps we will participate next time, if it does look as fun as you say," Rookwood said, a small smirk tugging at his otherwise stony features.

"Hmm, yes, who knows?" Rosier said, looking extremely unhappy at such a prospect.

Draco decided then that Rookwood was an all right sort, despite the company he kept. At least he knew when to take his partner down a peg.

"Shall we, then?" Pansy lead their little party across the common room. Draco didn't know if this was going to be a disaster or a lark, but he did know that whatever Rosier claimed about their clothing's

unsuitability, Pansy looked all kinds of... suitable in her jogging trousers.

Even though it was chilly, the lawn was still populated by a fair few students. Suddenly Draco wasn't so sure that making a spectacle of themselves was going to be as fun as it had sounded when he suggested it. After a moment, however, he straightened his shoulders and shrugged all thoughts of the other students to the back of his mind. Malfoys did not change their plans simply because others became witness to them. If it was worth doing privately, he should not be embarrassed to do it publically. His reasons remained the same, after all, and a Malfoy's reasoning was beyond contestation.

Ignoring the curious looks they were receiving, Draco began stretching alongside Rigel and Pansy as though it were any other morning. He had to reflect that there had probably never been three people better at collectively pretending not to notice something than he, Rigel, and Pansy in that moment of calm, unruffled stretching.

The moment was broken, of course, when Rosier said, "What does that one do?"

Rigel paused mid-twist and said, "Lower-back stretch."

"Ah," Rosier said, nodding seriously.

Draco dutifully suppressed a scoff. He was nearly certain at this point that Rosier was exaggerating his ignorant fascination on purpose. The git.

They left the two upperclassman to their own devices while they made a circuit around the lake. People seemed generally content to ignore them once it was clear they weren't doing anything more interesting than going for a jog. That disregard evaporated, of course, when they returned to their starting point and Draco began leading them through their footwork drills.

Before they'd even gotten through all of them, they were interrupted by a pair of inquisitive Gryffindors who apparently weren't raised to mind their own business.

"Are those the exercises from Dueling class, Malfoy?" Weasley sidled into their space like a homeless dog sniffing for scraps. "We weren't assigned any practice, were we?"

"Some people have the dedication of character learn without being forced to, Weasley," Draco told him, not pausing in his complex shuffle even once.

"Is that why Parkinson and Rigel are following along?" the redhead asked, scratching his nose in the most plebian way Draco had ever seen. "Only they aren't even in Dueling."

"Yes," he sniffed, "In life there's this thing called taking advantage of all your resources-not that you have any resources-and that means Rigel and Pansy don't need to be enrolled in a class to reap the benefits of instruction."

"So you're tutoring your friends in what Professor Lupin teaches us," Weasley said, scowling a bit as he attempted to ignore the insult Draco had given at his expense.

"Very clever of you to figure that out," Draco drawled.

"All right, you prat, I was just making conversation-" Weasley started, but Longbottom, of all people, cut across him.

"I think it's nice, what Malfoy's doing," the lump of porridge masquerading as a pureblood scion even seemed to *mean* it.

"It isn't nice; it's practical," Draco corrected him, wondering why all of a sudden people thought Slytherins were going soft. It was all Rigel's fault, he concluded. If not for his mushy reputation Draco wouldn't have to be twice as acerbic to make up for it.

"Well either way..." Longbottom visibly steeled himself, hands shaking slightly. "Would it be all right if we joined in? I don't know much about Dueling, but maybe I could try," he trailed off in confidence at the end, looking down at his feet as though wondering how they'd brought him here.

Draco actually had to stop and stare at the Longbottom heir for a moment he was so perplexed. When had he ever been inviting to this kid? Did he think that just because he was vague acquaintances with Rigel meant Draco was by proxy his friend as well? He opened his mouth to disabuse the poor, disturbed young man of this notion, but predictably Rigel seized the moment for his own misguided sense of fairness.

"That's a great idea, Neville," the dark-haired boy said, "We practice so often together, our moves are becoming predictable. A little new blood will be just the thing, won't it, guys?"

Pansy tilted her head in that politely calculating way of hers and nodded slowly. "Why not? It would be a good chance to diversify our range of tactics."

Draco had to pause at that. It *would* be nice to go up against new opponents; it would be nice seeing Rigel trounce somebody else for a change, at that. Draco didn't know how his friend was improving so quickly, but he'd shot ahead of Draco and Pansy in terms of fluidity and speed in the last few weeks. Draco would accuse him of sneaking in extra practices if he didn't spend most of every single day with Rigel. He supposed some people just had a knack for certain things.

"It might not be fair." Draco couldn't resist the small smirk that slid into place as he eyed Longbottom and Weasley in their weekend robes. "We practice daily, and keep in good condition." The unspoken 'unlike you' did not go unscoiled upon by the more freckled of the Gryffindor duo.

"Everyone starts somewhere," Rigel said evenly, "And Ron is in Dueling with you, right? So he can help Neville with the steps. They'll be at our pace in no time."

Draco shot Rigel an annoyed look-surely he was not suggesting they start including Weasley and Longbottom in their morning practices. That was *their* time.

"We could make it a weekly thing," Pansy jumped in, sending Draco a reassuring glance. At least one of his friends could be counted upon to read his mind, then. "If it goes well, that is."

Rookwood stepped forward from where he and Rosier had been keeping a respectful distance. "In that case, why don't we join now as well? From what I've witnessed, you three do seem to know what you're doing."

"The more the merrier," Rigel said, and Draco doubted he was even being ironic.

"How will it work, then?" Weasley said, eyeing the five Slytherins with a mildly flattering amount of caution, "Should we starting doing all those jumping things and push-up exercises?"

"You can join in those next week," Pansy said briskly, "For now you should stretch, focusing on your legs, arms, and wrists."

As Pansy lead the four newcomers through a beginners stretching routine, Draco pulled Rigel aside and asked, "Are we really doing this? It's going to slow down our training."

"Only for a short while," Rigel said, smiling a bit, "And we still have our weekday practices. This is just some extra inter-house cooperation."

Draco snorted, "More like an inter-house charity project."

"You can put it on your resume," Rigel said blithely.

He had to laugh at that. Wait until he told his parents he'd started a dueling charity for the tragically under-trained at Hogwarts. "What shall we call it?" he asked, grinning, "I need an appropriately impressive title to put after 'President and CEO' on the business cards."

Rigel thought for a moment, "How about the Slytherin Association of Defense?"

"You want people to call it 'SAD?'" Draco lifted an eyebrow at Rigel's innocuous expression. He could feel the amusement flitting through Rigel's mind as easily as the sun shining through the clouds.

"Then how about the Defense Association For Teens?" Rigel smirked.

"'DAFT' is worse than 'SAD.'" Draco rolled his eyes.

"Then what about Draco's Ultimate Life Lessons?" Rigel suggested.

"Now you're just being ridiculous," Draco laughed. How did Rigel come up with this stuff? "It has to be simple, easy to remember, and explicit. Let's call it the Dueling Club."

Rigel winced, "Remember the dueling club from last year?"

"Oh. Well, we don't want it associated with Lockhart." Draco frowned. "Should we just call it the Defense Association, then?"

Rigel tilted his head in exaggerated thoughtfulness. "That's perfect. And we can call it the DA for short, and when anyone asks what the DA stands for, you know what we'll tell them?"

Draco was almost afraid to ask.

"We'll say it stands for Draco's Army," Rigel said, nodding sagely.

He groaned at the utter cheesiness of that idea. "Just go back to stretching, Rigel, and leave the thinking to me."

"Yes, sir!" Rigel saluted him with a jaunty wink and quickstepped over to the others before Draco had a chance to reply. Honestly, his friends were quite ridiculous sometimes. Draco's Army indeed.

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Rigel was inundated with mail on Monday morning. The perfunctory post-Halloween 'are-you-alive?' letter from Archie was expected, as was the short, concerned-yet-proud note from Sirius, who'd apparently heard the story from Remus already. At least her uncle's timeliness saved her the trouble of telling Sirius herself, though Rigel knew her reply would have to be at once apologetic and self-deprecating in order to properly downplay the whole ordeal.

The missives attached to Archie's letter were a bit less expected, though not unwelcome. Leo had written yet another long, somewhat rambling letter by the looks of it. Rigel found herself more and more often becoming an ear to his troubles, and wondered if he was becoming a bit overwhelmed by his position. On the other hand, he might just be a remarkably poor letter-writer.

The last letter was from Caelum Lestrangle, and Rigel had to suppress an incredulous laugh as she hastily tucked it away with the others to read later in the day. The curiosity burned at her all through her first two classes, though, and when she finally time-turned back to Advanced Potions after lunch, she stepped into the first unassuming alcove and ripped the letters open with the tip of her wand.

Harry,

Tired of America yet? When are you coming back to the alleys? It's rather dull here without you. I haven't beat anyone into the dirt in ages-I do hope you're practicing, and not just that stuffy exhibition style they teach in schools these days, otherwise I may be obliged to

remind you how ineffectual that ridged nonsense is in real life. We'll have to find a new practice spot, though. The Phoenix opened its courtyard to the folk who lost housing units in the latest Ministry raid, so it'll be a bit crowded until at least the new year, I'd wager. Maybe you can come to my house for our lessons-that's right! I've got my own digs now. Da has been pestering me to get out of the house and find a job for ages. I haven't time for what he calls 'gainful employment,' of course, but my unofficial full-time gig does come with certain benefits, at least in the homestead arena.

Da talks about you often, and wants to know what your summer plans are-I wouldn't mind knowing myself, to tell the truth. Will you be wrapped up in another of your potions projects? Or maybe you'd like to do something more fun. There's a tournament in the lower alleys mid-July, and the organizers aren't exactly meticulous about the names that appear on the entrance forms. Might be a good chance to test your progress. If you do end up working with my Da again, be a sport and tell him I'm working at Ma's clinic. She's covering for me, keeping the lectures on 'wasting time with those ragtag friends of yours' to a minimum. I'm not complaining or anything; I brought it on myself when I decided not to tell him. He doesn't understand the lower alleys. He tries not to think about how many of Ma's relatives are in the court of rogues, and his station wouldn't let him approve of the work I do even if he were to know of it. I guess I don't need to tell you what it's like to keep secrets from your family-sometimes I think you know more than I do, on that account.

Well, I won't bore you with more maudlin musings at the moment. Plenty of time to wear your ears out when you come home. Time enough to wear your feet out, too! You'd better not have gone soft at your prissy American school, Harry. I'll set Marek on you if you have-he's been dying to teach you proper knife-fighting.

With those pleasant prospects to look forward to, stay safe, and I'll see you soon.

-Leo

Rigel shook her head as she folded the letter neatly and tucked it away. Definitely a terrible letter-writer. Leo sounded incredibly bored, and she wasn't sure if that was an improvement over his tired, somewhat bogged down tone in the previous letter or not. She didn't want her friend to be overly troubled, but a bored Lionel Hurst could not possibly be a good thing.

Lestrangle's letter was, if anything, at least a refreshing change from her usual correspondence.

Potter,

What have you been doing all semester? I haven't heard a lick of news about that tacky brewing technique you droned on about at the showcase. If you think you can keep the research all hush-hush now that you're not interning at the Guild anymore you've got another thing coming. That process you published was completely nonsensical, and if you don't send me your actual notes on the subject I shall tout you as a fraud to every influential Potions Master my parents are acquainted with-which is quite a lot, in case your feeble American education doesn't teach you about important things like Society.

What are you doing this winter? Wasting away in some mediocre lab, no doubt. The labs here at Durmstrang are state of the art, and it's almost a shame I'll have to leave them when I graduate this spring, but of course I'll be moving on to bigger and better things. Everyone here is scrambling to pick a specialty before they graduate, but naturally I've already secured a proper apprenticeship for the summer. Master Whitaker clearly recognizes talent when he sees it, as he's requested I accompany him on a research trip to Chile this June. If I show merit he promises to keep me on until I've taken my Mastery. I'll have my credentials before my nineteenth birthday, I don't doubt. Not as impressive as Master Snape's record, but I don't think they should let candidates take the Mastery exam before they've even had a real apprenticeship. What good is a seventeen-year-old Master without any experience? No doubt you're one of those arrogant twits who thinks you can pass your

examinations right after you graduate school, as Snape did. Well forget that nonsense right now and resign yourself to an apprenticeship like everyone else, you self-centered novice. Maybe if you're very good I'll let you be my apprentice once I have my Mastery. You can clean my cauldrons. If you haven't blown yourself up with your ridiculous tinkering before then.

Are you coming to the gala? Mother is letting me go again this year. I was politely asked not to show my face last year, something about an unfortunate incident involving your stupid cousin at the previous year's gala. I need someone to insult besides your dratted 'relative,' though. The twerp makes it entirely too easy.

You'd better send me those notes! And if you have any new breakthroughs I better be the first to hear about them. What's the point of pretending to be your friend, otherwise?

Don't take all month about it.

Your future Master,

-C. Lestrangle

Rigel allowed herself an incredulous laugh before tucking that letter away as well. Only Lestrangle would be such an obnoxious jerk and still manage to make himself sound desperate for attention. She would have to tell him that, when she wrote back to inform him that she wouldn't be his apprentice if he were the last Potions Master alive. She'd start her own Guild before that happened, in fact.

Reading the letters hadn't taken nearly as long as she thought it would, so she was significantly early for her Advanced Potions lesson. She didn't have anything better to do, however, and she certainly shouldn't be showing her face anywhere else in the castle while she was ostensibly attending Transfigurations, so she slipped down to Lab One under her invisibility cloak. She could at least get some studying done in the hallway before Professor Snape got there to unlock the door.

When she quietly arrived in the corridor leading to the Lab, however, she saw the door standing wide open, with stark, unforgiving light flooding out into the hallway. She slowed her approach, wondering what Snape was doing there so early-he had a class, didn't he? She was about to take her cloak off and step into the light when she heard a cultured voice that was definitely not Snape's acerbic drawl say, "Are you going to ignore me all morning, then?"

"As long as I am able." That was certainly Snape's resigned reverberation.

"It wasn't my idea to come here, Severus." Rigel recognized the other voice by its deceptively light remonstrance, and had to wonder what Lucius Malfoy was doing at Hogwarts in the middle of the school day.

"It was your idea to cancel my morning classes in the guise of securing my opinion on the state of Hogwarts' wards, though, was it not, Lucius?"

"Ah, but I *have* come to entreat your opinion on the matter. In any case, I thought you'd enjoy a break from your tedious duties. Do not tell me you've begun to suddenly enjoy teaching after all these years."

Rigel kept her cloak firmly around her and crept silently closer to the door. She really shouldn't be eavesdropping, and she had no actual reason to be suspicious of two old friends having a casual conversation in the dungeons, but there was something screaming at her instincts that this wasn't all it seemed. It was too convenient that Malfoy happened to stop by Snape's domain just after a mysterious force caused a creature attack at Hogwarts. Something suspicious in her gut nudged her closer to the doorway, insisting that she pay close attention to whatever came next.

"My opinion is that the wards are just fine, and that the incident on Halloween had absolutely nothing to do with the age of the castle's magic, as you very well know. I do not have time to indulge this

fiction today, and would appreciate if you could make your fake report to the other governors and leave." Snape was moving briskly back and forth across the lab, taking ingredients from various cupboards and pulling out equipment according to some mental checklist only he was privy to.

Malfoy was leaning against one of the spotless workspaces, watching Snape circle the room lazily as he said, "I'm sure I don't know what you mean. As a member of the Board of Education I have a vested interest in ensuring the security at Hogwarts remains unmatched in the world."

"And as *his* representative you have a vested interest in making my life more difficult than it needs to be," Snape scoffed.

"Not *more* than necessary," Malfoy gently stressed, "You must agree that getting to the bottom of this incident is in everyone's best interest right now. Dumbledore doesn't need any more bad press, and we certainly don't need traitors running about willy-nilly, sparking phenomena of national curiosity and living untouched by the vengeance they've so unwisely earned."

"I told you I don't know that it's him," Snape said with the air of someone repeating something for the umpteenth time, "Any number of things could have caused the madness we witnessed on Hallows Eve."

"If he had but a moment to explain to our lord what he thinks he's doing here, I'm sure we could clear up this little mystery in no time," Malfoy said, a venom behind his mild words belying the innocent nature of his suggestion. Who were they talking about? Someone at Hogwarts who shouldn't be?

"I can't touch him while he's holed up in this school." Snape had stopped gathering ingredients and stood, scowling, at an angle that let him view both Malfoy and the door. It would have been the perfect position to watch for eavesdroppers-if an eavesdropper hadn't been under an invisibility cloak, at least. "You know that. *He* knows that.

Even the rat knows that, which is why he's made his bed here in the first place. He's only hiding in plain sight because he knows the Party has no power here. Dumbledore swallowed some half-spun tale about repentance and redemption, no doubt. I argued against his placement, but I have limited sway over the appointments- obviously, or the wolf would not be begging at our door, either."

Rigel rolled her eyes at Snape's callous reduction of Remus to his condition, but largely ignored that comment in focusing on the rest of what he'd said. The only person she could think of at Hogwarts that was a Party member besides Snape was Pettigrew. At least, he was the only new addition to the staff that fit the description. It sounded very much like Peter Pettigrew had come to Hogwarts not as a spy for Riddle, as she'd half-assumed, but rather to find refuge from the powerful statesman. And Riddle suspected Pettigrew had something to do with what happened on Halloween, apparently.

"He must leave sometime," Malfoy said, an annoyed frown crossing his elegant features, "Perhaps over the holidays we can catch him out."

"I doubt it," Snape sneered, "For all his utter ineptitude, he is not careless. He's too cowardly to make a foolhardy mistake. I watch him carefully, but of course he knows I am watching. He may well remain on the premises over break, as well."

Malfoy rubbed his temples delicately, "Well he will want a full report, in any case. Your eyewitness account of the Halloween debacle as well, I don't doubt. Can you get away?"

"Not before the holiday," Snape flicked a hand dismissively, resuming his collection of materials.

"You must come to the gala, then," Malfoy said, relaxing a bit as the conversation moved away from serious waters.

"If I must," Snape snorted, "Who's hosting, again?"

"The Parkinsons," Malfoy said, sounding amused for some reason.

"Salazar save me from that woman's incessant matchmaking attempts," Snape muttered into the standard size three beaker he was inspecting for dust.

"Take a date, then." Malfoy's grin was unrelenting.

"Don't be absurd." Snape's face twisted in distaste. "I won't be staying long enough to entertain a guest."

"You're never any fun, Severus," Malfoy sighed.

"You forget how dangerous it is for your health when I have *fun*, Lucius." Snape straightened his shoulders somewhat predatorily. "Perhaps you'd like to remember at the end of term."

Malfoy grimaced, but Rigel thought it was good-natured. "I remember just fine, old friend. No need to emasculate me in the ring again-once was more than enough, and Narcissa still laughs anytime someone mentions peacocks."

"A common occurrence, I'd imagine, as you keep a herd of the beasts on your property," Snape smirked.

"A reminder." Malfoy shrugged unconcernedly. "I shall not forget the lesson in humility you dealt me that day. What callow youths we were, Severus."

"Speak for yourself, Sir Peacock," Snape said, drawing his wand to check the time. "I have an appointment at ten. I trust you can see your way to the gates without antagonizing anyone else?"

"Oh I don't know." Malfoy pretended to consider. "Perhaps I'll stop by McGonagall's classroom and tell her I'm doing a surprise quality of education audit while I'm in the neighborhood."

"Do as you wish, but recall that if you do antagonize her into transfiguring you, Narcissa is not here to change you back."

That was argument enough for Malfoy, it seemed, who began to move toward the door. Rigel scrambled backwards as quietly as she was able, but she still could have sworn Snape's eyes shot to exactly the spot she had been standing in for a few agonizing seconds. He didn't say anything, however, and Rigel could only hope he hadn't thought it necessary to use Occlumency to scan the area. She ducked around the corner in time to avoid colliding with Mr. Malfoy as he swept toward the nearest staircase, and waited an agonizing ten whole minutes before carefully stowing her invisibility cloak in an expanded pocket and making her way as casually as possible back toward Lab One.

It was a good thing they were going over a potion she'd already studied that day, as Rigel's mind was not as focused on brewing as it should have been. There were too many interesting implications to consider. Pettigrew had somehow betrayed the SOW Party and sought asylum at Hogwarts where Riddle's vengeance couldn't reach him. Whatever he'd done must have been pretty bad, to make him think running to Dumbledore was his best option.

She wondered if she should tell someone-Remus, maybe-that Pettigrew had potentially switched sides again, and might be in trouble. They weren't exactly friends anymore, but as Rigel understood it that was because when Pettigrew chose the SOW Party he discontinued his associations with the Marauders. There must be something left of the friendly Gryffindor boy her parents had once described, though. No one betrayed the Party; it was a for-life sort of commitment. To try and back out was social and economic suicide. Plenty of examples had been made to that effect in the early days of the Party's ascendancy, including some of what used to be the most powerful, wealthy families in Wizarding society.

Then again, was it really her business? A part of her said no, nothing was her business unless it directly related to her family or her potions work. A different, blossoming part of her hesitated to be so indifferent, however. If Pettigrew did have something to do with Halloween, then he was at least indirectly a threat to Remus, and

possibly a problem with the potential to impact thousands of people all over the country, if his influence on the creatures of Hogwarts was any indication. She had no proof that this was the case, but... perhaps she could acquire some? Riddle must know something about whatever was going on. He was presumably going to discuss said happenings at the gala with Professor Snape, in fact. Since she already knew the meeting was to take place perhaps she could simply... keep an eye out that night for anything of interest. It couldn't hurt to listen in for a short while-if only to make sure Riddle was keeping his promise about not interfering at Hogwarts. That was undeniably her business... right?

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Rigel put Malfoy's visit out of her mind until two weeks later, when its consequences unceremoniously marched through the front doors.

"Who're they?" Millicent asked from across the table.

Rigel looked up with the others to see a group of adult witches and wizards gathered at the entrance to the Great Hall.

"Ward experts," Draco said knowledgably, "They're here to inspect the Hogwarts defenses by order of the Board of Governors. My father commissioned them personally after that mess on Halloween."

"And the goblins?" Theo asked, raising an eyebrow.

Draco frowned and stood in his seat a little to peer over the heads of his peers, "Oh. I don't know. My father didn't say anything about goblins in his letter."

"Perhaps they know something about what happened that night," Pansy said, tilting her head consideringly.

"No need for them to come all this way to provide information," Blaise said, frowning, "Goblins don't trouble themselves for wizards very often, and certainly never without a vested interest of their own."

"Yeah, not like they care if a bunch of wizard kids get eaten by spiders," Theo said, shuddering a bit.

"Hogwarts is home to tons of really rare and valuable magical objects, though," Pansy pointed out, "Some of them are probably goblin-made. Maybe they want to personally see that those objects are well-protected."

Rigel thought that argument sounded a bit weak. If Goblins cared about goblin-made artifacts in that way, they were just as likely to be glad if those objects became vulnerable. Treasures that were well guarded by wizards weren't any use to goblins, after all.

She gazed thoughtfully at the group that was now milling about the Great Hall freely, looking up and around at infrastructure and wards that were presumably visible to their experienced eyes. Was it all an act? A ploy to excuse Malfoy's presence in the school those weeks ago? Looking at the goblins' fierce expressions, she doubted it. There was a deadly earnestness to their focus as they swept the hall, clawed hands firmly clasped around strange looking devices that beeped in low increments.

One passed by their table, and Rigel felt her stomach drop with alarm as its little device began beeping like mad just as it drew abreast of her seat. The goblin swung toward her in a move almost too fast to track, one hand leaving the device to seize the front of her robes and yank her bodily out of her seat.

Up close its face was arresting in its snarling suspicion. She brought both hands up automatically in a move drilled into her by Leo, one on the goblin's wrist and one on the outside of its elbow. The arm attached to the hand holding her robes was thin, but strong. The joint below her right hand was just brittle. It wouldn't take too much

pressure to snap it backwards, should it come to that. All of this information went through her head in an instant, but Rigel was nothing if not infinitely cautious. Instead of devolving into sudden violence, she braced her feet and lifted her chin, using her height in a weak attempt at intimidation as she said, "What?"

"You have an artifact of power on you," the goblin ground out, the words sounding like gears grinding without oil to slick them.

"So?" Rigel said, more calm than she felt. Inside she was trying to figure out what had set the little device off. Her time-turner? Her invisibility cloak? The Marauder's Map? She had all three on her at the moment. Depending on what the device was designed to detect, it could be any of them, or the combination of all three.

"Let's have a look," the goblin grinned nastily, raising the device with his other hand and pointing it at her person.

It began to beep faster and faster as it approached her sternum, where the time-turner nestled safely beneath her clothes. The goblin tossed the device aside and reached greedily for the neck of her robes, but his fingers had barely grazed her collar when a pale, long-fingered hand clamped down on its wrist and jerked the goblin back. She just remembered to let go of the creature's bony joint before it was thrown several feet away from her.

Professor Snape stepped menacingly between Rigel and the goblin, his tall, black-draped form more comforting than she would like to admit.

"You are here to search the castle, not its inhabitants," Snape said. His voice was soft, but his words carried in the utter silence that Rigel now noticed ruled the hall.

"It takes a wizard to use the artifact," the goblin spat, its device now back in its hands, "The boy lit up the magometer. He's *guilty*."

This, Rigel thought as whispers began to travel the hall, was not going to be good PR. Perhaps she would take up the Weasley twins on their personal image offer after all.

"My student carries a Ministry-sanctioned magical device on his person that has nothing to do with your ineffectual investigation," Snape said, his tone entirely dismissive. "I suggest you move on with your task if you don't want to be hauled in front of an inter-species relations committee to answer for the brutality you displayed toward this child of thirteen."

She could not see the goblin around Snape's torso, but she could hear the frustration in its voice when it growled, "Not until I see the artifact. You could be protecting-"

"Protecting the very thing that is a danger to my students? Do not insult me again, *goblin* ." Rigel could see the shiver go through the crowd at those words, and imagined the fury on Snape's face must be something to behold.

"I must ascertain its purpose," the goblin insisted, though it certainly sounded less eager to cross her Head of House now.

"Its purpose is to keep my student *alive*," Snape sneered, "By all means, remove it from his person for your little inspection and explain to your superiors how you broke the Goblin Peace Accords by murdering a wizard child in cold blood in front of a thousand witnesses."

The goblin spluttered, and she could see its feet slid back in clear panic. Rigel could feel the heaviness of the stares now leveled at her, and while she applauded Snape for defending her education so thoroughly, she wondered if claiming she needed some kind of life-sustaining medical device was really the only way to distract from her time-turner. She was going to have a lot of explaining to do, at this rate.

Professor Dumbledore finally stepped down from the dais and began serenely leading the group of ward-inspectors out of the hall, the goblins following grudgingly after.

Professor Snape turned to Rigel and inspected her person quickly before giving her a satisfied nod and a gesture to regain her seat. She sat down slowly, still trying to catch up to everything that had just happened. The goblins were looking for something specific, an artifact of significant magical power, and they had good reason to suspect it was at Hogwarts, being used by a wizard in a way that presumably had something to do with driving magical creatures mad. She could see why that might concern the goblins, but she wondered vaguely how they knew about such an artifact before her mind jerked her back to the most vital of present concerns.

If Pettigrew was indeed involved in the Halloween debacle as Snape and Malfoy suspected, then *he* had the artifact, and he was sitting right there at the Head Table- *no don't look! Time for that later.* *Focus, Rigel* . The goblins had left the hall to search the rest of the castle, which meant they might not find the artifact if Pettigrew had it on him, which meant it might be all her fault if something awful happened because the goblins had left because of her- *no, that's not right, concentrate!* Professor Snape had dramatically stepped in to shield her from the goblin but in doing so had essentially prevented the goblins from continuing their search in the Great Hall, effectively protecting Pettigrew as well. Why. Theory one: her Head of House valued her education so highly that it was more important than stopping a potential uprising of magical creatures- *false* . Theory two: Professor Snape had his own, secret reasons for not wanting Pettigrew found out right there in the hall in front of everyone. *Possible* . He wanted the artifact for himself? *No-Riddle wants it* . Rigel felt her eyes grow wide as all the pieces came together at once.

Riddle had tasked Pettigrew with finding or retrieving some kind of artifact. Pettigrew had found it, and, instead of returning to Riddle, had gotten it into his head to run to Hogwarts instead. Maybe he was

power-hungry. Maybe he was an idiot. Probably he was both, Rigel decided. This artifact meant something to the goblins, but it was important enough that the Ministry was (maybe, likely) conducting raids on the lower alleys in an attempt to track it down. All this started only a few months ago, however, which means it was an artifact that hadn't been discovered until recently, or at least had gone missing from its usual location recently.

A stolen artifact... Rigel's mind flashed to that summer, a redheaded curse-breaker casually mentioning a break in at a high-profile archeological site. It flashed again to the night of Halloween, the sight of a pudgy professor startled out of his reverie, something round catching the light as it rolled out of sight. A niggling memory dug at her mind until, with a burst of realization, she saw a panicked-face Pettigrew rooting around in the alley dust for a grubby paper sack, looking apoplectic despite being barely bruised by her clumsy collision. She was whirling with newfound knowledge, dizzy as the strands of chance and circumstances pulled tight in sudden irrefutability, settling into a picture that staggered even as it awed.

A hand on her shoulder jerked her violently back to the present, and her brain finally grasped the most immediate and insistent of concerns. Her time-turner secret was safe, but now everyone thought she was on magical life-support. Right. On the bright side, no one thought she was responsible for the mess on Halloween, which is how things could have gone without Snape's timely (if ultimately self-serving) assistance.

"Are you okay, Rigel?" Pansy asked quietly from her left.

Rigel told her head to nod evenly, but only managed a half-coordinated jerk that she doubted reassured anyone. Trying again, she cleared her throat. "I'm fine. Thanks. Sorry. That was... weird, wasn't it?"

"Uh... yeah," Theo said, leaning across the table in a parody of discretion, "No offense, Rigel, but what on earth is going on? What was Snape talking about?"

"I'd... rather not talk about it." It came out more as a plea than a statement, but her friends-her amazing, too-nice friends-settled back as though it had been a command.

The rest of the meal, they casually shielded her from the curious and mildly horrified inquiries of their fellow students, and despite her gratitude all Rigel could think about was how she was going to lie to them when the numbness wore off. Whatever Snape's intentions, he had played into her hands rather efficiently, if cruelly. Draco already thought Rigel Black sickly, plagued with some sort of chronic illness that kept him from feeling comfortable in his own skin. If a few others thought Rigel was fragile, vulnerable in some way that healthy children would find difficult to conceptualize, it might be for the best. Perhaps some of them would keep their distance, would bow to the instinctual defense mechanism that tells the brain not to get attached to wilting flowers and old people.

And maybe, if everything went terribly wrong one day and she and Archie lost control of their artifice, Rigel Black could quietly succumb to an undescribed malady that everyone had sort of seen coming for a while. She tried not to think about the coldness it would take to slowly, methodically break her friends' hearts. She tried, but she couldn't flinch away from the despairing look in Draco's eyes, nor the trembling fear in Pansy's elegant fingers. It had only been five minutes, and already she could not bear to watch their pained confusion. Years of this... it could not be. She would have to explain it some other way, at least for those who were already too attached to keep their distance.

They made it as far as the common room before her friends rounded on her in denial and desperation.

"Rigel, what-"

"Your not, please say you're not-"

"-can't do this to us, Rigel, you *can't* -"

"Stop." Rigel took two deep breaths as her friends all visibly fought to control themselves. "Sorry. I just-sorry." She blew out a breath. "I'm doing this wrong. I'm fine, you guys. Just fine, I'm not-not dying, I promise."

"How can you say that?" Draco snapped, "What in Merlin's name qualifies as fine on your sociopathic planet?"

"I am," Rigel insisted, quietly but firmly, "I mean it. I'm not-whatever you're thinking, I'm *not* ."

"Professor Snape said-" Pansy cut herself off with a hollow laugh, "Well, we all heard what he said. What did he mean?"

"He was just exaggerating to get the goblin to leave me alone," Rigel said, running a shaking hand through her hair, "I do have a magical device on me. But it's not-it's not life-sustaining, or anything. Professor Snape was protecting me, is all. He knew I didn't want to show it to the goblin."

"Why not?" Blaise said, a dark frown on his face, "What could be worth such an extreme claim?"

"I'm not supposed to show people my device," Rigel said, honest in that at least, "Not supposed to have it, really. It's... experimental. It's something only I have, and to let news of it leak out would be... a bad idea."

It sounded incredibly lame to her ears, too vague to be believable, but perhaps she had underestimated her mysteriousness in the eyes of her friends, because they slowly began to relax before her eyes.

"So you're okay-or as okay as you usually are," Draco clarified, blowing out a slow breath. "Good. That's good. Don't ever scare us like that again."

"Blame Professor Snape this time," Rigel said, shrugging uncomfortably.

"Is that device why you never change in front of us?" Theo asked suddenly, a look of guilty realization on his face.

"Part of the reason, yes," Rigel said. At least, it was part of the reason this year.

"I am a terrible person." Theo's face screwed up in dismay. "I take back all the things I said about you being cock-shy-"

"THEODORE!" Pansy and Millicent shrieked in unified shock and disgust.

"Well I just meant-" he attempted to backpedal as Draco and Blaise groaned in shared embarrassment.

"It's okay," Rigel said, relaxing into a smile and shaking her head, "I don't really mind. If it was someone else, I'd think they were odd, too."

"Yeah, but..." Theo attempted an awkward smile. "I'll get you an awesome Yule present, okay? The best ever, I promise."

"Ah, you don't have to get me anything," Rigel blinked, taken aback. She really didn't deserve to get presents out of this mess.

"Not get you-Rigel, you cheapskate! You weren't going to get me anything, were you?" Theo exclaimed, forgetting his embarrassment in favor of outrage.

"No, I was! Am, I mean," Rigel said quickly, holding back a laugh, "I just haven't decided what, yet."

"Well it better be good," Theo said suspiciously.

The others laughed, and Rigel sent the sandy-haired boy a grateful smile. For all his indelicacy, he certainly knew how to diffuse an emotionally difficult situation with style.

She went to bed that night with her friendships intact, and despite the compounding difficulties she'd had dumped on her head that evening, she couldn't bring herself to regret how things had turned out, at least. Additional complications were nothing novel, for her, and if the alternative was a clear-cut tragedy, she'd take an ambiguous artifice any day.

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The next morning saw the ward inspectors back in the Great Hall, though there didn't seem to be any goblins this time. Rigel, Draco, and Pansy were in good spirits after their morning workout and tucked into breakfast with brisk efficiency, ignoring the wizards milling about.

"Recon you scared off those gold-munchers," Theo said, grinning at Rigel from across the table.

"You shouldn't call them that," Blaise said absently as he scanned the morning's post.

"I'll call them whatever I want after they assaulted my friend," Theo said, lifting his nose in half-joking superiority.

"The goblin army hasn't declared war on Rigel," Millicent snorted, "It was one goblin who got a little carried away doing his job. Let's not sensationalize-"

"Too late." Blaise lifted the front cover of the *Prophet* for everyone to see.

HOGWARTS STUDENT ATTACKED BY VICIOUS MAGIC-HUNGRY GOBLIN!

"That's a bit much for a headline, isn't it?" Rigel asked faintly, wondering how she was supposed to explain this one to her family.

"It sort of wraps around the page awkwardly," Pansy agreed, "And that picture of you isn't even recent."

"They got a picture of me?" Now that was disturbing, seeing as she hadn't posed for a picture in all the time she'd spent as Rigel.

"Not really. Looks like they acquired a picture taken during one of last-year's Quidditch matches," Theo said, examining the page with interest.

"It doesn't say anything too specific," Blaise said in what was probably meant to be a reassuring tone, "Just that the goblin attempted to confiscate a magical item you had on your person against your wishes. It phrases it more like 'steal' than 'confiscate' and more like 'attempted murder' than 'against your wishes,' of course."

Rigel was already drafting the letter to Sirius in her head. She would have to intimate that she'd had the Marauder's Map on her at the time, and hadn't wanted to reveal it. He'd probably think the whole thing a laugh, once she explained that she hadn't been in any real danger.

"On the bright side, no more slimy goblins," Theo said cheerfully, piling another helping of eggs onto his plate.

"Think they'll give up the search, then?" Millicent asked, frowning, "Only whatever they were searching for must have been pretty dangerous, and probably valuable, too."

"Goblins never give up on treasure," Blaise said, "They can be pretty sly in their pursuit, however."

"How do you mean?" Pansy asked, eyes sharp.

"Look at the wizards inspecting the wards," Blaise said knowingly, "They aren't all the same as the ones here last night, are they?"

They all surreptitiously looked about, though Rigel wasn't sure how Blaise expected them to remember what all the ward experts had looked like. Then Rigel caught sight of flaming red hair standing by the Gryffindor table and abruptly ducked back down in disbelieving panic. What were the blasted odds of *him* being here?

Draco flinched next to her and dropped a demanding glare her direction, "What?"

Trying to stem the anxiety that was probably flooding his senses at the moment, Rigel shrugged, "Nothing."

Draco rolled his eyes, "I already saw your panicked face. What is it?"

In deference to Millicent, Blaise, and Theo, none of whom knew about Draco's empathy yet, Rigel refrained from arguing Draco's claim. Instead, she affected nonchalance and said, "Blaise is right, that's all. There's at least one inspector here who definitely wasn't last night."

"You know him," Pansy guessed suddenly, "That's why you were so surprised, right?"

Rigel really wished her friends were less perceptive sometimes. "Not very well," she said, "I met him this summer. He's Ron Weasley's older brother, William Weasley."

"A Weasley?" Draco wrinkled his nose slightly, "There's no way my father hired a Weasley to inspect the wards."

"He works for Gringotts," Rigel corrected.

"The goblins sent him to finish the search," Millicent hummed in an impressed way, "Very clever, since most people don't remember that the goblins employ wizards and witches in certain departments."

"Curse-breaking departments," Theo shuddered, "You think Hogwarts is cursed?"

"Just the Defense position," Draco said, smirking.

"Maybe the artifact they're looking for is cursed," Blaise suggested, eyes alight at the prospect of an interesting mystery.

"Why don't you ask Mr. Weasley?" Pansy said, smiling suddenly, "He appears to be headed this way."

Rigel contained her dread, she knew she did, and yet Draco still shot her a concerned look as the tall redheaded wizard loped toward the Slytherin table. She resisted the urge to slouch, knowing it was too late for that as the curse-breaker stopped in the isle beside them.

"Mr. Black?"

Looking up at the freckle-faced, blue-eyed wizard, listening to the familiar cadence of his voice, she recognized him immediately as 'Will' of the lower alleys. There was no way he didn't recognize her as Harry, but there was also no way she could acknowledge that connection despite what would look like overwhelming evidence. She would just have to bluff her way through it.

"Hello, Mr. Weasley," she said, smiling politely as she turned outward in her seat, "How have you been of late? Are your parents well?"

He seemed a bit taken aback to see her there, acting so normally, but shrugged casually nonetheless. "They're great. Mum mentioned you last time I was home."

"She's a lovely woman," Rigel said, "Will you give her my regards?"

"Of course," he said, somewhat slower than was perfectly polite. She could see the suspicion all over his face as he traced her features, but she knew that he couldn't say anything here, unless he wanted to advertise his own dalliances in the alley to all and sundry. "I'm

here in official capacity on behalf on Gringotts, as you may have guessed."

Rigel inclined her head. "I'm very sorry for my part in that incident last night," she said, "Please extend my deepest apologies and understanding to your employers. It was not my intention to cause any difficulties in your search."

"Thank you," Weasley said, blinking in wary surprise, "Though that sentiment was essentially what I was meant to convey to *you* . The goblins want you to know that they would never harm a wizard unwarranted, and that Stonetoe simply got a bit carried away with excitement last night. Everyone at Gringotts is very eager to recover the object of our search."

"It must be an important magical object to warrant such intense scrutiny of even young students," Pansy spoke up, "Perhaps we could help you search. What does it look like?"

"That's classified," the redhead said, flashing his teeth in a winning grin, "Sorry."

"Of course," Pansy smiled back, just as winning, "How silly of me. We'll leave the search to your capable expertise, then, Mr. Weasley."

"I'm honored by your esteem," the curse-breaker leaned closer in a half-bow, "Though between you and me, we could use more pretty girls on the team."

Pansy giggled obligingly, and Weasley rose once more with a nod to Rigel. "Drop by the Burrow sometime, Black. Mother would love to see you again, and I'm sure you and I could find a *lot* of things to talk about."

Rigel tried very hard not to gulp, even though her polite agreement was entirely ruined by the fact that Draco could feel her uneasy trepidation and was giving her a very measuring look as she attempted to turn calmly back to her food.

"That's interesting," Blaise said, his eyes lowering to half-lid as the curse-breaker wandered off, "I wonder how classified it is, exactly. Is Gringotts keeping the information among its own personnel?"

"Can't be," Rigel said, eager for the distraction, "The Ministry has been conducting raids in search of just such an artifact. The Aurors must know what they're looking for."

"I haven't heard anything about raids," Draco said, frowning, "Father always keeps an ear out for that sort of thing."

"Not on prominent wizards," Rigel said, trying not to roll her eyes. Sometimes she wondered if her friends struggled to remember that there were people other than rich purebloods in their Wizarding community. "They've been raiding the lower alleys in London."

"The what?" Millicent raised an eyebrow, "You mean that collection of slums tucked into the Wizarding space around Diagon? It'd be a good place to hide something, I suppose."

"It isn't just slums," Rigel said, a bit defensively. She caught herself and moderated her tone a bit before adding, "There are some nice neighborhoods back there, reputable merchants, too."

"Apothecaries, you mean," Blaise smirked, "We might have known you'd trek through even a place like that for good ingredients, Rigel."

"Don't knock it until you've tried it, eh?" Theo laughed, "Get it? 'Knock' like Knockturn Alley?"

The others shook their heads or rolled their eyes in various shows of exasperation.

"Returning to the point-are you sure the Ministry is searching for the same artifact?" Pansy asked Rigel.

"What are the odds there are two mysterious missing artifacts?" Rigel said.

"The Ministry might be using the missing goblin treasure as an excuse to conduct more raids," Draco pointed out, "It's the sort of thing they'd-" he cut himself off with a cough, probably in response to the offense Rigel couldn't help but feel at his words.

Her father wouldn't sanction raids against innocent people for no real reason. She was sure he was using his personnel to sweep the alleys for clues to the whereabouts of the missing object. Leo had made the efforts sound crude and clumsy, true, but she supposed it was natural for Leo to be a bit biased about people coming into his 'jurisdiction' to exercise the law.

The conversation picked back up after an awkward pause, but Rigel didn't hear much of it. She spent the rest of breakfast lost in thought, and vowed to spend some time-turned hours over the next week looking into the practices of Aurors and their relationship with various sectors of the British magical community. She was tired of having questions about things she ought to be well versed in, having grown up in close proximity to them. It was past time she stopped taking certain things for granted.

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November marched onward and snow began piling up on branches as the lake tried to freeze in fits and starts. Some mornings it was simply too cold to run outside, and Pansy, Draco, and Rigel had taken to huffing and puffing their way up the numerous staircases in the castle to keep things interesting.

It was on one of these idyllic mornings, high in the divination tower, that they stopped to catch their breath in a spacious reading alcove off the spiraling staircase.

"This... is so much worse... than jogging," Draco panted, hands on his knees, "My calves are going to mutiny and send me tumbling

down this staircase to my doom."

"On the bright side, your arse will look amazing in your burial trousers," Pansy laughed breathlessly.

Rigel and Draco were momentarily too taken aback by the word 'arse' coming out of their blonde friend's mouth to share her amusement.

"What?" Pansy blinked at them. "Oh. Sorry."

"Don't apologize," Draco said suddenly, straightening. He opened his mouth again. Closed it. Cleared his throat uncertainly.

"Just say it," Pansy said, frowning.

"Sometimes it feels like you're not being honest with us," Draco blurted.

Pansy raised both eyebrows and looked from Draco to Rigel and back, as if to say, *who's dishonest?*

"Okay fair enough," Draco conceded, "And I did apologize about keeping the empathy thing from you but it was a difficult time for me-"

"It's all right, Drake," Pansy smirked, "I forgave you for that already, remember? After you groveled and promised to wear a bow-tie to the gala this year."

Draco winced, "Yes. I remember. I-well, never mind, I guess. Sorry I said anything."

He made as if to start climbing steps again, but Pansy abruptly said, "No. Wait."

Rigel felt as if she was watching something critical unfold but didn't know what.

Draco and Pansy stared at each other for a long moment before Pansy sighed. "Let's sit," she said, "I suppose it's time I fessed up to something."

Wondering if Pansy, too, had come into a mysterious gift on her thirteenth birthday, Rigel was taken aback when her petite friend said, "I'm not a very honest person, by nature."

"That's not true," Rigel said, patting her friend's hand gently, "You're the most open, generous person I know, Pan."

Rather than smiling and accepting the compliment as her due as Rigel had expected, Pansy grimaced a bit awkwardly. "That's the thing, I'm really... not. I just..." she seemed at a loss for what to say.

"I've noticed that often your emotions don't really match up with that you do or say," Draco said tentatively, "At first I thought I was reading you wrong, but lately I've been thinking maybe I don't know you as well as I thought. And that's not something you should feel bad about," he rushed on, "So please, please stop feeling bad about it, because it's making me feel queasy." Pansy laughed, though it was a bit hollow, and Draco continued in a softer voice, "I think it reflects badly on me, Pan, not you. I'm the one who should have been paying closer attention, I think."

"Don't say that," Pansy frowned, "It isn't like I've been dropping hints- quite the opposite. You're not responsible for this confusion. I am."

"I'm confused, too," Rigel put in, feeling that she may as well be honest if they were, "Mostly about what we're talking about right now."

Draco and Pansy both laughed at that, and Pansy even smiled wryly. "You know I really thought you'd be the first to notice, Rigel. I knew as soon as I met you that if anyone had enough experience with social deception to sniff out my subterfuge, it would be you."

"Me?" Rigel tilted her head, "I've never been any good at reading other people. That's your area of expertise."

"So it is," Pansy said, sobering a bit, "I'm very good at figuring out other people. I can find out their likes, dislikes, wants, needs, fears, anything, really, with just a few short conversations."

Rigel was suddenly looking at the long, get-to-know you conversations she'd shared with Pansy back in first-year very differently. "It's an impressive ability," she offered weakly.

"More impressive when you combine it with my talent for dissembling," Pansy said, "You're good at that part of it, Rigel. For a while I thought you were like me, except then I realized you didn't understand other people at all. You only knew how to present yourself in a certain light, not how to see the ways other people were presenting themselves. I think you've gotten better at it, over the last few years, but I was *born* good at it. I've told you guys I didn't have many friends before you two, haven't I? The truth is, I couldn't stand playing nice as a child. I could read all the petty undercurrents in every simpering, fake conversation and it drove me mad to have to sit still and listen to hours of meaningless drivel and smile prettily while people patronized me and-" she broke off with a sound of acute vexation. "Well, you get it."

"I sort of remember you as a child," Draco said, nodding slowly, "I can't remember specifics, but I do recall asking my mother once why I had to keep going on play dates with you when you didn't want to play. She told me you were refreshing company. I didn't really understand that at the time, I just knew your house was boring."

"I was a rotten child," Pansy freely admitted, "Spoiled and headstrong. And it took a long time for me to deign to participate in social moors. When I finally did, though, well, I was good at it. I am good at it, aren't I?"

"You are," Draco smiled, and it was as much admiring as reassuring, "I doubted my assessment for months, and I could actually feel your

true emotions. That's some serious skill, Pansy."

Pansy smiled demurely, and even knowing now that it was put on, Rigel couldn't see any artifice in it. "Does it bother you, though?" Pansy asked after a moment, "Because I'm not sure I could stop now, even if I wanted to. I've come to enjoy it. It's like a game, you see?"

"I would never deny you your entertainment," Draco said, smirking suddenly, "I just want to play on your *side* . If you'll have a poor player like me in your corner."

Pansy lit up with surprised pleasure, and Rigel wasn't even going to try and guess if it was real or not. If it was what Pansy wanted her to see, then that's what she would see. Rigel could hardly extend any less than the courtesy she wished from others for herself, could she? The only difference was that Pansy played at duplicity, while Rigel was actually duplicitous. If Rigel could not forgive Pansy her manipulations, then how could she ever forgive herself for what *she* was doing, when it was exponentially worse?

"Can I ask what your true character is?" Draco asked after a moment of thought, "Is that even a valid question?"

"That's hard to say," Pansy said, sighing a bit, "Everyone manipulates their own character to a certain degree. To decide how much of what you purposely put on comes from a place of genuine feeling-it's difficult, you know? Some of what you see is my own personality exaggerated. Some of it is reactions and responses I make up depending on my mood which may or may not be similar to the mood I'm trying to portray. Sometimes I feign an emotion so well I forget whether or not I felt it to begin with. I feel it by the end, so it's true in a way. In another way it's just a form of self-manipulation, to match the manipulation of others in a way that makes it hard to distinguish between authenticity and artifice. I try not to over-think it, to be honest."

"I think everyone self-manipulates," Rigel shrugged, "I mean, if someone wishes they were braver or kinder or more patient and they emulate those qualities for long enough, don't they become a real part of their personality? The only difference is that most people don't even realize it's a pretense-they imagine it more along the lines of personal development. Your personality is just a little more fluid, Pan. There are lots of people like you out there, I bet." A few ladies from the court of the rogue came immediately to mind, in fact.

"The three of us are quite the deceptive bunch," Draco said at last, "It's no wonder they call us the Sneaky Snakes."

"Wasn't it the Slimy Snakes?" Pansy asked, smiling slightly.

"The Surreptitious Snakes, for certain," Rigel laughed.

"The Sly Snakes."

"The Scheming Snakes."

"The Stealthy Snakes."

"The Secretive Snakes."

"The Shifty Snakes."

"The... Shady Snakes?" Rigel frowned, "I should have said Suspicious Snakes."

"Too late, your lame answer shall live forever in infamy," Draco sighed, "You know there are people in this school who think you're cool, Rigel?"

"None that know me, surely," Rigel smiled.

"Adrian thinks you're cool, actually," Pansy said, "And... I think that Chang girl has a bit of a tendresse for you."

"It's pronounced 'tendre,'" Rigel corrected automatically.

"You speak French now?" Pansy asked archly.

"He does, actually," Draco said, shaking his head, "Caught him practicing with a house elf not long ago."

"You have the most diverting hobbies, Rigel," Pansy said. Then she grinned, suddenly, "Actually that's excellent! You can help me prepare phrases for my mial."

"You're what?" Rigel asked at the same time that Draco bit off a surprised exclamation.

"Already?" Draco was scowling in open dislike.

"I'm fourteen," Pansy shrugged, "It's within propriety."

"It's customary to wait until after OWL's," Draco scoffed, "You could be a complete idiot for all they know."

"Come again?" Pansy said, a dangerous glint in her eyes.

"Obviously you aren't," Draco backtracked easily, "But they're taking quite a risk. Who is it, anyway?"

"One of the Duval boys, I gather," Pansy said, seeming largely disinterested.

"Practically paupers," Draco said disapprovingly, "What is your father thinking?"

"Of course I'm not going to marry a Duval," Pansy rolled her eyes, "You're missing the point. If I start meeting men on the continent now, word of my beauty and charm will be already disseminated by the time I start seriously looking for prospects. The Duvals may be in hard straights now, but they still know everyone who's anyone in Paris."

"That's a lot of forethought to put into engagement prospects," Rigel commented.

"Not an unusual amount," Pansy said, smiling slightly, "Don't tell me your family hasn't even begun discussions on the subject."

Rigel realized abruptly that she was about to come off rather hypocritical. "I'm already engaged, actually. To Harry."

" *What!?* " Draco and Pansy could not have looked more shocked.

"Yeah, we... signed the paperwork last summer," Rigel said, affecting a sheepish expression, "I thought I mentioned it."

"You certainly did not mention anything of the sort," Pansy choked out, "Why-how could you make such a decision out of the blue like that. Early engagements are generally planned from birth, but you made it quite clear you'd never entertained even the idea of being engaged to Miss Potter when you last spoke of such things. What changed, Rigel?"

"And why didn't you tell us?" Draco added, still looking appalled.

She wasn't even going to guess how Pansy knew about the conversation she'd had with Rosier and Rookwood almost two years ago. "We changed our minds, that's all. It's going to be a very long engagement, in any case, so it isn't as though anything's set in stone. I didn't realize it would interest you so much."

"Not interest-it's only the rest of your life, Rigel!" Draco threw up his hands, utterly irate, "We haven't even met her yet. What if she hates us?"

Rigel felt an acute stab of guilt that wasn't softened at all by the pang of remorse that accompanied it. That Draco would consider Rigel's potential future partner to be something that would intimately affect his life... she hadn't really properly faced the fact that Pansy and Draco fully expected them to be friends forever, but now that reality was staring her down accusingly. "I-I know she'll love you both," Rigel said, swallowing tightly, "How could she not?"

If Draco had feathers, Rigel would have been able to watch them settle in proud appeasement. "Still," he said, "She probably isn't good enough for you."

Rigel laughed and tried to convince herself that it was not at all hysterical. "She'd likely agree with you on that."

"I'm sure she's wonderful," Pansy said, though her voice was a bit strained, "Rigel is an excellent judge of character, after all."

"Oh he isn't, either," Draco grumbled, "He's probably marrying her so he doesn't have to put any effort into thinking about it."

"Guilty," Rigel said, amused once more.

"Don't admit to it," Pansy admonished her exasperatedly, "You'll ruin Miss Potter's consequence before she's even been out."

"Out of what?" Rigel asked, grinning.

"Out in *society*," Pansy rolled her eyes.

"I'm not sure she's coming out in society," Rigel told her, "At least not anytime soon."

Pansy blinked, looking crestfallen for a moment. "Isn't she... coming to the gala this year?"

"Why would she-" Rigel cut herself off abruptly. Hadn't Mr. Malfoy mentioned the Parkinsons were hosting the gala that year? "Did you... send her an invitation, Pan?"

Pansy lifted her chin stubbornly, "Yes, I did. She would have been invited anyway, with her father the head Auror at the DMLE. I just included an invitation for her... separately, as well. In case her family doesn't want to come."

"Harry isn't really a party person," Rigel said, trying not to get her friend's hopes up. How could she possibly go as Harry? Unless

Archie wanted to go as her, of course. She stifled a smile at the image of Archie in a dress. She rather thought he could pull it off, for some reason.

"You must simply convince her to come," Pansy said firmly, "If you're going to marry this girl some day, Draco and I deserve to meet her at least, don't we?"

"I'll see what I can do," Rigel said, intending to do no such thing.

"Tell her we don't bite," Draco suggested, smirking.

"I try not to lie to my cousin," Rigel said. Everyone else, on the other hand... well, a girl had to do what she had to do.

"Now that that's settled, we really ought to get moving again if we want to make breakfast," Pansy said, jogging in place for a moment, "And on the way down, you can help me with my phrases for when I meet Duval, Rigel."

"I live to serve," Rigel said, affecting a snooty French accent as she began the trek down the long spiral staircase.

"Ooh, that's a good one," Pansy grinned, "How do you say that in French?"

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As winter break approached, their classes became steadily more challenging, in preparation for midterm examinations. Even Rigel's unofficial electives began issuing more complex and time-consuming assignments as her mastery over the basics became apparent.

Dumbledore's Alchemy class was as laid-back as ever, even as the material they covered gained momentum, and her Magical Theory

class, while fascinating, didn't give her much to stress over, either. Her Healing classes, on the other hand, had recently taken a rather sobering turn.

"It's best if you don't overthink it," Pomfrey said gently.

Rigel wasn't sure what there was to overthink about killing an innocent animal. It seemed pretty clear to her that she had erred grievously and the cat laying on the tiny operating table had paid the price.

They had moved on from studying things like lacerations and broken bones and into the territory of life-threatening injuries and conditions. She had practiced on animals before, of course, both in Madam Pomfrey's lessons and on her own, in the woods. This wasn't the first time an animal she'd been trying to save had died, either-sometimes she got to them in the forest too late. This was the first time an animal had died of wounds she was responsible for giving it, however, and the difference seemed appreciable.

"I thought I could do it," she said, a bit numbly. She had studied the process thoroughly before attempting a limb-restoration, and she had successfully re-attached several fingers and toes on other animals in the weeks leading up to this. Somehow, though, she hadn't been able to move quickly enough this time, hadn't properly appreciated how time-consuming the reconnection of severed nerves and muscle fibers would be, or how quickly the blood would seep out of the cat's tiny body.

"I know you did," Pomfrey sighed, "I did, too. The first is always the hardest, Mr. Black.

"I don't want there to be any more," she said, "I didn't-why didn't you save it, when it became clear I was failing?"

"It's a lesson you need to learn," Madam Pomfrey said regretfully, "It's the worst part of Healer training, and some don't have the stomach for it. This won't be the last mammal you lose on the table,

and it certainly won't be the last time you feel wracking guilt for failing a patient. You can't always save them, though. I know it sounds awful, but it's the hard truth. If you are serious about this career, it's better to learn now how to distance yourself from the lives you touch. You're always going to do more good than bad as a Healer, in the grand balance of things, but you won't be perfect for every single patient you treat."

"It's different," Rigel argued, gazing down at the mutilated feline, "If I fail to save someone who comes to me for Healing, it's different from being the one to hurt them in the first place. If I'd known the cat would die, I wouldn't have wanted to practice on it, Madam Pomfrey."

The older witch sighed again, "I know how you feel. If there was another way to reliably teach our craft I would use it, Mr. Black. In some schools they let students practice on real people, taking the young adepts to clinics and research hospitals to heal the cases that chance sends their way that day. They get plenty of practice with everyday hurts. They don't take those students to the emergency rooms, though. In a life-or-death situation there's no time to practice-you either know how to save the patient or you don't. If you've never practiced the procedure before, chances are you won't. If you wait for a guiltless opportunity like the one you describe to arise, you might be practicing your first serious Healing on your best friend."

"So I should just ignore it, then?" she asked, sick to her stomach, "Just focus on the people I might save one day and forget about the creatures I'm hurting now?"

"No," the mediwitch shook her head firmly, "Do not forget. Heal, child, as much as you're able. Heal all you can, to make up for the ones you cant, and the ones you hurt. Make this training *mean* something, and if it makes you feel better, send a prayer for their souls to the Great Mother Goddess."

Rigel didn't observe the old religions, but she did take a moment to make a promise to herself. She would keep careful track of the animals that died by her hand, and she would repay that debt tenfold

with her Healing gifts, even if she never became a real Healer like Archie would. Even if their whole ruse ended tomorrow and she never needed to pretend to have Healing abilities again, she would still use the gift as often as she could. It was the only thing she could do, in light of the cost its learning demanded.

"Are you ready to go again?" Madam Pomfrey asked after a long moment.

"Perhaps I should study more first," Rigel said, reluctant to see a repeat of the last half-hour.

"You already know what you did wrong," Pomfrey said sternly, "Shying away from the dirty work is a disservice to your teachings."

And my victims, Rigel added with a sickened lurch. Nevertheless, she gently prepared the dead cat for disposal and turned her attention to the next specimen.

The tabby had long fur, probably just recently grown out in deference to the winter cold. It slept peacefully under the machinations of a Deep Sleep Charm, and although Rigel knew the cat had been given copious amounts of numbing solutions, she still felt like the worst of beasts as she intoned the Severing Charm and watched its leg detach itself at the upper-thigh.

Moving faster than she had last time, Rigel raced against the cat's own circulatory system to stymie the bleeding while at the same time reattaching the fragile tissues before necrosis could take hold. Some cell death at the site of separation was unavoidable, but if she worked fast enough the cat wouldn't even know the difference when it awoke. If it awoke.

She was doing better this time, she realized as the bone fused seamlessly and the ligaments were sewn back together under her watchful gaze. Her wand moved back and forth in a flurry, and this time she attached the blood vessels before bothering with the muscles or nerves. Once blood could circulate normally throughout

the leg without spilling out onto the table, she rapidly built up enough muscle tissue to keep the leg stable at the joining, then set her attention to the nerve damage. This was by far the most difficult part, concentration wise, as nerves were exceedingly complicated to deal with even using magic. Her mistake last time had been in attempting to simultaneously deal with the nerves and other damage. Now, with the life-threatening issues dealt with, she was free to devote her entire focus to delicately repairing the synapses and receptors.

Almost before she knew it, she was lacing the epidermal together and finishing up with an expertly finessed hair-growth charm. She admired her handiwork for just a moment, flush with success and the knowledge of how far she'd come in the last months.

Madam Pomfrey took out her wand with a satisfied nod. The nurse enervated the sleeping feline, who stumbled to its feet with a twitchy shake of its head. It looked disoriented for a moment, then leapt from the table to the floor with only a slight spasm in the leg muscle to show where the neurons were reasserting themselves.

Pomfrey herded the cat into a traveling case with a bit of food and water, and Rigel cleaned up the operating area, wiping down all the surfaces and disposing of everything into a bright red litterbin that Pomfrey assured her the elves were very careful about handling.

Before she left for lunch, though she wasn't sure she'd be able to eat a thing, she said, "Madam Pomfrey?"

"Yes, Mr. Black?" the mediwitch said absently, scribbling away in a notebook that Rigel presumed kept track of her academic progress.

"Do you think it would be possible from now on to practice on different animals?" she asked.

"Cats are very good examples of mammalian systems," Pomfrey said.

"Yes, but do you think we could use, well, useful animals from now on?" Rigel pressed, "The cat that I killed... it's just a waste, you see? If I could use some of its parts in a potion, I think I'd feel better about it. Animals have to be killed for certain potions ingredients anyway. Perhaps we could contact an ingredient collection company and ask for specimens that are slotted to be euthanized already. They could have the ingredients when we're finished. I'll harvest them myself."

"I suppose that would be good practice for your anatomy lessons, too," Pomfrey said slowly, "Yes. I'll get in touch with some people right away."

"Thank you, Madam," Rigel said, feeling a little better about the grisly business already.

"Thank you, Mr. Black," Pomfrey smiled softly, "You're a good student. You did very well today, and it's always a good sign when a Healer cares about the animals he practices on. I think you will make a fine, compassionate addition to our field one day."

"You're too kind, Madam," Rigel fingered her bangs self-consciously.

"One can never be too kind, Mr. Black."

Rigel supposed, as words to live by went, that those were as good as any.

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Amidst all the diligent studying and cramming for the end of semester, Rigel did have one admittedly frivolous project to keep her creativity occupied when the rest of her brain was strained from what sometimes felt like constant abuse.

She hadn't forgotten what she owed the Weasley Twins after the paper flower prank, and her vengeance would be as poetic as it was sweet.

A pouch full of pink powder sat on her workstation beside a large bag of Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans and a small cauldron of simmering slime. The 'potion' was completely colorless and stuck to the sides of the cauldron belligerently despite Rigel's frequent stirring. Its recipe was of her own design, though it was really a bastardized version of a toxin-expulsion draught.

Once ingested, the actual toxin-expulsion draught would bind to any ingested poison and expel it as expediently as possible. It was a rather gruesome solution for internal poisoning, as the potion tended to expulse itself through any and all convenient orifices, including nose, mouth, eyes, and *pores* . Most people preferred to take a bezoar. The Weasley Twins, unfortunately for them, would not be given the choice.

Rigel had removed the binding agent from the potion's design, as she wasn't planning on actually poisoning her redheaded friends. This time. She'd also swapped out most of the ingredients for similar ones that lacked significant pigment and had less offenses tastes. She'd then used a bleaching agent to sap the color from the potion entirely, and the result was an expulsion solution that would be neigh-undetectable prior to ingestion.

The potion would be painstakingly painted over the beans (a Weasley favorite, she had observed) and set on a drying rack until the coating was smooth and transparent. It would probably take hours, but Rigel had all the time in the world. She tried not to laugh maniacally as that thought crossed her mind. She wasn't entirely beholden to her father's genetics, after all. Lily always had a sense of dignified grace when she was enacting vengeance upon an unsuspecting fool, and there was no reason Rigel couldn't emulate that half of her upbringing, too.

The pouch of powder was originally just the Marauders' standard colored sneezing powder. She had bought it with the idea to send it to Archie as a thank-you for working so hard, but she would have to postpone that care package until the next Hogsmeade trip. Her cousin would agree that teaching a lesson was more important.

The powder was designed with the intention of making the victim sneeze uncontrollably until they washed the powder off-except the powder turned to goo upon contact with liquid, making it impossible to wash off. The Weasley Twins would, of course, know to vanish the powder instead of washing it, but that was why Rigel had modified it, as well. She had painstakingly sifted out the sneeze-inducing component to the powder, leaving behind a tinted dust that would turn invisible upon contact with skin, making it rather easy to ignore once past the initial encounter. To that, she'd added a large supply of craft glitter, obtained with the help of her generous friend Binny, who she gathered had simply raided the school's Yule decorating supplies.

The glitter was a red herring. It would pull the attention from the innocuous-seeming dust it was mixed with, and with a little luck Rigel would have an epic, impossible-to-see-coming yet painfully-obvious-in-retrospect revenge prank.

It was a shame the Weasley Twins forgot who they were pranking when they set Rigel Black in their sights. Once a Marauder, always a Marauder; they would not be making that mistake again.

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She decided to strike on a Friday morning, partly in deference to the narrative portion of her prank, and partly because people were more alert and upbeat as the weekend approached. She didn't want anyone to miss the show.

The owls swooped down from the rafters in what Rigel had to say was her most anticipated mail time ever. A nondescript barn owl floated down like an avenging angel to alight righteously before the eyes of two sinners-okay, Rigel shook her head, that was probably enough poetry for one prank.

From her carefully selected seat she had a perfect view of the Weasley Twins' slightly bemused expressions. She had addressed one letter to each of them, and personalized the font enough to make the envelopes look inviting and official rather than suspicious. The twins shrugged and tore into the letters simultaneously. The explosion of glitter that followed could only have been explained by the rather strong localized pressure charm she had painstakingly cast on the envelopes' contents the night before.

Twin disco balls blinked amidst the glittering fallout in the moment of stunned silence before the hall burst into appreciative laughter.

Rigel allowed herself a modest chuckle. Draco's elbow tapped hers discretely, however, and she realized he could probably feel the utter glee she was suppressing. She spared him a winsome grin, then focused her attention back on the Gryffindor table. The Weasley Twins were laughing along good-naturedly, digging around in the piles of sparkling dust to find the cards she'd also included in the letter bombs.

Knowing what they said (*sorry, not sorry in advance*), she was ready with a toast from her water goblet as they swung their heads in her direction with identical smirks. They dusted themselves off dramatically, Fred even going so far as to shake his head over Angelina Johnson's eggs, and sauntered over to the Slytherin table to friendly catcalls and whistles.

"Oh, Fred, what are we going to do with our disobedient pup?" George asked mournfully, scratching his glitter-infested hair with the air of a put upon parent.

"Discipline, George, that's what today's youth is lacking," Fred sighed, wistfully clasping his hands together in despair.

"Out with the old, in with the new," Rigel said airily.

Fred snickered, "I'm not sure I'd go that far, little pup."

"It was only a glitter bomb," George added, looking both amused and apologetic as he informed Rigel she wasn't the second coming of pranking legend.

"But it was good, right?" She widened her eyes a tad, making sure to smile just like a child showing his parents his first magic trick. "It took forever to get all the glitter in the envelopes."

"It was great, Rigel," George said, definitely hiding amusement now, "I take it we're even for the flower prank now?"

"Of course!" Rigel leaned forward earnestly, "I was a little worried I took things too far, actually. I didn't want to tip the scales back the other way. I just couldn't resist doing *two* envelopes of glitter." She added a guilty little smile for maximum effect, ignoring the muffled choking going on beside her. Draco should really work on his subtlety.

"We won't take it too personally," Fred promised her, leaning in to ruffle her hair. She quickly ducked back with an indignant look, narrowly avoiding the powder clinging amongst the glitter getting in her hair.

"It washes off really easy under water," she informed them, affecting a serious expression, "So you can get rid of it all tonight."

"Ah, no offense, pup, but we'll probably just *evanesco* it if it's all the same to you," George said apologetically.

She gazed in mild horror at them, "Oh, no! Whatever you do, don't try and vanish it. I nicked it from my dad's experimental supply, and

his notes were pretty clear about the kind of reaction *that* might produce." At Fred and George's uneasy expressions, she scratched the back of her neck nervously, "It's okay though, right? One day isn't too bad. I mean it's not like you have Snape today or anything."

They did have Snape, in fact, first thing that morning, in a double block that would last until noon. She knew that when she planned the prank, of course, but it was a simple matter to fake distraught realization as she gazed back and forth between their awkward expressions.

"Oh, *no*," she said again, "I didn't-you're going to lose points, and it's all my fault!"

"It's okay, pup," Fred said, putting on a smile, "We lose points all the time. Don't feel bad. It was a good prank."

"No, I feel awful," Rigel moaned, her shoulders slumping forward, "I'm so sorry, you guys."

"Rigel, it's fine," George said firmly, "You can't always predict how a prank will turn out. It's our fault for getting caught in it, right?"

Rigel sniffed, blinking rapidly to give the impression that she was fighting tears. "I don't know. It seems so *wrong* ." Before they could contradict her again, she lifted her head brightly, saying, "Wait, I know!" She made a show of digging around in her bag until she pulled out the bag of Bertie Bott's Beans. "Here, take these. I know it doesn't make up for the points, but they're your favorite, too, right? I only have one bag... but you could share?"

"Oh, you really don't have to," George said, though he was certainly eyeing the bag with interest.

"I want to," Rigel insisted, pressing the bag into Fred's hands, "Take it as my apology for going too far. I clearly shouldn't be trusted with this much responsibility."

She thought she was laying it on a bit thick by that point, but Fred and George took the bag with big, grateful smiles. She held onto her innocently apologetic expression as long as she possibly could, but once the twins had each taken a handful of the beans and tipped them into their mouths she really couldn't hold back a pleased smirk any longer.

"Done being an idiot, now?" Draco asked mildly.

"Just about," Rigel said calmly, watching the twins glance at each other, then her with growing suspicion.

"Puppy," Fred said slowly, "You haven't gone and done something unnecessary, have you?"

"What's necessity got to do with cold-served revenge, Draco?"

"Nothing that I can think of, Rigel," Draco said obligingly.

"What's in the beans, Rigel?" George asked, groaning a bit at what Rigel assumed was his own stupidity.

"I'm sure I don't know," Rigel inspected her nails with forced cruelty, "I heard they're trying a new poison flavor for the holidays, though. Gee, what are the odds one would make its way into *this* bag?"

Fred appeared to be contemplating the merits of self-induced regurgitation, but George put a hand on his brother's arm reassuringly. "Rigel wouldn't actually poison us," he said confidently, "Monstrously deceive us, and lead us on for a humiliating ten minutes, maybe, but not poison us."

"You sound pretty sure," Rigel noted, trying to look as unmerciful and cold as her young, smooth cheeks would allow.

"I don't think you want to be rid of us just yet," George smirked. The effect was somewhat dashing, at least until a narrow stream of clear liquid began to dribble out of his nose. It rolled down to his lip,

collecting the heretofore ignored modified sneezing powder and ballooning out into a glob of pink goo. "What?" he touched his hand to his face and pulled it away incredulously. "Oh, no."

Fred, meanwhile, was attempting to stem the flow of pink slime that was running down his cheeks as his eyes leaked expulsion draught in a process that, while painless, looked absolutely disgusting. "What have you done, Rigel?" he asked, voice rising a bit in carefully controlled panic.

"I just thought people should know who the real piles of goo behind the paper flower prank are," Rigel said, though she kept her voice low enough that only Fred and George and a couple of her friends could really hear her. The point was to get the elegance of the prank across to the twins, not undermine their work with the original prank, after all.

By now the toxin-expulsion draught they'd ingested had started to ooze out their pores, and everywhere the powder on their skin and clothes came into contact with the oozing liquid it blossomed into rivulets of fluorescent, sticky goop, until soon it looked like Fred and George were giant pink popsicles that had been left out in the sun too long.

The hall was roaring with laughter as people stood on their seats to get a better look at the walking piles of sparkly slime that were the Weasley Twins.

Rigel had to school her expression into one of sober concern as Professor Snape made his way past their spectacle on his way out of the hall.

"You appear to have liquefied these two Gryffindors, Mr. Black," the professor said with supreme unconcern. She could read the appreciation in his eye, however, and flattered herself that he seemed ever so slightly curious as to how she'd done it.

"They're just a little melted, Professor," she said, smiling modestly.

"In your opinion, will they re-solidify before their morning block?" Snape asked, professional courtesy oozing in his voice.

"They might be a bit soft in the head still," she said, faking concern.

"Back to normal, then," Snape's smirk was positively cutting as he strode away, "Good."

The Slytherins sitting near enough to hear that exchange gave a healthy laugh in his wake.

"I suppose now you're going to tell us not to *evanesco this*, either?" Fred said, his voice muffled by the layer of slime that coated his face.

"No, go ahead," she said, smiling too-innocently.

He hesitated visibly, goo-covered hand poised on his wand but clearly expecting another trick.

George groaned in sudden realization, "We could have *evanescoed* the glitter in the first place, couldn't we?"

"That probably would have be the wisest course, yes," Rigel allowed.

"You realize we can never trust you again," Fred said morosely, clenching his eyes shut and muttering the vanishing spell with extreme trepidation.

"You say that, but..." Rigel trailed off with a winsome smile as Draco and Pansy chuckled appreciatively.

Once satisfied that Fred's goo had vanished without obvious side effects, George followed suit. Rigel thought the incident might teach them not to always do things at the same time. If there'd been any delay between the two in opening their letters or eating the spiked beans, she might have only caught one of them.

"Well, I can honestly say I've never seen a prank like *that* before," George said, after inspecting himself for any lingering goo, of course.

"What he said." Fred leaned toward Rigel conspiratorially. "Only how did you get the goo to come out of our, ahem..." he waggled his eyebrows in a way that Rigel really couldn't help but flush at. She *had* been trying not to think about that aspect of the expulsion draught.

"A true master never divulges his secrets," she managed to choke out as her ears turned red.

"Probably for the best." George grimaced good-naturedly. "Some things should be left to the imagination."

Secretly relieved that Fred and George weren't actually all that upset about her getting one over on them, Rigel readily agreed that the finer aspects of her prank should not be available to the masses.

"I think we've entertained those masses enough for one day, in any event." Fred glanced about at the raptly interested students around the hall and waved to signal that the show was over. People went back to their breakfasts readily enough, though she could hear speculation about what exactly had happened threading through most of the conversations around them.

"Though Rigel did most of the entertainment." George shook his head admiringly. "Clearly we need to talk about your pathological acting skills, little pup."

"I employ them mainly in self-defense," Rigel said.

Draco snorted in an entirely obvious way. "I'm sorry. What?"

Rigel shot him a betrayed look, "I do. It's not my fault I'm surrounded by aggressively nosy people who also happen to be incredibly gullible."

"You're aware that you shouldn't have said that out loud, right?" Pansy sighed.

"You're aware that that's only what I want you to think, right?" Rigel said.

"I'm not sure that makes any sense," George felt compelled to point out.

"I'm not sure that anything makes sense, anymore," Fred added, looking a bit glum.

"As long as no one is certain of anything we can all go about our lives in peace," Rigel said, shrugging.

Everyone was certain they had nothing to say to that.

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The end of first semester wound down rather anticlimactically, in Rigel's opinion. Slytherin scraped a win in their Quidditch match with Gryffindor, lending good spirits to the last couple weeks of classes despite the numerous tests and assignments coming due. Rigel was just polishing off the very last of Flint's essays when Draco poked his head into their dorm room and said, "Nearly ready?"

She tucked the parchment rolls away in her bag and slipped off the bed with a grin, "Lost track of time. I'll change now."

It was the last Sunday before break, and the sixth meeting of their unofficial defense association. After the initial couple weeks of awkwardness, Draco had taken to teaching like a fish dropped in an unfamiliar, but not altogether unpleasant new pond. Draco claimed he just enjoyed bossing other people around, but Rigel suspected he

found real satisfaction in the way the others looked to him for information and direction.

They collected Pansy, Rosier, and Rookwood in the common room, waving cheerfully to Pucey, who had taken to ribbing them about their little rendezvous with the Gryffindors every chance he got.

"Another play date?" the fifth-year called across the room.

"You're welcome to come if you're feeling left out," Rosier smirked, "We've more than enough toys for everyone."

"Ask me again in the spring, when my arse doesn't hurt so much from Flint's training!" Pucey laughed. Bole and Derrick, who sat close together on an adjacent couch, joined in a moment later.

"It's going to hurt worse in the spring, I promise," Flint spoke up ominously from a chair nearby.

Amidst playful groans and complaints, their group exited the common room with anticipatory energy in their steps. After a few weeks to settle into the rhythm of things, they'd all grown to greatly enjoy the weekend dueling practice. It was engaging and challenging to face off against different people, and as it wasn't for class credit or marks, it was fun and largely free of pressure, too.

That wasn't to say it was lacking intensity, of course.

"Bout time you lot showed up," Ron yawned, stretching his not-quite-noticeable-yet biceps as they approached their usual spot on the lawn. Neville, who seemed to be practicing a complicated wrist exercise, glanced up with a smile as they drew near.

"We wanted to give you as much extra preparation time as possible," Pansy said, smiling sharply, "You're going to need it this week."

"That's what you said last week." Ron allowed a confident eyebrow to quirk upwards.

"It was true then, too." Pansy lowered her lashes coyly. "Or have you forgot who won?"

"I hope you're up for a rematch, then?" Ron smirked.

"If you think you'd like to lose again," Pansy said, beginning to idly hop from foot to foot in an effort to warm her muscles in the cold December air.

Those two, Rigel reflected, had certainly managed to bring out the competitive spirit in one another. While most of them changed dueling partners regularly, Pansy and Ron had fallen into a weekly rivalry. She supposed they were a good match on the dueling pitch—Ron had a strategist's mind, from what she'd gleaned over the weeks, and Pansy was by far the most devious of their dueling circle. They matched wits as much as wands when they squared off, and Rigel was glad someone seemed willing to take Pansy seriously besides Draco and her. Rosier had refused on principle to duel the blonde girl, and Rookwood had seemed out of his element the one time he'd tried. Neville... well, he seemed scared to death of Pansy for some reason, which Rigel supposed meant he was the only one with any good sense in the group.

"Enough posturing," Draco rolled his eyes, "We've got a lot to do before you two get another go at each other."

"Yes, Grand Dueler Draco," Pansy dipped an elegant curtsy despite wearing loose-fitting running pants.

"Of course, Magnanimous Master Malfoy," Ron parroted, doing his own wobbly approximation of a bow.

It was a testament to six weeks of practice that Draco restrained himself to a mild scowl in the face of Ron's obvious facetiousness.

They started with an easy jog that didn't take them too far along the banks of the lake. The four newcomers still weren't in the same league of conditioning that Pansy, Draco, and Rigel were, probably

because they only really exercised once a week, so Draco tended to focus their efforts on exercises and moves that would help their dueling specifically, instead of the full-body fitness that the third-year Slytherins worked toward in their early morning practices.

Footwork drills and combination exercises took up the next twenty minutes or so, and once Draco was satisfied everyone had warmed up diligently, they broke into pairs. Rigel had dueled Neville last week, and Rosier the week before, so she squared off with Rookwood this time, a slow-simmering excitement laying low in her gut.

Rookwood was by far her most challenging opponent. Neville wasn't at all aggressive, Rosier was cunning but lacked ruthlessness, and Draco preferred coaching to dueling most weeks. Rookwood, though, was level headed, efficient, and difficult to read because his movements were so minimalist. His impressive repertoire of spells didn't hurt, either. Anyone who didn't know better would think it an unfair match up, a small third-year against a mountain-like sixth-year. Rigel didn't flatter herself when she acknowledged her own skill, however. The three and a half months since the beginning of the school year had been more like eight for her; she had as many hours to go over foot-drills and practice the maneuvers Leo had shown her as she could motivate herself to take.

It wasn't cheating, she told herself, since they weren't in any sort of competition, but it did give her a little guilty start every time one of her friends mentioned how scarily fast she was improving. Her quick progress, coupled with the fact that she didn't have to worry about her magic acting without her permission now that it was suppressed all the time, meant Rigel had grown into her instincts at last. She wouldn't call herself dangerous, or anything, but her skillset was certainly impressive for a thirteen-year-old.

They spread out a good distance from one another, with Pansy and Ron the farthest from Rigel and Rookwood. Neville and Rosier were the least likely to go overboard in their practice, so they were in between the more serious pairs.

"The usual rules apply," Draco announced, "Only this time let's try not to noticeably disfigure anyone-I'm looking at you, Pansy. If Weasley gets sent to the Hospital Wing one more time he's going to set a record."

"I thought the boils gave him character," Pansy twirled her wand carelessly.

"Detention builds character, too, and that's what we're all going to get if you keep getting carried away," Draco said. Rigel thought the amusement in his tone rather undermined the bark to his words. "All right. Ready? Set? Begin."

Rigel darted sideways to avoid an oncoming orange-colored hex she didn't recognize and threw up a shield a heartbeat later to intercept a fast-moving *incarcerous* that Rookwood had neatly placed in her path. *That's what I get for being predictable*, Rigel thought as she muttered the words for the tripping jinx under her breathe while sliding to avoid the concussion of a shield-smasher colliding with her *protego* a moment later.

Rookwood's dueling style was hard and fast. His impressive stamina meant there was very little pause between spells, which left his opponent feeling overwhelmed with the need to defend against the constant pressure. Rigel's best skill by far was dodging, however, and her on-the-go offense neatly avoided the issue of getting bogged down on defense altogether. With a sprinkling of shield charms thrown in as a nod to the 'pick-your-battles' philosophy, Rigel had a flexible style all her own that tended to dominate the dueling space just through its sheer mobility. Rookwood didn't seem to mind, of course, since Rigel almost never saw him move during a duel. She sometimes wondered if he did the footwork drills at the beginning of their sessions just to humor Draco.

She mentally thanked Remus for all his work with her that summer as she ducked and dove around spells with comfortable agility. Rookwood's expression never faltered, for all that not a single one of his spells came close to hitting. If it was to be a game of attrition,

Rigel rather thought her physical stamina could outlast Rookwood's core reserves.

To make sure of this, she randomly began increasing the power behind some of her spells, forcing the upperclassman to hurriedly reinforce his shields every time one threatened to break through. She jumped high over a *tarantallegra* placed at her kneecaps, then mentally cursed when she saw Rookwood use her slow jump to break his usual fast-paced rhythm and begin a complicated series of wand-movements that she just knew spelled trouble.

As soon as her feet touched down, she leapt backwards to put space between her and whatever was coming next. Not a moment too soon, as the earth between them swiftly transitioned from dry, brittle grass to smooth, slick ice. Wondering how on earth Rookwood had managed to transfigure so much ground so quickly, Rigel cast an underpowered sticking charm to her feet and began factoring in twice as much necessary time in avoiding spells.

It was a stopgap measure at best, as proven when one of her feet stuck just a second too long and she was forced she shield a spell she ought to have been able to hop right over. Curse Rookwood for thinking to aim for her feet, now the slowest-moving part of her. She tried to distract him with a couple of closely timed *stupefy* s, but Rookwood swatted them away like flies and sent back a vertigo jinx that she just managed to recognize in time to prepare the counter-charm as it approached.

The vertigo-jinx was one of the annoying ones you couldn't shield against. All one could do was prepare defense ahead of time and cancel it quickly. Although she lost perception for a moment, she had already sent her muscles diving to the side as the jinx connected, and so when she reoriented herself it was some feet to the right of where Rookwood's follow-up *incarcerous* had attempted to snare her.

One trail of rope has wrapped itself around her left ankle, however, and even as she cast a *finite* at the conjured binding she knew she

should have gone with *relashio* . *Finite* was an area-effect cancelling spell and so the sticking charm on her left foot was now gone as well. Rookwood had already sent another spell in her direction, and she didn't recognize it. Shielding would be ill advised, but dodging now would be likely result in a windmill maneuver that left her exposed as her left foot undermined her right.

The spell was too low to duck, but not too high to leap over in a last-ditch effort at surprise. She cast a severely over-powered *lumos* charm as she squeezed her eyes shut and pushed hard off her right foot, tucking herself into a dive-roll that, if she timed it right, would take her right over the incoming spell and much closer to Rookwood himself.

She came out of the roll a mere three feet from her opponent, and a mirror shield at precisely the right angle prevented Rookwood from firing any spells he wouldn't want to dodge at close range. The momentum from her roll was still carrying her forward, her left foot and right knee sliding across the ice easily as she kept in a crouch to minimize the target she presented.

Rookwood was blinking rapidly at what Rigel assumed was a great big black spot across his vision, but he wasn't done yet. He canceled her mirror shield with a projected mirror shield of his own that destabilized hers into collapsing, and his wand began to move in swift patterns as his brow knit with the concentration his next spell demanded. Before he could complete it, though, Rigel was already within his guard, propelling her momentum abruptly upwards with the sticking charm on her right foot and chopping her left hand down on his right forearm in a move that targeted the muscles he used to keep a good grip on his wand. Her knees dug into Rookwood's chest at the same time, and while any other boy his age would likely be completely winded, Rookwood merely stumbled backwards at her added weight.

It was enough. Rigel tumbled to the ground on top of the larger boy, wand at his throat even as his own wand fell to the dirt from a forcibly lax grip.

"Concede?" Rigel smiled from her seat upon his chest, panting through her triumph even as she inspected her opponent for any real damage.

"I'm not sure that counts," Rookwood grumbled, looking a little put out as he gazed up at the sky.

She gently pressed her wand into the thick muscle of his neck.
"Would you like me to stupefy you?"

"No," he decided, sighing deeply in a way that dislodged Rigel from her perch and sent her laughing to the ground.

They both sat up and shared an easy grin. Rookwood was never a poor sport, though Rigel thought she was the only one he'd actually lost to so far.

"Rigel won again?" Draco shook his head as he made his way over, "How many weeks is that running, now?"

"Rigel always wins," Rookwood said genially, "Except once when he dueled you."

"Draco can read my moves too easily," Rigel complained. She didn't understand how a little empathy could give him such an advantage in their duels. It wasn't like her emotions could tell him what sort of spells she was going to use. Perhaps it was simply that she couldn't take him by surprise when he could tell if she was about to do something devious. She did tend to win a lot of her duels on the grounds of creative surprises, come to think of it.

"I've been dueling you longer," Draco said, "Still, it was a good duel, from both of you. Edmund, you've finally figured out that stopping Rigel from dodging is the only way to gain advantage over the pacing, and Rigel... I can't tell if you planned all that or just panicked at the end, but it *did* work, and Professor Lupin says that results are undeniable."

An expression he'd picked up from Sirius, if Rigel didn't miss her guess. It sounded like the sort of argument he would use to get his way.

Rigel and Rookwood nodded their thanks at the roundabout praise, and Rookwood asked, "How did the others do?"

"Neville lasted a whole five minutes against Rosier," Draco said, smiling. Rigel decided not to let him know how proud he looked of the Gryffindor he would have said six weeks ago was a waste of good oxygen. "They dueled a couple of times before tiring out. Aldon has no stamina, I swear."

Rigel could barely comprehend Draco referring to Rosier by his first name, but something had certainly changed between the two of them over the last couple of months. They were friendlier, now, and sometimes when Rigel came across them she got the weird feeling they'd been talking about her. She shook her head. It was probably her suspicious imagination.

"Did Ron finally beat Pansy?" Rigel asked, looking over at where her blonde-haired friend seemed in deep conspiracy with the redhead. It was not an uncommon sight, as both were the type to go over their duel with a fine-toothed comb afterwards. Pansy had an analytical streak that Rigel could only assume came from her father, Mr. Parkinson, and Ron never missed a chance to break a maneuver down to its basic elements. Too much exposure to Quidditch as a child, she thought.

"Pansy thinks not, but Weasley is calling it a draw," Draco said, smirking, "All I know is that Pansy snapped when Weasley tried to get a hair-removal charm to connect and it's lucky the poor bastard made it out alive, frankly."

Upon closer inspection, Ron did look a bit worse for wear. Pansy had a *thing* about hair, as Draco and Rigel could personally attest, having spent endless hours the victim of her over-zealous braiding habits more times than they cared to remember.

"Well, let's huddle up, since everyone's done, now," Draco said, clapping his hands together smartly.

They gathered with the others, passing around congratulations and encouragement where appropriate as they all stretched out muscles carefully to avoid injury.

"Great work today!" Draco said. He looked pleased as punch, and Rigel thought again what a good thing this odd habit had become. It gave him an outlet apart from Quidditch to focus his energy on when wrangling with his empathy left him annoyed and feeling stifled.

"Rigel, Edmund, that was some very fast-paced dueling. Neville, you've gotten a real hang of the rhythm of spell-exchange, now. Next you should work on purposely disrupting that rhythm periodically so your opponent doesn't get too comfortable. Aldon, you should practice casting the higher-level spells until your core bulks up a bit- you were flagging at the end of the second duel. Also, try to find a little killer instinct. I know Neville doesn't exactly inspire it, but I think a bit of drive will really take your dueling to the next level. Pansy, I wish you had a bit less killer instinct, to be honest. You're going to emotionally scar Weasley for life if you aren't careful, and then we'll have to replace him, and just when he's starting to not look like a complete clown in the ring." Everyone laughed good-naturedly at the scowling redhead. "If you all want, we can plan to meet up again the first Sunday after break."

They all agreed, and then Ron spoke up. "First of all, I'd like to say it's bogus that I'm the only one you still call by my last name, *Draco* . And secondly, I think we should make this a proper club."

"Remember the disaster at last year's 'dueling club?'" Rosier reminded him.

"This'll be different," Ron said, waving a hand vaguely, "Run by students. I've had several people ask about what I'm doing with a bunch of snakes every week, you know. I think they're interested, but they feel like they can't intrude as long as it's a private thing."

"We'd have to get permission," Draco said, not looking entirely put out at the idea.

"Percy can use his Head Boy magic for something useful, then," Ron said, grinning, "He knows the Head Girl real well, too, so between the two of them, it shouldn't be a problem."

"We can start advertising in common rooms after the new year, then," Pansy said, looking excited at the prospect of organizing something, "We'll have to make it clear we're only accepting dedicated members serious about improving their skills. I expect some will drop out once they understand the physical demands. We might get enough to do a tournament, though, by the end of the school year."

Neville looked slightly intimidated at the prospect of new members, but he said, "I'll ask Professor Sprout if she'll put a flyer in the Hufflepuff common room."

"Good idea, Nev," Rosier said, smiling. He seemed to have taken a bit of a liking to the slightly timid Gryffindor. "It should definitely be open to all Houses."

"Professor Flitwick likes me," Rookwood said. She supposed that was as good as an offer to talk to the Ravenclaw Head of House about it as well.

"It's settled, then," Draco said, "I'll draw up a charter of some kind over the holidays. Stay in shape, now, and don't forget to practice your drills. We don't want to look like a bunch of fools in front of our new members, right?"

"What could be foolish about learning Dueling from a third-year?" Rigel asked, smiling as Draco narrowed his eyes at her.

"I'm sure I can find a willing assistant couch among the upper years, provided we do get any new members," Draco sniffed, "You just

worry about not knocking people over in your next duel, Rigel. We don't want to be banned for free-dueling, after all."

The others laughed at that, and Rigel quickly stifled a grimace. She really shouldn't have knocked Rookwood's wand from his hand bodily like that. It was, strictly speaking, bad form. It had just seemed like the most obvious thing to do at the time. Those sorts of instincts were the ones Leo would be pounding into her head over the break, too, so she would have to be doubly careful when their club resumed in the spring. No sense advertising herself to her peers as a violent brute, even if it was a more effectual style of dueling.

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By far the hardest thing she did before catching the train home that year wasn't packing, saying goodbye to her friends, or deciding which books to keep with her and which to leave in her dorm room. The hardest thing was surrendering her time-turner to Professor Snape's care the last day of term.

"I trust you've already completed your holiday assignments?" Snape asked, once the Ministry-required end-of-semester mental health checklist had been completed.

"Yes, sir," she said with no small amount of regret. What she would give to be able to take the innocuous golden necklace with her over the break. She had abused it terribly in the last two weeks, of course, to make up for all the time she would not be able to steal over the holiday, but just imagine what she could do with a time-turner at her parent's house! She could be at home with her family and in the alleys with Leo and studying in a library somewhere with Archie. For that matter, Archie could use it to-

She caught herself before the thought fully manifested. Maybe a break from the time-turner was for the best, after all. She didn't put a

lot of stock in rules as a rule, but there were some lines she probably shouldn't cross. Like revealing the existence of a secret time-turner to her cousin and letting him use it to catch up on his studies. It pained her, leaving it at Hogwarts, but that very pain was a warning sign, she thought. It was time to resume a normal pace of living, perhaps.

"The two years is almost up," Snape said suddenly, breaking her from her reverie.

"They are," she agreed, a bit nervous, "Have you... made your decision?"

Snape inclined his head, his lips twisting in a way she found odd until he said, "I shall speak to your father upon the new year."

"My-why?" Rigel swallowed thickly. "Isn't it my choice?"

"It would be, if you were of age, as most apprentices are," Snape said, "As it is... he does have the power to gainsay this, Rigel."

He was not speaking to her as a student, she understood, but as a mentor. "I will speak to him when I get home," she said, thinking hard, "If he is warmed up to the idea... perhaps it will not be so difficult to acquire his permission. I think if it comes down to it, and I insist... well, he's never actually refused me anything." Archie had never asked to be apprenticed to the son of Sirius' hated rival, of course, but perhaps she could phrase it somewhat differently.

"You will both be attending the gala at the Parkinsons', will you not?" Snape asked, clear signs of plotting in his expression.

"I... suppose so," she said carefully, "I haven't heard from Si-my dad either way, but we went last year at the Rosiers'."

"Good," Snape nodded, "I am required to attend in any case, so that will be as good a place as any." With a sudden flick of his fingers, he added, "Your cousin, Miss Potter. She will also be there?"

"I'm really not sure," Rigel said, dread pooling in her stomach. She hadn't forgotten Snape had wanted to meet Harry-her-sometime over the break, but she hadn't thought he would suggest a place so public. Nor a place where Rigel was already supposed to be. "She doesn't go to parties."

"She will attend this one, if she wants to continue benefiting from my second-hand tutelage," Snape said sharply, "Tell her to seek me out, and I will judge whether or not such an arrangement is fit go on."

"I will tell her," she said quietly, "Thank you, Sir. Is there anything else?"

"Nothing that cannot wait for the new term," Snape said, leaning back in his office chair, "You may go, Mr. Black."

"Have a good holiday, Professor," she said, forcing a smile. All she could think as she made her way back to her dorm was that she really, really wished she could have kept the time-turner over winter break. How on earth was she going to be in two places at once without it? She just hoped Archie made good on his promise of a new plan for their disguises. Between Remus, Snape, her friends, and their families, they needed a miracle to make it through the holiday undiscovered.

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[end of chapter nine].

A/N: So! Quite a long Draco's POV at the beginning, there, for those of you who are fans. The whole thing tops out around a modest 23,800. Again, really sorry for the long wait on this one. The next chapter will, of course, cover winter break, which is bound to be rather confusing, I think. There's a lot of crossing of identities involved, so just mentally prepare yourself for that, dear readers. As always, you humble me by reading this bit of nonsense, and I can't wait to read all the theories and ideas you come up with after this

chapter. Happy Halloween (super belated), and maybe if I'm a really *really* good worker elf I can get this next chapter out in time to wish you an relatively on-time Thanksgiving. No promises, but the next two weeks look pretty uneventful for me, and it's nice to have goals ^^.

Lots of love,

-Violet

Chapter 10

A/N: So here's the start of winter break. For those of you who wished the last scene at the Burrow had been longer-you're welcome. To everyone else-just bear with it. This chapter will disappoint some of you, because there's no gala (sorry), but I promise all of this filler stuff will be important! Eventually.

An Ambiguous Artifice:

Chapter 10:

When Rigel stepped off the train at platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$, she'd barely taken three steps when she was scooped up in a fierce hug that stole her breath and tugged her off-balance completely. Laughing a bit, she hugged Sirius back, saying, "Miss me, Dad?"

"More than ever," Sirius said, leaning back to get a look at her. "You haven't grown much, Sport. Been eating your vegetables?"

"I'm saving up my growth spurts for the summer," she said, grinning easily, "That way I don't risk getting new robes for Yule."

"Wouldn't want that," Sirius agreed, "Then I'd have to keep that new sneakoscope for myself."

"Dad!" she affected an appalled look. "Don't ruin the surprise!" Archie had a thing about surprises and people who spoiled them prematurely.

"I'm just kidding," Sirius said, slinging an arm over her shoulders and steering her toward the porthole, "Sneakoscopes are for people with enemies. Everyone loves the Black boys."

"Does uncle Regulus know you call us that?" she asked.

"Reggie doesn't have room in his head for such trivial details," Sirius said, "Too crowded as it is up there."

"What with its being stuffed full of his own consequence," she said, raising one eyebrow.

"What a caustic young man you've grown into." Sirius sighed dramatically. "It's my fault, really. I let you spend too much time with Harry as a child. Should have sent you to play with that Longbottom boy, instead. I hear he's very nice."

"Harry's not that bad," she said, "She's never mean to anyone."

"Not to their faces anyway," Sirius laughed, "I love our Harry, but you have to admit she's got a critical streak a mile wide."

Did she? Perhaps she used to, before it had become so difficult to live up to her own standards. These days, no matter the internal critiques her mind sometimes offered, she didn't have the hypocritical gumption to level any true condemnation at other people when her own life was such a mess.

"I think she's gaining some compassion in her old age," she said after a moment's contemplation.

"More like gaining some control over her tongue," Sirius said with a short bark of laughter.

"That too," she agreed. Looking for a change of subject, she asked, "Why didn't you send me to play with Neville as a child? Aunt Lily is good friends with Mrs. Longbottom. Did you just think Harry was enough of a playmate for me?"

Sirius gave her an odd look. "We did have the Longbottom kid over once. Don't you remember?"

She blinked, completely taken aback. Archie had had a play date with Neville once? Why hadn't he mentioned that? After the Flint

disaster, she would have thought he'd mention any other distant pre-Hogwarts acquaintances who might expect her to recognize them.

"I don't really..." she trailed off, wondering how she was going to explain this one.

To her surprise, however, Sirius dropped it immediately with a somewhat awkward, "Never mind, Arch. I'm probably misremembering."

They walked in slightly strained silence until the apparition point, each lost in their own thoughts. Eventually she decided to just ask Archie about Neville and see if there was anything important for her to know.

Sirius offered to get started on dinner when they reached number twelve, and she gratefully took the chance to retreat to her room and 'unpack.' In reality she simply un-shrunk her trunk and opened it up on the bed to give the impression of unpacking and settled in to mentally review everything she had to tell Archie about the last semester before they officially switched back.

It was half an hour before the door to Archie's bedroom whooshed open and Archie darted in, nearly slamming the door behind him in his hurry. She had to laugh when she took in his appearance—he was bundled up like a nomad fresh from the tundra, knit hat pulled low over his brow and a thick scarf pulled up over his nose and cheeks.

"Cold?" she asked, chuckling as he struggled to unwrap himself.

"No," Archie huffed, "Unless Lily asks, and then yes, you were very cold on the way here."

"They're going to see our faces eventually," she said, perplexed by Archie's strange and unnecessary maneuver.

"Not until I fix mine," Archie said, grinning with more mischief than she was ready to deal with so soon after coming home.

"You said you had a plan for our disguises," she said slowly, "You going to tell me what it is, now? I was sort of thinking we'd have to just pretend not to grow at all this year, and then somehow arrange to go away at the beginning of the summer and take the Polyjuice before we get back, or... something."

"Don't worry another moment," Archie said, nearly bouncing with excitement, "I've got a solution and you're going to be so impressed, because I worked really hard on it all semester."

"What is it?" she asked, more than a little curious now. How on earth did Archie have time to research new disguise methods on top of everything else he had to do that semester? Maybe AIM gave time-turners to its students, too?

"It's a surprise!" he said, "So close your eyes."

She did so, trying not to smile too fondly. It would only encourage her playful cousin to keep her in suspense. What felt like several minutes later, Archie gave her the go ahead to open her eyes again. She blinked, and found herself looking into a mirror. It wasn't the first time she'd used that expression to describe how eerily alike she and Archie looked, but it was the first time she hadn't been exaggerating.

"Is it an illusion?" she asked, turning her head this way and that to admire the angles of Archie's new look. It was uncannily accurate, though there was something... off about it. "I think it's on backwards."

"What?" Archie lost his smug little smirk with a disheartened slump. "It's symmetrical," he whined.

"Not perfectly," she pointed out, "Come look at the mirror with me." She dragged him over to the bathroom and gestured to their reflection. "See? It's flipped, because you were picturing what I look like when you look at me, weren't you? But when you see the slight quirk in my right eyebrow, it looks to you like it's on the left."

"Oh, duh," Archie groaned. Looking in the mirror between their images, he furrowed his brows and pressed his lips together in concentration. A moment later, without any noticeable wand-work that she could see, the faces in the mirror matched perfectly.

"How are you doing that?" she asked, frankly astonished, "It's much more solid than any illusion I've ever seen."

"Thank you," Archie said, smirking again, "That was the level of amazement I was looking for the first time."

"Maybe if you'd gotten it *right* -"

"Anyway! Remember when you gave me a Potentialis potion after our birthdays?" Archie said, grinning widely.

"Oh, no," she blanched. Not Archie, too. Draco's gift might have been a coincidence, but two gifts conveniently unlocked after two Potentialis potions? Unlikely. She would have to seriously look into what she was doing wrong with that recipe.

"Oh, yes!" Archie actually jumped in excitement, "I mean, I knew the metamorphmagus ability ran in the Black line, but the only case in the last two generations was Andromeda's daughter."

"The only documented case," she said.

"You think there were others that hid their gift? Why?" Archie's brain caught up with his voice abruptly and he said, "Oh. I guess for the same kind of reasons my ability will be undocumented, too."

He looked a bit down at the prospect of hiding such a major magical development from his father, so she said quickly, "It's really amazing, Archie. This is... beyond anything I imagined. Our ruse is going to be nearly indestructible, now. We can never be caught out as one another, because there's no way to be sure-" she broke off with an embarrassed laugh, "Well, only one way to be sure, I guess."

"Actually, I can become a girl now," Archie said seriously.

She leveled an amused stare at him. "Been practicing?" Her cousin flushed pink from ears to cheeks. "I bet your anatomy scores have really improved," she pressed, fighting a laugh at the mortified expression on his face, "Does Hermione help you practice?"

"Don't talk about Hermione like that!" Archie blurted, "It's not-I don't-stop *laughing*, Harry!"

"Sorry, sorry," she said, wiping one of her eyes discretely, "It's good, Archie. Really. I mean, now they really can't prove anything on your end. Me..." She sobered up quickly. "Well... maybe it's time I started considering taking the male version of the Modified Polyjuice. The older we get, the bigger the risk of someone realizing my hips are just a tad too wide becomes, right?"

"You said it was dangerous to suppress the reproductive organs' natural shape over a long period of time," Archie said, frowning.

"In theory," Harry shrugged, "I don't have any concrete data on it. Anyway, this whole thing is dangerous. It might be unavoidable at some point. This summer, maybe-I'm growing a lot this year, Archie. I can feel it, underneath the Polyjuice, growing pains all across my ribs and lower back."

"It'll be suspicious for different reasons to your parents if you suddenly turn into a boy, though," Archie argued worriedly, "I mean, what if Sirius throws another swimming pool party? What if your mom wants to come into the changing room with you at Madam Malkin's? It's too big a risk."

"I suppose there's time to figure something out," she said, trying to lighten the mood a bit, "Anyway, I'm really proud of all the work you must have done this semester. Coming into a new gift isn't easy."

"It was a lot of fun, actually," Archie said, shrugging, "I can turn my hair pink. Want to see?"

"Maybe tomorrow," she said, smiling at the mental picture, "Our parents will be expecting us for dinner soon. We need to hurry and change clothes, and I've still got to put my contacts in."

"Sucks to be you," Archie said, smirking, "I never have to wear contacts again."

"You might have to wear a bra, though," she smirked, "Maybe you should go as me to the gala-you can look more like a girl than I can right now."

Archie shot her an unimpressed look, "Yeah, like Harriet Potter would go to the gal-why are you looking at me like that?"

Grimacing, she wondered how she could have forgotten that she had tons of explaining to do. Now she would have to rush through it before Sirius came up to get them. "Change first," she sighed, "Then I'll explain everything."

"First you might want to drop that voice-changing spell," Archie suggested, "And undo whatever thickening charm you've been using on your eyebrows, or James and Lily may have a few concerns about the direction your adolescence is taking."

"They'll have a few questions, anyway." Harry rolled her eyes as she performed the cancellations. "I look like someone cast a stretching charm a ten-year-old boy."

"Your shoulders are much wider than a ten-year-old's," Archie said.

"Oh, good," she smiled, "Then it won't be suspicious when I start growing facial hair."

"You aren't going to grow facial hair," Archie laughed, "You'll have to pretend to, though. I recommend cutting your jaw a bit and then dabbing at it embarrassedly when your roommates are looking."

"Somehow, when I envisioned the future of our deception so long ago, this wasn't what came immediately to mind," Harry sighed. She changed quickly from Archie's familiar robes to her own somewhat alien outfit. Her clothes always felt too small the first few days after switching roles. Archie's male-cut robes were just so much more comfortable than the snug-fitting swaths that passed for feminine ensembles. At least she would be back in her brewing robes soon.

"So what's the scoop?" Archie asked once they were both suitably attired.

"It's complicated, but the long and short of it is that both Rigel Black and Harry Potter need to attend the New Year's Gala this year," Harry said. She launched into an explanation about Snape's demanding to meet her as Harriet at the gala as well as his plan to confront Sirius about Rigel's apprenticeship, then segued into her friends wanting to meet Harriet as Rigel's betrothed, and finally her fear that it wasn't going to be enough if she went alone that year. "I mean, you could in theory pretend to get violently ill the night of the gala and leave me to go as Harry-myself, I mean-with Sirius, but without using the Modified Polyjuice, Harriet is going to look exactly like Rigel. It'll be a bit suspicious, don't you think, if Rigel just happens to be sick and Harriet shows up looking and acting uncannily like him? I'm afraid Professor Snape will assume that Rigel is pretending to be Harriet in order to convince Snape to let Rigel keep helping Harriet with potions, which of course is going to make Snape think Harriet isn't actually any good at potions and Rigel has actually been covering for Harriet this whole time and-"

"Whoa." Archie held up his hands with a confused look on his face. "First of all, stop talking about yourself in two different third-persons-it's freaking me out."

"Sorry," she said, taking a breath.

"That's okay," Archie said, "I think I understood most of it. I'm just thinking-and bear with me here because this is going to sound crazy, but-why don't we both just go as... *ourselves*?"

Harry blinked slowly, "You think? I was going to research mind magics and see if there's a way to mentally connect our surface thoughts temporarily so we could feed each other information about credible responses to awkward situations in real time."

"That... sounds awesome," Archie admitted, "But I think in this case, the simple answer is better. You be you, and dazzle your Snape with a galore of potions expertise, and I'll be me, and dazzle everyone with my stunning good looks and charm."

"Except for the part where you look like me," Harry said.

"Our good looks, then," Archie waved a hand dismissively, "The point is, all 'Rigel' really needs to do at the gala is introduce Harriet-I mean, you, damn this is complicated-to people and not blurt out any terrible secrets in front on the entire Wizarding ton. Piece of cake."

"I'm not sure you can pretend to be me for so many hours, though," Harry said, biting her lip, "My friends are pretty observant. One of them can feel your very emotions, now, so you'll have to be convincing on more than just the surface level."

"Because you're so unique," Archie said, voice thick with irony. She had said something similar to him once, she thought, and maybe he had a point. There weren't many things, she had come to realize in the last few years, that couldn't be faked. "Besides, I'm pretending to be me, remember? It would literally be impossible for anyone to call me out on not being Arcturus Rigel Black."

"True," she conceded. Still... "What about your aura? Snape, Malfoy, and Riddle can all read them, and they all know I don't have one. I can fake one as Harriet, but you don't know how to suppress yours."

"I'll learn." Archie shrugged. "We've nearly two and a half weeks until New Year's. If I put all my time into studying aura-suppression, I'm bound to get somewhere."

Harry frowned at his confidence, but agreed that it was possible. She'd have to do something about her aura, as well. Now that she knew her diminished magical core wasn't strong enough to support shaped imbuing in practice, it would be incredibly foolish to appear in front of Snape with an aura that contradicted the words that would be coming out of her mouth.

"Kids! Food!" came echoing down the hall, and they wrapped up their plans for the moment.

"You remember all the topics I told you Remus covered in his lessons?" Harry asked Archie as they headed for the stairs.

"Got 'em," Archie said, "You read over all those letters Aunt Lily and Uncle James sent?"

"Twice," she said, grimacing. She would not be slipping up in that department ever again. Being held at wand-point by her own father had had a strong motivating influence on her ability to memorize those letters' contents.

"Let's go reclaim our rightful identities, then," Archie said cheerfully, bounding toward the smell of dinner with a look of hedonic ambition on his face.

Harry followed close behind, ready to get the looks of bewildered amusement that would blossom in the wake of she and Archie's stunning similitude out of the way, at least. Then she would lay claim to a large helping of what smelled like her mother's vegetarian lasagna. That conquest, at least, wouldn't leave a sour taste in her mouth.

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The next day saw Harry and Archie holed up in the lab beneath Potter Place, pouring over the dark disguise book. She'd read the chapter on auras before, but as her aura had already been suppressed at the time, she hadn't paid very close attention to the details in that section.

"This sounds like Occlumency," Archie said, frowning.

"It is, basically," Harry said, "You'll need to access your mental landscape, then essentially use your magic to construct something that conceals the main portion of it from the mists. Near as I can tell, what's on the first level of your mindscape is what people can read from your aura."

"So it's like putting your things inside a house, so people can't see them when they drive by," Archie said.

"Yes," Harry agreed, "And Occlumency is the process of building and defending that house, while Legilimency is the art of breaking into other people's houses."

"Sounds fun," Archie said, "Only how do I access my mindscape?"

"It usually takes a lot of meditation," Harry said slowly, "But I have an idea... I don't know if it will work, but it might be a huge shortcut."

"Is this like the time you had an idea to raise a baby fox in my closet without telling me?" Archie asked warily.

"I told you," Harry protested.

"After it ate the aloe plant on my windowsill and got sick all over my blankets," Archie reminded her.

"If Mum hadn't started wondering where all our milk was going it wouldn't have been so hungry," Harry said, feeling rather guilty about the blasé sense of responsibility she'd had as a child.

Archie sighed, "The point, though, is... are you sure your idea is a good one?"

"Not entirely," Harry said, "But I don't think it's going to hurt you."

"Has anyone ever told you how terrible you are at reassuring people?" Archie rubbed his jaw. "Okay, shoot."

"Remember when I showed you your magical core?" Harry said at once, actually a bit excited to see if her idea was going to work.

"You mean when your magical core tried to roast me? Yeah, I remember," Archie didn't look impressed.

"Well, I told you about how during the Sleeping Sickness I could access people's mindscapes through their cores, right?" she said, leaning forward, "Even though accessing other people's cores is somehow something only I can do, everyone should be able to access their own cores without a problem. So in theory I can pull you through your core into your mind."

"And you'll be able to direct me in constructing some kind of aura-containment field," Archie said, eyes widening.

"I could probably even help you," Harry said, "I think anything I made in your mind with my magic probably wouldn't last very long, but I might be able to direct your magic to help you create something."

"That actually sounds worth a shot," Archie said, starting to grin, "Can we try it now?"

Harry nodded, smiling back, "Sit with your back against something so you don't fall over. Then we'll begin."

They got into a comfortable meditation position, then focused their attention inwards.

"Do you remember how to project your consciousness toward your core?" she asked, eyes closed.

"I think so," Archie said. After a long moment of silence, he sighed happily, "Found it."

"I'll meet you there," Harry said. She focused on the secondary layer of her core, the writhing coils of fire that snapped out, whip-like in reflex, in answer to her focusing attention. As her avatar fully materialized beside the core, she fought a flinch of unease. It looked for lack of a better term *denser* than she remembered. She supposed that was the suppressor, compacting her magic as it locked the deepest parts of it away. She expected the core to look smaller, though, if it was being compressed by the suppressor. Instead it merely seemed darker, wilder, and hotter. She felt a frisson of fear as she stretched her hand toward the outer coils. Was she still welcome here? But no, this was her core. It couldn't resent her for suppressing it-magic didn't think that way. Everyone said so.

She coaxed a coil forward, wrestling a bit to get it to go in the direction of Archie's core. Once she felt the twang of connection, she followed the line with confidence. Projecting her consciousness got easier each time, and she hadn't lost the knack for it, despite not having occasion to practice since the Chamber of Secrets.

Archie's magic was as she remembered, wrapped in soft, swirling mist that seemed to invite even as it concealed. She followed her cousin through the gentle wafts of magic, parting the mists before them until they reached the babbling river of cheerful blue that made up his primary core. It flowed in a whimsical circle, uniform yet free. What a contrast it made to her own disgruntled and repressed core.

"Do I have to swim upstream?" Archie asked, letting his fingers dangle in the current.

"Only if you want to lay eggs and then die on the upper banks," Harry said, reaching out her own hand to dip in the stream, "We just need to push through the center. I guess in this case we dive in and swim until we hit the other side."

"Do we hold our breath?" Archie asked.

"Have you been breathing?" Harry smirked.

"Oh," Archie blinked as he realized that as a projected consciousness he didn't, in fact, need to breathe, "Weird."

She guided him forward, plunging them both into the rushing blue. When they emerged on the other side, Harry had to pause for a moment and stare at the world she'd just stepped into.

If she hadn't swam through his core herself, she might have assumed Archie had an air core, so full of light and atmosphere was his mindscape. There was no clear light source, yet everything she saw was bathed in a golden glow that offset brilliantly against the intensely blue sky that seemed to swallow up most of the horizon. She and Archie had emerged on a sandy bank littered with glass-like pebbles that sparkled in the light. The river in Archie's mind mirrored that of his primary core, flowing in one large, continuous circle that dominated the center of his mental landscape.

"What are those?" Archie asked, pointing upwards.

She craned her neck and couldn't believe she hadn't noticed them before. Filling the sky above their heads were bubbles-not filled with air, but with water. They skimmed along in an invisible breeze, large and small, each a self-contained pocket of crystal-clear river water that sloshed and swirled as it floated around.

"They must be your manifestations," Harry said, running a hand through her long hair thoughtfully. How were they supposed to even access those things, much less suppress them beneath a layer of secondary Occlumency?

"My mind is awesome," Archie declared, grinning proudly, "I bet nobody in the world has a mind this cool."

"And to think we haven't even done anything with it yet," Harry chuckled.

"Why mess with perfection?" Archie said airily.

"Because you have to pretend to be me, and my mind is considerably less... open," Harry said, gesturing at the blinding expanse of sky.

"Right," Archie said, rubbing his hands together, "Where do we start? Can we just gather all the bubbles in one place?"

"I think we have to cover them with something," Harry said, "The idea is to veil them from the first layer of your mind, from the 'view' of the mists. Anyone using aura-sensing or non-invasive Legilimency essentially scans the primary layer of your mind, so anything out in the open is 'visible' to them. Make sense?"

"Yeah, but... how are we supposed to cover a whole river?" Archie asked.

Harry looked at the expanse of water flowing peacefully. "It is pretty big." Her miniature sun seemed positively portable in comparison, in fact. "We have to cover the bubbles, too."

"We could build something to put them in, I guess," Archie said, looking around, "Right in the middle of the river-circle-thing. A dome or something..." He scrunched up his nose. "That would be pretty out of place, though."

"It doesn't have to be aesthetic," Harry laughed.

"Why shouldn't it be?" Archie asked, looking offended, "It's my mind. I want it to be all tranquil and stuff. Maybe it'll help me think."

"Occlumency does make your thought patterns more efficient," Harry agreed, "It's a side-effect of a well-organized mind."

"Well let's organize mine, then!" Archie looked excited to get started, but utterly unsure where to begin, exactly. "What if we just put, like, a privacy screen up along the outer border of my mind?"

"That's a lot of surface area to cover," Harry frowned, "And the mists extend pretty far up along the edges of your mind. But maybe we could grow some sort of... privacy vegetation. The ground along the banks looks pretty solid. I think it would take roots."

"Trees!" Archie gushed, "Yes, that's perfect! We'll plant trees all along both banks and the canopy will block out the river!"

"And we can attach the bubbles of water to the branches," Harry said, "So they can't be seen from outside either."

"They're so... free, though," Archie sighed, "Do we have to tie them down? What if we just moved them into the river, instead? Then they could flow freely, but still be hidden by the canopy."

"That could work," Harry said slowly. She wasn't sure if you could put aspect Manifestations inside the representation of your core, but she didn't think there was any harm in trying. Archie's magic couldn't harm his own mind. "Let's try it."

They stood for a moment, just staring up at the many globes of watery whimsy. "How do we get them down, again?"

"You should have some control over them, since it's your mind," she told him, thinking of how she managed her own mindscape. "Just focus on a bubble and think of what you want it to do."

Archie turned his attention to the nearest sphere, a small bubble about the size of his fist that wobbled in the air like a bobber in choppy waters. He lifted a hand coaxingly toward the little blue ball, then slowly retracted it like he was reeling in an invisible line. The bubble swerved through the air almost curiously to hover at Archie's nose. He laughed and caught it between his hands carefully.

The moment it was clasped between his fingers a peculiar look came over his face. "It's a memory," he said, sounding a bit breathless, "It's-I can feel it, like I'm really there. Remember when we made those snow-ghosts?"

"In Mrs. Bagshot's yard?" Harry smiled, "We surrounded her house with them. The glow-powder we sprinkled in their eyes lasted over a week, I think."

"Yeah." Archie smiled down at the memory bubble fondly. "That was a good prank. Even though Aunt Lily made us apologize when she found out."

"I think old Bathilda enjoyed it," Harry said.

"She did leave them up until they melted," Archie agreed. He walked to the bank of the river and knelt down. Gently, he released the ball of memory into the stream. The bubble seemed to slip into the river almost delicately, not sinking to the bottom like a stone but winding its way through the water easily of its own accord, matching the current, yet outside of it, clearly making its own path.

Archie turned his attention to the next bubble, and Harry took a moment to consider how she could best help. She didn't really want to handle Archie's Manifestations. It was a very personal part of the mind, and even though she knew almost everything about her cousin, it still didn't feel right to interact with his memories in that way.

She moved a short distance away, instead, and bent her will toward the water in Archie's river. In theory she could use her own magic to build something, but there was no telling how long it would persist in Archie's mind, or what it might do once she stopped concentrating on it. Better to ground his defenses in his own magic.

The water flowed at her command, as though eager to be useful. She directed a small trickle away from the stream with a thought, drilling it down into the sandy bank as though she were planting a liquid seed. Another moment of concentration, and the water hardened and darkened, sticking fast below the sparkling pebbles and shooting upwards in a fountain that solidified even as it blossomed toward the sky. She fed it more bits of magic as needed, guiding the offshoots into trunks and branches that burst into brilliant

green at their edges. In a short time, a supple river birch stood before her, several distinct trunks together spreading a multitude of cheerful leaves whose shade gave another dimension to the babbling stream it overlooked.

Harry ran a hand over the curled bark with a satisfied smile. Archie's mind was going to be lovely, by the time they finished.

"That's great, Harry!" Archie called from where he was herding a string of memories along in a strange parody of follow-the-leader.

Harry waved back in acknowledgement, then got to work on the next tree. They still had a long way to go.

She didn't know how long they worked, but eventually, when about a third of the circular bank was covered in canopy, Harry noticed that the water level in the river was significantly depleted. She jogged to where Archie was still ferrying bubbles into the river and said, "I think we should stop here for today."

Archie nodded. "The river is starting to get a bit crowded," he said, gesturing to where entire schools of memory orbs were swimming around one another even as they floated along with the current around them. "I feel tired, too, like after I practice a spell too many times. Only I haven't done any magic-it's kind of scary that you can use my magic like that without my input."

Harry blinked. "I think you could forbid me... probably."

"No need." Archie shook his head, amused. "Could you access my core without being in my mind, though? I mean, could you tap into someone else's core just by being near them?"

Harry recoiled from the idea. "Surely not. That would be..." Well, she couldn't call it impossible. Magic seemed to make most things possible. Still, it was the sort of idea that made her feel slightly ill. Using someone else's magic to help them was one thing. Using someone's magic against their will was unthinkable. Magic always

answered to the will of its owner. To even think that she might be able to circumvent that will was... "Dangerous."

Archie shrugged, but she thought it seemed a bit forced.

"Let's get back to our bodies," Harry said, eager to change the subject. "Do you think you could find this place again with meditation, if you need to work on it while I'm not around?"

"I think so," Archie said, looking around as though to cement the view of his mindscape in his imagination. "Yeah. Let's go."

They dove back into one of the rivers and let the current carry them out.

The first thing Harry heard upon opening her eyes was a loud "ouch!" from Archie. She opened her eyes to find him clutching at his neck and wincing. "Cramp," he whined, grasping for his wand with his other hand. A moment later he was muttering a muscle relaxant charm under his breath and sighing with relief.

Harry smiled. "Wish I'd known that spell back when I started meditating. It took forever to figure out how to hold my head so it didn't kink."

"Someday your trials will inspire Rita Skeeter to write a biography," Archie said solemnly.

She considered throwing something at him, but everything in reach was something she needed undamaged for her lab.

They stretched out their muscles and climbed the stairs to the kitchen. "Please let Aunt Lily have left sandwiches from lunch," Archie prayed under his breath as they poked their way into the fridge.

"Lunch?" Lily breezed into the kitchen from the other room, "Archie, it's nearly five-they're setting the table at Grimmauld as we speak."

"Did you come to collect us, Mom?" Harry asked, shutting the fridge sheepishly.

"Of course," Lily said, "You've been in the lab all day. I got a little worried that it was *too* quiet down there, but when I checked you guys were just meditating. Have you been at it all day?"

"I read that meditation can help you learn things faster," Harry said, "The study said that meditating for an hour every week can cut down the time a student spends studying by as much as two hours a day."

"So you two thought if you spent a whole day meditating you'd learn at the speed of light?" Lily guessed, smiling, "I'm not sure it works like that."

"Can't hurt to try," Archie said, grinning impishly.

"Just warn me if you decide to take up Legilimency," Lily sighed, "I'll have to Oblivate the knowledge of where your Yule presents are hidden."

"We'd never use our powers for evil!" Archie said, looking aghast at the very prospect.

Harry wondered how Archie could possibly classify 'peeking at presents' as 'evil.' Especially compared to some of the other things they'd done. She supposed Archie just didn't think of their deception as something bad, in the grand scheme of things. Neither did she, of course, but she did feel nearly constantly guilty about it all the same.

She and Archie flooed over to Grimmauld Place and were met with the glorious smell of food cooking as they wandered in from the floo-room. Before they reached the kitchen, however, Sirius intercepted them.

"I need a word with Arch, Harry," he said, looking determinedly cheerful in a way that only made her feel a bit uncomfortable.

"I'll help Remus finish up," she offered, scooting past her uncle in the hallway and wondering what had Sirius so awkward-looking. She didn't think he'd ever met a conversation he couldn't gracefully skate his way through.

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Archie watched Harry slink away toward the kitchen with nary a look back and wondered if she knew how utterly unconcerned she often seemed.

His dad gestured him toward the library, so Archie followed, taking a seat in one of the terribly old upholstered chairs and wrinkling his nose at the smell coming off the fabric. They really should update the decorating sometime.

"What's up, Dad?" he asked, tilting his head to invite his father to say whatever was on his mind.

"Son," Sirius said, his eyes roaming Archie's face restlessly, "Lately I've been thinking."

"About?" Archie prompted when his dad lapsed into silence once more.

"You look a lot like Harry," Sirius said slowly, "I mean, before there was a bit of a difference, sometimes, but now... you look almost exactly the same."

Archie nodded, knowing it would be absurd to deny the obvious. "I've noticed. I accused Harry of playing a prank on me last night, actually, but I checked and she definitely goes longer than an hour between drinking something so I know it isn't Polyjuice-"

"I don't think it's Harry," Sirius said, grimacing a bit. "I think... you may have inherited some latent metamorphmagus abilities."

"Me?" Archie chuckled in disbelief, absolutely stunned that his dad had put that together so quickly. Too bad he could never know how right he was. "But I can't change my appearance, Dad. And if I could, I'd definitely use it to look like the keeper for the Abbleby Arrows, not... Harry." He tried to make it sound as though the very notion were amusing, but Sirius didn't laugh.

"I don't think it's a conscious ability," Sirius said, frowning a little, "It's rare, because usually magic genetics is an all-or-nothing deal, but sometimes an ability can manifest passively. I can't think of any other explanation for why you and Harry continue to grow more similar instead of less."

"Why would it fixate on Harry?" Archie asked, thinking quickly. Maybe he could use this. If Sirius set upon a plausible explanation that didn't endanger the ruse, well, why not let him? It would stop his dad wondering about the strangeness of it, at least.

Sirius shrugged a bit helplessly. "I suppose, since you spent so much time together as children, you might be a bit... attached to Harry. Perhaps your latent ability has latched onto her as a sort of model for your own growth."

"What does that mean for me?" Archie asked, trying to look as though he were considering the possibility.

"Maybe nothing," Sirius said, "Maybe... well, it depends on whether it bothers you, I suppose, that your appearance might be shifting to match hers."

"You calling me ugly?" Archie squinted at his dad until Sirius let out a bark of laughter.

"No, and don't let Harry catch you implying she is, either," Sirius said ruefully.

"She wouldn't care." Archie waved his hand dismissively, then paused. "Do you care? I mean, does it bother you that I might end up looking like James instead of you?"

Though to be honest Archie rather thought Harry and he looked more like Sirius than James.

"It doesn't bother me," Sirius said, and Archie thought he was probably being honest, "I just worry it may not be healthy. I'm not saying you depend on Harry, because you're both very independent, strong-willed young adults. It might be that you need some... distance, though. For both your sakes."

"Distance?" Archie scrunched up his nose. He wasn't sure he liked that idea. Harry and he were a team.

"You spend a lot of time together," Sirius said, "Which isn't bad necessarily, but you also sacrifice a lot for one another. Harry studies Healing for you, you study Potions with... Snape....for her. It's just-you're very committed to one another, for being so young."

"Neither of us is doing anything we don't want to," Archie pointed out.

"That may be true, but you're still doing a lot for one another," Sirius said. He rubbed his chin. "I just think you need something for you, Archie. Harry had her internship last summer. Maybe this summer... you can do something by yourself?"

He said it more as a question than a suggestion, but Archie nodded easily, growing excited as the implications turned over in his mind. "If you think it's best, I'll start looking into opportunities. It could be really fun to have a project of my own next summer." In fact, Archie thought, maybe he could find an internship abroad. Without the chance to update their Polyjuice over the winter break, there would be a very noticeable difference in looks when they next took it. Harry's sudden change could be explained by a growth spurt while she was in America, but with Remus at Hogwarts... maybe a little

time away from his family was just what he needed. Or what their artifice needed, rather.

"Good." Sirius looked quite relived, and Archie concluded that his supposed passive metamorphic talent must have been bothering him more than he let on. "So. Dinner?"

"Race you," Archie grinned, taking off like a shot. It was only partly to escape the awkwardness of ending that heavy conversation; he was also *really* hungry.

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It took the rest of that week, working on and off, to get her and Archie's mindscapes straightened out. In addition to suppressing all the Manifestations of Archie's mind, she'd helped him set up a few rudimentary defenses to casual prying. She doubted anyone would try to Legilimens him at the gala, but she'd found that you never actually knew, with purebloods.

Once Archie's mind was shored up, Harry turned her attention to herself. She really needed to flesh out her projected aura a bit, just enough that it wouldn't be obviously fake to anyone familiar with reading them. Toward that end, she convinced Archie that it would be in their best interest to visit Frein's shop in the Lower Alleys. She had followed the instructions in the dark disguise book as best she could, but as she had no way of sensing her aura for herself, she didn't know if it would pass muster or not.

Frein had read her aura easily last summer. He would be the perfect, innocuous candidate to test her new, improved aura on. Archie's too. She thought the canopy they'd built would be very effective as a suppressant, but she wanted to double check before they showed up at the Parkinsons' on New Year's Eve.

"How much further in is it?" Archie asked, looking very uncomfortable as they turned onto yet another side alley.

"Not much further," Harry said, "See that fountain? It's just down the alley that opens alongside it."

"You know your way pretty well down here," Archie said, voice carefully neutral. "Last time I came to Knockturn with you we stayed on the beaten path."

"It's been two summers since I started working with Krait," Harry said, smiling a bit, "I know the alleys much better, now."

"I thought you meant the craftsman alleys," Archie said quietly, "Or maybe the more questionable retailer alleys off of Knockturn. I didn't know you'd been running around... way back here, Harry."

"This is where my apartment is," Harry pointed out.

"Really?" Archie looked dubiously at the ramshackle buildings around them.

"Not *here*," Harry rolled her eyes, "It's further in, in one of the residential districts: certainly not in the commercial areas close to Diagon."

"Is it nice, at least?" Archie asked, looking as though he wasn't sure he was allowed to ask that question.

"It is." Harry smiled. "Want to see it?"

"That's okay," Archie said, "I'll take your word for it."

She supposed he was even less comfortable in the lower alleys than he seemed. She couldn't blame him-she still remembered getting hopelessly lost the first time she'd ventured beyond Kyprioth Court.

They turned one last time and found themselves in front of a familiar sign reading "Custom Metalwork and Repair."

She opened the door to the shop and ushered Archie inside. It was as fantastically cluttered as she remembered, walls of miniscule boxes organized according to some mysterious schema. "Mr. Frein?" she called, stepping up to the counter, "Are you here?"

"Be right with you!" came a cheerful voice from the back of the shop.

"Are those fairy rings?" Archie asked, awe in his voice as he took in a glass display case under the counter.

"He works with all kinds of materials," Harry said, "Leo says he's a genius."

"Leo is too free with praise," Frein said, finally stepping out from the back room. His face was lightly lined with signs of frequent mirth, and he hardly had to stoop to scoot under the counter's divide, so short was he.

"He simply has excellent taste in the people he chooses to speak about," Harry said, "How have you been, Frein?"

"Very well, young miss, thank you." He gave a little bow that gave them a full view of his bright red hair. "What can I do for you today? Trouble with that ring of yours?"

"No, although I wouldn't mind if you had time to tweak it this week," Harry said, smiling a bit sheepishly, "I was thinking I'd like to have access to just a bit more of my magic-there's a brewing technique that's very hard to achieve without sufficient magical reserves."

"It shouldn't be too much trouble," Frein said, "May I have a look?"

Harry pulled off her glove with only slight hesitation. She could easily hand it over for a few days-she just wouldn't do any magic in the meantime. As long as she didn't use her magic, she could contain it just fine on her own.

He turned the ring over in his fingers once she'd pried it off and hummed a bit under his breath. "I can have it adjusted by four this afternoon, does that work?"

"Are you sure?" Harry frowned, not intending to inconvenience the man. "I don't want to rush you."

"If I say I'm sure will you wipe that ridiculous half-guilty expression off your face?" Frein laughed. "You honestly look very pitiful like that, child."

Harry's face relaxed in open surprise. Archie hooted with laughter. "He's got you there, Harry. Just let the man do his job when he wants to do it."

"All right. Four, then," Harry said, shaking her head.

"Was there anything else?" Frein asked, pocketing the jade ring.

"Yes," Harry said, wondering how exactly she could phrase her request.

"Can you read our auras?" Archie blurted, leaning forward excitedly.

Frein nodded easily, not even questioning their motive as he took a step back and squinted at them each in turn. "Interesting," he said, smiling widely, "Very interesting. You, young lady, have no aura at all! Have you suppressed it intentionally?"

Archie exchanged a look with Harry, then said, "I'm... a guy."

Frein looked acutely surprised. "Ah, I've done it again. I'm terribly sorry, young man, but I assumed the two of you were twins-you are identical, are you not?"

Harry and Archie both laughed, a bit uneasily. "We're related, but not twins," Harry said, "Though people do confuse us quite often. So you can't see his aura at all? Not even a little bit?"

"Nothing," Frein agreed, still smiling. "I'm guessing that is good news?"

Harry smiled enigmatically, but didn't answer. "What about my aura?"

"It's matured since I saw it in August," Frein said, raising a bushy brow knowingly, "Been working on it?"

"A little," Harry said, smiling back. In fact she'd added quite a few more of the supplementary Manifestations to her outer mindscape, and very carefully siphoned a bit more magic to the torch-like manifestation that sat atop her mountain. People would expect for her core to have expanded after her thirteenth birthday, and she felt her aura should reflect that. Even if nobody had probably been paying attention to it at the showcase, anyway. "Is there anything noticeably off about it? I'd like it to be as natural as possible-in the interest of academic curiosity, of course."

"Of course," Frein said, face serious. He squinted at her some more, but eventually shrugged. "I see nothing wrong with it. It's a little on the uncomplicated side, but not everyone has a complicated aura. Some say a simple aura is the sign of a simple mind, but in truth it is only the sign of a very clear-thinker. It will pass muster, I think, whatever you're preparing it for."

Harry had to try very hard not to laugh maniacally. It was all falling together. For once. With their auras in check, no one who could read them (i.e. all the most dangerous people she knew) would associate Harriet Potter with Rigel Black.

"Thank you, Frein," Harry settled on saying, "We really appreciate it."

"Come by anytime," Frein said jovially, waving off her thanks, "Four o'clock, in fact."

"Will do," Harry said, bowing her head once again in thanks as she and Archie made their way out onto the street.

They exchanged triumphant looks as they set off toward home. "I think we might actually pull this off," Archie said, looking like he wasn't sure whether to relax or keep an eye out for something to go wrong.

It was a little after two and they'd had an early breakfast, so Harry asked Archie if he wanted to stop at the Dancing Phoenix for lunch. "It's much closer to the main alleys," Harry said, "And you might be able to meet some of my friends, if they're here."

"Oh, sounds fun," Archie said, managing to summon a genuine-looking smile for a moment. "Do they take well to strangers around here?"

"You aren't a stranger," Harry laughed, tugging him along, "You're with me."

Archie looked like he wasn't sure what to say to that, but he followed her to Kyprioth Court nevertheless. He seemed to relax into the idea the longer they walked, and by the time they approached the Dancing Phoenix Archie seemed almost excited at the prospect.

"What kind of food do they have here?" he asked, rubbing his stomach exaggeratedly, "I'm starved."

"Solom makes the best shepherd's pie," Harry bragged as they ducked through the front door, "And since it's cold out he'll probably have lamb stew on today-it's to die for."

"Ain't a one died on me yet, though," Solom called from where he was wiping down a table by the stairs.

"*He says,*" Rispah, sitting with her feet up in a chair before the fire, laughed softly.

They seemed to be the only people about at the moment, so Harry waved a greeting to Solom, then steered Archie to the table closest to where Rispah was sitting and said, "Sit. I'll put our orders in to the

kitchen staff." No sense in making one of the serving boys traipse all the way out to the dining area when it was just them. "Risbah, this is my cousin Archie. Archie, this is Risbah, Lady of the Rogue."

"You didn't tell me you had a brother, Harry," the older woman said, setting a cup of something hot aside.

"He's not my brother," Harry said, shaking her head amusedly as she ambled out of the room.

She saw Risbah gracefully gain her feet and saunter over to Archie's table. She wondered if it was okay to leave Archie alone for a moment, then mentally shrugged-he'd be fine. Risbah was perfectly nice.

She chatted with a few of the cooks she'd grown familiar with over the summer, then collected a couple cups of milk and headed back to the dining room. She had to hold back a snort when she saw Archie sitting several feet closer to the end of the bench than when she'd left him. Risbah was sitting beside him, leaning on the table in a way that angled her body almost threateningly toward her poor cousin. It didn't help that Risbah, despite the winter chill, wore a supremely flattering but barely-there bodice that caught the eye with dozens of carefully embroidered sequins half-hidden among the laces.

"I hope you're playing nice, Risbah," Harry said, taking a seat across from them.

"She's not," Archie said, clearing his throat in the general direction of the tabletop.

Risbah chuckled, low and calculated, "This is nice, lad."

"My name's Archie," her cousin sighed, "Harry, I don't think your friends like me."

Harry was startled into a laugh at Archie's bald statement. "You've only met the one so far, and I'm sure Rispah's just teasing you. She likes most people."

"I don't either," Rispah smiled, shaking her pretty head of curls ruefully, "But I make exceptions for Leo's friends. And I suppose friends of Leo's friends-if they're nice to me." She said the last with a smile that Harry thought should be put on a list somewhere for unexpectedly lethal things. "What brings you and your friend this way today, Harry?"

"We're picking up an item I ordered later, so I thought we'd lunch here," Harry said, not too concerned with whatever was provoking Rispah's slight hostility. She probably just needed to get to know Archie. "I wanted Archie to see where I spend so much time, too. The Phoenix was sort of my home away from home last summer."

"I thought she was holed up in the Guild all those afternoons," Archie put in, looking determined to participate.

"How do you feel, knowing Harry was here, with us?" Rispah asked. Her voice seemed just a tad too sweet, and Harry wondered if Rispah was actually feeling defensive for a moment. She tried to see Archie from an outsider's perspective. His winter robes were finely made, the silver chain of a watch dangling from one pocket. His face, like hers, was aristocratically cast, for all its somewhat odd androgyny. He looked like a young Lord, from his carefully arranged hair to his upscale shoes, and Harry wondered how she hadn't realized he'd stick out. She'd just grown so comfortable in the lower alleys, she forgot sometimes that other purebloods usually didn't trespass these streets, and generally weren't welcomed anyway.

"I feel I ought to have guessed," Archie said, smiling in an unconsciously affable way, "I mean, Harry was always the adventurous one when we were kids. If anyone could find a gem like this in all these twists and turns, it'd be him. I'd have gotten hopelessly lost."

Rispah looked intrigued despite herself, "You two grew up together?"

"Of course," Archie said, grinning, "Harry really hasn't mentioned me? I'm wounded. We're cousins, but we grew up closer than siblings-it's like he's ashamed of me!"

"I am," Harry said, completely deadpan.

"Cousins?" Something in Rispah's face relaxed minutely.

"Of a sort," Harry shrugged, "Our families are very close. And we are related a couple of generations back."

"It's like that in most of the old families, I hear," Rispah said, gazing at Archie shrewdly.

"Some more than others," Archie said, a bit of embarrassment creeping into his voice, "My family is infamous for interbreeding. And lunacy. And those things probably aren't related if you ask my grandmother's portrait."

Rispah let out a full-throated laugh. "Does anyone ask her?"

"Actually, we put her in the attic," Archie said, ducking his head as though ashamed, "There's just no respect for the elders anymore."

Rispah laughed again, this time slapping her skirts heartily. "Aye, you'll do fine here, lad."

"Course he will," Harry said, smirking a bit, "He's related to *me*."

"You fit in too well here," Rispah said, flicking her curls and pinning her with a serious look, "It's not safe here in the alleys of late."

"You mean the raids?" Harry asked, sobering quickly.

"Raids are just the Ministry's way of pretending their law means anything down here," Rispah said, leaning closer, "It's the reaction to the raids that's the problem. Folk are getting restless. Angry."

Shopkeepers are growing bitter over all the disruptions, threatening to take their business underground. The vampire covens are organizing. And Leo hasn't been getting challenges."

"Isn't that last one good?" Harry asked, frowning. If Leo wasn't being challenged for his title of King of Thieves, it must mean people were satisfied with the way he was running things.

Rispah shook her head. "There's always challenges, except when someone's plotting foul play. If no one's trying to take Leo's crown in the open, you can bet there's something sinister a foot behind closed doors."

"Like Claw?" Harry asked, blanching a bit.

"Mayhap," Rispah muttered, "Mayhap not. Difficult to tell. A lot of people are upset 'round here-one more might not attract the attention it ought."

"Is there anything we can do?" Harry asked, unconsciously including Archie as a matter of course.

"Be a little more careful than you usually would," Rispah advised, "Stay to the alleys you know, the ones close to the clinic or the Rogue. And don't traipse about after dark. Especially if you're gonna be traipsing with outsiders-no offense, young lad."

"None taken," Archie said, eyebrows raised. He didn't seem to know what to make of such a serious conversation. "How long until I'm... an insider?"

"Well, you'll have to meet Leo, first," Rispah said, smiling a little once more, "He's in charge of these parts."

"We've met," Archie said, scrunching up his face to remember, "I think... I was helping Harry with her crates, and-"

"Her?" Rispah broke across him sharply, turning to look at Harry with new eyes.

Harry's eyes cut to Archie's frozen, apologetic look. "I suppose it was bound to happen. It's not a big secret, really."

"You're a..." Rispah dissolved into a fit of laughter, clutching at her stomach as though trying to physically hold herself to the bench.

"Oh, Goddess, that's a pretty trick, young miss! To think that I missed it-but you do look very boyish, Harry, if you'll forgive my saying so."

"It's true," Harry said, shrugging, "I look like my parents kidnapped Archie's twin and adopted him."

"Except you were born first," Archie pointed out, still looking very sheepish.

"Does Leo know?" Rispah was suddenly grinning like a cat with a mouthful of cream.

"He does," Harry admitted, sorry to disappoint the older woman. "I told him shortly after we met, in the interest of honesty."

Rispah nodded. "Good lad-lass, that is. Never lie to a King if you can help it."

"Easier to tell them to mind their own business," Harry agreed.

"What's he king of, again?" Archie asked, looking a little lost.

"Anything I want to be." Leo appeared from practically nowhere at the end of the table. She was sure she hadn't seen him walk through the front door.

Archie visibly twitched in response to her bright-eyed friend's sudden appearance. "That's rather convenient," he said after a moment.

"It's actually a lot of work," Leo said, not looking too torn up about it. He slid onto Harry's side of the bench, obliging her to move over or

sit in awkward proximity to him. "Archie, right?"

"Good memory," Archie said, nodding amiably, "It's been a while."

"It's good practice for a King to remember the people he meets," Leo said, grinning wolfishly, "No matter how seemingly insignificant."

"No seeming about it," Archie said, not put off in the least. Her cousin could always rise to a conversational challenge. "I'm about as uninteresting as they come."

"Really?" Leo picked at one of his nails off-handedly, "I heard you kill basilisks in your free time."

Archie choked. "That was once," he protested, "And how do you even know?"

"I know everything," Leo said, "About everyone who steps foot in these alleys."

"That must take up a lot of your time," Archie said, nodding seriously, "Or do you employ spies?"

"Looking for a job?" Leo asked, head cocked in interest.

"Employment doesn't suit the men of my family," Archie said, leaning back in his chair with a relaxed grin, "But we do enjoy a number of eccentric hobbies."

"Maybe I'll make an ear out of you," Leo said, grinning now, "I always need more in the upper echelons of the social crop."

"A friend of Harry's is a friend of mine," Archie said.

"Likewise," Leo smirked.

Harry honestly couldn't tell if they were serious or not. "Now that we're all friends..." Harry trailed off as a serving boy came trotting out from the kitchens with she and Archie's lunch. She pulled out of

a couple of coins and tossed them his direction, smoothly pushing Archie's bowl to his side of the table. "How have you been, Leo? Your last letter seemed a bit rushed."

"Lots to do before the snows get bad," Leo shrugged, gesturing to the large stack of pallets stacked neatly on the far side of the large dining room. He stole her cup and sniffed at its contents before wrinkling his nose. "Milk, again?"

"It's good for you," Archie and Harry said simultaneously.

Leo and Rispa laughed. "Now we *know* you two are related," Rispa said.

"Lots of people drink milk," Harry rolled her eyes.

"Not around here," Leo informed her, "Ale keeps you warmer."

"So do warming charms," Harry said.

"Too many squibs," Rispa said bluntly, "Ale's easier."

There was a moment of silence, in which Harry felt like an utter cad. Archie cleared his throat uncomfortably. "Do you need blankets, or..." he seemed at a loss for what to say.

"We can take care of our own, young Mr. Black." Leo tipped an imaginary hat. "I thank you though. There's not many would even offer."

Archie shrugged in a way that was grace and humility combined. "Well I'm around, if circumstances change."

"I know where to find you," Leo said, nodding agreeably.

Harry was certain that he did, however uneasy that might make her.

"You going to be around for training this holiday?" Leo asked Harry after a few minutes of letting her and Archie eat.

Harry swallowed. "Sure. Do you have time though?"

"Some afternoons are good," Leo said.

"Some afternoons it is," Harry smiled, "Should I bring a knife?"

Archie noticeably refrained from choking again.

"Do you have a knife?" Leo laughed, "No, don't bother-those cleavers you keep in your potions kit don't hardly count."

Harry tilted her head, "They do well enough for their purpose."

"Don't we all?" Rispah said, tracing a small ring idly on the wooden tabletop, "Don't we all."

They lapsed into pensive silence after that, finishing up their lunches quickly. Leo ambled off to talk to Solom about some 'court business,' and Rispah spent the rest of the meal casually trying to make Archie blush. She was well into her eighth or so pose, this one an artful lounge back on her hands that thrust her chest out rather coquettishly, when Harry stood. "We should be getting back to Frein's," she said, "It's a long walk there."

"It was nice to meet you, Lady Rispah," Archie said, even managing to sound sincere despite how utterly nonplussed he must be after her obvious attempts to fluster him.

Rispah sighed playfully. "One thing to say about you nobles-I do like your manners."

"See you around, my lady," Harry grinned, bowing in a movement that was echoed by Archie not half a beat later on their way out.

"I hope so, little lass," Rispah chuckled low, "The alleys could use a player like you."

Harry was sure that the alleys had plenty of players already, and said so. Rispah only smiled enigmatically, giving a little wave as the door

swung shut behind them.

"Your friends are... interesting, Harry," Archie said after they'd walked a short distance.

"You've met Marek," Harry said, "What did you expect?"

"I'd somehow convinced myself he was the exception," Archie said.

"They're great, once they warm up to you," Harry promised.

"I somehow doubt I'll spend enough time here to merit it," Archie said, "But I suppose it's nice to have goals in life."

"I don't think we need anymore goals," Harry said, "The last time we got ambitious things sort of spiraled out of control."

"I don't know." Archie pretended to think. "You think we've lost control?"

"If we haven't, I'd like to see what out of control really looks like," Harry huffed.

"Careful what you wish for," Archie teased.

As they made their way through thinly-disguised slums to pick up a ring that would re-suppress the majority of her magic, Harry rather thought that advice was a bit overdue.

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It was a few days before Yule that Archie received a letter from Ron Weasley, quietly begging Rigel to come to the Burrow for an afternoon visit. After a brief discussion with Archie over whether it would be better to decline or for Archie to try and be Harry all day at home, they settled on an ingenious alternative.

Archie sent a letter accepting Ron's invitation, but inquiring if it would be all right if Rigel brought his cousin Harry to visit, as well. It would be a test run, of sorts, for the New Year's gala. If Archie could pull off being Rigel around the Weasleys, several of whom knew Rigel's personality fairly well, he could probably skate through the gala all right.

The weather was foul that day, rain sleeting down into slush that collected on the windowsills, so after securing permission from their parents to go, she and Archie bundled up in their warmest cloaks, bringing along gloves and scarves on the off chance the Weasleys wanted to go outside.

Before they left, Harry had one more thing to do. She ducked into the downstairs bathroom and eyed her hair in the mirror. It was exactly the same cut and style as Archie's, usually, but she felt as long as they were intending to lead people's thoughts, Harry's hair ought to be at least nominally different. It would draw attention away from their similarities, and give people an easy feature to fix on when deciding which was which.

She very carefully put a tiny amount of power into a hair-growth charm, waving her wand back and forth over her head until the ends began inching slowly toward her ears, avoiding her bangs completely. She knew the trick was to go slowly, if you wanted the hair to appear at least semi-healthy, so she bit back her impatience and kept up her concentration as her locks crawled downwards. She grew it out several inches until, instead of resembling an unruly halo, her hair curled up under her chin in a restless bob.

She looked incredibly tousled, she thought critically, fingering the waves that always prevented her tresses from lying flat. The extra hair framed her face effectively, though, further disguising the uncanny similarity to Archie's features. It would be enough, she decided, to differentiate them in her friends' eyes.

Archie blinked when she emerged, tilting his head like a bird who'd come across a new species that might not be entirely friendly. "You

look like a girl. Sort of."

"Now you know what you'd look like with long hair," Harry smiled.

Archie laughed. "I already know what I look like with long hair-it was one of the first things I tried."

"Of course it was." Harry rolled her eyes. "Are you ready to go?"

"Yes," Archie said. A determined look crept into his eyes.

"Run through them again," Harry prompted.

"Arthur, dad, works at the Ministry in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts office," Archie said, ticking a finger, "Molly, mom, housewife with an impressive tolerance for chaos. Bill, the eldest, works at Gringotts in the curse-breaker division and he's the one who came to Hogwarts after that goblin attacked you-me."

"And he's the one we have to convince the most with our act," Harry put in, "He knows Harry from the lower alleys, and he thinks Rigel might be Harry, which we need to change."

"Even though technically he's right," Archie teased.

"Especially because technically he's right," Harry said, "I'll reveal myself as Harry, throwing the suspicion off of you."

"Right." Archie nodded, beginning his ticking of fingers once more.

"Charlie is the one I haven't met, and he works with dragons in Romania. Percy is a seventh year, wants to be a barrister, and helps me with Transfiguration study. He's also Head Boy. The twins are Fred and George, fifth years, pranksters and all around jokers. They swap identities a lot so I shouldn't directly address one of them if I'm not sure which is which. Ron is in my year, in the Defense club with me, has a rivalry with Pansy, has a good mind for puzzles and is best friends with Neville Longbottom. Ginny is a second-year, very

short tempered, rather sharp tongued, and she's the one who got possessed last year."

"Which you should never ever mention," Harry said.

"Which I should never ever mention," Archie agreed, "Is that everything?"

"I think so," Harry said, "Just be really polite to Mrs. Weasley, don't get upset at anything Ginny says, even if it seems confrontational, be sure to defend Percy if he gets ribbed too much, and don't let the twins bulldoze you in a conversation."

"And avoid talking to Bill," Archie added.

Harry smirked. "Yes. Leave William Weasley to me."

"Should I be worried for him?" Archie raised his eyebrows at what was probably a predatory look on her face.

"Worry about yourself, cuz," Harry said lightly, "This is your dress rehearsal, and I will be watching closely."

"It'll be like looking in a mirror," he promised, stilling his normally expressive features with eerie ease. "After all, *I* am the real Rigel Black."

"Keep telling yourself that." Harry ushered him toward the floo. "I might even start to believe it."

Archie floored through first, leaving Harry to rather predictably stumble through the grate after him. She really hated the floo. She blinked the soot from her eyes and looked up to see a familiar gaggle of redheads staring curiously in her direction. She affected a nervous, harmlessly distant look in place of the fond smile that fought to grace her lips.

"This is my cousin, Harry," Archie said, waving a casual hand her direction.

"It's nice to meet all of you," Harry said, stepping forward to address Mr. and Mrs. Weasley in particular. "Thank you very much for having me over."

"What manners," Mrs. Weasley sighed happily.

"We're very glad to have you," Mr. Weasley added.

"Harry was bored stiff at home," Archie put in, looking sympathetic, "Poor thing doesn't have any friends, and I couldn't just leave her there to collect dust in the library."

Harry's eye twitched, but before she could defend herself Mrs. Weasley bustled forward to engulf her in a warm hug.

"Poor dear." The housewitch patted her head gently. "I suppose all your school mates are in America?"

"Uh, yes," Harry mumbled into the other woman's shoulder.

"Well, my boys are very friendly, and I'm sure Ginny would love to make a new female friend," she said, smiling as though she truly believed it. Harry saw Ginny roll her eyes over Mrs. Weasley's shoulder.

"Oh yes, very friendly," Ron coughed after beat of silence and a stern look from his mother.

"I'm sure they are, Ma'am," Harry said, "Is this everyone?"

She knew it wasn't. At the kitchen table sat Mr. Weasley, Ginny, Percy, and Ron. The eldest two were presumably working, and the twins were nowhere to be seen. She tried not to read anything ominous into that observation.

"Oh, no, just my two youngest and Percy, our Head Boy," Mrs. Weasley said, beaming fondly at said boy as she made her way back to the table, where Harry could see she'd been darning a pair of thick winter socks. "Come to think of it, where are the-"

"Missing us, Mum?"

"We've only been gone five minutes."

The Weasley twins slunk into the kitchen with all the air of people who were trying very hard to appear completely innocuous.

"What have you done?" Mrs. Weasley frowned suspiciously.

"Done?" Fred pretended to think about it. "Nothing terribly interesting."

"In the last five minutes, anyway," George grinned.

"These are my two fifth-years," Mrs. Weasley sighed.

They turned as one to where Harry and Archie stood closer to the fireplace.

"Hey Rigel- *woah* ." They swiveled heads of red hair back and forth between she and Archie with slightly awed expressions.

"Rigel," George said, turning a serious expression toward Archie, "How in Merlin's name-"

"-did you forget to mention-"

"-that you had a *twin* !"

Harry was surrounded by overly curious fifteen-year-olds before she knew what had happened. Hands poked at her face and ruffled her hair experimentally as Fred and George fired rapid questions over her head excitedly.

"It's a girl Rigel!"

"She's even got the same chin-"

"-and the same unimpressed expression!"

"How *cute*," they sighed simultaneously.

"She's not my twin," Archie said, long-suffering, "She's my cousin, Harry Potter, and stop poking her, please. She's easily provoked."

Harry snapped playfully at the nearest twin's freckled finger.

"Woah, this one bites!" Fred said, cowering behind his twin.

"Can we keep it?" George asked Archie, widening his blue eyes in a desperate plea.

"She's mine," Archie said firmly, "Don't you have enough toys, anyway?" He gestured to Ron and Ginny with an idle smirk.

"But we want a *new* one," Fred pouted.

"I think I'm offended," Ginny frowned.

"You're always offended," Ron informed her.

"Fred. George. Stop intimidating our guest," Mrs. Weasley snapped, "Honestly. First young lady we've had over in ages and you two can't help but traumatize her."

"She doesn't look traumatized," George said, peering into Harry's blank expression curiously.

"Not like that girl Charlie brought last holiday, anyway," Fred put in.

"The one whose eyebrows you lengthened into curtains?" Mrs. Weasley scowled.

"We were doing her a favor," Fred shrugged, unconcerned, "Poor thing had plucked them nearly all away."

"She never did come back," Mrs. Weasley said, looking disappointed now, "What fine young babies they might have had."

" *Mum*," five mortified voices echoed around the kitchen.

"A mother can dream," Mrs. Weasley sniffed.

"Anyway..." Fred said, intentionally awkward, "Rigel, we've got a surprise for you-come see?"

Archie grinned, but she could tell he was restraining it to match Harry's personality as best he could. "Sure. Ron, do you want to...?"

"Better not," Ron grimaced, "I'll catch up with you in a bit."

"Great." George took Archie's arm and towed him off into another room. Soon footsteps sounded on the stairs and Fred waved a goodbye to the general assembly, adding, "Nice to meet you, girl-Rigel," as he followed the other two.

"Don't blow anything up," Mr. Weasley muttered. Harry waited for the others to laugh, but apparently the man wasn't joking.

"So, Head Boy? That's very impressive," Harry said, smiling in what she hoped was a friendly way as she stood there, unsure what to do. "There's only one Head Boy for the whole school, right?"

Percy nodded, his ears a little pink. "That's right. Do you have prefects and the like at your American school?"

Harry shook her head. "Not exactly. They separate us into tracts, and each tract has upperclassmen that act as monitors. Their duties include things like making sure the younger students don't get too out of line, checking the dorms after curfew, and tutoring those who need help. They have no authority outside of their own tract, though, so as a Healing tract student I wouldn't have to heed a monitor from the Charms tract, for example."

"Interesting." Percy adjusted his glasses and waved her over to the seat next to him. "So there's no one that represents the whole student body like a Head Boy or Girl would?"

"No," Harry said, "But school unity in general is different at AIM than it is at Hogwarts, I think. The tracts mostly keep to themselves, even in the general classes, and there's no inter-tract rivalries or anything, so a student that represents the whole school wouldn't have much to do, I think."

"No Quidditch, right?" Ron asked, looking sad for her.

"There's a sort of pickup league of intramural teams." Harry shrugged. "But they don't draw a big crowd, and they aren't affiliated with any particular tract."

"What do you do for fun, then?" Ron frowned.

"Same things that students who don't play Quidditch at Hogwarts do, I guess," Harry said, smiling a bit. "We hang out with our friends, go to club meetings, or work on extracurricular projects."

"I'm in a Defense club," Ron said, perking up, "With Rigel."

"I heard," Harry said, "How's it going? That Malfoy kid is leading it, right?"

"I guess," Ron said, avoiding the odd look his parents were giving him. Maybe he hadn't mentioned that most of the members were Slytherins so far.

"Rigel says you're really good at strategizing," Harry offered, "Did you learn that, or is it a natural gift?"

Ginny snorted, "Oh it's definitely *un* natural. Ron's a wiz at chess-kicks even dad's butt all over the board, and has since he was about eight."

"Not my game, chess," Mr. Weasley said mildly, perusing a magazine article rather absently.

"Have you ever entered a tournament?" Harry asked, "My uncle, Remus, entered one last year and almost won. He lost to this

hundred year old vampire, who I guess had been studying the game for several decades at that point."

"Professor Lupin?" Ron blinked a bit. "I didn't know he played."

"He's got a prodigious mind," Harry said, "He just hides it behind mild mannerisms. How are classes with him?"

"Terrifying," Ginny said flatly, "Your uncle is a sadist."

"That's true," Harry agreed easily, startling a laugh out of the other girl. "It part of what makes him a great teacher. He's not afraid to be cruel to be kind, you know? He'll push you when even you don't really want to keep going."

"He is a great Defense teacher," Ron said, "I've got him for Dueling, too-wicked fast with a wand, he is."

"He was a prefect when he went to Hogwarts," Harry said, "Even got an honorable mention on his Defense NEWT, I think."

"He went to Hogwarts?" Percy frowned, "But he's..."

"That was back when they allowed Halfbloods," Mr. Weasley said sharply, "And before Mr. Lupin's condition was more or less public knowledge."

There was a moment of silence before Ginny said, "Do you wish you could have gone to Hogwarts, Harriet?"

"Just Harry is fine," she said, smiling despite the somewhat rude nature of the question. Ginny was always refreshing, at least. "And yes, sometimes I do. The Healing tract at AIM is wonderful, as are the facilities and a lot of other things, but to be honest our Potions Master isn't much to write home about. Potions are sort of a passion of mind, so I envy Rigel being able to study under Master Snape-he's the best, right now."

"You wish you could come to Hogwarts... to study under Professor Snape?" Ron looked like he was trying to paste a polite expression over a horrified one, but failing.

Harry nodded, hiding her amusement. "Oh, yes. You're so lucky to have access to such a renowned expert in the field. A lot of places have reputable Charms or Transfiguration Masters, but truly excellent potions professors are few and far between, even at the major schools."

"Why is that?" Percy asked, looking perplexed, "There are a number of very well-known Potions Masters throughout Europe, after all. They're not like Defense Masters, who are rather hard to come by."

"The talented Potions Masters don't become professors," Mr. Weasley said knowledgably, "There's more esteem to be had working directly for a guild, or going the inventor's route and selling your own line of potions. More gold, too. Spell crafters rarely patent a spell with any success-it's just too easy to pass on the incantation, so those talented at wand work often go into teaching instead. Potion-makers can charge exorbitant fees for crafting and brewing difficult potions, though. Too many regular witches and wizards never bother to learn the art properly."

"That's right," Harry said, glad to see that others appreciated how important potion-brewing really was to society, "Master Snape is a rare exception-someone who contributes inestimable amounts of research to the field while also passing on his expertise to the next generation. He's really admirable."

"Admirable," Ron repeated, looking very dubious, "Right."

"I never realized." Percy, on the other hand, looked very impressed with his Potions professor. "I shall have to take better advantage of his expertise in the future."

"I'm sure he'll appreciate that," Harry lied, smiling. Professor Snape did deserve to be thanked and appreciated for his work, whatever

noises he made to the contrary.

"So if you and Rigel are both obsessed with potions, do you, like, spend all your holidays locked in a dimly-lit lab together, sweating over a pair of putrid cauldrons, or what?" Ginny was really looking for a button to push, Harry noted with a bit of amusement.

Undeterred, Harry tilted her head, "Only if mom doesn't let us open a window."

Ron laughed. "Good one. Leave her alone, Ginny. She seems nice."

"No such thing," Ginny said, leaning back in her chair.

"You wouldn't say that if you met my friend, Hermione Granger," Harry said, "She's the nicest person in the whole world."

"Never heard of her," Ginny said, one eyebrow raised, "She from America?"

"No, she's British. Muggleborn."

"And winner of planet-wide nice awards, huh?" Ginny didn't seem terribly convinced.

"That's right," Harry said. Ron snorted. "She's also a genius," she added, smiling.

"You're making her up," Ginny guessed, "No one is smart *and* nice. What's the point?"

"Why was I cursed with such cynical children?" Mrs. Weasley quietly despaired.

"Hermione would say that intelligent people have more responsibility to the people around them, not less," Harry said.

"She sounds like a lovely young lady," Mr. Weasley said, nodding in approval.

"Maybe you'll meet her one day, Mr. Weasley," Harry said, "I think she's going to do great things."

"Talking about your one friend again?" Archie and the twins came bounding back into the room.

"Hermione's worth all of your Slytherin friends put together," Harry said, quoting something Archie had once said to her. "Why do you look like you've been breaking into your dad's coffee cabinet again?" Harry added, eyeing his jubilant posture.

Archie noticeably stilled, laughing a bit sheepishly. "I only had a few cups this morning. I think I lost all my tolerance for the stuff when I went to Hogwarts-they don't serve it to us kids there." Harry refrained from nodding in approval, but it was times like these she appreciated how quick Archie was on the uptake. Now any excess energy on Archie's behalf could be attributed to caffeine. "Besides, you should have seen what Fred and George came up with this time. It's *amazing*, Harry, even our dads would freak."

As Fred and George preened under the praise, Harry held up a hand. "Plausible deniability. I know want to know."

"It's like she *knows* us," Fred stage whispered, looking awed.

"Didn't you know?" Harry blinked as innocently as she could, "Rigel tells me everything. Poor kid just can't keep a secret."

Fred was not the only one to smother incredulous laughter at that.

"Why don't you kids go outside for a bit," Mr. Weasley suggested. "It's stopped sleeting, by the sound of it."

"It's cold," Ginny complained, even while she trudged over to the kitchen door to pull on a pair of somewhat oversized boots.

"Too cold for the brooms," Ron agreed, also reaching for a coat from one of the many hooks by the window.

"Ice skating!" Fred and George crowed, racing each other to a cupboard under the coat rack that seemed overflowing with shoes of every different kind.

"We didn't bring our skates," Harry said, apologetic.

Ron laughed. "That's okay. Mum can make them."

Sure enough, Ginny was presenting her booted feet to her mother's wand, which twitched in a comfortable pattern almost lazily, as though she'd done such a thing countless times before. Twin blades of ice sprouted along their soles, curling elegantly at each end.

"What do you guys do?" Ginny asked, taking in her and Archie's impressed looks.

"We have a pair of never-melting skates from about a hundred years ago," Archie said, "They look like something out of a historical play, but they work all right. We just take turns."

"They smell like uncle Sirius' feet, though," Harry said, wrinkling her nose, "For some reason he never wore socks as a child."

Mr. Weasley's eyebrows rose at that statement. "I'm not sure Lord Black would want you telling us that."

"Dad would freely admit to it," Archie said, grinning, "He thinks embarrassing stories are the best kind."

"Sounds like a Marauder to me," Fred said.

"Your family sounds awesome," George agreed.

"I think your family is awesome," Archie said, smiling genuinely, "Besides, you haven't heard about all of them-Aunt Lily is down right terrifying."

"She isn't either," Mrs. Weasley tutted.

"Do you know my mother?" Harry asked, curious. Lily hadn't really mentioned Mrs. Weasley, except in passing relation to the Weasleys as an example of good, wholesome light-leaning wizard stock.

"I see her at Dumbledore's little soirée in the spring, most years," Mrs. Weasley said, referring to a gathering of Light politicking wizards who usually met around the Easter holiday. "Not last year, of course, with her being on home rest with her newborn. Ooh, I can't wait to meet little Adriana at the next one. I do adore babies. How's she coming along? Healthy?"

"Very," Harry said, "She's a lot like my mom, actually. Red curls and somewhat easily exasperated."

"Harry just says that because Addy hates her," Archie gloated.

Harry ignored the jab, taking her turn in front of Mrs. Weasley instead of answering, holding each of her booted feet up in turn.

"Who could hate our Harry?" George asked, coming up behind her to pat her head consolingly, "She's like a cuddlier version of Rigel."

"You've known me about ten minutes," Harry said, flicking his hand away, "And if you try to cuddle me, I'll give you an extra toe. On your face."

"Promise?" Fred waggled his brows.

" *Boys* ." Mrs. Weasley glared.

The twins headed out into the backyard, Ginny and Ron following. Archie's skates were almost finished, but Percy made no move to stand. At Harry's questioning look, the older boy cleared his throat uncomfortably, saying, "I don't skate."

"We'll see you when we get back, then," Harry said, trying another friendly smile.

"Thanks for the skates, Mrs. Weasley," Archie said, admiring his new blades, "That's a wicked cool charm."

"It'll only last a couple of hours," Mrs. Weasley said, "After that come on back inside and I'll have cocoa waiting."

With heartfelt thanks, they followed the Weasley children out into the cold. It was very awkward tiptoeing across the big backyard on blades of magic, but the sounds of whooping and laughing egged them on toward the pond. The ground sloped downward toward the water's edge, and while Harry carefully picked her way along the incline, Archie impulsively dropped to his bottom and slid the rest of the way, sprawling onto the ice with a carefree cry of warning to the others.

"Rigel!" Ron cursed and spun away from a collision with the black-haired boy.

"Sorry!" Archie called as he slid past, his momentum carrying him close to the center of the little pond before friction reeled him to a stop. "That was more graceful in my head."

"Story of his life," Harry remarked to Ginny, who had stopped at the bank to readjust her laces.

"You wouldn't know it, with how he's perceived at Hogwarts," Ginny told her. Her eyes followed Archie's relaxed form as it stumbled upright and set off on a circuit with confident glides. "I almost never see him this relaxed at school. He's just another calm, collected Slytherin, there."

"Rigel is many things to many people," Harry said, turning to watch her cousin as well. "Sometimes he's the perfect pureblood Heir of Black. Sometimes he's the potions prodigy, other times an amateur healer. Sometimes he's a Marauder, other times a studious shut-in. But these times, when he's just himself-they're rare."

"Why so many different faces?" Ginny asked, equal parts curious and confused.

"I think of it more as his different potentials," Harry said, "They're all a true reflection of what he could be. Rigel hasn't settled into a single path yet."

"Maybe he has, and just doesn't know it," Ginny said.

"I don't think so." Harry smiled slightly. "When Rigel Black chooses a path, the whole world will know it."

"You think a lot of him," Ginny remarked, slanting her eyes toward Harry even as her face stayed facing the pond.

"He's my brother in all but blood." Harry shrugged, sticking her hands in her cloak pockets and pushing off on one skate gently. Looking back she tilted her head at Ginny inquiringly. "It's a sister's job to expect a lot of our brothers, isn't it?"

Ginny followed, catching up easily and falling into a lazy glide beside her. "I think I had high expectations of my brothers once," the redhead said, putting on a moue of sardonic contemplation, "I can't remember much besides a crushing sense of disillusionment, though."

"If you were really disillusioned, you'd be inside with Percy," Harry pointed out.

Ginny glanced over sharply at her words, long fiery strands crossing her face in the breeze. "That's a very good observation, for having known us all of twenty minutes," Ginny said. Her tone wasn't suspicious, exactly. More testing.

"Some things are easier for an outsider to see," Harry said, looking away on the pretext of watching her footwork.

"You remind me of Rigel," Ginny sighed, stretching her arms out as they turned to follow the rounded edges of the pond.

"We did grow up together," Harry smiled, "You'd be surprised how many of our mannerisms are shared."

"Like an innate ability to deflect questions?" Ginny's grin was edged.

"Sure," Harry laughed, "But I was more talking about things like our competitive spirit-want to race?"

Ginny's smile turned feral. "Three laps around the circumference starting-go!"

Harry, easily anticipating the redhead's underhanded move, didn't even blink as she burst ahead. She was too busy pumping her own legs across the ice as fast as she safely could to rib the other girl for lack of sportsmanship anyway.

They flew over the frozen water, waving the three Weasley brothers and Archie out of their way as their rhythms settled in and their strokes evened out. Harry's world narrowed to the ice in front of her and the flash of red in her periphery that marked Ginny's position in relation to her own. Ginny claimed the inside curve, but Harry simply leaned further into the turns to compensate, building as much momentum as she could through the arc so that she rocketed like a sling-shot into the straightaways. Her thighs were burning and her toes aching at being dug into the ice like picks at every corner, but she barreled into the third lap with a huge grin across her face. Racing was something she and Archie had never been able to do with only one pair of skates. It wasn't quite like flying on a broom, but it was much more physically satisfying, she thought. Like a foot race, only faster.

The twins had set up a makeshift finish line using one of their knitted scarves held between them. Ron and Archie cheered good-naturedly from the sidelines. She could hear Ginny's breath beginning to come in fast pants, but weeks of running in the cold winter air had

conditioned her lungs to its thinness, and Harry pushed forward even faster, using her hard-earned muscles to pull away from her opponent in the final stretch. She lifted her hands triumphantly as she crossed the 'finish line,' expecting one of the twins to let go as she approached the stretched out scarf.

Why she expected such a reasonable thing to occur, she didn't know. It must have been the exertion making her loopy, because in retrospect it was perfectly obvious that the twins were never planning on letting go of the scarf as she hit it.

Instead, they held tight to the ends, using the transferred momentum of her impact to swing themselves in a circle around her, just barely avoiding a collision and managing to completely entangle her in the knitted fabric. She landed on her butt, squirming uselessly as she slid across the ice like a punch-drunk, color-blind mummy.

The others roared with laughter, and she could see at least Ron was having trouble staying upright as he cackled, clutching Archie's arm for balance as he pressed his other hand to his ribs. Ginny slid to a stop near where Harry had stopped, sending chips of ice all across her legs. "Should have ducked under the scarf," the younger girl said sagely.

"I see what you mean about disillusioned expectations," Harry mumbled through a mouthful of soft knit.

Ginny bent down and grabbed one end of the scarf with a mischievous smile. Before Harry could beg her not to, she'd yanked with all her might and sent Harry rolling across the ice toward the bank, unraveling from the scarf as she went.

She slid to a stop on her back, blinking up at Archie, who was grinning down at her with a brilliant twinkle in his grey eyes. "All right there, cuz?"

"You said your friends were nice," Harry complained, climbing to her feet with the help of Ron's hand and dusting herself off fastidiously.

"I didn't, actually," Archie said, "Mrs. Weasley is the one who said her kids were nice."

"Mum lies a lot," Ron said, only looking vaguely apologetic.

Harry let out a low laugh as she shook the ice from her hair. "At least there's honesty about the lying, I guess."

"Not until it's too late to turn back, though," George commented, gliding over with his reclaimed scarf tied around his waist in deference to its icy wetness.

"Now that you're one of us, though, cat's out of the bag," Fred added, ruffling a few more ice chips from her bangs helpfully.

"Or at least in a different, slightly less opaque-y bag," George mused.

"Still beats sitting at home, right?" Archie asked, nudging her ribs good-naturedly.

Harry nodded, still smiling. "Of course. This is a lot of fun, actually. Makes me wish there'd been more of us, growing up."

"Neither of our houses would still be standing, were that the case," Archie said, "And anyway, that's what friends are for, right guys?"

"Thanks again for having us over," Harry said, looking around at the four Weasleys with earnest enjoyment in her expression.

"Thanks for coming on such short notice," Ron said, his smile slipping a bit. "You might not believe it, but things were pretty down around here this morning."

"What's up?" Archie asked, adopting a more intent expression that, in Harry's opinion, put his face much closer to Rigel's usual demeanor.

"Our brother Charlie just found out he can't come home for the holidays after all," Fred said, disappointment clear on his face.

"He works abroad, right?" Archie said, guessing, "Did his international floo license expire?"

George grimaced. "Nothing so harmless. A bunch of dragons escaped a reserve in northern France last night. All the dragon tamers that can be spared are being pulled from colonies across Europe and re-assigned to tracking them down and moving them back to the reserve before the muggles notice."

"How many escaped?" Harry asked, alarmed. A rouge dragon was a natural disaster in its own right, never mind more than one.

"Five," Ron said, looking a bit sick at the thought.

"Five," Archie breathed, completely taken aback.

"Maybe they didn't go far," Harry said, trying to brace the mood a bit, "Maybe they'll get them rounded up before Yule, and Charlie can make the second half of the holidays."

"Or maybe they'll go on a rampage and cause a huge international incident and public outrage will turn on the dragon keepers and their families and we'll all be stoned in the streets," Ginny said, arms crossed as though to keep off the chill.

"Or... that could happen," Archie said, struggling to maintain composure, "It's always good to have a clear idea of the worst case scenario, anyway."

Ginny snorted. "The worst case scenario is the dragons kills hundreds of muggles and expose our existence to the world and wizards get hunted into extinction-"

"Okay!" Fred clapped a gloved hand over Ginny's mouth with false cheer. "Don't mind her. Too many ghost stories as a child. Prejudiced

her imagination rather negatively."

"Whose fault is that?" Ginny mumbled through the glove, rolling her eyes.

Ron turned flat eyes on the twins, who exchanged wounded glances before bursting into laughter. "Yeah, it probably was our doing," Fred admitted.

"But Bill told us the stories first," George pointed out.

"And you turned out just fine?" Archie's tone made it clear he doubted the accuracy of that logic.

"So critical," Fred wrapped an arm around Archie's shoulders plaintively.

George followed suit on his other side. "Our pup just doesn't love us the way we love each other, brother mine."

"Thank Merlin for that," Ron muttered. He lifted a shoe to examine his skate. "We've only got forty minutes left on these, you guys. Let's skate."

Fred and George hefted Archie underneath his arms and hauled him bodily back onto the ice. Ron, Ginny, and Harry followed at a more sedate pace.

"Your cousin's a good sport with them," Ron said idly, "Most people only tolerate the twins until the first time they get pranked, and then it's all offended pride and how-could-you lectures."

"People think being a pair or pranksters' friend means they won't prank you?" Harry's eyebrows rose.

"I know, it's crazy," Ron said, huffing a laugh, "If anything it's the opposite."

"It's like that at our house," Harry said, smiling fondly, "The Marauders love to target people they love. Drives my mom crazy-she's always walking into a pie, it seems."

"She sounds very tolerant," Ginny remarked.

"I think she just feels very lucky," Harry said slowly, "Mom never takes anything for granted. She's got a temper like an avenging angel, but her heart is bigger than anything. She's secretly mischievous, anyway-some of the most memorable pranks around our houses are ones my mom came up with."

"Sounds like a good match," Ron offered.

"It is," Harry agreed.

"Maybe the twins will meet someone like your mom, then," Ginny said, flicking a sly glance Harry's direction before striding off toward the other side of the pond on her skates.

Harry tilted her head a bit, confused at what exactly the redhead was implying.

"Ignore her," Ron sighed, "I wish I could say it was you, but Ginny is always like that."

"She seems very forthright," Harry said, smiling, "It's not unpleasant. Only surprising, on occasion."

"I revise my earlier statement," Ron shook his head, shooting her a bewildered look. "You *and* your cousin are good sports. When Rigel said he wanted to bring a friend, I was worried, cause my family can be a bit much, but all my siblings seem to like you. Even Percy likes you, and he's aloof around new people at first."

Harry thought guiltily that it wasn't that difficult to get along with Ron's siblings after knowing them for two years. Archie was the one who had met everyone today and simply dived right into the

friendships, no hesitation at all. Harry wasn't nearly that graceful in social situations. She somehow always came off either stifflingly polite or somewhat disinterested at first glance.

"I think it's just that your siblings are a lot like people I know at home or from my other school." Harry shrugged modestly. "And it helps that they're so great. I think it's wonderful how close you all are—strong sibling relationships are a rarity among wizarding families, in case you haven't noticed. Take my uncle—he never talks to his brother Regulus unless they meet unexpectedly at formal events. Sirius' cousins have a strained relationship as well: Narcissa Malfoy rarely converses long with her sister Bellatrix even at intimate social gatherings, and neither of them acknowledges their third sister exists at all without someone else bringing her up first. Then there are the Lestrangle brothers; rumor is their animosity in the workplace is tearing their company apart from the inside."

"Really?" Ron's eyes were wide, "How do you know all this?"

"Some of it Rigel's mentioned," Harry said quickly, "And the rest is just stuff I picked up hearing Uncle Sirius complain about his relatives."

"I guess..." Ron's mouth twisted into a grimace, "Well, they aren't perfect, but I wouldn't trade 'em."

"You sure?" Harry teased, "I'd trade you Rigel if you give me Percy—I hear he's a Transfiguration wiz, and that's far and away my worst subject."

"You're just getting sick of looking at yourself all day," Ron said, a lopsided grin on his face, "Admit it."

"It is rather surreal." Harry wrinkled her nose a bit.

"Why *do* you look so similar?" Ron asked suddenly, ducking his head a bit as though afraid the question was going to inspire an offended response.

Harry instead pretended to a thoughtful expression, "We're not actually sure. Sirius thinks maybe... hey, don't spread this around too much, ok?"

Ron blinked, then nodded solemnly. She suppressed a smile, knowing that she had given him just enough leeway to tell a few select people, who would then go on to tell a few other people, until eventually the fact that the Black Heir had some kind of passive metamorphism would be the sort of common knowledge that everyone had but no one was sure how they knew.

Harry dithered ostensibly for a moment, then leaned close to say, "Sirius thinks Rigel inherited a kind of passive metamorphic ability from the Black side of his family. Rigel can't actually control his features or anything, but Sirius thinks maybe his magic is unconsciously shaping his appearance to mimic mine."

"Weird," Ron said, one eyebrow lifting, "I've heard of passive gifts before, but it's usually stuff like a natural Occlumency shield or an affinity for creatures. I think Neville might have a passive plant affinity, actually. A passive metamorphmagus, though... well, it's Family Magic, I guess, so anything is possible."

"Especially with a family like the Blacks," Harry said, nodding along, "So many of their ancestors were secretive types-what records they kept might not even be accurate, so there could be close to anything in their blood."

That was the story she and Archie had decided to roll with after his talk with Sirius. It worked, as long as they made it clear to people that Archie/Rigel had no actual ability to morph his features consciously. The innocence of the ruse hung on it being uncontrollable circumstance that the two of them looked so much alike.

They eventually joined the others in seeing who could do the most outlandish trick on the ice. The prize, a reverently plucked pinecone, went to Ron, who was just gearing up for an attempt at a two-handed

toe grab when the ice disappeared from beneath his skates and he went sprawling arse over teakettle. He slid into an overhanging tree at the bank and came up with a face-full of slush and a very irritated squirrel who attempted to scalp him in retaliation for the disruption done to a certain acorn stash.

Cold, tired, but in good spirits, they all six sloshed back to the kitchen door and surrendered themselves to Mrs. Weasley's tender mercies. Cloaks, scarves, and gloves were whisked away to a drying rack while shoes were relegated to a place by the hearth in the den. Harry barely managed to keep her under-gloves on, hiding the suppressor ring from sight. Hot cocoa made the rounds, warming their fingers and stinging their numb lips as they huddled under afghans around the kitchen table.

Once they'd drained their mugs, Mrs. Weasley shooed them out of the kitchen so she could get started on dinner. At Archie's offer to help, the witch simply laughed and shooed him out all the quicker.

"Mum doesn't really trust us in the kitchen," Fred whispered conspiratorially.

"Can't imagine why," Ginny rolled her eyes, "You only blew up her favorite cauldron *twice* ."

"After the first time it wasn't exactly her favorite anymore," George scoffed, "So that only counts once, I think."

"Once was enough," Ron said, grimacing in remembrance
"Everything she cooked tasted like sulfur for a week."

"Oh, that was the week we put sulfur on your toothbrush, actually," Fred sniggered.

"Hardy-har," Ron sighed half-heartedly.

"What should we do now?" Archie said, turning the conversation toward more present difficulties.

"Is it okay with your parents if we keep you for dinner?" Fred asked, looking hopeful.

"Did we mention dinner?" Harry asked Archie; he'd been the one to ask permission, after all.

"I said we'd be home sometime later," Archie shrugged, "So I guess we could. If it's not too much trouble."

"Mum's already cooking extra," George guessed with a fond smile.

"She better be making extra dessert, too," Ginny said, shooting Harry a speculative look, "Harry looks like she eats a lot."

Ron, Fred, and George all choked. Harry looked down at herself, wondering if there was some sort of sign that said 'insert pie here' that she hadn't noticed Archie putting on her that morning. Archie just chuckled. "She really does," her cousin said.

"I'm a growing person," Harry said, only a bit defensive. She led a very active lifestyle, and that meant she had to pack away a certain amount of food to keep herself healthy.

"She kicked my butt in that race," Ginny said, still eyeing her frame speculatively, "I bet there's a serious amount of muscle under there."

Harry fought a blush. She wasn't used to people presuming to guess what was beneath her clothing-at least not to her face.

"Does she exercise with you, Rigel?" Ron asked, looking interested.

"More like I exercise with her," Archie said, looking a bit uncomfortable, "Harry trains with our Uncle Remus when she has time. She's the one who got me into, uh, physical activity, I guess you could say."

Harry fought a wince, and thanked the weather for being too cold to encourage dueling practice out on the lawn. The truth was, Archie had little to no conditioning, and no real Defense training at all. That

was one glaring hole in their ruse that they simply hadn't had the time to correct yet.

"Play Quidditch, too?" Fred asked eagerly.

"Of course she does," Archie said, smirking, "She's a beater."

"Like you?" Ron said, surprised, "How do you play with just two beaters?"

"Well, we... hit the ball back and forth," Archie said, faltering a bit, "And at home I'm really more of a chaser, anyway. I just played beater on the House team last year because that was the open position."

"Rigel's a great Chaser," Harry said, picking up the thread of the story when Archie seemed inclined to trail off, "My dad plays chaser, too, and my uncle Sirius is our other beater. Mum and Remus play keeper when we do three-v-three in the summer. They taught us all the positions, though, to keep things interesting. You guys don't just stick to one position, right?"

"True," George said, "When Charlie's here he always gets seeker, but the rest of us like to mix it up now and again. Dad's a surprisingly good seeker, actually-very focused. Sometimes I think he forgets the rest of the game is even going on."

The others laughed, and a short silence fell over the den. "What were we going to do?" Ron asked, scratching his head.

"Let's go bother Percy!" Fred said, bouncing on his toes a bit, "He's already done all his holiday work, so he can't ban us from his room anymore."

"Because holidays are about *family*," George said, his tone that of someone misappropriating a quote for their own less than earnest purposes, "And family doesn't stay shut up in a room."

"Unless it's crazy Aunt Muriel," Ron said, "In which case, it stays *locked* up in a room."

"Was that you?" Fred affected a scandalized expression.

"You believed the story about the latch getting stuck?" Ginny's face was full of incredulous pity.

"Reminds you of home, doesn't it?" Archie asked sotto voce.

"It's sad how I used to think our family was unique," Harry said.

"But also comforting to know that we don't have the only patent on lunacy," Archie said, philosophically.

"Oh yes," Harry snorted, "There's nothing more comforting than more lunacy in the world."

"That's the spirit," Archie grinned. Raising his voice, he added, "So are we going to appropriate Percy's time, or what?"

With Fred and George leading the way, they traipsed up the stairs to Percy's room, the door to which was only very reluctantly opened after a long and convoluted argument through it. They all squeezed onto the floor between the bed and the bookcases, and eventually Percy produced a pack of exploding snap cards with a remark that since a certain level of chaos was inevitable at that point, he may as well control the outlet as best he could.

It was a merry hour later that Mrs. Weasley's resounding voice echoed up the stairs to draw them back down for supper.

The kitchen table had been transformed from a cluttered family workspace to a scene from one of her mother's *Magical Mansions* magazines. Matching plates were squeezed up and down its length end to end, with a few placed at the corners in front of stools. Cutlery was stacked somewhat elegantly on top of the plates, leaving all available room in the center of the table to be filled with food. Bowls

of rolls and stacks of crackers with various spreads tucked into the nooks between. Beautiful spiral-cut ham sprawled on a platter, glazed with a maple sauce she could smell from the stairs. Carrots and yams fought for space beside green beans, mashed potatoes, and pitchers of berry-red juice.

Mrs. Weasley was bustling between the stove and the table, but Mr. Weasley was already seated at the head of the table next to a very relaxed-looking Bill Weasley.

"Grab a chair, everyone," Mrs. Weasley said over her shoulder, one hand on her wand and the other in an oven mitt. "The pie will be out any moment."

The Weasley twins grabbed Archie and hauled him between their seats on Bill's side of the table while Percy and Ginny exchanged knowing looks and seated themselves as far from the twins as possible on the other side. Ron claimed a corner stool for himself between Fred and the end chair that Mrs. Weasley likely used, leaving Harry to take the chair on Mr. Weasley's other side, next to Ginny and across from Bill.

Mr. Weasley, ever conscious of social proprieties, took the liberty of introducing her. "This is my eldest son, William. Son, this is Rigel's cousin, Harriett Potter. Rigel very thoughtfully brought her to visit this afternoon."

Bill looked much too perplexed to form a coherent sentence, merely nodding absently as his eyes roamed her features, flicked to Rigel down the table, then settled back on her with a frown. He lingered on the round lenses that adorned her nose, and she knew he recognized them as the ones Harry from the lower alleys wore. She could only imagine what he must be thinking-seeing her, looking like Harry but undeniably female, sitting there in his kitchen as a distinct yet similar entity from Rigel Black, unable to say anything because of the explanations that would be required to even begin to suss out the truth.

"It's very nice to meet you, Will," Harry said, allowing the tiniest of ironic smiles to bend itself in his direction.

"It's Bill," the young man said sharply. Clearing his throat, he eyed her somewhat intently. "Just Bill."

"My mistake." Harry allowed her eyes to crease apologetically. "You can call me Harry-everyone does."

His eyes widened almost imperceptively, and she could see the moment he squashed a rush of panic and decided to pretend ignorance. Good. The best-case scenario would be him becoming so confused he decided to say nothing in order to hide his own lack of knowledge. "All right. Nice to meet you. You'd be James Potter's daughter, then?"

"That's right," Harry said, "His eldest."

Bill's head tilted curiously, sending his fang earring into a swinging motion that made it catch on a lock of shocking red hair. He idly untangled it as his mother piped up, "I just can't wait to meet the new baby," as she deposited the pie in the only semi-open space on the table and took her seat.

"Boy or girl?" Bill asked, pouring himself a cup of something that steamed.

For a half-second Harry was put off by the question, thinking he was referring to her, but a heartbeat later her brain caught up and realized he was talking about Addy. "Girl," Harry said, smiling a bit, "She's cute." Mrs. Weasley seemed to be hanging on her every word, but Harry really wasn't sure what else she could say about Addy. She was a baby. They were all pretty much the same, right?

"Takes after her mother, then," Mrs. Weasley sighed, adjusting her napkin in her lap, "Always been known for her charms, Lady Potter has."

There was an awkward pause in which Harry could almost see the kind woman trying to find something of her mother's to compliment her on as well. Harry wished her luck-there was really no comparison, at this point. She'd taken mostly after James even before she started using the Modified Polyjuice Potion to fuse her looks with Archie's. Even her eyes, once the bright, startling green that had stood out even in rumor among the social elite, were now an average semblance of their former color, just cheap contacts dulled further by the false glasses she wore to keep up appearances.

"These potatoes are amazing, Mrs. Weasley," Archie spoke up from between the twins. Harry thanked him silently for moving the conversation away from her.

"It's an old family recipe," the matronly witch said, smiling proudly.

"All our old family recipes are poisonous," Archie said, looking very impressed at the idea of family cooking in general. "Before I was born we had a house elf who made all the food in the house, so Dad didn't even know how to wash dishes, much less fill them with something edible."

"Did your elf die or something?" Ginny asked, her voice as blunt as the spoon she was using to dump carrots on her plate.

"Dad had to give it clothes," Archie said, seemingly unaware of how awkward a topic house elves might be for a family who probably couldn't afford their own. "He says he caught it looming weirdly over my crib at night a few times. Creeped him out. Thought it might try and baptize me in the Dark Arts when he wasn't looking."

After a beat of mildly horrified silence, in which Mrs. Weasley looked like a witch who was suddenly quite glad she'd never had a house elf, Archie added, "That last bit was a joke. I don't think you can actually baptize someone in Dark Magic."

"Though if you could, the Blacks would have found a way," Harry said, forcing a light laugh in an effort to include the Weasleys in the

joke. Archie forgot at times that even though he didn't take the Black legacy seriously, it was still a semi-respected mostly-feared name in Wizarding Society. Others didn't poke fun at the traditionally dark family quite as readily as they did. In fact, Harry had only ever heard the Malfoys, arguably the Blacks' social equals, makes jokes at the family's expense.

"What was it like, growing up in a traditionally Dark home?" Percy asked, his curiosity more pressing than Harry's weak attempt at humor, apparently.

"It's all I knew, so I can't really compare, but I wouldn't say I grew up in a Dark household-not in the way you mean, at least," Archie said, the honesty clear in his tone, "There were a few cursed artifacts packed into the attic, and I did run across a boggart by accident in the library once, but my dad did his best to keep me away from any overt influences. I never really saw my extended family growing up, and all the particularly macabre literature was put up out of my reach. Dad is... not like other Dark wizards. And my mum was Light through and through when she... when she was..." Archie swallowed a bit dryly, then reached for his water glass with a subtle flush of embarrassed upset.

"I didn't mean to bring up..." Percy looked equally upset and embarrassed.

"It's all right." Archie's smile was back in action a scant moment later, one hand fingering the hair at his nape in a nervous gesture that Harry doubted anyone else recognized. "My childhood was a lot of fun, actually. Especially with Harry there-she's got those wild Potter genes, you know."

Many pairs of eyes turned to Harry, who blinked and summoned up a playfully innocent expression, as though to say 'who, me?'

"She did beat Ginny in a skate-race," Ron acknowledged after a moment of thought.

"Really?" Bill grinned, "Thought only Charlie could do that."

"He can race her next time," Ginny mumbled, rolling her eyes.

"We'll be sure to invite you two back when my other son can get away from his work," Mrs. Weasley said, smiling despite the clear regret in her eyes.

"We'd like that," Archie said, smiling in a barely-reserved way. He really was going to have to practice more before the gala.

Harry nodded in agreement, and Mrs. Weasley positively beamed with the happiness that comes to a hostess when her guests are genuinely enjoying themselves. Conversation turned to other things, and before she knew it Harry had eaten more in one sitting than she knew was possible. With compliments dripping from their lips, she and Archie gathered their things and prepared to floo home before their parents worried they'd overstayed their welcome.

"Thanks for having us, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley," Archie said for probably the fourth time that evening.

"Do come back," Mr. Weasley said, a warm smile on his face to back up his words.

"See you at school, Ron, Ginny, Percy-and you two as well, I guess," Archie ducked under a two-sided hug from the twins and waved to them all one last time before reaching for the floo powder.

Harry bid everyone a last goodbye, taking note of the way Bill's assessing gaze never strayed too far from her person as she, too, ducked into the hearth. She didn't doubt she'd be seeing him in the alleys very soon. The curiosity in his eyes meant he would let her explain, at least, before he jumped to any conclusions. That was the best she could have hoped for, considering; as she and Archie divested themselves of their outer layers in the floo room to Grimmauld Place, she considered the day overall positive in terms of their ruse. The fact that she got to spend an enjoyable afternoon with

her friends from school (even though they didn't know she was their friend) only added to the feeling of satisfaction.

The feeling only lasted until the following morning, when the precariousness of their position came swinging into focus once more, but it had been there, and that had to count for something.

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"You need to see this." Archie made his way into Harry's lab at a startling eight-o'clock in the morning, a letter clasped gingerly between his fingers.

"You're up early," Harry said, eyebrows raised, "What's the emergency?"

Her cousin held out the letter with a grimace. "It's from Flint. I thought it was for me, but... well, read it."

Harry took the parchment and sat on a nearby stool to peruse it.

Archie,

I write in haste. I need you to contact 'Rigel' without delay-whoever he is, wherever he is, I don't care. He and I have an agreement, and I'm calling it in. The Leaky Cauldron, three nights hence.

Marcus

"He's calling in the favor now?" Harry sighed, "I guess the timing could be worse."

"What do you think he wants?" Archie asked, looking incredibly out of sorts.

"Only one way to find out," Harry said, musing over the implications of sneaking out without her parents knowing after dinner.

"Harry-aren't you at least a little suspicious? He wants to meet you-or Rigel, whatever-in a pub. past dark, without even telling you why." Archie frowned. "I mean, Flint seemed an all right sort back when I saw him at Quidditch games, but... he's been blackmailing us for two and a half years now. What if he's changed his mind and wants to expose you?"

Harry shook her head slowly. "Flint knows me-or thinks he does. He even sort of likes me now, I think. There's also the vow we agreed upon: he can't expose me. It wouldn't be in his best interest to try, either. He gets more out of keeping quiet, especially if he does want to call in this favor. In fact..." Harry smiled suddenly. "This is a good thing, Arch. If I fulfill the terms of our vow now, then at the end of the school year when he graduates I'll be free of it. He'll have to keep our secret forever, but we won't owe him anything else in exchange."

"What if it's something you can't do, though?" Archie said, not looking convinced, "Maybe I should come with you."

"No, I need you to cover for me," Harry said, shaking her head, "I'm going to have to play sick, I think, and leave the house before dinner. Then I'll just sneak back in before the curfew wards go up."

"You will be careful though, won't you?" Archie checked. At Harry's droll look, he waved a hand impatiently. "I know, you wander the alleys all the time, but it's different at night. Your friend Leo said so himself, and he's the rat king or whatever."

"I'm just going to the Leaky Cauldron," Harry said, smiling reassuringly, "I'll floo straight there and straight back after talking to Flint. Nothing bad will happen."

"It will now that you've said that," Archie groaned, "Harry, how many times do I have to tell you about tempting Fate?"

Harry rolled her eyes, "The situation is dramatic enough without Fate stepping in this time, I think. Don't worry so much."

"I never used to worry," Archie sighed, "That used to be an other-people thing. Then we started this hare-brained scheme and suddenly my cholesterol is through the roof."

"Really?" Harry gave him a skeptical look.

"Well, no. We checked it this semester, actually-but it should be!" Archie exclaimed.

"I'll make a note," Harry said, turning back to her ingredient table, "Can I get back to work, Arch? I'll have to speed up my production a bit if I'm to take that evening off to meet with Flint."

"I'm going back to bed," Archie said, heading for the stairs, "I'll pretend all of this was a dream and we're not in way over our heads."

Harry frowned down at her tools for a moment. "Do you regret it?" she called after him.

"Not yet," came the tired reply. "Not yet, Harry."

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The next couple of days were spent subtly indicating she might be coming down with a cold. A cough here, an irritated throat-rub there, and by the third day Lily was suggesting she step away from the cauldron for an evening and relax for the sake of her health.

Her mum brought a glass of ice water up to her room, where she was re-reading one of the Guild's older special editions just to pass the time.

"How's your throat, Harry?" Lily asked, sitting on the side of her bed to run a hand through her bangs sympathetically.

"A bit worse than this morning," Harry said, huffing in disgruntlement for effect. She'd never been a very docile patient. "I think I'm going to take a sleeping potion and just let my body fight it off overnight."

Lily frowned slightly, "Don't you want dinner first?"

"My stomach is all achy," Harry said, "I'd rather just eat a big breakfast tomorrow."

"I'll make your favorite, then," Lily smiled fondly down at her. Harry waited for her to get up, but her mother seemed content to simply watch her for a moment longer. "You're growing so fast," she said, seemingly out of no where, "Some days it feels like I hardly recognize you as the little girl that was afraid of wands."

"I wasn't afraid." Harry flushed in remembrance. She'd been a strong advocate of wand safety at age six.

"You used to cry when Sirius put his in his back pocket," Lily said smiling.

"It's unsafe," Harry mumbled, chagrined.

"That it is," Lily agreed. "I admit I snapped at him the other day myself-he left his wand in Addy's cradle, if you can believe it."

Harry snorted, "Not surprising. Uncle Sirius is a scatterbrain sometimes. Just like Archie."

"They are very alike," Lily agreed. She seemed to hesitate, then said, "Harry, speaking of Archie, I've been talking to Sirius and I wonder if anyone has mentioned-well, explained, really, why the two of you look so much-"

"Archie talked to me after he talked to Sirius," Harry said quickly, "Passive metamorphism, right? Nothing to be worried about. I know

you didn't really separate us at birth."

"Some separation that would be," Lily laughed. Harry joined her, adding in a fake cough at the last minute. Lily stroked a hand through her hair again. "I just wanted to make sure you knew that the similarity was on Archie's end. I noticed you grew your hair out the other day-though you seem to have cut it again, huh?"

She fingered the blunt ends of her re-cut hair awkwardly. "I just... wanted to try something different for a day."

"It's okay to want to be different from Archie," Lily said softly, "I know you two have a solidarity thing going with the hair-cutting, and I hope you're not both still upset at not getting to go to the schools you wanted-"

"We aren't," Harry promised, "It was just a way to... remember each other. If we had the same haircut, we thought we'd remind ourselves every time we passed a mirror that the other one was thinking about us, too, probably."

"That's lovely," Lily said, "If you wanted to do something a bit more feminine with yours, though, I'm sure Archie would understand. You're a young lady, for all that we seem to forget that at times. You're entitled to want to feel like one, at this age."

"I know," Harry said, stumbling over her words a little as she tried to get her head around where her mother was coming from. What did she want Harry to say? "I just wanted to look a little different from Archie when we went to the Weasleys, that's all. So they'd be able to tell us apart without too much trouble. I might do the same for the New Year's gala-we are still going, right?"

"Well, we've no reason to refuse this year," Lily said carefully. She tucked a strand of her long red hair behind an ear. "Addy is old enough to put up with a few hours of people poking her, at least, and James is of course running security again-not to mention you were invited specifically by the young Miss Parkinson, for some reason."

"Archie says Pansy really wants to meet me," Harry said, grimacing a bit, "I guess Archie talks about me at school a lot."

"Well, why don't I help you with your hair that night?" Lily offered, "I'm quite handy with smoothing and curling charms, you know-I've even tamed your father's hair, a time or two."

"I'll have to see that to believe it," Harry chuckled.

"It's a date, then," Lily said, patting Harry's head once more. "Get some sleep, all right? I'll leave a few pieces of toast in the warmer if you wake in the night hungry."

Harry murmured her thanks and made a show of pulling a vial of sleeping draught from her potions kit as her mother left the room. She dumped the contents in her bathroom sink and left the empty bottle by her bedside as she slipped out of her pajamas and into clothes suitable for the cold night air. She waited until everyone had flocked over to Sirius' house for dinner (mentally thanking Archie for somehow managing to make it happen there even though it was technically the Potters' night to host) before slipping into her shoes and closing her bedroom door firmly behind her, heading for the floo.

The Leaky Cauldron had a decent crowd for the dinner rush, though Rigel knew it would taper off fairly quickly as the sun went down and the temperature dropped. People were always traveling through the pub from one world to the other, which was great for providing a steady flow of customers, but brought frequent frigid gusts of wind shooting from one end of the dining area to the other.

It took her a good minute to spot Flint, who had chosen one of the dimmest sections to sit in. He'd also pulled his hood up for good measure, and Harry wondered how he thought he'd be inconspicuous while trying so hard to avoid notice.

She slid into the booth across from him and signaled a passing waitress to bring them two butterbeers. Nothing was more suspicious

than people who came to a bar and didn't drink anything. Flint looked up from under his cloak and blinked at her, seeming taken aback.

"You-Rigel?"

"Who else?" she said, settling into the persona of Rigel Black with barely a thought to mark the transition.

"I thought you'd look different," he grunted, keeping his voice low.

"Why?" she frowned.

"No need to look like Archie over the break," he shrugged.

"It's a permanent body alteration," Rigel huffed, "Not worth undoing it for a few weeks."

"Hn." Flint's eyes darted around the room edgily and they lapsed into silence as the waitress deposited their drinks and held her hand out for the fare. Apparently they looked like the sort of sketchy people who might skip out on a tab.

Rigel dropped a generous amount of coin into her manicured fist and flashed a hand-signal she'd picked up at the Phoenix. It was technically a thief-sign, conveying a need to conduct private business without being interrupted, but Rigel didn't think Leo would mind her appropriation of it in this instance. Whatever Flint needed had to be important, to have him looking so out of sorts. The waitress gave a sharp nod and left them in peace readily enough, so Rigel supposed she was at least passingly familiar with the Court's people.

"What's going on, Flint?" Rigel finally asked, pushing one of the drinks his way so that it would at least look like he belonged there. "Your letter seemed fairly urgent."

"I'm glad Archie could contact you in time," Flint said, moving his hands up to cup the pint glass like it was an unexpected lifeline.

"Wasn't sure how far away you live."

"Archie and I have ways of fast communication while we're away from school," Rigel said vaguely.

"Good. I need you to come here again soon-I need your help, Rigel." He looked neither pleased nor unnerved by this admission-merely resigned to it. "I'm calling in the favor you owe me. The big one."

"I gathered," Rigel said shortly, unwilling to be reassuring until she knew what he needed. If he wanted something like a kidney, it was going to be a very inconvenient week. "What do you want?"

"Not want," Flint growled, almost to himself, "Need. It's my mother. She's... she needs help. I don't have anyone else to go to."

Rigel let a frown crawl across her brow. "Is she in trouble?" A moment later she cursed her foolish mouth-of course she was in trouble. Probably the kind of trouble that involved Flint's father, if Pansy's account of the upperclassman's home life could be believed.

"She needs a safe place to go," Flint said roughly, "I need you to-to take her to the muggle world. You can move about in that circle, right?"

"What makes you think that?" she asked cautiously.

"It makes sense." Flint jerked one shoulder in a brusque shrug. "It'd be harder to track you down, if you got found out and had to flee. You must have a back-up plan-a safe place to hide if you ever need to run. I need you to take my mother there. Just for a little while. Just keep her safe until I graduate; once I've got my NEWT's, I can help her start over. I just need time-" he blew out a frustrated breath. "I thought it would be okay until I graduated. I thought we could just wait it out. I was wrong."

He lapsed into a defeated silence, and Rigel took a moment to appreciate the monumental task that was now before her. It was a

sign of Flint's desperation, rather than any true trust on his part, that he came to her with this. Still, she would do what she could-the vow, and her sense of decency, demanded no less. The only problem was... she didn't actually know anyone in the muggle world besides her mother's hateful relatives.

"What's your end goal?" she asked him, a spur-of-the-moment plan beginning to make itself known in the depths of her mind. "Do you think your father will look for her? Does she just need a place to stay, or an entirely new identity?"

Flint blinked slowly, "I... yeah, he'll probably look. If only to make sure she isn't gallivanting around in society bringing shame to the Flint name." The last was said with acute bitterness, and Rigel had to wonder how often such sentiments had been drilled into him.

"What kind of life does she want to live?" Rigel asked, taking a sip of her butterbeer to distract from the paths her imagination wanted to walk. "Does she want to work? Or live at home?"

Flint looked a bit incredulous. "Rigel... whoever you are... I don't care. Just get her somewhere safe, and I'll work the rest out this summer."

"She might object to being locked away for so many months," Rigel said, frowning once more.

"She's been locked away her *whole life*," Flint snapped, eyes hard.

"Then maybe it's time for a change," Rigel said softly.

Flint stared at her. "You have an idea."

Rigel nodded tentatively. "I can't settle her in the muggle world. I can take her somewhere safe, though. Somewhere close. She won't have to assimilate to a foreign culture this way. And I can find her employment, if you give me a few days."

"Days?" Flint scoffed. "Don't be ridiculous. That kind of thing-to do it without drawing the attention of my father would be impossible. He has contacts in the Ministry, contacts he'll be able to take advantage of even considering he'll be trying to avoid a scandal. Any move you make in the Wizarding World will reveal her to him." He leaned forward to pin her with a serious look. "This isn't a game. Can you help me or not, Rigel?"

"You came to me because some part of you thought I could help-and I can, you just have to trust me. The Ministry will never hear a whisper of her. I can hide her away here, in London. She'll be safe. In a nice house, with nice neighbors she doesn't ever have to talk to if she doesn't want. Far from the reach of men like your father-I promise, Flint. I can make this work." She poured every ounce of sincerity she could into her face. She was about to take a serious risk, but Flint was already sworn to secrecy. It wasn't a significant increase when compared to the risks she'd already taken, and for once the risk would be taken on behalf of someone else-not selfishly. Maybe it was the holiday spirit making itself known in the air, but Rigel was tired of feeling like all her efforts benefited no one but herself.

"How?" Flint's voice was flat, but there was a look in his eyes that hadn't been there before. She thought it might be hope.

"I don't have a safe house myself," she said carefully, "But I know someone who does. It's sitting empty, fully furnished, not fifteen minutes from where we sit. It's not big-just a single bedroom, kitchen, living room, and bath, but it's perfectly livable. My friend will let your mother live there as long as she likes."

"Your friend," Flint repeated, looking skeptical. "I'm just supposed to trust some other person with my mother's keeping? I don't think so. The deal is for you to pay back the favor, not foist it off on someone else."

"Well this is the only way I can help you," Rigel scowled, "And my friend is just as trustworthy as I am-more, in fact. She's-"

"She?" Flint openly sneered. "I see how it is. You think my mother's going to sleep on the couch in your love shack like a common-"

"Will you shut up?" Rigel snapped, thoroughly exasperated. "First of all, I'm thirteen. I don't have a bloody love house or whatever. It's not like that at all. The girl is Archie's cousin-I know she's trustworthy because I've worked with her."

"Archie's cousin?" Flint's eyebrows rose, "The Potter chit? She's in on this mess, too?"

"Yes," Rigel said, rolling her eyes.

"I suppose I have to keep her secrets, too, now?" Flint huffed, looking disgruntled.

"It's no harder to keep your mouth shut on three people's secret than two," Rigel pointed out, "And stop complaining-you're getting your favor."

"So you say," Flint said, taking another swig of his drink. "I want to see this so-called livable house. Won't have my mum living in a slum. She's accustomed to better, no matter that our house was more like a cage most days."

"You can see it tomorrow," she said.

"Why not now?" Flint challenged.

"It's late," she sighed, "And my parents will wonder where I am if I stay out all night."

Flint's expression was one of open surprise. "Your... parents?"

"Yes, of course," Rigel said, frowning a bit, "What, you thought... I was an orphan or something?"

"Well yeah, kind of," Flint said, looking uncomfortable and a bit confused.

"Well, I'm not," she grimaced, "So... tomorrow?"

Flint nodded. "How soon can my mother move in, provide it isn't a hovel?"

"You can bring her with you tomorrow for all I care," Rigel said, rubbing her eyes.

Flint eyed her with something approaching gratitude. "If this works out, I owe you one."

"You really don't," Rigel said, "That's the point. But, uh... Flint, you know that... even if there wasn't the whole debt thing between us... I mean, I'd still want to help. You know that, right? And Pansy would, too. Probably even Draco. Not to mention Adrian and the others on the team. I just-you should know that you *do* have people to turn to. People who would help you if they could. It's not just me."

Flint actually laughed, a barking, grating sound that made her ear twitch. "You are priceless, little snakelet. You really think Draco has the resources to help me-without Lord Malfoy getting wind of the scheme and turning my mother right back to my father's clutches? That's what pureblooded culture means, Rigel. It means the law is on his side, not hers. She has no rights as a squib. No recourse in civil society. She married him, and that subjugates her to him forever. For all the power my pureblooded friends pretend to wield as scions of their houses, they could do nothing for my mother that wouldn't undermine their own positions in society. But *you* can."

It was not the first time Rigel had considered that in some instances it was easier to maneuver around the purported 'power channels' of the Ministry and the upper-crust of pureblooded society than to try and wade through them, but it was the first time she had heard the argument pertain to someone *else*. It brought home to her in that moment how limited many of her pureblooded friends were, in terms of real freedom, when compared to some of the denizens of the lower alleys.

She took a long breath, then nodded. "You're right. I can. I'll-are you even free tomorrow? I can be here any time of day." She would have to fake a rather miraculous recovery, but it wouldn't be too much of a stretch.

Flint was quiet for a minute, then seemed to come to a decision. "If you say it's a nice house, I believe you. I'll bring my mother tomorrow morning-she doesn't need to spend one more moment in that house. Is seven too early? My father will sleep until noon, at least. I can make as though I had no idea she'd gone when he wakes."

"Seven is fine," Rigel said, wincing internally. It would be a *very* miraculous recovery. "I'll meet you here?"

Flint nodded sharply. "Yeah. Tomorrow. Good."

"Go home, get some sleep, and I'll see you back here early," Rigel said, taking another big gulp of her drink.

Flint made to stand, then stopped and stared at her once more. "Thanks, Rigel."

"I'm glad to do it," she said, her eyes softening slightly at his obvious relief.

He made his way to the floo without a backwards glance. Rigel checked the time, not wanting to floo home before her parents went to bed. Luckily, they zonked out shortly after Addy these days. Poor, tired, dears. She thought she'd better finish her butterbeer, just to be on the safe side. She still had a couple of hours before the curfew wards would auto-set, so she relaxed back into the booth, taking her time to think out all the relevant details to this latest plot.

She would have to talk to Leo, she realized uncomfortably. She didn't want to betray Flint's trust, but Leo needed to know that he couldn't scale her apartment windows anymore. She just hoped he wouldn't nail her with questions in this instance. With his help, she had an idea of where to get Mrs. Flint settled for employment, though.

Hadn't Leo mentioned he had a pretend job at his mother's clinic in one of his letters? Perhaps Mrs. Hurst would be amenable to having someone to discretely do the actual work that Leo's pretend position covered. It was something like filing paperwork, she recalled, which meant it shouldn't be difficult even for someone without any work experience to attempt.

It would be a delicate act, she knew-keeping Mrs. Flint's identity from Leo and Mrs. Hurst while at the same time keeping the fact that *she* was Harriett Potter from the Flints. It would be worth it, though, if for once she could use her talent for dissembling in the service of a good cause.

She drained the rest of her drink, waited a bit longer just for good measure, then headed for the floor. She was as quiet as possible coming through the grate. Her parents' near-constant exhaustion would work in her favor, as they tended to sleep more heavily after a long day, and all their days had been long since Addy came along, but that didn't mean she could stomp around like a troll during mating season.

She did take a piece of toast from the kitchen on her way to the stairs, just so she had a flimsy excuse in case one of her parents happened to be wandering the halls. She needn't have worried, though. All was quiet as she crept up the stairs, avoiding the creaky ones on autopilot, and slipped into her room at last. Her clothes went back into their drawers, despite smelling like a bar. It was better than leaving them in her hamper to be questioned if by chance her mother decided to add Harry's laundry to her own this week.

She cast an alarm charm to wake her at six, and fell asleep to a whirlwind of plans and ideas that mapped their way across the inside of her mind with impatient fractals of thought and instinct. She wrapped a blanket across her shoulders and retreated into meditation to help her doze despite the cacophony of intentions all vying for attention between her ears. There would be time enough to plan again tomorrow, and the day after, and the one after that, as well. Sleep she had to take when she could.

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She woke early the next morning, dressed unobtrusively in slightly worn robes and a scarf to pull up over her face once she reached the Leaky Cauldron. The last thing she wanted was to run into someone who knew 'Harry' while she was supposed to be 'Rigel.'

Her mother was already feeding Addy in the kitchen when she ambled in. Harry smiled a good morning as she slipped past her to grab a cup from the cabinet, aiming for the pitcher of juice on the counter once she'd decided it was probably orange.

"Harry, you're up," Lily said, pleasantly surprised, "Not feeling too poorly?"

"Sleep was just what I needed," Harry said, emphasizing her alertness with a healthy gulp of juice.

"Glad to hear it," Lily smiled. She let one hand trail over Addy's fine red curls absently. "Can I fix you anything? I haven't had a chance to start on breakfast properly yet."

"That's okay, I know you've got work in a bit-I'll grab something in Diagon on my way to the apothecary-they should have my order in this morning," Harry said, affecting a look of anticipation.

"If you're sure you're up for it," Lily said, looking only a little bit concerned. Her mother knew Harry's practicality well enough to respect her judgment in most things.

"It's not too far," Harry assured her, "And I think a brisk morning walk might be just the thing."

"Wear your winter boots," Lily told her, reaching out to pat her cheek gently, "It's still a bit wet out."

"I will," Harry promised, rinsing her glass in the sink and smiling once more before leaving the kitchen to hunt down her shoes.

She was through the floo to the Leaky Cauldron with plenty of time before their designated meeting, but a quick glance around the pub revealed that Flint and his mother were already there, bent quietly over the innkeeper's English breakfast in one of the more tucked-away booths.

She kept her eye out for people she recognized as she crossed the dining area, but wasn't too worried. It was early yet for anyone to be coming to the alleys to do business, and the folk she knew who lived in the alleys didn't usually venture this far out.

Mrs. Flint didn't look much like her son, save for the suspicious look in her eyes as Harry approached and sat down across from them. "Hello, Mrs. Flint," she said, lowering her scarf a bit so her words would be audible, "I'm Rigel, Fl-Marcus' friend."

The older woman merely looked away, focusing on her sausages and curling her thin form inwards ever-so-slightly.

"You're early," Flint grunted, seeming more his usual self this morning, as opposed to the stressed, somewhat scattered young man he'd been the night before.

She shrugged noncommittally. They sat in silence for a few minutes as the Flints made quick work of the rest of their meal, then Flint-Marcus-threw down a few coins and they all got to their feet.

"The apartment isn't far from here," Rigel said, "But I think it would be best to floo there for now. I can show you around the neighborhood afterwards, if you like, but walking through Diagon alley might not be wise."

Mrs. Flint pulled her grey shawl tighter around her head. Flint nodded once in acquiescence, and Harry led them over to one of the

Leaky's floo grates. "The address is number eight, Dogwood Lane," she told them.

"You go first," Flint said lowly, "I'll send my mum after, then follow."

Rigel collected a handful of courtesy floo powder from the jar and brought the green flames to life. "Number eight Dogwood Lane," she said clearly.

She emerged in a familiar living room and stepped clear of the grate, sneezing softly as she disturbed a thin layer of dust. As she waited, she looked around the room with a critical eye. It wasn't exactly *Magical Mansions* material, but there was nothing a few cleaning charms wouldn't fix. Cleaning charms that Mrs. Flint couldn't do, she realized with a lurch of discomfort. Quickly, she pulled out her wand and cast several brusque vanishing spells at the dirt she could see from where she stood.

A few seconds later, Mrs. Flint came stumbling out of the floo, looking slightly ill. It occurred to Rigel belatedly that many people didn't prefer to use floo travel right after eating. She gestured to one of the chairs that Leo had procured for her, asking if Mrs. Flint wanted to sit down, but the lady only hugged herself quietly and kept an eye on the floo.

When Flint emerged, scowling a bit as he wiped soot from his sleeves, she felt rather relived. The seventh year looked around, moving to the window to peer past the curtains with a critical gaze. She supposed he was judging the quality of the neighborhood by the state of the neighbors' window boxes.

"It isn't regularly lived in," Rigel said, attempting to explain the somewhat sterile state of the apartment without outright admitting she-or Harry-had never used it.

"Smells like old people," Flint sniffed, turning away from the street view to inspect the rest of the room.

"Harry rents it from an elderly woman who lives across the street," she said, shrugging a bit, "It'll probably go away once you starting cooking meals here and such."

"Does she keep up on the utilities?" Flint asked sharply.

"Yes, it's paid through June at the moment, amenities included," Rigel reassured them. She thought about what else they would need to know. "There are several children on this street, so you may hear them playing from time to time. Your downstairs neighbor is a bit nosy, I think, so if she or anyone else comes to call either ignore them or tell them... you're Harry's aunt. That's what I'll tell Harry to tell the owner. I doubt anyone will bother you, though, especially if you use the floo to move in and out-that's what Harry generally does."

"Will Miss Potter be in and out of here at all hours?" Flint asked, sounding displeased.

"No, of course not," Rigel said, "She might check in from time to time, make sure nothing is wrong, but she'll owl before she drops by. Just call her Harry, though-people around here don't hold much with nobility, and not many know she's Harriett Potter."

Flint nodded with what seemed a bit like approval. "How far from Diagon are we?"

"Far enough that no one who shops there would find their way here," she said. "I'll draw a map before we leave, but I wouldn't advise walking all the way there until you know your way around a bit more. Best to floo to the Leaky Cauldron if you really need something. There're plenty of small stores around here, though, where you'd be less likely to meet anyone who'd recognize you."

"Not that many would," Flint said, a bit darkly, "Mum hasn't been out in society much."

She nodded in understanding. A sudden thought made her wince, though. "Are you closely related to a man named Aled Flint, at all?"

They both frowned in thought, and Rigel could suddenly see a stronger resemblance between the mother and son pair.

"Very distantly, maybe," Flint said, "We don't really associate with the lesser branches of the house. Why? He live in these parts?"

"Not close by, but yes, he runs an smithy here in the lower alleys. If he hasn't met your mother, though, there's no reason for him to recognize her." She wasn't sure if she should be speaking to Mrs. Flint or to her son, but as Marcus was the only one answering her, she settled her attention on him. "I'm going to see about getting her a job, if she's interested. It won't be difficult work, if I can make it happen, and the place I'm thinking of has a floo, so she could get there and back without wandering the streets, if she is reluctant to."

She really wasn't sure if being hidden away most of her life would make Mrs. Flint more or less eager to walk about in the alleys, but if what Leo had been intimating was true, it may be safer for her indoors anyway. At least if she could get her a position at the clinic, she would have somewhere to go and people to talk to during the day. She knew from experience how liberating having one's own source of income could be, as well.

"This may just work, Rigel," Flint said, letting out a slow breath.

She smiled. "Let's look at the rest of the rooms, then. You can help me tidy them up a bit."

Flint muttered something about not being a house elf, but nevertheless pulled out his wand and helped her Evanesco the worst of the built-up grime. His mother seemed to relax marginally as they made their way through the house, taking everything in with wide, sullen eyes. She would have to thank Leo again for furnishing the place, as it would have been significantly more troublesome to try and acquire amenities at such short notice.

When they reached the bedroom, Flint un-shrunk a trunk from his pocket and set it at the foot of the bed gently. Rigel hoped that the place would feel more like home once Mrs. Flint had unpacked. Maybe the woman would even be happy there.

She turned over the key to the front door once they were satisfied with the accommodations. She offered to show them the way to a small grocery store just up the street, but Mrs. Flint, her voice rusty with disuse, pleaded exhaustion, so they let her rest instead while she and Flint made the trek by themselves.

"It's an okay place, Rigel," Flint said after a few minutes of walking. His eyes took in the quaint streets and well kept, if a bit run down, stoops.

"Yeah," she said, "It's not a bad place to make a life."

He jerked his head as though cracking a stiff joint in his neck. "Hard to believe this is it. I always knew someday I'd get her out of there, but I thought... it'd be different, I guess. Less sudden."

"Does she need medical attention?" Rigel asked quietly.

Flint tossed his head irritably. "No. Not this time."

They lapsed into silence once more, Rigel only speaking up to point out useful shops and streets as they neared the grocer's. It was only twenty minutes' work to collect the basics of a rudimentary pantry. They were back at the apartment and unloading bags of food almost before she knew it.

"I should be getting back to the house," Flint said once his mother was as settled as they could make her.

"I'm going to see about that position I was thinking of," Rigel said, walking him to the floo, "Once that's settled..."

"Our debt is fulfilled," Flint said, eyeing her cautiously, "You... came through. Thank you for that. I may be a hard assed prick most of the time, but my mother... she deserves this."

"Everyone deserves a chance like this," Rigel agreed, "If you or she ever needs anything, unrelated to whatever debts or vows lay between us, just ask, okay?"

Flint grunted in a way that told her he would not under any circumstances ask for help that he wasn't already guaranteed by a magical oath. She supposed she'd just have to keep an eye on him, as well as his mother, for good measure.

"What name should I give people when they ask who Harry's aunt is?" she asked suddenly.

He was quiet for a moment, then said, "Merriam. She had a cat named Merriam once."

Rigel nodded. "Merriam it is. Flint..." she wasn't sure how to say this, so she just blurted it out. "Are you sure going back to your father's house is a good idea?"

Flint sneered at her, and she could see a spark of his usual derision in his eyes when he said, "Enough with the sap routine, Rigel. The deal is you worry about my mother. Leave my father to me."

Rigel held his gaze speculatively for a moment, but there was no fear or hesitation in his set expression, so she let the matter go. He would be back at Hogwarts in little under two weeks anyway. If he thought he'd be fine, who was she to tell him she knew his life better?

She bid the surly seventeen-year-old farewell, then returned to the bedroom where Mrs. Flint was sitting on top of the bedcovers, looking a bit lost.

"Marcus told me you might like the name Merriam," she said kindly.

The woman raised her eyes to Rigel's and blinked in a way that she supposed was agreeable. Rigel crossed the room to sit next to her on the bed, and took her hand in her own the way she would Lily's on the rare occasions her mother wasn't feeling well.

"I'm going to see about getting you a position at a nearby Healer's clinic," she said, searching the woman's face for any sign of an opinion on the matter, "The lady who runs it is very nice, and won't ask many questions. Would you like to work? You don't have to-your son has arranged everything, so if you'd rather just stay here for a little while before jumping into a new life, that's all right, too."

She waited for the lady to speak, patiently holding her slightly unfocused gaze until her lips pried themselves apart and she mumbled, "'m a squib."

Rigel tried not to soften visibly at those words, said so defeated, as a blind person might remind someone who'd asked them about the sunset. "That's all right; there's actually a proportionately large population of squibs in the lower alleys. And the work I'm looking into won't be magical in nature, strictly speaking-just paperwork, really."

Mrs. Flint looked down at her hands, one clasped in Rigel's, the other twisted unsurely in her lap, and shrugged.

Rigel patted her arm soothingly and rose. "You think about it, and rest up a bit more. I'll see if the position's available, and get you all the details to make your decision. I'll come by either later today or tomorrow to let you know and check on you, how's that?"

For a long moment, she thought the woman wouldn't say anything, but after a time a very soft "thank you" fell from her mouth.

"It's no trouble at all," Rigel said, hopeful that Mrs. Flint and she would become something like friends over time.

She bid goodbye and slipped out of the apartment, intent on making her way to Mrs. Hurst's clinic while she was out and about anyway.

Halfway there she stopped dead in the middle of the street and cursed herself for being an idiot. She had put her green contacts in her pocket that morning specifically in case she ended up going into Rogue territory and then almost forgotten to put them in. She re-directed herself toward the nearest public restroom. As a rule she avoided such places, as the stink alone could peel the skin from one's nostrils, but it would have a mirror, and with a few sanitizing spells she would be able to insert the contacts without risk of infection.

When she ducked into the street toilet, she sighed at the state of the sink-someone had obviously been sick in it the night before, and the mirror that hung above it was cracked and warped in several places. She held her breath while she cleansed her hands quickly and bent over the foul mess to situate the contacts in her eyes. Magical contacts never failed to impress her, the way they settled automatically on top of her irises and then blurred, blending into her natural eye as though they were a part of her all along. She dug a pair of false spectacles out of her pockets as well for the finishing touch.

Her identity as Harry thus secured, she hurried out of the restroom and made a beeline back along her original trajectory toward the clinic.

Janice was manning the front desk when Harry stepped in, shutting the door quickly to keep out the cold air. The older nurse smiled in a matronly way and said, "What can I do for you, young man?"

Harry didn't miss the way the healer's eyes ran over her from top to toe, assessing even as the expression on her face remained polite. She could guess that the conversation would have started differently if she'd looked to be in any way injured.

"Is Healer Hurst in today?" she asked, approaching the desk.

"Of course," Janice smiled, "You're Leo's young friend, aren't you?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'm Harry," she said, smiling in an embarrassed way that made her look like an awkward, but overall harmless, youth.

Janice nodded, "It's nice to know your name, Harry. I'm Healer Janice. Healer Hurst is in her office at the moment-would you like to go on back? She doesn't have any appointments until lunch."

"Thank you," she said, skirting around the minimalist counter that separated the waiting room from the offices and examination rooms in the back. "I'll try not to trouble her for long."

"Healer Hurst is immune to trouble, rearing that boy of hers," Janice chuckled.

Harry took a brief moment to wish that *she* was immune to trouble as she smiled in return. She made her way back to the head healer's office, sidling up to the open doorway with what she hoped was an endearingly appealing expression on her face.

"Harry!" Mrs. Hurst looked up and smiled widely at the sight of her. "Come in, dear, how are you? I've not seen you since the summer."

She rounded the little desk to accept a hug from the healer, taking a moment to appreciate the woman's particular brand of warmth and kindness before moving away to take the seat across from the desk with a self-deprecating smile. "I've been well, Mrs. Hurst. And yourself?"

"You know me, keeping busy-mostly thanks to my ungrateful whelp of a son, who seems to spend his entire week coming up with ways to run me ragged," Mrs. Hurst huffed in a tone that belied the fond smile on her face.

"I heard he'd taken up employment here," Harry said, fake-casual.

"That's a word for it." The healer shook her head. "Another one's mischief."

"It's nice of you to accommodate him like that," Harry offered.

Mrs. Hurst softened. "He's a good lad. The work he does in these alleys is sorely needed, no matter what outsiders think of the Court of Rogues. If I can make juggling his different lives a little easier, well, that's a mother's prerogative. I opened this clinic to help people, after all, and if helping Leo helps them too, then all the better."

Harry hesitated a moment, but supposed this was a good a time as any. "Mrs. Hurst, I wonder if you might be amenable to helping one more person." Mrs. Hurst's eyes swept her in a practiced fashion, and Harry hastened to clarify. "Not me. I have an aunt who is looking for work. Her husband recently passed away, so she's staying with me, now, and I'm worried she might feel at odds during the day while I'm away at school."

Mrs. Hurst leveled an expectant look at her and waited for the flush of realization to spread over Harry's cheeks. "My magic gets irritated by lies," she gently reminded Harry, who had indeed forgotten that little fact when she launched into her tale. How could the woman be so good at detecting perfectly plausible untruths? She wondered if the healer had some soothsayer blood in her family. "Should I take it simply that this woman you speak of, regardless of any supposed relation to yourself, is indeed in some kind of trouble?"

Harry's face settled into apologetic earnestness. "She is. I can't tell you the particulars, but I've recently given her lodging in my apartment, and I think employment will help her get back on her feet. I heard that Leo was pretending to have a job here, so I thought maybe this woman could quietly do the work Leo was pretending to do. You wouldn't have to do it anymore, to cover for Leo. You don't even have to take her on as an official employee-I'll pay her wages, even. She just... needs a place to go, with nice people who will talk to her and notice if she seems to be having trouble with anything. I'd really appreciate it, Mrs. Hurst. She's not a criminal, or anything-just very quiet, and a bit timid, and-"

"Stop, Harry, for the Mother's sake," Mrs. Hurst cut in on a laugh, "You don't have to keep convincing me-if this lady needs help, then we'll help her. It's that simple, child."

"You'll let her work here?" Harry smiled in acute relief, then paused. "She's... she can't do magic. It's just filing papers and such, right?"

The healer smiled kindly. "That's no problem. We have a man who delivers all our supplies who's non-magic, as well. She won't find any prejudice here."

"I knew that," Harry said, filled with gratitude for this wonderful lady, "Thank you so much, Mrs. Hurst. I'll ask her tonight or tomorrow how she feels about the idea. When should I tell her you'd like her to come in?"

"Bring her by anytime for a full physical," Mrs. Hurst said, pulling out a notebook to jot a few things down, "We always keep a healthy staff, for the patients' sake, so she'll need to be cleared of contagions and the like before she officially starts. Her hours can be flexible, to start with-just coming in whenever she feels up to it is fine. We haven't any desperate need, after all. Once she is trained and feels confident enough we can see if she fancies a more regular schedule."

"That sounds perfect," Harry smiled, "Her name is Merriam. As far as I know she's been a housewitch most of her life, but she was homeschooled at one point, and she has experience with children. I... don't know much else about her, but if anyone asks she's my aunt."

"Where does she live?" Mrs. Hurst asked, looking up from her quill.

"Dogwood lane, number eight," Harry said, "I rent it through Mrs. Whitlock, who lives with the Bottings."

"Nice family," Mrs. Hurst said absently, scribbling down the address, "Little Clara lost a tooth just last week and made me promise I'd

send it to the tooth recycling factory so that a little baby somewhere could get his first tooth in because, I quote, 'without teeth babies can't eat real food, and baby food is yucky.'"

Harry laughed softly. She'd only really met the child once over a year ago, but she remembered her precociousness quite well.

"Let's see... I think that's everything," Mrs. Hurst said, tapping her quill thoughtfully. "Except..." she brought a frank look to bear, "Is anyone looking for her? We can hide her from Aurors if need be, but we'll need to know so we can be prepared."

Harry shook her head slowly. "I don't think there will be a search of that magnitude. She's... not in that kind of trouble. She's a good person-just needs a place to make a new home. It might be best to keep her away from prying eyes for a little while, but I doubt anyone who may be looking for her will look here-that's why I brought her to the alleys. I think she'll be safe."

"Noble, was she?" Mrs. Hurst said dryly. She sighed and held up a hand when Harry grimaced. "No, don't tell me. I can guess most of it anyway, and the rest will be confirmed when I check her over. A healer always knows." Harry thought Mrs. Hurst overestimated other healers, or at the least greatly underestimated her own perceptiveness. Other people simply did not come to correct conclusions when left to their own devices-she should know, as she took advantage of that very human flaw with great frequency.

"Thanks again for doing this, Mrs. Hurst," Harry said after a moment, "Please let me know if there's anything I can do to help, or if you have any trouble."

"You're a good lass, Harry," the healer said, standing and coming around the desk and lifting her into another long hug. "Be careful walking home-the alleys are a bit different in the cold months. And don't be a stranger."

"I won't," Harry promised, giving the woman one last smile before heading for the door. "Say hello to Leo for me."

"You'll no doubt see him before I do," Mrs. Hurst chuckled, "He's got ears on you in these alleys, that's for certain."

Harry admitted that was true, though privately she suspected that Leo in fact had people in *Diagon* that kept an eye out for her. She almost always came to the alleys through the Leaky, after all. She doubted he'd get word she was in the area today, at least until she got back to Diagon on her way out.

She bundled up tight before journeying back into the winter air, though she didn't bother to pull her scarf over her face, as it didn't really matter if people recognized her as Harry at that point.

She hurried along through the winding alleys, admiring the many festive decorations hung from windows and doorways along her route. They had nothing on the fever of trappings going on at Sirius' house, of course, but then Sirius always did have too much time on his hands.

She passed Kyprioth Court and turned onto Knockturn Alley, briefly debating stopping in to see Krait. She'd have to drop by the next day with his next order of potions anyway, so there wasn't really any need, unless she simply felt like bothering the grumpy salesman. In the end she decided not to, and turned her eyes elsewhere along the narrow alley. As she neared the mouth of the alley where it met Diagon, her gaze caught on a little sign hung outside of Borgin and Burkes that read 'New Books Just In.'

Curious, she wandered closer, peering through the grimy window to see if there was a display of some kind. Most of the stuff in Borgin and Burkes was cursed junk, as far as Harry had heard said, but every now and then the antique shop came across something particularly valuable or intriguing in someone's estate sale. It was for this reason that it was frequented by a variety of patrons, including some of the upper crust, who came to look or even sell, if not always

to buy. Maybe she would have a look-more knowledge was always an advantage.

She caught sight of a flash of red hair through the window, and couldn't believe the odds. She and Bill Weasley were really starting to see too much of one another-not that he'd seen her, yet. She pulled her scarf up around the lower half of her face and casually opened the door, sending a bell clanging feebly as she edged into the small shop and headed directly for the bookshelves, keeping her face turned away from the two men talking at the counter.

"All books are buy one get one," Borgin's voice, as oily as his hair, called from across the shop. Harry made a vaguely interested grunt, after which Borgin seemed content to ignore her.

She examined the titles in a perfunctory way, much more interested in seeing what Bill Weasley was doing in Borgin and Burkes. Was he breaking a curse on something? Or looking for a last-minute Yule present, perhaps? She knew she shouldn't really spy on people for no reason, but there was something about Bill that piqued her interest. He played in a lot of different sandboxes, and she thought it would pay off to keep an eye on him, since he was undoubtedly keeping an eye on her, as well.

"Borgin," Bill sighed, sounding a bit frustrated, "I need to know."

"I've already told your goblins I ain't heard anything about it!" Borgin snapped, "Told the Aurors, too, when they raided my bleedin' shop and caught half the alley on fire."

"The Aurors barely understand what they're looking for," Bill said, a bit derisively. She could hear the cajoling note enter his voice as he added, "Gringotts is willing to pay a substantial sum for any information leading to the reclaiming of their property."

Borgin sighed disgustedly. "You think I'm hanging onto it or something? Keeping the information for myself? I got no use for the

sodding thing-got enough cursed gems in this shop already, an' can't sell 'em quick enough. Ruddy rubies give me the heebie-jeebies."

"It's not a ruby," Bill said quietly, "Much bigger. Not a true gem, but a stone of magical origin. And no, I don't think you're keeping it for yourself, but you might be protecting the information on behalf of another."

"Like who?" Borgin grumbled.

Harry had to agree-Borgin would sell his own mother up the river for a fistful of coin.

"Maybe someone powerful," Bill said, "Someone who could buy your silence with gold-or fear."

"If you want to know if Lord Riddle's paid me to keep quiet about the stone, just ask me," Borgin sneered. Bill must have made some silent entreaty, because the older man snorted loudly. "No, Will, I ain't been made silent on the matter-I just haven't got a clue about it, same as everyone else 'round here. You lot are looking in the wrong place, as I told you the last three times you came asking."

Bill sighed, and a bit of the tension in the room relaxed. "You know I have to ask, Borgin. My job."

"I know, Will," Borgin said dismissively, "Them goblins is stubborn little things."

"In this case, it's to everyone's betterment," Bill said, "The more I hear about this thing, the more dangerous it seems."

"I reckon they don't call it the 'Dominion Jewel' on account of its passivity," Borgin chortled.

"Indeed," Bill said shortly. There was a shifting of boots against the hard floor.

"Yer not going already?" Borgin sounded put out. "Need you to take a look at this necklace, Will."

"Today?" Bill sounded a bit harried.

"Before tomorrow afternoon," Borgin said, "I've got a bloke looking to buy it for a relative, but he wants to know what sort of nasties are on it first."

"I don't think I'll have time to break any curse I find before tomorrow," Bill said tiredly.

"Don't need you to break 'em." Borgin wheezed a laugh. "He wants his inheritance! I'll charge him *extra* for any curses you find, Will'em."

Harry bit down on a horrified choke and sincerely hoped Borgin was kidding. On the other hand, the man sold poisons, so... maybe not. She must have stiffened or gave some other sign of awkwardness, as Borgin suddenly snapped, "Buy something or get out, Bint, this ain't a library."

She waved a hand over her shoulder to placate him, plucking a book at random from the shelf in front of her and holding it up as proof that she was a serious customer. He grumbled a bit too quietly for her to hear, but subsided. She made a show of bending down to peruse the lower shelves just in case, but it seemed his attention had left her.

"Just a quick glance," Borgin encouraged, "Won't take but a mo'."

"I'll come by after work tonight," Bill said, "But it'll be double the usual price for the inconvenience."

Borgin made a token complaint, but overall sounded rather satisfied with the compromise. Bill left shortly after, and Harry made her way over to the counter with the book she'd grabbed, feeling too guilty to put it back now that she had used the man's shop to eavesdrop on his business acquaintance.

When she handed it over, Borgin glanced at the cover with raised eyebrows, looking up at her with slight disbelief. She looked down and read 'Mermaid Hunting for Fun and Profit.'

Stifling a wince, she looked innocently up at him, "How much?"

"It's buy one get one," he said, looking at her like she was slow.

"Right," she muttered, annoyed at herself. She marched back to the shelves and picked up the first potion-related book she found, depositing it on the counter with a sweet smile.

"Wilderness Survival Potions: Brews for the Barely Prepared," he read, lip curling a bit in derision.

"You're selling it," she muttered, pulling out her coin purse.

He charged her an outrageous three galleons, but she forked them over without complaint. It was her idea to go in there, after all. She ducked out of the shop and turned toward Diagon Alley before smacking straight into someone who'd been loitering awkwardly close to the shop's doorway.

"Sorry," she said automatically, glancing up. "Oh. Hi." It was Bill Weasley, and he was looking more than a little annoyed. "Fancy seeing you here," she tried, summoning up a friendly smile.

"Were you spying on me?" Bill asked, crossing his arms and staring down at her.

Harry tilted her head. "Spying? No, just browsing. Why, were you doing something suspicious?"

"Does your father know where you are right now?" Bill asked, scowling.

"Does your father know where you are right now?" She returned, raising an eyebrow. Bill eyed her unhappily for a moment. He opened his mouth but she cut him off. "There's really only one thing

to do, Will. I'll pretend I don't know who you are and you pretend you don't know who I am and we'll remain the best of friends."

Bill frowned harder. "I have a right to be here. You-you're just a kid. A girl kid."

"I thought you knew," Harry lied.

Bill stared at her. "Everyone at the Rogue thinks you're a boy, Harry."

"Leo doesn't," Harry said, "And Rispah knows, too." That was a recent development, but he didn't need to know that. "It's safer for me to be a boy, anyway-you don't want to put me in danger, do you, Will?" She blinked big green eyes up at him, a mixture of apprehension and sorrow swimming in their depths. It was a potent combination, according to Marek.

"Stop it," he said weakly, "You're not getting me to cover for you. The lower alleys are no place for an heiress like you."

"Were you worried about me before you knew I was Harry Potter?" she asked, trying a different approach.

"I thought you were just another orphan lad with no where else to go," Bill snapped, "Not some rich girl playing at slum life for kicks."

Harry reared back, feeling as though she'd been slapped. "I'm not... *slumming*," she said slowly, incredulity in every syllable. "The King of Thieves is my friend. I go to the Phoenix to see him and those of his people I've become close to, and I *don't* have to justify how I spend my time to you of all people."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Bill scoffed.

"Your family doesn't know about your alter ego 'Will,' do they?" Harry accused, "You should know better than anyone that the lower alleys offer opportunities that are hard to find other places. You've no room

to call me out for taking advantage when you're doing the same thing, selling your skills on the side for a little extra coin."

"My extra coin goes to keeping my parents in their home," Bill said sharply.

"And mine means a lot to me, too," Harry shot back, putting a hand to her hip in unconscious imitation of her mother in a snit. "You're not the only one who gets to have responsibilities, William."

Bill rolled his eyes. "You're thirteen."

"And I'm a full-time brewer at the potion shop on this very street," she said, lifting her chin, "Where else do you think they let halfblood little girls ply their trade? I'll give you a hint-nowhere."

Bill looked taken aback for a moment. "That's... you shouldn't be working anyway, at your age."

"How is that your decision?" she asked, lifting a brow.

"It's your parents' decision," he said, looking triumphant.

"My parents encourage me to be independent," Harry said drolly.

"I don't think this is what they had in mind."

"Luckily, you don't have to think about it, because you're not in charge of me."

"It's not *safe*, Harry," he snapped, running a hand through his brilliantly-colored hair in agitation.

"The world's not safe." Harry wrinkled her nose. "But I've got more people watching my back here than anywhere else. *Leo* is my friend."

"Not everyone in these alleys answers to Leo," Bill sighed.

"Well, I've got you watching my back too, apparently," Harry snorted.

Bill made a face at her. "Just... be careful."

"I will," she said, letting her face settle into more serious lines. "You be careful, too. This business with the artifact you're tracking down-it's heavy. Sounds like there are some major players involved, and it would be a shame if you got in over your pay grade."

"You were spying on me," he grunted, annoyed.

"Just looking out for you," she replied, widening her eyes in fake concern. "The alleys are a dangerous place, Will. A nice boy like you could get into trouble."

"Get out of my sight before I drag you back to Diagon," Bill said, eyes narrowed.

"I'm headed that way anyway," she said primly, stepping around him with a carefully timed sniff.

"And if your dad finds out what you've been up to, I knew *nothing* about it," he added as she walked away.

Harry shot a mock salute over her shoulder and ignored the groan of defeat that echoed up the alley after her. All in all, that had gone better than she might have anticipated. Checking her watch, she noted she'd be home just in time for lunch. Perhaps afterwards she could quiz Archie some more on the personalities and background information of people he might meet on New Year's Eve. They still had a lot of work to do before the gala. And then they could do a bit of research into the so-called 'Dominion Jewel.' It had an ominous ring to it that made her want to know everything she could on the off chance she crossed path with it again.

[end of chapter ten].

A/N: It's well over a week late, but I just kept remembering scenes that had to happen this winter break, and the whole thing spiraled out of control until it was 30,000 words without even reaching the gala! Next chapter will be the gala. Probably that will be the whole chapter, actually, because that whole thing is going to be very involved. Hope everyone's holidays are going well! Stay warm (or cool, depending where you are in the world), and spread the love this year. I'll see you faithful readers next time.

-V

Chapter 11

A/N: Here it is: the gala. I wanted to show this in all of its layers, so there are several POV shifts involved-it's not all from Harry's perspective tonight. Hopefully some of the other characters' perspectives will give you readers insight into the complexities that Harry herself often doesn't pick up on in their entirety. As always, enjoy.

The Ambiguous Artifice:

Chapter 11:

Draco looked into the mirror and recognized intrinsically that which looked back at him. A young lord on the cusp of ascendance, his clothes and jewels only the accompaniments of his station. The true reflection of his position lay bare in his eyes-Malfoy grey, the color of sober grace, and in the set of his shoulders-poised with the duty of his birthright, but far from bent beneath its weight. He looked and felt older than his thirteen years.

The last addition was the silver dagger his godfather had gifted him that summer. As coming of age presents went, it was spectacular in symbolism and, because it was Uncle Severus, usefulness. A plethora of enchantments made it as deadly as it was beautiful, and Draco knew his godfather had only allowed its incredible splendor so that he may carry it ceremoniously in places true weapons were discouraged, as he would tonight. It did look fine with his silver-trimmed robes, Draco was pleased to note.

A cleared throat turned his attention to his dressing room doorway, where his father loitered with a mixture of pride and regret bare on his usually impassive face.

"Severus has excellent taste, for all that he rarely employs it on his own behalf," his father remarked, eyeing the dagger that hung

weightlessly at Draco's waist with approval.

"The taste was incidental, I suspect," Draco said, a grin tugging at his mouth as he met his father's gaze through the mirror. "It's charmed to open locks-and to only strike true in the hand of one of my own blood."

"Keep it away from Bellatrix," Lucius drawled. Draco chuckled, nodding his agreement. His father examined him carefully for a long moment. "You have grown up so quickly, my son."

"It does not seem quick to me," Draco said, turning his gaze back to the mirror, this time seeing the flaws-the slight ganglyness that spoke of heights not yet reached, the chin that was not quite as firm as what his father's granite profile boasted.

"It will accelerate before you realize," Lucius said, "When you look back on tonight you will remember it as a milestone."

"It's just another party at the Parkinsons' estate," Draco said, raising an eyebrow in skepticism, "We've been to dozens."

"Not a gala," Lucius said, shaking his head slowly.

"I've been to other galas," Draco pointed out.

"This one will be different," his father said, eyes serious in a way that made Draco instinctually pay closer attention. "The sphere is widening this year. The Parkinsons are *very* well connected. There will be a great many Ministry officials in attendance with their families. More Neutral and even Light leaning families there, as well."

"Really?" Draco processed this silently. Tilting the field away from a concentration of Dark families was not necessarily a bad thing, politically speaking.

"You will pay special attention to Miss Parkinson tonight," Lucius said, "Flaunt our close connection."

"I will, Father," Draco said, frowning a little, "Though... I do not wish to send the wrong message. Pansy is beginning courting negotiations this winter-"

"You could do much worse than Rose Parkinson's daughter," Lucius cut across him sharply.

"Yes, Father," Draco said, automatically obedient.

His father eyed him through the mirror thoughtfully. "Perhaps you had a different prospect in mind?" Draco blinked in slow confusion. "Your friendship with Heir Black is quite *close*, Draco," Lucius prompted drolly.

Draco's nose wrinkled instinctively before he could still it. "Rigel is a friend, Father." There was a confusion in his breast that voiced some uncertainty about the exact nature of his relationship with Rigel Black, but it was easy to ignore. "Like you and Severus," he offered when his father looked unconvinced.

Lucius laughed shortly. "Severus and I were not always such good friends, Draco."

"I thought you were schoolmates," Draco said, eyes narrowing. He was sure his father and godfather had told him they met at Hogwarts.

"He was several years younger than I," Lucius said dismissively, moving from the doorway at last and approaching the large window on Draco's left. It looked out over his mother's garden, which the house elves decorated beautifully with silver lights in the winter months.

"How did you become close, then?" Draco asked, now curious as to why he'd never heard the story. "Through the SOW party?"

Lucius' smirk was incredibly wry. "In fact, when Severus first petitioned to join the Party I suspected him a spy." Draco's mouth fell open, prompting a dark chuckle from his father. "Oh, yes. He was a nobody in school-kept to himself and distained Society in all its forms. I don't blame him-Society is no place for a halfblood whelp without family to recommend him, which is exactly what Severus was. Then he took his Mastery at seventeen-breaking half a dozen records in the process-and suddenly all his reticence and taciturn disgust disappeared. He made the right friends, said the right things, and he was talented-so talented that he didn't need to say or do the right things, don't you see? The Party would have accepted him anyway, on merit alone."

"You suspected him of playing his way in?" Draco whistled. "I hope you didn't say that to his face."

"Of course I did," Lucius smirked, "I was young and indelicate-this was before I married your mother. Snape was easily provoked. A slur to his heritage brought his acerbic nature to the fore with little trouble; he was suspiciously resentful when it came to blood rights, for one who pledged himself to a Party created on the basis of their existence. I accused him of treachery and duplicitousness and demanded a duel to satisfy the honor of the Party."

Draco could not believe his ears. "You... *what?* "

"Don't look so surprised." His father sighed with acute chagrin. "I lost, of course. Severus annihilated me on the dueling field. I retracted my accusations at once and shortly thereafter the two of us became friends. I even sponsored his ascendance in the Party after that. I never forgot, though." Lucius had a far away look in his eyes all of a sudden. It made trepidation blossom in Draco's gut. "And I still have my suspicions. Severus is a little too close to Dumbledore, for all that he is employed at Hogwarts. Your godfather does not enjoy teaching."

"You don't say," Draco snorted. That much was certainly obvious.

"Whatever his excuses about contributing to the next generation-however arduous a task it may be, as he says-it has always felt off to me," Lucius said. He clenched his hand into a slow fist. "Severus is valuable to the Party, and he has become a good friend to our family, but he has secrets, Draco."

"Why are you telling me this now?" Draco asked after a moment of silence. "I know you've cautioned me about speaking freely on certain subjects with Uncle Severus before, but you've never said anything so explicit about questioning his... his *loyalties*."

"I tell you this to illustrate my relationship with Severus, which you claim is just like your relationship with Rigel," Lucius said, voice pointed. Draco swallowed. Before he could formulate a response, not sure if he ought to defend Rigel or Snape or neither, his father went on. "I understand your friendship with Heir Black, Draco. Talent calls to Malfoys-I raised you to respect it, to seek it out. Rigel is also family, which rightly elevates him even more in your esteem. You can be his friend, but I must tell you to be careful. Like we are careful with Severus. For all his seeming good-naturedness and harmless intellectual façade, Rigel Black has secrets, too. I am sure of it."

Draco knew as much already, had known as much almost from the start. But Lucius and Severus had been friends well over a decade, even with what was apparently a sea of doubt between them. He and Rigel would be just the same. He, the powerful, charismatic Lord Malfoy, and Rigel the anti-social but endearing academic who everyone esteems but only Draco really understands. Pansy would be there, too. It would be perfect. Or as close to perfect as real life got. Certainty wasn't the gold standard for everything-much less the Malfoy standard, which meant considerably more.

Draco moved a stray hair back into its place, then turned from the mirror at last. "Ready, Father? We best not keep Mother waiting."

"If your mother is finished with her coiffure, I'll go to the gala in stockings," Lucius said, nonetheless following him from the room. As they approached the floo room to await the lady of the house, his

father placed a hand on his shoulder that was heavy with meaning. "You will be careful, Son. Use your gift. Discover whatever you can, whenever you can. Keep the knowledge close. It is impossible to predict what-or who-may become critical to your future."

"I will, Father," Draco said, attempting to assure himself as much as anything. He would try to be careful. He had a feeling that carefulness was a ship that had sailed without his realizing it, however. Unlike Lucius and Severus, who approached friendship with wariness and restraint, Draco was already neck-deep in it. He couldn't imagine his future in any capacity without Rigel in it. His father may as well advise him to be suspicious of himself, so awkward and unwieldy the imperative felt.

Still, tonight was as good a time as any to approach his friendship anew. He would pay closer attention, and try harder to see things as they were, rather than as he would have them be. Somehow he doubted Rigel would even notice his increased scrutiny. Draco heaved a mental sigh. It was probably better that his friend was so oblivious. Draco wanted to take his father's advice seriously, but he didn't want Rigel to think him actually doubtful-Rigel had enough trouble understanding their friendship as it was. The last thing he needed to do was add complications to what was already a difficult concept for Rigel to grasp.

Sometimes he wished he could have simple friends-ones with simple needs and easy-to-suss-out goals, ones who didn't hide behind personas of gilded lies and who never over-analyzed anything Draco did or said. His wishing never lasted very long, though. That sort of friendship was for boring people, with small minds and even smaller lives. Draco was made for more interesting things, even if sometimes the interesting things were the most troublesome.

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Harry gave up looking for some semblance of herself in the mirror after a few unsuccessful minutes and simply settled for staring at the strangely glittering creature within. Her mother had made good on her promise to help her in dressing for the gala that night, but Harry hadn't imagined that her assistance would be characterized by such... *alteration*. Lily had, with her cautious permission, grown her hair out several inches, until it was long enough to twirl around the ends of her mother's wand like the ribbons of a party balloon. The effect was very feminine, she had to admit, but the way the curls stuck together in formation even when she shook her head was a bit eerie.

"Stop moving," Lily laughed, "They haven't set completely yet."

"They look very set," Harry said, voice dubious.

"That's because you're used to wearing it messy." Lily rolled her eyes. "James is just the same-every time I style his hair he claims I've *cemented* it. Just because it isn't tousled with flyaways..." she trailed off with a distracted mutter as her wand made another pass over the curls at Harry's nape.

Addy gurgled somewhat unhappily from her blanket across the room, summoning Lily to her side like an ancient Sheba. Harry took the moment to lower her glasses at the mirror, examining her eyes suspiciously. Her mother had done... something to her eyelashes, darkening and thickening them in a way that gave her gaze an unnatural intensity. Lily assured her it was subtle, but Harry thought it entirely alien, even with the frames of her glasses to divert attention. Her eyebrows had been thinned, giving her a wide-eyed look that she wasn't sure she approved of, and she was pretty sure her mother had altered the color of her lips slightly when she wasn't looking. She had no idea how she would undo all of it before she went back to Hogwarts, but with luck at least some of the spells would be temporary.

Her mother was playing a guessing game of some sort with her little sister while she examined her face. Addy was making variously insistent noises while Lily tried to figure out what exactly the infant

wanted. Harry wasn't sure Addy was actually communicating at all, as in her observation infants tended toward nonsensical noise making for mere practice's sake, but her parents had lately begun asserting the opinion that Addy was interacting intelligently with the world around her. She supposed they had more experience than she did on the matter.

"Your ball?" Lily said, holding up said toy with an exaggeratedly questioning expression on her face, "Or your blanket?"

Whatever Addy gurgled must have made sense to Lily, who smiled indulgently, "Your blanket? Okay, here's your blanket." The ceremony with which she handed over the snitch-patterned cloth would have done royalty proud.

"She's just so smart," Lily said, pride in her smile as she returned to the vanity. "Before you know it she'll be talking away. I'm going to teach her French, I think, once she's able to articulate most of the sounds."

"Shouldn't we teach her English first?" Harry said, smiling.

"Bilingualism starts young," Lily said, smoothing her hands over Harry's curls with a satisfied air, "I learned French in primary school, you know."

"I didn't," Harry said, surprised.

Lily nodded, smiling a bit wryly. "I suppose I don't speak it much anymore, but I was quite good at a young age. I even applied to Beauxbatons when I got my letter outlining my schooling options. I didn't get in, of course-it's listed as a school that accepts muggleborns, but I'm afraid that's mostly for posturing purposes. They only really accept those from old French families, and of those they prefer the ones with old money, besides."

"So you went to America," Harry said, wondering how she'd never known Lily hadn't gotten into the school of her choice either, all those

years ago.

"So I went to America," Lily agreed. She smiled softly. "It was for the best, in the end. I'd never have gotten my grounding in experimental Charms at Beauxbatons. They're very traditionalist when it comes to spell casting. I think Addy might do well there, though... at least, with the Potter family name, they can't refuse her application."

Harry wasn't sure what to say to that. She wondered if it still stung, being refused admittance to the elite French school. At least Harry had grown up knowing intellectually that she wouldn't be accepted to Hogwarts-for Lily the knowledge of her magical abilities and the disappointment of her blood status must have come all at once.

"If we'd thought far enough ahead with you, James and I would have taught you another language, too," Lily said sadly, "We didn't mean to limit your choice of school to America or Australia-we just got so caught up in the moment, growing with you day by day, and by the time we realized your future bore serious consideration, it was too late to give you a background in another tongue. Not enough to be schooled in it, anyway."

"It's all right," Harry said, trying to cheer her mother up again before they fell into a conversation of regrets. "When you teach Addy, maybe I can learn, too. It'll be fun, learning together. And when she gets old enough we can take a family trip to Paris."

"That sounds lovely," Lily said, beaming. "What did I do to deserve such an understanding daughter?"

"You gave me a father whose behavior instills a good deal of patience and understanding," Harry said.

"Speaking of which," Lily laughed, "Run into the study and tell your father it's time for him to begin dressing. He and Sirius always wait until the last minute."

Harry slipped out of the room, her steps almost mincing in the unfamiliar slippers she had donned to match her delicate dress robes.

The light was on in the study, but the door was closed, which immediately struck Harry as odd. Closed doors weren't exactly a thing in their house, unless someone was sleeping. Wondering if her father and uncle were plotting something interesting for their joke line, she crept closer on silk-clad feet.

"-still can't believe we're attending Satan's circus again," James was saying, "And the rest of them got roped into it as well somehow."

"Not Remus," Sirius said, sounding as though he was leaning close to the door.

"Well we can't all be werewolves," James sighed. "Even if it does get one out of a surprising number of fussy parties. What happened to the Split, anyway?"

"It's weakening," Sirius said, his voice nonchalant, "We knew it wasn't forever. Twelve years is a long time to have held Society so apart. We can't stay separate indefinitely-won't solve anything."

"How Neutral of you." James sounded annoyed. "Don't see any Dark purebloods going to Dumbledore's soiree though, do you?"

"Maybe this year they will," Sirius shot back. Harry could tell from the absurdist bite to his words that he was joking. "The gala is practically a Ministry event anyway, this year. Lord Parkinson's intellectual crowd will all peek in as well, no doubt. Lily and the kids will be fine."

"I know." James heaved a long breath. "I'm just dreading it. Security is going to be a nightmare. The Minister invited half his cabinet, and the other half will probably gate crash. We can't search the guests as they enter without offending everyone's family honor and all that rot, and ceremonial weapons are permitted anyway-not to mention the damage you can do with a wand, if you don't mind being found out

as the perpetrator. I've got a team at the estate now, getting familiar with the layout, but with this many people expected I doubt it will make any difference how many Aurors are there."

"It's going to be fine," Sirius insisted, "I'm sure you've planned for every eventuality."

"If I'd had time in the last two months to tie my own shoes I'm sure I would have, too," James said, audibly exasperated. "We've been run ragged with all this jewel searching nonsense."

There was a short pause, into which Sirius made a kind of 'hmm' sound. "How is that going, anyway?"

"Not well. The goblins are breathing down our necks and not saying anything helpful at the same time. We know this thing has something to do with upsetting magical creatures' natural temperament, but there's no solid information on what kind of a danger it poses to society at large. Hogwarts was the first real lead we had, with that mess on Halloween sending the office into a tailspin. We can't exactly raid the place without real evidence on where or who to search. The ward inspection was the best idea we had, and sodding Malfoy came up with that one!"

"How is the cow party mixed up in this anyway?" Sirius asked.

"We don't know," James groaned, "They seem as eager to butt into the investigation as the goblins. If only we knew what this thing was supposed to do, we might have a better idea for motive. I've asked Remus to keep an eye out at the school. I need to go through your library though, if you don't mind. We need hard facts on this thing before we have another mass dragon escape or the selkies go rouge or... whatever. All we know so far is it's dangerous, and whoever has it isn't being careful."

Harry fought against the impulse to step forward, open the door, and go to her father, tell him who she thought had the Dominion Jewel- tell him that it was called that, even. Only the knowledge that she

couldn't explain how she'd come by such information kept her feet rooted to the carpet. Maybe she could send in an anonymous tip to the DMLE. Then again, random information wasn't exactly the sort of evidence James needed to perform a legal search and seizure. She could investigate, though. Remus would be keeping his eyes open, apparently, but he didn't know where to look. Harry allowed herself a determined smile. She would add her eyes to Pettigrew's movements. When she had proof to present, she could go to her father. Or, she amended mentally, Archie could go to James.

She knocked on the door before opening it to stick her head in. "Mom says it's time to get dressed, Dad. You too, uncle Sirius."

James blinked at her rather stupidly. "Fawn? Is that you?"

"Course it's me," Harry rolled her eyes, fighting a flush. She didn't look *that* different.

"You look sparkling, kid," Sirius said, winking, "Lily up to her old magic, eh?"

"I was held as wandpoint for over an hour," Harry deadpanned, "Now it's your turn."

James winced. "She always puts glue in my hair."

The two men wandered off in search of combs and Harry headed to the floo room to wait. Archie was already there when she strode in and debated the merits of sitting and wrinkling the back of her robes or standing awkwardly for the next fifteen minutes or so.

"Don't do it-Aunt Lily will throw a fit," Archie warned her, apparently reading her mind.

"She probably won't," Harry said, biting her lip indecisively.

"She spent ages picking those out," Archie reminded her. Harry glanced down at the loose flowing folds of lavender and sighed.

Standing it was.

She leaned one shoulder against the fireplace, surveying her cousin briefly. "Where are your gloves?"

Grimacing, Archie pulled a pair of black dress gloves out of his pockets. "They feel weird. Like I can't use my hands."

"You have to wear them," Harry said, stroking lightly over her own silk-covered fingers.

"I know," Archie moaned, "But how am I supposed to eat?"

"You don't need to eat," Harry said, "I rarely partake at parties."

"Right," Archie sighed despondently, "I'm pretending to be a robot."

"Put your gloves on, robot," Harry chuckled. Archie reluctantly pulled them over his fingers, hiding the green rings that mirrored the ones on her own finger. She'd procured a cheap ring of fake jade for Archie, to match the suppressor she wore, and even without the gloves she didn't think anyone would notice the difference. Rigel was known to prefer wearing gloves, though, so Archie would wear gloves tonight as well.

"Is this going to work?" Archie asked, swallowing with obvious trepidation.

"Just keep your head down," Harry said calmly, "No matter what you do, no one can prove you aren't Rigel Black. My friends will chalk up irregularities to being in Sirius' presence most of the time, so relax when you're with him. When you aren't, just keep your mouth shut unless directly addressed. Better to seem preoccupied than to risk contradicting something they think is true about you. If you get into trouble, just feign amusement. It might be an inside joke."

"The fate of my life hangs on your inside jokes," Archie sighed.

"It hangs on your ability to fake a laugh," Harry corrected him.

Archie laughed loudly, clutching his belly and relaxing all his features into mirth.

"What's so funny?"

James, Sirius, and Lily filed into the floo room, her little sister propped on Sirius' shoulder. All four were dressed to the nines, even Addy, who looked surprisingly alert in her cobalt dress, which made the red hair on her head pop luridly.

"It's an inside joke," Harry said, sending Archie into another round of laughter, this time genuine.

"That's the spirit," Sirius said, rubbing his hands together, "Now. The Parkinsons are an all right lot, so all we need to worry about are the other dark wizards-

" *Sirius*," James shook his head exasperatedly.

"What?" Sirius held a wounded hand to his heart. "I'm saying this for Harry's sake, Prongs. Unlike the rest of us, she hasn't dealt with these kind of snobby, tight-eyed people before. Harry, just remember that you can't be formally charged on capital offenses until you're seventeen, so-

"Please don't encourage my daughter to murder anyone," Lily pleaded.

"Especially anyone she hasn't met yet!" Archie said, grinning. "She might get along really well with the party nobs."

"She'd better not," James grimaced.

"Yeah, no schmoozing with the politicians, Harry," Sirius said.

"I'll just stand in a corner, make no noise, and pretend not to exist," Harry said.

"I don't know, corners can be dangerous places to stand at parties," James mused, "Perhaps you should just stay home."

"She can't," Archie said, pouting, "Professor Snape wants to meet her."

"What?" Sirius frowned, "She's only going to see Snape?"

"He wants to talk to you, too," Archie said innocently.

"Let's not go," Sirius said, eye twitching. Harry marveled at how well he reversed roles, depending on who he was performing for. Hadn't he just played devil's advocate to James' bemoaning about attending the gala? She wondered if that was what a lifetime of practice at dissembling afforded one.

"It's too late, we're already dressed," Lily said, smiling indulgently. "We're going to be endlessly polite and friendly, show everyone how happy and healthy our family is, and have a lovely time. Does everyone have their emergency portkeys?"

"And did everyone put extension charms on their pockets?" Sirius added earnestly. "Remus is partial to chocolate biscuits, so every time you pass a refreshment table be sure to surreptitiously sneak one."

"On the bright side, they probably won't invite us back," Harry said.

"Or we'll be a huge hit," Sirius protested.

"Someone is going to get hit," James muttered.

"Let's just go," Lily sighed, taking Addy from Sirius in preparation for the floo trip.

Sirius volunteered to go first, spinning away in green smoke and ash with a look that was a little too eager to be believable. Archie followed, with Harry close behind. They stepped out of the way for her parents to come through, and once they were all assembled, an

extremely well-mannered house elf directed them from the ornate floo room to the adjacent hallway.

It was a corridor of glittering mirrors and gilded portraiture, and as they walked along it eyes followed them from every angle, either their own or someone else's. They could see other groups forming a cue up ahead, waiting to be announced at the entrance to the ballroom.

Harry glanced up to see an enormous archway entwined with golden fairy lights over the main doors. It was like walking through the gates of a grand estate, only inside the house. She had always known that her family, even with their more-than-comfortably-sized houses, understated their income in terms of material possessions. Most of their gold lay in their vaults, uncounted except by goblins, and for the most part ignored. Coming to houses like this had opened her eyes to the true extravagance that was pureblood wealth. It was impossible to ignore the incredible details etched into the frames of each mirror and painting they passed, nor the sumptuous oriental rug that ran the entire length of the corridor beneath their feet.

As they passed beneath the archway, Harry almost couldn't believe the scope of the room before her. She had been to the Rosiers' ballroom the previous year, but the ceilings that had seemed impossibly large then were now dwarfed in her memory by the sight before her. The ballroom itself was shaped something like an arch, much higher in the middle over the dance floor than around the edges. Even the low ends of the room were two stories in themselves, however, with three staircases spaced evenly on the left and right sides of the room that led up to spacious indoor balconies. She could already see dozens of people gazing down over the low banisters, observing the room from what was probably a spectacular viewpoint. On the far end of the room from the main entrance, she could just glimpse a long table that likely held refreshments for the dancers, many of whom already moved gracefully in the center of the classically tiled floor.

She couldn't see where the music was coming from at first, until she realized it emanated from a giant chandelier hanging in the epicenter of the ballroom. The ornament dripped with pearls and what she suspected were real diamonds, rather than crystals. It struck her how clever it was to center the music above the dance floor. The dancers would be able to hear it equally well whichever side they were on, yet the music would be fainter from the edges of the room, where people were more inclined to strike up conversation.

They reached the front of the receiving line, and Sirius hung back with Archie to allow the Potters to go first. Usually James wouldn't be in the receiving line, as he was there in official capacity in addition to being a guest, but as his family was there, and particularly as his children were to be presented for the first time, he was bound by the duties of his House to make introductions.

"Lord James Potter, Lady Lillian Potter, and daughters Harriett and Adriana Potter," the announcer called out, cueing them to step forward to where the Parkinsons waited, expressions politely expectant. She could see Pansy on her mother's left, dressed in forest green robes with filigreed gold at her waist and hem.

James approached first, with Lily at his elbow. Harry stood a half-step back on her mother's side, just far enough away that Addy's grasping fingers couldn't pull at her hair from where she perched.

"Lord Potter," Mr. Parkinson intoned, "We are grateful for all of your help in organizing the security details for this evening."

"Let us hope they prove superfluous," James said, inclining his head shortly.

"And Lillian, it had been much too long," Mrs. Parkinson said, stepping forward to embrace Lily briefly, mindful of Addy sitting in Lily's right arm.

"So long you've forgotten to call me Lily," her mother said, a soft smile adorning her face. "How are you, Rose? I daresay you've

outdone yourself this year."

"There, you see, Cassius?" Mrs. Parkinson smiled widely, "I told you the fairy lights weren't too much. I shall tell anyone who says otherwise that *the* Lillian Potter has given the party her aesthetic approval-that will still their tongues."

"First we ought to still our own, at least until the introductions are complete, my dear," Mr. Parkinson said, a slight hint of amusement in his tone.

"Of course," Mrs. Parkinson laughed lightly, "It was so good to see you again that I forgot myself. Lord Potter, Lady Potter, let me present to you my daughter, Pandora-"

"Honestly, Mother," Pansy sighed.

"-who prefers to be called Pansy," Mrs. Parkinson finished with an indulgent glance in her daughter's direction.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Pansy," Lily said with a sly smile of her own. "You might get on well with our own daughters, Harriett, who insists that she was named Harry, and Adriana, who we call Addy for brevity's sake."

"I'm sure I will," Pansy said, turning curious eyes in Harry's direction.

Harry's instincts summoned up a deferential bow before she could stop herself. Halfway through she realized she was wearing skirts, but had no graceful option except to complete the dip as naturally as she was able and offer a smile to the Parkinsons that she hoped took the edge off of any perceived slight.

"How charming," Mrs. Parkinson said, positively beaming at her. "It is so wonderful to finally meet you, Harry. And you as well, of course, Addy." She wiggled her gloved fingers shyly at Addy, who blinked big blue eyes in her direction and gurgled a bit.

"Thank you for having us at your estate this evening, Lord Parkinson, Lady Parkinson," Harry said, keeping her voice soft even though without the voice-altering charm she didn't sound too much like Rigel these days. "It's lovely to meet you, Pansy," she added, offering her friend a distant smile.

"You are most welcome, all of you," Mr. Parkinson said. With a sweep of his hands he gestured to the ballroom at large. "Please, enjoy your night."

They moved off to one side to allow Sirius and Archie space to greet their hosts.

"I didn't know you knew the Parkinsons, Mum," Harry remarked as they waited.

"Long ago," Lily said, "Before the Split, Dark and Light aligned families nearly always attended the same functions. Some charity, some political, others just for fun. There used to be a grand Yule Ball at the Ministry each year, but they stopped throwing it when prominent members from either side of the Split refused to attend as long as families from the other side were attending. I did not know Rose Parkinson so well as all that, however. She is an eminently friendly soul, and pretends to a greater affection than we carried in truth between us."

"It is part of her charm," James put in, "And the only thing that makes her husband's company bearable."

Lily discretely elbowed James in the side. "Be nice. He is our host, and he was perfectly polite."

"Exactly," James snorted, "Perfectly polite. And not one iota more."

"It's not as if they owe us anything," Lily said quietly, "Politeness is more than enough, for tonight."

"More than we expected, at any rate," James allowed. He ran a hand through his hair automatically, only to wince when he intercepted his wife's annoyed glare.

"Hold Addy while I fix this," Lily said, shifting the infant to her hands and holding her in Harry's direction.

Harry tried to shake her head, but Lily was depositing the baby in her arms before she could voice a protest. To her surprise, Addy seemed perfectly content to finger Harry's short curls while sucking on her own fist. *Of course*, she realized a moment later. She was projecting her aura now, so Addy wasn't unnerved by her presence. Taking full advantage, she pressed Addy close to kiss her cheek in a rarely allowed show of affection. Addy smiled, a bubble of spit dripping cheerfully from her open lips.

Lily casually plucked her husband's handkerchief from his breast pocket and wiped the drool away before taking Addy back into her arms. Before she could return James' handkerchief to his pocket, they were approached by a portly man in a bowler hat who said, "Potter! At last! That fellow you assigned me won't stop *hovering*."

"Minister." James greeted him with a professional smile. "It is his job to hover."

"Well tell him to do it from further away." The Minister, who Harry now recognized as the confidently smiling man in the Prophet, flapped his hands agitatedly. "How am I to charm new contributors for my next campaign with that stony mug looming over my shoulder?"

"I'll tell Dawlish to loom from ten feet, how's that?" James said, a smile tucked away into the corner of his mouth.

"Not satisfactory," the Minister said, frowning, "I need your pretty face, Potter. Come guard me." James gave Lily an apologetic glance, which the Minister caught with a jolt of exaggerated surprise. "Oh! Your lovely wife must come, too. My wife is dying to see her,

anyway." The Minister peered at Harry with curiosity. "This your daughter, Potter? My little sunshine would be glad to entertain her for a while."

Remembering Draco's disparaging comments about the Minister's daughter the year before, Harry said quickly, "I'll wait here for Archie and Sirius."

"Black?" the Minister smiled widely, "Good, good. Tell him I want to talk to him before he leaves tonight-now that the Black House is Neutral again, we have a few things to *discuss* ."

Harry thought that sounded rather ominous, and was suddenly glad to be inconsequential as she waved sarcastically to her parents, who were herded quite expertly into the crowd.

Archie and Sirius joined her not a minute later. "Did they lose you already?" Sirius asked with a laugh.

"They were captured by the Minister and pressed into his service," Harry said, "I barely escaped with my life. He's after you next, Uncle Sirius."

"Thanks for the warning," Sirius said, "Now I know who to avoid."

"Not talking about me, I hope."

Regulus Black emerged from the crowd just behind his brother, who gave a half-hearted wince as he turned to greet him. He was dressed impeccably, if severely, in all black, his dark hair pushed back neatly in contrast to Sirius' wild mane.

"Reggie," Sirius said bracingly, "How are you?"

"Just tickled to see you, brother," Regulus said. His voice could have been mistaken for the scraping of a knife across stale bread.

"It's wonderful to see you, too, Uncle," Archie put in before Sirius could give a retort, "What have you been up to?"

"The usual," Regulus said, sounding bored, "Protecting people from their own stupidity."

"I told you when you specialized in ward construction that you would spend all your time arguing with architects," Sirius said archly.

"At least I spend my time doing something," Regulus said, one eyebrow lifting, "When was the last time you added to our family's fortunes instead of merely depleting them, Brother?"

"I have a team of incredibly talented investors who do that for me," Sirius said, waving his hand dismissively.

"And how do they feel about you going Neutral?" Regulus asked, a sly smirk adorning one cheek, "Are they just ecstatic? Does it warm their accounting books to know that all those galleons you've been funneling into the Light Party's donation fund are safe in the vault where they belong?"

"My employees don't give a rat's arse what I do with my money," Sirius said, scowling.

"Hmm, and what about Dumbledore?" Regulus pressed, his smirk widening further. "How is the old puppet-master getting along without your oh-so-regular contributions?"

Harry's eyes widened as she realized for the first time that Sirius claiming Neutral status might have greater repercussions than he had intimated to them.

"Lord Dumbledore will be fine for a few years," Sirius said stiffly.

"So you admit you swung Neutral only in name, in a distasteful attempt to squirm your way back into the world your son has already begun to embrace, like a child swimming after its parent into deepening water." Regulus had lost his smirk, and now looked merely disdainful. "Is Lord Potter donating double, to compensate for

your clinging need to smother your Heir? Or perhaps you're still funneling galleons in your friend's name."

Sirius stiffened and even Archie looked shocked that his Uncle would state such an accusation out loud.

"You impugn my honor, Brother?" Sirius actually sneered, a look that brought him closer to the old paintings of Black Family Heads than Harry had ever known he could come. "You only insult yourself, as I am the Lord of the House you serve."

"As long as you acknowledge that I am the only one of us currently serving the House of Black," Regulus said smoothly, and oily smile his answer to Sirius' affront. "Well, me and your son, that is."

He gave Archie an ironic nod, which Archie did not return, instead meeting his uncle's gaze evenly, insulted pride on his father's behalf obvious in his eyes.

Regulus shrugged minutely at Archie's silence, and turned his attention to Harry instead. "Who's this, then?"

"I'm Harry," she said, smiling ever so politely, "Your... second cousin once removed, Mr. Black."

"Potter's Heiress," Regulus said, grimacing slightly, "Careful of the company you keep, Rigel."

With that, he walked off, leaving Sirius to fume for about thirty seconds before pulling himself together visibly.

"Well. Why don't you two run along and meet Archie's friends?" Sirius suggested. "I'm going to get a drink before I find some way to royally embarrass little Reggie until he remembers to avoid me."

She really couldn't tell if her uncle was kidding. They dutifully bid him goodbye, though, and began searching for her classmates.

"Stop searching so obviously," Archie said lowly after a moment, "I should be the one to recognize them, not you."

She didn't think anyone would be watching them so closely, but she did as he asked, scanning the room more subtly as Archie looked obviously about them.

"Maybe they aren't here yet," Archie said, frowning.

"The Malfoys at least have to be here," Harry told him, "They're close with the Parkinsons, and were probably one of the first families to arrive."

"I see blonde hair that way," Archie said, gesturing to the far side of the dance floor.

"I think that's Draco's parents," Harry said, "You don't want to talk to them yet-Mr. Malfoy can sense fear."

"I'm not afraid of him," Archie protested.

"You should be," Harry snorted. She caught sight of Millicent suddenly through a gap in the crowd. "This way."

She pretended to follow Archie, all the while mumbling directions, until he recognized the group of young purebloods she was leading him toward. She dearly hoped his memorizing pictures from backlogged society pages at the public library would get him through the introductions without hiccup.

Draco, Theo, Millicent, and Blaise all stood together near a pillar under one of the balconies. They looked over when Theo called "Rigel!" with a grin stretching his thin features.

"Hey Theo, good to see you," Archie said, smiling easily. He checked himself after a moment, reigning in his smile to a more reserved expression. "Draco, Millicent, Blaise. How's the party?"

"Excellent," Millicent said, "The food is being made continuously. It tastes like you plucked it from the chef's hands yourself."

"And the music is instrumental, thank Merlin," Blaise said with an appreciatory smirk, "Not that vocal extravagance last year."

"I liked the merfolk band," Theo protested.

"You would," Blaise snorted, "Sirens sing sweeter, and they can do it above water."

"And half the guests would suspect they were being hypnotized," Theo argued.

"Only the paranoid ones like you," Archie put in with a grin.

Well done, she mentally applauded him. All that time studying her friends' defining characteristics had paid off.

"At least I haven't left my cousin just standing there without an introduction," Theo sniffed. He relaxed into a more friendly expression a moment later. "Do you remember me, Miss Potter? We met in Quality Quidditch once."

"I remember you mistook me for me cousin, Mr. Nott," Harry said, smiling.

"You had shorter hair then," Theo said, coughing embarrassedly.

"It's Harriett, right?" Millicent said, leaning forward to catch Harry's eyes curiously.

"Just Harry is fine," she said, blinking uneasily from behind her glasses. Would Millicent think it odd that her eyes were less brilliant than rumored? "You're... Millicent, is that right?" She glanced at Archie as though double-checking.

Archie nodded, "Harry, this is Millicent Bulstrode, Theo you already know, Draco Malfoy, and Blaise Zabini." He nodded to each of them

in turn.

Harry dipped a small curtsey, feeling entirely out of place doing so. "It's nice to finally meet you all. Rigel has told me so much about you."

"Not too much, I hope," Blaise said, eyeing her in what looked like indulgent amusement. "We hardly know a thing about you."

"We know she's interested in potions," Theo said, seemingly taking it upon himself, as the only one who'd met her before, to smooth her way into the conversation.

"More even than me, if you can believe it," Archie put in, grinning slightly.

"We really can't," Draco said drolly.

There was an awkward pause, in which Harry affected polite aloofness to hide the feeling that she was intruding on something. She had known intellectually that meeting her friends as Harry would be different from meeting the Weasleys, whose easy acceptance was a reflection on their open-heartedness, not on the way friendships worked in general. She wondered if she had adequately prepared herself emotionally, however, as her Slytherin friends visibly hesitated on how to proceed.

"Did you all hear about that dragon escape?" Archie said, painfully drawing the subject into neutral territory. "It was all over the news before Yule, but they haven't printed much since then. Have they caught them all yet?"

"Only three," Blaise said, "The press is keeping a lid on it, so it looks less like incompetence at this point."

"Even though that's what it is," Draco said, sneering, "Those dragon-lovers on the reserves can hardly control the beasts in their fear to hurt them."

"Dragons are kind of hard to control in the wild," Archie said fairly, "It's difficult to make them go anywhere, when they can run in so many directions; all they can do is keep them away from human settlements until they run out of energy and fall asleep."

"They aren't doing a very good job, though, are they?" Millicent said, shaking her head exasperatedly, "My father told me one of them went hunting in a menagerie in Spain a few days ago. Caused an international incident, since apparently it ate a few members of an endangered species they were trying to repopulate there."

"They shouldn't be breeding magical creatures at a menagerie anyway," Blaise said scathingly, "Wizards never get it right. The creatures end up with mutations that then end up in the genetic pool and weaken the species substantially."

"Like the unicorns they tried to breed in America," Draco said, mouth twisted in distaste, "The whole herd ended up slaughtered by a pack of rouge werewolves, because they couldn't run as fast as true unicorns ought to be able to."

"And the *muggles* running the American Ministry acted like it wasn't their fault!" Theo exclaimed, "Like they weren't messing with sacred magic their half-formed cores couldn't possibly underst-oh." He looked suddenly at Harry like he'd been jolted with low-grade lightning. "Uh, no offense. It's true, though..." he trailed off with an awkward mutter.

"No offense taken," she said faintly, her face perfectly blank even as her heart pounded uncomfortably hard in her stomach. He hadn't said the word 'mudblood' to describe the American officials-no one in polite company used the word so freely-but by calling them 'muggles' it was a strongly implied sentiment. Everyone knew the Americans didn't hold with pureblood elitism, and often overemployed muggleborns and halfbloods in their international departments as a big thumb to the nose at other countries.

Archie looked incredibly uncertain, likely feeling a strange sort of guilt that her own friends were treating her so carelessly. She should have told him to expect it-should have expected it more herself, really. She recalled how stilted and pointed all of them had been with one another, when they first arrived at Hogwarts, and they were all on somewhat even footing at the time. Now, with her the strange halfblood they'd just met, coming into their circle with only Rigel's recommendation to say they ought to like her, well, she could understand the defensive, even somewhat possessive look in their eyes as they assessed her. She was Rigel's *other* friend, the one he'd known since birth and possibly valued more than them. She understood the unspoken comparison that was going on, even as she felt it abominably unfair that she should have to compete for her friends' affection with *herself* .

She could feel Draco's gaze on her, and wondered what he was sensing from her emotions. Hurt? Understanding? Or Betrayal? Whatever it was, she doubted it made a whole lot of sense to him.

The conversation moved on in fits and starts, and Harry realized none of them were going to relax as long as she stood there, among them yet apart. The forced casualness became too much after a few minutes, and Harry quietly and politely excused herself, faking a friendly parting smile with what she thought was remarkable skill. Archie looked like he might protest, likely afraid of what he might say or do without her there. Harry had faith in him, though, and let him see the encouragement in her eyes as she turned away.

She felt oddly touched, that her friends could be so protective of 'Rigel,' but she also felt acutely shunned, knowing that at least part of their unfriendliness was because of her blood-status. It was always glossed over when they spoke of Harry to Rigel, but she ought to have predicted that something easily ignored in conversation would be more jarring when confronted for the first time in the flesh.

She supposed to them a lower blood status was something like a disease. Like spattergroit, maybe. It was one thing to describe the

symptoms in compassionate terms in a textbook; facing the grotesque reality of the disease in the form of the actually afflicted would always be more difficult. It was an instinctive disgust, to them, and Harry supposed she would feel the same if confronted with something she had been raised to think disgusting-like a dead body, or a torture curse.

She took that knowledge into herself, making it clinical and holding it tightly until it didn't hurt anymore.

Not sure what to do with herself, she eventually settled on climbing to one of the balconies and taking in the party from above. If nothing else, it would be a glittering, beautiful memory that might distract her from the last fifteen minutes or so.

She chose the least occupied balcony, not wanting to fight for viewing space with other, much taller guests. The stairs curved elegantly as she ascended, giving her a moving perspective of the entire crowd as she climbed, from the line of people still entering under the main archway to the old biddies circling the hors-d'oeuvre table like particularly discerning vultures.

The gently swirling couples on the dance floor were somewhat mesmerizing from above, and Harry allowed herself to get lost in watching them for a moment. A taller body settled in next to her at the balcony, and after a moment, spoke.

"Rather graceful, aren't they?" she was surprised to recognize Rosier's voice and turned her head up toward him, but he wasn't looking at her. He was staring down at the dance floor in deep ennui. "Almost beautiful, when you can't see their faces."

She didn't know what to say to that, not sure Rosier even knew who he was talking to.

"That's my friend down there, with his future wife," the older boy said, almost to himself. "Looks happy, doesn't he?"

"Which one?" she asked, though she knew full well, able to see Rookwood and Selwyn's twirling figures from where she stood.

He glanced over at her for a moment, as though surprised she had answered, then did a double take. "Ri-no. You're..." His eyes flicked across her face, to her hair, her mouth, then settling on her glasses and the eyes behind them.

"I'm Harry," she offered, "Rigel's cousin."

"Aldon," Rosier said, smiling faintly, "Nice to meet you."

"You say that like you mean it," Harry said before she could stop herself.

"I do." Rosier blinked curiously down at her. "People being unfriendly?"

"No," she said quickly, shaking her head, "No, of course not. You just-ah, seem especially sincere."

"Well that's one I haven't heard before," Rosier laughed.

Harry blinked at him innocently, "Why's that? Do you lie a lot?"

"No more than most," he said, shrugging.

"Most people you know? Or no more than most people in general do?" she pressed.

"I suppose I can only speak for those I've met," he said slowly.

"Maybe you should keep better company," Harry said idly.

"You volunteering?"

She turned away to hide her smile, looking back over the pulsing crowd. "I was here first, but I guess I can't *make* you leave."

"You wound me, fair lady," Rosier said, sighing dramatically.

"Don't bother," Harry huffed, "Rigel's told me all about you."

"What does Rigel say about me?" Rosier asked, leaning toward her with undisguised interest.

"He says you like to confuse people," she told him.

Rosier looked perplexed at that, leaning back against the balcony banister with a thoughtful expression. "Rigel is intimidated by those who might see him too clearly. He confuses himself."

Harry looked back at the ballroom below them, wondering at that. She didn't know he thought so much about her-Rigel, that is.

"So what are you doing up here, cousin of Rigel's?" he asked, resuming a front-facing position next to her so he could gaze down in boredom at the masses.

"I don't really fit in down there," she said, surprising herself with her own honesty. Maybe she just needed to say it. Maybe if she said it out loud it would release some of the pressure in her chest. She looked sideways to judge his reaction, hoping for something other than pity or contempt. Understanding, maybe? He looked pained, at least. "It's all right," she said, not sure if she was reassuring him or herself, "I didn't really expect to. It just sort of hit me for a moment. It's quieter up here."

"Quieter in your head, you mean," Rosier said, "I understand."

For a little while that was enough. Even if he was only being nice to her because she reminded him of Rigel, or because he rejected everything his family stood for, including their hatred of people like her. She still appreciated it. They stood in silence, just soaking in the atmosphere passively.

"Want to count how many people we can see pretending not to be drunk?" Rosier suggested after a time.

"You're on," she said, scanning the crowd immediately, "There. That woman in the blue fur shawl just spilled her drink down her front, and now she's trying to wipe it up without looking like she's adjusting herself."

"The one giggling?" Rosier laughed lowly, "She's definitely tipsy. How about that man, in the brown top hat? He keeps teetering."

Harry shook her head. "He's wearing risers in his shoes to make himself seem taller. See how his tailored pants don't quite reach down to where they should? He's tried to disguise it by wearing boots, but you can tell because those are the boots he wears outside, and the pant leg is showing part of the boot that usually stays covered-see? The material is lighter where it doesn't normally get exposed to the elements."

Rosier stared at her. "How could you possibly see that? Do those glasses magnify things?"

Harry smiled secretively. They did indeed, though she didn't usually advertise that fact. "It would be pretty inefficient to wear glasses that only corrected my sight."

"You cheat!" he said, smiling widely.

"It's only cheating if I use this pair for Quidditch," she said.

"Well I feel cheated," Rosier protested.

"I'll let you have the next one," she said kindly.

"I only met you ten minutes ago and you're already patronizing me," he said incredulously.

"I was patronizing you the whole time," she told him sadly.

"All right, so that's how it is," he muttered, turning back to the dance floor with a scowl. "There. Lady in the orange shoes. Just started doing the steps to the Italian version of that dance while they're clearly playing the French music."

"I thought this song was Austrian," Harry frowned.

Rosier laughed, though not too unkindly, "Way off, Miss Potter."

"Just Harry," she said, feeling a bit like a broken record that night. "Oh, there's one-the man in those weirdly-cut satin robes, over by the far staircase."

"In the shadows there?" Rosier squinted. "He doesn't seem drunk."

"That because he just took a sobering potion," Harry laughed.

"You saw him?" he asked, smirking.

She shook her head. "See how he winces every time the lady next to him raises her voice to talk to that old man on her other side? And how he averts his eyes from the lights? That man has a serious hangover, and unless he got drunk at eight o'clock this morning, it's because he just took a sobriety potion and is waiting for it to fully kick in. The cheaper ones take the buzz away first, then cure the headache once the willow bark fully breaks down in the system."

"You are uncommonly observant," Rosier sighed, "I am never going to win this."

"Is there anything you're good at?" she asked, laughing lightly. Her smile fell when he was quiet a moment too long.

"Probably," he said, not looking at her and letting out a short laugh she could tell was forced.

She felt like that was her cue to say something, but she wasn't really any good at comforting people. They lapsed into silence once more,

not entirely uncomfortable, but not the easy calm that it had been, either.

"I should go back," she said eventually, "Check on my family."

"I'll walk you down," he said, the pureblood gentleman once again.

They descended the staircase slowly, neither particularly eager to rejoin the scene. As they reached the bottom, he grasped her hand suddenly.

"Would you like to dance?" his eyes stared down at her, imploring, but all Harry could think was how strange that would be, dancing with Aldon Rosier.

"Not on your life," she said, summoning the smile Rispah had taught her for use when turning people down to soften the bluntness of her speech.

"You and Rigel are quite a pair," Rosier said, smiling with the tiniest bit of self-deprecation as he released her.

She resisted the urge to roll her eyes. "If you say so, Rosier."

"It's Aldon," he said quietly, staring at her with a frown.

Belatedly she realized he hadn't introduced himself with a last name, which meant it was odd of her to use it. "Of course," she said, smiling sheepishly, "Rigel calls you that-sorry."

"It's all right," he said, gold eyes relaxing from their sharp inspection. He looked a little disappointed for some reason.

She glanced around the room indecisively. Should she rejoin her parents? Try to find Archie? A sudden glimpse of curtain-like black hair from across the room decided her-Professor Snape was here. "I have to go do something," she said, looking up at Rosier with a half-grimace. "It was nice to meet you. Thanks for... you know, distracting me."

Rosier bowed shallowly with a smirking grin. "Anytime at all, Miss Potter."

"Harry," she said, shooting him an annoyed look before she made a beeline through the crowd. Now was as good a time as any to have Archie 'introduce' her to Master Snape. She just had to find her cousin first.

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He watched the Potter Heiress disappear into the sea of people around them and wondered that Fate should plague him with another Rigel Black-albeit a softer, more relaxed version that didn't seem to know it was strange to be so unflinchingly honest to someone you just met.

A tap on his shoulder turned his attention to Edmund, who had apparently danced through the soles of his shoes and finally abandoned the dance floor-though not his dancing partner, who even Aldon had to admit looked ravishing that night. Really, he could understand Edmund's fascination with the girl at times like these.

"Still sulking?" Alice asked, her kohl-lined eyes slightly narrowed in mocking appraisal.

Then she went and opened her mouth and Aldon remembered why he thought his friend could do better than that soulless harpy.

"Was that her?" Edmund asked, his eyes following the wake of the Potter Heiress with thinly disguised curiosity. "Rigel's cousin? I've heard people saying the Potters were here."

"It was," Aldon said, affecting a light-hearted expression for his friend's sake-no need to infect the happy with melancholy thoughts.

"She's a bold one. Very much like Rigel." Only not nearly so defensive, he added to himself.

"They are engaged," Edmund rumbled, "Pansy informed me just before break."

He wasn't sure what he felt, but it was something between disgruntlement and longing. "They won't marry," he said, nothing but certainty infecting his tone.

"Sure that's not just wistful thinking?" Alice said. He could easily detect the pity and censure that colored her tone.

Aldon gave her his coldest smile. "It would be like marrying oneself, so alike are they. Such a waste. It won't bear fruit."

"You like her," Edmund said, smiling slightly.

"I don't dislike her," Aldon corrected. Honestly, he'd met the chit an hour ago.

"High praise," Alice rolled her eyes.

"She'll be an interesting one to watch, at least," Aldon allowed, generously ignoring Selwyn's attitude problems.

"Don't you have enough to interest you, Aldon?" Edmund looked disapproving, but that was not a novel look for him, at least where Aldon was concerned. Lifelong friendship did not exactly equate to a lifetime of support and encouragement in every pursuit-on either of their sides.

"Never enough," Aldon sighed. Nothing was ever enough to relieve the boredom. Some things pushed the cold feelings back for a while, but nothing he'd found so far could banish them completely.

She could tell Archie was nervous as she subtly steered him in Snape's direction. He had been having a relatively good time with her friends, it seemed, though it didn't surprise her, as one of Archie's strengths was his ability to meld seamlessly into any situation he found himself in. She couldn't think of a single person he'd ever met that he didn't get on with.

"Just make the introduction and then make yourself scarce," she told him quietly as they wove through the crowd. "The last thing you want is to get caught up in a potions conversation-you're good, but not good enough to pass Snape's scrutiny."

"I know," Archie said, laughing a bit hysterically, "Why do you think I'm so concerned?"

"He won't be looking too closely at you," Harry assured him, "He'll take you for granted at this point. Keep it simple, and you'll be fine."

"Simple," Archie said, nodding. "I can do simple."

"There he is," Harry said, indicating a group up ahead that included the Malfoys and Regulus Black in addition to Snape himself.

Archie cleared his throat uncomfortably, but squared his shoulders and approached the little circle with something like aplomb. As he neared, the Malfoys stepped slightly back in an inclusionary way, and Harry couldn't help but be moved on Archie's behalf. The Malfoys really were too good to her-Rigel-whomever.

"Lord Malfoy, Lady Malfoy, Uncle Regulus." Archie's bow was perfectly deferential. "Please excuse me, but I would like to borrow Professor Snape for a moment."

Snape glanced from Archie to Harry without expression. "Excuse me, gentlemen, lady, I must attend to this."

The other three all intimated various degrees of gracious agreement, and Snape led her and Archie to the room's periphery, his face as unreadable as stone.

Archie, probably eager to get the interaction over with, turned to Snape with an open expression. "Sir, this is my cousin, Harriett Potter. Harry, Master Snape would like to speak with you regarding the potions knowledge that is passed between us." Neither Harry nor Snape spoke, instead opting to size one another up in silence. Archie waited a beat, then said, rather abruptly, "About that other thing, Professor Snape..." When Snape's eyes flicked toward him questioningly, Archie hastened, "The apprenticeship, I mean."

"What about it?" Snape asked, eyes assessing, "Have you reconsidered?"

"Not at all," Archie said, voice sure. "I had some advice for when you approached my father, though, if you don't mind it."

"I welcome it," Snape drawled, managing to only sound a tad bit sarcastic and long-suffering.

"Try to time it so that you make the offer in front of my uncle Regulus," Archie said, eyes careful. "If you make it seem as though it's a matter concerning me as the Black Heir, not just as my father's son, he will feel obligated to consider it seriously. With my uncle there watching, I believe my father will be more likely to evaluate the offer from the perspective of the Family, rather than just in terms of what he thinks would be best for me."

Snape looked as surprised as Harry felt. She had no idea Archie was so empathetic when it came to Sirius' impulses. She always underestimated the close bond that existed between the two.

"An astute suggestion, Mr. Black." Snape inclined his head slowly. "I will take it under advisement."

With a final glance between the two of them, Archie began slowly edging away. "I'll just leave you to it, then."

Harry bowed deeply to her professor, saying quietly, "I cannot thank you enough for your lassitude in this matter. Rigel's second-hand instruction has been inestimably valuable to my own education, and it is thanks to you that I am afforded it, Master Snape."

She lifted her head when he did not immediately respond, meeting fathomless black eyes with no small amount of trepidation. If he wanted to, Snape could easily refuse to 'share' any more of his knowledge with Harriett Potter, thus rendering their explanation for her impeccable potions education rather holey.

It was a strange feeling, to be completely at another's mercy in such a way. She couldn't say she enjoyed it, but she comforted herself with the knowledge that even if he completely refused her any future knowledge, she would still be studying under him in Rigel's guise. It would make their eventual reversal less believable perhaps, but it wouldn't do irreversible damage to their deception. It was with equanimity, then, that she met Snape's gaze, ready for whatever he thought to throw her way.

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It was not often that Severus had to consciously force himself to look at something. He had not led a sheltered existence, and had come across and catalogued innumerable disgusting and chill-inducing specimens of nature. He flinched from neither man nor beast, but at that moment it was difficult to prevent his eyes turning away from the sight before them.

The girl had been sent to torture him, perhaps in payment for some offense he'd laid against the gods. Every feature was a barb, digging into his soul with careless momentum. Her hair, arranged in exactly

the style Lily had favored as a girl. Her eyes, a watered-down bastardization of the green they imitated. More than their color, though, it was the expression they carried that had him grinding his teeth. The girl looked at him like he were a magistrate, and she awaited a stay of execution order. Didn't she know how foolish it was to give power over oneself to a complete stranger? She gazed up at him calmly, even with the fervent hope burning in her eyes. Was she an idiot, to place so much unnecessary faith in a name she'd read in some backlogged Guild periodical?

He supposed there was a simple way to find out.

He couldn't recall what inane speech she'd made as he considered the merits of walking away, but it didn't matter. He would not be swayed by words of supplication or gratitude, no matter how neatly thought out. He cared only for talent, and he need only discover whether she truly possessed any, or whether she was, as he half-suspected, merely riding her more talented cousin's coattails.

"I read the notes you sent me," he informed her, aware that the silkiness in his tone had been known to send grown men into tremors. "You have a very forthright style of explanation, which will serve you well in academic endeavors. It is much like Rigel's."

The flat insinuation ought to have taken the anticipatory flush right out of her cheeks-instead she merely raised an eyebrow as though he'd said something somewhat interesting, but ultimately trite.

"Rigel and I are both academics-we learned our styles from the same essays and issues growing up." She did not appear to give his unstated accusation any weight. "Did you find the notes interesting? Do you think the brewing technique I outlined might be worth implementing on a larger scale?"

He did, in fact, find the possibilities raised by such a process intriguing, but that was not the substance of the discussion he wanted to have. "It seemed altogether impossible for most mid-level brewers to imitate," he said, sneering slightly in a habitual reflex that

was directed more at himself than at the girl. It had taken enormous amounts of concentration and willpower for him to replicate even the most rudimentary of the shaped imbuing recipes outlined in the notes she'd sent him. That with the instructions before him and the knowledge that what he was attempting was theoretically possible. The idea that this slip of a girl had created such a technique on accident was an insult to the abilities of Potions Masters everywhere.

"Most people don't bother learning wandless magic." The child shrugged- *shrugged*, as though such a skill ought to be taken for granted. "Once you can perform the requisite magic, the brewing itself is simple."

"Forgive me," he said lowly, eyes flashing in what his students would recognize as a warning, "But how is it that you are able to perform the *requisite magic*, Miss Potter?"

She looked wary for a moment, then noticeably relaxed, as though she'd considered it, but ultimately dismissed his words as a threat. "I've always had good magical control, Master Snape."

"This technique requires *excellent* magical control," he said sharply, looking for any sign of a lie in her attentive expression. "And a not inconsiderable amount of raw magic to power that control. Frankly, I doubt you have the reserves necessary to make this a worthwhile technique."

Her eyes widened slightly in what he assumed was belated understanding, but she didn't appear either guilty or conniving as she answered, merely... sheepish. "It's true I don't have an incredibly powerful core or anything." She actually smiled up at him as though apologizing for the natural state of her magic. "But I've enough for one relatively-powerful Shaped Imbued potion before my core runs dangerously low. It does make the research slow-going, but it's not as though I can do magic over the holidays anyway-I may as well use it all in my experiments."

Severus stared down at her, not sure if she was deliberately misinterpreting his words or just immune to insinuation. He had only glanced at her aura at the Guild's workshop, mostly out of curiosity's sake, but he had noted her low reserves. Did she think she could bluff her way around a basic lack of power? She couldn't know that he was able to easily discern her core's magic level through her aura, but she ought to know that eventually she would need to prove in person that she could use the technique she was claiming to have invented.

She continued to stand there patiently, not fidgeting or showing any signs of unease even while he took an uncomfortably long time in answering each of her statements. Feeling no remorse for any discomfort she was suppressing, Severus took a moment to adjust his magical sight. He would check her aura again, just to be sure of his assessment.

Her Occlumency shields came into focus first, and he frowned as he took in their general shape and feel—they were very similar to the way Rigel's had been constructed, the last time he'd bothered to peruse them, making him suspect that his student had been teaching his cousin more than just potions. Severus turned his attention to the next level of his magical sight, the aura.

What he found didn't make immediate sense. Her magic reserves appeared perfectly adequate—slightly above average, in fact. He didn't understand how he could have misread the projection that summer; her aura was rudimentary in its simplicity. *Nothing complicated about this one*, he thought, the snideness calming his mind and allowing him to reach for the obvious explanation. Clearly she'd exercised her magic heavily before the open house that day. If she had brewed one final Shaped Imbued potion before the presentations, the aura he had read reflected her state of exhaustion, not her true average.

In retrospect, he ought to have found the low levels of magic he'd observed a little odd. Whatever else could be said about her parents, their magic was strong.

"Tell me about your schooling," he said eventually, opting to drop the subject of her magical ability completely-he would take it as true that she *could* have come up with her technique.

"I attend the American Institute of Magic," she said, looking a little perplexed.

"You are not in the Potions tract," he prompted, remembering Rigel's convoluted explanation of this fact.

The girl nodded slowly. "The Healing tract at AIM is better than the Potions tract. The knowledge I would have learned in Master Tallum's classes I can pick up more efficiently in self-study. The Healing classes there are superb, however, imparting knowledge that cannot be learned from books. By joining the Healing tract, I optimize my learning."

"Which will you choose, in the end?" he asked.

"Potions," she said. The statement was neither earnest in an attempt to convince him nor casually thoughtless. It was a simple relation of fact.

"Why learn to Heal at all, then?"

She gave him an odd look. "Rigel has already explained this, hasn't he?"

"He did a poor job of it," Severus told her, smirking slightly. Rigel was at times both long-winded and incredibly circulatory in conversation, when he truly cared about the subject matter.

Looking slightly exasperated, she sighed. "I'm learning Healing because Rigel could not attend AIM himself. The same reason he is studying under your expertise, Master Snape. We both have near-equal interest in both subjects. So we each chose the one we could get the best instruction for at our respective schools, and we trade tutelage whenever we have the chance."

"It seems rather incredible that the two of you would be such devoted scholars from so young an age," he said, making his disbelief plain. "However did you come up with such a scheme?"

"Needs must," she said, shrugging slightly. He could tell she was becoming uncomfortable as his questions became more personal.

"And so you want my permission to continue learning through Rigel all that I teach him," Severus said, mercifully moving back to a neutral conversational point.

"I would very much appreciate it," she said, accentuating her statement with a short nod. "You don't know me, but I'm just as dedicated as Rigel is, in regards to potions. I've spent my whole life studying the field, but not everything can be learned from books. The Guild's internship showed me just how much more I could learn from a Master, and to be frank, you're the best, Sir. I won't squander your teachings. I won't use them for unscrupulous gain or take credit for the knowledge in any way. I just want to be a good Potions Master."

"Mistress," he corrected absently. Her face twisted in something like distaste for a moment before it smoothed into a nod of agreement. He filed that reaction away, thinking the chit may be wiser in the ways of the field she wished so fervently to enter than he'd assumed.

"As you are aware, I am attempting to take Rigel on as my apprentice this year," Severus told her, allowing a forbidding expression to cross his face. "You are asking me to essentially put my name behind two apprentices, to take responsibility for your potions career as well as your cousin's."

"You'll hardly notice me," the girl said quickly. "I'll be like the invisible apprentice who never bothers you. Rigel will do all the work of teaching me."

"And I will bear all the accountability," Severus countered. "If you blow yourself up attempting a potion you are not prepared to attempt, questions will be asked. Am I to say that I carelessly

allowed upper-level knowledge to be imparted without supervision or controls of any kind?"

"You could deny all knowledge," she said, blinking up at him. "No one has to know I blew myself up trying to brew a potion whose recipe I got from you through Rigel. I'll tell my parents I want to experiment with free brewing-"

"You will *not*," Severus snapped, unable to believe the nerve underlying her words.

"I won't," she hastily assured him, "I'll just mention it in passing, and then if I get blown up they can tell the Department of Magical Accidents how they should have seen it coming, and it will be terribly sad but no one will question you about it."

He stared at her for a moment, not entirely sure there was an appropriate response to that bit of nonsense.

She sighed at his lack of response. "I'm sorry, Sir. Sometimes my hypotheticals run away with me. Suffice to say I'm not planning on blowing myself up. The labs at AIM and the one I use at home all have excellent safety provisions built in. Explosion wards and everything. I promise not to die in a potion-related mishap."

"Your share Rigel's inability to be sincerely reassuring." He scowled at her.

"Rigel gets it from me," she said, smiling in an odd way that he immediately disregarded as irrelevant.

He was no closer to deciding what to do about the girl than he had been at the beginning of the conversation, though it was now apparent he didn't have a good reason to dismiss her out of hand. A part of him was amiable to humoring the continued leeching, if only because it would please Rigel so well for some reason. He also had to admire the girl's spirit, from an intellectual standpoint. She certainly seemed to have the dedication and drive that he looked for

in students. She might have done very well at Hogwarts, had she been born a couple decades sooner. He took a moment to disparage those who voted to ban half bloods for depriving him of perfectly good academic stock.

"It would mean immense amounts of individual study," he told her, hating the hopeful, happy look that lit up her face at his words. "I'm not agreeing-yet. I will consider this matter further. You should be prepared to work incredibly hard, however."

"I prefer self-study anyway," she said, looking as though she was only restraining a triumphant smile through sheer willpower. "Sir, you won't regret this-"

"I have not agreed," he hissed disgruntledly.

"Of course," she said, smoothing her expression expertly. "Take all the time you need."

The implication that he required more time to consider because he was a slow-thinker did not sit well with him either, and he thought spitefully that he would make her wait for a decision much longer, for that.

"This is dependent upon Rigel's father agreeing to the apprenticeship as well," he reminded her, determined to wipe the happiness from her soul.

"Sirius will agree," she said confidently. After a pause, she leveled a sharp look at him. "As long as you don't antagonize him needlessly."

"Excuse me?" he growled.

"Just try to be nice," she said cajolingly, as though she were dropping him off at the schoolyard and encouraging him to *make friends*. "Talk about Rigel and nothing else. Emphasize the good things that Rigel will get from the arrangement. And downplay the

advantages you'll get politically in the Guild from having a talented apprentice."

He could not begin to fathom how she knew so much about Guild politics. What were they teaching their interns these days? Just as he was on the cusp of a cutting retort, their conversation was interrupted by an obnoxiously familiar voice.

"Snape! Who dragged you out of a lab?"

They both turned to see Malcolm Hurst, Aldermaster of said Guild, melting out of the crowd like a specter sent by the Fates to haunt him. Why, in the name of all decency, had he thought he could attend this circus without getting cornered by one of the ringmasters?

"Malcolm," he said, intentionally freezing any hint of welcome from his tone. "Don't you have someone else to impress?"

"I've been impressing people all night," Hurst said, smiling like the press goober he so often aped. "I need a break talking to someone who doesn't put stock in pandering and charm."

"Lucky me," he drawled.

"And who's-Harry!" To his surprise, the Aldermaster recognized the girl immediately on site, stepping forward to embrace her like a long-lost daughter. "I didn't know you'd be here. How is your third year going? That old fusspot Tallum treating you well, I hope?"

"My schooling is going well, Master Hurst," she said, smiling politely and even *fondly* up at the other man. "How is your wife? And Leo?"

"My other half couldn't be here tonight-work in the clinic has been piling up these last weeks," the man said regretfully. Severus vaguely recalled his wife had started a St. Mungo's funded clinic in one of the less savory alleys beyond Knockturn. He had no idea where the Potter chit would have met the woman, however-she

wasn't known for skulking about the Guild like some other Masters' wives he could mention. "And Leo I haven't seen in days-he's moved out, now, so you'd know better than I how he's doing, I daresay."

So the girl had an in with the Aldermaster's son? That certainly explained how she got her internship. Judging by her embarrassed glance in his direction, she knew exactly what he was thinking. Not immune to insinuation after all, then.

"Perhaps if I tell him I saw you here, he'll be more inclined to accompany me next year," Hurst was saying thoughtfully.

"This doesn't seem his scene," the girl said, smiling slightly at some humor he was not a party to.

"Nor yours, I would have said," Hurst said, not unkindly.

The girl bowed her head agreeably enough. Unselfconsciously anti-social, then. Severus told himself firmly that he was not going to award the girl points just for that. It surprised him how like Rigel she was, though. One Marauder offspring turning out atypical from his expectations could be passed off as a fluke-two, however, bore contemplation. Was it Lily's influence? Or the werewolf's?

The girl spoke up before he could let his mind wader too far down that unpleasantly paved road. It was not his place to speculate on the lives of others, especially those not under his Slytherin banner.

"I ought to go check on my parents, see if they need help with Addy," she said, inclining her head once more in a polite farewell. "It was wonderful to finally meet you, Master Snape. Have a pleasant evening, Master Hurst."

As she left, Hurst turned eyes on him that were both curious and serious. "So you've officially met our most interesting new brewer-how did you find her? She reminds me of you, sometimes."

"I beg your pardon?" Snape sneered. It was an ice age too soon for any whelp of James Potter to be compared to him.

"Hardworking, passionate about the field, innovative, proud," Hurst ticked the traits off on his fingers with a small smirk. "She's much more polite than you, though, and more forgiving, too. I once witnessed one of her fellow interns deliberately sabotage her potion, and she didn't so much as send an accusatory glare at him-just fixed the mistake and presented the final product like nothing had happened."

"She is exceedingly foolish," Severus said, "She will never reach the position in the Guild she yearns for."

"Why's that?" Hurst asked mildly. "Because she's a woman?"

"Because she is weak," he said, mouth drawn in a harsh line. "She places her hopes in others, instead of relying only on herself. She lacks the competitiveness to move other, more ruthless brewers out of her path. She will defer to everyone around her until she ends up playing second fiddle at some large-scale, small-impact brewing company. Her name will never see the major journals, and she will fade, bitter and resentful, into obscurity."

"That's a bit harsh, Severus," Hurst said, voice soft but admonishing. "Harry Potter is an extraordinary young lady, and I believe her talent will take her places where ruthless competitiveness is unnecessary."

"Going to see to that?" he asked snidely.

"I see to all new talent in need of encouragement," Hurst said stiffly, not missing the accusation of favoritism. "Harry doesn't need my help-but yes, she will always have it. And not because of her friendship with my son and wife."

"So you say," Severus drawled, not believing a word of it.

Hurst bristled subtly, and snapped, "I did not know they were friends until after I'd evaluated her brewing skills. Her potions speak for themselves-I thought her much older, and more experienced, in fact, when I went looking for their maker, and no one was more surprised than I to find that the brewer I'd been tracking down was Heiress Potter, but there she was. Not everything requires such cynicism, Severus. Sometimes the young do surprise us. Surely you know that, working at Hogwarts for so many years. There must have been students that you just knew, immediately, were something special."

His mind lit immediately on Rigel Black, and he could not deny that such outliers apparently existed. He just thought it unlikely that they could exist so close together, in the same family, even. Statistically, it struck him as impossible.

"Where did you come across her work?" he questioned suddenly, realizing the implications of what Hurst had just said.

"I... came across it accidentally," Hurst said, looking uncomfortable.

Intrigued at the usually open man's reticence, Severus pressed. "You make it sound as though she were distributing-surely they haven't given the girl a license already? The Ministry is not quite that foolish, I daresay."

"She works through licensed distributors," Hurst said quickly, obviously not wanting Snape to think anything untoward of the girl.

He simply couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Plural? At her age? Who?"

Hurst grimaced, "It really isn't common knowledge. I shouldn't have said anything, I just didn't want you to be too dismissive of the young lady-she really is quite talented."

"Who?" Severus repeated, intimidation tactics coming automatically to the fore.

"One of them is Horace Burke," Hurst said, looking reluctant, "And that's all I can say, really. I'd appreciate if you kept this knowledge to yourself, however-she sells her potions anonymously, and I don't believe her parents are fully apprised of her activities..."

Snape's eyes narrowed. He used Burke himself for certain ingredient acquisition-his quality was always assured. If he distributed even one of the girl's potions, it meant she had access to some very well written recipes. Whatever was she selling potions at thirteen for? And without the knowledge of the elder Potters? Somehow he doubted she was strapped for funds. Did she simply enjoy the practice? She could donate them to St. Mungo's were that the case. Severus himself had done that while studying for his Masters examination-many potions students did, as there was never any need to waste good potions.

It struck him again how similar she and Rigel were turning out to be, at least in terms of how they dealt with the world around them. Rigel, too, avoided the supervisory involvement of adults wherever possible. If he had not warded the time-turner in his desk drawer himself before the winter holidays, he might suspect Rigel of playing a very dangerous game with him. As it was, he was slowly coming to accept that against all odds there were two incredibly talented and ridiculously secretive young potions brewers in England. Salazar help them all when those two became old enough to apply for Guild membership. He had a bad feeling that the field as he knew it was going to be shortly turned on its head.

"I will keep this information to myself," Severus agreed after a long moment. He would certainly be talking to Horace Burke, however. Clearly he needed more information on this Potter girl, if he was to make her his de facto proxy apprentice through Rigel. He ignored the part of himself that pointed out his diction indicated he had already made his decision on the matter. He was certainly not invested in her circumstances already. He would decide if and when the girl was deemed a suitable vessel for his expertise, and no

amount of mysterious backstory was going to intrigue him into capitulating sooner.

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Harry walked away from the Potions Masters feeling cautiously pleased. She thought it had gone well-even if her nerves had gotten the better of her at the end and caused her to act as though under a mild babbling charm. All she could do now was wait.

She circled the room in search of her family members, thinking vaguely that her mother might like her to carry Addy for a while. Babies got heavy, she gathered, if you held them long enough.

She passed the Parkinsons, where it looked like the receiving line was finally dying down-how late was fashionably late, anyway? Surely whoever had just arrived was pushing propriety. After sparing the party a curious glance, she saw to her surprise that it was Marcus Flint and an older gentleman who was, presumably, Lord Flint. She fought the impulse to freeze or duck guiltily, reminding herself that Harriett Potter did not know either man.

As she passed close enough to overhear the conversation, she caught Flint Sr. saying, "Home sick, unfortunately, otherwise she would have loved to be here, isn't that right, Marcus?"

Marcus' response was an annoyed grunt, followed by, "I feel a bit sick myself." He broke away from the group abruptly and made a surly beeline for the bar. Harry just managed to turn her face casually away as he passed her.

She moved on, weaving here and there around increasingly drunk partygoers. Apparently the Parkinsons were not at all stingy with their refreshments.

A few minutes later, she found her friends once more; they had drifted somewhat from the spot under one of the balconies that they'd occupied earlier. Archie was with them, but so were Adrian Pucey, Lucian Bole, and Caelum Lestrangle-and he and Archie didn't appear to be having a polite conversation.

"-which is why I can't fathom the level of sheer nerve you managed to summon in trespassing for the second year running where no one wants a-"

"Do shut up, Lestrangle, no one is listening," Harry cut in, smoothly stepping up beside Archie so that she was physically between him and Lestrangle. Archie could hold his own in petty bickering, she knew from experience, but he should haven't to put up with the pretty boy's nonsensical venom when there were perfectly good ways of stemming it.

"You." The icy-eyed boy sneered elegantly down at her. "What has it come to, that they allow the rabble to roam in hallowed halls?"

"I missed you too, Caelum." she smiled sweetly at him. "How's your final year shaping up?"

"Don't talk to me like we're friends," the black-haired boy hissed, trying and failing at not looking alarmed.

"But we are," she blinked innocently up at him, widening her eyes in a show of hurt confusion. "You told me your favorite color and everything."

"I did not," he snapped.

"Then how do I know it's dark blue?" she asked reasonably.

"It *isn't*," he growled, clearly annoyed. His expression only grew darker when several of the others chuckled lowly. Lestrangle visibly collected himself, apparently realizing how foolish she had made him sound. "Still up to your usual nonsense, Potter. How plebian."

She bowed mockingly, not bothering to hide her satisfied smile.

"How do you two... ah, know one another?" Bole was apparently the only one brave enough to ask.

Lestrangle turned to the other boy with a smirking expression. "We happened to intern at roughly the same time at the Potions Guild this summer. I got in on merit, of course, while she... well, I suppose she filled the novelty quota."

Harry mused thoughtfully. "He's right. It probably was novel for the Guild to have an intern with real talent for a change."

"Talent is about dedication," Lestrangle spat, "Any two year old can throw random things in a cauldron and call it a new discovery. If you had any sense of what being a true potions maker was about, you'd build on the tradition before you, not blow it to smithereens with your wild half-blood ideas."

"Maybe you're right," Harry sighed sadly, "I guess only purebloods can have good ideas." She turned to Archie ostentatiously and said, "Rigel, would you mind telling Master Snape that Caelum Lestrangle-that's C-A-E-L-U-M-thinks that he ought to keep his half blood ideas to himself, for the good of potions brewers everywhere?"

"I'd be happy to pass along the message," Archie said, smiling slightly, "Do you have a card I could include with the note, Lestrangle?"

The older boy looked close to frothing with rage, but instead he merely shot her a glare that promised retribution, turned, and strode off with a disgusted huff.

"He's getting better at taking his lumps," Harry observed into the silence that followed.

Archie nodded in agreement. "Not one call for his mother that whole time."

Theo, Millicent, and Pucey all snorted with laughter, and the others visibly relaxed. "I don't know how you two manage to just smile through his vitriol," Bole said, shaking his head. "Don't you know how powerful his parents are in the Party?"

"Our parents aren't in the Party," Archie reminded him delicately. "So we don't give two knuts what Lestrangle thinks."

"And he's mostly bluster, anyway," Harry said fairly, "He's not so bad if you get to know him-just likes to push people's buttons, that's all."

"He just insulted you in about a dozen different ways," Draco spoke up, eyeing her oddly again.

"He didn't really mean it," Harry said, shrugging.

"Sure sounded like he did," Millicent muttered, looking at Harry with something like reconsideration.

"You can't always tell what a person means by the words they say," Harry said. In fact, she'd been far more uncomfortable with her friends' insincere politeness earlier than she was with Lestrangle's honest disparagement. At least his insults could be met head on.

"Very well put," came a voice just behind her. She turned to see Pansy, finally free of the receiving line, smiling widely at her. "You're wise, Miss Potter. We could use more women of wisdom in the world."

Harry blinked, taken aback at the rich compliment, and hesitated before saying, "You are too kind, Miss Parkinson."

"Just Pansy," the blonde reminded her gently. After waiting for Harry to nod, she tilted her head, sending shoulder-length blonde hair swaying. "Would you honor me with this dance, Miss Potter?"

Harry could admit that was the last thing she expected her friend to say. "I-don't dance very well. Sorry."

Pansy laughed lightly, "That's what Rigel said to me once, but I saw him dance a set with Millie earlier, so you'll forgive me if I don't entirely believe you, *Harry* ."

She shot a look at Archie, who shrugged sheepishly. She turned back to Pansy to come up with another polite refusal, but Pansy cut across her.

"You wouldn't refuse your host a dance, surely?" her blue eyes gazed assessingly into hers, and Harry found she could not find a good excuse after all. At her hesitation, Pansy went for the kill. "Rigel once refused me a dance, and I was rather heart-broken. If you turn me away, too, I shall develop a complex."

Harry allowed exasperation to narrow her eyes, but nevertheless knew she was outmatched. "It would be my pleasure," she said, managing not to grit her teeth noticeably.

She couldn't even blame anyone but herself, she thought with irony, as it had been her as Rigel who ducked out of dancing with Pansy and thus set the proud girl on the idea. Knowing that didn't make her feel any less awkward, however, as she accompanied Pansy to the dance floor.

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Pansy was certain Harriett Potter did not realize the service she was doing her, dancing the most popular set with the halfblood friend of a friend. Already people were turning to look-sidelong and very surreptitiously, but Pansy could easily pick them out.

They took their positions among the other couples on the floor, and Pansy had to stifle a surprised chuckle when the green-eyed girl took up the dominant position seemingly without conscious thought, despite the fact that, as they were both girls, blood status ought to

have been the next deciding factor in the roles they danced. They grasped hands lightly, as the starting position demanded, and Pansy leaned forward to say quietly, "You know that technically I should be leading, don't you?"

Harriett flushed, her eyes widening with slight dismay. "Forgive my impertinence," she said, grimacing a bit. "I am more familiar with this form. I meant no disrespect."

"I know," Pansy told her, smiling reassuringly, "I don't mind, in fact. You are Rigel's cousin, and that makes us equals in my mind. I merely wanted you to know, in case you decide to dance with someone else tonight."

The other girl's eyes widened again, this time in surprise and, she thought, something like gratitude. Pansy wondered if the others had been less than polite to her-she would have words with Draco, if that were the case. Rigel was depending on them to make Harriett feel welcome. If they did marry, and Pansy was not sure at all that Rigel would put forth the effort in finding himself a better match if he already had a girl suited to his hobbies and habits at home, they would be seeing a lot more of her. That, coupled with the fact that if it came to a choice between his friends and his family, Pansy was not at all sure Rigel would choose them, meant that they *had* to make a good impression.

They began to move through the dance steps, mirroring one another in each choreographed spin and gesture. Harriett wasn't bad, per say, but she was obviously uncomfortable with the entire activity. It was all Pansy could do not to smile with amusement as a particularly grandiose hand flourish made Harriett's nose wrinkle with distaste.

It really was a shame the girl was half-blooded, she thought. It showed great courage to come to an unfamiliar place and stand up to sneers and titters when there was nothing to be gained from it, in the end. The other girl also seemed to be clever and polite. Harriett might have made a prodigious match, had she been born pure. Pansy might have considered her for herself, in fact, if things had

been different. She certainly had Rigel's talent for disassembling, if the interaction Pansy had overheard with Lestrage was any indication. Pansy admitted to herself that it was one of the things she liked most in her dark-haired friend, and to find it in someone she didn't already think of platonically was a rare pleasure.

With a mental sigh, Pansy turned her thoughts away from such matters. No matter the current pending legislation, her parents would never allow her to marry someone less than pure. They didn't have a strong prejudice against half bloods themselves, but the fact that others did made it a foolish move socially and politically. Still, she thought, one could never fully predict the whims of society. Things might change in that regard.

Why, only two centuries before it would have been completely unheard of for two women to dance together, and look at them now. Society was a fickle thing. It was all well and good to stifle and contain their offspring into strictly heterosexual matches, but once their population became dangerously depleted, the old biddies certainly changed their tune. In a strange way, they actually had blood mania to thank for the openness of Wizarding relationships in modern times, she mused. When purebloods became desperate for more children to fill out their ranks, in competition as they were with all the new muggleborns who came pouring into the Wizarding world each generation, it was suddenly less important to uphold conventional standards of sexuality and more important to encourage any couple, regardless of makeup, to marry and have babies with whatever magical assistance was necessary.

As she twirled and spun on autopilot, Pansy thought cynically that it didn't hurt that having the option of a homosexual relationship doubled the candidates with which one could be matched without resorting to incest. Pureblood insanity had taken a dramatic drop off when people warmed to the idea that marrying your sister wasn't necessary when you had a fourth cousin twice removed who could bear children with the right combination of potions. And how like the upper echelons of Society to veil this pragmatic change behind a

pretense of cultural openness and an encouragement of love and free will.

The dance was coming to a close, so Pansy pulled her wandering attention back to her partner, who looked a little too relieved to be perfectly polite when the music wound down at last.

"That was lovely," Pansy said, placing her arm on Harriett's as they exited the dance floor.

"Yes," Harriett said, smiling in a way that Pansy could tell was fake, but only because she'd seen a similar smile on Rigel's face so often. "Thank you very much for the dance, Pansy."

"Anytime," Pansy said, smiling at the uneasy look *that* produced on the other girl's face. "I must return to my parents. Will you escort me there?"

Harriett adjusted her glasses uncomfortably, but inclined her head nevertheless. "I should check on mine as well; perhaps I will spot them on the way."

As they maneuvered through the crowd, Pansy couldn't help but think that Harriett had never escorted anyone anywhere before. The green-eyed girl had noticeable trouble navigating the crush on both of their behalf, and several times had to stop and recover Pansy from where she'd been cut off between groups of people. With her incredibly apologetic grimaces each time it happened, Harriett came off entirely endearing, though Pansy had to wonder why someone obviously unaccustomed to leading would have practiced the lead position in dancing so singularly. Perhaps she had learned from Rigel. She would have to ask her friend when she saw him again. However innocuous Harriett Potter tried to come across, there was something curious about her that tugged at Pansy's mind even as she told herself to let it go.

It was with acute relief that she spotted Pansy's parents at last through the sea of people. To her surprise, her own parents were there with them, in a group that looked as though it was made up of all the most important people in the room. The Minister stood at James' side, along with several prominent Wizengamot members, including Marchbanks and Ogden, who Harry never seemed to see apart. On the other side of the circle stood Lord Riddle, the Lestranges, the Malfoys, and, of course, the Parkinsons.

Harry left Pansy with her parents, and circled the group until she reached Lily's far side, where Addy was propped on one slender hip.

"Harry, we wondered where you and Archie had gotten to," her mother said, smiling brightly down at her. "Are you enjoying yourself?"

"It's a lovely party," she said, smiling slightly, "Would you like me to hold Addy for a while?"

"Please," Lily sighed gratefully. "Your father is on duty, so he can't exactly relieve me."

Addy was handed down into Harry's unsure grasp. Her little sister blinked up at her assessingly and she awkwardly adjusted her until the babe felt somewhat comfortable in her arms. Eventually Addy seemed to decide Harry was not an immediate threat, and began dozing against her shoulder unselfconsciously. Harry comforted herself that if Addy managed to drool all down her robes, at least most of the people present would be too intoxicated to notice. Half the conversations around her seemed punctuated by giggles with unusual frequency.

Lily was having a lively conversation with Tiberius Ogden about the latest project she was working on for her experimental contracting company. Madam Marchbanks appeared to be tittering along to a story Rose Parkinson was relating with sparkling humor in her eyes.

The Minister was in quiet conversation with what Harry thought was one of his cabinet members, James looking on stoically. Riddle was engaged in discussion with the Lestranges, Mr. Malfoy, and Mr. Parkinson, but Harry noticed the Lord's eyes were fixed on a point across the room. Harry turned subtly under the pretense of readjusting the sleepy Addy in order to follow his line of sight.

She could just make out the dark clad form of Professor Snape, in close conversation with both brothers Black across the hall. They were all three strikingly tall, which made them stand out from the crowd even at a distance. Riddle was not the only one eyeing the three, she noticed, and no wonder when it was common knowledge that Snape and Sirius despised one another.

Harry could not prevent the silent prayer that graced her lips, just in case anyone was listening, that the conversation happening across the room would go smoothly. It would be revolutionary for Snape to take her on as an apprentice-a thirteen-year-old was almost unheard of. The things she would learn...

She tore her eyes away, aware that there was nothing she could do at that point. She cast about for a distraction, and her eyes lit immediately upon her mother, almost magnetically drawn. Blinking, she took in Lily with fresh eyes, suddenly realizing that she had never been to a formal event with her mother before, and had never seen her like... *this* . She was captivating-not just her beauty, which Harry had always taken for granted, but her sheer presence. She was certain Lily had never had such an aura of charm and grace about her before-what had happened to her tired, over-worked mother who lounged about the house after dinner in her pajamas?

At some point in her musings, she noticed Archie approach their circle on the other side, with Draco leading him to a place near Mr. Malfoy. Their eyes met and they exchanged brief smiles, but there was little opportunity for a proper greeting across the many different conversations around them.

Harry turned back to watching her mother with a frown. Perhaps it was the dress robes, she thought, but immediately dismissed the idea-she had seen her mother dressed up before. Lily's modest robes in no way outshone the plunging, glittering ensembles of the society matrons around them, besides. It was something in the way she held herself, the way she responded to others. Harry stepped closer, to better observe this new phenomenon.

"You young people always want to change things," Ogden was complaining tiredly. "No respect for the way things have been done for generations."

"It is not a lack of respect that drives us forward in search of progress," Lily said, her voice light yet sure. "Just the opposite-we build on the monuments of the past in reverence and appreciation."

"It is not called appreciation when one alters a masterpiece-rather, it is desecration," the elder Lestrangle, Rodolphus, cut in brusquely.

Lily was perfectly unruffled, somehow managing to look humbly intrigued by Lord Lestrangle's comment even while saying, "I do not think tradition is like a painting-not a stale, stagnant creation to be hung on the wall unchanged for centuries. Rather, it is a living thing, contributed to by all who inherit it even as it is preserved."

"You cannot preserve something *and* change it," Bellatrix said, her lip curling.

"But surely such a standard is self-defeating," Lily said, a kind concern in her expression now. "Imagine your own manors and estates, handed down through the generations from fathers and mothers to sons and daughters-they cannot remain completely unchanged, can they? You must update them to adhere to modern standards of comfort, perhaps add on a wing here or a garden there, attend to various repairs and improvements constantly, even as you preserve them in their entirety for the next generation. The result is the beautiful ballroom we stand in. More than a relic of the past, it is an heirloom that we live *within*. Is tradition not just so?"

Harry was amazed to see the lords and ladies around her carefully considering Lily's words. Somehow she had delivered them as an offering, not a challenge. Somehow her mother had put a group of proud, disdainful purebloods at ease by combining a sense of admiration for them with a soft confidence that was all her own, and wasn't abrasive in the least.

"Still, it does not do to renovate a historical home beyond recognition, wouldn't you agree?" Narcissa said from across the circle. "At that point one may as well build a new manor entirely."

"Is there no merit in building new homes?" Lily asked softly, eyes earnest without demanding anything. "Not everyone has an ancestral manor, after all. And what happens when your family grows too large for its walls? All great manors were new once, were they not?"

"Interesting argument," Lord Riddle spoke up. All eyes turned to him in deference. "In that analogy, all the great witches and wizards of our past would be the architects of the future we now inhabit. By implication, you're saying that the present legacy they left is now... inadequate?"

Lily stood strong beneath the disapproving gazes that swung her way. "The measure of time itself is decay-it isn't a question of inadequacy, merely of inevitability. When a volcano first erupts, it is brilliant and powerful. It creates an island with rich soil that blossoms into a flourishing paradise naturally. Years pass, however, and the ocean of time beats away at the island's shores, diminishing it. This degeneration does not call into question the might of the first volcano. It merely calls for a new volcano, a fresh source of power that could bring new life to something in the midst of decline."

"A new volcano might also destroy the island completely," Lord Malfoy said smoothly, one eyebrow raised, "Depending on where and how it erupts."

"That is true," Lily allowed, "Change should always be approached slowly, with great care. Just because something requires care, however, does not mean that it isn't worth doing. The traditions of our past are not pedestals. They are stepping stones. Some of the greatest and most respected of our heroes were the daring innovators of their time. The Egyptian pharaohs, the Chinese mystics, Merlin, the Founders, and so on. To resist change is to shy away from the possibility of greatness. There are risks, of course, but also great opportunity."

"How very true," Riddle said, his voice, while not loud, carrying easily through the noise around them. "Stepping stones, indeed. Still, to move in the wrong direction would be as disastrous as standing still. Better to follow those stones along the path the wise men before us have laid out. To press forward is admirable-but only insofar as one sights along the proper trajectory. We are not wiser than the Founders, surely?"

Lily bowed her head graciously, conceding the point, though she did add, "How difficult it is to know where the path may lead before one walks it."

Riddle smiled, and the conversation was ended. Until Harry picked up the faintest of hisses, words whispered mockingly on an invisible breeze to roost in her ears. *"Some of us see more clearly than others."*

She saw Riddle's eyes flick toward Archie, and Harry looked to him, too, but Archie remained completely oblivious, not having heard the comment, as he didn't actually speak Parseltongue, and certain pitches of the language were lower than the average human register. Harry tried not to wince as Riddle's eyes narrowed and a frown briefly creased his brow. She would have to relay the comment to Archie later, and see if he could slip mention of it into conversation if he ever had occasion to speak to Riddle alone.

Lily took Addy back, looking incredibly graceful despite cradling a baby in one arm. Harry had to take a moment to truly admire her

mother's carriage that evening. She had lost not an iota of her own self-worth, yet she had made everyone around her feel entirely valued and important despite arguing blatantly against their way of life. Harry had no idea how to go about replicating such a thing, but she could certainly admire it from afar. It struck her that her mother could play a crowd as well as Sirius did-only she did it without being self-deprecating or hyperbolic.

Her father, too, was changed by her aura. James looked like a Lord with Lily at his elbow, seeming stoic instead of stiff, and reserved rather than proud.

A movement across the circle distracted her; Riddle was stepping back from the group with quiet apologies to the Parkinsons. Mr. Malfoy stepped back with him, sending a glance across the hall in a very familiar direction. Sure enough, when Harry casually glanced around she saw Snape walking away from the Black brothers with a triumphant smirk on his face. She lost her focus for a moment, caught up in the implications of that. Did Sirius agree? Was she-Rigel-really going to be Master Snape's apprentice this year? She had to fight to keep from beaming in happiness-had she ever imagined that their ruse might come so far?

Her thoughts realigned themselves to the present moment when she caught Snape sending a discrete nod to Mr. Malfoy, who followed Mr. Riddle out of the room in short order. They were going to discuss the situation with the artifact, she realized, and Pettigrew too, probably. She wished she could go after them-her curiosity was burning her up inside; she couldn't be so reckless, however. Eavesdropping so obviously as to excuse herself in front of all these powerful people was just asking for trouble.

Not five minutes after Riddle's subtle exit, as though her thoughts of trouble had summoned the thing itself, a sound that no one was prepared for smothered the flames of conversation like a sudden vacuum. A hoarse cry of shock and pain, followed sharply by the sound of a body hitting the tiled floor.

Mr. Ogden had collapsed, crumbling to the ground in a spray of blood that caught several hideously expensive ball gowns even as their wearers stumbled back in horror.

Madam Marchbanks let out a cry like a wounded animal and lashed her foot toward her fallen companion in a move that made no sense until Harry saw it connect with some sort of golden thing on the old man's back, flinging it away. There was more frantic retreating as those closest sought to avoid coming into contact with whatever it was.

Her father surged forward, between the golden thing, which was writhing and skittering across the ground now, and the Minister. When it was close enough, he brought a booted foot crunching down onto the biggest part of the contraption, and it twitched like a crushed bug before going still.

Marchbanks meanwhile had knelt beside Ogden with tears running down her face, pressing gloved hands to the wounds on his back and whispering frantic pleas under her breath.

"We need a Healer!" someone shouted. Everyone started looking around as though they would see the traditional Healer robes somewhere in this crowd of glitterati.

"Where is Master Healer Cunnington?" James asked, moving to kneel by the injured man's side as well. Harry recognized the name of the Chief of Healing at Mt. Mungo's and felt acute relief that such a well-practiced Healer was in the vicinity. Mr. Ogden would be in good hands.

"He left early," Mr. Parkinson said, tense anxiety in his voice.

"Intoxicated," someone else muttered scornfully.

"Is anyone trained in mediwizardry?" Rose Parkinson called to the room abroad, half of which was just now noticing that something was wrong.

"Snape," someone called uncertainly.

"Not here," Mr. Parkinson said, his eyes flicking to the archway where Snape had left not minutes earlier with Riddle and Mr. Malfoy. He looked clearly torn between going in search of the man and staying to mediate the tragedy unfolding.

"I will go and search for him," Bellatrix said, stepping carefully around the fallen man before heading for the entryway.

"There's no time," someone from the crowd snapped, "Look at the blood."

There was indeed a pool of red rapidly spreading from Ogden's prone form.

"There must be *someone* here trained in Healing!" Mrs. Malfoy exclaimed, one gloved hand raised to her mouth in utter dismay.

Harry turned her eyes toward Archie even as James looked up from the floor and said, "My daughter is." All eyes turned, somewhat incredulously, in her direction, and she froze uncertainly. "Harry, can you...?"

There was nothing for it, she supposed distantly as her father's pleading eyes met hers. She stepped forward on shaking legs, digging deep in her pocket for her wand as she knelt down to see the damage. She should ask for Archie to do it-but how would she convince them that he was more qualified? Her eyes sought his for a panicked moment, but Archie only gazed steadily back at her, eye bright with trust and confidence. With a deep, steadying breath, she moved Madam Marchbanks' hands aside and ripped Ogden's robes with one hand while quietly casting the spell that would slow localized blood flow with the other. Once she could see the wound, she let out a deep sigh of relief-there were stab marks on his lower back, but none appeared to have brushed his spine. To be sure, she sent her consciousness into Healer mode, probing the extent of the damage swiftly.

The spine was fine, but one of the strikes had come in at an angle and torn right through the right renal artery that led to that kidney, severely damaging the inferior vena cava as well, which explained why there was so much blood. Ogden would die quickly in cardiovascular collapse if she didn't fix that immediately.

"Mr. Parkinson, do you keep a supply of Blood Replenisher Potions in the house?" she asked, her voice somewhat monotone as most of her attention was diverted to making sure the Ureter wasn't damaged-she didn't need bodily waste spilling out into the abdominal cavity.

"*Accio* Blood Replenisher," was Mr. Parkinson's response.

"Archie, can you give it to him?" Harry said, not glancing away from Ogden to see if anyone found her request odd. She needed his help, so the ruse was just going to have to adjust if necessary.

A few moments later, Archie was beside her on the ground. "I'm going to spell it into his stomach," he told her quietly, taking out his own wand.

"After that, check his lungs," Harry said, "His breathing is too shallow, for someone unconscious."

She turned her attention to knitting the major blood vessels back together carefully, aware of how important the kidneys were to a number of bodily functions. It was imperative that their homeostasis not be upset. Once she could feel the Blood Replenisher begin to work, she turned her attention to siphoning away the blood that had leaked internally around the kidney and spine.

"His left twelfth rib deflected one of the thrusts," Archie said at her ear, "It's fractured."

"It can wait," Harry said, "What about his breathing?"

With a subtle nod of approval, Archie said, "No wound accounts for it. Check his blood for toxins."

Harry frowned. "Poison..." she grimaced at what her magic was telling her. "Some kind of paralytic. No wonder the muscles around the entrance wounds have all seized up."

"Poison!" Marchbanks' exclamation caught the attention of those around them who were watching with morbid concern. "Is he going to die?"

"Not if we counteract it," Harry said, trying to both reassure the woman and concentrate on what needed to be done.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Mrs. Parkinson and Mrs. Malfoy step up to draw Marchbanks slightly away, comforting her with soft murmurs. She appreciated their initiative in giving them the space they needed to fix this.

"I can keep his lungs working for a while, but if it's already in the blood stream, we have to stop it before it can damage the heart too severely-otherwise we're looking at long-term recovery in St. Mungo's," Archie said quietly.

"Do you recognize it?" Harry asked, eyes tight with stress. "It looks like saxitoxin to me, but that doesn't make any sense."

"Like in shellfish?" Archie wrinkled his nose, "It would have to be extremely concentrated to have so fast an effect. Though if it got into the inferior vena cava when it was nicked, I guess it wouldn't have to be *that* powerful."

"Let's assume we're right, and flush it out," Harry decided. There were only a few poisons that needed special means of removal, and saxitoxin wasn't one of them. Provided they were careful, they should be able to detox Ogden with minimal difficulty.

It took a good ten minutes, even with two of them sweeping Ogden's system. Archie took care of flushing the delicate heart and lungs while Harry focused on the liver and kidneys-thankfully, not much of it had gotten to the extremities and the digestive tract was largely unaffected. They did have to painstakingly comb through the soft tissues of the brain to make sure absolutely none of it was left behind in the cerebral cortex.

As his breathing evened out and color returned to his cheeks, Ogden began to visibly retreat from death's door. She could vaguely hear people around them murmuring optimistically as she and Archie paused to wipe the sweat from their brows.

"I'll take the fractured rib," she said after a moment, "Will you finish up the flesh wounds?" Archie was very good at cosmetic Healing, or so he claimed.

Archie nodded, sparing a glance up at Marchbanks and the two ladies who held her hands. "He's going to be fine, Madam. Won't even have a scar-though he will have to take a regimen of muscle-strengtheners for his heart. He'll probably end up feeling better than before by the end of it."

Marchbanks broke down in relieved tears, even as Archie turned his wand back to the task before them. She had no trouble with the bone-it was hardly broken at all, and Harry was very familiar with fixing broken bones, even if she mostly practiced on animals. A glow of satisfaction lit her face as she rocked back on her heels finally and watched Archie close the last few inches of open skin on Ogden's lower back. After checking the elder's vital signs and sensing no sign of further bodily distress, they both stood.

"He's fine, now," Harry said, gesturing Marchbanks forward. "You can wake him."

With a breathless laugh of pure happiness, the elder knelt and hurriedly repaired and cleaned Ogden's robes to their previous

glorious state. She then pressed her wand to his side and whispered, "Enervate."

Ogden coughed, groaned, and pushed himself up from the tile with a confused grimace. "What-what happened?" he said, bracing himself on his hands and knees before climbing to his feet slowly, supported by Madam Marchbanks the entire way.

"You were attacked, Tiberius," Marchbanks said, arranging his hair with gentle, trembling fingers. "There was so much blood..."

"Attacked by who?" Ogden said, looking around the room with enraged suspicion.

"This." James stepped closer from where he had stood out of the way while Harry and Archie worked. He held up a mangled, golden device that on closer inspection seemed to have been made up of intricately interlocked gears. It might have resembled some kind of insect, before it was crushed, she thought. Many of its limbs tapered into sharp, lethal-looking points that dripped with red blood, marking them as the instruments of Ogden's wounds.

"What on earth...?" Ogden cringed away from the metal thing. "How did that even get in here?"

"I've been examining it," James said, holding it by one bladed leg to demonstrate its mechanisms. "This part here retracts-it appears that it could have masqueraded as a regular object smaller than the palm of a hand, which then transformed upon activation."

"So someone smuggled this weapon into my home," Mr. Parkinson looked rigidly livid. "Can it be traced?"

"It's covered in Elder Ogden's blood, now, so the only thing it would lead us to is him," James said, shaking his head.

Harry was looking at the mangled golden thing with something like nagging horror, knowing that it reminded her of something, but not

sure what. Where had she seen an insect like that before...? With a jolt of memory, she paled. She opened her mouth, then shut it abruptly-that hadn't happened to Harry. It had happened to *Rigel* .

"Rigel," she said pointedly. Archie looked over at her with a questioning eyebrow. "Doesn't that seem familiar? Remember in your first year, when you were attacked...?"

Archie gave her a blank look and blinked. "Um, sort of... it was that Jordan fellow, wasn't it?"

Draco was suddenly there at Archie's elbow, "Lee Jordan? You're talking about that spider thing he tried to use on you? It had a paralytic agent too, didn't it?"

Archie nodded unsurely, clearly trying to recall what she'd told him of the incident. "Yes. It had a neuro component too, though, to induce memory loss. It was primarily organic, too, while this thing seems to be mostly mechanical."

"Not to mention all of Jordan Sr.'s breeding experiments were destroyed after the Ministry was apprised of his illegal activities." Blaise Zabini had come up behind them to join their little powwow.

"That would explain how unsophisticated this one is compared to the one that attacked Rigel, though," Harry pointed out. "The poison on its blades was raw saxitoxin, not synthesized or anything like the neurotoxic venom bred into the insect that Rigel destroyed."

"How crude," Blaise wrinkled his nose in academic displeasure.

Meanwhile, James was interrogating Mr. Ogden about who may have motive to arrange for such a thing.

"No one at this gala has any grievance against me," Ogden said stoutly.

"It might have been stowed away on an unsuspecting wizard's person," James said, frowning, "By the looks of it, the insect might have been disguised as a piece of jewelry, a boot buckle, anything really. Anyone you might suspect could be a lead."

"Tiberius," Marchbanks said suddenly, "Where is your pocket watch?"

"My..." Ogden paled and swayed, "No. He wouldn't." Nevertheless he began to search his pockets frantically, looking more disturbed by the second.

"It was a gift from his nephew," Marchbanks told James quietly.

"One Leonard Jordan the first," Blaise muttered, dramatic irony thick in his voice.

"He wouldn't," Ogden insisted, his ancient visage drawn with pain. "He's capable of such an invention, I don't deny, but he wouldn't use it like *this*."

"He was asking about his inheritance," Marchbanks said, one hand on Ogden's arm, "He wasn't pleased that you were considering marriage to me so late in life."

"He's fallen on hard times," Ogden insisted, face red with suppressed emotion. "He hasn't got a truly violet bone in his-in his-" He clutched at his chest, wheezing a bit.

Harry and Archie started forward automatically, with Archie just barely remembering to hang back and let her do the diagnostic charm. "Your heart is still weak, Elder Ogden," she said respectfully, "You'll need to avoid putting stress on it for at least a week. Nothing that raises your blood pressure, if you can help it."

"Who are you?" Ogden asked, one wizened brow raised somewhat incredulously at her presumption.

"She's-" Marchbanks broke off as she realized they hadn't been properly introduced. "Auror Potter's daughter. She saved your life, Tiberius, along with young Mr. Black."

"Saved-" Ogden seemed to come to the sudden realization that he didn't know where his wounds had gone. "I thought a Healer..."

"There wasn't time to find one," Marchbanks said, voice tight, "You were bleeding out, Tiberius."

"From that little thing?" Ogden looked shocked, "Its blades are barely the width of my finger!"

"One of them nicked your inferior vena cava," Harry told him, "It was unlucky-if not for that there might have been time to move you to St. Mungo's for treatment."

"And if not for the poison," Archie piped up helpfully.

"Poison?" Tiberius looked incredibly shaken.

"It almost stopped your lungs, Tibby," Marchbanks said, clutching his arm a little tighter.

"You say your nephew gave this to you as a pocket watch?" James clarified.

"I... suppose so," Ogden said, looking defeated. "I received it as a Yule present from the whole Jordan family. My great niece even wrapped it in pink ribbon. I just can't believe that they would... and over *money*?"

"They might not all be involved," James said, gruffly reassuring, "After all, if it looked like a watch to you, any one of them could have fooled the others. They may even have bought it in a shop thinking it innocuous. We'll know more when we question them." With a nod of his head, he motioned two Aurors, who had been hanging back in

lieu of clear action to take, to step forward. "We'll need your nephew's last known address."

"You may want to question his great-nephew, Lee Jordan, especially closely, Auror Potter," Draco spoke loud enough for James to hear, drawing the attention of Ogden and the others, as well.

"Why is that, Heir Malfoy?" James asked, his professional mask fully donned.

"Lee Jordan orchestrated a similar attack in our first year on a fellow student," Draco said, "The insect was different in construct, but the use of poison is similar. And the attack on Mr. Ogden at my family's garden party two years ago also involved poison."

James frowned. "Dawlish, see to it that someone digs up the incident report on that attack, as well. Heir Malfoy is probably correct in relating them. We will look into Lee Jordan's means and motive carefully," he added, nodding gratefully in Draco's direction.

As Aurors were organized and scrambled, Mr. and Mrs. Parkinson began retaking control of the party. Harry was surprised they were going to continue as though nothing had happened, but she supposed it was the biggest event of the season, and no one had actually died.

Ogden came over to where Harry and Archie stood, something like shock and disbelief still manning his expression. "I must thank the two of you for your timely assistance," he said gravely. Marchbanks, still clutching his elbow, nodded in agreement. "It alarms me to think how fortunate I was to be within saving distance of two young people so learned in the Healing arts. It is a rare skill, in these times, and the night could all too easily have ended very differently."

Harry privately reflected that it wasn't so much a rare skill as it was a skill primarily taught to muggleborns and halfbloods, who attended schools like AIM. Hogwarts did not emphasize Healing abilities, and hadn't for some time, offering only a few scant students a year the

opportunity to begin learning the art before they graduated. Even with Madam Pomfrey's tutelage, Harry would not have been able to save Ogden's life just using what she'd learned at Hogwarts alone; she had learned the nuances of poison treatment from Archie's notes, after all, not to mention all that she'd absorbed about the kidneys from one of the assignments he'd sent her.

She wondered suddenly if Dumbledore deemphasized subjects that foreign schools like AIM emphasized on purpose, like Alchemy, to give those children of lesser blood a competitive edge in the workforce despite numerous Ministry sanctions discouraging employers from hiring those schooled abroad. Certainly Lily would have had a much harder time finding a job at her contract company if there had been a plethora of purebloods equally trained in experimental charms.

No, she concluded with a mental shake of her head, that would be too manipulative on too large a scale, even for a professional politician like Riddle, much less a respected public figure like Dumbledore. Out loud she merely said, "No thanks necessary, Elder Ogden-we learned first aid for a reason."

"That was quite a bit more than first aid." Lily came over, smiling proudly, one arm around Addy and the other coming to embrace Harry briefly. "I had no idea your studies were so progressed."

"Treating blunt trauma is the first thing they teach at AIM," Archie said, smiling a bit, "The later years are all reserved for diagnosing and treating more complicated things, like wounds inflicted by curses or other forms of foreign magic, virulent diseases, and injuries to more delicate parts of the body like the brain, eyes, reproductive organs..." he trailed off at the somewhat odd look Draco was giving him. "What? I read Harry's syllabi."

"I know, I just didn't realize you were so *excited* about Healing," Draco muttered. He looked a bit put off. Harry supposed that wasn't an emotion he was used to feeling from Rigel, to be fair.

"Whatever the reason, I am grateful," Ogden said, smiling indulgently, "To you both. Mr. Black, I am already indebted to you, as you may recall. I am chagrined to have to offer you once more my life in debt to your timely assistance."

Archie bowed deeply, a flush rising on his skin that Harry would tease him about later. "It is the duty of one wizard to another, Elder Ogden. There is nothing but respect between us."

"I hope you are not as humble as your friend, Miss Potter," Ogden chortled, turning tired eyes her direction. "I really must thank someone for my continued health."

"She is much worse," Archie told him conspiratorially, "But she wears it better."

Elbowing Archie discretely in the side, Harry bowed her head under Ogden's curious gaze. "No thanks are necessary, Elder," she said politely. "Your wellbeing is gratification enough. Do see a professional healer, though, at your earliest convenience." Such was common sense, but she had a nervous sense of complete liability that she hadn't anticipated. Did real Healers feel this way?

"I will see to it myself," Marchbanks cut in, giving Harry a soft smile. "Thank you, Miss Potter. We had heard from our friend, Master Thompson, that you had a rare talent. How fortunate that it extends across such disparate disciplines."

The elders took their leave, heading slowly toward the entryway. She noticed they passed Riddle on his way back in, and stopped to talk for a short moment. Whatever they said drew Riddle's focus directly to Archie, who didn't seem to notice as he spoke animatedly with Draco and Blaise about what had just happened.

Riddle paused until Malfoy and Snape, who had come hurrying into the room shortly after him with Bellatrix at their side, caught up. They exchanged words briefly, and then all three began making their way across the ballroom.

Harry felt the distinct urge to run, but her mother had a proud hand on her shoulder and Addy had at least three locks of her hair clutched in a grubby fist and Archie was turning to her with a concerned look-

"What?" she said, blinking, "Sorry, I wasn't listening."

Archie laughed, though she noted it was a bit strained. "Draco was just asking about your wand, Harry."

"My-" she tilted her head in an effort to disguise the freezing dread that came upon her. "What about it, Mr. Malfoy?"

Draco had a hard look on his face, but it was tempered by confusion, not outright accusation. "It looked like Rigel's."

Lily, who of course overheard that comment, frowned, "That's odd. They aren't of similar woods, are they? What was yours again, Harry? Ash?"

"Elm," Harry said blandly, not meeting Archie's increasingly doom-filled gaze.

Lily looked confused for a moment, "I thought Archie had Elm."

"He has Holly," Harry said, fighting valiantly to keep her expression bored.

"I must have misremembered," Lily said, smiling, "It seems like so long ago, now."

"Children grow up so quickly," Mrs. Malfoy said, gazing at Draco somewhat despondently.

Draco flushed slightly in embarrassment, but was unfortunately not distracted from his confusion for long. "I've seen you use your wand a thousand times, Rigel, and I'm sure it looked odd just now."

Archie had apparently decided to just get the mystery over with, and began digging in his pocket with an expression that clearly said he was humoring Draco. Harry wished she could tell Archie that now was the worse possible time to do this, with Professor Snape coming their way along with Malfoy Sr. and Riddle himself, but instead she had to affect a mildly curious look along with everyone else looking on—namely Mrs. Malfoy, Mrs. Parkinson, Lily, Draco, and Pansy. The only reprieve was that James and Mr. Parkinson were occupied discussing the filing of a report on the assassination attempt, and any of the other partygoers who might have been interested in the drama involving Mr. Ogden had left when he did.

"Here, what's so odd about—oh." Archie looked down at the wand in his hand as though in stunned surprise. "Harry—this is *yours* ." He laughed lowly, shaking his head as though unable to believe it. "We've switched again."

"*Again* ?" Harry, too, let her eyebrows rise in surprised amusement. She dug into her own pocket to produce the holly wand. Sighing with exasperation, she held it out to her cousin with a roll of her eyes. "I specifically reminded you this morning to take the right one once we were done flying. You always just grab whichever is closer."

"Well you didn't notice, either," Archie said, smiling teasingly.

"Only because I don't use it over the break anyway," Harry said, taking the elm wand and putting it into her pocket casually.

"You used it just now," Draco said, still looking a bit incredulous. "Are you telling me you use each others' wands without even noticing?"

Harry and Archie exchanged a look. "I suppose," Harry said, shrugging, "Is that odd?"

She knew very well that it was, but it wasn't as though they could prove she and Archie were lying. What other explanation could they think of for their switched wands, besides?

"You two always did share everything," Lily said, shaking her head fondly. Turning to the other adults, Lily smiled, "They used to wear one another's clothes when they were young. We'd dress them in the mornings, but by noon they'd traded half their garments for seemingly no reason whatsoever."

"Aunt Lily," Archie protested, his ears pinking.

Undeterred, Lily smirked faintly, "Why, the number of times I had to go through Sirius' laundry to find all of Harry's dresses-"

The other mothers tittered in delighted laughter while Draco turned incredibly amused eyes on his friend, successfully distracted. "You did *what*, Rigel?"

"Harry made me," Archie muttered, unable to look anyone in the eye.

With eyes on her, Harry shrugged in a deliberately nonchalant way. "His clothes were more comfortable. And he looks better in lace, anyway."

With low chuckles, the conversation moved on, at last, to other things. Riddle and Mr. Malfoy began conversing in low tones with Mr. Parkinson, no doubt divining what exactly had occurred in their absence. Her eyes caught those of Professor Snape, however, who was looking between she and Archie with a considering expression. It wasn't quite suspicious, but it seemed dangerously thoughtful to Harry, who knew very well that Snape knew how much trouble Rigel had using most wands that were not his own. Would he believe that Harry's wand was an exception to that?

Lily shifted Addy higher on her hip, and the movement caused her suppresser bracelet to catch the light dazzlingly. Snape's eyes shifted from Archie to Lily, and his gaze sharpened in realization and disappointment after considering the bracelet for a moment. Seeing his look, Lily followed his eye line to her suppresser and flushed almost guiltily. She sent the Potions Master a look that pleaded for

understanding, but Snape turned pointedly away, lip curled in utter disgust.

Harry turned her eyes away and tried to pretend she didn't see the exchange. Somehow, the gala was not turning out like she'd thought it would. She remembered being bored at the previous one, but not consistently uncomfortable. Was that the difference between being a pureblood and a halfblood? A boy and a girl?

Mrs. Parkinson left with Mrs. Malfoy to begin the lengthy process of making the rounds to various groups of important partygoers and assuring them that all was well. Harry supposed somewhat cynically that most of them had been too proud to gawp like tourists as Ogden bled out on the floor, but weren't too proud to solicit the juicy gossip from a reliable source afterwards.

"I'm going to get food," Archie said at her elbow. At her raised eyebrow, he grinned sheepishly, "I uh... worked up an appetite Healing." Deciding that that was believable enough not to make him seem out of character, she waved him off. Draco followed her cousin, though he did send her a single, penetrating look as he left. Pansy was assisting her mother in talking to as many people as possible before speculation ran rampant. The male adults were in heavy discussion, James and the Minister included, which left Harry with Lily and Addy, the latter of whom was looking very cranky.

Lily shushed her quietly, grimacing as she shifted the baby once more on her hip.

"Want me to hold her again?" Harry asked.

Lily smiled, "Are you sure? You always seem so convinced she isn't going to let you."

Harry smiled back. "Tonight is lucky, I think."

"Very lucky," Lily said, suddenly serious. "Harry, that was an amazing thing you did. When you first insisted on joining the Healing tract

instead of the Potions tract just so you and Archie could live some sort of vicarious half-life through one another, well, it made my heart ache. I think now, though, that maybe you were meant to. You saved a man's life today, little Fawn. And from what I understand, Archie saved his life a year and a half ago with some very specialized potions knowledge that I can only assume came from you. I think Fate had a hand in that. You two are going to do great things."

"It really wasn't that big a deal," Harry said, "If there had been someone else within hearing that knew how to Heal, they would have done the same."

"Well this time it was you, and you did wonderfully. And to thank you, I'm awarding you babysitting duties for the duration of one hour," Lily said cheekily, transferring Addy to Harry's shoulder with a sigh of relief. "I'd put a weightless charm on her, but I'm half-afraid I'll forget I'm holding her and let go."

"I'll watch her," Harry said, smirking, "Go dance with Dad." From what she could see, James seemed to be winding up his discussion with Malfoy, Parkinson, Riddle, and the Minister.

"What a marvelous idea," her mother mused, eyes twinkling, "It has been too long since James drooled at my feet, hasn't it?"

Grimacing, Harry made a face that only Addy could see. "Whatever you say, Mum. I'm going to take Addy someplace quieter so she can rest."

"Find us before midnight," Lily said absently, already eyeing her father like she was a cat and he a particularly lively ice mouse. "Sirius will want to toast together."

Murmuring a promise to do so, Harry resituated Addy more comfortably and wandered off, in search of a corner that was quiet enough to calm Addy down without being dark enough to risk coming across something unsavory. Eventually, she decided a balcony was her best bet and chose one at random.

She took the stairs carefully, very aware of how fragile the thing in her arms was, and how little she knew about infant anatomy, in case of an accident. Mentally adding that to her list of things to learn once she got her time-turner back, she ascended the final step and looked up, then faltered.

Rosier was up there with Rookwood and Selwyn, and all three were looking entirely curious. She hesitated, but realized it would be churlish to retreat at this point. Instead, she inclined her head politely in Rosier's general direction and hoped he would just leave her alone. She was tired, and quite ready to give up the evening as a bad job. Well, apart from her talking to Professor Snape as herself. That part she was pleased with.

He didn't, of course, leave her alone, instead waving his friends over to meet her. She supposed she couldn't be too annoyed-from Rosier's perspective, he was probably taking social pity on Rigel's pathetically friendless cousin. From that angle, he was actually being very nice.

"Miss Potter," he said, "This is Edmund Rookwood and his fiancé Alesana Selwyn."

"Congratulations," she said, eyes flicking to the lovely dark-stoned ring on Selwyn's finger. "It's lovely to meet you both. Rigel had mentioned you many times."

"Thank you," Rookwood rumbled, giving Selwyn a proud, smoldering look. Turning his eyes back to Harry, he added, "We can say the same of you, Miss Potter."

She blinked. She didn't really talk about herself that often when she was Rigel... did she?

Selwyn smirked slightly, her beautiful eyes rimmed flawlessly in kohl. "Why so surprised? You must know how he esteems you."

"I'm all he's ever known," Harry said, a bit wryly.

"Not any longer, though" Rosier said, smile like a razor.

Impervious to his attempt to goad her, Harry smiled back, just as sharply. "That's true. It's nice to see him make friends. He's so prone to trouble, as I'm sure you've noticed. Perhaps, once you've known him as long as I have, you'll be better at keeping him out of it."

Rosier looked positively offended, which made it worth throwing herself under the bus. She could not quite suppress the amusement she felt at getting under *his* skin for a change. As Rigel she worried about offending him-they were friends, after all. As Harry, though, she could say whatever she wished.

Rookwood chuckled appreciatively. "Careful with this one, Aldon. She is under no obligation to put up with you."

"I noticed," Rosier said, looking as though he was holding back a pout. "She refused to dance with me, you know, then went and danced a set with Pansy. It hurt my feelings."

Harry suppressed a snort. "When have you ever denied Miss Parkinson something? The girl is impossible to refuse-Merlin knows I tried." When Rosier insisted on holding onto his hurt expression, she sighed. "Miss Parkinson invited me personally tonight. How could I refuse her invitation in light of that?"

The golden-eyed boy hummed. "I suppose that's true. Very well, I forgive you. Provided you dance with me at the next gala."

"I won't be at the next gala," Harry said, disbelief coloring her expression. "I told you, I'm only here because I was specifically invited, and Rigel wanted to introduce me to Professor Snape."

"Snape?" Selwyn's eyebrow lifted. "Why?"

"I'm his biggest fan," Harry deadpanned.

"Regardless." Rosier waved a hand, looking mildly disturbed. "If need be / will personally invite you to the next gala."

"Your family hosted the last one," Harry said, "You can't host it again next year."

Rosier's eyes sharpened just a tad. "Rigel really tells you everything, does he?"

"Yes." Harry intensified her gaze until she knew it could give a grown man shivers and held Rosier's eyes. "Everything."

The upperclassman dropped his gaze with a grimace, distinctly uncomfortable of a sudden.

Selwyn laughed. "I like you, Miss Potter. Most halfbloods would think twice before antagonizing the son of Lord Rosier."

Not sure if she should be flattered or offended, Harry demurred. "Do you know many halfbloods, Miss Selwyn?"

"Very good," Selwyn said, eyes flashing. "If you do return next year, keep that gumption. It will serve you well."

Harry was about to ask what she meant by that when Addy began to fuss. Harry began juggling her awkwardly, really not sure what she should do to make her stop. When she began crying louder, Harry winced and cast an imploring look at the other three. "How do I-ah-stop this?"

"Haven't you any experience with her?" Rosier asked, "She is your sister."

"Not really," Harry said, attempting to switch Addy around-maybe she wanted to see something? "She sort of dislikes me." At her less than graceful handling, Addy let out a shrill shout of annoyance that caused several nearby people to look over in annoyance.

"Let me," Selwyn said sharply, scooping Addy out of Harry's hands with natural ease. The dark-haired girl held the baby closer to her chest, instead of further away to spare her ears. She rocked very gently back and forth, her free hand stroking Addy's soft hair. Harry started to profusely thank the girl, only to pause upon registering the acute look of longing on the other girl's face. Selwyn looked more fond of Addy in that moment than even Harry was, and she considered herself quite attached to the small wailing creature.

"You're very good with her," Harry said, injecting the proper amount of gratitude into her tone.

"I had a little sister, once," Selwyn said softly, her attention far away. "She was sickly, but she had a cry that could shatter crystal. I used to hold her for hours at night, when my mother needed to rest."

Harry, noting the past tense with a pang, kept silent as Rookwood curled an arm around the older girl. Noticing their sympathetic expressions, Selwyn's face closed abruptly. "We lost her to the Fade. The doctors warned us, of course. Everyone knows the risks. It was a foolish ambition."

Harry found she couldn't tear her eyes from Addy in that moment. She knew about the difficulties pureblooded families had in producing more than one child-everyone did, just as Selwyn said. The cause wasn't completely understood, but healers thought it had something to do with the nature of magic taking root. Pureblooded mothers could often carry one child to term, but after that it became exponentially more difficult. Second children were often squibs, but more often they were born weak and struggled to live despite nothing being physically wrong with them.

When such a child died, they called it fading, and textbooks described the slow, inevitable drain of strength and life that afflicted the infant. No book could describe the horror of standing by while a child died, however. Looking at her little sister, Harry was struck by how much she took for granted in her life. How many of the women at this gala had lost infants? How many were too afraid to try,

paralyzed by the probability of tragedy. Were there others, even among her own friends, who might have had younger siblings?

"Take good care of her," Selwyn said, shifting to hand the now-quiet Addy back to Harry.

"I will," Harry promised. She was unable to keep herself from wondering, as Selwyn walked away, if her little sister was the reason she could see thestrals. Harry hoped not.

Rookwood and Rosier bid her a quick farewell, hurrying after their friend.

There was a very large clock of white gold hanging over the refreshment table, and with the hands only minutes from striking midnight, Harry supposed she ought to find her family once more. After everything that had happened tonight, she couldn't say she wasn't looking forward to going home. She just wanted to lock herself in her lab for days, or at least until her mind stopped feeling like a sieve, leaking thoughts and emotions into the rest of her body like a flash flood.

Maybe the new year would be better. Simpler. She could go back to being Rigel, soon, and concentrate on her upcoming apprenticeship. Ignoring the little voice telling her that pretending to be someone else wasn't supposed to be easier than being yourself, Harry cast one last glance over the glittering assembly, then turned away.

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The sounds of several hundred indisposed notables filled the room, but he could not join in their frivolity. He had too many things to consider, in light of all he had learned that night. Plans to make. Vengeance to take. His position required he make nice with the

fabulously wealthy and powerful as the year was made new, but is was all he could do to survey the hall without losing his dinner. Jewels dribbled from ears and down necklines like rivulets of particularly pristine drool, marking their wearers as members of that indescribably extravagant class of wastrels. How distastefully predictable they seemed to him.

His perusal of the scene was interrupted as the young Lord Black and his family caught his attention. Sufficiently distracted from his distain, his lips curled at the thought of Dumbledore's faction now short all that precious funding. Not to mention the Wizengamot votes. And it was all thanks to the man's heir, the enigmatic Rigel Black.

How very innocuous the boy looked, smiling in anticipation just as a dozen other young wizards were as the clock counted down the seconds in a loud ventriloquism spell. He looked different than last he saw him, but he supposed that was the fluidity of youth. There was something suspicious about the boy, nonetheless. Already an anomaly, tonight the young Heir Black demonstrated knowledge of Healing that was inexplicable in light of what he knew of his schooling. Lucius had certainly not mentioned any Healing classes. He would have to interrogate Severus more closely on the matter, but even if the boy was incredibly gifted, he could not have learned so much in four months of third-year Healing classes. From Cassius' report, Black had demonstrated at least as much capability as his cousin, who had the benefit of two and a half years of intensive study in the art, at the best Healing program in the Western Hemisphere, no less.

It patently did not square. Then add to that the spectacle of a witch and wizard *accidentally* using one another's wand. Unheard of. A witch would sooner accidentally take another's child from the playground. It shouldn't even be possible to use another's wand with such a degree of skill, at least without consistent practice and the wand's full allegiance. Might they have been swapping wands for so long that it became moot? Could a wand have dual allegiances? He

didn't know, and that displeased him. Perhaps a visit to Ollivanders was in order.

The girl, too, was suspicious. More, in fact, from what little he'd seen to judge. Severus had spent nearly fifteen minutes in deep conversation with the chit, which was red flag enough, but her aura was off, too. At his first, perfunctory glance, it was nothing special. When he'd reentered the ballroom after her Healing, however, it hadn't fluctuated one bit. She ought to have been nearly drained, if her magic levels were accurately reflected, but they didn't have a dent in them. Her cousin, however, had ravenously attached himself to the food table shortly thereafter.

Had Rigel Black been supplying the majority of the magic without anyone noticing? Why would the girl pretend to be doing the work? To secure a life debt? It would be difficult to conceal such a ruse under the noses of some of the sharpest witches and wizards he knew, however. On the other hand, why would she conceal the true levels of her magic? There weren't many wizards with the skill to even read auras, much less falsify their own. To think that a little girl had picked up the ability by chance was absurd. But what *need* could she possibly have?

He had briefly considered plucking the information from her mind, but a quick scan had revealed Occlumency shields at least as substantial as her cousin's: likely able to detect his attempt, at any rate. He would have to come by the understanding honestly, it seemed. There was at least a dram of satisfaction to be found by such inefficient measures. Now was not the time, however.

With a deft mental compartmentalization, he turned his attention to more important matters. He had things other than thirteen-year-olds to consider at the moment. His mind's eye turned to Hogwarts, and the rat who thought he could escape there with his prize. That could be his only priority. No one fooled Tom Riddle and lived to gloat about it.

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[end of chapter eleven].

A/N: So there it is. The gala. If things in this chapter don't seem immediately relevant, well, you're not wrong. Some of this is a set up for problems to come. In retrospect, the events set into motion in this chapter will be clearer, I hope. That said, my readers are much more clever than I, so I don't doubt your anticipations will be near the mark.

A/N2: I have do dedicate this chapter, and every chapter, really, to Alan Rickman, whose artistry and scope brought the character of Severus out of the pages and beyond even the most dedicated fan's imagination. My interpretation of Snape will never hold a candle, but it and others like it will always be expressed in relation to the character that Alan Rickman perfected, and in that way, his work will live on.

Chapter 12

A/N: This one's long, so set aside a good amount of time before you read. I may have gone a bit heavy on the foreshadowing, but, as always, I have no sense of what's obvious to the readers and what's obvious only because I know what's happening. This is the beginning of the end of book three. I think two or three more chapters, max. Events will be moving quickly and somewhat erratically until the climax, and if some of this looks like filler-well, I hope you know better by now, clever readers.

The Ambiguous Artifice:

Chapter 12:

Hermione was staring at him again. She'd been distractedly examining him at odd moments all week, which was very unusual for the studious witch. Normally nothing could pull her attention from the blackboard in class. Archie glanced over at his friend with a raised eyebrow, his quill taking over where his hand left off without pause. Hermione spared the dicto-quill a disapproving look before turning back to *gaze* at him again, her own eyebrow raised right back.

Resigning himself to being confused until the curly-haired girl got around to explaining herself, Archie sent Hermione an exaggerated eye-smile that had her turning back to her notes with a silent huff. He had to let a real smile out at that. Hermione was too cute when she got annoyed-which was often, and rather refreshing, he thought. Harry almost never got annoyed at him-even when he was being purposely annoying! Drawing his thoughts away from his cousin's unnaturally thick skin, he tried to concentrate on what their Medical Procedures professor was saying. Something about consent. And how was a person in dire need of medical care supposed to consent, anyway? He peeked at Hermione's notes to see if she'd written down anything about that, and saw 'emergency-implied?' scrawled in the

margin. That's what he loved about Hermione-they were always on the same page.

"You're on the wrong page," Hermione hissed, jabbing his arm with her pointed quill. Archie checked the pair of students to his left and realized that they had, in fact, moved on to a new chapter when he wasn't paying attention. He offered a winning grin as he quickly flipped to the page everyone else was reading from. "Honestly," his partner said, sounding quite exasperated, "You said you would be in charge of the book this semester. If you can't keep up-"

"Can I help it if you're so distracting?" Archie muttered playfully. "How can I pay the lesson any attention when I've given it all to you, 'Mione?"

"Don't blame me for your lack of focus," Hermione whispered sharply. She pulled the book they were sharing closer to her side of the desk with a narrow-eyed glare that just dared him to object. Archie merely smiled and leaned closer to read over her shoulder. Objection was the furthest thing from his mind.

Fifteen minutes before the lesson was scheduled to end, Professor Bernhart told them to pack up their materials. Hermione looked as confused as he felt, so Archie felt confident that this hadn't been in the lesson plan.

"As you all should know, this is the last year of general Healing classes before you will be expected to begin considering a specialty," Bernhart said, brushing a lock of curly hair back from her rectangular frames. "Beginning in fourth year, your schedules will be considerably more flexible. You'll be responsible for choosing classes that best reflect the area of Healing you'd like to someday practice. There is room for overlap, of course, and many students prefer to keep their options open until sixth or seventh year, but it is important to begin as you mean to go on. With this in mind, today we'll be testing your individual levels of magical output to give you some idea of where your talents might be put to best use."

"What does that mean?" Sally Parks looked very worried behind her long, straight bangs.

Professor Bernhart looked slightly uncomfortable, and said delicately, "Some fields of Healing make higher demands on a witch or wizard's core than others. At this point most of your cores should be fully matured. The level of magic you have access to will likely not fluctuate much in the coming years. If the more magic-intensive Healing procedures are beyond your capabilities, it would be better to know now, so that you can choose your specialties sensibly."

Several of their classmates seemed apprehensive at this information. Archie could understand why-they'd all worked very hard to get to this point, and to be told that your future career depended on something you couldn't control was disheartening.

"Don't look so alarmed," Bernhart said, smiling kindly, "Very few fields have such a restriction on them-just Critical Care, Infectious Diseases, and Neonatal-Perinatal, really."

Sally, who Archie suspected was leaning toward Toxicology, looked relieved, but Hermione and Archie shared a silent look. Hermione was fascinated with Wizarding childbirth and he had never considered any specialty besides advanced-stage disease treatment and prevention. To have this potential obstacle come out of nowhere was a little off-putting.

Hermione raised her hand with a determined expression and Professor Bernhart, to her credit, only looked slightly apprehensive as she called on her. "Why were we not told of such a requirement at the outset of our choosing this tract?"

"There was little point in bringing it up before you could be tested, Miss Granger," Bernhart explained gently. "A witch or wizard's core can't be properly measured until their thirteenth year. Making you worry over something you could not influence would only be detrimental to your studies. It isn't quite the crisis I'm sure you're imagining. There are many interesting and important fields of study

that do not require above average levels of magic for success. Don't worry, and think of this as a learning exercise. Your levels of magic are not a reflection of your talent or ability. They are something you should understand about yourself, however, so that you may grow to your full potential."

Hermione did not look at all satisfied with that answer, and Archie knew she would spend the next week researching the various factors that influenced a wizard's power levels. There wasn't time for any more questions, however, as Bernhart was already pulling out a device that Archie recognized by its cylindrical shape as a magometer.

"When it is your turn, you will step out into the hall with me," Bernhart was explaining. "Simply channel your magic as you would when performing a basic bone mending, except instead of stopping when the bone is knit, you will continue to feed magic into the device at a constant rate until you run out. You are excused from your practical work this afternoon, as your cores may take a night to replenish what the device siphons off." Seeing the unnerved expressions on some of the faces around the room, Professor Bernhart added, "It won't hurt. Who would like to go first?"

Unsurprisingly, Hermione's hand shot up with eager anticipation. Bernhart smiled encouragingly, and led Hermione out to the hallway for a little privacy. Archie leaned back in his chair, mulling over this new development. He supposed he didn't have much to worry about—the Blacks were known for generally high levels of magic, on average. Hermione though—well, muggleborns were hard to predict. A lot of them had below-average level cores, but sometimes they had nearly double that of a regular core. Aunt Lily, for instance, apparently had much more magic than he had previously imagined, if what Harry said was true.

Hermione came back into the room a few minutes later with a pleased glow across her cheeks, and Archie realized he needn't have worried.

"It turned light blue," Hermione whispered softly, aware that their curious (and rather competitive) classmates were not-so-subtly trying to listen in. "She said that's plenty of magic for Neonatal Care, especially as I'm so efficient with my spells."

"That's great, Hermione," Archie said, proud and gratified on her behalf. His brilliant and hardworking friend deserved to study whatever she wanted.

When it was his turn, he ambled out into the hallway, mildly curious at what his own diagnosis would be. Since hearing Harry describe the device, he'd wondered what it would feel like. He grasped the end of the long tube firmly, taking a moment to stir his magic to activity.

"If you need any help in channeling your magic, just let me know, Mr. Potter," Bernhart said. She had a clipboard in one hand that Archie could see, with his perfect peripheral vision that everyone assumed he didn't have because of the fake glasses he wore, bore a list of names with several blanks after each.

He gave his professor a relaxed smile, then began funneling his magic into the device as though it was a person he was trying to Heal. He could feel the runes in the device helping him direct his raw magic, which would probably have gone all over the place otherwise, and noted with interest that the crystal sphere on the end was blooming with color already. He watched it absently as it turned from red to orange and began to bleed yellow, then got distracted by a sudden lurch in the pit of his stomach.

Something was tugging at his magic, and it wasn't the device. He felt a familiar tingling in his face and realized with mild horror that the magic holding his metamorphing in place was beginning to unravel. He firmed the transformation immediately, as the last thing he needed was for his teacher to witness a sudden inexplicable shift in his features. As he pulled magic back into maintaining his guise, however, he felt the magic that was being channeled to the device slow significantly, shortly coming to a stuttering halt.

Archie let out small pants of breath as Bernhart took the device from his numb fingers. He was monstrosly exhausted all of a sudden. At the forced smile on his professor's face, his gut clenched further and his eyes darted to the end of the magometer. It was a sickly yellow-green.

"Perfectly respectable, Mr. Potter," the older woman said evenly, marking down the shade on her clipboard. "And what specialties are you considering?"

"I want to do Infectious Diseases, Professor," he said, voice subdued.

"You... may want to reconsider," she said gently. "There are a lot of other-"

"I don't want to do anything else," he said firmly.

Bernhart's lips pressed together in a suppressed sigh. "The Infectious Disease path is one of the most difficult, Mr. Potter. I'm sure you have the drive, and you aren't lacking in intelligence, but at some point the practical work will be too much for your reserves. Many of the more advanced treatment procedures simply require a great deal of magic to pull off. I'm sorry, but it won't be possible to employ you in such a field."

Archie made a show of shrugging nonchalantly. "I don't need to be involved in treating them myself, Professor. I'm more interested in the research side of things, to be honest. I want to made headway in curing difficult or poorly understood diseases, but I don't care if I'm the one doing the physical curing. It's enough for me to focus my studies on them, and work in the theoretical aspects of the field."

"Even so," Bernhart protested, "The coursework required to achieve such a specialty is itself magically demanding. It would be difficult to pass with distinction-"

"But not impossible," Archie said, giving the professor his best believe-in-me smile. "I can do it, Professor. If it becomes too much I promise to reconsider switching specialties, but you can give me a chance, can't you?"

Bernhart looked torn, but allowed, "It is your decision. I can only attempt to guide you toward a responsible choice."

"Put me down for Infectious Diseases, please," Archie insisted. "I'll make it work."

She sighed, but did as he asked. He strolled back into the classroom with an air of supreme unconcern, but Hermione's frown told him she wasn't fooled at all.

"That took a long time," she said softly, "Is everything all right?"

"Perfect," Archie told her, "I'm Infectious Diseases, like I wanted."

"That's wonderful," Hermione said, excitement leaking into her voice, "What color did you get, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Green," he said, telling himself it wasn't technically a lie. No need to worry his friend. Especially since it wasn't a true concern, in any case. He hadn't realized staying constantly morphed tied up such a large portion of his magical core. It took enormous concentration, of course, especially to keep it up in his sleep, a feat he still felt great pride in having achieved, but he'd never considered the magic involved. Still, he wouldn't need access to *all* his magic until the upper years of study. By then, maybe Harry could come up with a way to make their Polyjuiced forms even more similar, so that his metamorphic abilities didn't have as much work to do.

Since their practicals had been canceled for the day, he and Hermione took a stroll out to their favorite tree to get some reading done before dinner. After the unexpected excitement of magic testing earlier, Archie had almost forgotten Hermione's unexplained staring

problem, but when he caught her giving him measuring looks from over her textbook he tilted his head in friendly invitation to speak.

"How was your winter break?" she asked, very casually.

Archie was pretty sure she'd asked him that several times since they'd been back, but he played along. "Really great. How was yours?"

"Fine," she hummed. After a moment she added, "It's strange going back to the muggle world after so much time here, though. What's it like, living with other wizards? Do you do anything exciting for Christmas-I mean, Yule?"

"Nothing spectacular," Archie said, "Just gift exchange and lots of food, really. Some folk go to services for the old gods at Midwinter, but my family isn't particularly spiritual."

"What about New Year?" Hermione asked, blinking curiously. "I've heard wizards mark the modern calendar year as well with parties and the like. There's a really popular one in England, now that I think about it, isn't there?"

"Ah, yes," Archie said, trying not to frown. "There's a big gala on New Year's Eve that the SOW Party throws. It's sort of a fundraiser, but also sort of a social event for, um, high society types."

"You mean purebloods," Hermione said bluntly, "Yes I've heard. Have you ever been?"

"I... did go this year," Archie said, wondering why on earth Hermione was so interested in the event. Had she heard something? There wasn't anyone at AIM who would have been at a pureblood society event besides him, he didn't think. American and British Wizarding communities didn't really mix, and all the Englanders at AIM were muggleborns or halfbloods. He supposed someone might have family who'd been there, but why would they talk to Hermione about it?

"That's unusual, isn't it?" Hermione commented, "It's my understanding that the guest list is very exclusive, at least when it comes to those of mixed heritage like us."

"My cousin wanted to introduce me to some people," Archie said vaguely, "And my dad was working security for the Minister that night, so my family went along. It was unusual, yes. I probably won't attend again."

"Why not?" Hermione asked, "Don't you get along with those Sow Party types?"

"I just won't have cause to," Archie said, a bit uncomfortable. Looking to change the subject, he added, "It's pronounced like 'sew' by the way, not 'sow.'"

"What?" Hermione looked taken aback, and Archie congratulated himself for successfully distracting her. "No, I'm sure I heard someone call them the Cow Party, and it rhymes, doesn't it?"

"Actually, no," Archie explained, "That's a reference to what the Party used to be called. It started out as the C.O.W. party, then it got changed later to the S.O.W. party."

"What does C.O.W. stand for?" Hermione wrinkled her nose, "And why would anyone think up such an awful acronym?"

Archie laughed. "I don't think anyone called it the C.O.W. Party back then. It was the Cure Our World campaign. It-well, it was actually extremely bigoted. 'Cure' was meant mostly as 'Cleanse,' I think, and the entire platform was the thinning out of mixed or muggle blood from Wizarding Society."

Hermione's mouth fell open in outrage. "But that's barbaric! It's the same sort of rhetoric that excuses ethnic genocide! How could there possibly be a political platform in this day and age that supports such obvious-" she broke off into a short growl of disbelief. "Cure our world indeed-just who do they think they *are* ?"

"They're mostly prejudiced gits who are too blinded by their own enmity to notice that the world has moved on without their bigotry," Archie said, shrugging a bit, "It's made up of families from a political oligarchy that goes back centuries, really, but their party was losing influence steadily after the fall of Grindelwald, until about forty years ago when Riddle took over and revitalized it completely. He's the one who changed the name to Save Our World, and it was his people who started calling it the SOW Party. Their motto is something to do with sowing the seeds of the future or whatever-that's why it's pronounced like 'sew' not 'sow.' It's mainly Light-sided wizards who remember what the true root of the Party is that call it the Cow Party-it's an insult, and a reminder, see?"

Hermione's eyes widened, "That's why their seal has a bag on it-it's a bag of seed!"

Archie grinned slightly, "Thought it was a bag of money, didn't you? That's what a lot of people think, cause it's made up primarily of old moneyed families."

"I knew the Sow Party had strong stances against muggle influences on society, but I didn't know it was the basis of their entire platform," Hermione said, looking incredibly upset.

"They have a lot of other agendas, too," Archie said, "At least, they do now. Riddle champions all sorts of causes through the Party, like the releasing of restrictions on Dark Magic and Artifacts, the reintroduction of certain standards of schooling, the establishment of various societies and charities devoted to the preservation of traditional Wizarding culture... all sorts of stuff, really. Blood supremacy is just one of the most volatile and controversial issues they push for. And the oldest."

"They have so much influence, though," Hermione groaned. "How can roughly half of an entire population be so-so- *wrong* ?"

"It's not half," Archie reassured her, now regretting bringing up the subject. "I mean, purebloods do make up a quite a chunk of the

population, but a lot of purebloods are in Dumbledore's Party, too. There're loads of people who don't care either way, too. It's just that those few who have a lot of influence in society tend to be in one party or the other. There aren't a lot of really powerful Neutrals anymore."

"They aren't all purebloods, though," Hermione said suddenly, "Other people associate with them, don't they? You went to one of their events, even. Why would anyone who wasn't pureblood support their agenda?"

"The SOW Party has power," Archie said, "Influence. They've rigged the employment system with laws and incentives so that the only way for a halfblood or muggleborn of talent to get a position in the Ministry or in the numerous private companies secretly funded by the Party is to play by their rules. Also, like I said, they support other things. Most Dark inclined witches and wizards support the Party, even if they aren't pureblooded, because it's the only organization fighting the stigma against Dark Magic."

"Why would anyone want to support Dark Magic?" Hermione snapped, clearly indignant.

"It's not all Unforgivable Curses," Archie said slowly, "It used to have a better reputation, actually. The Light aligned wizards have spent a lot of time in the last fifty years working to undermine the SOW Party by attacking the kinds of witches and wizards who support it. Traditionally Dark families also tend to be more politically conservative and more blood-obsessed. So by working for restrictions against Dark Magic and setting a tone of intolerance about it, Dumbledore's Party can indirectly discredit other things Dark wizards stand for, and resist efforts by the SOW Party to pass blood supremacist legislation as well."

"So instead of debating the real issues, both sides just attack the parts of the opposition's platform that are easiest," Hermione summed up, disgust on her face, "But that's ludicrous. Then you've got people who don't even care about blood supporting prejudiced

policies for the sake of some other end and causes of real merit being overlooked on both sides because of which side endorses them-it's so terribly inefficient and irresponsible!"

"It's politics," Archie said, not sure what there was to be so worked up about. Then again, he grew up knowing how things were in the Wizarding world. "It's always been complicated. Everything is about alliances and money and power and the exchanges they facilitate. There are ways to get around the system, though, if you're clever."

"It's idiotic," Hermione insisted. "Someone has to do something." She began muttering to herself wildly as she abandoned her textbook completely in favor of scribbling out long lines of neatly printed letters in one of her notebooks.

Archie settled back to watch her fume and plot. He wasn't sure if there was anything a thirteen-year-old could do, exactly, but if there was, Hermione would be the one to figure it out. She was alarmingly brilliant when she set her mind to a problem. All the more reason to keep her mind on things other than him, in fact. If nothing else, solving the Wizarding world's woes would keep Hermione too busy to consider his many idiosyncrasies.

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Transitioning back to her role as Rigel after the break came almost too easily to Harry. Even after being on the other side and meeting all her friends as herself for a brief moment, Rigel's semi-persona was comfortable and almost relaxing. Here at Hogwarts she didn't have to worry about what Archie was doing or saying or what her parents or Sirius would think or what others would think they were thinking or... anything. She could just let go of all that drama for a while and get back into the familiar rhythm of classes, studying, and, of course, potions making.

Her friends hadn't brought up anything about the gala since she'd been back, which she took as a good sign that their ruse had been pulled off rather deftly-that is, until she walked in on them talking about it without her.

It was the first Saturday after break, and she was the last to wake. She'd been absolutely exhausted by the time she collapsed into bed the night before, having turned back a full day and a half cumulatively since the last time she'd slept. On weekends, when Defense Club meetings meant there was no need to wake up early to exercise, she could take as much sleep as she wanted, getting the most out of her sleep-cycle adjusting potion, even if it did make her look like a bit of a layabout to her roommates.

She washed her teeth and face and grabbed her bag, thinking to beg a meal from Binny before turning back once again to see Snape about an assignment she was meant to be handing in that week.

Spotting her friends across the common room, she wove her way over with the intent to see what was on the agenda later in the day. As she approached, however, she heard Millicent saying, "You noticed too? I thought maybe he was nervous."

"Rigel doesn't get nervous," Theo, whose chair was facing away from Rigel as she walked up, scoffed lightly, "More likely he was acting for the sake of his fam-"

A swift elbow from Blaise, who had noted Rigel's presence, shut Theo's mouth rather quickly, but it was too late at that point to pretend politely she hadn't heard. She loitered at the edge of the couch as serenely as she was able, smiling good naturedly to make sure Theo knew she wasn't offended-she knew he didn't think long about most of the things he said. It was part of his charm.

"You guys are talking about the gala, right?" she said.

"We just thought you seemed a bit uncomfortable that night," Pansy, ever the diplomat, said. "Was everything all right?"

"Of course." Rigel shrugged. "I suppose I must have been distracted. I worried about Harry most of the night-she's not very social, and I know how many people were looking forward to meeting her."

"Miss Potter was just lovely," Pansy said, "There was no reason to be concerned. How could we not like anyone you held in such esteem?"

"That's kind of you to say, Pansy," Rigel said, amused. "Harry did mention to me how solicitous you were that evening. It meant a lot that you all included her."

She hid a smile at the slightly guilty looks on several of her friends' faces. *Serves them right*, she thought slyly. As Harry she didn't care much how people who were essentially strangers looked at her, but as Rigel she wanted better of her friends.

"We were, ah, going to work on that Transfiguration essay this morning," Theo said after a long moment. "Did you want to join us?"

Rigel shook her head. She couldn't tell them that she'd finished the essay on Tuesday when it hadn't been assigned until Wednesday, but she had other business in any case. "I have to go see Snape."

"It's Saturday." Draco frowned. "And you just saw him last night."

She mentally winced, realizing that was an idiotic thing to let slip out. She was in fact about to turn back to the previous night, but it was entirely surreal to hear Draco tell her she'd already done something she hadn't, in fact, done yet. "I forgot to ask him something," she said, resigning herself to making up an excuse to stop by that morning when she was next present in it, just in case one of her friends checked.

As she left the common room, she wondered if she was overdoing it on the time-turner, now that she had it back. This would make her third-no, fourth-Friday evening. She had also spent Friday evening brewing in her lab, researching obscure cauldron treating techniques

in a secluded corner of the Library, and working on one of Flint's essays in the Come and Go Room. At this rate, she would be through most of the things she was interested in learning by the end of the year. Then again, those things would likely lead to new things to learn, and she didn't know how long she would be allowed access to such a valuable resource. It would be criminal to waste it.

She slipped into an alcove and turned back sixteen hours to the previous evening. With a quick check to make sure she did, in fact, have the assignment for Snape finished and in her bag, she made her way through the dungeons toward Snape's office. With a quick nod and greeting to Draco, who was going in the opposite direction, she knocked on the door and waited to be admitted.

There was no immediate answer, which she found odd, as they nearly always met at the same time on Friday evenings to discuss the week's assignments. Perhaps he was tied up elsewhere. She debated leaving the assignment under his door, but decided she could wait at least a little while for him to show up. It wasn't as though she didn't have the time, she thought with a secret grin. The grin left her face when she realized she had forgotten to get breakfast before turning back to meet Snape. Her stomach rumbled and she patted it sympathetically. She had the suspicion that time-turning took a toll on the user's energy reserves, as she was much hungrier than usual of late.

It was ten minutes later that her Head of House came striding down the corridor with wide sweeps of his robes. She put her Herbology textbook back in her bag and stood aside patiently while he unlocked his office door. She settled into the chair he conjured for her and took out her assignment from her bag. He'd given her a recipe for an unknown potion and asked that she fill in the blank ingredients and directions based on what she imagined the recipe was intended to do. She'd come up with two possible versions that she thought were, if not equally viable, at least *interesting* interpretations, and was eager to see what he made of them.

Snape dropped a bag from his pocket onto his desk and scowled at it for a moment before sitting down as well. As his robes met the chair, they sent up a fine cloud of black dust that glinted oddly in the torchlight.

Rigel's eyes fixated on the metallic particles floating between them for a long moment, a memory stirring. "What is that from, Professor?" She didn't think she'd seen it anywhere at Hogwarts. It definitely looked familiar, though.

"This?" the Potions Master spelled it away with an annoyed sneer. "From the Metallurgists' Guild, of course. Their foyer is coated in it."

"The one on Craftsman Alley?" she asked, frowning. She'd never been there, but it wasn't too far from the Potions Guild.

"Mm," Snape hummed, sounding displeased. "I acquired a number of suspiciously cheap moonstones from a dubious associate and required use of the Guild's expertise to ensure the stones were genuine."

"Does the Metallurgist Guild often work with the Potions Guild?" she asked distractedly as she tried to recall where she'd seen the dust. Somewhere in the alleys... it hit her. She'd knocked into a man on her way to the Guild one morning, a man whose robes were covered in the black dust, and whose little brown sack she'd helped to recover... she had to stop herself from groaning out loud. It had been *Pettigrew*. She hadn't recognized him as her parents' old friend at the time, but looking back it could have been no one else. He'd probably had the jewel on him that very day-in the sack she'd so blithely handed back to him, even!

"The metallurgists will check the properties of any materials you bring them, for a relatively low fee," Snape was saying. "Though I might have saved myself the trip-the odds of Fletcher having anything but synthetic moonstone were miniscule in any case..."

He seemed to be speaking mostly to himself, now, which was good, because Rigel wasn't hearing most of it. If Pettigrew had been to the Metallurgist Guild with the artifact, they may have tested its properties-they may know something about the jewel, or remember Pettigrew and be able to recognize its description if someone were to ask. But how would anyone know to ask unless she did something about it?

"In any case, your assignment, Mr. Black?"

Rigel snapped back into the present, relegating the jewel to the back of her mind for the moment. "Here," she said, handing it across the desk. She sat silently as he perused her work, and felt a little glow of pleasure as his lips twitched just the slightest bit in pleased approval.

"Very creative," he said, drawling his voice a bit, "Though your adding the jasmine blossoms in the second variation is a bit of a stretch-its only purpose would be to eliminate the effects of the garlic, which would make putting garlic in the potion to begin with rather fatuous."

"But not beyond the capacity for idiocy that some recipe designers possess," Rigel said innocently, fighting to keep a smirk off her face.

"Hmm, quite," Snape said, his eyes flicking up from the parchment to assess her politely interested expression. "Still, it was a bit impudent to turn Heinrich's Vampire Repellant into a breath-freshening potion, don't you think?"

"Is that what the original recipe was?" Rigel's eyes widened dramatically. "I had no idea."

Snape looked very close to rolling his eyes. "Clearly you require more difficult coursework in the future."

"I wouldn't want to strain your question-fabricating abilities," Rigel said, affecting a concerned look. "I'm sure it's been a while since you

had to come up with new assignments. Er, how long have you been teaching again, Sir?"

"Impudent brat," Snape snorted. "For that, you can write a four foot essay on the effects of modern muggle agricultural technology on the potency and availability of magical ingredients worldwide."

Rigel couldn't stop the smile that escaped her. *That* sounded interesting. "Thank you, Sir."

Snape sneered, but nonetheless wrote out the assigned topic for her with a generally satisfied air. "Now," he said, leaning back once more, "Your extracurricular classes are going well, I presume? No difficulty completing the winter assignments without your time-turner?"

"Yes, Sir, everything is going smoothly," Rigel said, tamping down on any guilt she might feel at overusing the device until nothing but responsibility and gratitude shone on her face.

"Good," he said, "Your next Ministry-required evaluation will be mid-February."

"All right," she said, not particularly worried. The last few had been straightforward-well, as straightforward as the Department of Mysteries got, apparently.

"As to your apprenticeship-"

"He said yes ?" Rigel beamed, having been waiting for this moment since she stepped off the train.

Snape gave her an odd look, and Rigel realized he would have expected Sirius to have told her already. He probably did tell Archie, but Archie likely assumed she would assume correctly.

"He did," Snape said, valiantly suppressing a sneer at the barest mention of Sirius in passing. He really was getting better at ignoring

his sustained hostility in her presence, she thought, quietly grateful. "As such, you ought to have some idea of what your commitment will entail. These past three years we have covered a wide assortment of potions, moving much quicker through those of common or important use than I had originally anticipated when first I agreed to tutor you."

She allowed herself a small sigh of pride that she was certain did not escape his amused notice.

"We will continue filling in what few gaps remain as the year progresses, moving on to exceptionally difficult and dangerous potions in your weekly lessons," Snape went on, "However, I anticipate that your grounding in the material aspects of the field will be as thorough as I can reasonably make it within the next few months." At her surprised expression, Snape allowed a wry smirk to cross his mouth. "You underestimate how far you have come, Rigel. I have never taught a student so dedicated to mastering the field."

She felt her cheeks grow warm against her will. She thought there ought to be a word for the feeling that welled up when everything you'd ever wanted was handed over without ceremony.

Snape cleared his throat uncomfortably. "There is more to mastery than an in-depth knowledge of ingredients and recipes, however. That is why, beginning next year, I will be teaching you free brewing." Rigel felt her breath actually catch in her lungs. Was he serious? "It is a dangerous technique, and many Potions Masters go their entire careers without so much as dabbling in it, but you are not most brewers, Mr. Black. I believe you could become quite adept at the art, given enough practice."

Her smile probably looked ridiculous, but she couldn't help it. Free brewing was the ultimate mode of experimentation in the potions community. Successful free brewing had resulted in some of the most revolutionary discoveries of the last few centuries.

"I would like that very much, Sir," she managed to get out after a moment of internal celebration.

"There is a condition," Snape said quietly, in a tone that caused the smile to slide right off her face. "Free brewing is not a technique that everyone is capable of performing safely. It requires a good deal of magic, and exceptional control over that magic, to hold an unstable potion together until it can be neutralized manually. Without that magic and control, the first misstep might cost a brewer his hands-or his eyes."

Rigel grimaced, but it was not at the gruesome image-rather, it was at the direction she could now see this conversation progressing. "You want me to stop using the suppressor." All enthusiasm was gone from her voice, now.

"Not immediately or all at once," Snape said, attempting to be diplomatic. "Eventually, however, yes. You must learn to harness all of your magic, Mr. Black."

She refrained from saying that such a statement was merely his own opinion, and instead said evenly, "Is this a condition of the apprenticeship itself, or only of learning free brewing?"

Snape scowled. "I have accepted you as my apprentice, Mr. Black, regardless of your own stubbornness, but remember that I have just explained the increasingly shallow body of knowledge I have to impart. I could spend the next four years coming up with exponentially more obscure and unlikely recipes and ingredient combinations, but that would not service your potions education in any useful way. Alternatively, we could attempt to fill the remainder of your school years researching various projects, but would it truly be enough to satisfy you? You sought this apprenticeship because you wanted to benefit from my instruction, did you not? Free brewing is something only a small handful of people on this half of the world can teach you. I am offering this knowledge to you, and, if you are very adept and can convince me of the prudence of such a thing, to your cousin Harriett Potter, as well. All you have to do is gain control of your own magic-something which will benefit you in *all* areas of your studies. Do you truly believe that is an unreasonable condition?"

She felt as though she'd swallowed something that had been advertised as sweet and had instead turned out extremely sour. A rather childish part of her was saying, *he can't do that*, in the back of her mind, but he could, and he was, she was forced to acknowledge. She couldn't argue with his reasoning, either, really. She had heard many times how dangerous free brewing was, and magic was the ultimate stabilizer, everyone knew that. It made perfect sense that wizards of greater magic would be better able to brew unstable potions without getting blown up. Even so, she couldn't help but think this was just Snape's excuse for making her give up the suppressor he disapproved of without a fight. She had to give him points for Slytherin cleverness, at least.

At her long, silent hesitation, Snape frowned, and asked, uncharacteristically earnest, "Why are you so against this? An honest attempt at controlling your magic does not seem so much to ask, in exchange for what you want more than anything-do not deny it." She wasn't going to. It was everything she'd ever wanted. "You are a *Slytherin*, Rigel. Why do you even consider jeopardizing your primary ambition simply so that you may remain mediocre?"

She chaffed at the last comment, but recognized that Snape was making an honest, if somewhat snarky, effort to comprehend her reticence. "I'm not sure you can understand," she said slowly. "Most of the Slytherin students have ambitions of power or wealth; they want to be important, to be known and have influence in some way or another. I-my ambition is somewhat antithetic to that. I don't want to be important. I want to do important *work*, but I don't want to be noticed myself."

Snape looked unconvinced. "You cannot tell me you don't crave recognition-I have seen it. There is no shame in such a desire, Rigel. You *should* be proud of your talents."

Rigel felt her forehead crease with frustration, not sure there was anyway to explain what she wanted in a way he would understand. "I just want to learn potions. When I came here, yes, I wanted your recognition, because it validated my reasons for pursuing this field.

When you told me I was good at potions-I don't think you can understand what it meant to me. No one ever told me I *should* study potions. It was a hobby my family humored, and financially supported, which I'm very grateful for, but it wasn't-I needed someone who *knew* potions to tell me I had a real chance at making it in the field. You made me believe that even though I'm a-" she broke off before her mouth could run completely away with her. She had almost said *halfblood girl* . "Even though I'm *young*, that I have the potential to do something great with my abilities. I do think that now. And it's enough. I don't care if other people know how talented I am. If I make Mastery, I won't care if anyone ever hears the name Rigel Black again. I just want the knowledge, and to further the field, and invent potions that change people's lives, and-" She swallowed hard. "I just want to be left alone to brew, Sir."

Snape had the oddest, most unfathomable expression she'd ever seen as he looked at her. After a lengthy pause, however, he merely said, "What does this have to do with your magic? Learning control will only help your potion brewing. You can still be an anonymous academic if you wish."

"I can't though, don't you see?" Rigel frowned deeply, wondering if he was being deliberately obtuse. "I'd be happy living my life mostly unnoticed, apart from my work, but having powerful magic is not something people in our society just *ignore* . Those with unusual gifts are picked out of the crowd, elevated to a position of high expectations. People start calling them 'Lord' and push them into throwing their magic around, if not literally, then socially and politically. Everyone wants to be acquainted with them, except no one actually wants to be their friend. I don't want that life. I just want to be left alone."

"You do not know that such a fate is inevitable," Snape argued, "There are plenty of powerful wizards who live in relative peace."

"No, there aren't," Rigel said flatly. "Don't say Dumbledore and Riddle, either, because neither of them are left in peace. People watch them constantly. They have to make friends with other

powerful people because if they don't make friends they'll make enemies simply by being perceived as too aloof or secretive. People are too curious to leave power alone. They already look at me differently because I speak Parseltongue and because of the weird thing my magic can do with other people's cores. If it got out that I had magic so powerful I could barely control it, everyone would want to know what I was going to do with it. No one with power manages to stay unnoticed for very long, unless they hide it, which is what I am *trying* to do."

"You are ignoring it, not hiding it," Snape scowled.

"But it's for the better, can't you see that?" Rigel leaned forward to brace her hands on the desk in front of her. "Most of the people with high levels of magic in history end up becoming Dark Lords or getting killed by someone jealous of their power or creating dangerous magical artifacts that ravage the earth or-or-something else incredibly egomaniacal and stupid. No one should have that kind of power. It's dangerous to the whole world. If I develop my magic, that's one step closer to using it-if I even *can* use it without hurting people. More than likely I'll lose control and something terrible will happen."

"Who do you insist that you are a danger?" Snape said, visibly frustrated. "Have you ever actually hurt anyone with your magic?"

Rigel shook her head slowly. "No... but I have this gut feeling I can't shake. It's telling me my magic is dangerous."

"A feeling is not sufficient reason for ignoring your potential," Snape snapped. "What's dangerous is not learning to control your magic. If pent up long enough it will hurt someone."

"Not if it's suppressed all the time," Rigel said stubbornly, "It's only if I take off the suppressor that it will have the chance to lash out. My aunt keeps hers suppressed all the time, and-"

"Do not bring Lily into this," Snape snarled, bringing a hand down on the top of his desk angrily. With a deep breath, he reined his temper, and added, "This is about you. No one else."

" / don't want to take a chance with other people's safety."

Snape rubbed his temple in irritation, "And I need you to acknowledge that I have more knowledge on the subject of magical abilities than what panicked conjectures you've come up with on your own. You are not the first student with unruly magic I have taught, nor will you be the last. There are ways to control it, ways that do *not* involve putting a lid on it. Just because you cannot feel your magic at the moment doesn't mean the fire isn't there. If you leave things as they are too long, it will boil over. You must learn to *tame* your magic, not simply cage it."

"Some animals can't be tamed," Rigel muttered. "My magic is not a lion. It's a lethifold."

"You are being dramatic," Snape told her, sneering. "And what's more, you know that I am correct in insisting on this. It is not for negotiation. Promise me that you will work on it."

Rigel mulled the demand over silently, trying to come up with another argument she could give him. What rankled was that she *had* other arguments, but they all pertained to keeping she and Archie's ruse running as smoothly as possible. If she began developing her magic, surely people would notice, and people noticing Rigel meant higher expectations for Archie. He didn't have as much magic as she did-it would be impossible for him to pretend he did, unless he kept his aura shielded his entire life and ducked all attempts at making him use his power somehow. It was just too dangerous for them if Rigel Black had uncommonly powerful magic. She couldn't tell Snape that to flaunt her magic was to risk a stint in Azkaban, however, and without that argument he would see no reason why attempting to harness her full power could cause problems.

The most she could do, she realized, was stall for time. "I will work on it," she said, begrudgingly and with no small amount of bitterness. That was vague enough to put him off for a while, surely. Perhaps in the meantime she could find out exactly how much magic a free brewer needed, anyway. There's no way it was as much as she had. Then she'd just have to adjust the suppressor until she had enough to be successful without letting all of it out to overwhelm her and cause trouble.

"If I think that you are not making sufficient progress, I will take things into my own hands, Mr. Black," Snape said, sinister warning in every syllable. "If you break your word I will have no compunction doing whatever is necessary to facilitate this."

Rigel pressed her lips together in slight resentment, but nodded once, capitulating, if a bit gracelessly. It felt like she'd been backed into a corner, and told that it was for her own good, to boot.

As she left the office, she willed herself to relax. She was Snape's apprentice. She should be happy, not angry. She was going to learn things many potions brewers would give their golden cauldrons to be privy to. And really, what could Snape do if she didn't put all her energy into controlling her magic? He could forcibly remove her suppressor, perhaps, but he couldn't *make* her use her magic. She would just outwait him, and show him that she was talented enough to learn free brewing without lord-level magic.

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That evening she slipped up to the Owlrey, a note printed by dicto-quill on nondescript parchment clutched between gloved fingers. She reassured herself that there was no way to trace who the letter had come from, even if the best people at the Ministry tried tracking it. They would only see that it came from Hogwarts, and they already suspected the jewel had something to do with someone at the castle,

so there was no reason for anyone to think of her, specifically, when they read it. Even so, she could not help feeling very vulnerable as she read through the words one last time.

To: Aurors in pursuit of goblin artifact,

Man with large jewel of suspicious origin was seen in the Metallurgist Guild on Craftsman Alley, July. Questioning the material specialists there may yield the answers you seek.

-A concerned citizen

She picked the most common-looking owl she could find and whispered the destination "Ministry of Magic, Department of Magical Law Enforcement" in its ear. It winged away silently into the night, and she sighed with more than a little relief. She had done something to help the Aurors without implicating herself in the slightest. Feeling pleased with herself, she stole back down the tower steps and made her way toward the Come and Go Room. By now, her earlier self should be done using it, and she wanted to get a short workout in before crashing there for the night.

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It was a few weeks into the new semester that Rigel finally made the acquaintance of the other Alchemy student Dumbledore had told her about.

She was somewhat surreptitiously slinking through the Library late that evening, skirting slightly close to curfew but not quite breaking the rules yet. She technically shouldn't be out without her invisibility cloak on, as she was currently also in Gryffindor Tower finishing up a study session with Percy, but she wanted to check out a couple of books, and that meant being visible to Madam Pince going both in and out of the Library.

There was no one there to see her anyway, so near to closing time. Madam Pince locked up a half hour before curfew set in every night, and it was too early in the term for there to be frantic OWL and NEWT students begging for five more minutes.

She was quite surprised, then, to round the corner of the dusty, seldom-used isle on Alchemy texts and see someone else standing there, nose deep in a thick, faded tome. He looked up at her approach and frowned in a way that reminded her of Percy Weasley.

"This section is restricted," he said, eyeing her tie in an obvious way. "You have to have a pass."

"I have one," she said, judging the boy to be around sixteen or seventeen, despite his rather petite size.

"From who?" he asked, looking incredulous.

"Professor Dumbledore," she said, frowning back at him. Did he not believe her? She didn't know why he cared, but maybe he was a prefect she didn't recognize.

The boy snapped his book closed emphatically and scoffed. "The Headmaster gave *you* a pass to the Alchemy section? You don't look old enough to even be an OWL student."

"I'm in third year," she said, trying to be polite. "I'm very interested in learning Alchemy, though, and Dumbledore was kind enough to give me a pass and a few recommendations when I asked."

"You can't learn Alchemy from a book," he said, a patronizing expression on his face.

"What are you doing here, then?" she asked, a bit annoyed at his condescension.

"I am looking up conversion tables for the magic coefficients of rare materials," he sniffed, "Not that you know what that means."

Realizing at last that he must be the sixth year student Dumbledore had told her about, she took a deep breath and reminded herself not to be antagonistic toward someone who could help her out, if she convinced him of her good intentions.

"You must be Mr. Albright, then," she said, smiling in a friendly way that seemed to catch him off guard. "Dumbledore said you were in his Alchemy class."

"Really." Albright's eyes narrowed, but he dutifully held a hand out nonetheless. "Yes, I am the Heir of the House of Albright. And you are?"

"Rigel Black," she said, shaking his hand for only a moment before he snatched it back with a slight sneer. Ignoring that, she offered, "He said you were working on a project this semester. Can you tell me about it?"

"I think not," he said, wiping his hand on the side of his Ravenclaw robes.

"I understand," Rigel said, forcing a smile, "I suppose you want to keep it a secret until it's finished."

"No, I just don't want to discuss it with a burgeoning Dark wizard. Rowena knows what you'd do with the information," Albright said, looking perfectly serious despite the outlandish nature of his remark.

"I'm not a Dark wizard," she said, eyebrows rising.

"Not yet, maybe," Albright said, unconvinced.

Deciding to try a different tract, she said, "I won't ask about your project, then. How did you become interested in Alchemy? Have you been studying it since third year, or did you start earlier?"

The affronted look on his face was almost humorous. "Don't you know who I am?"

"You're Mr. Albright," Rigel said, containing a sigh, "You haven't told me your first name yet."

"I am Eric Alright, son of Ulrich Albright, Aldermaster of the Alchemist Guild, Premier Executive of Illuminux Inc.," Albright said, no small amount of exasperation in his voice. "You want to study Alchemy and you don't know that my family *is* Alchemy? Nicolas Flamel is my many-times-great uncle, for Merlin's sake."

"Oh," Rigel said, trying to look impressed, "I didn't know."

"How could you know anything about Alchemy?" Albright said, shaking his head in disgust, "It's a Light art. Ordered. Precise. Balanced. Requiring measured sacrifice. Not something Dark wizards can understand."

"What makes you so sure I'm Dark?" Rigel asked, a bit exasperated. While true that Alchemy was a highly exact field of magic, you certainly didn't have to have Light magic to use it. No more than you had to have Dark magic to use Divination, though that field of magic was highly unpredictable and very forceful in nature.

"You're a Black," Albright shrugged, as though the answer were obvious, "Your Darkness is bred into you by centuries of selective magical copulation, just as my *Light* magic was carefully cultivated by my own ancestors over a multitude of generations."

"It... hasn't been proven that magical natures are determined by genetics, actually," Rigel told him. "A lot of people have different natures than their parents or grandparents."

"That's what Dark wizards say to deflect suspicion from their dark deeds," Albright said, sneering. When she opened her mouth to protest, he cut her off, "I don't have all night to spend arguing with you, Black. Just try not to leave fingerprints all over the books-or better yet, give up this passing fancy with Alchemy now. You'll never get anywhere in the field with your family history, anyway."

He stepped around her pointedly, giving as wide a berth as he could in the narrow isle. "Thanks for the advice," she said, the sarcasm helping to soothe her annoyance somewhat. She got the books as quickly as she was able, and just barely managed to get them to the front desk before Pince could order her out.

She hurried to get back to the common room before curfew set in. She had down in her notebook that she had turned back a few minutes after her earlier self had left the Gryffindor common room, so she should be all right to reenter the common room as she was.

Draco came across her in the dungeons, and joined her on the way to the common room entrance. His hair was wet from showering after Quidditch practice, which had been running later and later as Flint's 'win or else' philosophy began to gather momentum as the Quidditch Cup approached.

"You looked exhausted," Rigel said, eyeing the way he winced every other step. Too much time on a broom could severely cramp the leg muscles.

"It'll be worth it, if we win," Draco said, smiling tiredly. "Where've you been?"

"Gryffindor common room," she said, anticipating his annoyed huff with a grin.

"What do you see in those blood traitors, Rigel?"

"Oh, the usual," she said lightly, "Friendship, companionable silences, long walks by the Forbidden Forest-

"Stop, before I hurl what little dinner is still left in my stomach all over your ugly boots," Draco groaned.

"They aren't ugly," Rigel sighed, "They're-

"Practical," Draco mimicked. "So you've said."

They walked the cold corridors in silence for a little while, Draco pretending not to shiver and Rigel pretending not to notice. Rigel's mind kept going back to Albright, and how peculiar his opinions had been, and she wondered if his family was indeed as notable as he seemed to believe, or if he was simply full of himself.

"Draco," she said, "Have you heard of a family called Albright? I think they're-"

"Albright?" Draco's head snapped around so quickly that several drops of water flew off his hair and onto her face. She wiped them away with amusement as her friend demanded, "What about them?"

"You know of them, then?" Rigel said, a bit surprised, "I've never heard them mentioned in society before."

"Not Dark Society," Draco rolled his eyes at her, "They're Light supremacists, Rigel. The whole family is a bunch of high-strung narcissists who spend all their political capital opposing everything *my* family does regardless of principle or reason."

"I thought they were mainly Alchemists," Rigel said, taken aback by Draco's passionate dislike.

"That's their income source," Draco said, waving a hand dismissively, "They've had a stranglehold on the Alchemist Guild for centuries, and use it to channel money back and forth between the research labs there and the Albrights' private corporation, which is basically an elaborate front for them funneling Guild money into their various political campaigns."

"That... sounds involved," Rigel said, "How do you know so much about it?"

"Ulrich Albright *hates* my father, and I assure you the feeling is entirely mutual," Draco said, his face pinched and angry. "Albright is always getting in the way of the SOW Party's agendas. Father thinks Illuminix is being used to manipulate the market on magical

materials, too. They're always buying up huge stockpiles of ores or crops, claiming they need it for their 'Alchemical research,' but really they're just monopolizing the commodities so they can allocate them strategically and force the prices up. You remember that shortage of fairy eggs two years ago?"

Rigel blinked. "Of course. The price tripled for almost six months. I had to start substituting doxy eggs instead for some of my potions."

"Everyone did," Draco said, crossing his arms indignantly, "And guess who just happened to buy up an enormous pile of doxy eggs right before the fairy egg shortage? Illuminix. They planned the whole thing. Or at least took advantage of insider knowledge somehow. Just like they did with the ginseng crop during the Sleeping Sickness."

Rigel's lips parted in surprise. "That was them? How did they know? And why weren't they selling any of it, if they wanted to make money?"

"To spite my father, of course. I almost died, Rigel," Draco reminded her.

"There's no way they could have known you were allergic to the substitution," Rigel said, frowning. "Your father didn't even tell the school nurse what your allergies were."

"They probably got access to my records at St. Mungo's," Draco said.

"Those are heavily warded, I'm pretty sure," Rigel pointed out.

"Well I don't know how they do it, exactly, but it's a pretty sinister coincidence, don't you think?" Draco scowled.

"I suppose, but surely they wouldn't take a political rivalry so far as to try and indirectly kill you," Rigel reasoned.

"They certainly would." Draco looked at her in an incredulous manner. "The Albrights are the sworn enemies of the Malfoys."

He said it with such deadly seriousness, even as his hair dripped a puddle onto the flagstones, that Rigel couldn't help but poke fun. "I thought that was the Weasleys."

Draco scoffed. "The Weasleys are an embarrassment. And blood traitors anyway. The Albrights are evil."

"They probably think the Malfoys are evil, too. Maybe you're both just misunderstood," Rigel suggested, starting to walk back toward the common room again.

Draco spluttered as he scrambled to catch up. "We are *not* misunderstood. The Malfoys *are* evil."

She shot him a sideways look that said clearly, *are you sure you want to go with that?*

"I mean, we have tended in the past to be a bit unscrupulous. And drawn to Dark Lords." He paused for a moment in thought. "I mean, in the past some members of my family have done what might be considered regrettable things in the pursuit of power. But it's *family tradition* ."

Rigel snorted, "That is a rotten tradition."

Draco's face was positively indignant. "It is not. Tradition is what holds our way of life together. It's what-"

"I've heard the Party speeches," Rigel cut in, summoning a grin to show she wasn't actually annoyed. "You have to admit that not all traditions are good, though."

"Like what?" Draco said, lifting his chin defiantly.

"Like..." she cast her mind around for something that wouldn't offend her friend. "The Blacks have a tradition of beheading our house

elves and mounting their heads on the hallway walls."

"What?" Draco spluttered, "My mother never told me that."

"Well, it's true," Rigel said, smirking, "At least for the main household. It's stupid though, because they smell even under the preservation charms and they clash with every décor style that isn't utterly macabre. That is an example of the power of tradition, though. Some Black ancestor decided to behead his house elf and keep it around, so every Lord and Lady Black after that did the same thing without thinking how distasteful and pointless and gruesome it actually was."

Draco was silent for a moment, looking slightly grossed out. "I'm sure it had... great significance at one point," he settled for saying, not even managing to keep the dubious look off his face.

And Rigel was sure it was just another example of blind adherence to inherited patterns of behavior and thought, but she was much too fond of her friendship with Draco to ever say something so bluntly dismissive out loud. There were some opinions he was simply ill equipped to hear.

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The first Quidditch match of the new term was on the last Saturday in January, between Slytherin and Ravenclaw. Spirits were particularly high on the Ravenclaw side, as the ravens were currently leading in points for the House Cup, and a victory on the Quidditch pitch would put them almost irrevocably ahead. Usually when Slytherin played a match, the two houses not participating would choose to root for whoever the other team was, but in this case the lions and badgers didn't want Ravenclaw to pull so far ahead in the House Cup either, so the support for the two teams was rather mixed.

Rigel was in the staff box, having been invited along with Pansy to once again spend the match with the Malfoys. She was beginning to think they simply enjoyed having people to talk down to wherever they went. Or else they were hoping for a progress report on their son.

"How is the new term coming along?" Narcissa asked after greeting them with her patented poised smile.

"Very well," Pansy said. "Draco is doing particularly well in Transfigurations and his Dueling Club is a complete success. We've had nearly a dozen new members since he opened it to the school."

Rigel hid a smile at her friend's prompt report. Apparently she was not the only one who suspected the true reason for the Malfoys' ongoing invitation.

"How wonderful," Narcissa said, smiling proudly. "It is so nice to see Draco taking up the mantle of leadership at such a young age."

"He has a natural charisma," Rigel chimed in. "Even the older students from other Houses listen respectfully when he runs drills." She didn't add that some of them probably only listened to him because his father was a school governor. There were plenty of people in the club who *did* genuinely respect Draco's way of doing things.

"He is only a third year," Mr. Malfoy pointed out with an air of polite disbelief. "Your interpretations are perhaps influenced by your friendship with our son."

"Results speak for themselves," Pansy said serenely. "He's already had several requests for individual training sessions. Not that he'd agree to allow his time to be monopolized like that, of course."

"The individual training sessions are for us, after all," Rigel added.

The adults laughed politely, looking satisfied that their son was at least doing well enough that his friends had nothing unhappy to say.

"And how are your studies progressing, Miss Parkinson?" Mr. Malfoy asked after glancing down at the pitch for a moment to check the progress of the warm-ups. "Which classes are you taking this year?"

"My extracurriculars are Divination, Arithmancy, and Care of Magical Creatures," Pansy recited, looking as though she'd told him so before at some point and wondered why he was asking again.

"Ah yes, I recall now," Mr. Malfoy said, smiling in a way that Rigel didn't believe for a second was casual. "And you, Mr. Black? What electives did you select again?"

Rigel fought to keep her eyes from narrowing, sure that she had heard more than casual interest in his tone. "Arithmancy, Runes, and Magical Theory," she said.

"Not Healing?" Malfoy frowned in a politely curious way that didn't fit his face at all. "But you are so skilled in the art, Mr. Black."

Rigel affected a look of earnest gratitude. "Madam Pomfrey is kind enough to tutor me unofficially whenever we both have free time. My cousin Harriett lends me her Healing textbooks over the holidays, too, and has been a great help in furthering my understanding of the subject."

"Why not simply take the class, if you have such an interest in it?" Narcissa asked, looking genuinely perplexed.

Rigel shrugged a tiny bit. "I had to choose the three subjects I thought would be most difficult to learn on my own. I can learn Healing through my cousin and Madam Pomfrey's generosity, so there was no reason to take up a slot on my schedule that could be filled by a subject I have no other way to study."

"Is it wise to attempt to focus on so many different subjects at once, instead of choosing to master a few that interest you greatly?" Mr. Malfoy asked, one eyebrow raised.

"They all interest me greatly," she said, as guilelessly as possible.

"It is so rare to meet such a devoted academic these days," Narcissa cut in, smiling in a way Rigel knew was meant to soften her husband's rather pointed inquiries. "Perhaps some of it will rub off on our Heir."

"Draco doesn't take direction from his peers," Pansy said, drawing the attention away from Rigel once more. "It's quite the other way around."

The game began soon after, and Rigel's attention was distracted from wondering why Mr. Malfoy was suddenly so interested in her schoolwork. Perhaps he was simply curious as to how a Hogwarts student learned so much about a subject that was not emphasized in the curriculum. It had seemed like more than that, but Rigel admitted to herself that she was probably being paranoid. She had been feeling increasingly as though she were missing something important, lately, and it was apparently starting to give her suspicious tendencies.

Snape had appeared sometime just before the tip off, and now stood at the elder Malfoy's elbow as the game commenced.

"The team looks in fine form," Malfoy remarked a few minutes into the match. "The Chasers are remarkably efficient."

"As I understand it, Captain Flint has been particularly driven this last month," Snape drawled.

"I think the words you're looking for are 'increasingly manic,' Professor," Pansy offered, shaking her hair back until it hung against her upper back instead of her face.

"Well, he may actually graduate at this rate," Snape smirked.
"Presumably he sees this year as his last campaign, so to speak."

It certainly did look like the chaos of war as players on both sides attempted to claim an early lead by any means necessary. Rigel had to wince as both Slytherin beaters attempted to shoot bludgers at the Ravenclaw keeper simultaneously. It was obvious that the keeper was used to intercepting balls rather than dodging them, as his first instinct to fly toward the incoming bludger was only checked at the last moment in a desperate and panicky roll to the side.

She could see Draco circling high, his sharp features flushed with adrenaline and the cold slap of the wind. After a few minutes she realized she was missing all the action, just keeping her eyes on her friend, and attempted to catch back up with the rest of the game. Before she could so much as determine who had the quaffle, however, a stabbing pain eclipsed her lower abdomen and sent her gasping to her knees.

"Rigel?"

She heard Pansy's concerned cry vaguely over the noise of the stadium, but it was hard to concentrate over the nauseating sensations of snakes crawling through her belly. She felt like she'd just swallowed a galleon of Polyjuice Potion, only several times worse.

"Mr. Black," it was Snape's voice now, and his hand on her head. She blinked up at him, but he was going in and out of focus like a poorly timed picture. Her brain put two and two together just as Snape's eyes began to narrow, and she ripped herself away, turning toward the stairs with an exaggerated groan.

"I'm going to be sick," she gasped out, and that was enough to make the few adults between her and the steps step back automatically.

She dashed between them and ran with all of the speed she could muster down stair after stair until she reached a landing with no one

on it. Pulling the cloak she had been grasping for in her bag over her head she fumbled with her time turner and gave it a random spin, too panicked to care how many revolutions it took as it whisked her away from the present moment and back to the only safety afforded to her just then.

She saw Snape rounding the landing just above her as she faded, invisible, from the scene, and made a note to reappear somewhere believable when she sorted things out.

When she opened her eyes from where she'd closed them against the dizzying sensation of time travel, it was to a silent stairwell, probably hours or possibly a full day before the match was set to occur. Rigel kept the cloak firmly over herself as she hurried down the rest of the stairs and away from the pitch. She still felt violently ill, but she could also now feel the beginnings of a transformation that, if she had been thinking *at all*, she should have been able to predict.

She headed for her lab, despite having no idea what time it was and therefore no clue whether there was another version of herself in there at present. She didn't remember the door randomly bursting open at any point in the last week while she was working in there, so logically, if the time stream was consistent, she hadn't interrupted herself-or wouldn't. Whichever.

After cloistering herself in her lab and locking the door with as powerful a spell as she could think up, she pulled her cloak off and breathed deep in both relief and in an effort to calm herself down enough to think clearly. When her body came back into view, it was obvious what had happened. The Modified Polyjuice she had taken that summer had worn off completely. Scowling at the inconvenience, she nevertheless had to admit that it was entirely her own fault. She knew the modified potion would only have an effective life of about a year. What did she think was going to happen when she crammed so much extra time into her days and weeks?

Still, she paused, had she really lived a year in roughly four and a half months? That was a little much. She briefly considered cutting

back on the time turner for a while, then realized that if she was going to get out of this mess, the time turner was her only chance.

She needed to brew a new Modified Polyjuice using hairs from the same samples that she'd used the last time she took it. Otherwise, her appearance would change. Luckily, or rather due to her incredibly obsessive tendencies when it came to potions ingredients, that much would be no problem. She took out her potions kit from her bag, and opened the expanded drawer that contained all the human samples she collected. She had plenty of her own hair, having been collecting it at regular intervals for years. Finding one from the end of summer was a cinch. She needed Archie's too, though.

Skipping over those vials labels with names of other people she knew, and grimly hoping her friends never found out about her strange but oddly comforting habit of keeping bits of their hair in her potions bag, she found the row of vials with Archie's name on them and skimmed the labels. She had more recent samples from the winter break (mostly because she was curious what would happen if you Polyjuiced with hair of a metamorph who was transformed when the sample was taken), but she needed the one dated August... there!

She only had three hairs left from that sample, but one was all she needed. *This is why Theo is right and paranoia pays*, she thought idly as she set the vial aside.

Now the real problem: completing a new Modified Polyjuice Potion, which took an entire month to brew properly, in the next... she cast a quick tempus charm and grimaced. Six hours. Before she could despair, she sat down on a stool and pulled out a piece of parchment and a quill, muttering determinedly.

"Okay. I can do this. What do I have? Most of the ingredients..." she made a quick inventory, grimacing as she realized she'd have to somehow get ahold of an amber stone. One preferably a bit bigger than the pea-sized ones she'd been using. She didn't want to be

doing this all over again if she happened to somehow squeeze another year into her remaining four months.

Amber wasn't stocked in their student storeroom, she knew, and while it was possible that Snape may have some in his private store, it was not possible that Snape would not ask her what exactly she needed it for. She could owl order it, but she didn't know how long that would take, and it was the very first ingredient she needed to put in the cauldron.

There was also the problem of logistics, she realized. Her time turner could only go back a week at a time, and Polyjuice needed to brew continuously for a full moon cycle. She would have to fold four weeks into one while somehow not running into herself or anyone else along the way.

"Oh, no," she groaned out loud, realizing that reliving the same week four times would be impossible. "I've already done Tuesday three times." That would put her at seven selves in one time, which was very, very dangerous according to everything the Ministry and Snape had told her. "Okay." she talked herself through it. "All right. I'll redo this week three times, then go back to Wednesday on the fourth go-round and live through Monday, then go back again to Saturday morning once the potion is finished. Yes. But where....?"

At various points in the last week she had already been present in the Room of Requirement and her lab, ruling both of them out as places she could leave the Polyjuice because she didn't remember there being unexplained Polyjuice in either place when she was last there. She would need somewhere to sleep, too, or rather four different places to sleep throughout the week that somehow didn't include her dorm or the Come and Go Room, since she had already slept in both places almost every night over the last week.

"What a mess," she sighed. She could try camping out in the forest, but the odds of her not being eaten eventually by Acromantula while she slept were probably fairly low. With a reluctant grimace, she realized her safest option was going to be leaving Hogwarts

altogether. Once out of the school, she could purchase the amber stone at any apothecary and simply hole up in a series of cheap hotels.

It felt wrong to contemplate leaving the school in the middle of the semester, but, she reasoned with herself, it wasn't as though she wouldn't also *be* at school that week. It would only seem to her as though she'd taken a month off of classes. No one else would even know.

It was probably going to involve breaking a dozen rules, but hadn't she already? "Better than being sent to Azkaban for using a Ministry controlled potion to impersonate a pureblood," she muttered halfheartedly. That was the likely consequence if she couldn't get her appearance back under control before Snape tracked her down after the Quidditch match. She had seen in his eyes the beginnings of suspicion-and why not, when he likely knew exactly what the symptoms of Polyjuice wearing off were? There was no way she could buy the standard potion on the black market and use that until she had enough legitimate time to brew her own, long lasting version-Snape would likely be watching her more carefully than ever as soon as she rejoined the time stream. She wouldn't put it past him to arrange for her to be in his presence over an hour continuously that very day just to be sure she wasn't taking the potion.

How much easier things would be if she and Archie had been twins instead of cousins. She loved her mother dearly, but it was difficult sometimes not to imagine how simple life might have been if she could have just gone to Hogwarts a normal girl.

Curious, almost against her will, she took out her wand and conjured a basic mirror. The person who looked out of it at her was like a vision from another life. Dressed in Slytherin robes, she smiled tentatively, almost unable to believe her eyes. She certainly didn't look like Archie anymore.

With a tilt of her head, she took in her reflection raptly, realizing that this was the first time in over a year and a half that she had seen her

true face. Longer than that, she amended, if you counted the months of folded time, too. Her hair was the same, short and black, but nearly everything else was... off. She squinted and realized belatedly that her eyesight was even worse than she remembered it being. Perhaps she'd just gotten used to perfect sight. With a sigh, she realized she didn't have a pair of glasses here at Hogwarts-why would she? She resigned herself to a long month of nearsightedness.

Stepping closer to bring her features into sharper focus, she noted to her surprise that she looked a bit like Lily, in her face shape, at least. It was rounder than the pointed purebred look she'd been sporting for so long. Her cheeks were softer and her lower lip slightly fuller. Her eyes were uncanny, after seeing them in grey and dull green contacts for so long. They almost glowed, but that might be the intensity with which she was inspecting herself. She didn't know if the girl in the mirror could be called pretty-she just looked odd to her.

She'd never considered vanity one of her defining traits, but she couldn't deny a certain amount of fascination as she experimentally turned from side to side. She was definitely maturing, she noticed with mixed feelings. Her waist was sloping in and her chest slightly out. She'd also lost at least an inch in height, she thought with annoyance. It figured that Archie would be taller than her. At least she still had her musculature. Relative health was one of the things about the body that even Polyjuice would still reflect.

After one last look, she banished the mirror, satisfied that at least no one would recognize her as Rigel Black while she was away from school. She would have to lose the school robes, though. "This is going to be more elaborate than I thought," she complained to herself, mentally drawing up a list of things she would have to do. First was collecting a couple changes of clothes and her savings from her dorm room. As it was very early Saturday morning, she would have to wait until her previous self woke up and left for the Quidditch match. That gave her a few hours to prepare the rest of it.

She began gathering cauldron, scales, stirring rods, knives, and anything else she might need to complete the Polyjuice. She used the cauldron as a carrying container, as her book bag was not quite extendable enough to shove an entire pewter size two inside comfortably. She made a list of what books she wanted to grab from her dorm to read while she was waiting for the potion to brew, then tried to decide if there was a way she could get food from the kitchens without any of the elves asking who she was and why she looked sort of like Rigel. Binny, at least, would probably notice something off. Food would wait, then.

Where should she go first? "Not Hogsmeade," she said aloud. She was obviously school age, even if she didn't look like Rigel Black. It would be too easy for someone to alert the school. They'd probably even think they were doing what was best for a young girl wandering about on her own. A moment later she realized that her youth, at least, she could fix.

An Aging Potion only took a couple of hours to whip up, after all. She would have to renew the dose every few hours, but with no one watching her every move, that was easy enough. She rolled up her sleeves and got started, determined that her plan was going to work. It had to work.

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Slipping out of the castle with her supplies had been almost unnervingly simple. The Marauder's Map led her straight into Hogsmeade through the one-eyed witch's hump, and from there it was an easy matter to Floo to Diagon Alley. Fifteen minutes later she had a key to room number six at the Leaky Cauldron and rent secured through the week.

The first thing she did was purchase a hideously garish scarf to wrap around her head. The material was so eye-catching that she doubted

anyone who glanced her way on Diagon would be able to remember anything else about her. Thus garbed, she strolled in her newly lengthened dress robes right into Tate's shop and purchased the largest amber stone he had. Tate didn't blink an eye at her, to her amused relief. She was back in her room at the Leaky with her prize and enough food for a few days long before the Aging Potion wore off.

It was a quiet week. The barkeep, Tom, seemed incredibly disinclined to pester his guests, and if anyone noticed the admittedly noxious smell coming from her room, they didn't care enough to say anything.

When Saturday came back around, she found herself a bit at a loss. Where would she stay next? She snagged a copy of the Daily Prophet and flipped through it to see if anyone was running advertisements for a room for let. The only mention was for an apartment complex off of Craftsman Alley, which seemed geared toward attracting the international clientele that came to visit the English Guilds for business reasons.

"I can work with that." She smirked slightly, crossing to the large satchel she had been using as a makeshift suitcase for the last week and pulling out the blonde wig that she had never gotten around to getting rid of, even after Snape ensured she had full use of the Library. "I knew this would come in handy."

A few minutes later, or a week earlier, depending on how one thought about it, Eloise Barnes from Paris, France stepped out of the Leaky with her things in tow. Her Polyjuice Potion was tucked away beneath her invisibility coat, kept simmering with an overpowered Warming Charm that she hoped would do until she could get it over a fire once more.

The address given in the paper led her further down Craftsman Alley than she'd been before. She passed several different Guild Houses on her way, one of which she took special note of, as it had "Alchemists of England" in big letters across the gate, which

appeared to be made of gold. She wondered if that was a reference to the fabled Philosopher's Stone, which supposedly turned lesser metals it touched into gold, or just an incredibly obvious show of the Guild's wealth. Either way, she wondered how she hadn't noticed it before.

Turning down a side street, she found the complex of small apartments without trouble. The woman at the front desk looked up with a friendly smile as she walked in, though her nose twitched unmistakably as she drew closer, no doubt able to smell the Polyjuice from across the room, even if she didn't know what she was smelling.

"I'd like to rent a room for ze week," she said, putting on her best heavy French accent. "I'll need it until Saturday."

"Would you like one with a window?" the woman asked, very subtly turning her nose into her own collar in the guise of looking down at some papers.

"Oui, ah, yes," she said, smiling tiredly. "Merci."

"No trouble," the woman said, "Just the one bed all right?"

She nodded, trying not to look like she was in a hurry. She could feel the cauldron at her side cooling off slightly, and attempted not to glance down at it in worry, knowing she must already look pretty odd with her arm propped out from her side for seemingly no reason.

"Would you like to pay now, or when you leave?" the lady asked, her expression turning serious for a moment. "I must tell you that if you wish to postpone payment we'll need to fill out a few forms, and I'll have to register your wand, as well. Just in case." She smiled brightly, as though by sheer friendliness she could erase the insinuation that she might try and shirk payment.

"I'll pay now," she told her, pulling out a small sack of galleons with her free hand and handing it over.

"Oh, you've already exchanged for galleons, good," the woman said brightly.

Right. Obviously a French traveler would have French Wizarding money. Ah, well. It probably wasn't unusual enough to merit comment.

"You'll be in room twelve, my dear, just up the stairs and to the left, all the way at the end," the lady said. "All right?"

"C'est bien," she murmured, taking the key with a grateful smile and hurrying away up the stairs.

After putting down a flame retardant mat and setting up her cauldron over a fire once more, she sighed and began unpacking the meager necessities she'd accumulated over the past week. The room was very comfortable looking, if a little outdated. Overly floral wallpaper was the least of her problems, she supposed. She checked on the potion once more before taking out her Ancient Runes book and flipping through to where she'd left off. At least one good thing would come from this spectacular misadventure-she'd be way ahead on her schoolwork.

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Near the end of the second week, she began looking once more for a place to stay. There were some high-end hotels off an alley near the Gringotts end of Diagon, but in addition to being hideously expensive, they had somewhat stringent standards for their guests. She would not be able to avoid registering at least her wand, if not her name and Gringotts vault number, if she attempted to stay in one of those rooms for a week.

In her guise as Eloise, she stepped into a second-hand robes shop and begged the owner for a quick moment of her time.

"What is it, dearie?" the old woman asked, peering at her distraught face with wizened eyes.

"I 'ave come to England to look for my brother, madam," she said, her French accent actually pretty good after a week of practice. "I 'ave checked all ze 'otels I could find, but none of zem 'ave seen him. I thought, perhaps someone who lives 'ere would know of somewhere else I could look."

"Oh, dear," the old woman said, a frown scrunching up her wrinkly forehead. "Well, are you sure he's come here? He could be in any number of Wizarding settlements in England, you know."

She nodded tearfully, her long hair falling into her face. "Oui. I know 'e is in ze alleys. 'is note was very clear." She wrung her hands in distress. "I do not know what 'e was thinking. Zer is no way for him to afford living on 'is own."

"Well, if he hasn't much coin you won't find him at the big hotels," the old woman said, taking her hands between her own kindly. "Have you checked the Leaky Cauldron?"

She sniffed. "Oui. And ze apartments for rent by ze Guilds."

The woman thought for a moment. "Well," she said slowly, "I suppose if your brother was truly in desperate straits he may have tried the Lamia Lodge..."

"Where is zat?" she asked, not having head of it before.

The old woman hesitated visibly. "It isn't in a very nice part of the alleys, dearie. And it's... well, I suppose it wouldn't hurt for you to ask there, at least." Her face took on an anxious expression. "You will go now, won't you? While it's still light out? It's no place for a lass like you to be wandering after dark."

"Of course," she promised, grinning internally. It sounded like the perfect place to lie low. "Is et near?"

The shop keep wrote down detailed directions, and with a last, slightly concerned look, bowed her from the shop with wishes of luck in finding her brother.

She perused the directions on her way back to her temporary apartment. The Lamia Lodge seemed to be situated off of Knockturn Alley, somewhere on one of the side alleys between Krait's place and Kyprioth Court. The old woman was right to be wary of sending her there. It was certainly not a place a young woman wanted to walk alone at night.

On Saturday morning, she packed up her things once more and said a friendly farewell to the proprietress as she left the building. She stepped into a public loo to lose her blonde wig and, cauldron awkwardly held under one arm, turn back a full week for the third time. After making sure no one else was present (and why would they be, when she'd turned back to the early dawn hours of Monday morning?), she tucked her invisibility cloak away and traded it for a long, nondescript black cloak with a deep hood. Once on, it concealed most of her features and disguised the awkward way she held the cauldron close to her side in its heavy folds.

As the sun rose slowly over the sleepy streets, she made her way down Knockturn Alley. The nocturnal denizens had largely deserted the alleys by now, and it was not yet day enough to tempt even the most accommodating shops to open their doors, so it was to the sound of her own quiet footsteps that she navigated her way through narrow streets. She found herself before an imposing building with narrow windows that had all been boarded or blackened and a door of deepest grey that seemed to have been gouged in several places near the doorknob.

"Charming," she muttered, steeling herself. "At least no one will recognize me here."

The numbers hanging crookedly above the antiquated knocker, a match to the ones the old woman had written down, were the only assurance that this was the correct place. Steeling herself, she

grasped the knob and opened the door with a confidence she did not feel.

It swung inwards with an awful squeak that she felt had to be contrived for some sort of effect. There was simply no way those gleaming hinges actually contained that much rust. A narrow, carpeted hallway led to a slightly larger room with a desk pushed somewhat lazily into one corner. Slumped at the desk, facing away from the entrance, was a thin, wane man with long, lank hair and robes that looked like they'd lost a fight with a nest of moths sometime in the distant past.

"Excuse me," she said, raising her voice slightly in case he was asleep as he looked.

"No need to shout." His voice sounded like a spider had spun cobwebs in his throat. She half expected dust to come spewing from his lips, but barely a particle of air stirred as he rose fluidly from his slumped position and turned to face her. He was quite a bit taller than she was, but she told herself that height was a ridiculous thing to be intimidated by.

"Do you have any vacancies?" she asked, a bit quieter this time.

"Vacancies?" he repeated, sounding distantly amused at something. "Whatever for?"

"I'd like to rent a room," she said, tucking her chin to keep her face in shadow as he bent down as though he might peer at her from across the room. "This is a hotel, is it not?"

His laugh was raspy and took an unnaturally long time to fade out. "This is the Lamia Lodge, child."

"I know," she said, "And I'm not a child, Sir."

He was looming over her before she'd noticed him move. His hand moved faster than her eyes could track, whisking the hood from her

head even as she drew breath to protest. His eyes, which she noted belatedly were too black to be normal, took in her face briefly. "You smell younger than you look, under the stench of whatever you are holding," he said, interest trickling into his tone.

"Well you smell older than you look," she snapped, annoyed. "Do you have a room or-what is so funny?"

He was laughing again, slightly louder this time, and as his lips pulled back she caught a flash of fang that made the blood drain from her face. He was a vampire.

"You should see the look on your face," he said, his eyes flashing red in what was probably an attempt to scare her. She told herself firmly that it wasn't going to work, though there was a voice in the back of her head that asked just what she had gotten herself into. "Did you honestly come to a vampire hotel without expecting to see any vampires, child?"

"I didn't know it was a coven-run hotel," she admitted. "I just need a place to stay for a week and heard this place was cheap."

"Oh, it *is* ." he smirked, showing fang again. She wasn't sure if it was meant to be threatening or not. "I'm curious, though; did you imagine it was called the Lamia Lodge because of the food?" He laughed again, apparently highly amused at his own joke.

"I thought it was named after the beetle," she muttered, realizing in retrospect that Lamia was also the name of an ancient Libyan vampire who had a habit of eating her own young.

Vampires were apparently very easily amused, as hollow sounding chuckles filled the space between them once more. She was about to suggest she look for lodging elsewhere when another voice spoke up from across the room where a narrow stairwell descended into the floor.

"What is all this racket, Gavril?" the newcomer asked. She was a vampiress with long red hair braided back from her face, and her voice was low and sleepy. "Some of us are trying to rest."

She hadn't thought they'd done anything loud, but she supposed a vampire's hearing must be as good as she'd read.

"This one wants a *room*," the first vampire, Gavril, said slyly.

"So give her one." The vampiress shrugged gracefully. "If she isn't a Carpathian, what matter?"

"She's human," Gavril said, looking almost proud of this fact.

"Truly?" the other vampire wrinkled her nose, "She smells like the dead."

"I can just go," she offered, feeling very uncomfortable.

"Nonsense, you must stay," Gavril said quickly. "Why, we happen to have a lovely room overlooking the inner courtyard. Won't you consider it?"

"How much?" she asked, more than a little wary.

"We can discuss that later." Gavril smiled widely.

"I'd rather discuss it now." She frowned, stepping back unconsciously.

"Stop being such a beast," the vampiress swatted her companion with an annoyed glance. "The room is yours for a galleon a week," she added. "I assure you no one here will bother you. This idiot just hasn't fed in a while."

That did not make her feel any better, but on the other hand... one galleon for the whole week was an incredible deal. Even if there were bloodstains on the walls, she'd be a fool to pass it up.

"I'll take it," she said quickly. She would just have to make sure to only leave her room during the daytime. If there were other guests, they'd probably be too busy sleeping to be curious about her comings and goings.

"This way," the female said, brushing past Gavril with a pointed look. "Go downstairs and find something to eat. I'll watch the door while you're away."

She beckoned with one hand and led Harry through a door that was the same color as the walls, making it nearly invisible until they'd drawn near. On the other side was a staircase going up, which took them to a curved hallway lit with antique candelabra. The vampiress stopped before a door that looked much like all the other doors and unlocked it with a large brass key.

"I hope you enjoy your stay," the vampiress said softly, sending involuntary chills up her spine as she crossed the threshold. With a mumbled word of thanks, she closed the door behind her and slumped to the ground. That was the last time she took directions from strangers, even if they did look like someone's sweet old grandmother.

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To her surprise and relief, her week at the vampire hotel passed quickly and uneventfully. Even so, she wasn't keen on finding yet another shady place to sleep when Saturday, once again, rolled around. She was picking up food at a market off Kyprioth Court, her hood drawn up around her face as a precaution, when she overheard a witch mentioning the Court of Rogues to her friend.

It made her wonder what Leo was up to, and if he'd kept away from her flat on Dogwood Lane like she'd asked. Hopefully Mrs. Flint had been able to get settled without too much trouble. A moment later

she froze, nearly dropping the apple in her hand as a sudden thought struck her. She had a flat. She hadn't considered using it, as Mrs. Flint lived there now, but... maybe she *should* .

Wasn't the premise of their backup plan that Harry was living on Dogwood Lane while Archie was at AIM in her place? If she popped in while Mrs. Flint was staying there, well, that was a pretty solid alibi, should the worst happen. She had warned Mrs. Flint that it was her cousin Harry's house, and that she might stop by now and again, hadn't she? Surely the woman wouldn't begrudge her kipping on the couch for a week. All she had to do was avoid going outside much, as it would be hard to explain to any of her alley friends why she suddenly looked so very girlish.

Immensely pleased with her plan, she hurried back to the Lamia Lodge and gathered her things once more. The potion was looking exactly as it should, and in seven more days, she would finally be done with the whole ridiculous charade. By the time the last dose of Aging Potion had worn off, it was almost dusk, and she was impatient to get going. She cast one last look around the darkly furnished room to make sure she hadn't forgotten anything and locked the door behind her, cauldron under one arm, wrapped safely in her cloak.

Downstairs, Gavril sat on one corner of the desk, his mate, the vampiress who'd first welcomed her to the hotel, pressed close to his side. She had over the past week met the two of them several times, as they seemed to be the only ones about during daylight hours. At night, however, the sounds of dozens of other voices filled the courtyard outside her balcony.

"Madam, Sir." She bowed her head politely. "Here is your key."

"Leaving so soon, human?" Irina, the female, smiled wryly.

"Thank you for your hospitality," Harry said, smiling tightly. She handed over the agreed upon galleon, and bid them a polite farewell.

"Do recommend us to your friends," Gavril called after her, his voice, while not loud, carrying eerily down the hallway after her.

"You're hilarious," she muttered, knowing he could hear her. "Really, you should consider a career on the wireless." His distinctive laughter chased her out the door.

"Never again," she promised herself, once she was far enough down Kyprioth Court that she felt safe relaxing. She pulled her cloak tighter around herself and picked up her pace a bit. She wanted to get to Dogwood Lane before the sun set completely.

She was halfway there before she stopped, groaned aloud at her own stupidity, and made a beeline for the nearest public toilet. She pulled the invisibility cloak over her head and awkwardly got out her time turner one-handed. With a long-suffering sigh, she turned the hourglass over and over, keeping a mental count until she reaching the number that would take her to Wednesday morning. That done, she strolled back out into burgeoning sunlight and twittering birds. Sometimes she wondered how her circadian rhythm was ever going to recover from owning a time turner.

The street was just as she remembered it, quaint and quiet, and she let herself into the foyer shared by numbers seven and eight with her own spare key. The stairs leading up to her apartment were clean, and a cute little rug that she didn't remember being there before sat by the door. She knocked quietly, and, after a moment, realized she should remove her hood if she didn't want to scare the woman witless.

She heard soft footfalls, and then the door was opened just the tiniest crack, an eye peeking out at her suspiciously. "Who's there?"

"Hello," she said, smiling softly, "My name is Harriett. My cousin Rigel told you about me, I think. Is it all right if I come in, Ma'am?"

There was a long pause, but the door did slowly retreat inwards as Mrs. Flint shuffled back away from it. Harry slipped inside and set

her cauldron down out of the way before turning to hold out her hand. "It's a pleasure to finally meet you. I'm sorry to drop by so unexpectedly, but I was wondering if I could impose on your hospitality for a few days?"

Mrs. Flint took her hand slowly, her eyes flicking from her face to her satchel to the cauldron she'd set on the floor, and back. Harry stared back, and noted with approval that the woman seemed much healthier than she'd last seen her. Her form was a little more fleshed out, and her hair and attire spoke of a woman taking good care of herself.

"It's... your apartment," the woman said after a moment. Her voice, while soft, was nowhere near the disused, halting sound it had been.

"It's yours now," Harry told her. "If you aren't comfortable with it, I'll leave at once and find somewhere else, I promise. I just thought I'd see if you wouldn't mind company for a week."

Mrs. Flint looked around the room, as though there would be something to tell her what to do, and Harry waited patiently while she made up her mind. "I don't mind," she said after a long pause. "I'll..." she glanced back toward the bedroom, but Harry cut in.

"I'll sleep on the couch, if that's all right. I won't be in your hair at all, ma'am," she said.

The older woman nodded slowly, then looked questioningly toward the cauldron she'd brought.

"It's nothing dangerous," Harry said, moving to set it up by the window. "If we open the shutters a bit, it probably won't smell up the house much." When it was settled, she turned back to Mrs. Flint. "Thank you so much for letting me stay. I'll get my own food, so you don't have to worry about cooking for me or anything."

"I like to cook," she said suddenly. "I cook for the ladies at the clinic, sometimes. They like my food a lot."

"That's really kind of you," Harry said, "Do you like working there, then?"

"Very much," Mrs. Flint said, nodding earnestly. "It was your doing, wasn't it? Healer Hurst told me you arranged it all. Thank you. I've never-they're so good to me, there."

"I'm glad," Harry said, smiling widely. "Mrs. Hurst is a lovely woman." After a moment she added, sheepishly, "Could you, er, maybe not tell her I'm here, though? I'm supposed to be in school."

"In America," Mrs. Flint said, nodding slowly, "I remember. Why are you... sorry, sorry, never mind. It doesn't matter."

"It's okay," Harry said. She didn't want the woman to think she begrudged her questions. "My friend is covering for me, so they won't miss me at school. I just had a couple of errands to run here. And I had this potion to finish." She gestured to the cauldron, hoping that vague explanation would do.

"Healer Hurst says you brew for Mr. Krait," Mrs. Flint said, almost tentatively. "Is it for him?"

"It's for my other distributor, actually," she said, in case Mrs. Flint ever thought to ask Krait about it. She was surprised the woman had met or heard of Krait already, as his storeroom was fairly far from the inner alleys, but she supposed it was a relatively close-knit community, and those prominently positioned in the Rogue were fairly well-known. "I have to keep an eye on it all week, so I can't really attend class again until it's finished. I should be out of your hair by Tuesday morning, though."

"Stay as long as you need," the woman murmured politely. With a glance at the clock near the fireplace, she said, "I ought to get going."

"Of course," Harry said, retrieving a book from her satchel and attempting to look unassuming. "I'll stay here and study. Can't be too

far behind when I show back up at school."

Mrs. Flint's smile was relatively weak, but it still brought an answering smile to Harry's face. Once the older woman left, she relaxed onto the couch and settled in to while yet another day away waiting. She had never missed Transfigurations lectures so much as she had the last few weeks. She loved to read, but apparently she needed to rethink the assumption that she could spend the rest of her life alone with her studies. It was supremely boring, after the first couple of weeks.

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By the time Monday evening rolled around, she and Mrs. Flint were, if not friends, at least very comfortable around one another. The Polyjuice Potion had finished maturing without mishap, and the only awkward moment had been when Mrs. Flint floored home to see Harry in the middle of drawing runes on the living room floor. When Harry explained that the ritual was harmless (without explaining exactly what she was blending two random hair samples for), Mrs. Flint had seemed inclined to leave her to it, though Harry did see the older woman peeking curiously out from the kitchen several times after it had begun.

Mrs. Flint had even fed her dinner afterwards, when her core, or at least what part of it she had access to, was nearly completely depleted. After a quick nap to restore her energy to basic human levels of functioning, Harry packed her supplies away for the final time, bottling the dose of Modified Polyjuice she would take and carefully disposing of the rest. It would be useless if not taken in the first week, so saving it for later was impossible.

She bid Mrs. Flint a fond farewell and Floored to the Leaky Cauldron before Flooding on to Hogsmeade, just in case. The village was quiet,

and Harry decided she'd have to turn back to a busier time of day if she wanted to sneak into Honeydukes' cellar without being noticed.

She chose Friday evening, so that she would have plenty of time to prepare for re-entering the time stream, and turned to approximately six o'clock, when plenty of people would be running pre-weekend errands after work.

By the time she made her way back into Hogwarts under her invisibility cloak, dinner was over, and she was pretty sure the two other versions of herself were in the Library and in the Room of Requirement, respectively. As she reentered her lab, she had the strangest feeling of surrealism. She felt like she'd been gone a year, but technically she hadn't even gone anywhere yet.

She went to put all her brewing utensils in the places she remembered them being before she left, then laughed when she realized they already *were* in the places they'd been, and stowed her duplicate materials in an out of the way cupboard to be collected when their originals disappeared into the time stream with her previous self the next day. She sat wearily on her familiar stool, thinking over what she had just accomplished. Archie, if she ever told him, would have a hard time believing it. She took out the little vial of Modified Polyjuice and had to laugh at how much work had gone into making such a tiny thing. She uncorked it and brought it to her lips, then hesitated.

She stood, grasped her wand in her other hand, and conjured a mirror before she could second-guess herself. She stared at her reflection a long time, taking in her green, green eyes and vulnerable mouth and stubborn chin. It didn't look like her at all, really. She looked down at the vial in her hand and tossed it back impatiently, grimacing at the awful taste that swam down her throat and pooled like grease in her belly. Her appearance began to waver, then stretch and bubble in a sickening dance. She closed her eyes against the feeling, then opened them when her body had settled into a shape.

The person in the mirror blinked back at her, familiar, yet not, after a month in a different skin. "This is who you are," she reminded herself, watching the lips move along with the words. "I am Rigel Black. I am Rigel Black. I am Rigel Black."

By the fourth or fifth time she repeated the phrase, it started to sound true, and after pacing the length of her lab for another ten minutes, she felt as though she'd never left. It was just another night brewing in her lab. The next morning she would return all the books she had taken to her dorm room, though it would be a close race to return the books after her first self had left for the game but before her other self came to collect them... She fished in her bag for a Headache Relief Potion and reminded herself firmly that it would all be over soon.

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Snape found her kneeling in the stall of a stadium bathroom the next morning, face green from the combination of mustard and salt water that she'd choked down just a minute earlier. As he burst in the door, she heaved spectacularly into the toilet once again, unable to even smirk at her excellent timing as the biscuits she'd begged from the kitchen just a few hours earlier came roiling back up.

"Mr. Black." Her Head of House knelt beside her and hesitated only a moment before pulling her head back away from the bowl and peering intently into her clammy, pale features. She knew he was looking for any sign that she had been taking Polyjuice, but all she could do to convince him was play dumb.

"I think," she panted harshly, "I may have... messed up... my sleep cycle potion." After fighting a gag rather convincingly, she muttered, "I knew those skullcap flowers looked off. Should've-" She heaved again. "Just ordered more."

"Do you require assistance in reaching the Hospital Wing?" Snape asked, standing back up and looking down at her with veiled suspicion.

"I'll just take a Stomach Calming Potion," Rigel said, shaking her head tiredly. "As soon as I can get it down." She made a show of standing, bracing her hands on her knees for a long moment and then crossing to the sink to wash her face and mouth. She dry heaved a couple of times into the sink, then fumbled in her book bag for the potion that would settle her gut. After a long swig and a sharp shudder, she brushed her hands through her hair calmly and nodded to Snape gratefully. "Thank you for your concern, Professor. We should return to the game now."

Snape's eyes were still dissecting her, but he nevertheless led the way. Waiting outside for them was Pansy, who looked equally relieved that Rigel was alive and that she didn't have to enter a male restroom just to be sure.

"What on earth happened, Rigel?" she asked, folding him into a gentle hug. "You looked like you'd been stabbed-your face positively *contorted* with pain and I was half afraid you'd pass out and fall to your death down those stairs, you were moving so fast, and-"

"I'm fine," Rigel said, smiling reassuringly at her rambling friend. "Just got sick to my stomach all of a sudden; I think I ate some bad fish this morning."

"You had porridge this morning," Pansy said, clearly dubious.

"Must've had fish in it," Rigel said, snorting slightly.

Pansy gave her an exasperated look, but after examining her closely and seeing that she was, at least, in one apologetic piece, she sighed. "Well try not to panic half the stands next time you get a stomach ache, Rigel."

"I didn't mean to be so dramatic," Rigel said, ruffling her hair sheepishly. "You have to admit it would have been worse if I puked on Mr. Malfoy's shoes, though."

Pansy gave a disgusted noise, and flounced toward the stairs. "I'll thank you not to ever suggest such a thing again in my presence. Honestly. *Boys* ."

"Girls," Rigel sighed, looking over at Snape ruefully. If she was expecting a commiseration of some kind, she was to be disappointed. Snape swept past her with a sneer, no doubt supremely annoyed at having gotten worked up for no reason.

As she followed them back up to the staff box, she had to take a moment to bask in the sheer relief and pride she felt at having somehow pulled off such a farce. She vowed then and there that she was going to back off the time-turner as much as possible, only using it when she truly needed to. She had come to the conclusion over the past week-month-whichever-that it might be more trouble than it was worth.

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Unfortunately for her integrity, her solemn decision to respect the sanctity of the laws of time did not last longer than the first week in February, when she realized that there was a very important thing that she should be doing with her time turner, but wasn't.

It had taken that long for her to come to the conclusion that either the Auror department was very inefficient in investigating anonymous tips or the metallurgists at the Guild hadn't remembered Pettigrew's visit after all. No one from the DMLE even came to question the Creatures professor, and eventually she realized more proof was needed.

It was a simple thing to watch the Map and get a feel for his schedule. Pettigrew spent most of his time in his room when he wasn't teaching, but he also took frequent late-night trips to the Library, it turned out, and while she hadn't yet seen him do anything besides paging furiously through book after book, it comforted her to know that if he did do something majorly suspicious, she would be the first to know.

That was why, when she caught sight of his dot sliding out of the castle one evening just before dinner, she felt no compunction stealing away from her friends for a moment to turn back an hour, giving herself plenty of time to sneak outside under her cloak and wait.

He hurried across the lawn with a heavy cloak swamping his short frame, muttering to himself all the way. She tried to creep closer, to hear what he was saying, but when she rustled a leaf too near he swung around with a wild, hunted look on his face, brandishing his wand unsurely.

"Who's there?" he called, his breath coming sharply as his eyes darted here and there. He looked like a man under siege. Or perhaps one going mad. Seeing nothing, he backed away a few halting steps before taking off at a faster pace toward the Forbidden Forest.

She hung back, not wanting to give herself away, but regretted that decision when she lost sight of him around a large tree. She hurried forward as quietly as she could, but couldn't see him anywhere when she rounded the tree herself. She frowned and listened, but couldn't hear anything but the smallest of rustling in any direction. Where had he gone? She took out the Map to see which direction his dot had taken, but only just caught sight of it falling off the edge of the Map before it disappeared entirely.

Annoyed at herself, but mostly at him for traipsing suspiciously through the forest like he was hoping to be caught out at being up to something, Rigel retraced her steps and hurried back toward the

castle. There was no telling how long he would be in there, and she could watch for his dot coming back toward the grounds just as easily from the warmth of Hogwarts as she could from the freezing forest.

She would figure out what he was doing with the Jewel, no matter how long it took. Time was in her favor, after all.

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It took a couple of weeks to get back into the rhythm of classes after her unconventional hiatus, but all the extra studying she'd done while mindlessly waiting for the Polyjuice to finish had an unexpected consequence.

"How did you finish so quickly?" Pansy asked lowly, looking exasperated as Rigel looked up from the book on exotic poisons she'd been perusing as the rest of the class finished their Arithmancy quizzes. "It took me *ages* to figure out which formula to use when calculating exponential loss of magic in semi-permanent artifacts of a non-sentient nature."

"It's a combination of two formulas. They were explained in the appendix of our Arithmancy text," Rigel told her. She knew, because she'd read the whole thing twice while trying not to listen to what she thought had been some kind of vampire revel going on in the courtyard beneath her balcony one night.

"Two?" Pansy sighed, "Well, I've botched that one, then."

"It was extra credit," Rigel said, smiling a bit at Pansy's perfectionism. "I think your marks will recover from this blow."

"Not my dignity, though," Pansy said, "I always fancied myself good at numbers, you know. My maths tutor said he'd never seen a child

so fast at mental computations. These word problems are so convoluted, though. It's not at all what I expected when Father told me it was like Divination done with numbers."

Rigel had to agree with that assessment. While in the higher levels, perhaps, Arithmancy could be used to actually divine the outcome of complex events, at the level they were on it was simply a tool for calculating magic empirically in various situations. Some of it was the basis of Alchemy, figuring out how much of A was needed to get effect B, except A was always magic and never other materials. Arithmancy could also be used to calculate how many runes were needed in a ritual, how long the wards on your house would last after you cast them, and even, she'd learned, to solve for the amount of raw magic one needed to keep a potion from destabilizing.

It had surprised her to learn that when Potions Masters were designing new potions from scratch, they almost always had to rely on Arithmancy to tell them mathematically how much magic would be required at various stages to make it viable. It was also a sure way to double check a recipe prior to brewing it to make sure it wouldn't explode midway through. She wished she'd known that, as she would have looked into learning Arithmancy much earlier, even if she did personally find it much easier to feel how the potion was doing through an imbuing link. As it was, she was making good headway in the subject, but would probably never be as efficient at the actual calculations as someone like Pansy, who had a true appreciation for numbers.

Pansy might do very well as a real Arithmancer, in fact, someone who could assign numbers to real-life circumstances with a degree of accuracy. It took years of practice and a good head for relativities, according to their professor, but it was an extremely sought after skill, if only because so many wizards had difficulty with logic to begin with.

Professor Vector finished collecting the last of the quizzes and waved her wand to fill the chalkboard with notes. "Today we'll be starting on Personal Arithmancy." There were scattered murmurs of

interest. "As the name implies, this is the study of self-arithmancy, which means you'll need to first collect a series of data points about yourself. Can anyone give me an example of the sort of information you need before you can begin assigning numbers to your own magic?"

"How much magic you have to work with," someone said reasonably, "The size of your core, I mean."

"Yes, your reserves must be taken into account for high-level projects and rituals, but what else?" Vector asked.

"Your magical affinity?" Another student guessed. "Some runes have to be aligned with a Light/Dark balance, so a person's magic might interact with them if it had a strong inclination, right?"

"That's correct," Vector nodded, "It's important to know where you lie on the affinity scale. Anyone else?"

"The rate at which you can cast," Pansy said, a thoughtful look on her face. "Speed of magic is important in determining short-term outcomes."

"Yes, excellent," Vector said. "What about non-magic-related data?"

"Age," someone suggested, unsure.

"Generally, yes, although you only need to know the broad category you fall into; in the case of you all, it is the 13-25 range," Vector said. "Anything else?"

"Sex," one of the boys laughed. "Girls' magic is different from boys' magic."

"Yes and no," Vector said, raising an eyebrow. "Certain spells or rituals can react to a person's biology, so it is important to keep it in mind. A pregnant witch or wizard's magic is also very different from

one of their sex not carrying a child. Relative things like health and infirmity can have effects, too. What else?"

There was silence as people tried to think what else could affect magic.

Rigel frowned, thinking there was an obvious one no one had mentioned. Vector caught sight of her perplexed expression and nodded her direction. "Yes, Mr. Black? Did you think of one?"

"Blood status," she said, attempting to speak without inflection. Several people laughed, but were stifled with a swift look from their professor.

"Interesting," Vector said, her eyes boring into Rigel's face. "Some people would say there is no difference in the magic of purebloods or halfbloods or muggleborns, other than an accident of birth. Many of your classmates were thinking something similar, but did not have to courage to say so, as the rhetoric behind one's blood status is increasingly political in our time. Ten points to Slytherin for speaking your mind, Mr. Black, but I wonder if you can tell me what you think the difference is. Blood? Power?"

"No," Rigel said clearly. "Those things are immaterial." She ignored the low gasps and murmurs that broke out around her, telling herself firmly that if Archie were sitting here in the same chair as she was he would say the same thing, and not be afraid. "There are plenty of powerful muggleborns and pureblooded squibs." The murmuring was louder now, and some of it was disgruntled, so she spoke louder. "There's no clear evidence one way or another that your ancestry makes you a better or worse wizard."

"But you just said it should be taken into account," Vector pressed, smiling slightly.

"The same way Light and Dark affinities should be taken into account," Rigel said, nodding. "There is a difference, but it isn't a matter of power or worth. It's just different. Purebloods have had

magic in their genetic make up for so many centuries that it's been refined, made to follow genetic patterns that run through bloodlines, and sometimes manifest into Gifts or Magical Abilities that are common to a particular Family. Muggleborns never have refined abilities, because their magic is closer to the natural source of magic-it's *new*, you could say. It's raw in a way that magic that's been running through generations of magical families just isn't. It's mercurial and more unpredictable, but also more Neutral and more versatile. Since the magic behaves slightly differently in its raw form, there's no way it *couldn't* make a difference in upper-level casting and rituals, right?"

Vector clapped slowly, a smile wider than they'd ever seen her wear on her face. "You are the first third year in many years to be so versed in the theory of Wizarding Genealogy, Mr. Black. Too often I see students whose personal beliefs cloud their understanding of the facts." She held up a hand against any protest. "I do not intend to discuss politics in this class. What you do with facts has no bearing on my lessons. I will, however, give you the facts and allow you to interpret them as you will. Mr. Black is correct. There is a quantitative difference in magic between purebloods and muggleborns, though halfbloods are much more difficult to accurately numerate." She looked briefly annoyed at that. "Qualitative, we shall not speak of, nor am I interested in reading your family's stance on the issue of blood status in your next essay." She pinned them with a very stern expression. "Facts. Only."

After a long silence in which Vector made sure every student understood how strict her policy on the subject of opinion-driven research was, she moved back to the front of the room and gestured to the blackboard. "Now, we will begin collecting your data. Due to the kind of problems you'll be expected to solve on this year's end of term exam, we will be focusing on your rate of casting, rate of recovery, and relative depth of reserves..."

The class went on, and Rigel settled down to take notes, ignoring the many, varied looks that were sent her way throughout the period.

Perhaps, she reflected after catching even Pansy looking at her oddly from the corner of her eye, she ought not to have expressed her ideas on magical genetics quite so bluntly. Or forcefully.

As they copied down their homework assignment-given the relative rate of casting and recovery of you and your evil wizard opponent, predict your probability of successfully escaping-and packed up their things, Anthony Goldstein, a Ravenclaw boy, walked over to their desk.

"I've never heard of that theory you were talking about," he said abruptly. Rigel was going to shrug and apologize if her words had offended him, but he added, "Can you tell me what book you found it in? I'd like to read about it for myself."

She blinked, but rattled off the books that contained the best information on the subject automatically. Goldstein scribbled the titles and authors down on a spare bit of parchment and smiled at her tightly. "Thanks. See you around, Black."

"I heard muggleborns were descendent from squibs, and that's where their magic comes from," Pansy said quietly as they walked back toward the common room. "I... Father says that muggles are there as a repairing mechanism for magic that's gotten too convoluted in Wizarding bloodlines. He says it gets rejected in the form of squibs and then after a while it repairs itself and becomes muggleborns, thus recycling magic back into the system."

Rigel thought that sounded like the sort of thing that gave purebloods a reason to call muggles and muggleborns trash or defective or lesser, but instead of saying so, she shrugged. "It's not clear yet how magic works or doesn't work in the instances of muggleborns and squibs. There are a lot of theories. All I know is that they've measured the differences in magic between muggleborns and purebloods empirically and shown that while there aren't significant, consistent differences in average power levels, muggleborn magic is closer to the unbound, formless magic found in nature and magical

creatures than the magic of wizards who've had tons of wizard ancestors is."

"I'd like to read those books too, I think," Pansy said, face blank.

"They're in my trunk," she offered stoically. "You can have them whenever you want."

It wasn't really her intention to push her friends into considering new ideas. She'd always been content to let them think what they want, seeing as it wasn't their fault what they were brought up to believe, and it certainly wasn't her place to rock the system-she'd lost that privilege when she decided to use it to her advantage. And yet, somehow, she was having an increasingly difficult time keeping her opinions to herself. Maybe because she'd seen the effect her friends' mindsets had on other people as Harriett. Maybe because they were growing up, and it was natural to begin asserting personal beliefs more strongly. Whatever the reason, she would have to step lightly. The last thing she wanted to do was alienate her friends. She cared about the truth, but she cared about her friendships more. At least... she thought she did.

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The first weekend of February, she received a note with her breakfast from Remus, asking if she would be amenable to tea in his office that afternoon to catch up. She sent her uncle a cheerful thumbs-up from across the Great Hall, which made him chuckle visibly into his goblet at the Head Table.

"What was that about?" Draco asked from the seat next to her.

"Remus wants to have tea with me this afternoon," she said honestly.

"That's a first, isn't it?" Millicent said, eyeing her curiously from across the table. "I thought you said at the beginning of the year that you and Professor Lupin were close."

"He's been maintaining a professional distance," Rigel explained. "He knows he'll see me all summer at home. It's important for his integrity that it doesn't look like he favors me."

"Seems a bit concerned with appearances," Draco said, eyebrow rising, "After all, everyone knows you're a talented student. No one would think you hadn't earned your Defense marks."

"He has to be concerned with appearances," Rigel said, feeling a little defensive on his behalf. "People are always watching him, waiting for him to make a mistake or show any sign of unsuitability."

"You know, sometimes I forget he's a werewolf," Theo said conversationally, "I mean, he's a bit boring actually-not his classes, of course, but just as a person. I'm honestly more scared of Professor Trelawney."

"She is rather terrifying," Pansy said, smiling in amusement. "Do you know she's predicted three deaths this week alone?"

"Not yours, I hope," Draco teased.

"She wouldn't dare," Pansy sniffed. "Though she did tell me I was going to fall ill around the end of term."

"Not much of a prediction," Millicent snorted, "Everyone falls ill at the end of term-finals put stress on the immune system."

"Pomfrey is already having Snape brew Calming Draughts for the OWL and NEWT students," Rigel said conspiratorially. "It's driving him spare."

"Is that why he took twenty points from that Hufflepuff student for, and I quote, 'breathing so loudly you give credence to an alternate

explanation of your House's dubious nomenclature'?" Blaise asked.

They burst into undignified laughter at the way Blaise perfectly captured their Head of House's ungodly derision.

"Someone should be writing these down," Millicent said, wiping her eyes, "We can give it to him as a book when we graduate."

"I'm not sure that will make him remember us fondly," Theo grinned.

"Not to mention if he started using the same material it wouldn't be as effective," Pansy pointed out. "Half the fear he induces is of the mindboggling, how-on-earth-did-he-come-up-with-that-so-quickly variety."

"He was probably teased a lot as a child," Blaise said suddenly, causing them all to fall into an uncomfortable silence. The dark-skinned boy cleared his throat. "I mean, generally speaking that would have necessitated quick comebacks."

Thinking about Snape as a kid brought a grimace to Rigel's face. He'd attended Hogwarts in a time when halfbloods were still admitted, but everyone could see the direction the policy was beginning to take. How must it have felt, to be one of the last halfbloods around Hogwarts? Did he feel lucky, to have barely squeaked ahead of the political wave? Or resentful, that his was a dying circumstance and everyone knew it. It was probably why he worked so hard as both an educator and a researcher, she mused. To prove his place in society wasn't unwarranted.

The mood mostly ruined, they finished their breakfast in a subdued manner, and split up shortly after to pursue their own activities. Rigel went to her lab, thinking she could brew up a few batches of Calming Draughts before her meeting with Remus and give Professor Snape a break from the monotony. She honestly didn't know how he found time to be a professor and the Hogwarts potions supplier while conducting his own research as well. It wasn't as though *he* had a time-turner.

Wondering vaguely why they didn't give all researchers time-turners, to speed up production of groundbreaking discoveries and cures if nothing else, she got out the supplies she needed automatically, lost in a world of thought.

By the time she'd finished her last batch, she was slightly overdue for her tea with Remus, but that was fixed with a quick half-turn back of the hourglass, which hardly even counted, as the overlap was really negligible... she told herself.

Before leaving the lab, she pulled out what she was calling 'eau de Archie' in her head and sprayed it liberally under her arms and around her collar. That done, it was an easy thing to make her way to Remus' office and muss her hair up just before entering, throwing the door open with a dramatic flourish and close it swiftly behind her for good measure.

"Hey," she panted lightly, "Remus. How... are you?"

"I'm well, Ar-Rigel," Remus said, smiling a bit, "May I ask what your haste is about? You aren't late yet, you know."

"Archie's fine when it's just us, Uncle Remus," Rigel said easily. "And I may have, ah, turned the hangings in our dorm room Hufflepuff yellow. My roommates are on the warpath." That should explain the overwhelmingly sweaty scent she was sporting, at least.

"Your father would tell you to use the Map to avoid them, instead of running every which way," Remus said, chucking. "As I recall that's how Sirius avoided the people he broke up with until their ire cooled down."

"And what would you say, Moony?" she grinned lopsidedly, affecting Archie's boyish charm.

"Well, as your educator I would have to advise against such childish diversions," Remus said gravely. A smile snuck into his voice as he

added, "But as your Uncle I'd tell you to try pranking people you don't share a dorm with. Unless you enjoy being hexed in your sleep."

"So you don't think I should dip Draco's essay in peanut butter tomorrow?" she asked, voice innocent.

"That depends," he pretended to think, "Is it his Defense essay?"

They laughed, and Rigel began bouncing her foot a little as the silence settled. The key to playing Archie successfully around people who knew him was to never be still. Archie was movement, restless impatience and energy and excitement over anything remotely not-boring. To be still would remind Remus of Harry.

"How are your other classes going?" Remus asked, sipping on his tea with a relaxed expression. "You're in Magical Theory, aren't you? I took that myself at your age. How are you finding it?"

"Fascinating," she said, smiling happily, "I'm taking it with Hannah Abbott, who want to be an experimental charms researcher in a private company like what Aunt Lily does, and Anthony Goldstein, who doesn't actually like the class I don't think, only he wants to be a cursebreaker, and Magical Theory is a prerequisite for the NEWT cursebreaking class. Did you know Ron Weasley has an older brother who's a cursebreaker? He works for Gringotts."

That was another thing about Archie-he noticed people, more than objects or ideas, and could ramble at length about anyone he'd had the slightest contact with. It was what made him so good at relating to complete strangers socially, as evidenced by his spectacular performance at the gala.

"I've heard that's a very exciting career," Remus agreed. After a moment, he paused, "Archie, you are good friends with the Weasley children, aren't you? Sirius mentioned you'd gone to their house a couple of times over break."

"Yes," she nodded easily, "They're really nice, except Ginny who pretends she's not nice because it makes her seem tough, and I think her brothers picked on her a lot when she was young. Ron is in the Dueling Club with me, and Percy helps me with my Transfiguration homework sometimes, and the twins... well, lets just say I sleep with one eye open at night."

Remus chuckled obligingly, but asked, "How do your other friends feel about your friendship with the Weasleys?"

"Um, they get sort of annoyed, actually," Rigel said, not seeing the harm in being honest. "Draco especially doesn't approve of them, though he's been a little better now that Ron is listening to him in Dueling practice."

"That's good," Remus said, looking relieved. "I wouldn't want you caught in the middle of anything. You're a good young man, Archie. You should build friendships wherever you see fit."

"Remus," she said suddenly, frowning a bit, "Why do people like Draco dislike the Weasleys so much? It almost seems like they look down on them as much as they look down on muggleborns, which doesn't make sense. I mean, they're both purebloods, no matter what their stance on politics." Remus looked troubled, and Rigel hurried to add. "It's not that I don't understand the political issues at stake. It just seems to me that you could disagree with someone without actually hating them, you know?"

Remus took a long drink of tea, seeming lost in thought, then said, somewhat delicately, "There are many families across the Light/Dark political divide who do respectfully disagree. The Weasleys, however, are considered-by the most extreme supporters of blood purity mind you, not the general populace-to be blood traitors."

"That just means they support muggleborn and halfblood rights equal to pureblood rights, doesn't it?" Rigel said, a bit confused. She hated not understanding a problem completely. "Everyone who supports Dumbledore's faction is anti-blood-supremacy."

"But they aren't all looked upon as the Weasleys are, are they?" Remus said knowingly, watching the wheels turn in her head.

"What... what's the difference I'm missing?" she asked, troubled that she hadn't picked up on that nuance before.

"What do you know about the term 'blood traitor,' exactly?" Remus asked, slipping into professor mode.

"Well, it's an insult," she said slowly, "A sort of synonym for 'muggle-lover,' I guess."

"Precisely," Remus said, "In fact, the root of the term is a reference to the literal meaning of the insult 'muggle-lover.' Both terms are used loosely as insults for people who support or even sympathize with muggles and muggleborns, but originally it was very explicit. A muggle-lover-a blood traitor in its truest sense-refers to a witch or wizard who has *relations* with muggles or muggleborn witches and wizards."

Rigel wrinkled her nose. "That doesn't make sense, though. The Weasleys are pureblood."

"There are some," Remus said carefully, "Who believe it is a mere technicality." He looked incredibly awkward, but soldiered on in his explanation. "Some purebloods believe that the Weasley family... bred with muggles or muggleborns on purpose, in an effort to revitalize their bloodline. The accusation, indelicate though it may be, is that blood traitors like the Weasleys are thought to make an effort to circumvent the fertility issues that true pureblooded families contend with by periodically-no more than once every few generations, mind you-marrying and producing children with those of less than pure blood. They are then accused of intermarrying aggressively with other purebloods once more until their own line is considered technically pure-that is, the current head of family has four magic-wielding grandparents. Their pureblooded pedigree is thus considered somewhat of a sham, if you will-a veneer that protects the family socially while not bearing up under idealistic

scrutiny. Thus the term 'blood traitor' refers to someone who betrays his own blood while not relinquishing the claim to that blood status completely."

Rigel was trying not to look shocked, but she had honestly *never* heard anything of the sort. "If people think-if they *believe* that families like the Weasleys can actually achieve increased odds of fertility simply by infusing a little genetic variation into the bloodline, then-then why don't they try it? So many purebloods lose children to unknown causes. If the Weasleys have found a way around that, I don't see why everyone isn't using it."

Remus grimaced. "Archie, you were raised in a moderate, open minded household. I'm not sure you can ever understand how deeply preconceived notions about the world can run. Imagine if someone told you tomorrow that your thoughts on, oh, academic integrity were all wrong, and that if you wanted to get good marks on your final exams the only way to do so would be to cheat. You would think them ridiculous, and insist that you could get good marks by studying hard and doing what you've always done, and you'd think that anyone who cheated to pass the test was an immoral fool who didn't deserve a good mark-isn't that right?"

"Well, yes," she said slowly. "I suppose so."

"To people who believe very strongly in the superiority of blood status, telling them that mingling with muggles might save them is not only blasphemy-it's incompatible with every truly-held faculty within them." Remus sighed. "What seems obvious to us is little more than ridiculous posturing by unworthy specimens of magic to them. They would sooner change almost anything else they think or endorse than change their stance on blood purity."

"But the children," Rigel murmured, unable to really understand. "If someone told me I had to cheat on a test to keep Addy alive, I'd do it without question. I wouldn't care about my integrity at that point."

Remus reached across the small tea table to pat her arm gently. "It isn't so simple, I'm afraid," he said softly. "No one walks up to pureblooded mothers and says 'here are your choices: mate with a muggle or watch your child die.' Of course it isn't so simple. Instead they have people on every side telling them not to worry, or that it's worth the chance that everything turns out all right. And the Healers don't fully understand it. And the media doesn't make any sense at all. And everyone they know and love and trust is telling them this is the only way, the way it's always been, the way it has to be... do you see how difficult it would be to think anything else?"

"I suppose," Rigel said slowly, "That the real miracle is that families like the Weasleys ever thought to try something new in the first place."

"That's a good way to look at it," Remus said, smiling wanly. "I'm afraid any change that upsets what people view as the natural order of things is going to come slowly, and with much confusion."

"Yeah," she said shakily, wondering how she ever thought a few well-chosen words in her friends' ears would change anything.

"You don't need to worry about all that," Remus said abruptly, "Come, I didn't bring you here to despair about the world. Let's talk about something else."

"All right," she said, trying to get back into Archie's character somehow. "How is the New Wolfsbane working? Are you doing well?"

"Very well," Remus smiled, "Thanks to you and Professor Snape, I hardly feel the call of the moon most months. It does make me a little disoriented after I wake, but that is a small price to pay. I heal faster from the transformations, and my appetite is greatly increased in the days leading up to the full moon. And you can tell all that to Harry, who I know put you up to that question."

His smile was fond, and Rigel couldn't help but smile back sheepishly. "She worries about you, is all."

"I am very lucky to know so many generous, caring young-"

He broke off as the door to his office was flung open suddenly.

"Remus, my old friend, I have to tell you something-" Peter Pettigrew stopped, looked at Rigel and mouthed a soundless 'oh.' He looked back and forth between them, something in his face seeming shaken and torn.

"What is it, Peter?" Remus said, beginning to rise.

Pettigrew shook his head quickly. "I don't know. Never mind." He bolted out of the office as though he had hounds on his heels.

"What on Earth?" Remus slowly sank back down into his chair, perplexed.

"Maybe he found something interesting in the Library," Rigel said suddenly, seeing her chance.

"The Library?" Remus frowned in confusion. "Why would you think that?"

"I see him in there a lot," she said, trying to hint innocently. "He's always in there, it seems, paging through old books. I wonder if he's studying for something, or just looking for information on something in particular."

Remus cleared his throat and averted his eyes. "How odd. He never was the studious type."

She hoped dearly that he was pretending ignorance for her sake and that he did, in fact, suspect something about his old friend. All she could do, she realized, was plant seeds. She would have to trust the adults to take matters into their own hands, once presented with enough information.

Rigel thought ruefully that when she was an adult, she would be much more proactive about things than the generation before her seemed to be.

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Before she knew it, Valentine's Day had come to pass. In Rigel's defense, it was struggle enough to remember which day of the week she was present in and how many other times she'd done it already, so keeping track of the actual calendar days had sort of fallen by the wayside. She supposed it was her own fault, then, that she was taken almost completely by surprise.

She had attributed her friends' unnaturally good spirits to the upcoming weekend until they walked into the Great Hall and saw a huge crowd over by the message boards, all gabbing excitedly about something or other.

"It's a Hogsmeade weekend coming up, right?" she guessed, trying to seem engaged in the present.

Draco snorted. "It's the fourteenth, Rigel."

"The..." She grimaced. "Oh." Of course it was.

"Perhaps there's an activity of some sort planned," Pansy said, eyeing the mass of milling students with interest.

"Let's go see," Draco said, glancing at Pansy with fond patience. "It would be a shame to have to get the story secondhand."

Thus decided, they crossed the Great Hall to see what the fuss was about. When the first young girl turned and spotted Rigel, immediately dissolving into a fit of giggles, she thought maybe she'd surprised the girl by standing too close behind her. After the third

person to turn around, catch sight of her face, and nudge the person next to them, however, she was starting to feel dread pooling in her stomach.

Draco, perhaps feeling her sudden change in emotional state or else noticing the odd behavior of the students around them as well, said, "What?" very loudly.

Laughter spread through the mob and several students obligingly parted before their trio to let them have a look at the message board. There was a lurid pink flyer taking up most of the five-by-five foot space, and smack in the middle of it was a Wizarding photo of *her* . The Rigel in the photo wasn't looking anywhere near the camera, wherever it had been, but was rather gazing off at something out of frame, frowning as though gently intrigued. It was, frankly, ridiculous.

"Rigel Black's Labor of Love," Draco read, grimacing even as the words left his mouth. "Got a letter you're scared to loose? Is your amour better off anonymous? Rigel Black has got your back! One day only, put your passion to parchment and let Romantic Rigel do the rest." He turned to Rigel with a pained expression. "What is this, Rigel?"

"I don't know," she said, her voice rising a bit as she took in the rest of the poster. "It obviously wasn't me!"

"Hmm, it says 'sign your smoldering secret Valentines with the name Rigel Black, and I'll deliver them free of charge,'" Pansy noted, amusement in every syllable. "'On my honor, every tender triviality, adoring affection, and devious detail will be delivered-with your identity incognito.' It even has a copy of your schedule today so people can give you their love notes at any time-how sweet is that?"

"How quickly can I eviscerate the Weasley twins?" Rigel muttered darkly. They had taken the Rigel-signed note thing too far this time.

She turned and made for the Gryffindor table, ready to nip this prank in the bud with extreme prejudice. Before she'd gone two steps,

however, a tentative hand grasped her sleeve and waylaid her.

"Are you... Rigel Black?"

Rigel looked down into the beet-red face of a Gryffindor first year. "I am," she said, fighting a grimace. "Who are you?"

Instead of responding, the eleven-year-old girl pressed a small paper heart into her hand with an embarrassed grin. "The name is on the inside. Thanks, Black."

Before Rigel could protest that she was certainly not a Valentine's Day owl, the first-year was gone, and Rigel was staring down at a piece of red-colored parchment with a bewildered expression. "How is this my life?"

By the time she made it to the Weasley twins, she had four cards in her hand and she was fairly certain another stuffed in her pocket when she wasn't looking. They took one look at her irked expression and burst out laughing. "Why the long face, Rigel? Didn't you get any valentines?" Fred asked, sending George and several of the other Gryffindors who'd overheard into appreciative chuckles.

"Why?" It was all she had to say. "Why do you do this to me?"

"One day you'll thank us," George insisted. "You're going to be a symbol, Rigel. A symbol of love, truth, beauty, and-"

"*Grouchiness*," Fred said, poking her cheek, where she could feel a tick developing.

"I will get you for this," she promised. "Both of you. Maybe not even at the same time."

"I don't think anyone's ever threatened to prank us separately, George," Fred said, looking interested.

"Could be fun," George agreed, grinning.

Rigel sighed, and turned back to the Slytherin table, not sure why she even bothered. When she went to take her seat, however, she found a pile of cards stacked on top of her plate. A round of snickers met her disheartened sigh.

"Didn't know you were such a romantic at heart, Rigel," Pucey spoke up from a few seats down the table.

Rigel took a deep breath, picked up the armful of Valentines on her plate and dumped them unceremoniously into Pucey's lap. "For that, you can deliver these, Adrian."

Pucey spluttered. "No way. Do you know what it will do to my reputation if I go handing out little pink hearts?"

"All I know is that you owe me *several* favors, Adrian," she said, raising an eyebrow challengingly. "I think the least you can do is help me out today, don't you?"

"He's got a point, Adrian," Derrick said, smirking. He pulled out an elaborately embossed red card from his breast pocket. "Deliver this to Lucian for me, won't you? Don't tell him who it's from."

Pucey scowled and snatched the card roughly before tossing it across the table into Bole's lap. The fact that Bole was sitting right next to Derrick didn't appear to amuse Pucey. "Rigel, come on, have a heart..." he trailed off with a resigned groan.

"Oh Rigel has hearts," Theo piped up, arriving at the table with a large grin. "There's a whole stack of them by the common room entrance, in fact, all addressed to him."

"Already?" Pansy hid a smile behind her hand. "My, word certainly spreads quickly."

If Rigel thought her friends were going to have their fun and then let the joke go gracefully, she was quite mistaken. All day, in addition to having to smile politely while students from all grade levels handed

her cards, letters, and even, in one case, an elaborate origami flower, she also had to endure her so-called friends' poorly-stifled guffaws and smirks.

Most of the people whose names were on the valentines she found piled on her desks or passed along by her friends were students Rigel didn't even know. She had to rely on good-natured classmates from other Houses to get many of them delivered, but she was almost proud to say that by the end of the day she'd sent every last wretchedly tacky heart on its way.

She made it back to the common room just before curfew, having successfully delivered the last batch to a very helpful Cho Chang at the base of Ravenclaw tower. Adrian Pucey intercepted her on the way to her dorm room, saying, "I hope you know that we are assuredly even after this, Rigel. I have never been the butt of so many jokes."

"That you know of," Rigel said, summoning up a grin. "Thanks, though. I wouldn't have managed them all on my own."

"Yes, well." Pucey cleared his throat. "Here." He produced two modest-looking valentines that had her groaning in protest.

"No more," she pleaded. "I can't look at another one. Can't you deliver them?"

Pucey smirked lopsidedly, "I am."

"What?" She blinked dumbly at the proffered cards.

"These are addressed to you," Pucey said. "They're signed from you, too, but I'm assuming you aren't *that* much of a masochist."

She took them with an incredulous laugh. "Thanks... I guess."

"Yeah, whatever, Black," Pucey sniffed. "Next time do your own dirty work."

Rolling her eyes, she made a beeline for the third-year hallway. All she wanted to do was sleep. Theo and Blaise were already in their sleeping attire when she walked in, with only Draco still sitting up in his school clothes, penning something on his personalized letterhead.

"Writing thank you notes for all the valentines you got today, Draco?" she asked, chuckling a bit. She'd delivered one herself that had been handed off by Daphne Greengrass of all people. It had actually fountained confetti upon Draco opening it.

"I only received the one, as you very well know, and there's no way I'm writing a thank you note to a second year," Draco scowled.

"You know who it's from?" Rigel lifted an eyebrow. "I thought the ones coming through me were supposed to be anonymous."

"It's that Greengrass chit," Draco rolled his eyes, "The younger one. She was only stalking me all day to see my reaction to getting it. I could feel her depressing brand of fearful yearning from across the castle."

"Astoria, right?" Theo put in from where he was sprawled across his bed. "At least she's nicer than her sister."

"It would be difficult to be more harridan-like than Daphne," Blaise said mildly, not even looking up from the book he was perusing.

"I suppose a thank you note would only embarrass her," Rigel shrugged. "Still, you could at least nod politely the next time you saw her. I think she looks up to you after you calmed her down in the carriage that time."

"And encourage her?" Draco wrinkled his nose. "I think not. I've enough problems without adding lovesick shadow to the list. If I ignore her, maybe she'll get the hint and go away."

Rigel sighed, but knew that it wasn't really any of her business. It might even work, at that. She sat down on her own bed and kicked off her shoes before opening her own valentines curiously. Maybe the twins had sent her one each. It seemed like the sort of cherry-on-top thing they'd do.

After close examination, however, they didn't seem to be gag valentines at all; rather, each contained a message that appeared to have been intended genuinely. The first, a white card with red ribbon tying it closed, read simply: *Be Mine?* The second, smaller in size but filled with red ink, said: *I've always admired your honest compassion, and thought I may as well say it now. You make me think better of Slytherins, and better of young men in general. Thanks for being inspiring, in your own quiet way. Happy Valentine's Day.* It was signed *Your secret admirer/ Rigel Black.*

Her lips quirked at the thought that *she* had a secret admirer. How unlikely.

"What're those?" Draco asked suddenly, coming off his bed to have a look. "You've got valentines, Rigel?"

She shrugged in an unconcerned way. "Guess so."

"Oh, stop, I can feel your gooey insides just melting," Draco drawled. "Let's see them, then."

She held them on her other side, out of his reach. "Read your own."

Blaise, the traitor, snatched them from her hand from his side of the bed before she realized he'd left his covers. "I haven't got any to read," he said, smirking. Opening the first, he cleared his throat before saying, in a dulcet tones, "Be. Mine. How incredibly deep."

He went to open the other one, but Theo had made a grab for it before he got the chance. "Ah-ah-ah, I *know* you've had a valentine from Hannah, because it had adorable animated crups running along the border. I get to read this one." He recited the note grandly,

interspersed with laughs from the other two, and when he was finished, he handed the card back to Rigel with great aplomb. "Looks like we have a little mystery, boys. Who could our Rigel's secret admirer be?"

"Admirer s," Blaise corrected, handing the card he'd taken back as well.

"I bet I can figure it out within the week," Draco said, smirking.

"You have an unfair advantage." Blaise rolled his eyes.

"Which you still have no proof of," Draco sniffed, not having officially told anyone other than Rigel and Pansy about his gift.

"But which is nevertheless entirely obvious," Blaise said dryly.

"I'd really rather not know," Rigel said hastily. "It's more fun as a mystery... right?"

"No," Draco said flatly.

"Nope," Theo grinned.

"It is always better to know something than not," Blaise said, nodding firmly.

"Well, good luck then," Rigel sighed. "Just leave me out of it."

"Careful with your ice cold attitude, Rigel," Theo laughed. "You're going to break hearts at this rate."

"Like you're one to talk," Draco said, getting back to his letter. "I saw that tear-stained love letter from the Patil girl."

"We parted amiably," Theo said, sounding exasperated. "And we only dated once. It's not like there was some grand romance that fell to ruins. She's being dramatic."

"It's probably the first time she's dated anyone," Blaise said reasonable. "She'll gain perspective once she matures a bit."

"That doesn't help me now," Theo grumbled. "She wants me to take her to Hogsmeade on Saturday, but I've already asked Geoffrey Hooper."

"What are you doing for Hogsmeade, Rigel?" Draco asked, cutting across Theo's whining.

Rigel looked over. "I haven't any plans. I don't really need anything, except maybe some more lacewing flies, I guess. Actually, I should probably get a few other things as well." She frowned, wondering why she hadn't thought to replenish the ingredients she'd gone through with the Polyjuice while she was staying in the alleys.

"I meant for fun, not errands," Draco said. "Who are you going with? Pansy has a date, you know."

"Oh." Rigel wondered why she hadn't known that. Maybe she'd been asked that day, while Rigel was running about delivering cards.

"Well, I guess I'll go with whoever doesn't have a date, then."

"I'm not going," Blaise said, grimacing apologetically. "I have to spend the summer at my family's Italian estate, and Millie offered to start catching me up on European politics."

"Just us then," Draco said, his tone a little too casual. "What should we do?"

"Whatever you like," she said, not too concerned. It wasn't as though they hadn't been to Hogsmeade before.

She turned over to get more comfortable and missed the look of calculation on her blonde friend's face. Had she seen it, she might have been a little more on her guard. As it was, Hogsmeade was the furthest thing from her mind. Though it wasn't far off in the liner

sense, she had several more days of time-turned classes and studying to get through before looking to the weekend.

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Draco was of the firm opinion that no proper wizard should ever rouse himself from bed before the sun had bothered to grace the sky with at least a grasping finger's breadth of pink luminescence. At least, he had been of that opinion, before morning exercise with a certain dark haired roommate of his had somehow become a normal part of his cultured existence. The recent frequency of early rises hadn't made them any less utterly and uninspiringly odious, but sometimes it was necessary to make sacrifices for larger ends.

That was why, even though it was so obnoxiously early that dawn hardly described the situation, Draco roused himself with difficulty from the cocooning warmth of his blankets. His roommates, lucky sods, slept soundly as Draco crept to the foot of his bed and slipped one hand into his trunk. Feeling around for the little pouch that he'd specifically left on the top of all the other items the night before, he grinned in the darkness in a way that he told himself was not at all deranged. He'd always heard stories from his father about hatching plans and seeing them come to fruition, but he hadn't really had the chance to make his *own* plans. There had never been any reason to. Until now.

Rigel Black was up to something, and as his friend, it was Draco's responsibility to figure out what. That, and the curiosity was eating away at his soul. After getting a handle on his rather unexpected Empathic Gift, he'd become accustomed to knowing things. It was immediately obvious to Draco when Rigel began sneaking around at the beginning of the year, but every effort he'd made to keep an eye on his friend had been frustrated by the fact that Rigel was always doing something perfectly reasonable. Draco was practically

drowning in feelings of guilt and excitement every time Rigel made an awkward excuse and ducked into a bathroom or around the corner or... wherever he would disappear to for inexplicably short amounts of time. He was never unaccounted for longer than a few minutes, which was the really strange part. Draco just knew he was up to something, but what could possibly be both interesting enough to hide and accomplished in five minutes?

His running (if admittedly unlikely) theory was that Rigel had a relationship he was keeping secret, which had him sneaking off for kisses in broom cupboards all over the castle... or something. Nothing else that he'd come up with made any sort of sense, unless Rigel had had an embarrassing case of irritable bowel syndrome all year.

Today, he would find out one way or another. His plan was foolproof. In his hand was a tiny little tracking device purchased for a modest seven sickles from a certain joke shop he'd visited over the break. While advertised for use on professors-and how ridiculous a notion was that, putting a tracker on Snape's robe hem?-Draco thought it would be perfect for keeping tabs on his most suspicious friend. He stepped quietly over to where Rigel's shoes were sitting on the floor beside his bed and carefully attached the tiny tracking bug onto the underside of Rigel's right sole. With anyone else, this would be a bit of a gamble, but Rigel wore the same pair of shoes every day. It would be his undoing, Draco thought with a somewhat maniacal smirk.

As he slipped back into bed to 'go back to sleep' until the others woke up, he had to admit it was pretty exciting, sneaking around like one of Grindelwald's spies. He could see why Rigel would find it appealing, but that didn't mean he would just let the other boy get away with it.

He was creeping through a dark forest, his wand at the ready-wait, that wasn't his wand, it was a sugar quill. Taking a bite thoughtfully, Draco spotted a majestic unicorn coming into the clearing. "Hail, Unicorn!" he said, saluting with his sugar quill smartly. "Hail, Draco!"

the unicorn whinnied, bowing its horn low to the ground. "Where did you learn to bow, Unicorn?" he asked, confused. "The same place I learned to curtsy," the unicorn said, now wearing a skirt. That made sense, he thought, setting off to a different part of the forest. He was looking for something... something important... there! A flashing light up ahead made him break into an excited jog. The light led him to a clearing full of sunlight. There were birds singing and the most delicious smell in the air. It was... it was... he opened his eyes and fell forward into a meadow of strawberries. Only they weren't strawberries, they were strawberry tarts and they were calling out his name. Draco... Draco...

"Draco, get up." Someone was shaking him. He opened his eyes into Rigel's exasperated grey orbs. "Weren't you the one so eager to get to Hogsmeade today?"

Draco yawned, rubbing his eyes and hair simultaneously. "I hate mornings."

"It's almost nine, Draco," Rigel said, openly amused at his expense.

"I didn't sleep well," he said, trying to regain a semblance of his usual poise. Rigel's secret had better be worth his beauty sleep.

"That's a first," Rigel snorted. "Usually you're out cold the moment your head hits the pillow. Bad dreams?"

"Malfoys don't have bad dreams," Draco informed him. "Even the figments of our imagination know their place."

"Yes, yes, all hail Draco, King of Dreams," Rigel said, heading for the door. "When you rejoin reality, I'll be at breakfast."

"Hail Draco, yes," he murmured sleepily, reclining back into his pillow once more. A few minutes later he sprung up with a gasp and cursed quietly. "Focus, Draco," he told himself firmly, pushing the covers back and hurrying to make himself presentable. He could not afford

to be off his game today-not if he was going to catch Rigel by surprise.

He arrived at the Slytherin table in time to hear Rigel inquiring politely about Pansy's date.

"It's obligatory," their friend sighed. Draco wasn't fooled by her nonchalance, however. He could read a subtle excitement underlying the slightly disengaged calculation that he'd come to understand was Pansy's norm.

"Don't dissemble," Draco teased her. "We know you love sussing out new people."

"Especially when they don't see it coming," Rigel said, moving over a bit to make room for Draco to sit.

"Only fools take the world at face value," Pansy sniffed, fluttering her lashes. "Can I help it that so many young men these days are fools?"

"Not us, though, right?" Theo grinned lasciviously from across the table.

"No comment," Pansy said sweetly.

They finished their meal and broke off in different directions for the day. Rigel and he took a carriage to Hogsmeade alone, and Draco tried to remember the last time he'd done something with just Rigel and none of their other friends.

"How've you been?" he asked, somewhat lamely, just to get the ball rolling. If he could persuade Rigel to tell him what he'd been up to now, it would save him a lot of trouble. Then again, Draco thought with a slight frown, he'd already gone to the trouble of coming up with such a brilliant plan. It would almost be disappointing if Rigel revealed his secret right off.

"Just fine," Rigel said, smiling a bit and radiating amusement to Draco's senses. "Snape is letting me brew Felix Felicis next week."

"That's very advanced," Draco said, suitably impressed.

Rigel smiled wider, visibly pleased. "It would take six months to complete, and of course the Ministry doesn't encourage casual brewing of the substance in any case, but we'll at least be able to get a good start on the base before the end of the school year."

"Sounds... involved," Draco offered.

"It's going to be fascinating," Rigel agreed. "So where do you want to go today?"

"Wherever you like," Draco said. His plan was actually to let Rigel get comfortable, while simultaneously monopolizing his time all morning. Then, if his usual pattern was anything to go by, Rigel would inexplicably feel the need to sneak away at some point. Draco would graciously pretend to believe whatever excuse Rigel made, then he would follow Rigel using the teacher tracker and see what he was *really* up to. It was perfect.

Rigel was quiet for a few minutes, staring out of the window, radiating pensiveness. "Would it be all right... if we went to see the Shrieking Shack?" Rigel asked, glancing hesitantly at him, as though fairly certain Draco wouldn't want to.

Normally, he wouldn't go anywhere near the supposedly haunted place, but his plan called for Rigel to be completely oblivious to any attempts at manipulating him, which meant Draco would appease his curiosity, in this instance. "Sounds good, I haven't seen it yet, either," Draco said, smiling magnanimously.

"Thanks." Rigel smiled, but the subtle expression was nothing compared to the quiet gratitude that floated Draco's way, filling up his senses as though the air in the carriage had been perfumed with the emotion.

Draco breathed it in deeply, despite knowing it wasn't an actual smell.

They departed the carriages and made their way slowly through the village, content to stretch their legs and take in the bustle and energy of the student-flooded town. They passed the main shopping streets and before long had reached the outskirts of the village. The noise of rowdy students had long since faded away, and by the time they reached the fence that set the shack back from the road, Draco might have thought them in another place entirely, so eerily silent was the atmosphere.

Rigel rested both arms on the fence and leaned forward until his chin was propped atop them, gazing at the dilapidated, boarded-up house with what Draco recognized after a moment was sadness, mingled with pity. Not knowing why Rigel would feel pity for a house, even a beat up old neglected one, Draco said, "I've heard that a family of banshees live there until some villagers found out about them, then set the shack on fire to try and run them out. The banshees died in the flames, though, and every now and then you can hear the awful shrieking as their ghosts relive the anguish."

Rigel, instead of appearing appropriately impressed with Draco's gruesome tale, merely snorted. "That's not true."

"You sound sure," Draco said, smiling as he felt Rigel's amusement and knew he'd been the cause of it.

"I am," Rigel said. "This shack was built in the same year as the Whomping Willow." A flicker of unease crossed the air between them, and as Rigel rushed on Draco wondered if he'd said something he hadn't meant to. He didn't see what that violent tree had to do with the shack in Hogsmeade, but he tucked the information away in any case. That was what Malfoys did after all- they remembered things that seemed important even if they didn't understand why they were important. Someone else might understand, one day. "Anyway, the shack was actually built a couple

of decades ago at Dumbledore's behest. It looks much older, but that's part of the intended façade."

Draco lifted a brow. "How would you know that?"

Rigel hesitated visibly, but seemed to decide there was no harm in telling Draco whatever was making him look so morose. "My uncle, Remus, didn't become a werewolf later in life-he was bitten as a child, and never imagined he would get the chance to attend Hogwarts like a regular kid. Dumbledore took a chance on him, though, and arranged for this place to be built so that Remus would have somewhere to go during the full moon. You can't tell from here, but the entire structure is heavily warded, and with a few rumors spread among the locals to keep people away, it was the perfect place to keep a werewolf hidden, but safe."

Draco could not quite stop the shocked look that crossed his face. "Dumbledore brought a werewolf to Hogwarts... on purpose? Before the Wolfsbane potion was even invented?"

"It was a calculated risk," Rigel shrugged. "Dumbledore believes the best of people, and in this case, he was right. Remus never took his education for granted. He worked incredibly hard, studied everything he could, and graduated near the very top of his class."

"It's impressive, considering how ill he must have been several days out of every month," Draco allowed.

"It didn't do any good in the end, though," Rigel said, frowning. "For all his brilliance and kindness and work ethic, Remus has never been able to keep a steady job. He refused to hide his condition, refused to lie about what he was, once he graduated. He wanted to be appreciated on his own terms. And the world let him down. Every time, he was told no, you aren't good enough, no, we can't take the risk."

"You can't blame people for-"

"Can't I?" Rigel sighed. "He's more risk to his family and friends, the people who stand by him when the moon waxes, than he is to an employer who would likely never see him after five o'clock anyway. We saw the good in him. Dumbledore saw it when he was only eleven. I've never understood... why couldn't other people? Why is it so hard to look past someone else's circumstances?"

Draco didn't have an answer to that. At least, not one he thought Rigel would understand. Rigel wasn't afraid of anything. Of course he didn't comprehend how fear could motivate people to prioritize themselves over others, even unnecessarily so. It was basic instinct, not something rational that you could change about the world. People would always shun the monsters and embrace the ordinary.

"I'd heard about this place, but I've never been here," Rigel said, looking at the shack once more. "Seeing it... I wonder how it would have felt. Remus was our age-younger, the first time he was brought here. A dark, lonely house that creaked in the wind. Waiting for the sun to go down and a monster to claw its way out from his own soul. Then waking up, alone and in pain, and wondering what he'd done the night before and waiting for someone to come collect him. Wondering if they would this time, or if they'd finally decide to just leave the monster be. Sometimes, when I encounter difficulties, I think of Remus, and I wonder if I would have had the strength that he did. Most werewolves bitten young don't live to adulthood, you know."

"I didn't," Draco said, feeling distinctly uncomfortable. If he'd ever thought long about werewolves in the past, it had been in terms of whether he was ever likely to meet one on a full moon. He certainly hadn't thought about what life was like from a werewolf's point of view; he hadn't ever thought about how a werewolf became that way, except in the academic sense. It made him realize that *he* could become a werewolf, easily, if he were unlucky enough to be caught and bitten. That thought bred an automatic fear that he had difficulty channeling into objective caution; his instinct was to avoid thinking about werewolves at all.

"The curse is hardest on the mind, and children are weak-willed and weak-minded, generally speaking," Rigel said flatly. "In most cases the child either gives into the wolf and goes completely feral or dies in the violence of the struggle to remain human. Whenever I find life difficult or aggravating I remind myself that I have suffered nothing, compared to some."

Draco made a noncommittal noise, really out of his depth in the conversation now. He didn't spend inordinate amounts of time thanking Fate for the lot he'd been handed. Somehow, he was deserving of it-or, that's what had been implied. He was a Malfoy, after all. It wasn't accident, but providence that he should be so favored. Rigel's depressing self-deprecation couldn't go unremarked, however.

"You're a good person, Rigel," Draco told him, utterly serious. "You work hard, get all you can out of every moment, and do your best at everything you take on. I don't think you can ask more of yourself than that. It's not a bad thing that you haven't suffered-it's a good thing, and you should be glad of the life you live. If you don't appreciate it, then... then it *is* wasted, right?"

Rigel mused for a long moment, then turned to Draco with a soft smile. "Yeah. You're right-I should appreciate what I have more, instead of worrying if I'm somehow less because I've avoided hardships that others may experience."

Draco thought it odd that Rigel had said 'avoided' instead of something like 'not been subjected to,' but he ignored that in favor of putting a solicitous hand on Rigel's shoulder. "The past was shitty, Rigel. For a lot of people. The future will be better." It ought to be, anyway, with everyone alive having already inherited the world of those who came before them. Draco had always thought that the present was naturally better than the past. It was inevitable, in many ways. They wouldn't even have to try that hard-it was like strolling along a garden path; each step came organically, easily, a continuation of the step that came before. Nothing strenuous or difficult about it, in the grand scheme of things. He didn't get why

people got so worked up about changing the world, come to that. Change was always happening, with or without people's help. It was halting change that was the real challenge. His father was always lamenting the pervasive, inconsiderate march of 'progress.'

"I suppose you're right," Rigel said at length. "I'm being overly somber, aren't I? My apologies, Draco. This wasn't what I intended by coming here. It's just I've heard so many stories... being here sort of brought them to life, you know?"

"Sure," Draco said easily. "There's a portrait in my father's private office of my great great great grandmother, and when I was seven she told me that she strangled a Ministry official with her bare hands in the blue salon. I've never been able to walk past that room without shuddering."

Rigel let out a mildly horrified laugh, and the tension was broken at last. "Why did she strangle him?"

"Her," Draco said, grimacing a bit. "Apparently my ancestor suspected the witch of conspiring to bear a Malfoy bastard. The claim was never substantiated of course-mostly because the witch never got a word out."

Rigel was suddenly very disturbed, so Draco hurriedly changed the subject. "Let's get back to the village. We can get a butterbeer and you can tell me how you've managed to show so much improvement in Dueling this semester-did you spend the whole winter break practicing, or what?"

They spent the rest of the morning walking and talking and generally just wasting time. Draco hadn't been so amused in a long while-his friend's dry wit and semi-caustic opinions almost made him forget that the day had a plan. Almost.

They had lunch in the Three Broomsticks, and afterwards Draco began to subtly press Rigel into admitting that he had somewhere to

be. "I wouldn't mind splitting up for a while, I mean, if you needed to get some errands run."

"I don't really have anything besides going to the apothecary on my list," Rigel said, looking entirely nonchalant. Draco didn't believe it for a moment-he hadn't gone this long without sneaking off for a moment all week. Whatever his secret was, he knew it needed some kind of... maintenance or something. Any moment now, Rigel would make his excuses.

"Right, the apothecary," Draco said, working to keep a knowing smile of his face. "I suppose you wouldn't mind if I tagged along."

"Of course not," Rigel said, eyebrows rising. "I suppose it might be sort of boring for you, though. If you have something else you want to do, I'd understand."

A-ha! Rigel's face was calm but Draco had felt a subtle thrill go through his friend as he spoke. He was hoping Draco wouldn't want to accompany him, for whatever reason. Well, he wouldn't make it hard on his friend, he thought with a smirk.

"I'll just run to the sweet shop then, shall I?" Draco said casually.

"All right," Rigel said. "Will you pick me up a licorice wand?"

Draco mentally cursed. His friend was crafty, making sure Draco really would have to go to Honeydukes if he wanted to make his story believable. No matter. Rigel would be in the same position, having to really go to the apothecary to throw Draco off his scent, which meant Draco had time to run and get a couple of sweets before getting down to the serious business of ferreting out Rigel's secret.

They parted ways, and Draco hurried through the packed streets until he spotted a group of students coming out of Honeydukes with bags full to bursting. "Hey, do you guys have any licorice wands?" he asked quickly.

One of them, a sandy-haired boy with lots of freckles, clutched his bag possessively. Bingo.

"What did you pay for it?" Draco asked. "I'll give you double."

His eyes went wide, and he glanced between Draco and his friends, torn. "I waited in line forever, though...."

"Triple," Draco snapped. "For the licorice wand and one other sweet."

The boy sighed forlornly. "Okay. It's a deal."

They exchanged goods quickly, and Draco ducked into a relatively deserted side street to pull out the 'map' that had come in the package with the teacher tracker. It was a mostly blank piece of paper with a black dot in the center and a series of rings set up like ripples around it. Each successive ring had a different value of distance noted next to it, and at the top right there was a crude compass designating North. When he said the activation phrase, the tracker in Rigel's shoe would show up as a red dot on the map, which would move around in relation to the center dot-a bit like a radar system that only showed one thing.

More excited than he would care to admit, Draco whispered the activation phrase and waited with baited breath for the dot to appear. It winked into existence slowly, a little unsurely, not far from where Draco was standing-which made sense, since he wouldn't have had time to go very far yet. What didn't make sense was the way another dot blinked into existence a heartbeat later, much further away from the center dot and the other red dot. Then, a moment after that, yet another dot appeared, closer to the second but separate enough to be distinct. He frowned down at the map, confused.

He began walking experimentally, and all three dots moved relative to his position, just as they should. Why was it defective? Did the map pick up all teacher trackers in the vicinity? That was annoying. And actually, there should be many more dots if that were the case.

There were about twenty on the shelves of Zonko's alone. Maybe it only showed trackers that had been activated. That was still a rather obnoxious design flaw.

At least he could be reasonably sure that the dot closest to him was Rigel. He began tracking that one, not noticing until he was nearly on top of it that the map had led him straight back to the apothecary. Maybe he was going to run his 'errand' first, and then sneak off? Draco settled into the alley across from the apothecary to wait.

Fifteen minutes later, he was bored, and twenty-five minutes later he was annoyed out of his mind. What was Rigel doing that was taking so long? Wasn't he in a hurry to get to wherever he had been sneaking off to? Draco was sure he would see Rigel meeting up with a mysteriously cloaked stranger who was extorting him for money or else an older, more experienced paramour who was too embarrassed by Rigel's age to be seen in public with him...

He looked down at the map again, but the dot he thought was Rigel was stubbornly in the same exact spot. He began to get uneasy. What if the map didn't work at all? What if Rigel had left his shoes behind? No, that was ridiculous. Rigel loved those shoes. And yet... what was he *doing*? No one could possibly spend so long picking out potions ingredients. Not even Rigel. And what about that thrill of eager anticipation Draco had felt? He just had to be up to something.

Draco's toes were starting to get cold, and he was sick of standing in the same alley without anything exciting happening. How did professional spies do it? They had to have more sophisticated methods of keeping track of people. He bet no real spy ever had to wait outside in the bitter elements for over an hour while their mark tried out all the cauldrons in the store or whatever Rigel was doing.

Finally getting fed up, he crumpled the map in his pocket and stormed into the store. He found Rigel standing in front of a shelf of newt parts, a stupid smile on his face as he looked back and forth between a jar in his left hand and a packet in his right.

"Rigel," Draco said, exasperated, "Have you been here the whole time?"

Rigel blinked at him in mild confusion. "It's only been..." He glanced at the clock behind the register. "Twenty minutes, Draco. Did you have somewhere to be?"

It was all Draco could do not to strangle his infuriatingly oblivious friend. Twenty minutes? As if. He felt like he'd been standing out there for *hours*. "It's fine," he grit out, suppressing an eye twitch with difficulty.

"I'm almost done," Rigel said, voice apologetic now. "Here, what do you think-should I get the single-wrapped newts or the bulk-packaged one? The bulk ones are better quantity per Knut, of course, but they sometimes slip some shoddy quality newts in with the good ones..."

"What difference does quality make in newts?" Draco asked.

"The eyes, mostly," Rigel said, "Sometimes if the newt died under stress the eyes are strained or damaged."

"If you get bad eyes on a few can you still use the rest of the newt?" Draco said.

"Yes..." Rigel said slowly, "I suppose I could just buy a small container of eyes, in addition to the bulk-packaged newts. That's probably still cheaper than buying a bunch of individually packaged newts. Thanks Draco." Rigel smiled like he'd just solved Merlin's Paradox. Draco did *not* immediately forgive the boy for wasting his time.

As Rigel paid for his ingredients and the two of them started back toward the castle, Draco heaved a mental sigh of disappointment. It looked like his friend was more wily than he'd thought. He was a Slytherin, for all that sometimes he seemed more like a Ravenclaw. He supposed it was only right that it be hard to catch him out. Still,

Draco had all semester. He would leave the tracker in Rigel's shoe, even if it did seem to be a bit glitchy. Eventually, he would figure out what had his friend so secretive.

That is, *more* secretive than usual.

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Rigel had no idea what was making Draco act so oddly while they were in Hogsmeade, but she was ready for an hour or so of quiet when she got back to the castle. She left the common room, which was pretty rowdy that Saturday, in favor of heading to the Library, where quiet was guaranteed thanks to Madam Pince's stringently consistent enforcement habits.

She had been planning to read some more of Dumbledore's handwritten 'textbook' that afternoon, but when she caught sight of Ginny scribbling away at a corner table she was reminded of a question she'd been meaning to ask the girl. Rigel made her way over and waited patiently while Ginny finished the paragraph she was working on.

"To what do I owe this honor?" the redhead said, propping her chin on one hand in a parody of interest.

"Do you have a minute?" Rigel asked. "I wanted to get your thoughts on something I'm working on."

"I suppose," Ginny said, clearing her parchment and quill off to the side. "It's not like this Charms essay was going to win any awards."

"I'm sure it's very good," Rigel said politely.

"I'm sure you're full of crap, like usual." Ginny smiled sweetly.

Ignoring her confrontational conversational style, Rigel sat across from the girl. "How is your Occlumency coming along, if I may ask?"

Immediately, she was on guard. "Why?"

"I've been working on mine, and I'm having creative difficulties," Rigel admitted. "I wondered if I could pick your brain for new ideas."

Ginny shrugged, relaxing a little. "As long as you aren't doing so literally, sure. What's up?"

"Well," Rigel said slowly, aware that this was a delicate topic for the second-year. "When that construct had you imprisoned in your mind-"

"Careful, Rigel," Ginny said sharply.

"Pretend it was the other way around," Rigel said quickly. "Imagine you were trying to imprison something-him, or anything similar, really-in your mind."

"Why?" Ginny frowned, looking uncomfortable.

"Just for the sake of the exercise," Rigel said, shrugging off the question for the moment. "How would you do it? I mean, you have experience being on the other end of it, so I thought you would have good ideas on what *you* would do. What kinds of safeguards you would put into place, that kind of thing."

"Rigel. What. Are. You. Doing?" Ginny leaned forward and lowered her voice. "If you're trying to build your own construct I will personally *poke your idiot eyes out*."

"I'm not," Rigel promised. "It's-remember I talked to you last year about building a guardian for my mind? Something semi-autonomous that would take the place of active Occlumency in a pinch?"

"I remember telling you it was a terrible idea," Ginny hissed. "Have you learned nothing?"

"I have," Rigel said, mildly offended. "I've put lots of restrictions on it, based on what I've learned. And that's why I'm asking you-to see what you learned, and if it's different than what I thought of."

Ginny looked sour, but said, "What have you done so far?"

"Well," Rigel said, a bit excited to be talking about her personal project with someone else, "I've already got a form for it-kind of a hollow shell that I'm planning on making autonomous-"

"How?" Ginny broke in, frowning fiercely.

"I'll get to that," Rigel said, "It's theoretical. Anyway, I gave the construct a form like a human, so that it could move around the mindscape, and fool an intruder into thinking it was me if necessary. I knew there were areas that I didn't want it to have access to, though, in case it could be influenced by an intruder and, I don't know, turned against me or something. So I altered the defenses around other areas of my mind, specifically those containing my magic, my consciousness, and my memories. I figured there wasn't much damage it could do to me, that way, but it would still be able to fight off anything that came into my mind from the outside."

Ginny nodded slowly. "That's good. But you can't only think of yourself. The mists aren't only an entrance-they can be an exit, too. That's how real Legilimens get in and out of other people's heads. If you're going to create something even potentially dangerous, you better make sure it can't leave *your* head and get into someone *else's*."

Rigel blinked, taken aback by that idea. "I didn't think of that at all. I don't know Legilimency... do you really think something I created would have any way of figuring it out if I don't have the knowledge myself?"

"You said you were making it semi-autonomous," Ginny said, eyebrows lifted challengingly. "Doesn't that mean a basic level of sentience?"

"You're right," Rigel frowned. "I'll have to build a perimeter of some kind to keep it in. That will take some time, but maybe I can work it into a first line of defense to keep others out, too. That would be fairly efficient."

"What about the parts of your mind that control physical movement?" Ginny asked. "It might be able to control your body even if your consciousness was out of its reach."

Rigel considered that. "The physical ties to the body are all over the mindscape. I couldn't block off its access to *all* of them without severely limiting its usefulness. I don't think it would be able to take over my body if my consciousness was free, though-I have the stronger tie to my physical self than an outside presence, after all."

"It isn't an outside presence," Ginny said pointedly. "It'll be an extension of you, right?"

"Exactly," Rigel said, "A part of me. I think it's unlikely to try and do anything that might destroy *itself*."

"Don't make the mistake of thinking you can trust all the parts of yourself," Ginny said darkly. "You're a teenager. Inevitably there will be parts of you that are dumb, self-absorbed, and contemplate world domination."

Rigel winced. She wanted to say 'not every teenaged Slytherin boy is like Tom Riddle,' but she wasn't sure Ginny would believe her. That, and her concerns weren't exactly unfounded. Just because she personally didn't have any interest in power or subjugation didn't mean a semi-sentient creation might not develop its own interests.

"I'll just have to make sure it's not an independent entity," she said, thinking hard. "Tie it to my will, so that even if it can think for itself, it

can't do anything contrary to what I want. How to design something like that, though..."

"Tie it to your commands, not just your will," Ginny suggested, also deep in thought. "Sometimes your desires can be conflicting, and that might give it leeway somehow. Make it so that it can only act within the perimeter of specific jobs or orders you give it. It can still respond creatively, but only along a prescribed track of goal-oriented behavior. And make it logically consistent, so that it can't respond to the command 'protect my mind' in any way except ones that will ultimately protect your mind. Make sense?"

"Yes," Rigel said, tapping her fingers on the table idly. "I'll have to design a whole chain of commands, to keep it appropriately bound. It will take time, but I can probably borrow from other sources. Typical formats for magical oaths, maybe. And records of command sequences others have used. Semi-sentient objects aren't that uncommon, after all."

"Except most people don't make them in their own heads." Ginny rolled her eyes. "I still think this is a bad idea, but I'm not your moth-" She froze for half an instant after saying that, half-poised to apologize for the slip, but apparently decided to just keep going instead. "Well. You should ask Percy for help, if you're determined to be stupid. He's been studying all kinds of Wizarding law this year, looking into future career options. Barristers have to come up with airtight contracts all the time, right? He should be able to help with the wording, once you get what you want figured out."

"Good idea," Rigel said, making a mental note to do just that. She really wanted this project to work. She had so many theories about how mental magic operated, and so many things she wanted to try, if she could get this up and running. For instance, could she treat the construct like a second consciousness, of sorts? Give it selective information and then ask it to solve a particular problem? That would be fascinating. She'd be able to simulate an objective opinion inside her own head. And what if she could store data in the construct, like

a back-up brain in case one of her memories was Obliviated? The possibilities were endless, really.

"How are you going to give it sentience, anyway?" Ginny asked, reluctantly curious. "It takes years sometimes to design sentence spells complex enough to seem life-like."

Rigel smiled, "I have an interesting theory, actually. You know how when magical folk give birth a tiny part of the mother's core breaks off and grows into the child's core? I think maybe I could take a piece of my raw magic and put it into the construct. Magic has a certain amount of its own willpower, so that, combined with complex command chains, might be enough to give it its own sort of impetus."

"Wild magic may have its own will sometimes, but the magic in you has only your will," Ginny said, frowning slightly. "I think that would only give you a vessel that you could command with your will... which now that I think of it would actually be pretty useful. You might get good enough at controlling it that you wouldn't have to be meditating to direct it, which means it could be doing some activity that normally you would have to be present in your mind to accomplish. There aren't many tasks like that, but you could direct it to build something, maybe..." Ginny shrugged, looking bored again. "Let me know if you get anywhere with it. I've got to get back to my essay."

Rigel thanked her for all her help and left her to it. She had a lot to think about, but she was feeling optimistic. The experimenter in her couldn't wait to see if her theories panned out. She reminded herself that she couldn't let her enthusiasm outpace her caution, but couldn't bring herself to be too worried. Talking to Ginny had only cemented the idea that, with the proper precautions, getting her construct up and running was a project worth her energy.

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After Madam Pomfrey had heard what happened at the New Year's Eve gala, her Healing classes had taken on an intensity that had previously been absent. The older woman had muttered something uncomplimentary about young people who thought they were fully qualified at something just because they'd read a few books on the subject and determined that if Rigel was going to be Healing real people so much sooner than the nurse had anticipated, then at least no one would be able to say she hadn't taught him well.

As such, her lessons had been running longer than usual, with Pomfrey packing as much information into each session as the madam possibly could. The nurse had also taken to insisting that Rigel practice on human subjects when it was possible, as in the case of diagnostic spells and charms.

Unfortunately, that was also where they ran into a bit of a snag.

"You cannot understand what the reading should look like if you haven't seen it on a healthy person," Madam Pomfrey said, exasperated. "This Charm is much more in-depth than the ones we've been working with, and that means the information it gives is both more complicated and harder to interpret correctly."

"I've already cast it on you," Rigel said, a stubborn tilt to her chin.

"And now you must cast it on yourself," Pomfrey said, hands on her hips. "A male reading differs on a number of levels from a female's. There will be differences due to our different ages and medical histories, too, and it's important that you be able to pinpoint where in the output they occur."

"I don't want to," Rigel said, trying to be as firm as possible.

"Why on earth not?" Pomfrey finally demanded. She frowned at Rigel's silence, adding, in a softer tone, "What on earth is wrong, child?"

"I just don't want to," Rigel said, shrugging uncomfortably. "Don't I have a right to refuse? Doesn't any patient?" she added, attempting to look at least a little less suspicious.

"Yes, of course," Pomfrey sighed, "But *why* ?"

"It's personal," Rigel said, unblinking. "What would I do, then, if a patient refused to be diagnosed?"

"That is an interesting question," Pomfrey said, allowing herself to be distracted with a modicum of grace. "It depends on what, exactly, the patient has refused-the diagnostic spell itself, or treatment in general."

"People can refuse treatment?" Rigel said, surprised. "I mean, for optional operations, sure, but for life-saving procedures?"

"They can." She did not look at all approving of such a thing. "Any patient has the right to refuse any or all aspects of Healing, even if it would save their life. The only exception is when the patient is with child. In some cases, the parent would not have the option to refuse Healing that would benefit the child, as long as it created no risk to the carrier."

"What about children themselves?" Rigel asked.

"Children cannot refuse care until they are eleven-old enough to have a wand, old enough to self-determine matters of their own health, or so says the law," Madam Pomfrey explained. The disgruntlement was clear in her tone as she said, "As a Mediwizard you must bow to the wishes of your patients, even if it is not the course of action you would endorse."

Rigel laughed quietly. "You don't bow much to the whims of your patients, if I may say so, Madam."

Pomfrey sniffed. "My patients sometimes don't speak loudly enough for me to hear. And many of them don't know that they have the right

to refuse, poor dears."

"Were you a Slytherin?" Rigel asked, amused.

"I'll never tell," she said primly. "Now come. You can do the charm again on me, if you insist, and I will attempt to explain where the differences would be. Some areas of information you must ignore, as they are not applicable to male anatomy..."

The lesson went on as though nothing unusual had occurred, but Rigel could feel the older woman's eyes on her through the rest of her instruction. Madam Pomfrey might have let the matter go, but she would not, Rigel suspected, forget it. She would have to be especially careful around the matron, from now on.

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It was early March before her insistent stalking of Peter Pettigrew bore fruit. She was finishing up an essay for Flint in the Room of Requirement, with the intention to spend the night there, as a previous version of herself was already sleeping in her dorm room. She'd taken the habit of checking the Marauder's Map every so often just to check up on the professor, and this time caught sight of him heading for the Library.

It was a couple of hours past closing, but that was not unusual for Pettigrew. He spent inordinate amounts of time reading in the Restricted Section-if you could call paging feverishly through tables of contents reading, at least. Rigel ought to know, as it wouldn't be the first time she'd followed him there to try and get a look at what books he was looking through. So far, she didn't know anything except that Pettigrew didn't appear to have any idea what he was looking for. That, or he was completely pants at research of any kind.

She put aside the essay and fished out her invisibility cloak, pulling it on with a tired yawn and promising herself she'd sleep a full ten hours that night. The halls were silent as she made her way toward the Library, avoiding ghosts and patrolling prefects deftly. The door to the Library was unlocked, as Pettigrew was there before her, so all she had to do was sneak in quietly and close it soundlessly behind her. The trick would be getting *out* before Pettigrew re-locked it. The other night she was almost certain he'd felt the displacement of air as she slipped out just behind him.

Pettigrew carried a fairly bright lamp to read by, so it wasn't particularly difficult to see where he was. By the books on magical compulsions again, she thought. She was coming to know the layout of the Restricted Section rather well, from all the hopping around Pettigrew did while she observed him. He was sweating slightly in the light of the lamp as he shakily turned page after page, muttering anxiously to himself as he was wont to.

After a short time, he sighed despairingly with a murmured, "No, no, no. This isn't it at all." He re-shelved the book and selected another from the same section, seemingly at random. Did he honestly expect that to work? That he'd somehow just come across the answer by luck or through sheer probability if he searched through enough books?

The short man looked so hopelessly lost that she almost felt sorry for him. A sound from the hallway outside the Library echoed through the dark stacks just then, and Pettigrew froze completely like a frightened animal, clearly spooked. He hastily grabbed an armful of books at random and began scurrying toward the door. Rigel followed silently, wondering how this man had gotten up the gumption to put himself in opposition to such powerful people when he was afraid of his own shadow. He seemed pathetically inept to her.

She shook her head in silent self-admonishment. She should know better than to judge by a person's appearance. For all she knew, his bumbling fool routine was an act. Pettigrew's foot caught in the hem

of his robe and he sprawled noisily, books tumbling to the floor. In his scramble to pick them up, his knee became tangled in his shoulder bag, and the moment he attempted to stand, the seam split and papers fluttered into the air around his dismayed expression of stupor.

It could be a very *good* act, she supposed dubiously as the man fumbled and muttered as he attempted to collect all the books and papers that had spilled. Halfway through, he realized he ought to repair his bag first, and had to put everything down and start again. Rigel shifted her focus impatiently, feeling slightly rude while watching him crawl around so piteously.

Her gaze caught onto a piece of parchment covered in scribbled notes, which had floated, unnoticed by Pettigrew, a fair distance further than the other papers. Holding her breath, she crept forward slowly until she was right next to it, then lifted the cloak just enough to drop it quickly over the stray parchment before Pettigrew noticed it. There was a slight rustling noise, but when the Creatures professor looked over fearfully, he didn't seem to see anything amiss.

He stuffed all the papers away into his newly-repaired bag and left at something close to a run, books encumbering him so much that he appeared not to bother locking the Library behind him. *Sloppy*, Rigel thought as she bent to pick up her prize and slip it into her pocket. She locked the door herself on her way out, and made her way quickly back to the Come and Go Room.

Once situated comfortably, she took out the scrap of notes that she'd claimed and swiftly perused it. There was a passage of some kind written out shakily at the top of the parchment. It looked like prose of some kind, or perhaps a poem. Underneath, and filling up the edges of every margin, was a collection of scribbled notes and half-formed ideas that were apparently Pettigrew's attempts to decipher the paragraph at the top. Wondering what had been so important for him to figure out, Rigel began to read the passage carefully.

If Dominion is desired, domination is required

~ere the moment be expired

To reach for selfsame power is to see Creation cower

~or to find oneself devoured.

The birds and beasts and flowers will conspire through the hours

~to contend these rising powers

So if supremacy you seek, look to reign beyond the weak

~else your Destiny be bleak

Master yourself; master the other,

Take control or be took by another

Keep Power alive, yet under control;

Dominion will answer, transforming the soul

Ascend and rule, but bear the cost

Beware what comes of power lost

She rubbed her eyes tiredly after reading it through twice. *Well that wasn't cryptic at all*, she thought sourly. She'd always found riddles incredibly annoying. She preferred less oblique means of communication, herself. She could start with the structure, though- there was something about the rhyme scheme that she thought was important. She looked tiredly over the passage, noting the two juxtaposed meter systems and counting the lines in each. Four lines of tripled rhymes followed by three rhyming couplets. Seven rhyming units total- a number of power, the Arithmancy student in her noted. Where had she heard about magical prose? Sometime talking to Pansy, she thought, wracking her mind for the memory. Her blonde

friend had mentioned the importance of rhyming schemes in relation to one of her homework assignments. It hadn't been an assignment she shared with Rigel, which meant it was for one of her other extracurricular classes. But which one? Divination or Care of Magical Creatures?

After a sleepy attempt to recall the details of the brief conversation, she remembered where she was and asked the Room politely for a book on the technical aspects of magical poems and prose. An incredibly dense tome landed in her lap with a cloud of dust that sent her into a brief sneezing fit.

Rigel paged through the book to the chapter that dealt with identifying pieces of magical literature by their structure. She skipped over the sections on identifying spells, chants, vows, summonings, and various other rituals, eventually finding a section on divination that looked promising.

It was a prophecy, she groaned in belated realization, or something very close to one. It followed exactly the pattern said by the book to be favored by centaurean foretellers. According to the short paragraph the author offered on the seven-part rhyme scheme, it wasn't a true prediction of the future-more a prophetic collection of knowledge pertaining to an unknown subject. Centaurs weren't as reliable as human Seers when it came to predicting specific moments or events, but they could read general information on a broad range of topics from the stars. Still... where had Pettigrew found such a passage? As far as Rigel knew, centaurs rarely gave prophetic advice to wizards, and, unlike human Seers, almost never consented to their predictions being recorded. Even the book she had open on her knees referenced the rhyming structure as an oral pattern of conveyance.

The bed in the corner of the room was calling to her, but she knew she should at least make an attempt to figure the passage out before going to bed. It would only keep her awake if she didn't. It was definitely about the Dominion Jewel; aside from the fact that she'd

taken it from Pettigrew, who couldn't be researching anything else, the word Dominion was capitalized on the paper.

Wait... if it was a centaur foretelling, then how would there be capitalized words? Were they arbitrary, or a true reflection of the inflection given by the original speaker? Rigel supposed ruefully she had no way of knowing, so she would take the capitals as important on faith, for now.

Scanning the verses for any other obvious conclusions, she grimaced slightly. There was a lot of mention of controlling things and dominating and mastering and reigning... that didn't bode well. Neither did the ominous warnings about being devoured and the explicit mention of cost. In her experience any magic that referenced sacrifice so blatantly was either powerful, dangerous, or a potent combination of both.

All right, let's take it line by line, she thought with resignation. Why couldn't Pettigrew have accidentally dropped a passage with very explicit directions on how to neutralize the jewel's power, or maybe a map to where he was hiding it?

The part about desiring Dominion seemed clear enough-it was introducing the requirements for using the jewel. Domination being necessary wasn't entirely surprising, though she had to wonder if Pettigrew met that qualification at all. The 'moment be expired' part was promising, too-if there was some kind of time limit, then maybe Pettigrew wouldn't be able to gain the power he sought before it was reached. He had looked pretty panicked for time while going through Library books.

Creation in capitalized form probably just meant 'everything,' she supposed, and she didn't like the dichotomy the second line seemed to be setting up. Make everything cower before you or end up devoured yourself? What an awful set of alternatives. The 'birds, beasts, and flowers' part was obvious-even Pettigrew had made a note in the margins about how the creatures around Hogwarts had reacted to its use. So they, at least, recognized the power the jewel

offered as a negative thing. That in itself should dissuade anyone from trying to use it, Rigel thought. Magical creatures rarely agreed upon anything, and that was when they involved themselves outside of their own communities in the first place.

The 'so' in the line directly after that worried her, though. It seemed to indicate a continuation of the line before it, which would put the birds, beasts, and flowers in direct juxtaposition to the 'weak.' What did that mean? That one should only reign over strong magical creatures? Or that it would not be enough to reign over weak things? She supposed it would bely the whole 'dominion' idea if the wielder settled for using it on petty things, but why would that be important enough to include in the verse?

'Master yourself; master the other,' she read again. But was that sequential or conditional? Which were you supposed to do first? Take control or have it taken by another-that seemed like a warning that if you didn't use the jewel someone else might. What a power-hungry, paranoid thing to worry about.

She had no idea what keeping power alive meant, nor why that mention of power in particular was capitalized. As far as she knew you couldn't 'kill' power. The next line about the jewel actually transforming the soul of the one who used it was equally ominous. That made it sound like the jewel had a deep effect on the one who used it. The last couplet wasn't any better-bearing the cost was in line with what she knew about truly powerful magic, but she would have thought the warning would be about the dangers and responsibilities that come with power, not about what might happen if you lost the power.

There was so much vagueness about power and control in different forms. It almost seemed like a general warning against being weak-without any concrete information on how to actually use the jewel. Judging by the disjointed, frustrated notes all over the page, that fact had been infuriating Pettigrew to no end.

Her brain was protesting violently in the form of a headache that throbbed in time with her heartbeat, so Rigel set the parchment carefully aside and decided to call it a night. She could pour over it more tomorrow, for all the good it would do her. She wasn't any closer to getting the proof she needed. How nice it would have been if Pettigrew put his name in the upper-right corner of all his notes like Theo did. Chuckling a bit at the image of the beady-eyed man carefully signing all his incriminating research notes, Rigel drifted off into a deep, bone-weary sleep.

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With Hermione's recent and rather persistent habit of considering looks, leading questions, and expectant expressions, Archie had seen this confrontation coming for a while. He'd been dreading it, fully aware that she'd somehow become suspicious of *something*, but unable to redirect her conclusions without being able to figure out what she thought she knew.

Nothing he'd imagined in all his panicked scenarios had prepared him for this, however.

They were outside at their usual spot, and Archie was sure that if he hadn't already been sitting on the grass beneath their shady tree, he would have fallen over in shock. "You... come again?"

"I said I *know*, Harry," Hermione said, somehow looking both apologetic and impatient at once. "I know you're a girl."

"I'm... not," Archie tried, weakly. Her accusation, while false and somewhat humorous, still betrayed a dangerous amount of knowledge-how could she have come to that conclusion without knowing something?

Hermione sighed, and managed to summon a very disappointed look that Archie was pretty sure they only taught people with small children. "I've known for months. I've been waiting for you to tell me, but I realized you weren't ever going to, so... so I'm telling you now."

"Months?" Archie croaked. "How, uh, exactly did you come to this conclusion?"

"My parents got me a subscription to the Daily Prophet for Christmas," Hermione said, gazing pityingly at him, as though he ought to have guessed how she knew. "I saw the article they did on the gala the Sow Party hosted. It said that someone had almost died there, and then mentioned that your dad was head of the Minister's security detail. I was perplexed, because it went on to say that Auror Potter's own daughter was one of the two people who saved the life of the man who was attacked. I was so *confused*, Harry, because I knew you had a little sister but you'd never mentioned any other siblings." Hermione was rambling now, the words spilling out quickly and almost pleadingly. "I went to the British Ministry and tried to look up some information about your dad, thinking maybe he had a child from a previous marriage you hadn't told me about, only they don't let citizens access Ministry personnel records, apparently, so I had to go to through the individual genealogy records kept by the Ministry's Department of Magical Heritage -did you know your family is in the Book of Gold?" The last was said with a demanding glare, which Archie was too distracted to cower appropriately before.

"Yes," he said, swallowing roughly. "Those records aren't always updated correctly, though-"

"Don't bother," Hermione huffed. "Even after I saw your entry written as Harriett Potter in the Book of Gold, I wasn't entirely certain. So I went to the Bureau of Magical Land Management and talked my way into looking at the estate records by saying I was doing very important research about the conservation of folded space for *Wizarding Wildlife* ."

"You shouldn't lie to Ministry officials," Archie croaked.

"Don't you dare talk to me about lying right now, Harry," Hermione hissed. "Guess who the Potter Estate is currently entailed to? The Heiress Harriett Potter, eldest daughter to the current Lord." She folded her arms triumphantly and waited with raised eyebrows for him to collect his thoughts.

It wasn't a disaster. She hadn't accused him of anything awful, yet, like being someone else entirely. So she knew Harry was a girl. Harry was a girl, and it wasn't like that was really a secret-back home, anyway. Looking at her pouting lips, Archie suspected Hermione was more concerned with the idea that he'd been lying to her for two and a half years than with wondering *why* .

"That's very impressive deducing," Archie offered, smiling in a transparent attempt to lighten the air between them.

Hermione's face only darkened. "You lied to me, Harry. To everyone here. Do you know how stupid I felt once I'd figured it out?"

"You're not stupid," Archie exclaimed, feeling suddenly awful.

"I know that," Hermione snapped, "And yet I somehow missed all the signs leading up to this. How your letters were always addressed to Harriett, how you had to explain to even the teachers at the beginning of first year that your dad was just playing a joke on them- but he wasn't, this whole time. You were the one playing the joke."

"It wasn't a joke," he said quietly.

"And how you never invited me over to meet your family or let me stay to meet them at the airport, even though you've met mine half a dozen times," Hermione went on, working herself up into a real rant. He supposed she'd been bottling it in for a while. "And how you flirt outrageously with everyone you meet because you're overcompensating for the fact that you're *not really a boy* ."

Archie didn't suppose she was in the mood to hear that that was a genuine part of his personality.

"Were you ever going to tell me?" Hermione asked, her eyes slightly wet with suppressed hurt. Archie had never felt more a cad, but he didn't know how he could fix things without jeopardizing everything he and Harry had been working for. If it was just his dream... maybe he could give it up for Hermione's friendship and understanding. Harry's dreams were everything to her, though. He could never betray their ruse like that. Not even for his best friend. Somehow, he would have to improvise and hope that Hermione was as wonderful as he thought she was.

"I didn't want you to think of me like that," Archie said after some quick thinking. The only way out of this was to invoke Hermione's sense of compassion. "If I told you I was a girl, pretending to be a boy, you'd always treat me as some kind of imposter, instead of understanding who I really am."

"You..." Hermione's concentration was beautiful as she tried to follow the trail he was laying down. "You don't identify as a girl?"

"It's always been a struggle for me to feel like I belonged in my own skin," Archie said, trying to squash the feeling of incredibly guilt he felt at misleading her like this. "I thought, coming here, it would be like a fresh start. I could be the person I want to be, instead of who I was born." That much, at least, was true. And Harry was a bit of a tomboy, so he wasn't stretching reality *too* much.

"Don't you think it would be better to come to terms with yourself, rather than try and suppress parts of it?" Hermione asked, frowning concernedly now. That was good, he told himself. If she was worried about him she would be less likely to think up more sinister reasons he might have for hiding his gender.

"I've been working on it," he lied. Time to set some groundwork-and wouldn't Harry be proud? She was always telling him to think ahead. "Maybe one day I can go back to being a girl. For now, though... I'm more comfortable like this. Does it really bother you so much?"

"It bothers me that you lied about it," Hermione said, eyes narrowed. He could tell most of her anger had bled away once she felt she had an adequate explanation, though. "Have you even talked with your parents about it?"

"Not... exactly," Archie grimaced. That would certainly be awkward.

"Well you should," Hermione said firmly. "It's not healthy to bottle things up like this. I'm sure your parents would understand and work through it with you-this is actually very common, you know. I've read about it in several reputable psychology books."

"Of course you have," Archie said, smiling fondly.

"I must say, I didn't consider that you might actually feel more comfortable this way," Hermione said, frowning. "I should have thought of it. I was thinking maybe you'd done it as a big joke, or maybe as some sort of attempt to avoid sexist discrimination in the future-I know you've mentioned there's some unfairness in certain Wizarding industries still-and I was prepared to lecture you sternly on how wrong it is to avoid the issue yourself while everyone else in your situation is still subjected to unfairness, because you have to fight for change, of course, but... well, I'm glad that wasn't it," Hermione finished, smiling sheepishly.

Archie kept a bland expression on his face through force of will, but he could feel his insides curling up in shame. Hermione's assessment had been, once again, too close for comfort. He could only imagine how angry and disappointed she would be if she knew that he was doing exactly what she'd feared-and worse, because the issue he and Harry were skirting was blood prejudice, which Hermione already felt very strongly about fighting against.

It amazed him, how mature she was. The idea that their duplicity tacitly endorsed the unfair system they were circumventing in the first place would have never occurred to Archie without someone pointing it out, but of course it was far too late to do anything about it now. He would just have to look for other ways to atone, if he could.

Perhaps once he was himself again, he could use what influence the Blacks had left to bolster Hermione's campaign.

"If I may ask," Hermione said after a moment, "How... how do you *look* like a boy? I can't see the girl in you even now that I know to look for it. Is that natural? Is this why you made me steal all the Polyjuice in first year? I still never saw you taking any. If it is natural, what are you going to do in a few years when you fill out and it'll be obvious to anyone-"

"Take a breath, 'Mione," Archie said, lips quirking a bit. If she was already starting to think of how he'd hide his gender in the future, then it looked like she was planning to stay friends after all. He wasn't sure he should tell her much more, at first, but then realized that if they were going to be friends till they graduated, it would be very suspicious to Hermione if he never started looking like a girl. "I... have to swear you to secrecy, Hermione," he said, lips tightening.

"Yeah, okay." Hermione rolled her eyes.

"I'm serious," Archie said. He held her gaze for a long second, to make sure she understood how earnest he was. "I won't make you swear a binding oath-"

"As if I would agree to something so *reckless* -"

"But you must promise me solemnly to never tell anyone what I'm about to tell you," he concluded.

Hermione bit her lip. "I suppose... you're not really hurting anyone..." Her expression revealed the furious debate taking place inside her head, but in the end she sighed gustily. "Fine, but after this you are not getting rid of me, Harriett Potter. We are in this *together* ."

"Nothing would please me more," Archie said, smiling widely.

"Then... I promise not to tell anyone what you tell me about pretending to be a boy. I won't even tell anyone that you *are* pretending, if you don't want-though I maintain that you should talk to your parents about this," Hermione said.

"Noted," Archie said dryly. He gathered his courage, then said, "I'm a metamorph. It means I can-"

"I know what it is," Hermione breathed, eyes widening. "That's so *rare*, Harry! I read it was only common to a couple of Wizarding families."

"It runs in the Black line," Archie told her, "And my grandmother was a Black. I haven't told anyone, though-not my family, not *anyone* . But it's how I live as a boy."

"So... this isn't what you really look like?" Hermione asked, looking perturbed.

"Not really," Archie said wryly. She really had no idea.

"Hmm," she said, taking it in slowly. "It's almost a fateful coincidence that you would harbor such confusion about your inner self and then be given the means to manipulate your outer self, don't you think? Have there been studies of other metamorphmagi? Maybe the feeling uncomfortable in your skin thing is a side-effect of the ability, a natural adaptation of the brain, perhaps, or... well, I suppose I could look into it."

Archie was amazed, as always, at the way Hermione's brain worked.

"Just so you know, you could have told me sooner," Hermione said, tilting her head at him admonishingly. "My family happens to be very progressive."

"I'll keep that in mind," Archie laughed, fully relaxing at last. Everything was going to be okay. His relief lasted until he realized that Harry would have to be informed of this development. He could

feel the blood draining from his face immediately. She was not going to like this. And somehow, he was certain, it would end up being his fault.

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[end of chapter twelve].

A/N: So... this one got a little long-winded, huh? Nearly 40,000 words, which I had said I wouldn't do again. Sorry ^^ I hope everyone enjoyed it, though. I had many people guess at who would get closest to the truth first. Surprisingly, not many guessed Hermione, as most people were focused on Rigel's end. Riddle and Snape are not the only clever characters, however, and Archie, bless his earnest heart, is not as good at confusing people as Harry is. Plus Hermione is just brilliant. And endlessly curious. I hope you enjoyed that little surprise, in any case. I know you didn't think someone was *actually* going to figure it out, though. The ruse lives on... Mua. ha. ha.

Thanks for all the excellent feedback on the last chapter! I got so many ideas from your speculations and opinions. As always, thanks so much for reading. Happy Valentine's Day.

-Violet

Chapter 13

A/N: Sorry in advance to any students of Egyptian history-I've run it pretty ragged here.

The Ambiguous Artifice:

Chapter 13:

Rigel wasn't sure why she'd thought that obtaining a prophecy on the subject of the Jewel would herald some progress on her understanding of the artifact; it hadn't seemed to do Pettigrew much good, if his continued late-night bumbling through the library was any indication. She'd had to give up following him around the narrow stacks about the third week in March-it was just too depressing. She reasoned that as long as he was in the library, he wasn't up to anything more nefarious than incompetent research methodology. It would serve her time better to begin her own research on the subject, she thought, and from then on she spent the time Pettigrew sweated over crumbling Dark Arts books deep in the history section, sure that the answer to the mysterious artifact lay in the past, not in pursuit of other, equally vague methods of dominion, as Pettigrew seemed to believe.

There just had to be some record of such a powerful artifact-if humans could be counted on to do one thing through the annals of history, it was to take advantage of dubious avenues of power. She believed absolutely that power attracted attention, and so she was far from surprised to find a series of oblique references to an artifact like the jewel in the oldest of historical records available. The trouble with ancient history, she found, was that truth was rarely separated from myth, and an accurate recounting often played second fiddle to an interesting story. Each new source she found seemed increasingly removed from the rigors of credentials that she was accustomed to in her usual research.

One particularly ambiguous account concerned the pharaoh Amenhotep I, who, according to one historian, had lived a modest life tending to his mother until he suddenly conspired to kill his two older brothers and ascend to the throne unopposed. Once in power, he waged war on surrounding nations with a tenacity that granted him the epithets "bull who conquers the lands" and "he who inspires great terror." His rule was apparently so awe-inducing that after his demise he was deified with cult-like fervor. This was not altogether unusual for ancient pharaohs, who didn't do much to keep their magical abilities from the eyes of their mostly muggle subjects, but the historian whose account Rigel was perusing argued that Amenhotep's success was owed to his having been in possession of the Dominion Jewel.

Part of his evidence for this came from the order given by Hatshepsut fifty years later to demolish Amenhotep's mortuary complex. The Egyptian queen's personal scribe noted later that all involved in the complex's dismantling were unceremoniously executed halfway through the project without recorded cause.

Such hasty and unceremonious a mass execution was not typical of Hatshepsut's reign, the historian wrote. All evidence points to something powerful and dangerous being there unearthed, and subsequently guarded with great jealousy. It may not be too presumptuous to note, the author added, that Hatshepsut's reign, while not as violently war-oriented as many others, was characterized by an unusual and almost obsessive ambition to remake the face of the natural world in the queen's image. Hatshepsut's unprecedented (and nearly inconceivable) archeological feats might thus be cast in a more sinister light...

Rigel's eyes unfocused on a yawn, and she paused in her reading to take a peek in Pettigrew's direction. He was slumped over a table not far from the Restricted Section, looking close to sleep.

Rigel shut the book and replaced it on the shelf quietly, resigning herself to another night of wasted effort. Every possible account of the jewel was the same-someone previously ordinary (in terms of

Wizarding kings, at any rate) reportedly obtained the stone just prior to going on a power-fueled bender. How many of those stories were possible and how many simply some historian's attempt to make sense of a ruler's sudden change in personality? She had no way of knowing. There didn't seem to be much consistency in the way in which the jewel helped one achieve power, either. Some reported acquirers gained unheard of military prowess, while others gained a sudden power over the natural world, or were all at once able to subjugate large groups of creatures or muggles or even other wizards. How could one jewel give someone so diverse a power? And why, if it could give power over *literally everything*, didn't all of its so-called possessors become masters of everything? The stories consistently compartmentalized the kind of power each jewel-bearer exercised. That made no sense, as far as she could tell. It would be like someone making a philosopher's stone and only turning things to gold with it, never producing the elixir of life.

It's probably all nonsense anyway, she thought to herself despondently. *No one who actually had contact with such an artifact would risk writing something down about it. Unless they were incredibly thick*, she added, watching Pettigrew furiously scribble notes all across a piece of parchment with no apparent care that they might fall into the wrong hands.

Then again, the jewel seemed to draw megalomaniacs-or at least create them, she allowed. Ego-driven people who obsessed over power probably rarely considered that another might gain that power in their stead through a careless mistake. She didn't want the power, but what if Pettigrew dropped his notes when she wasn't around to pick them up? Who knew what sort of person might come across them?

She shook her head, well aware that she was now being paranoid. They were at Hogwarts, after all, not some evil villain's secret base. If a student saw a piece of parchment with mysterious notes scribbled all over it they'd probably throw it straight in the trash. She

had yet to meet a student who could stomach any more studying than passing his or her exams required.

By the way the Creatures professor was nodding, it wouldn't be long before he packed it up for the night, so she didn't bother picking another book to read. Instead she watched the little man thoughtfully from under her cloak, wondering what had possessed this person to take possession of the jewel in the first place. He didn't seem the domineering type, nor the power-hungry. Someone who truly lusted for power wouldn't be wasting their time in a library trying to research how to correctly use the jewel-they'd be out using it, and damn the consequences. She wasn't sure Pettigrew had used the jewel at all since the disaster on Halloween, and she liked to think it was because he hadn't meant to cause such a clamor.

The fact that he was persisting in digging deeper into the mystery didn't reflect well on him, but she couldn't entirely blame him. That prophecy hadn't been particularly forgiving. All that stuff about taking control or having it taken, bearing the cost and bewareing the consequence of losing control-or was it power? She was too tired to recall. Was 'bewareing' even a word?

In the end, the sum of all she read on the subject seemed to be that the jewel was very dangerous. History would likely have been better off without it.

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She slept a full eleven hours when she finally got back to the Come and Go Room, and woke just in time to pick up where one of her previous selves had left off on Saturday after lunch.

She rejoined her friends in the common room just as Draco and Pansy broke off to change for their Dueling Club meeting. Theo and Millicent had come once or twice, but neither seemed particularly

devoted to developing the skill, and Blaise had flatly refused to even attempt it, claiming physical exertion to be the least diverting thing he could think of.

They met up with several of their housemates who now attended the club religiously, including Rookwood and Rosier, the latter of whom was wearing one of the hideously expensive 'toiling robes' that he'd commissioned over the winter break. As far as Rigel could tell, it was a glorified sweat-proof smock, but she had seen him receive some very admiring comments from others in the club, so she had to conclude that she simply knew nothing about fashion.

They arrived at their usual spot by the lake to find numerous members of other Houses already warming up, and while she and Pansy began stretching, Draco set about in an approving fashion to supervise the newer members who hadn't quite got a hang of the regimen yet.

"He's really come into his own," Pansy commented, mid-bend.

"He's a natural leader," Rigel agreed.

"Naturally bossy, you mean," Pansy smirked.

"I think direction is only considered bossy when it's unsolicited," Rigel remarked. "It doesn't hurt that he knows exactly which direction is the right one every time, either."

Draco had made leaps and strides with his gift of late. He could read others' emotions faster and more accurately, now, and made unapologetic use of this knowledge when dealing with his club members. Others thought it uncanny how the young snake could always tell who was confused but pretending not to be because of pride and who was growing annoyed and wished to be left alone for a while. Rigel could see the confidence her friend was gaining in what had previously been the most troublesome area of his life, however, and was proud of him for coming so far in so short a time.

When it came time to pair everyone up, Draco hesitated upon assigning Rigel a partner. "You've pretty much surpassed everyone young enough to reasonably pair you with," Draco admitted, looking resigned. "If I pair you with a seventh year from the Dueling class, it will be taken as an insult. Especially if you win, which I wouldn't put past you at this point. You're a bloody natural."

She wasn't, she knew, but there was no way to explain her rapid progress in the subject to Draco. She spent long hours perfecting what her friend taught her from Remus' class, as well as going over what she remembered of Leo's lessons from winter break. It did feel a bit like cheating, but she reasoned that she needed those hours of exercise the balance the time-turned hours she spent hunched over a book or scroll.

"Would you be averse to pairing with Neville?" Draco asked after a short pause.

"Not at all," Rigel said. Neville had come quite far since they started the club meetings. He still cast relatively slowly, but he was becoming harder to predict as experience gave him a measure of creativity.

"He needs to work on shielding between offensive spells," Draco told her, "So try to use wide-area spells he can't dodge."

"Will do," she said, saluting in the irreverent way that she knew her friend detested, just to see him lose his serious composure for a moment as he rolled his eyes at her.

She found Neville, and the two of them claimed a section of grass as their own. The air filled with the sounds of enthusiastically cast magic and she lost herself easily to the familiar rhythm of a one-on-one duel. It had grown from the exercise of a necessary skill to a very enjoyable practice over the year. When she worked with Leo, she could feel the intensity in every movement, and the idea that what she learned could save her life one day was never far from her mind. Here, though, she practiced with those who had never seen magic

used to systematically attempt to harm another. To them, it was more like a game, an exhibition skill that they might one day be called upon to demonstrate in competition, but which no one anticipated using in earnest. The last Wizarding war to involve Great Britain was beyond living memory. Grindelwald's campaigns were a page in the history book much like the goblin wars, to those here.

After several engaging but ultimately unchallenging duels, she and Neville cooled off in the shade and took turns pointing out which of the other members was using the most interesting combinations that afternoon.

"Hey Neville," she said after a time, "My dad mentioned something over the break I thought was curious."

"About me?" Neville looked bewildered. "I don't think we've met."

"That's what's odd," Rigel said, "He seemed to think we'd had a play date at some point while we were younger, but I can't remember ever meeting you before Hogwarts."

Neville furrowed his brows. "I don't remember that either. I did think it odd, though," he offered abruptly, "I mean, my mum is really close with your cousin Harriett's mum, and you're really close with Miss Potter, so I did sort of wonder why we hadn't ever... met. I just figured your family wasn't too social, maybe. My family isn't *that* social, really, but I met Ron a bunch of times before we started school, since our dads worked at the Ministry together."

"Dad acted really odd when I said I didn't remember, too," Rigel said, an ominous feeling in her heart for reasons she didn't quite understand. "He tried to brush it off as his mistake, but something about it didn't sit right with me."

"I'm getting an uncomfortable feeling, but I don't know why," Neville said hesitantly, "Like there's something important I'm supposed to know but don't."

"Yes!" Rigel said, breathing deeply. "That's it exactly. What does it mean?"

"That we should let it go and pretend that this conversation never happened?" Neville suggested weakly. "I'm getting a very strong 'stop thinking about this' vibe."

"Doesn't that make you want to know what's causing it?" Rigel said.

"Not really," Neville said, frowning, "It makes me feel like I'm about to break an oath I don't remember taking, and that is scary enough that I'd rather live in ignorance."

Rigel didn't think that was very Gryffindor of him, but she couldn't exactly say so. She would have to work out the answer to this most troubling revelation on her own, she supposed. "We can talk about something else," she offered. She didn't think Neville had anything else to tell her, in any case.

The mystery of the play-date that wasn't hovered in the back of her mind, troubling her sleep late into the night when all other thoughts had been quieted. It sent her delving into tomes on memory, on bindings of magic that might affect the mind, and drove her to write a long letter to Archie trying to articulate the feeling of foreboding that crept upon her at every attempt to recall something that probably hadn't happened, and couldn't possibly be important if it had. She turned it over unhappily: that is, until something much more immediate occurred to redirect her attention.

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She had half-hoped her talk with Snape would be enough for him to let the subject of her magic lie for a while, but before she'd even thought about how she was going to go about doing something she wasn't sure was possible, the Potions master forestalled her from

leaving his office one evening to inquire just how her magic control was coming along.

"Not at all," she said, quite blunt. "If I try to use even the simplest of spells without the suppressor it floods my wand until something explodes."

"Have you been practicing?" Snape demanded.

"Not really," Rigel frowned. "I assumed someone might disapprove of me *exploding* things."

"Do not take a tone you may regret, Mr. Black," Snape drawled. He looked entirely disgruntled.

"Sorry, Sir." She dropped her eyes in brief submission, then said, "Is that all?"

"It is not all," Snape sneered, "Not if you haven't made any progress. You gave me your word in this, recall. I am not above taking this over your head if I must."

"You promised not to tell my family, if *you* recall," Rigel said, fighting to maintain politeness.

"I do not break my promises," Snape hissed, visibly affronted.

"Neither do I," Rigel said, not actually sure at this point if that was true. "I'll work on it. I need more time."

She took her leave abruptly, sure that he would have more to say if she gave him the chance. She knew what she'd promised; she just didn't see any point in pushing it. It's not like they were starting free brewing tomorrow. Snape said himself it would be next year sometime. She could work on it over the summer, if she really had to, when she didn't have a dozen other distractions.

She had never known her Head of House to make an idle threat, but it somehow still caught her completely flat-footed when he requested

she meet him in a disused classroom close to his office one Sunday morning soon after that. They never met on Sundays, as Snape usually reserved that day for marking and preparatory work for his classes. The location was odd, too, and if she'd received the message any other way than straight from the professor's mouth she might have been suspicious.

When she saw the wizard Snape had brought with him, she could only think that she ought to have been suspicious after all. Lord Riddle, in all his richly tailored glory, stood calmly in the center of the empty room, as though he often spent his time lying in wait for unsuspecting third-years. She resisted the urge to run a hand nervously through her hair, instead closing the door gently behind her and turning to her Head of House with questioning eyes. She was entirely content to ignore the well-dressed elephant in the room-forever, if she had to.

"Am I early?" she asked, despite knowing full well there was no plausible reason for Snape to be meeting with Riddle in the same place he'd asked to meet her unless her day was about to go very downhill.

"You are perfectly on time, as well you should be," Snape said, beckoning her to step forward to where the two men waited. "You are acquainted with Lord Riddle, are you not?"

"Tangentially," she said, completely confused as to what Riddle wanted with her-for surely that was the only explanation for Snape setting up a meeting on their behalf.

"Our acquaintance is not so peripheral as that, Mr. Black," Riddle said. He was eyeing her speculatively, which perplexed her, as she believed Riddle had already taken her measure and found her to be a simple, if terribly unlucky, child.

"If you say so, Mr. Riddle," she allowed, feeling petty amusement as Riddle's brow ticked with displeasure at hearing the lack of title. He was no doubt accustomed to more respect from his Slytherins, but

she would hold her respect until she knew what he wanted. If he intended to go back on their deal, she would have to find a way to dissuade him.

"He's less polite than I remember," Riddle said mildly, giving Snape a chiding glance. "Your influence, no doubt."

"The boy is remarkably headstrong, for one who knows so little of the world," Snape said, keeping his eyes on Rigel as he spoke, that she might see exactly how annoyed she'd made him lately.

"Thus the need for my interference," Riddle said, chuckling softly.

"What interference is that, Mr. Riddle?" Rigel asked, wary at receiving their combined focus.

"You have not told him why I am here," Riddle observed.

"I believe he would have come less readily were he to be forewarned of my intentions," Snape said, voice wry.

"This is an ambush," Rigel concluded suddenly. "Why?"

"You have not kept your word-" Snape began.

"My magic *again* ?" Rigel bit off a sharp sigh. "I told you I need time, Professor."

"I do not believe you," Snape said. "You have dug your heels in against learning to control your magic from the start. It is clear that if you are not made to do it, you will see no progress."

Rigel had nothing to say to that, as it was, she had to admit quietly, the truth. Still, she didn't like being cornered. "What has this to do with Mr. Riddle? Is this your way of forcing my hand-revealing me to those whose interest I sought to avoid, so that my reasons for avoiding the issue become null? What's next? Are you going to take me to Dumbledore's office and parade me before him as well?"

"Watch your tongue, Rigel," Snape growled. He seemed to be saying it more for Riddle's sake than for any want of her respect in that moment. Snape's face was laced with understanding, and she forced herself not to be angry by focusing on the evidence that he was not *trying* to bring her many plans to ruin. "I have not betrayed you. I brought Lord Riddle here to help you. He has the experience you need to guide you in this."

"Indeed," Riddle cut in. "I was young once. I remember the feeling, the sudden influx of power that came, almost over night, like a blessing from the world. It can be intimidating, at times, the knowledge that you are destined for great things, but it is not something to be ignored-embrace it! This power was meant for you, Mr. Black. Once you accept that, all these doubts will disappear." He accompanied the last with a wave of his hand that was entirely dismissive of her 'doubts.'

"With all due respect, Sir, I don't think that's true," Rigel said, thoroughly unimpressed.

"That is because you are inexperienced in the ways of the world," Riddle sneered. "You know nothing yet of the incredible opportunity that power brings."

"Those aren't the sort of opportunities I'm looking for," Rigel said, attempting to diplomatically convey that she did not, in fact, aspire to be like Riddle in any way.

"Then you are a fool, Rigel Black," Riddle said. "Unfortunately for you, a fool is not something we can afford to abide." She didn't like the sound of that at all, and fought briefly with the impulse to step back toward the door.

"Lord Riddle, perhaps-" Snape attempted to cut in, but was silenced by an imperious hand.

"No, Severus. The boy is being unconscionably narrow-sighted. This is not about you, Mr. Black," Riddle said sternly. "Slytherin needs

strong wizards to represent it-the more the better. The Black Family needs a powerful Heir to steer it back in the proper direction. The politics of this cannot be ignored. You must learn quickly, and take your place at the helm of this new generation, for the good of our world."

She could see Snape wincing from the corner of her eye, and it occurred to her that this was not what he'd anticipated in inviting Riddle here. Her Head of House must know that this was exactly what Rigel did not want to hear. If anything could have solidified her suspicion that powerful magic attracted attention and trouble, this was it. With the cat out of the bag, so to speak, what was she to do now?

Riddle was saying something else, something about power being the ultimate decider in everything, but all Rigel could think was-did the politician really think her so stupid that she might believe he had some altruistic compassion for the House of Slytherin itself, or the Black Family in particular? It was painfully obvious he meant the SOW Party needed her power, needed to shift the balance toward Dark politics once more. Did he think because she was a friend to his sycophants' heirs that she would toe the line politically and socially as well? Had she given him that impression somehow?

"So if you will not think of yourself, of the doors and avenues that open before the command of true power, then think of others-of your House and your Family," Riddle concluded, smiling in a way that she was sure had won him many favors in the past.

"It is others I think of when I choose not to use all my magic," Rigel said, knowing that someone like Riddle was not likely to understand, but also knowing that it was the only truth she could give him. "Their safety. The integrity of their relationships with me. My magic would put these things in jeopardy, if it could. I will not risk attempting to use it for something as abstract as political gain."

Riddle's face darkened, and there was a shadow of the boy that she had met in the Chamber of Secrets staring out at her suddenly. "Your

obstinance leaves me no choice, Black."

"It is not your choice, Sir," she said, wary.

"Magic belongs to the world, Mr. Black," Riddle said, a sinister smirk that she did not trust at all tucked into his cheek.

Rigel frowned, wondering why Riddle thought that *he* spoke for the world. As she attempted to reiterate her refusal, however, Riddle's wand was in his hand and she felt a violent tug on both her gloves. They flew across the room and into Riddle's hand before she could so much as make a fist in protest. She fisted her hands afterwards, though, glaring at Riddle and taking several steps backward in open refusal.

Another twitch of Riddle's wand and her basilisk scale ring grew loose and slippery, wiggling its way off her finger of its own accord. Even as she tried to hold it with her other hand, it jerked away and finally broke free to join her gloves in Riddle's hand. He looked down at the ring curiously. "Basilisk scale. Pretty, but not what we're after, is it?" His wand moved but the suppressor on her finger didn't budge. After Snape had threatened to make her take it off, she'd had Binny make extra certain it could not be taken off by anyone but herself. No doubt the house-elf magic was putting up an unexpected fight against Riddle's summons.

"Well-warded little thing, isn't it?" Riddle said, too casually. His unconcerned tone made her half-afraid he would simply cut off her entire finger. When his wand moved again, however, the ring still didn't move. Instead, it burned. Gasping, Rigel clutched her hand in pain and surprise. It felt like her ring had somehow been made molten, so hot it grew, and yet to her eyes the ring appeared unchanged. Was the spell on the ring or on her hand? Or on her mind? She couldn't focus past the agonizing searing. Her hand was twitching uncontrollably in thwarted instinct, trying and failing to remove itself from the object of its torture.

"Stop it," she panted, tears swimming to her eyes as her brain fought against the incoming sensory signals.

"It will stop when you remove it," Riddle said, voice still casual.

"Lord Riddle, this is still Dumbledore's school," Snape said sharply. She thanked him for his attempt even as she cursed him for being too beholden to Riddle to demand that he cease for *her* sake.

"He will notice nothing amiss," Riddle snapped. "Take the ring off, Black."

"I can't," she tried, a last, vain attempt to dissuade him. "It's spelled to be irremovable."

"You lie," Riddle said. He was plainly amused. "Fine attempt, but I can read you even without an aura. Take it off, or I will set your boots on fire."

Rigel liked her boots. Also, the pain in her hand was starting to grow mind numbing, and she realized she was fighting a losing battle. Slowly, in deference to her pride and fury, she worked the ring off her hand and slipped it into her pocket with the most annoyed scowl she could muster. She wasn't about to hand it over-the politician would probably refuse to return it on principle, even after he got whatever it was he wanted.

She wanted to continue to glare at Riddle, but her magic seized all of her attention in the next moment. It had noticed it was free. A riot occurred beneath her naval, and power, thick and furious, stormed through her with the grace of an ogre tumbling down a hill. It ran too hot in her veins, snaking through any available outlet to pour out into the air around her like air into a vacuum. The weight of it gathering around her pressed her head and shoulders down and her arms inward to curl about her ribcage protectively. It felt as though she were being squeezed on all sides. She imagined this was what being hugged by a giant who was trying to kill you would be like.

"Not so uneager after all, are you?" she heard Riddle say. Her head shot up to retort angrily that it wasn't *her* doing, but as her attention shifted so did her magic's attention. It swept away from her in a wave that had her pulling in deep gulps of air as the pressure around her eased. Riddle snarled in surprise, however, as the magic was suddenly upon him, pushing and tugging in equal measures at his previously immaculate hair and clothes. "That's quite enough, Mr. Black," he said firmly, his fingers tightening on his wand as he flexed his own magic to gain breathing room.

"It isn't me," Rigel snapped, her hands shaking as the magic continued to pour out of her in a rampage of freedom claimed at last. "I told you I can't control it."

"And so it happens to harass me, the object of your ire, rather than Master Snape?" Riddle shook his head in a superior way. "I don't think so. This is your doing, whether you know it or not. Now you must take control consciously."

Rigel, anger and trepidation warring in equal measure within her, attempted to call her magic back coaxingly. *Please*, she tried, *Come back here. Settle down*. The magic drew back from Riddle immediately, but it did not return docilely to her side. It turned on her with a vengeance, coursing through the air with irrepressible speed and violence, making her the center of a displeased tornado of magic. She reached out toward it gamely, a grim expression of determination on her face. She *had* to get it under control. Her hand had barely left her side before it was swatted back with a malevolent lash of power.

There was a raised welt on the back of her hand where she'd been struck. She stared at it for a moment in disbelief. This wasn't the magic she knew. Normally it was only unruly in use. She had never been unable to suppress it-just unable to control it once it manifested. This... it was as though the magic had at last rejected her authority completely. It no longer deigned to even be contained within her.

"Control it!" Riddle said above the sound of air slashing about her.

"I can't," Rigel gritted out. "Haven't you heard anything I've said?"

"When you believe you can't, then of course you can't," Riddle scoffed.

"People keep saying that," Rigel snapped, utterly sick of people telling her the only problem was her own perception. "Only saying 'believe in yourself' is nonsense that doesn't actually *help*."

"True enough," Riddle allowed, still openly amused at her expense. She hoped his perfect teeth all fell out during one of his speeches. "Start with a focus, then. Attend all your will toward one thing, one feeling, one instinct. Even if it is destructive, try and force the magic to destroy the thing *you* choose."

"I don't want to destroy," Rigel said, face tight.

"It is easier to begin that way," Riddle said, mockingly patient. "Once you can control the more... passionate aspects of power, the technical applications will follow. Now, choose something to direct its attention to-not me, if you please-and will it. It will answer."

"How?" she asked, trying to calm her mind by breathing very slowly.

"Your wand, of course," Riddle said. His arms were crossed and he gazed at her as one would a child refusing to eat its vegetables.

Harry took out her wand, which had been busy burning a hole in her pocket in response to the nearness of her magic, and pointed it at a desk on the far side of the room, well away from Professor Snape. Riddle could get stuffed with splinters for all she cared. Her magic, perhaps drawn to the wand as electricity to a good conductor, swirled around her hand impatiently, building there until her entire forearm struggled against the currents. She hesitated on incanting the Bombardment Hex, having no way to aim reliably with her arm shaking all over the place, but the intention had scarcely entered her

mind before her wand was suddenly alive with magic pouring through it. It shot out of her core as though she'd pulled the cork from a champagne bottle after shaking it vigorously, and the magic in the air around her joined it readily, merging with the spell and transforming it visibly as it flew through the air.

The magic, which resembled more closely a miniature cyclone than any spell she'd ever seen, impacted one of the pushed-aside desks and... *devoured* it. There was no other way to put it. The faded wood turned black upon contact with the magic, then began to dissolve as though exposed to acid, or particularly fast-working termites. In the space of a few seconds, there was nothing left of it, not even a pile of ash on the floor where it had been.

"What spell was that?" Riddle asked, the kind of awe in his voice that musicians reserved for works of Beethoven.

" *Bombarda*," she said, rubbing her now-sore wand arm.

Riddle frowned. "That was nothing like a *Bombarda*. "

"My magic does what it wants," Rigel grumbled. Said magic had returned to her and was now whistling sharply in her left ear like a spoiled child, begging for another sweet. Irritably, she attempted to quell it once more, picturing it receding back into her core and laying dormant. Immediately, the wind around her picked up and sent her stumbling sideways. *Okay, okay*, she capitulated, raising her hands to her face to protect it as the wind took on an edge that cut through her robes in several places. When it had calmed marginally to a stern wind, she examined the rips with deep resignation. "Sirius is going to be displeased. He just had these tailored," she muttered morosely. If she asked for new ones, he'd send her Archie-sized robes and she'd have to fix the hem herself.

"Again," Riddle said decisively. "Continue focusing the destructive tendencies in your magic until you can rein it in reliably."

Rigel frowned. "I don't think it's a good idea to encourage my magic's 'destructive tendencies.' It's only going to teach it bad habits."

"That is not how magic works," Riddle said, a snide curl to his lip.

"Magic is highly impressionable," she argued.

" *Children's* magic is impressionable," Riddle shot back, "As is wild magic. A fully fledged wizard's is not."

She opened her mouth again, but Snape, closer now but still far enough that his robes barely stirred in the breeze of her magic, broke in at last. "Rigel, you must listen to Lord Riddle. He knows what he is doing. He dealt with this very issue himself, once."

Riddle was full on smirking as he said, "I never let my magic grow so unruly, but yes, the theory will be much the same. Now, do it again."

Seeing that she was outgunned, Rigel gracelessly jabbed her wand at a different desk and sent her magic toward it with a great mental push. The desk turned into a bust of Riddle's smiling face, then imploded.

"Very amusing," Riddle said, looking anything but. "Try it again."

Sighing, Rigel rallied her mental fortitude. This was going to be a long morning. It didn't take much time to destroy all the desks in the room, thus necessitating the men to begin conjuring targets for her magic's wrath. Snape stuck with simple pieces of furniture and the occasional straw dummy, but Riddle was especially creative. His targets inevitably took the shape of delicate china vases, stained-glass windowpanes, golden mirrors, and once an elaborate replica of Hogwarts itself done in crystal. When he conjured a live bunny, Rigel's temper, frayed thin from a pounding headache and constant struggling against the unruly tide of her magic, simply snapped. She transfigured the bunny into a viper without even pausing to think about it, sending it snapping at Riddle's ankles with a thoroughly vexed slash of her wand.

Riddle vanished the snake with a wide smile and began to clap, slowly and very patronizingly. "Well done, Mr. Black."

Realizing that her magic had obeyed an impulse that was not entirely destructive, Rigel reined in her ire and took a slow breath. She surveyed her magic for a long moment, noting that while it still encircled her in a steady current, she felt much less like she stood in the eye of a hurricane. Now it was as though she was a planet, rings of magic orbiting her body rhythmically, but not threateningly.

"See how much easier it is to control, now?" Riddle said, smiling superiorly down at her.

"I could have told you that expending a large amount of my magic makes it easier to control," Rigel said, giving an unimpressed eyebrow flick. "It is, after all, the point of the suppresser I wear. Take a large part of it away, and it isn't hard to control at all. Your way works too, but it seems idiotic to destroy a classroom every time I want to pass a Transfiguration quiz, don't you think?"

"What is idiotic," Riddle said in a low voice, coming within arm's reach of Rigel and seeming completely unaffected by the wind that buffeted his face, "is thinking that I will be intimidated by this power as others are. You would do well to set a respectful tone to your tongue before I silence it, boy."

"I respectfully do not see the practicality of such a violent method of control, Mr. Riddle," Rigel said. She refused to be intimidated by the man just because everyone else was.

"You will see when you want to see," Riddle said, eyes sliding over hers in a way that reminded her she was looking at a man rumored to be an incredibly subtle Legilimens. "Control takes time. It also required a good deal of practice. You have let it go too long, with rather predictable results. It will take dedicated attention to prune the wildness from your magic now that it has taken root."

Rigel resented the implication that her unruly magic was her own fault—it had always been that way... hadn't it? She couldn't remember why she thought so, but she was sure it wasn't something she'd caused by wearing the suppressor alone. The problems had started before that.

"That is not to say you lack potential," Riddle went on, a calculating glint now hardening his eyes. "You may yet be useful, Mr. Black, if you but stretch out your hands to the world around you. Your magic will lead you to extraordinary places, but you must first grasp the reins. I can show you how. Let me tutor you personally during your summer holiday. With my help, you could do great things."

Rigel was frozen in speechless disbelief for a long moment. Had he just... offered to *mentor* her? She glanced at Snape to see what he made of Riddle's unexpected suggestion, but her professor's gaze, while wide with something like shock, held neither approval nor censure. She swallowed soundlessly and scrambled for an answer that would not offend the man.

"That is very generous of you, Sir," she said, hoping he didn't pick up on how her magic became more agitated with her unease. "I must decline, however. I've made other arrangements for the summer. Also I... do not seek the sort of greatness you could help me achieve."

"Do not try my patience with this naïve insistence that power is not something you desire," Riddle said softly, a dangerous edge to his voice. "Power is a matter of necessity. It is *practical* to develop every talent Fate gives you."

"Even so, I do have other plans," Rigel said, making an attempt at firmness. "I'm sorry, but I will develop the rest of the control I need on my own. Thank you very much for your help today, Lord Riddle. I am in your debt."

Riddle's face was closed tight with anger, and he turned from her without another word. "Talk some sense into your student, Severus,"

he hissed, tossing her gloves and her other ring to the Potions master on his way out the door. "I'll be in your office."

The door shut behind him and Snape turned to her with an entirely resigned expression. "You would have me tell him no, I take it?"

Rigel grimaced a bit in sympathy, but nodded. "Sorry, Professor. I really can't agree to that, though."

"I'm not sure what he was thinking, even offering," Snape muttered. With an annoyed snort, he got out his wand and began setting the classroom to rights. "Mr. Black," he said after a minute of conjuring new desks, "I feel I should tell you... this was not entirely what I intended, in bringing Lord Riddle here today."

"I know," Rigel said quickly. It was hard to be mad at Snape for doing what he thought was best for her-especially when Riddle had so effectively drawn her ire in his direction. "I understand that you were trying to help me. I just... I hate that everything to do with my magic is so violent and destructive. Without the suppressor, I can't do anything without it blowing up in my face, and then I'm told the answer is to be so destructive that I burn through power like Draco at a tart festival-" Snape snorted in amusement, but Rigel ignored him, well into her rant now, "-and it seems so pointless when I could just wear the suppressor and not have to blow anything up, and what's the point of having all that extra magic if the only thing it's good for is mass destruction anyway?"

She shoved her hand into her pocket and took out the suppressor ring, flinching slightly as her magic picked up around her and began oscillating wildly back and forth, making her stumble a bit as she struggled to get the ring back on her finger without dropping it. When she tried pushing it on, however, a pressure built up around her finger that blocked it, like a hundred miniscule gusts of wind all rushing around her finger madly. It burned terribly where the friction from the wind scraped against the tender skin left by Riddle's earlier attempt to remove the ring, and she whimpered in a way she knew was pathetic at the renewed pain.

"I can't even get this stupid thing on," she whispered, blinking back moisture from her eyes. She would not cry in front of her Head of House like a child. She was just so frustrated by it all. She wanted to crawl into a dark hole and stay there for a week or two. She'd rather do anything but deal with her magic for a single moment longer. "I'm so sick of this," she said tiredly.

Pale, spindly fingers covered her own, stopping her attempt at forcing the ring any further. Rigel relaxed, glad that one thing, at least, had been taken out of her hands. As she ceased trying to put the suppressor on, the pressure of her magic eased, confused by the sudden lack of direction in her mind, no doubt. In the wake of that ebb, Snape slid the ring onto her finger swiftly, not giving her magic any time to react. She felt the roar of her power as it sank into her skin and seeped back into her core; echoes of anger rang in her bones, and she trembled, knowing somehow that the next time she released it, it would be worse.

"Thank you," she said, mouth a bit stiff in the aftermath of such a long, emotionally trying morning. "Sorry I snapped at you before, about bringing Riddle here. Does Dumbledore know too, now, though?"

"I cannot speak to what the headmaster does or does not know," Snape said, handing over her gloves with the ring of scale and stepping back a pace to put some distance between them once more. "Lord Riddle had some business with the headmaster today in regards to an event they are cooperating to organize in the coming months. He stopped by to see me in my office, as he usually does on the rare occasion he visits the school, and we had a very long and involved discussion on the merits of regulating the migration patterns of certain magical species of birds." At Rigel's small smile, Snape cleared his throat uncomfortably. "When Lord Riddle told me of his visit, I admit I thought it opportune. It was clear to me that you needed motivation of some kind to take control of your magic completely. I... believed you might relate to another who had dealt with the same sort of problem. It was not my intention to corner you,

though I see now how it may have appeared. I merely wished you to understand that your situation is not unique."

As that was probably the closest Snape could get to saying, 'I wanted you to know you aren't alone,' Rigel was touched. Any lingering resentment she felt at his highhandedness melted away, and she summoned the most grateful, reassuring smile she was able. "Thanks, Professor. I'll... work on my magic, all right? If only to prevent you summoning Lord Riddle on me again." She hitched up her mouth on one side at the last, to let him know she was joking, and that he was already forgiven.

"See that you do," Snape said shortly. His gruff tone was utterly belied by the spots of color high on his cheeks. "If that is all, I must go make a very powerful man extremely unhappy."

"Good luck," Rigel said, grinning a bit, "I hear they bite."

"Only when provoked," Snape sneered. He left the classroom and turned in the direction of his office, while Rigel turned toward the kitchens. She was going to eat a bar of chocolate the size of her head, then think about everything that had just happened. Then she was going to sleep. Possibly for years.

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How long had it been since his plans last resulted in unmitigated disaster? He pondered this in wry self-deprecation as he parted ways with his student. It been some time, he noted, since he misread a situation so egregiously. No. Not the *situation*. Riddle. Lips pressed into a thin line of displeasure, he was in no mood to find the man lounging behind his desk as he entered the room. Riddle did not bother to stand as Severus entered, so Severus conjured an intimidating armchair and sank into it with a scowl.

"Could you have been any more confrontational?" Severus asked, very interested to know why Riddle had completely disregarded his advice and suggestions for dealing with Rigel.

"I could have cut out his tongue for his insolence," Riddle said, the smallest of smiles playing in the corner of one cheek. It relaxed Severus minutely to know that the man was not as angry as he had seemed. Why put on a show for the boy's benefit? Did he think he could scare Rigel Black into submission? The child had killed a basilisk, for Salazar's sake.

"I requested your assistance in this matter so that you could calm the boy's fears," Severus said, forcing patience into his words. "You were to make the magic seem *normal*, not terrorize him and then draw out its destructive energies-do not think I missed that little manipulation, Lord Riddle."

"It isn't normal," Riddle scoffed, "Nor should it be treated as such. It is extraordinary. He will be extraordinary, if he ever gets his head on straight."

"And riling him up is supposed to help straighten him out, is it? You were *feeding* the restlessness in his magic," he said angrily. "What is going to happen when the energy you mingled with his is absorbed by his core?"

"Rigel Black could use a little more restlessness," Riddle informed him. "It will give him drive."

"Or drive him mad," Severus snapped.

"I didn't give him that much." Riddle was openly restraining an eye-roll. "Just a little nudge."

"In the wrong direction," Severus seethed. "Could you not see the trouble he already has with it? The magic is so detached from his will that it was physically injuring the boy. Making his magic wilder is only

going to make it harder for him to control. That is the precise converse of what I asked you to do."

"I know what I am doing, Severus," Riddle said, a warning in his tone that Severus easily ignored.

"Whatever you are doing is irrelevant to my point," he spat. "That is *my* student. I decide what is best for him, not you. You overstep your bounds, Lord Riddle."

"My *bounds* ?" Riddle clutched both armrests and leaned forward on a hiss. "Do not *ssseek* to *inssstruct* me on my *limitsss*, *Ssseverusss*." It was as close to Parseltongue as Riddle could come while still being intelligible, and it was always a sign of grave danger, but Severus was not finished.

"You hold dominion over *me*, not the child," he said, nostrils flaring with rage. "I stood by as you tormented him physically and emotionally in the vain belief that you had a purpose that served his best interests, but that is the last time I will do so."

"Your lack of understanding does not reflect upon my methods' validity," Riddle said.

"I understand the result well enough," Severus said. His eyes narrowed to catch Riddle's next expression. "His magic was so wild at the end that he could not re-don his suppressor. He nearly broke a finger trying."

The fleeting surprise that flickered in Riddle's eyes was the only thing that saved the man from the full infliction of Severus' ire. "That is impossible. Magic is not intelligent in the way you are implying."

"That's what I used to say about Rigel's magic," Severus said flatly. "It seems I shall be reconsidering that opinion. You would do well to reconsider your approach with him, as well. At this moment it is unlikely he will willingly come within ten feet of you. Somehow I doubt that was your intention."

Riddle scowled. "Cease, Severus, your point is made. I will consider your words. I must reject your assumption that the boy is yours alone to influence, however. Our plans may require his allegiance-and not just to you."

"Prepare to be disappointed," Severus said, cynically amused. "You know very little of Rigel, it seems, if you think he will be swayed to any political agenda. The boy cares nothing for politics."

"Do not sound so proud, Severus," Riddle admonished slyly. "You once felt similarly, did you not? Look at you now. A Party man, unless I am very much mistaken."

"Our circumstances are not the same." Severus felt an old bitterness churning like acid in his gut. "Rigel has strong familial ties, much stronger than the ties of friendship he has forged in Slytherin." Even as he said it, Severus was not so sure of the truth in that. Many things contradicted that idea: the strange social dissembling between Rigel and his father, the singular academic interests that isolated him still further, the distance between the depth of his talent and his family's ability to even comprehend it.

"New ties can easily replace old ones," Riddle said, leaning back now to look across the desk from beneath lowered eyelids. "You could be a father figure, if you but put forth the appropriate effort, Severus." Severus immediately squashed the ambiguous feelings that bloomed at such words said aloud, but not before Riddle sensed them. "You'd make a good role model for the boy, Severus. You deserve such a child to teach, to foster and mold as though he were your own son."

Damn the man's cunning. He never failed to root out the most vulnerable parts of a person, no matter how well concealed. "The boy does not look to adults for personal guidance," he said after a long moment, ignoring the sting of his own words. "That is why you will find it so difficult to manipulate him to your side. He seeks only academic appreciation; no other acclaim even mildly interests him."

"Hence the need to motivate him through necessity," Riddle said, tapping a finger on the desk pointedly. "If he thinks he can avoid an issue, he will, is this not so? I have noticed that trait in conversations with the boy; always he sidesteps when he senses the approach of confrontation-except, of course, when he is motivated by a principle greater than himself." The older man seemed to be talking almost to himself, now, and Severus did not disturb him-if Riddle wished to speak aloud his plans, the better for Severus. "Perhaps that is the leverage I need. If he will not strive for himself, perhaps he can be made to strive for another..."

Riddle lapsed into a pensive silence, and Severus knew better than to interrupt him. Riddle's thoughts were precious, and those who intruded upon them learned swiftly of the cost they incurred.

"That girl," Riddle spoke again, this time glancing in Severus' direction to let him know the question was not rhetorical. "The Potter girl-Black is close to her, is he not?"

"Extremely," Severus agreed. "They were raised as siblings, and appear to esteem one another before most others, for whatever reason. You think to use the girl to motivate him?" He could not articulate how he felt about that idea. It would depend on the nature of the motivation, he supposed.

"Perhaps," Riddle said vaguely, clearly still in the process of generating plans. "There is something... *off* about the combination of the two. I haven't grasped the exact trigger, but many things incite my suspicions. They look remarkably alike, and yet I have heard no rumors of infidelity or conspiracy regarding either the Potters or the late Lady Black. Then there is their dovetailing academic interests. What fostered such intellectual tendencies in a family of brash-headed Gryffindors? Something doesn't add up."

"There is a rumor," Severus offered, his lip curling at the distaste he felt in relating gossip of any kind. Riddle was the sort to demand any and all information pertinent to a discussion implicitly, however, no matter the seeming triviality of it. "Regulus related it to me in a desire

to know if I found any merit in its claims. There is a belief that the boy possesses some sort of passive metamorphic ability that has affected his physical development somehow."

"I have never heard of such a thing." Riddle frowned.

"Nor I," Severus agreed, inclining his head. "And yet they do look uncannily alike. His father is apparently of the opinion that Rigel's close bond with his cousin brought out an unconscious desire to identify with her. It would explain why they have similar interests, and, if there is any truth in the metamorphic talent, why they appear as twins despite having different parents."

"Have you seen evidence to support this theory?" Riddle asked.

Severus hesitated. When Riddle caught the pause and lifted a single, demanding eyebrow, he was forced to say, "I thought I noticed his features blurring once. When I looked again, however, they were as they always are. It may have been a trick of the light-or a simple muscle contortion; he was ill at the time."

"Or the illness may have caused the magic to slip for an instant," Riddle mused. "You checked him for Polyjuice?"

"Every day for a week," Severus snorted, still annoyed at *that* erroneous suspicion. It had been a colossal waste of time, coming up with flimsy pretexts for keeping Rigel under his watch longer than an hour successively.

"Normally I would dismiss a claim like this-magic does not behave in such a way," Riddle said, frowning. "To even suggest that one's magic might accidentally, unconsciously, yet consistently enact a physical change for years-one that evolves over time, no less-is preposterous. And yet... apparently Rigel Black is rewriting the rules of magic before our eyes." There was no small amount of frustration in Riddle's expression, and Severus felt some small measure of satisfaction at the sight of it. *Welcome*, he wanted to say, *to the club*

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"If this is the case, then the boy has an unnatural dependency on this halfblood girl," Riddle added, now looking sharply displeased. "He will have to be broken of that connection if he is to move forward."

Severus could not suppress the scowl that moved his features at those blunt words of portent.

Riddle merely smiled at his disapproval. "Weren't you better off, Severus, once it was all said and done? Surely you don't regret the doors that opened once that one swung closed behind you?"

Severus drew his best sneer to the fore. "Life's choices are absolute. There is no room for regret in the well-organized mind."

"So noncommittal, Severus," Riddle complained, smiling fully now. "Will I ever know the depths of your soul?"

"Find an easier soul to plumb," Severus suggested sharply.

"Oh, I intend to," Riddle said, drawing himself up a bit straighter. An unconscious attempt to intimidate whatever he was thinking about, Severus had guessed from experience. "Where is the rat?"

Now they came to Riddle's true purpose in coming to Hogwarts, Severus recognized. The pretense of meeting with Dumbledore was just that; Riddle had all summer to plan his little tournament. He wanted Pettigrew dealt with *now* .

"He will be at the noon meal," Severus assured him.

"Good." Riddle's eyes flashed. "I want him to see my face and know that he is not so untouchable here in Dumbledore's castle as he thinks."

"The headmaster will notice if you curse the man," Severus reminded him. At times Riddle's thirst for vengeance overrode his otherwise careful scheming.

"I don't need to curse him." Riddle smirked. "He is a scurrying rodent. When he recognizes my ire in the flesh he will crawl back of his own accord like the sniveling coward he is. He has only lasted so long in this rebellion because he is removed from the reality of his transgression. How easy it is for the mouse to laugh at the snake while it sleeps safe in its den. When the snake comes to call, the mouse laughs no longer. Pettigrew's spinelessness will reveal itself shortly, Severus. He will be back at my side before the month is out."

Severus was not so sure. He did not know Pettigrew well, thank Merlin, but what he had observed over the past months did not mesh with what he thought he knew of the man. Something had changed him. He stood straighter as he walked, made eye contact in the hallways with Severus when before he would have scurried in the opposite direction at his approach.

Perhaps sensing his doubt, Riddle said sharply, "If he does not repent, my next visit will not be so lenient. He is fortunate that I do not wish to cause a scene at present. It is not beyond my political capital to do so, however. Tell him that, won't you, Severus?"

"I will attempt to convey the depth of your bereavement at his departure, My Lord," Severus drawled.

"Your sense of humor knows no wisdom, Severus," Riddle sighed.

"That is why you recruited me, I believe," Severus reminded him.

"It is why I allow you to berate me, at any rate," Riddle said, resignation in every syllable.

"Criticism is healthy," Severus told him.

"Is that what you tell your students?" Riddle asked, amused.

"Some more often than others," Severus snorted.

Riddle stood with a fluid grace that had made more than one person accuse him of vampiric inclinations. "Come, let us adjourn to the Great Hall. I have a rodent to intimidate and you have a student to check on."

Severus scowled as he followed Riddle out of the office. He had no intention of seeking out Rigel at lunch like an overprotective parent after his child's first day of school. When they entered the Hall and he didn't see Rigel seated at the Slytherin table, he told himself firmly that he was not worried. He steadfastly ignored Riddle's annoyingly knowing smile to the contrary. The man was too nosy for Severus' patience. He would be well rid of him that afternoon.

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He hadn't expected to see *him* here, of all places. There was a part of him that thought he should be alarmed by this unexpected occurrence, but most of him was strangely calm. Unaffected. Uninterested. He knew if he thought about it that this was unusual. He would have been afraid, he knows, not long ago, but that feeling was a lifetime away. It didn't belong to him anymore.

He knew it was the Jewel, giving him power, courage. It focused his mind on what was important, and Tom Riddle wasn't important anymore. What was important...? The Jewel. The Jewel was important. His mind turned away from the man sending daggers through his eyes from just a few seats down the table. His vision narrowed to the prophecy. Why hadn't he made a copy? He could remember much of it, from poring obsessively over each line for weeks after he'd forced the centaur to tell him what it knew-the Jewel was good at forcing creatures to obey him. He almost never lost control anymore. He'd turned two acromantula from their intention to make a meal of him the other night. His progress was impressive. The satisfaction filled him up, making the food he mechanically swallowed almost irrelevant to his hunger. Then dissatisfaction,

stronger and more biting, gnawed at him. He still hadn't unlocked its full powers. The wyrm still resisted...

A debilitating depression gripped him, sending his fork stabbing into his potato with something like frustrated rage. After a moment, the feeling passed, and he was able to focus his thoughts again. The prophecy. The prophecy was the key. It said he had to prove his right to dominion by dominating others. He was trying. He could subjugate most of the creatures in the forest, now. It wasn't enough, though. He had to 'reign beyond the weak' or something... what else could he try? What would prove him worthy? He had to take control of something powerful. Just dominating magical creatures clearly wasn't enough. 'Master the other' it had said. Maybe... maybe he was supposed to master some *one* else, not some *thing* else. Another wizard...?

The feeling of greed was swift, rushing into his veins eagerly. That was the Jewel, he knew. He could feel it burning in his pocket, even through the makeskin pouch he kept it in to avoid having it summoned or stolen from his person. He began to smile down at his plate. If the Jewel liked that idea, then he must be on the right track. His smile faded once more as he looked around himself and wondered how he was to accomplish such a thing. He was in no position of power. Those ancient pharaohs had it easy-they could boss their slaves around all day and no one would bat an eye. Who could Peter control?

He looked speculatively up and down the staff table. He had wizards in plenty, but... the likes of Albus Dumbledore? Tom Riddle? Severus Snape? Filius Flitwick? Who was he kidding? The depression swallowed him violently, weighing on his shoulders like a boulder. What a hopeless task. His eyes lit on his old friend, Remus. The sandy-haired man ate sedately, but he knew that was a façade. Peter would be a fool to try subjugating a werewolf. It was a shame, for his old friend was trusting, even now. He might have been able to convince him... convince him... of what? He had something to tell

Remus. Something important, a warning... he shook his head.
Focus. Find a wizard to control.

His frustration ate at him. Anyone with enough magic to qualify as 'beyond weak' would not be controlled by *him*. He may have to start small. Like with the creatures. Work his way up. Yes. Not all wizards were on the level of Albus Dumbledore, after all. He could start with a woman. Not McGonagall, obviously, but someone easy to fool. A weak woman, or... a child, even. His eyes lit greedily on the expanse of students chattering boisterously there below him. It was so obvious! Their innocent faces were like beacons to his desperation. It would not be so difficult. He only had to decide which one...

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When March dwindled to a close, Rigel welcomed April with mixed feelings. On the one hand, everything about the term so far had been exhausting. She was starting to feel the toll of the time-turner daily. She couldn't quite bring herself to stop using it so frequently-it was addicting, in a way, knowing that she had so much more time than everyone else. She knew it was borrowed time-she was aging, even if no one else would be able to tell. It would be a relief, as well as a shame, when the device was taken away from her for the summer. On the other hand, she was learning so much, and progressing so quickly in her dueling, even without being able to use most of the tricks Leo had taught her. The coming of April meant only two months left at Hogwarts. It meant only two more months with her friends. It also meant she had two months to get useful information on what Pettigrew was doing with the jewel-something more than circumstantial conjecture and one cryptic poem.

The big things lurked in the background, however, largely detached from the day-to-day life that she considered 'real.' As she sat in the Gryffindor common room going over Transfiguration theory with Percy, she didn't feel at all connected to the version of herself the

Map said was studying in the Room of Requirement, nor to the version that she'd glimpsed walking toward the library at roughly the same time she had been going to dinner. The real version of her-the one that interacted with others, the one who walked without an invisibility cloak and whose whereabouts were kept track of-lived a simple life. She spent time with her friends, studied, ate, and slept. Today, she listened to Percy pontificate on the half-life of semi-permanent Transfigurations.

"So it's really dependent on the material you start with, as much as it is the amount of power that goes into the spell," Percy was saying, gesturing with his quill to a table full of example figures for various materials.

"These numbers are directly proportionate to a material's magical coefficient," Rigel said suddenly, bending closer. "Look, the half-life of walnut is one third that of cypress-because the magical coefficient of cypress is one third that of walnut!"

"The what?" Percy asked, alarmed. "That isn't in any of my review sheets. Is that NEWT material?"

He looked ready to burst a vein, so Rigel said quickly, "It's an Alchemy term, not Transfigurations." NEWT students were growing increasingly touchy, with exams coming up in a matter of weeks.

"What do you know about Alchemy?" Percy asked, settling down visibly and adjusting his glasses calmly as though he hadn't almost taken her head off. "I did know it was related to Transfiguration, but I've never heard them compared mathematically."

"I read about it in my spare time," Rigel said, carefully casual. "In Alchemy, you have to calculate the amount of magic needed to change however many units of the starting material into however many units of the ending material. It's all about balancing materials and magic. Alchemists have worked out standard coefficients for measuring the amount of magic needed to transform materials. They describe how resistant a certain material is to transformation. This

sounds like the same thing, only in reverse. How long a material stays Transfigured in a Semi-permanent Transfiguration is inversely related to how resistant the material is. The more resistant it is, the shorter the spell lasts, right?"

"Yes, that's one of the principles," Percy said. "So you're saying the rate that the magic wears off is always a perfect inverse of its magical coefficient? That's very interesting. I wonder how long it took to standardize the math like that. It would be fascinating to read a history of the development of the two fields..." He broke off with a sigh. "I don't have time, though. So much reviewing to do..."

"I'll look for some books in the library, and then tell you which one is the best so you can read it over the summer," Rigel offered.

"You don't have to-"

"I'm interested too," Rigel said firmly. "And I have tons of free time."

"Apparently," Percy said, looking jealous for a moment. "Well, anyway. Where were we?"

"You were about to tell me how being in a magically saturated environment can affect something's half-life," Rigel said.

"Right." Percy cleared his throat. "Well-"

"No one cares!"

Percy scowled across the room at where Fred and George were racing down the stairwell that led up to their dorm room. The both had gigantic hats on their heads. Fred's read, "I'm the Birthday Boy!" while George's said, "No, I Am!"

"You don't even know what we're talking about," Percy rolled his eyes.

"I know you were about to talk," Fred said, plopping down on the table with his legs crossed a moment later.

"My notes," Percy groaned, pushing Fred until he leaned far enough that the Head Boy could rescue his crumpled parchment. "Why do you always do this?"

"Ah-ah-ah," George shook his finger admonishingly as he came to rest one hip against the table on Rigel's other side. "It's our birthday, Perce. You're not allowed to be mad at us."

"You two turned my favorite quill into a hamster on *my* birthday," Percy said.

"That was a birthday present," George said, blinking.

"Obviously," Fred added with a grin.

"Speaking of which!" Rigel cut in, smiling widely, "I brought your presents with me." She dug into her bag quickly and produced two handsomely wrapped boxes, one green and purple for Fred and one orange and blue for George.

They took them almost gingerly, exchanging surreptitious glances. "What did you get us, then?" George asked, oh-so-casually.

"It's a surprise," she said sweetly. "Why don't you open them?"

"We can open them later," Fred said, laughing nervously.

"But I want to see you open them," Rigel frowned, affecting a sad sort of disappointment. "Don't you like them? I Transfigured the wrapping paper myself."

With pained grimaces, the twins began examining each box carefully. "Looking for traps?" Percy asked, snorting incredulously.

"Well..." George eyed her suspiciously. "Our pup does owe us a prank. And today is April Fool's Day. And it's our birthday. It's pretty much the golden opportunity for revenge."

Fred nodded in agreement, peeling a corner of the paper back on his box and tensing dramatically, as though waiting for a bomb to go off.

"Would I do that to my two favorite tricksters on their birthday?" Rigel asked, one hand placed over her heart in acute dismay.

"I hope so," Percy muttered, smirking a bit.

"We should probably get it over with," George sighed.

"We do deserve it," Fred said, in a tone that would have suited a soldier marching off to war in defense of his homeland.

They ripped back the paper as one and... nothing happened. They stared in confusion down at two identical, completely nondescript cardboard boxes. Exchanging another long look, they each took hold of a flap and pulled, wincing, outward. The boxes opened and a plethora of sweets spilled out rather anticlimactically onto the table.

"Uh..." Fred pawed through his box quickly, noting the wide range of assortment. "Thanks, Rigel."

"Some of them I got at Hogsmeade," she said, pointing them out, "But some of them I baked myself in the kitchens, see?"

George pulled out a bag of fudge with a most nervous expression. "Looks good, Rigel. Thanks."

"Try a piece," Rigel encouraged them, smiling. "It's really good. You like chocolate, right?"

"They love chocolate fudge," Percy said helpfully, grinning along, "Why, at Yule they ate a half a pound each!"

"I, um, had a big dinner," George said warily.

"Me too," Fred said, smiling apologetically. "We'll have some later."

She pulled out The Look. Eyes wide, mouth trembling slightly, she blinked once. "You... don't like it, do you?" She bit the smallest corner of her lip. "It's okay. You... you don't have to eat it. Give it away, I don't mind." She looked down into her lap as though she simply could not bear to look them in the eye as she said it. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to gross you out. You probably think a potions maker can't bake anything that doesn't taste like slugs."

"We'll have some!" George said desperately, clapping a hand on her shoulder. "Really. We just wanted to save it for later-greedy, that's us, right Fred?"

"Right," Fred gulped. When Rigel looked up she saw him gazing resignedly at the fudge. "Can't wait."

"Oh, good!" Rigel smiled brightly, clapping her hands twice just to see the twins flinch.

They slumped in defeat and each took a chocolate square from their bags. They held them up and gave a 'cheers'-ing motion that bumped the pieces together before tilting their heads back and swallowing the fudge as though knocking back a vial of Skele-gro. They both froze, eyes closed, as a few seconds stretched into a minute, then a minute more. Eventually, they gazed at one another with relieved confusion, then looked at Rigel suspiciously.

"How was it?" Rigel asked, still smiling.

"Ah, pretty good, I think," George said, scratching his head with a slight frown.

"You ate it too fast to tell?" Rigel laughed. "Well, have another piece. Maybe this one will be more memorable."

The twins paled at her words, and shuddered minutely. The suspense appeared to be actually killing them. "We'll eat the rest later," George choked out after a silent inner struggle. "It was

greattoseeyouRigelbye!" He ran off toward the dorms with his box of sweets, Fred fast behind him.

"Happy birthday!" she called, waving exaggeratedly after them.

When Percy stopped laughing, he said, "What's really wrong with the sweets?"

"Nothing at all," Rigel said loftily.

"Nothing...?" Percy shook his head, "Really? You know they're going up to the secret lab they think I don't know about to test them extensively, don't you?"

"Then I guess the joke's on them for being so suspicious," Rigel said, smirking a bit.

"That's... pretty funny, actually," Percy said, smirking back. "They'll agonize over this all night. It's a good way to get them back for that Valentine's Day thing."

"Oh, this isn't my revenge," Rigel said, affecting a surprised tone.

"Oh, no. My vengeance can wait until they've driven themselves positively mad with suspense. When they start seeing shadows around every corner, when they start questioning if any of it is real or if it's just their paranoia-that's when they won't see me coming."

"Mother always said to beware a Slytherin's revenge," Percy said, looking uneasy, yet impressed.

"She should have said to beware a Marauder's revenge," Rigel said. "It comes ever so *creatively* ."

"I think I'll take care not to stand too close to my younger brothers for a while," Percy remarked, smiling a bit unsurely.

"See that you do." Rigel smiled back.

With the first week in April came yet another Ministry-mandated psychological evaluation. Snape seemed entirely jaded with the process at this point, running through the questions rapidly and without much interest. When they finished the final question, Snape sat back with a satisfied nod.

"This is very good, Rigel," Snape said. She blinked at the use of her first name, which she didn't often hear from her Head of House.

"Most students who have been afforded this privilege do not do half as well. Many end up running themselves ragged trying to keep track of everything, and almost all have to deal with increasingly suspicious classmates by this point. Yet you say you haven't been spotted even once somewhere you weren't supposed to be. It is impressive-if worrying, considering that it means your skill at sneaking about it is much greater than I am comfortable with as your Head of House."

She smiled at the wry joke. "What can I say? My classmates are quite unobservant." Also, she had an Invisibility Cloak and the Marauder's Map, which made avoiding the problems that came up for other students granted the use of a time-turner rather easy.

"So it would seem." Snape shook his head disapprovingly. "I shall have to remedy that, if my Slytherins are to be worthy of the name."

"Don't think too badly of them," Rigel said, smirking a bit, "We can't all be paragons of this noble House. It would be unfair to hold them to *my* standards of Slytherinness."

"Would it now?" Snape asked, sardonic.

"Oh yes," Rigel said sadly. "They'd have to be able to cure incurable sicknesses, slay basilisks, take twelve classes at once while winning the hearts of the people, *and* talk to snakes."

"Is that all?" Snape raised an eyebrow. "Two Gryffindor feats, one hallmark of Ravenclaw, one ambition worthy of a Hufflepuff, and a single genetic accident to mark your true House. I can't say I'm impressed."

"You haven't heard about my stunning good looks," Rigel said seriously. "I can melt a heart at ten paces."

"Another genetic happenstance," Snape said dismissively. "Your father had looks, for all the good it did him."

Amazed at such a casual, barely contemptuous mention of Sirius, she eagerly continued the banter. "He did land Mum. She was an amazing witch."

After a slightly uncomfortable pause, Snape lifted his chin at her. "Is that your plan, then? Use your looks to attract a mate and then-what? Bask in your self-proclaimed Slytherinness?"

Rigel wrinkled her nose. "What an awful picture." After a laugh, she said, "No, I'm actually hoping everyone forgets about all that nonsense. It's such rubbish, what people say about me."

Snape looked ready to refute that statement, but instead he continued playing along. Someone must have put him in a good mood that evening. "And how will you catch your intended prey if you give up all your remarkable Slytherinness and good looks?" He sneered at the phrase 'good looks' as though it meant 'acute maculopapular dermatitis.'

Rigel shook her head on a self-deprecating chuckle. "I don't have to land anyone-I already have, didn't you know?"

"What?" Snape's eyebrows drew together sharply. "What are you talking about, Rigel?"

Rigel blinked. She didn't know why Snape sounded so serious all of a sudden. She thought they'd been joking around. "I just meant I'm

engaged to Harry, that's all. I thought everyone knew."

"You are engaged to your cousin?" Snape sounded completely incredulous. "I thought Black dispensed with that sort of thing? Does he want your children to come out like Bellatrix?"

Rigel's eyebrows rose at that blunt implication. "Our relation is relatively distant," she said after a moment. It's not so unusual."

"It seems entirely premature," Snape said, sneering slightly in his disapproval. She wondered why it mattered to him who she married.

"We've known each other our whole lives," Rigel attempted to explain. "It's not like I don't know Harry."

"Your cousin is *all* you know," Snape said. "You cling to her like a security blanket."

"I what?" Rigel let out an incredulous laugh. "What gave you that idea?"

"You think the world of her, do not deny it," Snape said sternly. "You two do everything together or for one another, you *look* like each other, and now you want to marry one another? It's absurd. Whatever gave you the idea that you should tie yourself to the first person you can stand? Just because you know one another well does not mean you are well suited. There is an entire world of people who can show you different perspectives and give you new ideas. It is ridiculous to deny yourself even the possibility of discovering something new about yourself simply for the sake of convenience."

"It's really not like that," Rigel backpedaled, very confused at how this conversation had gotten so weird.

"Whose idea was this?" Snape demanded. "Your father's? Is he really so eager to merge his and Potter's lineages that he would force-"

"No!" Rigel exclaimed, "It's nothing like that, Professor, really. It's just-it's a formality at this point, that's all. I'm not being forced into anything, and neither is Harry."

Snape scoffed. "Harriett Potter should be so fortunate as th-" he paused suddenly, eyes narrowed in thought. "That's it, isn't it? The engagement is a ploy your family has come up with for *her* sake." His eyes flashed in the most potent of rage. "How dare they use you as some kind of shield against the realities of Potter's choice in bride. Your future is not a birthday cake, to be given out in shares to whoever comes sniffing-"

"Professor!" Rigel raised her voice sharply, realizing he was working himself into a fury. "Please calm down." At his silent glare, she smiled reassuringly. "Thank you for being concerned, but it is misplaced in this case. My future is not in any danger of being, um, eaten by party guests... or whatever that metaphor at the end was. Honestly. I'm sorry I brought it up. It's not important, and it doesn't matter to me at all one way or another. So... you don't have to get mad on my behalf, okay?"

"Someone should," Snape growled.

"I appreciate it," Rigel said again. "I just don't think it's necessary at this point. If I ever feel like my love life is being unduly infringed upon, I shall inform you immediately." They stared at one another for a long moment, and both seemed to realize how ridiculous that sounded. Snape looked away with a snort, and Rigel let out a breathless laugh. "Wow. That was cheesy," she said. "Sorry."

"It is I who should apologize," Snape said, unusually magnanimous. He had seemed nicer, somehow, since that morning with Riddle. Maybe he thought he had to make it up to her. Rigel almost preferred the stern taskmaster she was accustomed to, though. He at least wasn't confusing.

"Let's forget this conversation even happened," Rigel said. "I have to get back before curfew. See you tomorrow, Professor."

"Good evening, Mr. Black," Snape said, sounding more defeated than dismissive.

She left his office wondering if it wasn't Snape who needed the psych evaluation. He had definitely been off, lately. At least around her.

Once she was a fair distance away, she got out the Map and searched for a particular dot. If she wasn't mistaken, it would be somewhere around the Quidditch pitch... there. Still in the stands, as usual. Flint was incredibly predictable, at least in regards to his post-practice routine. Draco was on his way toward the Slytherin common room, so she took the long way through the dungeons to avoid him. He would have questions if he saw her heading away from the common room at this time of night.

After dodging a couple of prefects who had begun patrolling early, Rigel slipped out of the front doors and hurried through the chilly night down to the pitch. Flint was halfway up the stands, scribbling away on a roll of parchment. He looked up as her boots echoed on the stairs, relaxing a bit when he recognized her.

"Come to harass me about spending too much time on Quidditch and not enough on NEWT prep?" he asked lazily, still writing. "You can forget it. Pansy already gave me an earful."

Rigel chuckled. "She usually knows what's best for people. I've actually come to take some of that NEWT prep off your hands, though. Do you have this week's assignments?"

"With me?" Flint asked, looking incredulous. After a pause in which Rigel raised her eyebrows expectantly, he barked out a laugh. "Yeah, I've got them. I usually mail them after practice. No witnesses this late."

"How do you get past the prefects?" she asked, curious.

"I glare at them until they go away," Flint grunted. "Unless it's that walking rulebook Weasley. Him I have to hex."

She favored him with an unimpressed look. "The assignments, Flint?"

He dug deep into one of his pockets and pulled out a wrinkled packet. "That's all of them."

"Good," she said vaguely, paging through them.

"Rigel," Flint said, his tone making her look up. "I mean that's all of them. Ever."

She blinked. "Ever? But... it's only April."

He smirked. "From here on out it's just test-prep for seventh-years. There's some out-of-class work, but it's stuff I actually need to do."

"*You're* going to do test-prep work?" she wondered if she'd crossed into a parallel dimension recently.

Flint glared at her, and she could see why the prefects avoided him. "I have to get top marks if I want a job that pays enough to support my mother."

Oh. That was... very responsible of him, actually. "How is she?" she asked.

He thought about it for a moment before answering. "She writes more often, now. I think she likes working, and living alone. She seems almost at peace. I have you to thank for that."

"I was glad to help," Rigel said smiling a bit. "Let me know if she mentions anything she needs. I can get hold of Harry any time."

"You've done enough," Flint said gruffly. "Our debts are nearly met. Soon you'll be finished with all of this. Relieved?"

"I suppose," she said, musing. "I don't mind the learning. It has been a very educating experience. I feel almost as though I've done the last three years here already. I'm going to be very bored come fifth year."

"You'll find something to do," Flint scoffed. "Probably read the whole damn library by the time you graduate." She had a brief fantasy of doing just that, and smiled. "Meanwhile, I'll have to keep your ridiculous secret for the rest of my life," Flint complained, rolling his neck as though it pained him at the idea of keeping up his end of the bargain.

Rigel found it hard to be sympathetic. "I'm sure *not doing anything* will be terribly difficult for you," she said, heavily sarcastic. "Try not to strain anything while you keep your mouth shut."

"It's touching that you've grown to care so much about my wellbeing these three years," Flint remarked.

"Almost as touching as you actually applying yourself to make a better life for your dear, sweet mum," Rigel shot back.

"Watch it," Flint growled.

"Oh, it's too late to intimidate me," Rigel said, "I already know your secret. You toil deep into the night, reading frantically by the light of a single candle, lit by the strength of your love-" Flint took a swing at her, which she ducked, laughing. "You've spent too long on a broom, Flint," she said, clicking her tongue softly. "You're slow on the ground."

"You'll be *in* the ground if you don't scam before I remember that you haven't done the last of my essays yet," Flint threatened. She waved off his words with a small smile, making her way down the stands once more. "Wait," he called after her suddenly, "How do *you* avoid the prefects?"

"They avoid me," she called back.

"Brat!" she heard him bark down at her.

"Grump!" she shot over her shoulder.

She honestly couldn't remember why she'd ever been afraid of Flint. He was just a ticked off ogre living in a teenage boy's body. Her face grimaced at that mental image. She supposed on second thought that did sound pretty terrifying. The papers in her pocket rustled as she hurried across the lawn. Soon she'd be pretty much rid of him. It would almost be sad, she thought, when she no longer had Flint's work to keep her so much busier than her peers. She'd been doing his essays since almost the day she started at Hogwarts. They were as much a part of her school experience as moving staircases, at this point.

Perhaps she'd see if Archie would send her *his* essay topics next year-it might be interesting to compare the styles of schooling, since AIM was considered a progressive, relatively modern institution, while Hogwarts was one of the last bastions of neoclassical Wizarding education.

Lost in plans for the future, she fingered her time-turner eagerly. If she went back just a couple of days, she could probably finish all of Flint's essays by the end of the week. Then she'd be done *forever* . The next couple of months suddenly seemed full of possibility.

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By mid-April the nights were finally warm enough that she didn't need her heaviest cloak to go walking by the forest. Her lessons with Madam Pomfrey were coming along apace. There were very few kinds of physical trauma she couldn't Heal, and the matron had promised her that if she kept up her studies over the summer they could start on ailments caused by jinxes, hexes, curses, and other forms of magic. Pomfrey told her that one of the advantages of

learning at Hogwarts was the profusion of such injuries-she'd have plenty to practice on, once she got the basics down.

As was now usual for her nighttime strolls, Treeslider found her within minutes of her entering the tree line. She heard his hissing song through the underbrush as he approached, irrepressibly cheerful.

" *Juiccy mousse coming sssoon, nicce and fat, not too chewy,* " he sang sibilantly. She could tell if she listened very carefully that his little chant rhymed in his language, but her Parseltongue ability sort of jumbled the translation in her head until it sounded like English-silly English, at that.

" *Over here,*" she called out into the trees.

" *I know, I know,*" the boomslang snake hissed back, " *I sssmell you* ."

He came shooting out from a nearby bush and coiled happily around her feet. His green scales flexed adroitly as he climbed her boot, head swaying eagerly toward the pocket she'd stowed the mouse in. " *Hungry ?*" she laughed, fishing the wrapped treat out and holding it up by the tail for his perusal. " *I'm afraid I only found a little one thisss night .*" The mouse was substantial, of course, thick and fresh, but Treeslider had high standards in his food.

" *It isss pitiful,*" the snake agreed mournfully, an eager look in his bulging eyes that gave lie to his disapproval. " *I know you did your besst, Ssspeaker .*"

" *Your approval meansss much,*" she said. She didn't bother with an eye roll, as she was fairly certain it would be lost on the reptile. " *Have you ssseen any animalsss in need of help tonight? "*

The snake swayed silently for a moment. " *If I have not ssseen any, do I ssstill get the mousse? "*

Rigel smiled. " *Asss long ass you tell the truth .*"

The snake made a parody of a nod by bobbing its head. Had he learned that from her or had he always done that? She couldn't remember. " *I have ssseen nothing. I ssswear .*"

" *That'sss odd,*" she said, tilting her head. She'd always been able to find at least one injured animal with Treeslider's help.

" *It isss becaussse there are no predatorsss on thisss ssside of the foresst anymore,*" Treeslider said, eyes fixed only on the mouse.

" *None?*" Rigel frowned. " *That doesssn't make sssenssse .*"

" *It isss sssensssible for them,*" Treeslider said uninterestedly, " *Bad thingsss have been happening to the biggessst, baddessst creaturesss in thessse partsss .*"

" *What kind of thingsss?*" she asked.

" *Sssome have been found ssslain,*" Treeslider said, writhing a little uneasily now. " *Ssstrong onesss, like the ssspidersss, sssometimesss. Sssome have lossst their witsss, and wander, aimlesssss, without themssselvesss. Sssome, like the horsssemen, jussst left without warning. No one knowsss why .*"

Rigel dropped the mouse for the snake to devour while she pondered his words. Not many things were big enough to kill an acromantula, and centaurs were not easily run out of their own territory, even a part of it. As to the report of creatures being robbed of their faculties completely... that was worrying. Could it be Pettigrew's doing? She hated to automatically blame him for what could be an unrelated mystery, but she had seen him go into the forest numerous times. She hadn't ever been able to follow him past the edge of the Map, but she had seen him stumble out looking a bit worse for wear on a few occasions.

It seemed a senseless thing, killing creatures in the forest for sport. The centaur's portent hadn't said anything about slaying spiders, as far as she could decipher. It seemed more about controlling great power. She supposed something so vague could be interpreted in a variety of ways, but if Pettigrew thought he needed to kill things to gain power that was undeniably *very bad*. The other things, though... how would he scare the centaurs away? Did it have something to do with the prophecy he'd somehow gotten a copy of? Perhaps he'd angered them, or threatened them with the jewel somehow. The jewel... could it be responsible for taking away the minds of otherwise sentient creatures? What would be the point of such a power? The more she learned about the Dominion Jewel the more she wondered who on earth would countenance creating something so obviously ill advised.

She was jarred from her thoughts as Treeslider began trembling suddenly on the ground at her feet. Crouching down, she looked over him in concern, but could see nothing obviously the matter. "*Indigessstion?*" she asked, a bit amused.

"*Do not insssult me, Ssspeaker,*" Treeslider complained, still shaking. "*There isss a feeling. It comesss sssso frequently thessse daysss .*"

"*Where doesss it hurt?*" she asked, peering down at him.

"*Not a feeling of pain,*" the snake hissed. "*It isss a feeling of fear.*"

"*Where does it come from?*" Rigel asked, stroking the snake's head soothingly. "*From a thought? A memory?*"

"*Elsssewhere,*" the snake said, shaking its head agitatedly. "*It comesss to the foressst from elsssewhere. It doesssn't belong. The foressst hatesss it .*"

"*But what isss it?*" she pressed.

" *I don't know,*" Treeslider said, sending a snake-glare into the trees.
" *But I wisssh it would leave.* "

" *Isss it in the foresst now?* " Rigel asked, looking the direction he was, " *Can you sssenssse it?* "

" *Over there,*" the snake said irritably, jabbing his shaking tail in the direction of his glare.

In her head the cadence, memorized painstakingly over days of study, rang out unsummoned. *The birds and beasts and flowers will conspire through the hours to contend these rising powers.* Could it be? She dove into her bag and pulled out the Marauder's Map, scanning it breathlessly. The last she'd checked, Pettigrew had been in his quarters, pacing swiftly back and forth between his rooms. As her eyes devoured the parchment, she realized with dismay that the man was nowhere on the Map. That could only mean he had slipped past her and gone deep into the forest while she'd been walking.

Rigel set off determinedly into the dark, resolved to figure out just what Pettigrew was doing once and for all. If he was killing creatures or wiping their minds somehow, then he needed to be turned over to the authorities at once. Studying a mysterious artifact was one thing. Even accidentally causing a huge ruckus on Halloween that put people's lives in danger didn't condemn him completely. Torturing sentient beings, however, most certainly crossed a line. She couldn't in good conscience wait any longer for the man to come to his senses if things were the way Treeslider intimated.

Treeslider hissed in annoyance, trailing clumsily through the leaves in her wake. " *What are you doing, Ssspeaker? Don't go that way. You do not want to encounter that one! He issss not one to ssspeak before roasssting hisss visssitors!* "

Rigel slowed her jog, turning with alarm to say, " *What? Roasssting?* "

Before Treeslider could answer, she heard a roar, plain as day, if rather distant, echo through the trees behind her. What on earth...? As far as she knew, the Forbidden Forest didn't have any animals that roared so loudly within its borders. Had a family of manticores moved in recently?

She rushed toward the sound, knowing as she did so that this was incredibly idiotic. She could hear Snape's voice in head telling her to go back and get a teacher, but really, what professor would just jump up and follow her into the depths of the Forbidden Forest on her word? And how would she explain that she knew Pettigrew was in there because she had a magic map that violated about a dozen rules of privacy in the code of ethics? And what if they came too late? Something big and loud sounded very angry. She didn't know what she'd be able to do if it was a manticore, but she knew what she couldn't do: nothing.

She left Treeslider behind as she sprinted toward the roars, which got louder much quicker than she'd anticipated. It sounded as if the sound was a long way off, until all of a sudden it was right in front of her, as though she'd crossed an invisible barrier that had been muddling the sound. She pushed through a densely growing copse of trees and stumbled to a stop abruptly at the scene on the other side.

Pettigrew was indeed standing on one side of the clearing, but her numb brain nearly overlooked him in its preoccupation with the other occupant. There was a dragon in the forest. There was a *Dragon*. In the forest. She fell back against the tree behind her, clutching at the bark with shaking fingers. She didn't know enough about dragons to identify the breed, but it dwarfed the clearing with its wingspan, and its clawed limbs dug great swathes of dirt from the forest floor as it roared its rage to the sky. She gazed open-mouthed at the enormous grey-scaled reptile, and all she could think for one hysterical moment was *why couldn't it have been manticores?*

She drew two deep breaths and forced her thoughts into a linear and useful direction. *How did it get here?* Her brain made the leap easily-

it was one of the escaped dragons that had been running loose since the winter holidays. *Why would it come to Hogwarts?* She didn't know. Hunger? Had the dragon been killing the acromantula for food? *No, focus, why would it stay here? How could it, with no one noticing?* It looked like it would be as tall as the trees if it straightened to its full height... oh. She narrowed her eyes at the dragon, now calm enough to take in the enormous metal shackles that hung from its neck and forepaws. Chains ran between them and down into the earth. There was no telling how deep they were embedded, but it had to be at least a hundred feet to keep a dragon grounded.

Why would anyone want to keep a dragon in the Forbidden Forest? Her eyes moved to the other figure in the clearing. Pettigrew stood to one side of the enormous beast, holding something high in his hand, as though warding the creature off. Neither the man nor the dragon had noticed her entrance, each focused entirely on the other in an obvious battle of wills.

She huddled against the tree, in no hurry to jump in the middle of this particular scenario until she knew exactly what was going on. The dragon made a sudden movement with its neck, a sort of horse cough-sneeze that made it shake its head violently. A tendril of smoke escaped its nostrils, but nothing more. It was trying to use its flame, she realized, but something was preventing it. Pettigrew appeared to be panting harshly, his arms trembling even though the red jewel he held could not possibly be very heavy at all. He must be doing something to the dragon with it, she surmised. Pettigrew took a step forward, still holding the jewel between himself and the reptile like a shield-or maybe a sword, from how the dragon flinched back, pawing the ground in agitation.

Pettigrew continued to step forward, pushing the dragon back until it reached the far end of the clearing. With its back against the thick trees and its shackles at the end of their chains, the dragon growled and whined, dropping its head in a cringing motion that didn't seem very dragon-like at all. Before long, Pettigrew stood triumphantly

over the dragon's nose, breathing hard but standing tall. In his flush of success, he relaxed his hold on the jewel, lowering it ever so slightly.

In the blink of an eye, the dragon struck. Its talon slashed through the air and caught Pettigrew's leg with a spray of blood. He sprawled to the ground, and the dragon seized immediately on the moment to sink its teeth into the man's arm, raised instinctively to protect his face. The reptile shook its head back and forth like a dog with a bit of rope, flinging Pettigrew across the clearing like a rag doll.

It then surged forward, and Rigel realized Pettigrew, now lying prostrate on the ground, was not yet out of the range that the dragon's shackles allowed. Springing into motion, she grabbed for her wand and shot a summoning charm at his prone form, managing to get him clear of the dragon's teeth just in time. Unfortunately, the reptile's attention then shifted rather predictably to the thing protecting its prey-her.

Rigel had the absurd urge to smile and hold out her hands non-threateningly. Unfortunately, she didn't think a dragon was likely to respond to something that worked on a suspicious dog. The dragon snorted threateningly at her, and a thick funnel of black smoke filled the air between them. The beast seemed to realize at the same time she did that it was able to use its fire now that Pettigrew wasn't suppressing it with the jewel. Her eyes widened as the dragon inhaled deeply, a glint in its snake-like eyes that Rigel recognized as Treeslider's I-am-about-to-eat-this-mouse-look.

"We're the mice," she said breathlessly, frozen before the vision of her impending death. Many ideas raced through her mind in that half-moment. Dodge to the side or roll out of the way-except a dragon's flame was meters wide and she could never get the speed on foot to outrun it. Use the protective potion, she had several doses in her bag-except there was no time to locate one and complete the circle before she was cinders. Try and use the jewel the way Pettigrew had-except she had no idea how it worked. Even as all this ran through her mind, a paralyzing fear turned the blood in her veins

to slush. Her airways felt clogged and her mind felt like a blind man grasping and clutching at thin air at he fell from a cliff he'd never seen coming.

She didn't notice her fingers moving, had no awareness that her hands were coming together behind her back, stripping the gloves smoothly away, nor that her jade ring loosened and fell to the dirt even as the dragon's belly turned the glowing red of a newly lit furnace. The next thing she knew for certain was the blast of power that exploded from her chest, throwing her physically backwards into a tree even as it raced in the other direction toward the source of her fear.

The flames met something intangible halfway across the clearing, a pressure that swallowed them into nonexistence as though all the oxygen in its path had been sucked mercilessly away. The dragon ceased its fiery breath much sooner than Rigel would have thought, if she could have thought of anything beyond the numb shock that had subverted her usual neurological pathways. It coughed and hacked pitifully, looking as angry and confused as its reptilian features would allow. Rigel felt the magic come back to her like a blow to the head, sending the world tilting drunkenly as her vision swam and reality became a hard thing to focus on past the rush of energy setting her nerve endings randomly alight.

"What... how..." Pettigrew was attempting to push himself off the ground, looking from her to the dragon with pained confusion. He paled at the sight of the furious reptile. It roared at him defiantly, and he flinched back against the ground violently. "I don't... what's happening... no, no, no," he chanted, shaking his head as though throwing off a terrible memory. His gaze was drawn to the blood-red jewel still clasped in one hand, and he began to tremble, shaking his hand frantically as though trying to shake it away from him, even as his fingers clutched it ever tighter.

"Don't move around so much," Rigel said distractedly, her eyes still mostly on the creature across the clearing. "You'll make your injuries worse."

"My what?" Pettigrew looked entirely confused, until he looked down at his body with a shocked gasp. She wondered how he hadn't noticed getting slashed open by a dragon, but maybe the trauma of being thrown fifty feet had affected his memory. "Oh... oh Merlin..." He attempted to staunch the bleeding on his leg and arm, the latter of which looked like it had been dislocated from its socket. He only had one hand, though: the one attached to the mangled arm, which he could barely move, as the other refused to let go of the jewel. He was starting to hyperventilate and probably about to go into shock, so Rigel attempted to snap him out of it.

"Professor," she said sharply.

"Who, me?" Pettigrew blinked helplessly up at her. "Yes?"

"We have to get out of here," she said, thinking quickly. There was no way Pettigrew could walk on that leg. She shot her wand into the air, intending to shoot red sparks above their location. Instead, her magic shot out a cacophony of light and sound that looked like a firework display shot at close range above the tree line. The dragon let out a roar that was almost a squeal, rubbing its nose to the dirt in acute distress at the loud noise. "Way to piss it off," she groaned at her magic in frustration.

"What?" Pettigrew whimpered.

"Not you," she snapped. She took a deep breath. She had to calm down. She dug through her bag to find one of her protection potions. She was pretty sure it wouldn't hold up against a dragon, as the shield it was based on certainly wouldn't have, but it was better than nothing. She hoped someone had seen that light show. She hoped they could last until help came. "Can you stop it from flaming, Professor?" she asked. She didn't want to encourage him to use the jewel, but if the alternative was dying... well, she really didn't want to die before she at least invented a potion to cure spattergroit or something.

"I... no, no I can't," he said, shaking his head back and forth quickly, even as he looked at the jewel with something like terrified hunger. She didn't know if he was disheartened by his recent failure or trying to somehow pretend he didn't know what she was talking about, but either way it seemed he would be of no help. Swallowing her contempt, she completed the protection circle, shoved a Blood-Replenishing Potion into Pettigrew's good hand, and turned to face the dragon herself.

Normally she would make a better attempt to see to his injuries, but at the moment her magic was everywhere *except* in her control. It filled the clearing with wind that changed direction every other second, giving the entire clearing a surreal feeling that made it hard to concentrate on the gritty reality of the danger before her. The dragon seemed to be biding its time before it tried roasting her again-and why hadn't she stopped to let Treeslider explain that there was a *dragon in the woods* before she rushed ahead?

There was no guarantee help was coming. She needed to think faster. What did she know about dragons? Not a lot, except that in the stories Ron told about his brother Charlie they were a lot bigger. It was also a bit more docile than she might have expected. It had been at least five minutes since it sent fire their way. Had Pettigrew damaged its flame-maker somehow? Or maybe... she thought back to every little comment Ron had thrown out in their conversations. It wasn't a fully-grown dragon at all. It-it was an *adolescent* dragon, she realized. That's why it was so small, compared to what she'd heard of adult dragons. That was why it needed so long between jets of fire, too-it hadn't developed that ability fully, yet.

She looked over the creature in a new light, taking in the spindly legs and tapered torso. It looked sick, she thought. How long had it been here? It was probably starving, if most of the animals had left this part of the forest and it couldn't move beyond this clearing. No wonder it was so angry. The creature was probably severely weakened and nearing desperate straits in regard to its own survival.

She wondered if it had ever been out on its own before it escaped the reserve. It had probably been born and bred in captivity.

She shook her head sharply and marshaled her defenses as smoke began seeping from the reptile's nostrils once more. This was no time to be feeling sorry for something that could bite her in half without trying. She pulled on her magic insistently, hoping beyond hope that it would come to her defense again. Between it and her protective potion, they might just survive.

As the fire raced toward them across the clearing, she heard Pettigrew squeak in terror from the ground beside her before his body twisted in the corner of her vision and then-disappeared. She tore her gaze from the flames jettisoning toward her in sheer disbelief. Had he just Disapparated? No, there was a small rat curled on the ground where he'd just lain, bleeding out from wounds on two of its limbs, a deep red jewel almost as big as its body on the ground next to it. *Idiot*, was all she could think, even as her eyes darted back to the more pressing matter of fire blooming into white-hot doom before her protective barrier. He was going to die if he stayed transformed with injuries like that. And a rat would burn to death faster than a human, anyway.

The flames were so close she could feel the hair on her head trying hard to catch fire. They didn't penetrate the shield, though, and whether that was because her magic lent a helping hand or because the protective potion was strong enough to stand up to an immature dragon's flame, she didn't know. As the dragon roared its frustration to the sky, she thought it was time to take things on the offensive while she could. Not many spells could penetrate a dragon's thick hide, but she could attack it peripherally, she thought. If its reaction to the firework display her magic had put on was anything to go by, it had sensitive hearing. That strength was about to become a weakness.

Mentally apologizing to the beast, she cast a Wailing Charm with as much power as she dared. It wasn't as powerful as a Caterwauling Charm, but she didn't know how to cast one of those. It didn't matter,

in the end. Her magic took the Wailing Charm and magnified it so effectively that she lost hearing entirely as her eardrums burst with a ringing pain that sent her to her knees. She frantically gasped out a *Muffliato*, but couldn't hear to know if she'd been successful or not. She didn't even notice she had been screaming until her throat began to hurt.

The only saving grace was that the dragon was affected just as badly, if not worse, than she was. She watched through the tears that filled half her vision as the reptile thrashed and writhed wildly in its bindings. She mouthed apologies to no one in particular, forcing herself to keep looking at the poor beast, knowing that its pain was her fault. The shackles were beginning to cut into its skin, scales fracturing in various places where the dragon lashed mindlessly against the metal. Its mouth was open wide, and she knew if her ears weren't filled with blood they would be filled with its guttural cries.

As she watched, the strain on the thick iron links finally became too much and one shackle blew apart in a spray of metal. The dragon noticed something different amidst the pain that drove it, and struggled all the harder against the other chains. She wondered if she shouldn't just release it. It was awful, locking the thing up like that. Reason intruded, however. Where would it go? What if it hurt someone else? What if it ate all the goats in Hogsmeade or something? An image of a thousand goats bleating from the inside of a dragon's belly drifted across her mind before she refocused it forcibly.

Her choice was taken as the other shackles gave way at last. With scarcely a moment's pause, the dragon shot off the ground and exploded out of the trees, wheeling away into the night. She realized in immediate retrospect that it would want to get as far away from the insanely loud noise as possible. That was good. It would lick its wounds somewhere and she could tell... tell someone about it. Sometime.

She was too dizzy to stand, so she crawled unsteadily toward where the rat lay several paces away. It was unconscious, probably because of the extent of its injuries. She poked it gently, but insistently, until it began to stir. She had to tumble backwards as Pettigrew retook his human form without warning, clutching at his own ears, which she guessed from the blood leaking out had probably also been ruptured.

"Sorry," she mouthed. He didn't appear to notice, focused only on his own injuries-and, of course, the jewel, which he snatched up from the ground and stuffed in his pocket with a guilty desperation that she found a bit sad, considering the situation.

She took out the antidote to the protection potion, not sure what would happen if she tried using her magic to make a ward-disruptor. She'd probably electrocute them both. Once free of the circle, she made her way, clumsily and very slowly, back to where she'd been standing before her ring had come off. How had that happened, anyway? Had she unconsciously known what to do? More likely her magic had taken advantage of the mental absence caused by her terror, she thought darkly.

She found her gloves fairly easily and shoved them in her pocket. Now where did that ring land? The ground swam in and out of focus too fast for her to see effectively. She knelt and began shifting her hands through the grass. After a moment, the bent position of her head became too much for her stomach, and she lost her dinner, just barely remembering to turn her head to the side so that she didn't throw up right where she was looking for her ring. Digging through a pile of her own puke was probably the first thing on the list of things she didn't want to do right now. Second was falling unconscious before she got her magic back under control. The thought of it raging around free while she wasn't there to attempt to corral it was sickening.

She coughed out the last of the bile in her stomach and got back to searching. Eventually her fingers found it, barely visible in the green grass of the clearing. She paused before grasping it fully,

remembering what happened last time. She focused all her attention on a tree on the other side of the clearing, channeling anger, fear, anything she could pull from the dredges of her emotions, strung out though they were. Her magic perked up like a hungry dog at the sudden intensity of the emotions she let pour over her. She felt its intention shift, and the wind started to divert itself away from her. It seemed curious at first, not sure why the tree was important. She supposed she wasn't manufacturing emotions sincerely enough. She imagined the tree infested with flesh-eating slugs, focused all her attention on the disgust she felt at the idea. Her magic roared as it recognized the challenge.

It swept across the clearing eagerly, zeroing in on the tree Rigel was making the center of every prominent thought, even as her fingers twitched toward the jade ring-which she was not thinking about! Her magic shuddered to a sudden halt, its attention evolving violently midway to the tree. Cursing, she abandoned the pretense and grabbed for the ring as fast as she could, shoving it onto her finger so hard she jammed the knuckle. The pure, unadulterated rage that coursed through her as the magic was forcefully reabsorbed into her skin left her newly nauseated. She gagged and dry heaved for several minutes before she felt stable again. Or, as stable as someone with no balance in their inner ear could feel.

She took a moment to curse her bad luck at being in such a predicament, and her own stupidity for rushing into such a situation, and Riddle in particular simply because she didn't believe all that demolition in the classroom had helped her magic at all. If anything, it was more powerful and even harder to control, now.

She would gather her strength for a moment, then figure out a way to get her and Pettigrew back to the castle. She felt a sudden rush of heat behind her that made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. She spun on her knees, gasping at the way the world whirled on the wrong axis. Had the dragon come back? How hadn't she noticed it landing? Was it going to-?

Rigel blinked at the sight before her. It was a phoenix, not a dragon, and attached to its tail feathers was the headmaster himself, looking serious indeed as he surveyed the clearing. His sharp eyes took in Pettigrew lying in a pool of blood, Rigel sitting next to a puddle of her own vomit, the shackles on the other side of the clearing, the scorch marks on the ground where the vegetation had been razed, and the remains of the protection circle she'd broken. He strode forward swiftly, saying something she couldn't hear.

She pointed to her ears carefully, almost poking herself in the eye in her dizziness. "I can't hear," she said, probably too loudly. "There was a dragon. I ruptured our ears running it off. Professor Pettigrew needs a Healer." The headmaster looked both concerned and incredibly perplexed. She supposed some of that might have come out garbled.

Nevertheless, the headmaster moved without delay. He stepped forward to grasp Pettigrew's uninjured arm gently, then the two men and Fawkes disappeared in a flash of fire. A bit of the tension in her relaxed. The headmaster would send someone for her. She was going to be okay. Even as she thought that, Dumbledore was back, this time with a hand held out for her. With a weak smile, she took it, and then warmth and heat enveloped her. When she opened her eyes, it was to the blinding white of the Hospital Wing.

Madam Pomfrey had her hands on Rigel's head almost before she had registered where she was. She could see the matron's mouth moving, but it was many minutes before she could hear the tirade the older woman was heaping on her ears.

"-kind of reckless, ridiculously thickheaded nonsense is it to cast a Wailing Charm so loud it breaks half the castle windows? You're lucky there's anything left of your eardrum to repair!" she seethed, her wand jabbing Rigel in the ear pointedly with every other word. She was pretty sure *that* wasn't part of the healing process.

"I'm sorry," she muttered, "It's not like I had any choice. There was a bloody dragon chained up in the Forbidden Forest!"

"And just what were you doing in the Forbidden Forest, young man?" Pomfrey demanded, glaring.

Headmaster Dumbledore chose that moment to cut in. "I would appreciate an explanation to that as well, Mr. Black."

Right. Of course he would. Because being almost fried by a dragon wasn't enough for Fate. She had to get detention, too.

"I was walking near the edge of the woods when this snake I know told me that someone in the forest was in trouble," she invented, sticking just close enough to the truth that Dumbledore wouldn't be able to tell she lied unless he employed some serious Legilimency. "I did think about getting a teacher, but I thought it would be better to respond quickly. I followed the sound of roaring and found a dragon in one of the forest clearings. Professor Pettigrew was trying to fight it off, but he got hurt, so I stepped in to get him out of harm's way. It... got complicated after that. Basically I made a really loud noise and the dragon broke free of the shackles and flew off. You should probably send someone looking for it. It's probably injured and angry, but also desperately hungry if I had to guess, so they should probably bring it a goat or something. Do dragons eat goats?"

"He's delirious," Pomfrey sighed, "Goats and dragons. What nonsense."

"Hmm," Dumbledore said, stroking his beard slowly. "It seems Professor Pettigrew is fortunate to have such a quick-thinking rescuer. You may want to go easy on the noise charms next time, though."

"Next time!" The nurse glared daggers at the headmaster. "There will be no next time if he wants to be treated in *this* infirmary."

"Teach me how to repair eardrums and I'll do it myself next time," Rigel said, smiling fondly up at the prickly woman.

"You won't either," Pomfrey snapped. "You're not patching yourself up while I'm around."

"Whatever you say, Madam Pomfrey." She grinned, watching the matron's eyes narrow as she realized she'd been tricked.

"Bed rest," the nurse growled. "Overnight. Now."

"Yes, ma'am," Rigel said, settling back into the bed she'd been laid up on.

Dumbledore gave her one last, penetrating look before nodding farewell and requesting Madam Pomfrey fetch him when Pettigrew woke up from his Healing-induced sleep. As Pomfrey shut off the lights to the ward, Rigel slipped gratefully into oblivion. In the morning she would figure out the rest of it-what to do now that she knew Pettigrew was using the jewel for ill, how to explain to Pansy that she'd managed to piss off a dragon since they last spoke, and how to justify to herself the idiotic choices she'd made over the last few hours. Her last thought before falling asleep was that for once she *hadn't* used the time turner when she *should* have. If she'd used it right when she realized there was something wrong in the forest, she could have gone back and gotten help before any of it even happened.

That was one mistake she swore she would *not* make again.

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When she woke next, the Hospital Wing was as silent as a graveyard. The windows let in the barest of moonlight, and she wondered if she'd been asleep a few hours or a whole day. She slipped out from the blankets, shivering slightly as the cold tile met her bare feet. She didn't know who had taken her shoes off, but it

relieved her to note that nothing else on her person had been removed, save her bag, which hung from the chair by her bed.

She brushed past the curtain quietly, aware that there might be another sleeping nearby. A bed two down from hers with the curtains drawn tightly around it confirmed her suspicion. Pettigrew was still recovering from his injuries, too, then. She stood there for a moment in the semi-darkness, thinking. After all she knew now, there was nothing else she could do. It didn't seem right, but it was definitely the course of action that made the most sense.

She crept closer to Pettigrew's bed and slid back the curtain slowly. He was terribly still, his breathing even, but relatively shallow. She supposed the Healing had probably taken a lot out of him; he wasn't exactly in the peak of physical condition to begin with. On the chair beside him was his coat, stained with blood and grass and scorch marks. She kept her breathing soft and moved toward it. Inside one of the pockets would be the jewel, unattended for probably the first time since Pettigrew had come across it.

Resolved, she began rifling through the pockets carefully, sending glances over at Pettigrew's sleeping form every so often to be sure he lay undisturbed. She found no trace of the jewel, until she came to a small, mokeskin pouch in the innermost pocket. She clenched her fist around it, feeling nothing within but knowing that an undetectable extension charm was likely at work. She gritted her teeth with a feeling of defeat. Everyone knew mokeskin pouches could only be opened by their owners. Even if she took the pouch, it would disappear from her hands the moment it sensed it was getting too far from its master's reach. They were incredibly rare, but she had to admit it was the perfect place for Pettigrew to keep the jewel. Until he took it out himself, it could quite literally not be taken from him.

As she was putting the pouch back, she heard a low groan break through Pettigrew's lips. She froze, but her mind was getting used to thinking quickly. She took the coat in both hands and draped it over

Pettigrew's supine form just a moment before his eyes opened, unfocused until they zeroed in on her embarrassed smile.

"Sorry," she said. "You were shivering so hard the bed frame rattled. I thought maybe you were cold."

"I was?" Pettigrew struggled to sit up, wincing and moaning at the stiffness in his hurt limbs. He caught sight of the coat and clutched it with his good hand. "Yes. Thank you." His eyes darted between her and the coat frantically, and she knew he was wondering if she was telling the truth.

"Well, I'm glad you're okay," she said, backing away a bit. "That was a close call, huh? I mean, with the dragon and all. Heh."

"Yes," he said, licking his lower lip nervously. "I... did they ask you what happened? What did you say?"

She couldn't help but think he really ought to work on his subtlety, if he was going to play such dangerous games. "Oh, yeah," she said, outwardly nonchalant. "I told them how I heard the roaring and went running toward it. I tried to help when I saw you were being attacked. Guess I made things worse, though, huh? Sorry about bursting your eardrums like that. I misjudged the power of my noise spell." She laughed sheepishly. "Say, what were you doing in the forest, anyway? Pretty bad luck to run into a dragon like that."

She couldn't let on that she thought he'd been the one to tie the dragon up like that. Now that she could think clearly without fearing for her life, it seemed likely that Pettigrew had been practicing his mastery of the jewel on the dragon-and any other creatures he happened to come across, if Treeslider could be believed.

"I... was tending to some of the creatures," he squeaked out after a suspiciously long pause. "I am the Care of Magical Creatures professor, after all. I was as surprised as anyone to find a dragon in that clearing. It just attacked me! I could have been killed!"

Anyone who came across it could have been killed, she thought irritably. It was just so irresponsible. "Well, good thing Dumbledore rescued us, then," she said, affecting a yawn. "I'm going back to bed. Get well soon, Professor."

She trotted back to her own bed and closed her eyes, pretending to a tiredness she didn't feel. Had he bought her act? There was no way to be sure. She would have to keep her distance for the next couple of weeks, until he relaxed his guard.

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Madam Pomfrey was an eagle-eyed old bird, and extremely watchful when it came to things she considered 'in her nest,' but Rigel was able to slip past her with the help of the time-turner and her Invisibility Cloak. She'd be back before the matron even missed her, and in the meantime she had a job to do.

The Owlery was loud and crowded with birds, but she blocked all that out as she scribbled a brief note that, she hoped, would be enough to put an end to this jewel nonsense once and for all.

To: Aurors searching for the Dominion Jewel

Peter Pettigrew, employed at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, seen attempting to control creatures in the Forbidden Forest with a blood-red stone.

-A very concerned citizen

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[end of chapter thirteen].

A/N: We are so close to the end! I got so excited I wrote this one a little faster than usual. I hope it satisfies at a mere 21,000 words. I wanted to thank every single person who has ever reviewed, even if it was just to say you think the story needs work, for helping The Ambiguous Artifice break 2,000 reviews. That's amazing! You all are the runaway train behind me that brought me back to a sprint with this story, so thanks for that, too! Chapter fourteen promises to be a doozy, so it may take longer than normal to complete. That said, I'll do my best ^^ . I hope everyone is having a great week.

In addition, I cannot take credit for the grammatical amazingness of this chapter (which many of you may notice is a head above my usual work in that department). I finally caved and realized it was a disservice to you readers to post something that wasn't as perfect as it could be, especially with something as easy to fix as poor word choice. Much thanks to Mary for her editing skills and patience (seriously, in the original version I said things like 'bread in captivity' lol).

All the best,

-Violet

Chapter 14

A/N: So... you guys should be good by now at this time-turner stuff, right? I know you won't get too confused. My advice on this chapter is: when you get to what looks like the climax, don't get too excited! This one's a marathon. Not a sprint. And it's a bit rough. Basically this chapter is a long slog through a swamp of hopelessness and I want you all to be prepared for that. There's a lot of exposition b/c of the nature of the scenes, but it's all really important, so try your best to get through it! Dun Dun Dun.

The Ambiguous Artifice:

Chapter 14:

Rigel wasn't in the Hospital Wing for very long, but her stay wasn't short enough to get out of explaining to her friends exactly what had put her there. She attempted to shrug off their concern with a vague, "I got sick, that's all," but Pansy and Draco knew her too well, it seemed.

"You suddenly got sick on the same night something in the forest created a wave of sound so strong it shattered most of the windows on that side of the castle?" Draco asked, pausing in putting pepper on his eggs to gesture to where one side of the Great Hall was warded off temporarily to prevent students from messing with the broken glass until architects were brought in to fix them.

"Yes," Rigel said, pursing her lips.

"So I guess Blaise was wrong when he said you were probably down by the forest when it happened," Pansy said, examining her nails casually.

Rigel aimed a slow, betrayed look at Blaise, who shrugged beneath her accusing gaze and said, "I only deduced that it was likely,

considering how frequently you go walking down there in the evenings. The odds of you getting into an unrelated accident at the same time all those windows broke are lower than the odds of you being directly involved in whatever happened."

"You wouldn't say that if it were someone else," she complained.

"No one else has luck like you do, Rigel." Blaise smirked. "The odds on you are one of a kind."

"So you *were* involved," Pansy pressed, looking disappointed. "Rigel, what have we said about-"

"It doesn't matter," Rigel sighed. "It's over now, so what's the point in making you worried over something that already happened? Yes, I was walking by the forest last night. I was close enough to whatever made the noise that it ruptured my eardrums and I had to go to the nurse to have it fixed. Do you feel better now that you know?"

Pansy sniffed and looked away, but Draco said, "Yes, we do. Thank you."

She shook her head in amusement and got back to her breakfast. Her friends were equally endearing and ridiculous, sometimes.

"Do you know what happened to Professor Pettigrew, then?" Theo asked, pointing his knife up at the Head Table. "He's missing this morning and I heard his classes have been canceled."

"He was in the Hospital Wing when I was there," she said honestly. "I guess he ran into some trouble in the forest. Maybe he broke the windows."

Theo was content to debate the likelihood of that with Millicent and Blaise for the rest of breakfast, leaving Rigel to eat her porridge in peace.

"You know we're just worried about you, right, Rigel?" Pansy asked as they were finishing up. "I know we've seen a lot more of you this year, but it still feels like you're a bit distant, somehow. You can talk to us, if you need to."

Rigel smiled with quiet gratitude, but knew that she couldn't, in fact, talk about this with her friends. So many powerful people wanted to get their hands on this jewel. Riddle and the SOW Party wanted it as badly as the goblins did. If she told her friends everything that was happening, they'd be tempted to tell their parents where the jewel was and what it did. Rigel was wary of even telling Dumbledore about the jewel-she didn't think anyone should have such a thing. The best thing was to tell the Auror Department. They would make the right decision on what to do with it. Or at least, they would do what was legally right, which was more than she could presume about any of the other parties. Maybe they'd send it to the Department of Mysteries and let them tinker curiously with it for all eternity. Anything but hand it over to one of the leaders in the political quasi-war that had quietly taken over their world.

"Thanks, Pansy," she said, placing her napkin on the table slowly. "I'm not even thinking about it anymore, though. I'm more worried about the upcoming exams. Professor Snape hasn't told me what he wants to do for my individual Potions final, but it's sure to be grueling, knowing him."

"I'm certain you'll do just fine," Pansy said, still looking a bit concerned, but transitioning topics gracefully nonetheless. "Professor Snape knows your level, after all. He won't make it impossible."

"You say that like you don't know his expectations at all," Rigel grinned.

"He only has such high expectations because you keep meeting them, Rigel," Pansy said admonishingly.

"I'll have to do better at being a disappointment in the future, then," she said wryly.

"Or you could just resign yourself to people thinking highly of you," Draco drawled. "Oh, wait, I forgot who I was talking to for a moment there."

"What's that?" Rigel cupped a hand to her ear curiously. "I can't hear anything over the swelling in my head. Is that you, Draco? You look so small from up here."

"Shut it." Draco nudged Rigel with an amused grin. "Let's get going, before we're late to class."

They filed out of the Great Hall and the day went on, as most days do, in complete normalcy.

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A few weeks passed, April bloomed into May, and the days seemed to grow shorter as examinations grew closer. The OWL and NEWT students could be seen traveling in packs, shooting information back and forth aloud in frantic, ever-quavering undertones. The Quidditch season was officially ended, with Slytherin once again in possession of the Quidditch Cup. The House Cup would be theirs, too, if no one messed up royally between now and the end of the year.

Pettigrew was teaching once more, but his extracurricular movements had changed quite a bit since the night he almost became dragon food. The portly professor no longer went to the library at all. He didn't spend long hours pacing in his rooms as he used to, either. He was almost nightly in the forest, and Rigel perpetually attempted to work up the nerve to go out and see what he was doing. She couldn't bring herself to do it, though. She didn't want to go back into that forest ever, if she could help it.

It felt like a betrayal of her principles, sitting in the castle and watching Pettigrew's dot drop off the edge of the Map every evening. He was probably torturing some creature or other and she was doing nothing to stop it. What good would she do, though, wandering through the forest and getting caught up in whatever incredibly foolish thing he was attempting? The dragon had been more than enough hint that she was in over her head, thank you very much. Every day she waited for Aurors to come through the Entrance Hall and demand to know Pettigrew's whereabouts. Every day she was disappointed. Didn't they read their mail at the DMLE?

How long could she afford to wait before taking more drastic measures? Until he got control over a giant and squashed half the school? Until Riddle got his hands on the jewel and changed his mind about being a politician after all and went on to rule the world? Until Pettigrew got himself eaten by a lethifold? Actually, she thought darkly, that might solve a lot of problems all at once. As long as the jewel got eaten, too.

She shook her head and picked up her pace, knowing she had to hurry if she wanted to get to her Magical Theory class on time. She would wait a few days more. The Aurors were probably just taking the time to marshal their case against the man. They would come before the week was out.

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Just when she had started to think Pettigrew had forgotten all about her presence that night in the woods, reality intruded and reminded her that power never went unnoticed. Not even by half-dead half-wits who, in her opinion, ought to have had other things on their minds at the time.

She was up late in the common room, going over their Charms notes one last time before bed with Draco and Pansy, when Rosier and

Rookwood dropped by their table on their way through. Rigel looked at Rosier expectantly, as he almost never let a chance to say something pithy pass him by, but the golden-eyed boy was quiet, deferring, unusually, to Rookwood as they approached.

"Sorry to disturb your studying," Rookwood said, his low voice rumbling in the air between them. "I have a matter I think Rigel needs to hear."

Rigel straightened from her textbook and blinked inquisitively at the upperclassman. "What is it?"

"Are you acquainted with Professor Pettigrew?" Rookwood asked, eyes deep and searching.

"Not well," she said carefully. "Why?"

"He held me after class today to ask about you," Rookwood told her, a slight frown on his face. "I suppose he heard we were friendly."

"You can say 'friends,'" Rigel smiled slightly.

"Friends, then," Rookwood smiled ever so slightly back. "Pettigrew asked after you, in any case. Said he was an old friend of your parents and was disappointed not to have you in his class. Wanted to know how you were doing, lately. I found it odd, so I thought I'd mention it."

Rigel swallowed thickly. That was... not good. She had played as dumb as a rock after the whole dragon thing. Was he still suspicious? Or just wondering if she'd told anyone what she'd seen?

"Pettigrew asked me about you, too," Pansy said suddenly, eyes sharp. "I didn't think to mention it, because it was in passing, but that's a little strange."

"What did he ask you?" Rigel asked, clenching a fist under the table in nervous anticipation.

"Nothing that made any sense," Pansy said, frowning. "He asked how you were doing in classes and if I thought you were a good wizard. I said I wouldn't be friends with you if you weren't. It was supposed to be a joke, but I don't think he got it."

"Hmm," Rigel said, noncommittally. Her mind was racing. What was Pettigrew looking for? Evidence that she was clever enough to figure out his game?

"Do you know him at all, Rigel?" Draco asked, likely picking up on her unease. "Why is he asking questions about you? You said you only saw him that one time in the Hospital Wing. Did you talk?"

"Not really," Rigel prevaricated. "He is an old friend of my family, so maybe... he's just curious about his friend's son. I'm sure it's nothing."

"Keep away from him," Rookwood advised unexpectedly. "I didn't like the look in his eye. He's up to something."

"If you say so," Rigel said, now a little disturbed. She would have to make extra certain he never caught her watching his movements. Lately, she kept such a distance that there was no way he could have-unless he guessed that Sirius had given his son the Marauder's Map. She blanched, fighting to keep a normal look on her face even as Draco glanced sharply at her. If Pettigrew deduced that, he would have every reason to suspect she knew more than she should. "I'm not in his class," she forced herself to say calmly. "I can't see how we'd cross paths anyway."

Rookwood didn't look entirely reassured, but he and Rosier bid them goodnight all the same. After they left, Draco put down his quill. "You're afraid of this Pettigrew fellow," he said. "Why, if you don't know him?"

"I..." What could she say? "I wonder if he might hold a grudge against me, because of the way he fell out with my dad and uncles. It was before the Marauder joke line made it big, so it's possible he

resents not sharing in the success of that venture, which he was technically a part of when it started, I think."

"Oh," Draco said, relaxing a bit. "You think he might be like that Lee Jordan fellow, right? You wouldn't think people would get so worked up over pranking supplies, honestly. Whatever happened to Jordan anyway? Did they catch him after the gala?"

"He ran," Rigel said, having heard the story from her dad before coming back from break. "His father had no idea where he'd gone and, after questioning, it was determined that Jordan Sr. wasn't involved in the assassination attempt on Ogden. Lee was the one behind it, but they haven't tracked him down yet. He'll run out of places to hide, eventually."

"Well, I'm sure Pettigrew won't turn out like that," Pansy said reasonably. "He's a bit strange, and getting stranger as the weeks pass, but he doesn't seem like the type to hold violent grudges. He can barely remember who's turned in their homework and who hasn't. I'm half afraid he'll just assign everyone a random grade at the end of the term."

As Draco reassured Pansy that it was worth studying anyway, Rigel lost herself in worry. Pettigrew had moved at least some of his attention onto her. That didn't bode well. On the one hand, it might detract from the time he focused on the jewel. On the other, it was one more person paying attention to her now. This year really hadn't been a success on the lay-low-o-meter.

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Late one evening after brewing in her lab, Rigel stopped by the kitchens on her way to the Come and Go Room. She was absolutely famished. Her usual seat was waiting for her already, and she was beginning to wonder if the house-elves knew about her time-turner.

They never seemed surprised that she ate sometimes three full meals in the kitchens with them, despite the fact that she was fairly sure students weren't supposed to eat outside of the Great Hall.

Maybe they'd been informed to cater to the increase in calories she'd found use of the time-turner caused her to crave. Even if she were using the time-turner more judiciously, she thought she'd have to add at least one meal a day to keep herself appropriately fueled. In any case, she hadn't yet got up the nerve to ask. If they didn't know about the time-turner, that would constitute a willful breaking of one of the more stringent of the Department of Mysteries' rules.

Binny was there at her side moments after she sat down, launching into a story about one of the laundry elves who mixed the uniforms for the Gryffindor and Hufflepuff teams into the same load and turned both a lurid orange. "*He is being new*," Binny giggled in French. "*He is not fitting in very well, but I is thinking him funny* ."

"*He sounds entertaining*," Rigel said, smiling. She poked a piece of chicken around her plate half-heartedly. Even after all this time, she still hadn't developed a taste for meat. "*I hope the others aren't being too hard on him*."

"*He is being recently dismissed from his family*," Binny said, quieter now. "*We is understanding* ."

She nodded distractedly. "*That's good* ."

Binny nudged her with a toe under the table when she lapsed into silence. "Is something being wrong?" She had switched back to English and was using her wide eyes to solemnly intimidate her into answering.

Rigel was ready to brush off the elf's concern, used to not talking about her problems, but something in Binny's earnest gaze made her pause. Why not, really? Who would Binny tell? She never saw anyone besides the Weasley twins down here, and even they were rare visitors. Unlike her friends and Professor Snape, Binny had

absolutely no stake in any of this mess. She was also extremely respectful of people's privacy. Binny wouldn't ask pointed questions or try to pry out any more information than Rigel was willing to give.

She smiled at the elf a bit tentatively. "Are you sure you want to know?"

"I is giving very good advice," Binny told her firmly.

"Well," Rigel said slowly, not sure quite where to begin. "Do you remember me telling you about the difficulties I was having with my magic before? Back when we first met?"

Binny nodded quickly, ears flapping. "You is thinking your magic isn't listening to you, but I is telling you that *you* is not listening to *it*."

Rigel blinked. "Yes, that's right. You have a great memory, Binny."

"All house-elves is having good memories." Binny sniffed. "It is being necessary for us."

"Makes sense," she said. "Well, I thought I had gotten my magic under control, but this year it sort of broke loose again over the summer-"

"On Young Sir's birthday," Binny said knowingly. "You is being thirteen, now, yes?"

"That's right," Rigel said again, amazed at the elf's perceptiveness. "It grew out of my control again, so I got this ring made to suppress the excess, so I could manage it more easily."

Binny shot the gloves on her hands a nasty look. "That is being a bad idea, Young Sir."

"Just Rigel is fine," Rigel said, frowning. "And yeah, that's what people keep saying. I thought they just didn't approve of me wasting my potential, so I didn't listen, because it's none of their business

what I do with my magic, really, but I'm starting to think it isn't a good idea for other reasons."

"It isn't being healthy," Binny said sternly. "It is being like binding ears."

"Like what?" she asked, not having heard such an expression before.

Binny grew very grave. "In old times, it is being the practice to bind the ears of house-elves when they is born. Some wizards is thinking the elves is looking sweeter with little ears all tucked away, but it is hurting baby elves and stunting growth of ears forever. When ears isn't growing properly, they isn't working properly, and elves is being less effective servants, so eventually the tradition is dying out. Young Sir's magic is needing room to grow. Binding magic is being like binding ears-silly and hurtful."

"It doesn't hurt," Rigel protested weakly. Was such a comparison really the case?

"It isn't hurting you," Binny admonished. "You is being like old wizard masters. Your magic is being like baby elf. *It* is being hurt and you is not noticing, because you is thinking you is knowing better."

Rigel winced. "Is that why the magic is angry with me? I thought it didn't like being kept under control. Am I really hurting it? Can magic feel things like that?"

"I is not knowing," Binny said slowly. "But I is knowing this: wizards is not being given magic they is not being able to control. Nature is knowing what is best. You is meant to be trusting nature, trusting your magic, and trusting yourself. If you is not trusting *it*, it is not trusting *you* ."

It was hard to trust something that liked to destroy things as much as her magic did. Binny may as well ask her to trust a rabid animal. And she wasn't just trusting it with her own safety-she was trusting it with

the safety of everyone around her. She would sooner put an actual rabid dog into her baby sister's cot than rely blindly on the faith that her magic, more powerful than could possibly be natural, wouldn't turn on her will without warning.

"Nature doesn't always know what it's doing," Rigel said eventually. "Sometimes accidents of nature happen and they're no good for the species as a whole. I'm one of them."

"Nature isn't making accidents," Binny argued. "It is carefully preparing and planning all through time. Sometimes it is trying something special. It is being a test, not an accident, and nature is giving the answers, too. You is just needing to look."

Rigel smiled a bit at the elf's wise tone. "How do you know?"

"Everyone is knowing this, deep down," Binny said, giving her an odd look. "Maybe wizards is forgetting, but they is knowing if they is remembering."

She worked through that sentence in her head for a moment. Was she talking about cultural knowledge or instinct? "Were you born knowing this?"

Binny shook her head. "It is being obvious, if you is paying attention." The elf struggled for words visibly before saying, "You is comparing wizards to Muggles, yes?"

"Okay," she said, tilting her head, "on what terms?"

Binny tapped her head. "Smarts. You is coming to Hogwarts when you is eleven. Is you knowing any muggles at eleven?"

"Just my... er, my cousin's cousin," she said, thinking of the brief interactions she'd had with the Dursley family.

"Is this Muggle being like you?" Binny asked. "I is not talking about magic. I is talking about brains. Is he being smart like you? Is he

thinking like you?"

"Well, no," Rigel said, frowning, "But he isn't a good example of Muggles in general when it comes to brains."

"You is thinking that, but I is guessing he is being average," Binny said, wagging her finger. "Muggles is not having magic from birth. They is not growing up with great power being at their fingers. They is not needing to be smart until later. Magical children is needing brains sooner. They is needing not to be killing themselves before they is learning, yes?"

"You're saying magical children develop at a faster rate mentally than their Muggle counterparts?" Rigel thought this over with interest. It was a very compelling theory, biologically speaking.

"On average," Binny prevaricated. "Yes. Nature is knowing that wizards is having more dangerous childhood, so nature is making wizards smarter sooner, so wizards is living to make more wizards."

Binny was talking about an evolutionary mechanism in terms of a sentient being of nature, Rigel realized. When pared down to the theory itself, she had to admit it made a certain amount of sense. The idea that magic would have *no* effect on a child's development would be harder to swallow, she realized. A magical child lived with the magic constantly, even from its time in the womb. It probably did do something to the brain. Was it an effect of the magic itself or of the body's adaptation to the magic, though? Did the magic make its host smarter so that it would be better utilized or did the host grow smarter by necessity of dealing with the magic? She was now desperately curious about the answer.

She would write Archie, she decided. He could talk to his friend Hermione and ask whether she had felt significantly more developed than her peers before joining the Wizarding world. She had never considered her peers' level of maturity unusual, but she supposed she wouldn't notice something like that, ensconced as she was among people like her.

"When do Muggles catch up?" she wondered aloud.

Binny shrugged, "I is not knowing so much about Muggles. I is guessing once they is being on their own."

Sometime around the age a wizard would finish school, then, she presumed. Interesting. She couldn't imagine the catastrophe it would be if wizards didn't gain a measure of maturity until well into their teens. There would probably be a lot of dead teens, she realized with morbid interest.

"The point is being," Binny said pointedly, pulling her back from her thoughts, "that nature is giving wizards what they is needing to deal with the magic they is having. Same as house-elves is being given good memories for the things they is needing to be doing. Thestrals is being given wings for flying and grindylows is being given gills for swimming. Young wizards is being given strong wills for controlling strong magic. It is being obvious, yes?"

It seemed obvious when put in so simple a light, Rigel had to admit. She didn't feel very strong-willed, though. A thestral could see easily whether or not it had wings before it tried to fly. Was she supposed to jump off a metaphorical cliff and just hope for the best?

"You is getting there soon," Binny said comfortingly, patting her arm. "You is only needing to be patient. Nature is not rushing things. Wizards is. And you is needing to stop binding your magic, before it is being too late, Young Sir."

"Just Rigel, Binny," she reminded the elf. After a moment she added, "Thanks. I'll think about it."

She would think about it, she promised herself. If even house-elves were telling her she was being an idiot, then maybe it was time to start listening. She would work on it this summer, once everything was settled and she had the space to experiment without hurting anyone. She would wean herself off of the suppressor, too. Somehow.

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She checked the path to the Come and Go Room on the Map once she left the kitchens. She had been extra careful about not getting caught using her time-turner of late. She was in the home stretch and she didn't want any mistakes at this juncture to ruin her perfect record and jeopardize her chances of getting to use it next year, too.

While perusing the Map, she spotted two dots creeping slowly through a corridor on the fifth floor that made her stop and smile slowly. She had been waiting a while for her chance, watching the Map idly for the perfect moment, and it had finally arrived. The Weasley twins were out after curfew, all alone, and they were about to rue the day they challenged Rigel Black.

She took a teacher tracker out of her bag. She'd been saving it for this occasion. She activated the tracker and slipped it into her pocket, taking out the corresponding map to make sure it was working. The two dots overlapped exactly in the center. Perfect. She tucked the parchment away and took out the Marauder's Map instead. She needed to plot her course carefully. There was another version of herself on the Map, and she kept her distance until she saw her other self meet up with the twins. Once all three dots had converged, she began walking slowly but surely in their direction, herding them like sheep in the direction they needed to go. The three dots traveled together for a while, until Rigel's other dot broke in one direction while the twins went another way. Perfect. She waited a good five minutes just to be sure, then took out her time-turner and turned back several hours. It would take a while to set everything up.

A good amount of time later, everything was finally in place. It would be the most epic experience of their little lives, she thought maniacally. By the time the previous version of herself had left the kitchens, Rigel was heading across the fifth floor on an interception course. She destroyed the teacher tracker in her pocket, leaving the

only dot on the radar map the one carried by her previous self. A few minutes later, she heard the sound of two footsteps coming around a corner ahead of her. She stopped and turned her back to their approach, making a show of fretting over the piece of parchment in her hand.

She heard their footsteps stop abruptly and whirled, gasping, only to relax when she 'recognized' them. "Oh, it's you two," she said.

"Rigel?" Fred grinned. "What are you doing out at this time of night?"

"Said the pot to the kettle," Rigel snorted.

"George and I have important business," George told her.

"Yeah, me too," Rigel smiled. "Got to get back to it, actually..." She looked down at the parchment again with a prominent frown. "I've got to go. Night."

She began walking away, then stopped, biting her lip. "You guys... aren't going that way, are you?" she asked, gesturing back the way she'd come.

"We are. Why?" Fred asked, frowning at her.

Rigel grimaced. "Don't go that way. Filch is coming."

"How do you know?" George wanted to know. He looked a bit suspicious.

Rigel clutched the parchment as though reluctant, then made a show of caving. "Okay, look. I put a teacher tracker on Filch's lantern. See? This is us, at the center, and that's him." She showed them the dot moving steadily in their direction. "Judging by the distance, he's about two corridors over, but he's been moving systematically through the fifth floor in this direction. You have to come with me if you want to avoid him."

"Smart," Fred said, leaning forward interestedly. "We've tagged his robes before, but it seems a pain to do it every day. He always carries the same lantern though....we really should have thought of that, Freddie."

"Speak for yourself, Georgie," George said with a smirk. "I like the thrill of the chase."

"I'm not sure Gryffindor's hourglass can afford your adrenaline rush," Rigel said, referring to how Gryffindor was in last place for the House Cup.

"At least we can't afford the unpopularity that would result," George admitted. "All right, lead the way."

Rigel took them down a series of side corridors that would circumvent 'Filch,' only to groan aloud in dismay a few minutes later. "He's circling around! Quick, this way." She made to head up a set of stairs one corridor over, but the twins paused, exchanging a glance.

"Actually, we've got it from here," Fred said, smiling. "Thanks for the tip, but we'll go our own way."

She pretended to look confused, then shrugged as though it didn't bother her what they did. "All right. Good luck." She set off up the stairs while the twins took a path that would lead them to a little-known secret passageway that jumped the sixth floor entirely and came out close to Gryffindor Tower. It was the perfect choice for them to avoid Filch and get back to their common room quickly. The route Rigel had tried to take them on was the long way round, after all.

They obviously assumed she didn't know about that particular passage. Poor, innocent little lions. They should know by now not to underestimate their enemy's cunning.

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"That was close," Fred whispered as they eased the false door away from the dark passage it concealed. "Good thing Pup warned us."

"Nice of him," George agreed. "Then again, we rule-breakers have to stick together. We'd have done the same for him."

"If we'd thought of it," Fred said. He was still clearly annoyed that they hadn't tagged Filch's lantern. It was an obvious move, in retrospect.

"What do you think he was up to?" George asked as they carefully closed the wall behind them. He didn't bother with a light, as they knew this passage by heart.

"Smelled like the kitchens," Fred noted, taking the lead.

"The kitchens aren't on the fifth floor," George said. "He must have been on his way back down from somewhere higher. The Owlery, maybe?"

"Odd time of night to mail a letter," Fred said. "Maybe he was meeting someone for a little risqué romance."

"If Rigel is seeing someone, I'll eat every one of those seriously suspicious sweets he gave us," George said. Honestly, Rigel with a secret rendezvous? Not likely. The boy barely looked at other people without prompting.

"It's a little worrying that we haven't found anything wrong with them yet," Fred agreed. "Almost like there *is* nothing wrong with them. Which means-"

Whatever it meant, George never got to hear. The next thing out of his brother's mouth was a shout of surprise. There was a whoosh of

displaced air as Fred stumbled forward in the darkness and hit the ground with a splat. Wait, a *splat*?

"Fred," he said worriedly, groping the air before him blindly. His feet caught in something ropery and he only had time for a surprised "Woah!" before he hit the ground, too.

It was wet. He spluttered and jerked his head back from what felt like at least three inches of... something. It wasn't water-too thick. It smelled like syrup of some kind, but why would there be a huge puddle of syrup in the passage? And what was that he'd tripped on? He rolled over, grimacing as the syrup coated his back, and sat up, fumbling for his wand in the dark. Fred got there first and conjured a light that had them both wincing as their eyes readjusted suddenly.

His twin was as covered in the sticky stuff as he was. On closer inspection, it appeared to be strawberry jam. "What on earth...?"

"Gross," Fred chuckled. "What happened here? Peeves?"

"Didn't know he knew about this passage," George said, looking around. The floor had jam spread all over it, several inches deep and at least as far as their light reached.

"He probably knows all of them by now," Fred reasoned, licking one finger curiously. "Come on, let's get through this mess and clean up on the other side. It looks like it goes all the way through."

George thought about suggesting they double back, rather than walk through a whole corridor of jam. Then he remembered why they'd taken the passage in the first place. The last thing he wanted to do was run into the caretaker while inexplicably covered in strawberry jelly. That was sure to land them a double dose of detention.

As they stood and began moving forward once more, grimacing at the squelching of jam under their boots, a sudden draft of cold air wafted past them, and in its wake came an eerily echoing voice.

"You..." it whispered, seeming to wind its way directly into George's ear. "You..."

"What is that?" Fred stopped walking abruptly. "Do you hear that?"

George nodded, squinting into the darkness of the corridor ahead. He couldn't see anyone or anything. "A ghost?"

"Don't recognize the voice," Fred said, frowning.

"You..." There it was again. Louder, this time. "You have angered the gods..."

"Okay I'm officially creeped out," Fred said. "Let's get out of here."

They moved forward again quickly, peering around them warily.

"The pranking gods," a voice whispered harshly in his ear, just before all hell broke loose.

Fred tripped over something invisible and went down again. George stopped abruptly to avoid the same fate, but a sudden push from behind sent him careening forward with a little scream that did *not* sound at all girlish.

He attempted to catch his balance, but the jam was suddenly thinner, slipperier, and he went sliding onto his butt with another splat. Fred was way ahead of him, for some reason, carrying the light with him. Before he could call out for him to wait, George realized he was beginning to slide forward. What the-?

It was then he noticed the floor was sloping downwards before him. But how? This passage was uphill! There was no time to work out the improbable physics, as he was quickly sliding down the passage at a speed he was entirely uncomfortable with. As he caught up with Fred, the light from his twin's wand picked up something huge and white blocking the tunnel before them. They were going to smack right into it! It was too late to slow their out-of-control slide. They let

out matching cries of dismay and George tried in vain to at least protect his face before they-

Slid with an anti-climactic *smoosh* into a wall made entirely of marshmallow fluff. It killed their momentum, and he and Fred blinked slowly at one another behind what looked like masks of sticky cotton.

"What... just happened?" Fred asked, sounding a bit numb.

It began to rain chocolate syrup from the ceiling over where they sat. The thick, stick liquid dribbled almost insultingly gently onto their heads, sticking everywhere to the marshmallow and jam combo they were sporting.

"Some booby-trapped this entire passage," George said, filled with the utmost disbelief. He struggled to stand, feeling like some sort of swamp monster, covered in sweet-smelling goo like some sort of demented birthday cake.

"And we walked right into it," Fred complained. "What are the odds? And who would trap a secret passageway so elaborately? There's no way of knowing who'd fall victim to it, and you wouldn't be around to see it... anyway... wait. You don't think...?"

Catching on to his twin's train of thought easily, George shook his head (with difficulty, on account of the pile of red and white and brown glop on his head). "Rigel probably doesn't even know about this passage. And there's no way he'd have time to set this up-it was five minutes after we left him! And how would he know which passage we'd take anyway? It was our idea to come this way to avoid Filch."

"... was it?" Fred asked, struggling to his feet as well. "I mean... maybe he tricked us."

"There's just no way..." he said before trailing off in thought. Rigel was clever. But still... there was no way he could have pulled this off. Too many variables would have been at play.

"Let's just get out of here and worry about who did this to us later," Fred decided.

They began wading forward once more. The passage was still going downhill. Which was impossible. George was starting to feel like he was in the middle of a very surreal dream. They finally reached the end of the passage, a red door with a large, brass handle that George was sure he had never seen before. "This isn't right," he said, exchanging a nervous look with Fred. "The passage ends in a tapestry."

Fred grimaced, glancing back up the way they'd come. "You want to climb back through it all?"

Not a chance in hell. George grasped the knob resignedly and turned. It exploded into gold confetti. He opened his mouth on a groan and immediately regretted it as the golden bits filled his mouth. They were sprinkles, he realized after a moment of trying to scrape them off his tongue. Golden sprinkles. He pushed the door open with annoyed force, but wasn't fast enough to avoid the bucket of *something* that upturned itself over the doorway as they stumbled out into the corridor. He froze, slowly looking over at Fred in disbelief. His twin was smeared red and white and brown from head to toe with gold sprinkles in a layer over it all. Littered in his hair and stuck to his shoulders were little red balls that he recognized after a moment as de-stemmed cherries.

Fred started to laugh, pointing at George, who no doubt looked similarly ridiculous. He choked out, "A cherry... hahaha... on top... haha. Get it?"

"A cherry..." George had to snort at the sheer cheek of it. "Where's the ice cream, then?"

Like magic, the door across the corridor from them creaked open and out walked one Rigel Black, licking a three-scoop cone of soft serve with so much casualness that George couldn't stop the laughter that escaped him.

"You rang?" the boy drawled, giving a long, exaggerated lick.

" *You*," Fred groaned, pointing a goopy finger dramatically. "I knew it. But how, Rigel? *How*? "

Rigel unhurriedly put a hand into her shoulder bag and pulled out a camera. Before they could react, she snapped a picture of their gaping expressions. "This one is going in the Book of Glory."

George had no idea what that was, but it didn't sound good. They had more important things to worry about, though. "Seriously, Rigel, *how did you do that* ?" he asked, utterly bewildered.

"How did I get all the booby-traps to work in smooth synchronization?" Rigel clarified, tilting his head infuriatingly. "How did I know where you'd be tonight? Or how did I make taking that passage seem like your own idea?"

"All of it," Fred said. George didn't need to see his face to know he was dying of curiosity. Fred hated not knowing something.

"As to the first," Rigel said, pausing to lick his ice cream. "Immense patience and planning. As to the others-well, I'm psychic."

George had to sigh at their own foolishness. How could they have trusted Rigel for even a second? They'd been so sure his revenge was in the sweets somewhere. *Talk about serving it cold*, he thought, eyeing the ice cream in Rigel's hand with ironic appreciation. "How did you make the passage seem like it was going downhill?" he asked after a moment. That part didn't make any sense.

Rigel smirked. "That secret passage you two always take doubles as a passage to the third floor, if you press the right stone on your way through. I changed its destination before you got there."

What? *What*? How could he know that? They'd been taking that passage for *years* and they didn't know that. Was this the power of a

true Marauder? What a legacy. He couldn't help a moment of envy. What other secrets about the castle was their pup privy to?

"I'd show you which stone it is, but I don't fancy getting my favorite boots dirty tonight," Rigel said, yawning widely. "Well, I'm for bed. Good luck getting back to that tower of yours. Filch probably isn't on the fifth floor anymore-if he ever was." Rigel chuckled to himself as he walked off into the darkness slowly.

"We were duped from the start," Fred admitted, sighing. "He never even had a tracker on Filch.

"He's an evil genius," George agreed. They had their work cut out for them, if they were going to top it. They would, though. Their pride as pranksters was on the line. They would just have to work harder. The summer would be upon them soon and they would spend the time wisely. Some of their preliminary products were nearly ready for *testing*, he recalled with a grin. When they came back next year, Rigel wouldn't know what hit him.

Before that, though, they had to get back to the common room. *After cleaning up*, he grimaced. Leaving a trail of jam-covered footprints behind them would be an excellent way to get caught and they had to at least deny Rigel *that* satisfaction.

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That Friday evening, she walked with calm steps toward her Head of House's office, for once not looking over her shoulder or worrying about whether anyone caught sight of her. She was not doing anything surreptitious, for the first time in what felt like awhile. She was as prepared as she could be for the upcoming final exams, was nearly finished with Archie's syllabus for the semester, and, after turning in her last set of assignments for Snape, was planning on

spending the weekend relaxing. Well, probably not the *whole* weekend, she mentally amended. Maybe just Saturday.

Unusually, there weren't a handful of other versions of her running around that night, as she was, frankly, running out of things to do. She had brewed so many potions that Krait was complaining about overstock and she'd long since read and reread all of her textbooks. Pettigrew had been almost completely unsuspecting the last couple of weeks. He wandered around the castle a lot, but she hadn't seen him return to the forest for maybe ten days. He seemed to be dialing back work with the jewel, which she could only be hopeful about. If he wanted to spend hours waking in circles, that was fine with her. She had stopped tailing him around the castle after the first time. All he ever did was lurk through the corridors aimlessly.

What *would* she do this weekend? She could work on her Occlumency, but she was stymied on her work with the construct. The frustration ate away at her concentration, so she kept that project on hold for the moment. She had a stack of books on the roots of mathematical transfigurations, in any case, that she was rather looking forward to reading.

The dungeons were quiet, which was not uncommon, as they were large and sprawling, with so many routes to go through that the Slytherin students rarely met one another in the passages. She heard no footsteps behind her and saw no shadow looming on the walls before her. The only evidence that she wasn't alone in the damp corridor was the barest whisper of a spell that came just moments before her wand abandoned her pocket with a sharp twist.

Rigel whirled to face her attacker and could not find it in her to feign surprise at the sight of Peter Pettigrew holding her wand tightly in his fist. In his other hand was the jewel, shining with an unnatural light.

"Professor," she said, voice even. "May I have my wand back?"

"You won't need it," he said. The usual squeak in his voice was absent, even as his beady eyes darted this way and that in manic

nervousness.

The passage they were in wasn't long. There was a turn maybe twenty feet behind her. If she could make it around the corner before he got a spell off, she could throw on her Invisibility Cloak and escape. When Pettigrew took a single step toward her, she made her move. Turning on the ball of her foot, she sprinted down the corridor as fast as she could. Six steps, seven-she was almost there when something like a heat wave enveloped her from behind. Her legs were abruptly trapped in molasses, struggling to move, and the air around her shimmered in a hazy, mirage-like furnace. Sweat broke out from every part of her. Her lungs tightened and shriveled like dried prunes. She gasped in air and fought to turn her head to see Pettigrew coming up the corridor after her, step by slow step, brandishing the jewel before him and squinting against the light it was putting off.

He held it higher, coming within arms reach of her frozen form. The world was starting to develop a surreal quality and she blinked rapidly against the red-orange film that crawled across her eyes. Her mind was floating in the heat, sluggish, sloth-like, and confused. What was she doing? What...what was important? There was a tickle in her brain, behind the heat that seared the frayed edges of her concentration. She reacted on instinct, knowing the feeling of something invading her mind all too well to remain docile, despite every form-driven thought telling her to stop doing anything at all.

Her fist lashed free of the magic holding it, bloodying Pettigrew's nose and jerking her into the realization that the heat wave was in her mind, not in reality. It was the jewel, attempting to subvert her will. She gritted her teeth and pushed back against it *mentally*, not physically, giving it everything she had. Pettigrew, clutching his nose with the hand not holding the jewel-and what had he done with her wand?-didn't see her break completely free of the compulsion until she'd kicked him in the stomach and followed him to the floor. Her elbow slammed down toward his throat, but fire bathed her mind without warning and she rolled instinctively to the side, clutching her

ears as though she could put out the flames between them with her bare hands.

There was hardly room for anything in her head that wasn't pain, but the word "Incarcerous" registered above the white-hot mindlessness. Leo favored that spell heavily in their spars, telling her over and over it was the go-to method for thieves, murderers, rapists, and all sorts of miscellaneous evildoers to neutralize a mark. Her elbow braced itself at an angle automatically, even as the ropes encircled her shoulder to knee and squeezed. Her joint protested even louder than the fire in her head, groaning as the ropes continued to tighten until the spell was satisfied that it had found the limits of its victim's form.

The weakness of the Incarcerous Spell, Leo had lectured, was its non-lethal nature. It wasn't intended to squeeze a person to death, so it only tightened until it registered that the target was compressed as much as could be accomplished without breaking anything. That meant that if you could convince the spell you were bigger than you were, you could break free once it had settled into shape.

She fought against the jewel's influence with everything she had while the binding spell solidified into place. She needed her senses for this next part. When she felt the ropes begin to harden, she collapsed her bent elbow, using the split-second of loose slack to slip her right arm between the coils and grab for the golden chain around her neck. Just one turn and this would all be over.

Her fist found the little hourglass at once, digits fumbling over the sides for the dial. That was when it slipped from her between her fingers-not, not slipped, *flew*. It jerked away from her grasp, clipping her in the ear as it whizzed over her shoulder and landed, to her horror, in Pettigrew's outstretched hand. The blood running down her neck from where the outer edge of her ear had been torn open was easy to ignore in her shock and dismay. How had he... the Notice-Me-Not Charm was no good if she drew attention to it, she realized. He'd simply summoned it away when he saw her go for it. And *why* would there not be anti-summoning wards *on a time-turner*? In her frustration, she wasted precious seconds cursing her own stupidity

and the Ministry's incompetence. The next Incarcerous came before she could brace her free arm against it. Not that Pettigrew would have let her use the same trick twice, she thought dully.

She opened her mouth to scream, acutely aware that her choices in methods of resistance were dwindling. A hastily conjured gag caught her mid-yell. She glared over it at her attacker, who stood, panting around a broken nose, glaring right back. Pettigrew opened his fist slowly, looking down to examine the golden thing he'd caught within it, and she took that second to look down at the ropes frantically. Her right hand was bound close to her face, but the suppressor ring was on her *left* hand, making an attempt to pull it off with her teeth rather moot. She felt like crying. The one time she *wanted* to take off her suppressor and unleash her wandless magic capabilities, she couldn't. The irony felt like a slap from the universe.

"What is this?" he muttered, turning the time-turner over in his hands. She hoped he fumbled the dial and sent himself back hours into time. That would let her escape the same as if she'd used it herself. "This... it can't be..." He sounded awed and breathless. Not a good sign. "How did *you* get one of these?" She grunted somewhat sarcastically from behind her gag, but he only smiled at her, suddenly calm once more. "It is Fate. It knew I needed more time to figure this out. Now... I have all the time I need."

Rigel shuddered with trepidation at those words. What was he going to do? What had she done, letting him get his hands on that? She calmed herself by remembering that the time-turner only went back a week. What could he possibly do to the time stream in seven days? It wasn't the end of the world. When she got out of this mess, she would go to Snape, and he would inform the Department of Mysteries and they would send a team to take it back. Yes. There were still ways to fix this. He wasn't supreme overlord of a new world order yet.

While she was thinking, Pettigrew had been marshaling himself as well. An egg yolk running down her neck let her know that she'd been Disillusioned. Pettigrew shimmered out of sight a moment later

and she felt a chain draping itself around her neck. No, she panicked, throwing her head to the side as much as her bonds would allow. Her skull cracked into Pettigrew's with a sharp pain, but it wasn't enough to stop him turning the dial. She could feel the sensation of time-travel coming on and wondered desperately how far back they were going as the world began to fade away. She thought she saw a figure in black robes come around the corner into their passageway just before they melted temporally out of existence, but she couldn't be sure. It didn't matter now. Whenever they were going, that person would be long gone. She was beyond the reach of the present, for now.

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After kicking her vindictively for nearly cracking open his skull, Pettigrew had cast a quick Tempus to orient himself. "A week," the squat man said. "Only a week." He sounded displeased, but Rigel could not believe her ears. Had he seriously just turned the dial as far as it would go without knowing how far that was? What if she'd had a more powerful time-turner? What if it had taken them back months?

He levitated her out of the dungeons carefully. She wondered a bit hysterically if they would pass the version of her that had been on her way to hand in last week's assignments at this time on Friday evening, but Pettigrew was careful to take the least used of avenues toward the Entrance Hall.

He took her quickly across the lawn, making a beeline toward the last place in the world Rigel wanted to be taken. They were headed for the Forbidden Forest. Was he going to kill and bury her, then make his escape a full week before anyone noticed either of them missing? It was clever, if getting rid of her was the goal. He'd accosted her before he knew of the time-turner, though, so he must

have had some escape plan that didn't rely on having a lot of time. At least, that was what she assumed.

Pettigrew took off the Disillusionment Charm once they were far enough into the trees that no one was going to see him heading off with her. He traipsed through the forest with the ease of familiarity, seeming to know exactly where he was going. Rigel kept her eyes peeled, trying to memorize their general route so that she could find her way back, once she escaped. And she *would* escape. She just had to be patient for now. Everyone made mistakes, eventually. She refused to believe that Pettigrew would prove a more effective kidnapper than Tom Riddle Jr.

Her every faculty was bent toward formulating as many escape plans as she could think up, while she still had the wherewithal to think of anything at all. She knew the odds that he wouldn't use the jewel on her again were extremely low. It was hard to concentrate, though, with Pettigrew's constant, mind-numbing mumbling. He apparently considered himself 'home-free' already.

"No one will even notice you're missing," he muttered, obviously pleased. "And my alibi is air-tight. No one will suspect until it's too late. Even then, they won't look for me. It will be a mystery." He paused in walking for a moment to gaze down at the golden device in his hand with naked lust. "Think of all I could accomplish with endless time."

She could certainly relate to that sentiment, but surely it had never sounded so sinister in *her* head. She had to wonder if Pettigrew knew how time-turners actually worked-about the rules and limits. Maybe he would destabilize his core by trying to use it too many times at once. *It would serve him right*, she thought. Just who did he think he was, kidnapping her?

As they moved deeper into the forest, she couldn't help but worry. If she had been trapped in time a week ago-from the perspective of her most current self, at least-then that meant she hadn't been freed in that week, because if she had, then something would have

happened in the regular time stream, like Pettigrew being arrested. Was she really going to be trapped a whole week? No, she calmed herself. That wasn't certain. Maybe she'd been rescued quickly and they'd kept it quiet to keep the time stream intact. Her first thought was *they better not have let me get kidnapped just to preserve the integrity of other people's temporal reality* . Then she realized that all of that was wishful thinking, anyway. No one would even know she was missing until Friday evening at the very earliest. There would be no reason to look for her, before that, and a week was a long time. Hadn't her father said once that most kidnapping cases were decided one way or another in the first two days? Either the victim was found or they were dead.

She shook off those morbid thoughts. She *would* escape.

Rigel had to wonder why she hadn't noticed herself going missing-that is, why she hadn't seen Pettigrew taking a version of herself into the forest at this time last week-this week-no-ugh never mind. She supposed whatever versions of herself there were at the moment simply weren't looking at the Map. One was in Snape's office, she recalled, and another brewing in her lab... she thought. It was increasingly hard to remember.

It didn't matter, anyway. She didn't remember noticing herself getting dragged into the forest, which meant she *wouldn't* notice this time around either. They finally stopped moving as Pettigrew stepped into a clearing surrounded by thick-trunked trees that must have been at least a couple of miles from the school. It was well off the edge of the Marauder's Map.

Pettigrew dropped his levitation charm unceremoniously, letting her fall to the soft dirt with an irritated grunt. She wiggled until she could roll enough to see what he was doing. If he was going to kill her, she wanted to see it coming. He held the jewel aloft, pointing its energy toward-the ground. Confused, she squinted through the darkness. What was he doing? The earth began to tremble at his feet, churning almost as if it were liquid in some way. It parted before the jewel,

creating an opening that expanded slowly until it was large enough for a person to drop comfortably through.

Thus, it was somewhat unsurprising when she was nudged to the lip of the hole and pushed in. The predictability didn't make it hurt any less, she discovered as she hit a dirt floor six feet down. She landed on her left side, the dirt sending a pulsing throb resonating through her hip and shoulder. That was rather petty, she thought, considering he was perfectly capable of levitating her down. Far be it from her to try to impress manners on her accoster, however.

Pettigrew joined her underground a moment later and it was short work after that for him to use the jewel's power to close the hole in the ceiling once more. It was pitch dark until Pettigrew lit a single lantern. Its light barely reached the edges of the dug out cavern, which stretched about fifteen feet across its diameter, from what she could tell. The edges of the room sloped downwards in a dome, giving the entire cavern the feeling of being inside a very small circus tent. It smelled of earth and damp musk and appeared to be entirely empty, with no distinguishing features beyond the lantern that hung by a wooden peg pushed into the dirt wall and a pile of animal carcasses on the other side, all of which looked fresh.

"I prepared this place weeks ago," Pettigrew said, his voice distorted by his still-broken nose. "Ever since it became clear to me what I had to do. I had my creatures working on it by moonlight. They were not so eager, at first, but I persuaded them to my way of thinking. Do you like it?"

She wondered why he would ask such an inane question, but there was a vaguely disoriented look in his eyes that made her question whether he even knew what he was saying.

"I can make all sorts of creatures do my bidding, after so much practice. I can make them mine, such that they do not even remember a time when they had wills of their own," Pettigrew said. He stood looking down at the jewel, the time-turner now tucked away in a pocket, no doubt. There was desperation in his gaze, only

tempered by the disorientation that made him look more helpless than hungry. "Even the rocks and plants bend to do my bidding, now. The natural world moves at my command. And yet... it's not *enough*."

The last was said with a growl, in which she heard a year's worth of frustration. His whole body shook briefly, before settling once more. He stretched his neck almost casually. "I knew, after you saw me that night with the jewel, that it had to be you. Fate chose you for me. Brought you to me to show me the path I must take, revealed me to you to force my hand. I built this prison for you, you know. I waited and waited for the right time, looked and looked until I caught you walking alone. And it's almost complete..."

Rigel didn't like the sound of that, or anything else that had happened so far, come to that. All those nights she'd seen him going back into the forest after the dragon debacle: this is what he'd been doing? All the time she'd been unknowingly witnessing the construction of her own cage? And the time she'd followed him around the castle he'd been looking for *her* ?

Pettigrew looked over at the pile of dead animals-nifflers, she thought, following his gaze with a sickened clench of her stomach. "Perfect," he said, beginning to smile. "Just what I need." He said that as if he wasn't the one who put them there, as if they were a gift from some higher power. She was starting to realize just how far from sane Pettigrew was at this point.

He moved to where the dead animals lay and picked one up by its tail, causing the blood from its wounds to drip onto the dirt floor grotesquely. He tucked the jewel away into his coat and used his now-empty palm to catch the blood. It pooled sluggishly across his fingers. He dropped the niffler carelessly and walked to a seemingly arbitrary section of dirt wall, where he began smearing the blood carefully, drawing something with great concentration. She shuddered to think what he could be intending; blood magic was rarely benign.

When the symbol was complete, it lit with an iridescent glow that didn't come from the blood itself. Lines of magic shot out from what she belatedly realized was a rune to connect to dozens of other points all over the cavern, forming a matrix that covered the walls, ceiling, and floor. It was a ward, that much was obvious, but the pattern of runic placement indicated a protective barrier of some kind. Was he hoping to keep out anyone who might come to her rescue?

"It took ages to find the right ward," Pettigrew said, turning back to face her once the rune sequence, now completed, sank invisibly into the dirt once more. "It had to be something unbreakable, to keep you here no matter what. I had no intention of spending the rest of my life down her, however. So I got a little... creative."

He approached her and took her chin between his blood-covered fingers. She fought against her stomach's reaction to the smell as he turned her head forcibly toward the lantern. "Do you see that?" She blinked at the light, wondering what she was supposed to make of it. "That," he repeated, shaking her head a little and pointing with his other hand to a spot below the lantern that she hadn't noticed until now. It was a small hole, no more than six inches across, which sat at the base of the wall. "That is the only way in or out of this cave, now. Can you fit in there?" He moved her head back and forth in the parody of a shake with his hand. "Well / can." He turned into a rat and back to a man so fast his body was one continuous blur.

Rigel stared at the tiny hole with dawning alarm. He'd sealed them off... completely? How could she escape through that? It was impossible, unless she could figure out a way to take the ward down. Maybe he would leave her alone at some point and she could make an attempt to find the ward's weak spot. Very few designs lacked *something* that could be exploited. She refused to give up hope. Not yet.

"Your father thought it was so funny," Pettigrew sneered. "Peter the rat. *Wormtail* . But it got me this, didn't it?" He fished the jewel from his pocket and held it toward her. She flinched, but he wasn't using

it. Just showing it off to her. "My master sent me into the tomb because no one else could do it. I crept through air pockets and drainage canals no wizard could ever fit through, ones the Egyptians didn't bother booby-trapping, they were so small. I carried my destiny out with my *wormy* tail, didn't I? So who's laughing now?" He barked out a long and bitterly triumphant laugh, in case there was any doubt.

"Well?" he demanded suddenly. "Why aren't you laughing?"

The gag vanished from within her mouth, sending pain shooting through her stiff jaw as it suddenly snapped closed. She tasted blood where her teeth had come down on her tongue and spat it out onto the dirt floor with a grimace.

"Now, now, don't go desecrating this place." Pettigrew wagged a finger at her slowly. "You're going to be here a long time. The longest of time, actually. Did you know the ancient pharaohs spent *ages* touring their burial complexes before they died? It was a matter of grave importance, their final resting place. You should try to come to terms with your tomb while you can. Not many wizards these days get such a chance."

"I'm... not going to let you kill me," she said, coughing a bit.

"That's the spirit," Pettigrew said. He seemed entirely detached. "In any case, I don't have to kill you. I just have to leave you here, once I've taken your magic."

So he was too cowardly to kill her himself. That was fine with her. She would start planning a way out now, then, and wait for the moment he left her alone. "How can you take my magic?" Rigel asked, not really wanting to know. The first rule of being kidnapped was keep the other person talking, though, and so she would, despite the way Pettigrew's whole demeanor was giving her the creeps. "It's bound to me."

"The jewel can do anything," he said surely. "I am Fated to, in any case. 'Take control or be took by another.' 'Master the other.' It is the only way to succeed."

"It also said 'keep power alive,'" Rigel said suddenly, deciding that keeping cards off the table wasn't going to help her at this point.

"How do you know that?" Pettigrew dove for her, grabbing her shoulder in one hand and thrusting the jewel in her face with the other. "What do you know of this?"

"I saw that piece of paper you dropped," she told him. "I read it. It definitely said you should keep me alive."

"Only until I control your power." Pettigrew frowned. "Don't try to trick me. I know what I'm doing." He stepped back and looked down at her. She was lying in what was possibly the most uncomfortable position on earth, bound with two layers of thick ropes that were cutting off circulation just about everywhere, one hand pressed against her side while the other was bound close across her chest. "I should take more precautions. I don't trust you."

"The feeling is mutual," she bit out.

Pettigrew reached into his coat's expanded pocket mechanically and pulled out a very familiar bag. It was hers. She supposed he'd picked it up from the corridor after binding her. Clever, to not leave any evidence behind. Her eyes must have lit up at the sight of the shoulder bag, for Pettigrew chuckled a bit cruelly. "You want it? Come take it." He held the bag out to her in one hand, the jewel clenched tightly in the other. She didn't see why he bothered with his nonsensical jokes. She glared up at him from where she was restrained. To her utter shock, the ropes around her slackened, and feeling, sharp and painful and beautiful, raced back to her extremities.

She rolled immediately to her feet, ignoring the tingling needles that were jabbing numbness away everywhere they advanced. She

lunged for the bag and hooked it away from him swiftly. Before she could make a proper retreat to the other end of the cavern, roiling heat erupted around her and drove her to her knees, panting. The world was a desert and she was dying slowly, baked and sizzling before the might of a thousand suns.

A cool breeze swept across her face. *Open the bag* . The what? She turned her head toward the feeling. Please, please, come back. *Open the bag* . The bag? What, this? Her attention turned slowly, sluggishly toward the thing in her lap. What was she doing? What was important? *Open the bag* . Her fingers floated toward the clasp, deftly undoing it and peering dumbly into the reinforced fabric. *Take out the potion* . The what? *The potion* . Which one? Confusion tried to assert itself, but the desert wind blew it back. It didn't matter. What didn't matter? What was she doing? *The potion* .

A picture came into her mind. There was a dragon, and a skinny boy with dark hair was pouring something onto the ground in a circle. Recognition lit somewhere inside her and her hand moved unconsciously into the bag, rooting around automatically until the correct vial came to her fingers. She pulled it out dazedly, blinking at it. There was something important about this. What was it?

Give it here. She held out her hand, but then retracted it sharply. Something was wrong. What was wrong? Nothing. *Give it here* . Something. *Give it here*. Her head hurt. It didn't feel good anymore. Why had it felt good, again?

The potion was snatched from her hand and she snapped out of it, gasping for air in the wake of such utter deprivation of herself. How did it do that? She hadn't known anything. She hadn't remembered who she was or-or *anything* . It was the most terrifying thing she'd ever experienced. She shook off the aftereffects with difficulty, grasping for a linear thought amidst the senselessness that had taken hold. She looked up to see Pettigrew standing a good distance away from her, shoulder bag back in his hands and an empty vial in the other.

She stood, as though in a dream, and stumbled forward on pain-filled legs. She hit an invisible wall before she'd made it two steps. She leaned against it, mind haltingly whirling. She looked down. There was a line of potion on the floor and it circled back around to... to enclose her completely. The Protection Potion. He'd used it when she was disoriented. She was trapped. No, she wasn't, she realized. She struggled to keep a smile off of her face. She could break the ward easily with a ward-disrupter. As soon as Pettigrew left her unattended she would take off her suppressor, then-then what, exactly?

If she got out of the barrier without electrocuting herself with her unsuppressed magic, then what? She was still trapped underground until she found a way around the ward Pettigrew had set up. She backed away from the side of the round barrier that Pettigrew stood beyond, sitting down in the middle and pulling her knees into her chest slowly. What should she do? She stared out at Pettigrew and he stared back. She felt like a caged animal, put on display for someone's amusement.

"I'd never seen this potion before that night in the forest," Pettigrew said, almost conversationally. "It held up against dragon fire, though. It ought to hold you without much trouble."

Don't count on it, she promised silently.

Pettigrew cast a Tempus and read the result. It was deep into Friday night. How long had she struggled with the jewel? It had felt like minutes-could it really have been *hours*? Pettigrew did look exhausted, she noticed. He pulled out a wand-his, not hers-and conjured a basic pallet to sleep on. He laid himself down, shifted fitfully for several minutes, and finally turned away from her accusing eyes completely. He slept facing the wall, and Rigel debated for nearly half an hour over what she ought to do.

She could take off her suppressor and break free of the barrier, then attempt to break the ward-but wards were not like shields. They couldn't be broken with brute force alone. The runes that fed the

design fueled it with power outside of the magic used to cast the ward. It drew strength from the air around it, from the ground it was anchored to, and so on. Her magic probably wouldn't be able to just bust through it, unless it had been cast improperly.

Then there was the fact that the barrier would not break quietly and she would lose the element of surprise the instant she was free. As long as he had the jewel, he could turn her will against her at any time. If he merely restrained her physically with it, she thought she could fight it off. She recognized the feeling, now. If he attacked her mind, though... well, she didn't know how she could fight without the idea of resistance to even remind her that she ought to be fighting. Retrospectively, it had been like losing her conscious self completely. Did she want that to happen when her magic was free? She shuddered. Definitely not. It would kill her for him if left to roam without a will opposing it, like as not. She would wait, then. There would be an opportune moment. Eventually.

She resigned herself to getting some sleep. If he was going to be well rested for whatever came next, then so was she. It was all she could do, at this point, to improve her odds.

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His dreams swam around him in circles, just out of reach. They mocked him. He knew he had to catch them, but didn't know how. When he woke, he wasn't any clearer on what he was to do. He had brought the boy here. The Jewel had been happy; he'd felt its pleasure wafting through him as he bent the child's will toward his commands. Now, though, it only felt empty. Cold. Distant. His mind was washed in confusion. He'd been so full of purpose, hadn't he? What was he to do now? Why didn't the Jewel respond to him? It was supposed to guide him now that he had control over the boy, the 'other' that the Jewel had led him to. It was supposed to transform him, giving him power beyond his dreams. Had he run out of time?

No, he couldn't have. He controlled time, too, now. It bent to his will. So why didn't the Jewel? He didn't understand.

He sat up and looked across the cavern to where the boy now slept. He supposed he hadn't met the requirements for controlling the boy, yet. He needed to control his magic. He didn't know what was so important about this child's magic in particular. It was powerful, he'd seen, but immature. The boy didn't control it well. Was that why? Was he *meant* to control it instead? How?

It doesn't matter how, he thought staunchly, making his way to stand before the barrier. He *would* control it. He refused to fail.

The boy looked small, curled up in sleep. Why did it have to be Sirius' boy? His old friend would never forgive him... he shook off the thought before it gripped him fully. He didn't care what Sirius thought anymore. He didn't care about any of them. He was the one who had moved on to better things while they were still making their little toys.

He held the stone up to the barrier, then paused. What was he doing, really? This wasn't a dragon. It was a person. A child. His fingers shook. Was this what he had come to? Killing children for power? The Jewel perked up at the thought of power. *Not killing*, he corrected himself slowly. *Just... controlling*. The stone in his hand thrummed soothingly. Once he had the boy's magic under his control, the Jewel would give its full allegiance to him. That's what the prophecy said. If Dominion is desired, domination is required. He *had* to. Anyway, it was too late to turn back. The boy had seen too much and knew too much. He had to be dealt with. It was just economical to make his demise useful, wasn't it?

He nodded slowly, the fog clearing from his mind. It must have been a dream. He was waking, now. His thoughts were sharp again. Get control. That was important. And he would be important. Just like his old master had always promised. Peter would thank him, one day, for leading him to the Jewel. He felt a flicker of guilt. Hadn't he meant to give the Jewel to that man? A shudder of rejection flowed through

him. Give it away? Never. *Why give the world to another when it's already in my hands?*

He was so close. He just needed to focus a little longer. How many creatures had he already bent to his will? Too many to count. One more would be easy. He would subjugate the boy's power and make it his own. With all that magic at his command, the Jewel would be persuaded fully to his side. It would grant him all the power he could imagine and he would be unstoppable. He just had to do this one thing.

Just one more thing, and then the universe would unfold before him. Greatness beckoned. He raised his fist once more. The Jewel glowed. The boy screamed.

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She woke in flames. It wasn't the heat of a desert pressing on her from without, this time. The fire was inside of her and it wanted *out*. She was screaming, but that was immaterial to the pain. It felt as if something was being pulled from her soul but had got trapped by her skin on its way through. There was no thought, only agony, for immeasurable time.

When the pain receded, she came back to herself slowly, almost uncertainly. Did she want to know? In the end, the answer was yes, of course she wanted to know. She opened her eyes, finding her vision blurred and painful. It was possible she'd damaged something in her delicate eye tissue screaming. She was still inside the barrier and Pettigrew was looking at her with alarmed bewilderment. His beady eyes flicked from the stone in his hand to her and back again, utterly nonplussed.

"What... did you do?" she asked, her voice raw.

"I... it wasn't supposed to hurt that much," Pettigrew stuttered.

She prodded her brain into coming up with an answer that made sense. What had he been trying to do with the jewel? Oh, she grew into the realization slowly. He must have tried to take her magic. Unsuccessfully. She could still feel it like fire in her veins. Why hadn't it worked? She thought carefully. Something had resisted the jewel's ability to draw out her magic. The only answer that made sense was... the suppressor? It didn't suppress all her magic, of course, but her magic was still bound together as one entity. Part of it was simply stifled. If the jewel was unable to take the free part without taking the bound part as well, it would explain the failure. And the pain.

On the bright side, the suppressor was extremely effective. She'd have to recommend Frein to her friends. A hysterical giggle left her lips. She stifled it quickly, but not before Pettigrew took a half-step back uncertainly.

"Why didn't it work?" he asked. She didn't know if he was talking to himself or actually asking her, but she figured it was a good opportunity.

"It's impossible," she told him, making up what she thought was a plausible falsehood. "You can't take another wizard's magic. It's bound to me-you're going to kill me if you try, and that violates the prophecy."

"Shut up!" Pettigrew began pacing back and forth before the barrier. "That's not right. I've done this before, with creatures. I can use their powers as my own, once I control them. How do you think I got that prophecy in the first place, you stupid child?"

She had to concede that he was probably right. If he'd done it before, then the jewel must have some way of superseding the bond between one's magic and one's will. Still, he didn't seem entirely sure of himself. She could probably still divert him, if she stepped carefully. "It's probably different with wizards," she said, trying to be

convincingly firm despite her slur. "I mean, humans and creatures aren't the same at all. Isn't our magic greater? I bet the bond between a human and his magic is much stronger. Maybe the jewel can't break it."

"Maybe I need to try harder," Pettigrew said quietly.

She scarcely had time to regret how quickly that had backfired before her world narrowed to the existence of pain alone. As she wasn't taken by surprise, she was slightly more aware this time as the magic in her core flooded through her forcefully, searching desperately for a way out. She didn't know how the jewel had managed to awaken her magic's will, as normally the ring didn't allow it to do anything while it was repressed. She did know that the push and pull between the jewel and her suppressor was going to slowly tear her apart from the inside out.

As the torment persisted, Rigel lost all sense of herself in the tide of pain that blossomed and receded and peaked again in a cycle of contention that ceased to have either beginning or end.

At some point, consciousness stopped being possible, and she fell away from reality, into dreams about drowning in a lake of fire. When the torture ended for her body, her mind dragged her far beneath the riptide of thought. She slept there at the bottom of the ocean of her mind, hoping she never resurfaced.

She did, of course, some time later, to spasms of pain in every limb and a throb in her neck where she'd probably strained something thrashing. She knew, medically, what to expect if this continued. It was with a detached sense of shame that she acknowledge the evidence of her bowel control having deserted her at some point. She forced herself to take things in a practical lens. This solved the problem of her modesty, and losing her dignity now meant it wouldn't be something she had to fight for later.

She didn't see Pettigrew anywhere in the cavern. With a groan, she pushed herself up and noticed with mixed feelings that the barrier

around her had faded. Had it been more than twelve hours already? She forced herself to stretch every muscle painstakingly until she could move more or less at human levels of coordination. She stood and crossed the cavern carefully, eyes on the discarded shoulder bag by Pettigrew's abandoned sleeping mat.

She sank to the ground beside it, pulling it open and taking things out as fast as her twitching fingers would allow, looking for anything that would help her survive. There was a canister left over from her run on Friday morning. She uncapped it with an eagerness that would have embarrassed her at any other time. There was maybe a third of the bottle of water left inside. She drained it greedily, pausing only afterwards to wonder if she should have saved a little for later. She put the empty container aside and continued looking. Her potions kit was broken open. She must have done it while under the jewel's control, or maybe Pettigrew had been going through her things.

Any panic she may have felt at that was squashed quickly. She meticulously began cataloging the contents of the bag. Was there anything that he could have found to use against her? She didn't keep the letters Archie sent her after reading them and there were no new ones in her bag that she could recall. Her work for Flint was long finished, with nothing incriminating left. She had a potion for menstrual cramps in her potions kit, but she doubted Pettigrew would recognize it. Even if he did, she had a lot of potions in her kit, many of which made no sense for a thirteen-year-old boy to carry, such as the ones she brewed for Krait.

In fact... she dug quickly through the extended compartments until she found a Pain Relief Potion. Perfect. She downed it immediately and thought about taking another, but in the end decided to save the other doses. There was no guarantee she wouldn't need them. She went through the rest of her bag carefully. Aside from textbooks on subjects she wasn't officially taking, which would be moot to disguise since Pettigrew already knew she had a time-turner, there wasn't

anything besides her Invisibility Cloak and maybe the Marauder's Map that she didn't want Pettigrew to find.

Rigel considered her options. She could hide under the Invisibility Cloak. Then, when he came back, he might assume she'd escaped and... what? Leave, probably, which left her still trapped with no way out. She tucked the Invisibility Cloak away into an extended compartment and then stacked books on top of it, so that it was marginally hidden from casual perusal. The Map she put into her own pocket. She also filled the pockets of her outer robe with all the potions that might be useful. Vials of Pain Relief Potion along with those of Nutrient Potion, Blood-Replenishing Potion, Invigoration Draught, Pepper-up Potion, Numbing Potion, and even Gasnik's Gastric Solution, in case she went hungry for a while and needed to dull the ache.

She considered pouring out the rest of the vials of her Protection Potion, but thought better of it and merely added the vials of the antidote to her pockets instead. That way, she'd have a way out of the barrier and Pettigrew would have a sense of security, however false. If she didn't leave him some of the Protection Potion, he'd probably find another way to contain her, she reasoned. One she couldn't counter.

Rigel carried her outer robe back to where she'd slept, in the center of the room, and folded it carefully as though she'd been using it as a pillow. Hopefully, he wouldn't think to check it for anything hidden when he returned. She took a moment to wonder where he'd gone, then decided she didn't care. She would use the time given to her gratefully. It was time to examine those wards.

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Pettigrew returned not long after she'd searched the entire cavern end to end for her wand. She'd found nothing, which she supposed

wasn't surprising. He probably had it on him, along with the jewel. She'd attempted to dig a hole in the dirt wall, something that would have been easy, were there not magic involved. The ward sprang up in the way of every attempt to penetrate its boundary.

She took to hitting the walls with a rock she found and watching the patterns of runes that appeared around the room until she thought she had them all memorized. She was paging through her Ancient Runes textbook in hopes of identifying one of the runes that she wasn't familiar with when she heard a soft scrabbling coming from the hole Pettigrew had indicated as the only way in and out of the cavern.

Rigel hurried to replace the book and take up a position flat against the wall near the tiny entrance. If Pettigrew didn't know that the barrier should have faded by now, she could take him by surprise. A rat scrambled awkwardly through the hole, a small rope between its teeth. It tugged a small sack behind it slowly-an easy target. Her foot shot out with all the strength she could put behind it, catching the rat square in the underbelly and sending it careening into the dirt wall across the room. She leapt after it, but Pettigrew retook human form before she got close enough to try knocking the rodent out. He was disheveled and crumpled into a defensive ball, but he had enough wherewithal to grasp the jewel and send her reeling back before its power.

"Don't. Come. Any. Closer." Pettigrew's breathing was so ragged he was barely comprehensible, but the jewel's will made the command very clear as it rooted her feet to the dirt. Rigel fought against the oppressive heat, glaring down at her captor as she struggled to throw off the mental compulsion. She hadn't expected that to work, but she'd got unexpectedly close to turning the tables. To have that taken away was infuriating.

Pettigrew reached blindly with his free hand into the pouch that lay beside him. He pulled out a loaf of bread and Rigel's mouth began watering mindlessly. She swallowed against it, even as she eyed the bread with undisguised longing. It had been almost a full day since

she'd eaten and she was not accustomed to hunger in the slightest. "You want this? I'll feed you, if you do as I say."

She tilted her head wordlessly. She was not above bargaining for sustenance, in these circumstances.

"Food and water, if you go quietly into the barrier," he said.

"You have to feed me anyway, if you want to keep me alive," she said.

"And you'll be forced into the barrier anyway if I use this jewel," Pettigrew growled.

She wondered why he didn't simply use it, then, but realized after a moment he was probably trying to save his strength for conquering her magic. She would save her strength, too, then. "Deal," she said, retreating slowly toward where her outer robe lay.

Pettigrew scurried over to her bag, which she'd left lying open, if only to prevent him using the jewel on her again to reopen it. She was getting sick of that thing enslaving her to this pathetic man's whims. Pettigrew pulled a potion out and, as he approached her to pour it on the ground, she couldn't quite contain a sneer.

"That's a Deflating Draft," she told him flatly. "Going to ease your swollen head?"

"Shut up," Pettigrew hissed, throwing the potion in a fit of anger and letting the vial smash against the wall. What a waste, she thought, annoyed. Pettigrew stomped back to the bag and dug about inside it until he pulled out a potion he was apparently satisfied with. She wondered how someone who didn't even bother checking the labels on potions vials had engineered so effective a prison. Was it dumb luck? Or was he marginally intelligent when he bothered to concentrate on something in earnest?

He cast the barrier around her, almost forgetting to toss half the loaf of bread and a canteen of water to her before sealing it completely. She wolfed down the bread and sipped lightly at the water, stowing the rest next to her cloak almost protectively, like a dragon guarding a pile of gold.

When the food was gone and Pettigrew rose from his pallet to face her across the barrier once more, she knew that the truce, whatever it had been, was over. She moved as far from the precious glass vials tucked into her 'pillow' as she could, telling herself with trepidation that bracing for the pain would only make it worse.

It was worse, in any case. Her nerve endings, or whatever parts of her brain the magic was pressing against trying to get out, were still sore and they flared with a vengeance when the jewel tried once again to force the power out of her. The suppressor held firm, but amidst of sea of suffering it was hard to muster gratitude for that.

When it stopped again and Pettigrew took to his pacing, Rigel pushed herself to her knees and fought a tumultuous battle with her stomach. She was *not* going to loose the bread she'd just put into it. Her mind felt scrambled, thoughts going in all directions in a desperate attempt to find a way that led away from the pain. She could take the suppressor off. She could just take it off and all of this pain would stop. She knew that. She stared down at her gloved fingers, barely visible through the tears and snot that dripped between her eyes and nose and got tangled in the sweat-soaked fringe clinging to her forehead.

Something hard in her gut protested this, though. Despite the pain, despite the utter senselessness that threatened to wipe her mind of any coherence at all, she was still *Rigel Black* and there were some things that *Rigel Black* could not do. She forced her mind away from the present, sending it back to one year earlier. *Do you remember? Remember the Chamber?* She had been willing to die to keep the unstable construct from controlling her magic. She could not be less willing to endure mere physical pain to keep Pettigrew from the

same. Consistency was important. She didn't remember *why*, exactly, but it was.

She held onto this knowledge. It was not anything as strong as a mantra and it did not soothe the pain in any way. It held her to herself, though, and when the pain began again, it was the only thing left that mattered.

Eventually, Pettigrew gave up. She could dimly hear him railing aloud in anger and frustration, but the words were a garbled mess to her ears. Her brain was having trouble doing the interpretation thing, at the moment. She closed her eyes for a long minute and woke to find it quiet. Pettigrew was asleep across the cavern and she knew she should be doing something-taking advantage of his guard being down to do something. She couldn't move, though. She couldn't even find the strength to crawl to her robes, even though she knew there were potions there that would take the pain away. It devastated her to be so close to relief, but unable to close the distance. She lost the fight for consciousness again and collapsed within herself.

She didn't know what time it was when she awoke. She wasn't even sure what day it was. Sunday? The lantern in the cavern was her only light source and it burned day and night, not giving much clue as to how much time was passing. Pettigrew wasn't there, but the barrier was down. Perhaps he'd gone for food again. She hoped so. She was terribly hungry once more and the small amount of Nutrient Potion she drank did nothing to fill her stomach.

It took her quite a while to master herself enough to stand, but when she had the strength, she limped to her bag and settled into scouring her Runes book. She had to figure out a way out of here. Nearly an hour later, she found a piece of the puzzle. The rune she hadn't recognized wasn't drawn in her textbook, but it was described in general terms under the section of non-human runic adaptations.

One species in particular is known for their extensive and creative appropriation of Wizarding runic systems for their own gain. Goblins

have long since devised ways of using runes in place of wands to direct and channel natural magic to achieve their ends. The complex warding system that protects the thousands of vaults at Gringotts is an excellent example of goblin-designed and forged runic anchors. Over the years, goblins have also developed a runic alphabet that is particular to their language, with symbols for many complex ideas that our own languages don't have words to capture succinctly. Recognizable by their square, almost seal-like nature, such runes are notoriously difficult for wizards to counter, and were put to devastating use in the goblin wars of the sixteenth century in particular-

"What are you doing?"

Rigel twisted with a gasp to find Pettigrew standing over her, burlap sack in one hand and jewel held warily in the other. How hadn't she heard him come back? As he dropped the bag and stepped toward her threateningly, she noted the lack of sound accompanying his movements and realized that he had cast a Silencing Charm to prevent her ambushing him again. Rigel tried to push the book away surreptitiously into her bag, but he caught sight of the title before she could.

"Trying to find a way out?" Pettigrew actually laughed. "This is a goblin ward. They used it for wizard prisoners of war, a long time ago. It excludes humans in particular from crossing the ward without a creature's assistance. You can't get out unless I take you out. And no one can get in unless I help them in. It's not perfect, of course. The goblins stopped using it so much when wizards figured out an Animagus could slip through it and help the prisoners escape. I don't think you're an Animagus, though, are you?"

He laughed again at the shadow of defeat that crossed her face. She wouldn't be able to escape on her own, if he told the truth. Not without dismantling the entire ward system. That could take weeks, though, without the runes that unlocked the sequence. She didn't know any goblin runes. What was she going to do now? She doubted Pettigrew would be so kind as to escort her out in his rat

form-and through what door, anyway? The passage that led away from the cavern was too small. She had briefly considered trying to somehow brew a Shrinking Solution with what she had in her Potions kit. She had no cauldron, and it wasn't meant to be used on living things anyway, but it had been a slim ray of hope. That possibility vanished with the knowledge that even a tiny human wouldn't actually be able to walk through the wards.

Pettigrew bent to retrieve a bag of peanuts and two bananas from his burlap sack. "Don't look so glum," he said, smirking at the despair in her eyes. "Look what I brought you. It's all yours if you go back to the ring."

She stood shakily, eyeing the jewel in his hand consideringly. Could she knock it away before he used it on her? Probably not, she admitted, with the current state of her muscles. She would not be quick enough. She hobbled slowly back to her circle, feeling much like a circus elephant rewarded for performing a trick when the bag of peanuts landed in her soiled lap.

Pettigrew looked entirely pleased at her docility, at least. He had no way of knowing that it cost her nothing to agree to a prison she could break out of anytime. She ate half the peanuts-cursing and biting back tears as her spasming fingers made the task infinitely more frustrating-and one banana. No sense in counting on the man's generosity continuing, after all. He waited impatiently for her to finish-wary of making her choke to death accidentally, no doubt.

As she set the food she was saving aside, she tried to reason with him again. "It's fruitless, you know. Maybe you've misinterpreted the prophecy. You should try to get power another way. Or leave England while you still can. Now is a good time to escape, actually. No one will notice you've gone for several more days."

"No," Pettigrew said, shuddering. "Nowhere is safe. They will come after the jewel no matter where I go. My old master... will not be forgiving, if it is he who finds me. I must master this power. If I can control other wizards... only then will I be safe again."

She wondered how it was that the idea of leaving the jewel and making a run for it by himself didn't even occur to him. Had the jewel really done so much for him? She thought it still seemed like more trouble than it was worth. She also thought he already *could* control other wizards, if his using it against her was any indication. The control was imperfect and she thought she would be able to fight it with enough time, but it was certainly enough to win advantage in a fair fight. Why wasn't it enough for Pettigrew? Was this the influence of the jewel? Or his own stubborn ambition?

He bent the jewel to taking her magic once more and this time Rigel found her mind centered in the pain, but intact. Was the jewel growing weaker, or was she growing better at being tortured? She had the faculties this time to think that withstanding torturous amounts of pain had not been on her list of things-to-get-good-at. She didn't know if cynicism in the face of pain was beneficial or detrimental to her mental health at this point. It didn't make her feel better, at any rate. She almost preferred the mindlessness of the last time. It didn't leave room for self-reflection and she didn't have to second-guess her own sanity, as it was already absent in the first place. She also hadn't noticed her bowels releasing last time. This time she did.

As Pettigrew's efforts faded into livid curses and whimpering pleas, Rigel rolled shakily onto her back, drawing in air slowly and shallowly.

"How are you doing this?" he demanded.

"It's not... me," she coughed. "Don't you think... I would make it stop, if I could?"

This argument stymied him for a moment, but a second later he was growling, "I know it is within the jewel's ability to do this. I've been researching all day and there's nothing that differentiates a wizard's magic from a creature's in that way."

"Look... again," she huffed, struggling upwards onto her elbows. The smell of her shame hit her nose and she raised her arm against it, grimacing.

Pettigrew took his wand out and spelled her clothes clean with a derisive sneer. She ignored him, rolling over to face the opposite wall. Her body was a trembling pile of uselessness at the moment. She needed rest. She had to keep her strength up.

She tried to ignore the little voice in her head that suggested she was acting tougher than she was to stave off the deep sense of despair that crept over her with each passing hour. The voice got louder, however, the longer she lied to herself. It was becoming increasingly clear that escape was a very narrow window, receding into the distance and getting smaller all the time.

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He rose on Monday with panic in every fiber of his being. His failure overwhelmed him, making it harder and harder to focus on the task. Why did the Jewel keep failing? Was it him? No, he was doing everything right. It was the boy. Somehow the boy was keeping his magic locked away beyond his reach. But *how*?

He would find out. Somewhere in the vast library at Hogwarts there were answers. He calmed himself, patting the pocket where he kept his time-turner reassuringly. He had time to figure it out. The boy would not thwart him forever. Already, he should be losing strength. The herbs he'd been straining into the boy's water should see to that. They would weaken his resolve, slow his mind. Sooner or later he would give into despair and doubt, and his resistance would crumble completely.

In the meantime, he would figure out what about that child in particular was thwarting his Jewel. He slipped out of the cavern and

into the forest in his rat form. When he reached the castle, he would Disillusion himself and make his way to the library. There wouldn't be anyone there, with classes in session. He slipped past his very own Creatures class on his way across the lawn. How strange this time-turner was. When he mastered the Jewel, he would turn his attention to unleashing its full potential as well.

He looked through book after book, trying to find something that would explain the magic's unheard-of resistance to the power of the Jewel. It was as if the magic was trapped, somehow... but what could do such a thing? Was it Occlumency? Some sort of trick? He didn't know. But he would find out.

Hours later, he despaired. There was nothing in the books about mind arts that would explain the inaccessibility of the boy's magic. He was so tired, so tired of trying. And for what? He was having trouble remembering. The world around him was growing heavy. So heavy...

He jolted awake to a prodding finger, whirling and nearly attacking the sandy-haired Ravenclaw student blinking back at him. "Um... Professor? It's almost breakfast. You don't want to miss it." The student smiled and walked away toward the library exit. Peter realized his Disillusionment Charm had faded away sometime after he'd fallen asleep. He gazed in panic at the window. He'd been gone all night! Oh, no. The boy. There was no way he could have escaped... right?

He hastened to get to the kitchens and collect the food he needed to keep the boy in line. There was no telling what he'd prepared for him with all the time alone he'd had. His ribs still hurt from that kick. He'd thought a child would be easy to control. Why was it all going so wrong?

When he crept silently into the pit, he expected to meet some sinister challenge and, as such was carrying the Jewel in his mouth, fairly certain he could still use it in his Animagus form if he had to. What he saw was... the boy, sleeping fitfully within the circle of the faded

barrier. Why was he still sleeping? He had been gone so long. Was he faking? He reassumed his true form and stepped closer, wary of a trap.

No... he was just sleeping. Peter frowned down at the shaking child. He slept an unnaturally long time. Some of it could be from his time-turner use, Peter reasoned carefully. If he was awake longer in the day, maybe his habits had altered to keep him well rested. He shouldn't be sleeping all day, though. Unless... maybe the Jewel was doing more damage to the boy than Peter had thought. He'd certainly screamed a lot, but children were notoriously dramatic. Well, the boy was breathing, so he supposed it couldn't be doing *too* much injury. Whatever he was doing to resist the Jewel was probably just tiring him out.

The Jewel was an impatient presence at the back of his mind, giving him a headache that worsened the longer he went without making any progress. Pettigrew set the food and water inside the circle next to the boy and then cast a new barrier quickly. He had to get back to the library. He had to find the answer soon.

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She opened her eyes once Pettigrew had left the cavern. She'd woken as he placed the bag of food beside her, but pretended to sleep. It had been nearly a full day since he left and now he was leaving again? She allowed herself a small smirk as she sat up. He must be having a hard time figuring out that she was wearing a suppressor. With luck, he'd give up soon. The smugness faded from her mind almost immediately. If he gave up, what would he do with her? Probably kill her immediately. Unless he was exceptionally good at Memory Charms. Even then... if she were evil, she had to admit she wouldn't take the chance of leaving her alive.

She wondered if he even was evil. He seemed very conflicted the whole time he threatened her. Why would someone so unsure of themselves try and do something so unequivocally dastardly, anyway? It was stupid. Someone like him should be an undersecretary somewhere, toadying his way into modest influence and letting other people do the thinking.

She opened the bag and began going through it. Water! She gulped half the canteen down immediately. She was beginning to live for the moments that water appeared before her. She'd tried to ration the food she had yesterday, but in the end had succumbed and eaten it all before going to sleep. Her stomach still rumbled and she promised herself she'd never take Hogwarts cooking for granted again. She pulled out three muffins and an apple from the bag. The apple she saved. The muffins she scarfed down with abandon. Her body needed the energy, she told herself. She suspected the truth of it just came down to the ache in her belly.

She spent a few hours going through her spell books for anything that might be helpful in ward dismantling. The problem was, wards were designed precisely so that they couldn't be dismantled from certain angles. For protective wards, like the kind put on houses, the ward could only really be taken down from the inside. To break it from the outside required unimaginable preparation and exact application of specific runic counters. The inverse was true for the kind of containment ward she was in. It would take skill she didn't have to figure out a way through. The longer she spent analyzing the problem, the more convinced she became that her only option was to overpower Pettigrew physically and wrest the time-turner away from him. If she could get back to a point in time before Pettigrew had activated the wards, she could blast her way out with magic.

The jewel was a problem. It could cripple her body before she got close enough to take Pettigrew down. If she could just find a way around it, she would be on her way to freedom.

Pettigrew was gone for hours and hours. It felt as though most of the day (or night, she wasn't sure anymore) had passed before he

appeared again. She was caught off guard, having been attempting to scratch an identification rune into the wall in a bid to learn more about how the ward was constructed. His angry voice caused the rock in her hand to slip and her heart rate to skyrocket as she turned to see him bearing down on her.

"I finally figured it out," he said, looking entirely too manic to make any deduction, must less correct ones. He held the jewel in front of him like garlic held before a vampire and she found herself scrambling back before it, much to her disgust. "I know how you're doing it. You have a magic suppressor, don't you? This whole time, you've been wearing something that locked your magic up beyond my reach. Clever little beast, aren't you? Well. That ends tonight."

So it was nighttime, she thought in a distant part of her mind. That would make it... Tuesday evening? Three full days until anyone would notice her missing. She needed to stall longer, somehow.

Her herded her with the jewel back into her circle. He cast the Protective Potion around her again and she wondered how exactly he was planning on getting her suppressor off, now that he knew it was there. He clearly wasn't planning on taking it off of her physically-as if he could. It was irremovable to anyone but herself. She could outlast Pettigrew's determination. She was sure of it.

"Take the suppressor off," Pettigrew said, fists clenched in ire on the other side of the barrier.

She shook her head silently, waiting for his true attempt.

"I will take everything on you away, item by item, until I discover which it is," Pettigrew snarled.

She blanched, an icy fear that came from a place she rarely even acknowledged suddenly making itself known. He... wouldn't really... She took in his resolute expression. He would, she realized. And then he would know her secret, the one thing she wanted to protect

above all else. She would have to—she cut off that thought ruthlessly. She did not *have* to do anything.

Her choices lay before her, crystal clear. She could take off her suppressor, surrendering her magic to the control of the jewel, and keep her secret. She could also hold onto her suppressor and resign herself to the uncovering of her deepest deception. The suppressor could not be taken off of her without her consent. As long as she hung onto it, even if all other articles of her clothing were stripped away, she would retain control of her magic. If she gave over the magic to Pettigrew's attempt to control it... he would probably kill her as soon as he had what he needed to fulfill the prophecy.

Would she die, then, to protect her secret? Would she take it to the grave? It was a moment of utter clarity for her. The answer was so immediate that she didn't have to even think about it long. No. She wouldn't. Not in these circumstances.

She folded her arms around herself protectively, but resolutely shook her head again. She would not take the suppressor off. Not even if it meant her secret was revealed. Some things, she discovered in that moment, were more important than her ruse.

Pettigrew growled in annoyance. She said, hoping against hope to dissuade him against all odds, "It can't be summoned. You'll be wasting your time. This whole thing is a waste of time."

"We'll see," he said, pulling out his wand. "Accio suppressor!"

She felt a brief, intense pain in the finger on her left hand, but did not react to it. The spell hadn't worked. She could see the wheels working in his head as he took in the barrier between them. *How slowly they must turn*, she thought scornfully.

After a time, he seemed to strike on an idea. The jewel shone brightly as he turned it toward her. The heat that enveloped her was entirely predictable and she was heartily *sick* of it.

Take off the suppressor . Her mind focused unnaturally on that one idea, even as another part of her swam angrily against the current in protest. *Take the suppressor off now* . Her hands, apparently detached from her good sense, began moving outside of her consciousness. They stripped her left glove away and twitched toward the jade ring before she ground their movement to a halt through sheer, concentrated willpower. *No!* She refused to give in at this juncture when she'd endured so much to keep Pettigrew away from her magic. She clenched her fists and pulls her hands as far apart as she could, panting wildly at the strain even so simple a directive put on her mind. *Take the suppressor off*. The jewel hummed in her head insistently, but she was onto its game. She could fight it, she now knew.

"I... won't," she ground out between her teeth.

The pressure on her skull abruptly stopped. Pettigrew was gazing at her with considering eyes. "My control usually gets easier with each successive attempt. You seem to be getting better at resisting, somehow. It doesn't matter, though. Now I know your suppressor is one of those rings. If I can't make you take it off with the jewel, I will use other means to persuade you."

That was the only warning she got before pain invaded her senses and drove her to the dirt. What was he playing at? He knew he couldn't draw her magic out by force! He was using the pain to try and force her into giving in and taking the ring off. That-she didn't have the words. That he would sink to actual torture to get his way-! She didn't know why, but a part of her felt betrayed. Until now, it had seemed like Pettigrew felt he had to act the way he did, in order to achieve his ends. Now, though... he was torturing her to speed things along in lieu of any actual cunning or power. Well, *screw that* .

She rolled with the pain gamely. It was tearing up her body, this constant pressure on her magical coils, but she didn't care anymore. She was angry. Her magic could go boil itself for all she cared. Pettigrew and the jewel, too. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction. Not even if it crippled her.

She held onto consciousness much longer than she had previously, she thought. It wasn't a happy thought, but it gave her a certain grim satisfaction that she would not have recognized in herself just days ago. What was this place doing to her? There was no time to wonder in what form she might emerge, if she ever did escape. She was already slipping into the blackness of oblivion once more.

When she woke, it was to the feeling of someone fumbling eagerly with her left hand. She clenched it in silent denial, but it was pressed flat to the floor with the exception of the finger she wore her rings on. The basilisk ring was pulled off carelessly, then fingers slid for purchase on the ring of jade. Pettigrew cursed, the sound so close it sent air wafting against her neck. She tried to lift her head, but a rippling agony shot through her muscles each time she attempted to tense them.

"Why won't it move?" Pettigrew hissed.

"It's irremovable," she garbled, trying the same lie that hadn't worked on Riddle.

"No," Pettigrew seethed. "It can't be. I'll-I'll cut it off."

She clenched her teeth at that mental image. Should she just take it off? Her hands meant a lot to her. It wasn't her knife-wielding hand, but still... if he was going to cut her finger off then the suppressor would come off either way.

"No... wait. What's this?" Pettigrew's breathing picked up and his hand stroked over the jade band slowly. "This is... it's *creature* magic."

A pool of dread bled into her gut and her breath hitched abruptly. No. Surely he couldn't-

Pettigrew began to laugh gleefully. "This is too perfect. This whole time, the answer was right in front of me."

She squinted from the corner of her eye to see him holding the jewel close to her hand. The ring on her finger got hot all of a sudden. It hurt, but nothing like when Riddle had tried to force it off, and Riddle's attempt paled in relation to the pain she'd been introduced to in the last few days, in any case. This pain was a shadow of true pain. A blip on the radar of suffering. Pettigrew's gleeful muttering was far more devastating. "It is Fate, that it should come down to this. Creature magic is *my* purview. I'll have this off in a sec-" He paused abruptly. "No. That isn't-I have to be smarter." She felt him leave her side and heard his quick footsteps scraping through the dirt. She tried to get some response from her body while he was gone, but her muscles felt completely shredded. Just breathing hurt in places she hadn't known even had nerve endings.

She heard the now-familiar sound of a potion being poured onto the ground and intuited his plan. He was enclosing her in a barrier, now that he knew how to remove the suppressor. Once it left her finger, her magic would be unleashed and he didn't want to risk it getting at him before he could control it. He was almost annoyingly cautious. She supposed someone like him had to be, as opposed to someone like Riddle Jr., whose arrogance was in part a reflection of his faith in his own ability.

It seemed entirely unfair that the powers of the jewel could reach through the barrier while regular magic and physical things could not. Rigel supposed it was not the Protective Potion's fault. The shield it was based on must not have been designed to withstand mysteriously omnipotent artifacts. She would fix that, if she ever got the chance.

She tried to think of some way to stop Pettigrew from getting at her magic. She had run out of things to try, however. She had no more diversions or misdirections up her sleeve. When the suppressor began to heat once more, she clenched her eyes in true despair. There was nothing she could do. When the jade ring shattered, she braced herself for the storm.

At last. He could feel the power unfurling on the other side of the shield and it delighted him. He was finally succeeding. With this magic under his control, the prophecy would be fulfilled and the Jewel would fully bond with him. Then he would be unstoppable.

He bent the Jewel's power toward the barrier. He would make sure the magic was under control, first. Then he would soak it up into the Jewel like a sponge soaking up water. He felt the Jewel's happy thrum in response to his plan and smiled slowly. He was so close. All of his efforts were finally going to pay off.

CRACK.

He jumped backwards and stared, shocked, at the barrier. It had shuddered underneath the assault of the boy's magic. What was it doing? How was the boy controlling it without a wand? Once he drew it out of the boy, it should have been aimless. Dangerous, yes, but wild, like all the other creatures whose magic he'd taken. And yet his eyes told him frantically that the magic was coiling, marshaling itself, and aiming for the side of the barrier closest to him. As though it knew he was a threat. As though it were resisting with a modicum of intelligence.

Peter shook his head rapidly. That wasn't possible. It was the boy-he must have some kind of wandless magic capabilities that came out when his magic was released. He didn't waste time wondering why the boy had so much magic locked away in the first place. What did he care why the boy did anything? All that mattered was severing his unnatural control over the freed magic.

He readjusted the Jewel's target. Instead of attempting to soothe the magic, it would wrap itself around the boy. If Pettigrew could make him fall asleep, his will would be severed and the cohesion keeping the magic together would scatter. *Go to sleep*, he commanded. *Go to sleep now*. It should have been easy. The boy was obviously still

weakened from his attempt to hold out against removing his suppressor. That, combined with the mind weakening herbs should have made him incredibly pliant. Instead, Peter felt a desperate scrabbling against the power of the Jewel, as though falling asleep were the scariest thing the boy had ever been made to do. Peter scowled and poured all of the power he could muster into the command. *Go to sleep.*

The boy resisted several long minutes before his body finally collapsed in unconsciousness. Peter felt a rush of triumph-until the barrier CRACK-ed loudly once more under the assault of the boy's magic. He stumbled back, utterly terrified. It shouldn't be possible. The boy was asleep-no one could use magic in their sleep. He desperately turned the Jewel back to the cloud of magic that hung menacingly suspended on the other side of a transparent-and worryingly flimsy, it seemed-shield.

His every attempt to wear the magic down with the Jewel was met with implacable defiance. The Jewel slid away from the magic like water over glass, utterly ineffectual. He could feel the Jewel itself becoming frustrated and he channeled that on top of his own desperation, unable to believe that this child's magic had a will that was stronger than the Dominion Jewel. It had subjugated *nations* . It had transformed the souls of *countless* unworthy wielders and raised them to from obscurity to prominence. It could *not* be thwarted by the wild energies of an underdeveloped fleshling-

Peter grasped his head with his free hand in sudden pain. Were those... were those his thoughts? He didn't think so. Was the Jewel...? He felt a rush of glee at his realization. It was bonding with him. It was finally recognizing him as its rightful master. It would come into his soul, now, and make him stronger, smarter, better looking, and- *focus* .

Yes. He had to get control of that magic. That was the most important thing. Together with the Jewel, they could not fail.

Except, they did. Over and over for hours until Pettigrew was quite sure the magic was some sort of preternatural force of nature that had been possessing the child somehow. The Jewel just couldn't get a grasp on it from any direction. Its power was jolted away at every angle by an untiring unruliness the likes of which Peter had never imagined. The first time he saw the protective barrier around the boy begin to crack, he could not quite fathom it. He had seen this shield deflect dragon fire, for Merlin's sake. He was barely able to get a second shield poured around the first before it shattered completely.

From then on, he ran through potion after potion, trying to keep a barrier between himself and the magic. There was not an endless supply of the potion, however. After pouring a vial onto the dirt and watching it smoke and fizzle uselessly, he realized he was out of the potion he needed completely. The final barrier began to flicker ominously each time the magic slammed against it and Peter admitted he could not go on in this way. Something would give, and he was certain it would be the shield.

Bitter and angry, he fled the cavern. The wards would keep the magic locked in until he came up with another plan. It seemed he had another unexpected hurdle to overcome. As he slunk through the small tunnel that led to the surface, he had to wonder if he shouldn't just find some other kid to control. This one was clearly too much for him. The Jewel gave a displeased jolt of magic that dug into his head painfully at the thought. It wanted that magic. And it would have it. He felt the certainty seep from the Jewel into himself, calming his mind and steadying his nerve. Yes. He would have that power. One way or another.

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Rigel awoke slowly, wondering if she'd been transported to a far-off island. She could feel the breeze on her face. It smelled of salt. She must be close enough to see the ocean. If only she could open her

eyes. They felt caked shut. Probably got some sand in them, she sighed. She started to stretch, then groaned as her every muscle protested. Why did her limbs feel like noodles? Had she been swimming too long? As if on cue, a cramp made itself known in her abdomen. She gasped, but breathing was difficult, too. Was she underwater? She struggled to open her eyes despite the gritty buildup keeping them closed.

She was met with dimly lit darkness and the sight of dirt all around her. She moaned in disappointment as reality crept back into her head, almost apologetically. Her magic was free, swirling restlessly around the little circle she was stuck in. Its movement had been the breeze she felt. The smell of salt was the crusted sweat all over her face. She couldn't breathe because her lungs were bruised from all the exertion they'd been through in the last few days. The pain in her abdomen wasn't a swimmer's cramp-it was ravenous hunger.

She had to sit up, she told her muscles firmly. They politely refused. She had to sit up, she told them. She needed the apple that was stashed under her robes-

The apple dropped onto her cheek and bounced onto the dirt beside her face. What...? She strained her eyes in the semi-darkness to see her magic hovering curiously above her. She laughed weakly, then winced at the pain that caused. "Great," she whispered hoarsely. "Now... can you lift it into my mouth?"

The apple twitched, then rolled from the dirt up the side of her face, coming to a stop on top of her lips. She opened her mouth and took a bite. *Sloppy, yet effective*, she thought with dark amusement. The magic obligingly held the apple in place until she'd eaten every bit that wasn't stem or seed.

Now a Pain Relief Potion, she thought hopefully. The clinking of a vial was music to her ears, and a moment later she was struggling not to choke as the liquid was poured down her throat. It took mere minutes to kick in and she was then able to override her muscles' complaints and sit up fully.

Pettigrew was nowhere to be seen. He couldn't have left more than twelve hours ago, or the barrier would have fallen, she reasoned, so she figured it was... Wednesday? Maybe? Two more days. She could hold out for two more days, surely. She didn't know how she expected anyone to find her, even once they noticed her missing, but she didn't want to discount the possibility just yet. There were a lot of people who would care if she disappeared... right? One of them would find a way. Sirius was an Animagus, even. He might be able to widen the tunnel enough to fit his shaggy dog form through. She just had to be patient.

She made her way to her pile of robes and took a quick inventory. There was a little bit of water left, which she polished off quickly. She downed a Nutrient Potion-her last one-and thought about taking another dose of Pain Relief, but reasoned she should save them.

Taking the potions was about the extent of what her energy reserves would allow her to physically accomplish. She sat, hunched over her lap and clutching her shoulders in opposite hands wearily. She lost track of time, there in the eye of her magic's lazy hurricane, trying not to think about anything, because every thought that led back to Pettigrew or her current situation was a thought that sent her magic buzzing angrily around her. Its anger and hate was a palpable thing and she hoped vaguely that Pettigrew had some sort of plan for when he came back. Her magic was ready to kill him.

Ignoring the sinister pleasure that coursed through her magic at that idle thought, she wondered if that wouldn't be a good thing. If her magic killed Pettigrew, she could take the time-turner from his corpse and turn back to before the wards were set on her prison, letting her escape. Despite her magic's excitement at that plan, something bothered Rigel about it. What was the matter with it?

Setting aside questions of morality, which she felt were entirely ambiguous at this stage from anyone's point of view, there was something about the idea of taking the time-turner and turning back to before Friday evening that sent an unconscious shiver of fear

down her spine. What was it? It was like she was forgetting something she wasn't supposed to-

"No," she whispered aloud, shocked into voicing her denial by the force with which the despair suddenly hit her. No, no, no. She couldn't go back to before the wards were set. Why hadn't she remembered the first rule of time-turning? There could never be more than six versions of oneself in any given time. Tuesday, how many times had she done Tuesday morning? Three in the course of her normal class schedule, once brewing in the Room of Requirement, and once... once out running on the other side of the lake while everyone was in class. That was five times. It hadn't seemed reckless at the time. But now... Pettigrew had taken her back a full week, so she now had six selves existing simultaneously on Tuesday morning. If she went back again... well, she wasn't sure what would happen, but she was pretty sure the words 'crippled magically for life' had been tossed around while Snape was explaining it.

She felt tears well as the full realization of her doom came upon her. She couldn't use the time-turner to escape. It had been the last resort left to her that depended on her own impetus. All that remained was the hope that someone would come or Pettigrew would leave himself open to some manipulation that would get him to let her out.

She took deep, slow breaths for a long time, just focusing on getting through the next second, then the next, then the next. Once she was certain she wasn't going to fall apart, she turned her attention to modifying her immediate plans. Pettigrew could not die. He was one of the two tickets out she could come up with.

Her magic roared in fury at that resolution, denial in every drop. It slammed into her seated form and sent her bowling to the side. The winds grew sharp, cutting her exposed skin and ripping into her clothing mercilessly. *Okay*, she thought at it frantically, *all right*. She would not think of keeping Pettigrew alive, then. She would not think of him at all.

Her magic remained suspicious, so she began reciting the ingredients for a Befuddlement Draught in alphabetical order until it went back to circling their prison slowly, almost peacefully. She hoped it was enjoying its time free. Once she was out of here, she would be finding a way to remedy that. The magic growled. It was more of a feeling than a noise, but she ignored it all the same and stuck her tongue out at it for good measure.

They settled into an uneasy truce after that and she passed the time watching the Marauder's Map. She could see all of her other selves walking about the castle, innocently oblivious to what would befall them in a matter of days. She watched her friends go from class to class and tried to imagine their faces where the little dots were. She strained her memory to recall what they'd been talking about when one of her dots converged on one of theirs, and made up fanciful dialogue to substitute for the conversations that had been too short or inane to remember.

She watched them until her eyes slid in and out of focus dispiritedly. Pettigrew's dot was in the library, where it had been all day. Why hadn't she thought to keep track of him this way earlier? Her mind had not been as sharp as it usually was, throughout this entire trial. When her friends all converged in their beds, she assumed curfew had fallen up in the castle. Pettigrew's dot didn't look to be going anywhere, so she guessed he hadn't yet come up with a way to get what he wanted out of her magic.

Said magic perked up as her thoughts turned its way. The barrier had long since fallen and it had spent the day exploring the small cavern they were trapped in over and over. It didn't seem to have much luck with the wards, which didn't surprise her. They were designed to keep wizards in, and she didn't think the goblins would be careless enough to leave a loophole that allowed a wizard's magic to leave the containment by itself.

If she died in the cavern, perhaps her magic would be smart enough to latch itself onto an animal that wandered down the hole someday. Imagining a squirrel possessed by her demonic magic gave her a

tiny amount of amusement, before she recalled that she was dead in that scenario.

She tucked the Map away and curled up on the dirt. She didn't want to sleep, since it meant leaving her magic largely unattended. It couldn't really do anything besides loom at the moment, though, and her body needed the rest. She had to keep herself together until Friday night. Her last thought before drifting off was *two more days...*

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It was late in the day on Thursday when Pettigrew finally returned. He came in as a rat while Rigel was staring up at the ceiling listlessly. She didn't notice until his human self loomed suddenly over her. Even as her head tilted slightly to take in his determined expression, her magic struck from above and behind him, breaking like a wave against a rock.

She eyed the ward that shimmered into existence around the man curiously, but distantly. She was finding it difficult to focus her emotions into anything stronger than boredom. She was so tired, but she couldn't sleep. She was hungry, but the thought of choking down another potion on an empty stomach made her want to retch.

"Get up," Pettigrew said.

She blinked, slowly attempting to put some energy into her body. Her arms moved after much resistance, sliding under her slowly to prop her into a sitting position. Her legs were entirely uncooperative, though. She looked at him blankly, wondering what he wanted with her. It was her magic he cared about now, wasn't it?

He pulled out a bag and her vision narrowed alarmingly. Was there food inside? Water?

"I'll make a trade with you," Pettigrew said, ignoring for the moment the way her magic battered at whatever ward he's managed to erect around his person. Her mind tore itself away from wondering if he'd drawn the runes onto his clothes or onto his skin, refocusing on the bag with almost painful longing as he shook it to keep her attention. "You can have this, if you take an oath for me."

Her mind stuttered to a halt as her gut said *No*, rather forcefully. *Wait*, the hungry part of her whined. *Let's hear it out*.

"An oath to do what?" she croaked.

Pettigrew smirked. "An oath that you will not try to kill me."

She paused for a moment, thinking that over. "What makes you think I would try to kill you?" He gestured to the magic currently hammering away at his rune-powered armor. "That's not me," she said quietly. "I can't keep my magic from killing you."

Pettigrew sneered. "You'll forgive me if I do not believe you. You must be directing it somehow and even if you aren't, I want your word that you will not add your will to the magic's attempts."

"This won't help you," she said, frowning up at him. "Trust me. I kept my magic locked away for a reason and it had nothing to do with that jewel of yours. It's dangerous. And easily provoked. It will try to kill you without my help, if you keep angering it."

"As long as it is without your will, I can control it," Pettigrew said. That was what he'd come up with over the past day? Controlling her to control her magic? If her magic were controllable she would have done it already. Didn't he see that?

Her stomach growled and she forced her mind to consider the problem at hand. If she took an oath not to attempt to kill him, would her magic's actions be considered a violation of the oath? She supposed as long as she acted against her magic trying to kill him as best she could, that would constitute upholding it. She wanted

Pettigrew alive, anyway, and she needed the food... it seemed like a positive scenario for her. Was she missing anything? It was so hard to think, lately. Her body's aches constantly distracted her mind and ideas that had once seemed very clear were becoming increasingly muddled.

"Your oath, or the food stops now," Pettigrew warned.

"The prophecy," she tried.

"It will take some time for you to starve," Pettigrew said, looking unconcerned. "I'm sure by then you'll be weak enough that your magic will have lost its forcefulness."

She didn't think the strength of her magic was related at all to the strength of her body, but if Pettigrew believed that, then he really would be willing to watch her slowly waste away. Should she....? Rigel didn't think any other choice would help her more. "All right," she said slowly. "I'll need my wand to swear-"

"Nice try," Pettigrew sneered. "I'll be doing the bonding." He pulled out his wand and stepped toward her. Rigel's magic collected near Pettigrew's wand like a hive of angry bees, but it could not get through the ward that seemed to cover Pettigrew from head to toe, flashing into existence each time her magic got within a foot of the squat man. She wondered where he was getting such effective rune systems. They didn't seem to fit with the bumbling image she had of the man, but she supposed it didn't take a genius to look up an array that someone else had designed and copy down the symbols. Anyway, she shouldn't disparage someone who had successfully beaten her into the dirt for nearly a week. It was an indirect insult to herself.

She eyed Pettigrew's wand, considering, but he kept it well back from her reach, and her muscles had not the strength to move at anything above a snail's pace, anyway. He clasped her hand and raised it to the proper position for her, then said, "Make the oath."

She gathered her thoughts and willed them with difficulty into coherent words. "I..." she paused. She could not say her name. She would do what she had when she swore the oath with Flint and merely refer to herself by intent. "... do hereby swear not to conspire with my magic to kill Peter Pettigrew, nor to make any attempt myself to end his life." She waited to see if he was satisfied and, after a long moment, he nodded and sealed the oath.

"So mote it be."

"So mote it be," she echoed. A golden thread wrapped around her wrist and disappeared, leaving no trace. It was done, for better or worse.

Pettigrew dropped the bag into her lap and she dug in eagerly. There was a single raw potato inside, and a canteen only half-filled with water. Her fists clenched angrily on the sides of the sack, but she pulled the contents out anyway. It was all she had.

Her magic, enraged at the disappointed bitterness that had engulfed her at the thought of eating raw potato, reacted rather predictably. It lashed at Pettigrew from every angle, engulfing his ward-protected form in a vortex of slashing winds.

"Stop it! You swore!" Pettigrew cried out fearfully.

Rigel didn't think her oath constituted a promise to keep her magic from reacting on her behalf, but just in case, she swiftly cleared her mind of anything related to Pettigrew or the potato, chanting the thirty-six uses of the Aloe Vera plant. *Antifungal, antiviral, antibacterial, burns, constipation, stomach cramps, inflammation...*

Her magic calmed marginally, but still hovered suspiciously over Pettigrew's head. "I can stop it from attacking you on my behalf, but I can't make it not react in its own defense," she warned him. "You'd better leave it alone, if you're so afraid of it."

"I'm not afraid," Pettigrew snapped. He had the jewel in his hand once more, however, and his thumb stroked over it in a way that was blatantly self-reassuring.

You should be, she thought. Her magic was as wild as she'd ever seen it and she suspected the only reason it hadn't done something more drastic by now was because it was marginally free to move about and exert its will, for once. As soon as Pettigrew succeeded at all in gaining a measure of control over it, the magic would probably show its true colors. She hoped dearly that Friday would come before he made any progress. Otherwise they were both in trouble. *Just one day more...*

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The world was conspiring against him. Every step he took landed him two paces back. It wasn't fair! He'd done everything the Jewel told him to. He'd earned the power and yet it floated tantalizingly out of his reach. No matter what he did, the boy's magic resisted. He'd given himself a blinding headache trying to batter it into submission, but his desperation made no difference.

The Jewel was growing angry with him. Each new failure sent a backlash of pain resonating in his head that made it harder and harder to focus. The prophecy rang tauntingly in the back of his mind. *'Ere the moment be expired...'*

He needed more time. Yes, that was all. He could figure it out, if he just had more time. Time. He had time, of course, what was he thinking? He would have to work quickly, of course, but then-no, he had no need to. This place... it could easily be made to accommodate his needs. And it had been! He smirked gleefully. The boy looked uneasy at the expression on his face. As well he should. He had great plans. First he would need a little help, but soon they

would come to fruition. There was no turning back, now. The die was cast.

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As Pettigrew inexplicably slipped out of the cavern on Thursday night, Rigel had to wonder what he was up to now. The last day had been an exercise in patience, on her part, at least. Keeping her mind continually occupied with things that didn't involve maiming Pettigrew had become more and more difficult the longer he provoked her magic with that blasted jewel of his. He either had no sense of self-preservation or he honestly thought he was going to be able to control her magic. Even watching him try, it had become clear to her early on that he wasn't making any headway at all. It was a little terrifying, actually, knowing that her magic had been able to shrug off so easily the powers of the Dominion Jewel, when she herself had been so quickly ensnared by it.

She supposed she ought to be grateful for her magic's implacable nature, for once. It was the only thing standing between her and Pettigrew deciding she'd lost her usefulness. The thought of Pettigrew leaving her to die riled her magic to a dull roar, so she quickly thought about something else. Like the fact that she needed to relieve her bladder before Pettigrew got back. Her body ached weakly in response to even the thought of moving far enough that she wouldn't be offended by the proximity of the waste.

Before she had mustered the strength to do anything about her body's pressing need, a very alarming invisible tug moved her in a kind of self-levitation several feet away. That was... convenient. Her freed magic was quite the unexpected boon, it seemed. When it wasn't lurking menacingly over her shoulder, that is. The magic slunk off toward the other end of the cavern, seemingly in response to her wry thought. She had to admit, it was almost like having company.

Pettigrew came back an hour or so after he left. When he reentered the cavern, however, he was not alone. There were five live nifflers following close behind him. They barely squeezed through the entrance hole and, once inside, they lined up like soldiers before their general, apparently awaiting Pettigrew's command.

"What are those for?" she asked, struggling to lift her head from the floor. She knew she ought to be stretching her muscles and working her way back to full movement, but it hurt too much to contemplate, so she just turned her head sideways from where she was lying and squinted at the nifflers in confusion.

"Don't you recognize them?" Pettigrew asked, sounding very excited about something.

She didn't know any nifflers personally, so she wasn't sure how he expected her to recognize them. The only ones she'd even seen recently were the dead... wait... She shifted her head slightly to take in the spot where there was a pile of dead nifflers. Oh. No. This was bad. If they were the same nifflers as had been dead on Friday evening, then... She looked at the five perky nifflers with a newfound sense of horror. How did their dead bodies get into the past? Surely Pettigrew wasn't going to... he wasn't going to go back another week, was he? She thought hard. What good would that do him, besides allowing him to plant the dead nifflers for his past self to use to finish up the rune sequence on the cavern?

He must realize he was running out of time before someone noticed her missing. How did he plan on getting more time to control her magic without... her there to...?

"No," she said, struggling against the pain to try desperately to sit up. Her muscles locked and seized and she growled in impotence. "You can't."

"Caught on, have you?" Pettigrew sneered. "You didn't think your imprisonment was nearly over, did you? I have as much time with you as it takes to-"

"You don't understand," she snapped, panting harshly as the effort it took her lungs to speak. "You can't take me back to the past again. There's a limit to how many times a person can turn back. You can't live a single moment more than six different times. It causes a resonance in the core that-"

"What are you talking about?" Pettigrew growled. "This plan is perfect. And anyway, I've already done it, don't you see? That's why the niffles were left there. I finally figured it out-it's a sign. So I know what I have to do-or what I've done..." He looked very close to scratching his head in confusion, but shook it instead. "Look, I know what I'm doing. I have to take you back, to get more time with your magic. I don't even have to build a whole new prison because... well, you'll see."

"I'm telling you it isn't possible," she said, coughing as the strain on her voice became too great. "You... can't take me back. I've already done parts of this week six times."

"You're lying," Pettigrew snapped. "It isn't going to work."

"Please, I'm not," she begged. "You can go look it up in the library-it'll be in any book about time-travel, honest-"

"Oh, yes, go looking through the library again and in the meantime you'll wait patiently for someone to notice your absence and come and save you, is that it?" Pettigrew laughed. "I'm not going to ever allow you that chance. We'll turn back tonight and do the week again. If I need more time, we'll turn back another week, and another, until I find a way."

"I'm telling you I'll *die*," she said weakly.

"I know," Pettigrew said. He looked hesitant for a moment, then added, "I've known you were going to die for a while, actually. I can smell it."

She had no idea what he was talking about, but she knew she couldn't let him take her back in time. She struggled to sit up, gasping and crying at the knives that shot through every part of her as she did so. She needed to sit up. She had to move past the pain. There was no other choice.

As Pettigrew was coaxing the nifflers one by one into his burlap sack, Rigel was focusing all her attention on finding a way to stand, to get away from the man. She made it to her knees, and then, amazingly, felt an alien strength flooding into her muscles. Her magic was trying to help her, she realized. It sent air into her lungs even as the organs shuddered and stalled. It cleared the pain from her mind as she put first one foot beneath her, then the other. It steadied her legs when her knees threatened to buckle and it solidified her stomach muscles in anticipation of the coming fight. She would *not* let this happen.

When Pettigrew saw her standing, he gave her a pitying look. "You haven't the strength to fight anymore, boy."

Her trembling limbs agreed with him, but Rigel was stubborn. She would fight, because to do otherwise was to concede to death willingly.

Pettigrew stepped forward slowly and she sank into a trembling crouch. He dropped the sack from his left hand and took his right out of his pocket. To her surprise, she didn't see a wand or the jewel in his other hand. It was curled into a fist. Could he really be so arrogant? She opened her eyes wide and focused entirely on the way Pettigrew's body shifted back and forth uncertainly. He was not an experienced fighter, from the look of his stance. She was in no shape to be tussling with anyone, but if her magic would keep her propped up, she could last long enough to knock him out, maybe. The oath prevented her from killing him, but she could at least destroy the time-turner.

She ignored the doubtful voice in the back of her head that said she couldn't have destroyed the time-turner if there was a pile of niffler

carcasses in the cavern when she'd arrived. Not unless she had escaped and then requested that a Ministry official kill some nifflers and plant them at a certain time to protect the time stream.

There was no more time for doubts, though, as Pettigrew made his move. His fist shot forward toward her and she had no trouble at all dodging to the left, the strength from her magic lending her a speed that she considered acceptable in the circumstances. His fist flew past her ear and she thrust her own toward his solar plexus. She connected solidly, pulling a gasp from Pettigrew as he retracted his fist instinctively. On its way back toward him, however, the fist opened and a spray of dark powder caught her square in the nose and eyes.

Sleeping Dust, was all she had time to comprehend before the world went black.

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She awoke feeling surprisingly good-not good, she amended, but better than she had in a while. How long had she been asleep? Her mind went back to the last thing she remembered and her blood ran cold. She sat up swiftly and looked around her. She was still in the cavern. She frantically looked to where the pile of nifflers had sat-there. She slumped in relief. They were still there. Then she hadn't been taken back in-time. There were only four. Where was-

A sickening squeal followed by an ugly squelch had her turning slowly to the other side of the room. Pettigrew held the last niffler by the tail and his wand had just perforated its guts from groin to liver.

She glared at the Animagus as he tossed the last carcass carelessly into the pile. How infuriating that he would act so casual about killing things. She supposed she shouldn't be surprised. He'd just killed her, after all. She started to shake as it sank in that she was truly

finished. Come Tuesday morning, there would be seven of her in existence. Her core would resonate wildly and, if a regular wizard could expect to be crippled or maimed by the experience, she could only imagine what the resonance of a core as big as hers would cause. She imagined being split into a thousand different pieces and cringed. What an awful way to go. She wondered how much time she had left.

"How long..." She couldn't complete the sentence; instead she coughed through her disused throat uncontrollably.

"You've been asleep almost an entire day," Pettigrew told her, wiping his knife off slowly. "It's Friday afternoon. You missed my nifflers' excellent work. Oh, well. I suppose you'll get to see it firsthand, won't you?"

He gestured to a spot a few feet away, where there was a good-sized hole in the dirt floor of the cavern. But where did it go? Why would he bother digging a hole underneath the hole they were already in? Her mind caught up a moment later. They were about to overlap their own time stream, of course. She and Peter would show up in the cavern Friday evening, which meant the two of them couldn't also be there, obviously. He was going to move her to a lower chamber of the same prison. He must have had the nifflers building it all day.

She moved forward to look down the hole with a grimace. It was much smaller than this cavern. Her gaze flicked to her folded robes, pockets stuffed with what was left of her useful potions stash. She needed to take that with her. Even if she only lived another three days, she could at least make them comfortable days. No one deserved to die in pain.

She looked around the cavern for her magic and found it unexpectedly settled near the dirt roof, rather docile. Had it calmed down while she was asleep? Was it running out of steam? A rumbling feeling of disagreement rolled through her. It was waiting. For what?

"It's been quite well-behaved," Pettigrew told her, smirking triumphantly. "That Sleeping Dust really did the trick. Too bad your family will never know how useful I found their little joke product." He laughed at the irony of her attempt being thwarted by a Marauder product in particular, then looked up at where her magic hovered like an overgrown bat. "I've let it be and its strength seems to be waning. Soon, it will be easy to control. First, we must move locations, though."

She ignored him as he went about the room, erasing all signs of their having been there. She had to marvel at how different the cavern looked, just one week earlier. She had forgotten how smooth the floor had been before so many Protection Potions had been pored on it. The whole cavern smelled cleaner, which she supposed reflected the lack of a week's worth of waste buildup. She wished she could say the same about herself. She stank royally and her teeth were so fuzzy she thought they might be growing a winter coat.

"Feeling nostalgic?" Pettigrew asked, rather cruelly. "Enjoy your last look around. You won't see it again."

"You seem pretty sure," Rigel said, her voice empty.

"I am," Pettigrew said flatly. He beckoned her forward toward the hole. She pondered whether she wanted to go quietly or not. She felt like resisting on principle, at this point, but she also wanted to keep her stash of potion vials. In the end, she decided it wasn't worth the fight. She gathered her robes into her arms slowly, as though reluctant. Really, she was just hiding the faint sound of clinking. She came to the edge of the hole and looked down. It wasn't more than four feet down. She wouldn't even be able to stand up in the lower cavern, it seemed. She hesitated at the edge, really not wanting to go down there, but a push from Pettigrew solved her reticence. Belatedly, she realized that the wards must have been modified sometime while she was asleep so that they stretched far enough down to cover the lower level. Otherwise, she could never have passed through the floors without being accompanied by Pettigrew in

his Animagus form. *When was this guy going to make a mistake?* she thought with utter frustration as she fell.

She dropped to her knees and moved out of the way before Pettigrew could toss the lantern on top of her. Instead of that, he tossed her bag down, which she just managed to catch before it hit the ground. She clutched it to her, backing away as far as she could. It wasn't far. The entire hole seemed to be ten feet across. When Pettigrew jumped into the hole without the lantern, she frowned until she realized with dismay that the lantern had been in the upper chamber when they'd first arrived. They couldn't take it with them.

Pettigrew closed the ceiling behind them with the jewel, its light the only thing distinguishing the space around them. She had to wonder what exactly his plan consisted of, at this point. As far as she could tell, he had brought no provisions. She spotted a hole close to where she was sitting and supposed he must have created an alternate exit for himself from this lower chamber. Was he planning on doing something similar to the week before, leaving every day or so and gathering sustenance? That would get old quickly, she thought-then again, she probably wouldn't be around the whole week, this time.

"The last few days I've wondered where the smell was coming from," Pettigrew said casually as he took out his wand. "I thought it was just you, at first. It wasn't until I realized I was going to build this room that I recognized the scent as death." Her breath caught in her throat as he turned to her with cold eyes. "You're going to die here. Haven't you noticed the rotting garbage smell at all over your own stench? That was you, I'm afraid."

It couldn't be. Her stomach rebelled in protest. She'd been smelling... her own corpse? That was beyond twisted. She watched in horror as Pettigrew set up a Secrecy Charm. She didn't know why he bothered, as no one would hear them fifteen feet below ground, but then she realized that it was so the versions of themselves that would shortly be above them wouldn't hear anything. And they wouldn't be able to hear them, either. It was so creepy to think of two parallel versions of herself existing so close, with one having no idea

of the tragic future that awaited her. She felt an acute sympathy for the her of one week ago. She'd been so sure that if she was patient enough and clever enough she could get out of anything. How ridiculous. In the end, her greatest ruse had been one of self-deception.

What did she think, that just because Riddle Jr. had been arrogant and careless that every villain was so? That just because Pettigrew wasn't *impressive* meant he wasn't *dangerous*? Wasn't ruthless? How foolish she'd been. And all the time she'd been thinking he was the fool. She wondered morbidly if it was the destabilization of her core on Tuesday that killed her, or if Pettigrew wrangled control of her magic before then and did her in himself. She'd noticed his hesitation and reluctance fading away over the past week. He was coming into this whole 'evildoer' thing. He'd probably have no compunction about killing her himself, at this point.

He certainly seemed to be in no hurry, as he curled into a ball to sleep on the other side of the small hole. She knew how endless time could seem, when you held its lever in your hand. She thought he was putting an awful lot of faith in his personal ward, however. Wards that weren't tied to an anchor of nature didn't typically last very long. She figured he had a few days at best until the runes were corrupted by being exposed all the time. And that was without her magic hammering away at it.

She supposed it didn't matter. Her magic hadn't been doing any hammering lately. She looked up at it, curled in the dome of the new ceiling, and wondered if it had given up. A thrumming negation went through her bones, but that was all the answer she received. She settled down into a kind of detached depression. She didn't really want to sleep. Not if she only had a few more days left to live. What did she want to do? Cure lycanthropy, maybe. She wondered if she thought about it for three days straight if she could come up with a new idea. Then she closed her eyes in new despair.

Even if she cured lycanthropy in her mind, what would she do with her new idea? Scratch it into the dirt? No one would find it. All her

ideas would die with her. It would be better not to try, than to risk getting a stroke of brilliance only to die with the knowledge that it would never be realized.

She heard soft snores fill the small cavern and had to think wryly that that was just the icing on the bloody cake. In the moment between that thought and the next snore, her tiny world exploded into chaos.

She was blown back into the wall as her magic descended like a bird of prey without warning. She couldn't see anything in the darkness, but she could feel the incredible wake of the jet stream even at its peripheries. Pettigrew cried out in surprise at being woken by such a battering and a moment later the jewel glowed with light as Pettigrew attempted belatedly to fight back against the sudden assault.

He was pinned to the ground, she realized, amazed. The force of the magic coming down on him was so strong that it was keeping her pressed back against the dirt. How powerful the concentrated propulsion must be. She could see Pettigrew struggling against the current, trying to move out of the way or even lift his hand with the jewel against the magic. He couldn't, though, and the longer he stayed splayed on the dirt like some kind of rare insect on a collector's board, the more amazed she became. Where was her magic getting this power? Had it been biding its time, growing stronger? She didn't put that kind of strategy past her magic, exactly, but she couldn't help but wonder if the influx of freedom was affecting it. It also seemed rather clever to wait until Pettigrew was asleep to launch a counterattack. Her magic was many things, but *patient*? Not the magic she knew.

Sparks of magic began to fly from where Pettigrew was pressed to the floor and her eyes widened as she realized what she was seeing. The ward Pettigrew had constructed around his person was being forcefully ground against the ward around the chamber that ran through the floor beneath him. The magic in each ward was attempting to neutralize the other and, even before it happened, she could predict the result: the lesser ward would give-in this case, the one around Pettigrew.

It was *brilliant* . She was terrified and impressed all at once. Was it a coincidence or had her magic come up with that strategy on its own? Caught up in her speculation, she almost didn't recall the oath that she'd made. Should she do something? It was clear from the amount of malevolence coming from her magic what would happen when Pettigrew's personal ward fell. She wasn't breaking the letter of the oath by doing nothing, unless the magic interpreted her silence as allowance or encouragement to do as it pleased. She grimaced. Perhaps she would have to do something after all.

She almost didn't want to. She felt a curious ennui that had been tightening its hold on her ever since she realized that her death was a very likely possibility. What did it matter if the oath turned on her for breaking it, at this point?

Pettigrew's cry of pain and fear moved something within her that she hadn't known still existed, after everything that happened. Even if death awaited her, even if the oath didn't technically require her to come to Pettigrew's defense, she was still Rigel Black. Sitting silently while her magic killed someone was not something she could do, no matter the circumstances that preceded it or those that would follow. She was better than that, even now.

Her body, while much recovered either from her magic's assistance in her stand against Pettigrew or the long stasis that had followed, was not up to the task of physically rescuing Pettigrew from her magic's wrath. She could not control it with mere willpower, either, at this point-she felt drained, emotionally and mentally, and probably wouldn't succeed in controlling a wounded puppy in her current state.

There was something else, though, that she might be able to do.

It had come to her at some point in the past few days, the slow, steady growth of an idea that she'd tucked carefully away from conscious thought, just in case she needed a last resort against her magic's complete separation.

Rigel sank backwards into her own mind, swimming mentally away from reality with relief that was tempered by the knowledge of what she needed to do. The last time she'd seen her magic, it had looked different to her mental senses: visibly changed by the suppressor she had worn. In reality, the ring was only a physical manifestation of the runic configuration that locked her magic away. What could be done physically could be done mentally, in the realm of magic. She thought, with the proper application of Occlumency, she might be able to replicate the effects of the suppressor on the sun in her space room. She could build a cage, perhaps, or some other sort of mental barrier that would have the same result as the physical barrier the ring had created. In theory, at least. And why did it always seem to come down to that? She really ought to experiment more before she was caught in do-or-die scenarios. Or do- *and* -die, in this case.

Her mindscape was bright. She knew it was the artificial, sourceless light of her own imagination, but after so many days in near-darkness it was like finding religion. The mountain appeared just as it had when she'd left it last, snowy and still. She flitted into the mountainside cave and noted distractedly the construct that sat in an armchair with blank eyes, an empty shell that she hadn't ever been able to fill. Another project that would go unfinished.

The tunnels under the trapdoor were warm. No, she noticed with a slow frown. They were hot. She began walking faster, now concerned that all was not right in her mental sphere. Temperature wasn't logically consistent in a mental world. Unless one specifically constructed the likeness of the sensation, the mind would be devoid of that sense. She could think of only one thing that might produce true heat in a mindscape-magic.

The door to her space room looked innocuous, but some premonition snagged her attention as she touched the doorknob. There was a sudden shock of energy, like the shot of heat that might be felt in the knob of a door that separated one from a house fire.

She couldn't run the other way, though. This was her mind. If there was something wrong, she wanted to know what it was.

She flung open the door to a conflagration. In the center, where the sun of her magic should have been rotating, there was a massive tornado of fire. It swept all the orbs in the room around it in a frantic tailspin, and everywhere flames lashed out and licked at the edges of the room. At the opening of the door, the entire scene seemed to contract in surprise before expanding at a rate that flung her back into the passage with the force of its approach. She stumbled backwards and turned on her heels, sprinting back up the corridor with speed born of desperation. What was that? Her magic had completely broken from its regular mold. There was barely a cohesive shape remaining to the firestorm that she'd witnessed in that room. Had it really run so utterly wild since being set free at last by the breaking of her suppressor?

She jumped the rungs up into her potions lab frantically, flames licking at her heels, and slammed the trapdoor shut behind her to buy herself a little time. *What now?* she thought. Her plan was completely moot. The fire would consume her if she even tried to contain it. All she could do was slow its progress-

Even that thought was interrupted by the roiling appearance of fire spreading out from beneath the area rug that covered the trap door. She noticed with confusion that the fire wasn't burning anything. The rug remained completely unaffected. It was simply spreading, much as the sleeping sickness had. Would the spread of her magic in such a way also correspond to the loss of control of her body? She hoped not. She stuck a toe nervously in the direction of the closest crawling ember, only to jerk her leg back with a hiss as the magic burnt her. So she was not as immune as her mindscape was. She supposed that made sense. There was no point in her magic destroying the mental landscape-its target was herself, the consciousness that represented the will that had suppressed it for so long, in one form or another.

As her potions lab became infested with fire across every surface, she retreated onto the mountain. Maybe the snow would slow the fire down.

It didn't.

Ice melted away before the unstoppable march of fire. Step by step it chased her further up the mountain, until she finally looked up to find it sliding down the mountain top toward her as well, having crested the other side of the peak to encircle her. With the diameter of snow between her and her magic evaporating beneath her feet, Rigel slowly sat down and put her head in her hands in utter defeat.

So, this is the end. Burned to death in my own mind by my own magic. I didn't see that coming, so at least it was unpredictable. She let out a harsh laugh at the idea that an element of surprise somehow brought some quality of interest to her death. She slammed her fist angrily against the mountain beneath her. What kind of contest did she think she was winning- *what is that?*

She looked down at where her fist had landed on something that didn't feel like rock at all. It was squishy and black. A leftover piece of the Sleeping Sickness? No, it wasn't that. It was a small orb, half-buried in the rock and still dripping from the snow that had melted away to reveal it. Distracted from her impending doom, she dug her fingers around the sphere and pried it loose. It looked like a memory orb, but it was pure black. She'd never seen one that color, and what was it doing out here, anyway? All her memories were in the space room. She was sure she'd never even *seen* this one before...

She pulled it closer to her face, trying to make out the memory within. Usually she could tell which one an orb contained by peering into it, but this one seemed to be completely opaque. She shook it a little, wondering if somehow the memory had become congealed by being left under the snow for so long. Instantly, the mindscape around her faded away. She had triggered the memory, she realized as her vision cleared. She looked around, curious. All thoughts of the

fire raging out of control in her mind or the magic equally out of control in the cavern faded away as she was immersed in the past.

She stepped out of fog and into the receiving room at Grimmauld Place. There were several adults standing around the room, easily recognizable despite their younger appearances. Sirius was there with Diana, whom she almost didn't recognize. It felt like so long since she'd last seen the beautiful witch, faded and wan, in St. Mungo's disease ward. The couple stood along with James, Lily, and Alice Longbottom. She looked around for herself, knowing that the memory could only have been in her mind if it was *hers* .

She found herself on the other side of the room, with little black pigtails that she could recall clearly telling her mother she would never wear again on her seventh birthday. She would be six, then, or slightly younger. Archie was squatting on the floor next to her, his chubby fingers drawing a terribly unfortunate picture of a griffin in the dust. His imaginary friend, she remembered dimly. He'd named it something ridiculous, like Finny, and for years had required a seat at every meal to be saved for the invisible griffin, who only ate raisins and whole sticks of butter.

Leaning close to the picture, nodding interestedly with each disproportionately added feature, was a child who, upon closer inspection, she gathered to be Neville Longbottom. He was cheerful-looking and gap-toothed, and he asserted himself quickly by adding a sword and shield to the picture, laughing. "It's the Sword of Griffindor, see?"

"He needs a bad guy," young Harry said, poking her own finger into the dust. "To fight."

She watched as her six-year-old self drew a monster with a plethora of teeth. The Floo going off didn't disturb the children, but it caused her to look around in time to see Mrs. Longbottom taking her leave. She had dropped Neville off to play, then. Her vague suspicions confirmed, she watched eagerly to see what would happen next. She

had no memory of this day and she desperately wanted to know *why* .

Sirius called over to the children. "Why don't you all run along and play upstairs in Archie's room?"

Archie and Harry jumped up immediately, Neville only a short beat behind. They raced out of the room and up the narrow staircase. When they got to Archie's room, they slowed to a stop. "We could play vampires and werewolves," Neville suggested, looking between them uncertainly as neither Harry nor Archie made any move to go into the room.

"We don't play that," Archie said, frowning. They hadn't, because Remus' condition was never hidden from them, even at a young age.

"Let's play in the attic," Harry said, smiling slowly as Archie continued to frown.

"We're not allowed..." He drew out the objection in a considering way. He always did that, she remembered, and they always played in the attic anyway.

"What's in the attic?" Neville asked, looking excited.

"Monsters," Harry whispered dramatically.

Neville giggled. "Let's go see!"

Archie finally grinned. "Yeah, let's go. Dad won't check on us for awhile."

They traipsed up another couple of stories, winding through the maze-like house until they came to the door that led up to the attic where Sirius and Diana stored all the old things they didn't want to leave lying about, but also didn't feel right getting rid of. She remembered playing there many times as a child. It was full of old

crotchety portraits, forgotten pieces of Black Family memorabilia, and furniture that no longer fit in the rest of the house.

She and Archie had treated it like their own private clubhouse, when they were little. She didn't see what was so unusual about them taking Neville up there. What had happened that was worth forgetting about? And how had she forgotten in the first place?

She watched little Archie try the door and huff, "It's locked." She expected them to turn around and find something else to do-it was what they'd always done when Sirius remembered to renew the locking charm on the attic door. Instead, her younger self stepped forward with a smile.

"No problem," Harry said, reaching forward with her hand. She didn't touch the door, but she scrunched her face into a frown and glared at it for a long moment. To her amazement, the door swung open before her six-year-old self's smug smile. She'd never done that... had she?

"Woah, cool!" Neville said, clapping enthusiastically.

"Come on, show off," Archie laughed, leading the way up the attic stairs. They filed into the attic and Neville gaped appreciatively at the piles of random things scattered in every direction.

"There's so much stuff," he said, eyes wide. "What should we play?"

"Dress up!" Harry said at once. It had been her favorite game. She rushed across the attic to a trunk that sat on an old end table. Throwing it open, the young girl pulled out a long, black cloak with purple fur around the collar. She draped it around her in a pool of silk, lifting her chin haughtily and saying, "I am the great dragon-rider, Targof! I will fly to the moon!"

Archie pulled a hat off a nearby coatrack and flicked the feather out of his face with a grin. "Oh yeah? Well I'm Baniby the Beast Tamer! Uh, Neville, who are you going to be?"

Neville searched the room quickly and grabbed a large golden sheet off the painting behind him. "I am Merlin! My magic cloak of gold protects me from all evil!"

Archie frowned. "You can't be Merlin. Then you'd always win."

"Not if I'm Morgana!" Harry shouted, pointing her finger dramatically at Neville, who looked quite ridiculous swathed in a giant gold toga. "I will defeat you, Merlin, and Camelot will be mine at last! Haha!"

They played in this vein for a long while, each new character becoming more outlandish than the last. She watched them with a frown, still not seeing anything unusual about this memory. It was almost touchingly innocent, in fact.

Eventually the play dissolved into a spirited conversation about what they were going to be when they grew up. "I'll be a Knight of Gryffindor!" Neville cried, brandishing an imaginary wand. "I'll zap my enemies away and be the strongest wizard in all the land."

"What if they sneak up behind you?" Harry said slyly, climbing onto a table and jumping at Neville from above. "Attack!"

Neville leapt aside, pointing his imaginary wand in her direction. "Die, evil wizard!"

Harry pretended to get stunned, stiffening and falling backwards dramatically. She watched in horror as her younger self swooned directly into the path of a ceremonial sword set precariously on a stack of dining room chairs.

Her younger self was not impaled, however. An invisible force caught her just before she hit the pointed tip, pushing her gently back to her feet so smoothly that her younger self giggled and went right back to playing, not noticing anything odd, apparently.

What was going on? Her magic hadn't been that way. She didn't remember anything like the benevolent watchfulness she had just

seen.

"This is fun," Neville said after a little bit, breathing heavily and plopping down to rest. "Are you guys gonna be in Gryffindor when you're grown up, too? We should be friends forever."

"Yeah!" Archie said, grinning ear to ear. "We can be just like our dads were-the Marauders return! Right, Harry?"

Harry nodded so fast her pigtails bounced. Then she paused. "What if I'm in Ravenclaw? Is that okay?"

"Of course," Archie said, laughing. "Maybe I'll be in Ravenclaw, too."

"No, you have to be in Gryffindor with me," Neville said, frowning.

Archie looked torn. "Well-"

"Oh, do *shut up*," a sharp voice cut across their conversation.

"Who's there?" Neville asked, looking frightened. "Is it a monster?"

"It's just a dumb portrait," Archie said, folding his arms. "We must have woke one up."

"We have portraits at my house, too!" Neville said. His fear had gone as quickly as it had come. "They remind me to do stuff sometimes, like tie my shoes or make my bed, and my great-great-great-great aunt Minnie tells me where Papa hides the crisps."

"These ones are mean," Harry whispered, unsuccessfully trying to keep her voice down.

"Yeah, and some say things to Harry that are really rude," Archie agreed.

"Where is it?" Neville said, frowning fiercely. Archie pointed at the portrait Neville had uncovered earlier. She moved through the memory to take a closer look, but she didn't recognize the portrait as

one of the ones, like Walburga, who used to yell at her. Neville marched right up to the painting and stuck his finger out angrily. "Don't you be mean to Harry. If you don't have nice things to say, then you shouldn't say anything, that's what Papa says."

She smiled at the future Gryffindor's swift defense. Her younger self just looked worriedly between Neville and the painting. The man depicted had long, dark brown hair and a close-trimmed beard. He sneered at Neville without restraint, drawling. "How the House of Longbottom has fallen."

"Be quiet!" Harry said. "We'll cover you back up if you don't."

"Go ahead," the painting sneered. "Anything would be preferable to watching the utter desecration of the House of Black. Children running wild. Halfblood whelps polluting the air with their obscene naivety."

"I'm not a... a *whelp*," Harry said quietly. She wondered if she'd even known what that word meant, at that age.

"You are an impertinent fool," the portrait said, painted eyes cold. "And worse, you're an *ignorant*, impertinent fool."

"Am not," Harry whispered, bright green eyes beginning to fill with tears.

"You speak of attending Hogwarts with your little friends as though they allow your kind to disgrace those halls," the portrait snapped.

"They-they do," Archie piped up, uncertainly. "Uncle Remus went and he wasn't... um... fullblood."

"Yeah!" Neville said, nodding fiercely. "Everyone can go to Hogwarts. You just have to be really good and eat all your vegit-bles."

"Haven't you heard?" The portrait smirked. "Those days are over. How sad that the Heir to the House of Black is less informed than the

paintings on his walls." The long-haired man began to laugh darkly, louder and louder.

"Shut up!" Harry shouted, her little fists in tiny balls. "I am too gonna go to Hogwarts."

"You will never set so much as a toe inside the wards, *halfblood* ." The portrait's face twisted in disgust.

"You're a *liar*," Harry growled. "I can do whatever I *want* ." At the last word, flames engulfed the painting without warning, sending Archie and Neville skipping backwards with shouts of alarm. Little Harry stared angrily at the portrait, watching it burn. It *screamed* and Harry only glared at it harder. "You're just a stupid painting," the young girl muttered. "I don't have to listen to you."

Archie and Neville ran to hide behind a nearby stack of boxes, both whimpering and looking terrified.

"Stop! Stop it, *please*," the painting begged, even as oil and canvas melted and twisted together.

"I don't want to," Harry said, her lower lip trembling. She watched solemnly as the rest of the painting was engulfed. Its subject's cries gradually faded as the painting crumbled to ashes, and Harry turned wet eyes to look for her friends. A few leftover embers from her magic jumped from the pile of ash to her hands and traveled up her shoulders in a parody of a hug. It made her look like she was aflame.

She watched her younger self peer about in confusion, wondering where Archie and Neville had gone, and was utterly speechless. How had such a thing happened? Was it real?

Young Harry called out, "Hello? Where'd you go?"

"Is it gone?" Neville's voice was small and timid, nothing like the boisterous fearlessness he'd shown just minutes earlier.

"Yeah, the portrait is all gone," Harry said.

"No, the *fire*," Neville whispered, peeking out from behind the box.

"Huh?" Harry looked down at the flames that had settled into a warm glow about her shoulders.

"AH!" Neville ducked back into hiding, "Make it go away!"

Harry frowned, looking at herself in confusion. "I... I don't know how."

Archie crept out from behind his box slowly. He eyed the ashes on the floor with a low moan. "Oh, no. We're gonna be in so much trouble."

"We can sweep them up," Harry suggested, yawning a little. She wondered if the potent use of magic had tired her younger self out.

"No, we hafta tell," Neville said, darting from the box to stand behind Archie, eyeing Harry with obvious fear. "When there's a fire you hafta tell a grown up."

She watched her younger self's eyes go wide with panic. "We can't tell!"

"Maybe we should," Archie said, biting his lip.

"No!" Harry said loudly. The magic on her shoulders moved restlessly and Neville squeaked, dipping his head behind Archie's shoulders. Even Archie looked a little scared.

She moved to her younger self's side and placed a phantom hand on the little girl's shoulder. The emotions that flooded her were heartbreaking. She was confused, scared, tired, and hurt. She didn't like how Archie was looking at her. She didn't want to tell. What if Mummy looked at her like that? What if Daddy did, too? Shame made her tremble hard and start to cry. Why did she get so angry? Archie said mean things sometimes, but she never got mad like that at him. It wasn't fair. She didn't mean to.

Archie held out a calming hand, even as the little boy swallowed hard. "It's okay, Harry. Dad won't be too mad. He doesn't like these paintings."

"You can't tell," Harry said desperately. "I-I won't let you."

The magic moved before any of them could react. It swept Archie and Neville up into a glowing fog. Both boys slumped, their eyes closing slowly as their bodies fell to the floor. Harry gasped and ran forward, shaking their shoulders frantically. "Oh, no, no, no. Wake up. Wake *up* ."

The little girl started to cry, fat tears falling to collect under her chin. She watched her cry, finally starting to understand the nature of the memory. She found herself waiting with bated breath for the little boys to wake up, even though she knew they both ended up just fine.

Not long after, Sirius came hurrying into the attic with a worried expression. "Archie? Harry?"

"Over here," Harry said, sniffing. "They won't wake up."

She had never seen Sirius's face so white. He fell to his knees beside his son and checked his pulse frantically. After a long moment he sucked in air and sat back on his ankles, running a hand through his hair. "They're sleeping, Harry. It's okay."

"Really?" Hope came back to Harry's eyes. "They're okay?"

"Yes," Sirius said, now eyeing her sternly. "How many times do I have to tell you two not to play up here? It's incredibly dangerous. I don't even know everything that's up here. You could come into contact with *anything* ."

"I'm sorry," Harry began to cry again. "I didn't mean to. I didn't mean to hurt anyone."

"Oh, Harry, it's not your fault," Sirius said, looking immediately regretful. "I just want you lot to be safe. Run and get Aunt Diana, okay? I'll stay with the boys."

Harry nodded and raced from the room and the memory faded. Everything dissolved into fog, then reformed in a darkened corridor. She spotted her younger self standing silently in the shadows before a cracked doorway. The light inside the room illuminated Sirius talking quietly with Neville's parents.

"How is he feeling?" Sirius was asking, voice tight with concern.

"He seems just fine," Alice said. It was clear she was attempting to be reassuring while confused herself. "He doesn't remember what happened, though."

"Neither does Archie," Sirius said. "He woke up just fine, but can't recall most of the day. I asked Harry what happened, but she didn't want to talk about it. I think whatever happened scared her pretty bad." Sirius blew out a breath. "There's all kind of junk in there. They could have come across anything from sleeping powder to a cursed cummerbund. I don't even know how they got up there. I *just* renewed the locking charm this morning. I'm so sorry, Alice, Frank. I should have been watching them more closely."

"Neville is a very curious child," Frank Longbottom said, smiling ruefully. "He gets into scrapes all the time. It wasn't your fault. We'll keep a close eye on him, but I don't think there was any real damage done, whatever it was."

"Still..." Sirius trailed off with a frown. "I'll let you know if I find out what it was. Whatever did it needs to be taken out of this house, before it hurts someone else."

Harry smothered a gasp and ran back down the corridor with fear and self-loathing written all over her face.

The scene dissolved and solidified in Archie's room. By the light of a night light she could see Archie sprawled on a pile of blankets on the floor, snoring. Her younger self was lying awake beside him. They must have decided to have a sleepover that night.

Tears dripped silently into the pillow beneath her as Harry stared up at the ceiling with wide, solemn eyes. A stirring of wind brushed against her cheek, ruffling her hair in an almost caressing breeze. Harry bit her lip and shook her head sharply. "Go away," she whispered, her voice choked with sadness.

The wind picked up restlessly around her and Archie stirred slightly in his sleep. "No, go away," Harry hissed into the dark. "Go away and don't come back!"

The wind fell still and Archie sat up with a befuddled, "Wha-?" He looked around and saw Harry awake. "What's wrong?" he asked blearily.

"Nothing," Harry said, turning over so that her tearstained face was hidden. "Nothing's wrong. Go to sleep, Archie."

She knelt down by her six-year-old self's curled up form and patted her head helplessly. At the brief touch, the emotions running through the child blasted through her. Sorrow and shame mixed together with fear of what her family would think if they found out. She wished the day hadn't happened. She just wanted to forget, and she wanted it to never happen again.

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The memory stuttered to a halt and Rigel opened her eyes to an alien landscape. The wintery snow of her cold mountain was gone and in its place a lake of golden fire bathed the rock and warmed the air. She took in a deep breath and wiped the tears from her avatar's

face. The fire around her had ceased expanding, having claimed every inch of physical territory that her mind would allow. It licked at the mountainside beneath her feet, but she felt no pain. She felt entirely calm, for the first time in a long while.

She understood, now, what she'd been so afraid of all this time. She wasn't afraid of her magic. She was afraid of her own anger. Afraid and ashamed of herself for something that had, in retrospect, been a simple case of overzealous accidental magic. The feeling of dread that crept inside her at the very idea of her magic being more powerful than she liked had stemmed from an infected memory that had festered, like a sore, beneath the skin of her consciousness for all these years.

It relaxed her, to finally know that fear and be able to confront it, to see it for what it was. She could see, now, that it was a child's fear, grown larger and more important than it was by an aura of mystery and a lack of understanding. She was afraid of what other people would think of her, and of her magic, and that was okay. It didn't mean she had to be afraid of *herself*. She was not a scared little girl anymore. She had grown a lot since then. She was not going to go to her death pale and frightened, a rabbit before a wolf. She refused to let an old memory make a coward of her for a single minute more.

She summoned every ounce of determination she possessed. It was hard. She was tired and drained emotionally. She wanted to curl up and sleep. Instead, she forced herself to remember *other* memories. She brought to mind the stubbornness and gumption that had brought a halfblood girl to Hogwarts. She thought of her determination to study under Master Snape, of all the bitter sacrifices she made along the way-her relationship with her parents, her appearance, her chance to be recognized by Professor Snape on her *own* terms, and more. She focused on the fortitude that brought her through obstacles like a basilisk, and on the everyday perseverance it took to lie, over and over, to the people she loved and respected the most.

All of this she drew into her consciousness, like a tree sapping strength from the earth. She channeled it, determined that now, for once and for all, her magic would bow to her-not to her will, a fickle, fleeting, changeable thing, but to her *principles* . Her magic would bow not to her desires, but to everything she stood for and believed in. To her ironclad character traits. To the part of her that refused to let her magic kill even the man who had imprisoned and tormented her.

You will not hurt anyone else, she thought with all the fierceness in her heart. You will not disobey me. You will act in a way deserving of the power you represent. Starting now, you will be held to the standards to which I hold myself. Irrevocably. Forever.

The fire slid away before her avatar, as krill before a whale. She threw a hand imperiously away from her and the magic was thrown from her mountain in a single swift movement, a blanket cast off after a long sleep. She banished it back into the inner reaches of her mind, following, unhurried, behind its retreat. When she reached the space room, she took in the newly compressed sun, burning brightly and flexing a bit defiantly, as she approached. She sunk her hands into the fire unhesitatingly.

"I'm sorry for how I've been acting," she told it seriously. "But I'm not afraid of you anymore. So you have to act differently, too, now."

The warmth that came emanating from the sun wasn't entirely forgiving, but it was welcoming. She smiled, just a tiny bit regretful. Imagine how much happier she might have been, if she had been wiser sooner.

She whispered a soft goodbye, then let her mindscape slip away and crawled her way back, however reluctantly, to her physical body. She would have liked to stay there, in the peace of her mind, but there was reality to be faced. And she was finally ready to face it.

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He could feel the inevitability of his struggle. He felt it in his bones, crushed beneath the weight of a magic he was only now re-estimating. He felt it in his heart, worn thin and flinching by all he had given to this task-this impossible, doomed task. The Jewel was silent and cold in his hand. It had assisted him, at first, but as the tide of magic was proven stronger than Pettigrew's ability to fight it off, the support of the Jewel had waned.

He supposed that was all he needed to know that he had failed. He couldn't fulfill the prophecy after all. His great plans would come to nothing. When the energies of the Jewel turned against him, taking strength instead of giving it, he mustered no surprise. He felt nothing but bitter resignation. Even his despair was gone and he had to wonder how much of that desperation had been the Jewel, pushing him forward on a path he could neither see nor understand.

At least, he thought faintly as he caught sight of the unconscious boy by the light of the treacherous Jewel, *I did not kill the boy after all* . He would at least die without that sin on his soul. He knew the boy didn't have much hope of getting rescued, but, he thought, he hadn't directly killed him. That would count for something. Wouldn't it?

No answer came to him as his life force poured out, sucked greedily away by the very artifact that had promised his victory and engineered his defeat. What an ambiguous thing, power had turned out to be.

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[end of chapter fourteen].

A/N: This is not the end of the book. I split this last chapter in half, so don't bother reviewing this one; just keep on reading, lovely readers.

Chapter 15

The Ambiguous Artifice:

Chapter 15:

She opened her eyes slowly, squinting against the bright glow of the jewel across the small room. The air was still, her magic having been completely absorbed back into her in the wake of her newfound control. She expected to wake to Pettigrew's renewed attempt to absorb her power; with it no longer out of her control, she would have to fight off any attempt by the jewel to subjugate her magic personally.

Nothing stirred in the cavern, though, besides the eerily pulsating light of the jewel itself. She pushed up from the ground and crawled over to where Pettigrew was lying, fear growing in her heart. Had her magic killed him before she got it under control? She had felt so much triumph in finally gaining mastery of her own power, and to know that it had been too little too late to prevent the death of another would be devastating. She had to know, however.

She poked his leg cautiously. There was no response. She took the wrist closer to her and pressed on the pulse point. She waited. And waited. She let out a breath that was mostly a sob. The man was dead. Her eyes strained in the flickering light to try and see what had caused it. She didn't know what she expected to see. A blow to the head, maybe, or a neck broken under the pressure of the ward bursting. What she did see sent her reeling in shocked alarm. The body before her looked nothing like Pettigrew. In the place of a middle-aged man of rotund plainness was a dry, shriveled shell of a human being. It looked like the corpse of an old man, or of someone who'd been starved slowly to death over months. The skin hung loose, the muscles were hollowed out, and all the moisture and vitality seemed to have been sucked dry in the moments before his

death. He'd been *mummified* . Had her magic done such a gruesome thing? She wanted to throw up.

The jewel pulsed suddenly in Pettigrew's hand, and then the hand began to move. She scrambled back in raw disbelief. *He-he's alive!?*

The jewel pried itself free from Pettigrew's grip and rose into the air of its own accord before her. She felt conflicting waves of relief and fear wash over her simultaneously. Relief that Pettigrew was not an Inferius, fear that the jewel was *levitating all by itself*.

It floated toward her and she backed away again until she was trapped between it and the wall of dirt behind her. "Stay away," she said, thoroughly creeped out. She felt her magic respond, almost carefully slow, flowing helpfully from her core to her hands. She smiled and threw up a shield between her and the jewel. She wasn't the victim in this scenario anymore.

The jewel passed straight through the shield as though it wasn't there. She flinched as it came at her, but it slowed to a stop just before her face. Its glow dimmed and it came closer. She moved her head away but it followed her. What on earth did it want? Couldn't it see she didn't want anything to do with it?

It rose to the level of her forehead, then bumped against it. She swatted it away but it came back, faster this time, and then she felt a pressure against her Occlumency shields. Her eyes flashed in anger. No. She wasn't about to be made a power-mad mind slave like Pettigrew. She grasped the jewel in an attempt to fling it across the room but it would not budge. She thrust her magic at it blindly but it did no good. The jewel was made of some other kind of magic, something just as implacable and resolute as her own, but which operated by different laws.

What do you desire? The voice was echoing through her mind, not her ears.

Nothing, she tried. *Get away* .

It persisted, filling her mind with a gentle heat even as she tried to block it out. *What shall you control?*

I don't want control over anything, she insisted. *Only myself*, whispered a part of her she was not quick enough to stifle.

Done . The jewel pressed harder against her forehead and then, to her horror, began sinking slowly into her skin. What the bloody hell was it *doing*?

The tingling feeling that crept across her mental senses was all too familiar. Enraged, she dived into her mindscape with a vengeance. She had just reclaimed that! No artifact, however ancient, was going to butt in now.

She found the jewel on her mountaintop, wandering about uncertainly in search of something.

"Get out of my mind!" she cried, surging forward.

She caught it in both hands and through her skin she felt it say, *You desire self-control. I will control you.*

"You certainly won't," she spat, willing her consciousness back to reality. She was getting this thing out of her head now.

When she opened her eyes, her hands were empty. Damn. How was she going to get it out? Physically carrying it out did nothing, and magic slid right off of it. She hurried back to her mindscape again, thinking that she was going to get very good at swift meditation if this went on much longer.

She caught up with it in her potions lab. "Get. Out."

She grabbed at it but it skipped out of her reach. She dove, not dissuaded in the least, and fainted left before grabbing it as it flew right. *I have already agreed to this purpose*, the jewel protested as

she glared at it. She could not believe she was arguing with a rock. Was this how low she'd stooped?

"I meant control over my magic and my temper, not control over me," she growled.

I control you, I control your magic, I control your temper, the jewel thought at her. It seemed entirely too greedy in response to the part about controlling her magic for her to believe its innocent 'logic' act.

"I already have that control," she said firmly. "I don't need you. Get out of my head, *now* ."

Impossible . The jewel dismissed her request. *You are my wielder now. We are inseparable* .

"I've seen what you do to your wielders," she sneered. "I don't want any part of it. You can go back to the tomb Pettigrew robbed you from."

He failed the test, the jewel protested. *You have not failed.*

"I don't want to take the test!" she cried. "You can't have me as your wielder anyway. I'm going to die... soon."

Irrelevant, the jewel decided. It began tugging away from her, and she despaired of a solution. She could hold it for now but she couldn't stay in her mind forever. Well, she supposed she *could* stay in her mind until Tuesday morning, but she wasn't sure she'd be able to hold onto it for that long. Already it had slipped twice from her grip and she'd had to grab it anew. It was like an incredibly non-aerodynamic non-golden Snitch.

She needed to trap it somehow, and quickly. Could she create a prison that would hold it before it escaped from her grasp and got to her magical core? Who was to say the jewel couldn't go through the door to the space room? She needed to encase it in a part of her

mind it wouldn't be able to escape from. It would take ages of work to design a prison, so-

She reeled her mind to a halt, considering. She had sort of... already built something like that, hadn't she? A piece of her mind designed from scratch to be barred from accessing certain areas of her mind, including the space room. Her eyes slid from the jewel in her hand to the blank-eyed construct sitting listlessly in a chair by the fire. All her experiments to put unshaped magic into the shell had failed. The magic slid out like water, or else occupied it like flowers in a vase when she wasn't giving it direct instructions. It worked nothing like the semi-sentient construct she had imagined.

Her eyes went back to the jewel. It was... almost too perfect, wasn't it? The jewel needed a secure prison. Her prison needed sentience. Even if it didn't work... well, she was only going to be around a couple more days, anyway. She couldn't see the harm, and there was so much excitement bubbling up at the prospect of actually finishing this one last project before she... well. It had been some time since she'd felt excitement, and she thought satisfaction was a good feeling to die with, if one got the choice.

The jewel felt suspicious at her sudden smile. It could do nothing, however, when she firmly carried it across the lab and approached her empty construct. "Open up," she said. The boy opened its mouth obediently. She shoved the jewel inside the construct's mouth and said, "Swallow," before the jewel could get loose.

A single gulp and the Dominion Jewel was trapped in the stomach of a construct she'd designed to be a guard dog for her mind. The construct twitched and jerked, and she waited with great anticipation as it blinked several times and then focused on her. Its eyes narrowed and a frown crossed its face. "What is this-" It stopped. Blinked again. Then opened its mouth curiously. "A voice...?"

She smiled widely. "It worked!"

"What have you done?" the construct said slowly. "You've given me... a body?"

"Not exactly," she smirked. "I've trapped you in a limitedly mobile prison."

"Trapped?" the boy stood and began to walk in a circle, a smile slowly replacing the frown on its face. "Ha. Haha. I'm *free* ."

"You wish," she scowled. "You're contained in a mental construct that I designed especially to be susceptible to my own will. You cannot leave my mind. You cannot access my memory, character, or magic. You will follow the prime directives I laid down when I designed you, and they are as follows: you will obey direct orders I give you, you will not act in any way that undermines my best interest as I define it, and you will protect my mind from any intruders that I have not invited in myself. Any questions?"

The boy was quiet for a long moment, an introspective look on his face. Then, before her eyes, he began to change. He grew taller, his hair lengthened, his teeth sharpened and his eyes began glowing red. Claws grew from his fingertips and in the center of his chest appeared something like a diamond stamp in red. He slashed at her without warning, but his body turned aside just before his clawed nails might have touched her face. He straightened and examined his hand with a blank expression. "Interesting."

She smiled triumphantly. Her design had worked. She'd spent ages getting the wording correct for all the command chains she wanted embedded into the construct's very being. It had taken a lot of research on contracts and loopholes and it had also meant ages of painstaking meditation carving runes into the construct that covered all the conditions she wanted it to be bound by.

"But how will I control your magic?" the jewel-driven construct mused, seemingly to itself.

"You won't," she said. "You will do nothing but what I tell you to do."

"I don't think so," the construct said. "I think I have to do what you say, but I doubt your ability to keep me from doing other things, as well. For example..."

He shot across the room faster than she could blink, reappearing next to one of the shelves on the other side of her lab. It was the shelf with an orb of her magic on it-the one she kept separate from her true core for when she wanted to project an aura as Harriett. What did it think it was going to do? She had designed it to be barred from accessing-oh, no.

The construct's mouth opened impossibly wide and it stuffed the orb of magic into its maw before she could get close enough to stop him. The construct swallowed it whole and a look of sublime pleasure overtook its face. "Ooh, yes. Your magic is very potent, young one."

She gritted her teeth angrily. "Don't think I'm going to let you use that." She opened her mouth to give it a command to never use any part of her own magic, when it forestalled her hastily.

"Come now, you've just given me the task of defending your mind, haven't you? How can I do that without magic to defend it with? Do you expect me to be a glorified distraction?" The construct looked disgusted at the very thought.

She huffed out an annoyed breath. "You don't get to control my magic."

"I have to," the jewel snapped. Its constructed form drew itself to full height, towering over her mental avatar. "My purpose has been set. I will be your self-control. I must have your magic to fulfill that purpose."

"I don't care if your purpose gets fulfilled." She rolled her eyes. "I don't care about you at all. I don't even need you to defend my mind. I just put you in there to see if it would work. I already told you I... I'm going to die soon. None of this really matters, anyway..."

She trailed off somewhat sadly. She was coming to terms with the end of her life-she *was*, and yet... there was so much she still wanted to do.

"You do not want to die," the construct told her.

"No one wants to die," she said tiredly.

"Inaccurate," the construct contradicted. "But nevertheless *you* do not want to die. Are you so certain of your Fate?"

"Not usually," she admitted, "but this time... yes. I can't see any way around it."

"Tell me," the construct said, voice greedy. "I am a master of changing a man's Fate."

"You are master of nothing, now," she said, voice cold. She could not forget all the trouble the jewel had caused. Even if it was not to blame for Pettigrew's decision to take her into the past and doom her, it was still not innocent in the yearlong affair of deceit and endangerment. She could see now that it had an impressive amount of sentience for a glorified piece of costume jewelry. That meant she could hold it accountable-and she did.

"I am master of this," the construct said, gesturing to the entirety of her mind. There was a smug smile on its face. It pointed lazily to the rug obscuring the trapdoor to the tunnels. It turned a royal blue. The construct smirked. "Yes. This domain will be my dominion, for now. You will come seeking power eventually. They always do."

She frowned and said nothing. The construct began to move about her mind, going this way and that, changing colors and moving things around seemingly at random. It was testing the limits of its control, she realized. Well, let it. What could it do, even if it changed the color of every single thing in the parts of her mind it could reach? She didn't care if it turned the mountain purple. As long as it was occupied and not trying to take over the world. She would be doing

her final good deed by taking that jewel out of the world with her, she thought.

Her energy was waning, and she knew it was because her physical body had been without nourishment for too long. She wanted to stay in her mind but biological instincts were difficult to ignore. Even knowing it was pointless, she felt a need to do everything she could to preserve her life. There was a newly awakened fire for existence that was burning in her soul.

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She woke to utter darkness. The smell that assaulted her nose was indescribable. She had no idea how much time had passed, but it was long enough for Pettigrew's body to begin to smell strong. She coughed and gagged, then managed to crawl to her outer robes, piled not far from where she lay. She tore a piece of the relatively clean fabric off and blindly tied it around her nose and mouth. It limited her breathing, but it did filter some of the stench.

She had to eat something. She contemplated searching Pettigrew for food, but the idea of touching his dead, mummified body made her physically ill. Instead, she called up her magic. "Accio food." She felt the rush of the spell leave her fingers but there was no answering rustle from the direction of Pettigrew's still form. She swallowed slowly. Okay. No food. "Accio water." Nothing. He really must have been mad, by the end. That or he had been planning on leaving through the small hole that sat next to her book bag to-

The bag. She crawled over toward it. There wasn't any food per se, but there were other things inside that she could use. She tore open her potions kit with an idea to begin taking inventory-this time with an eye to *anything* edible, not just the most useful potions. She paused when she realized that it would be incredibly difficult to sort through her ingredients by feel and smell alone.

She summoned her magic once more, scared because she wanted this to work so badly. "Accio wand."

A whooshing thump and she felt what she recognized after a moment as a moleskin pouch land in her lap. She felt for an opening, daring to hope. It opened easily to her touch. With its master's death, the pouch's protective enchantments fell, she deduced. Inside were two wands, Pettigrew's and- *hers* . The wand leapt eagerly to her hand, thrumming angrily at being separated from her.

"I missed you, too," she whispered, tears of happiness falling onto her cheeks in the darkness. "Lumos."

She cried out in pain as light bright enough to illuminate the whole cavern completely sprang from her wand tip, just inches from her face. Well, that was stupid. It took a good ten minutes for her vision to clear of spots and a headache potion to get rid of the pain behind her eyes.

When she could see properly, she promptly vowed to avoid looking toward the side of the cavern Pettigrew was lying on at all. The gruesome image would likely haunt her dreams. She turned her attention to her ingredients. She began pulling them out one by one, sorting them into three piles. The pile to her left was the poisonous, completely inedible pile. On the right went things that were either harmless or not poisonous enough to be worth not eating. In the middle she put ingredients she could mix by hand that would neutralize one another's dangerous components. That pile she was able to make largely because of the book she'd bought in Knockturn Alley while trying to fool Bill Weasley. The memory brought a smile to her lips. The oddest circumstances turned out to be fortuitous, didn't they?

The pile of hopelessly toxic ingredients she put back into her bag so that she wouldn't be tempted to consume them, even if she were delirious with hunger. She ate a few of the roots from the okay-to-

consume pile to keep her energy up, then got to work pulverizing the ones that could be combined together. She would eat those first.

She also sorted the potions into 'can drink for water content' and 'not under any circumstances.' The not-ingestible pile was thankfully small. It mostly included such things as tinctures that were meant to be applied to the skin, like Agnes' Ageless Agent, and potions like Skele-Gro, which would do actual harm if taken by a healthy individual.

After drinking the last of the Pain Relief potions she curled up, exhausted, with her face as close to the hole leading out of her prison as possible. She didn't know how much fresh air was coming through it, but every breath she could take that wasn't filled with rotting corpse smell was a positive in her book.

She slept, an odd feeling of satisfaction creeping over her. She'd done everything she could, hadn't she? Surely no one could ask anything more of her, now.

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Tuesday was upon her before she knew it. At least, that's what she assumed the debilitating pain cramping her stomach was. It could also have been one of the raw tubers she'd eaten, but as the pain was several times worse than what she'd felt the night she turned thirteen, she rather doubted the cause was bacteria-induced indigestion.

If the jewel trying to remove her magic had felt like fire trying to get out of her skin, this was like being exploded into dozens of pieces in extremely slow motion. She cursed and cried and sweated as something inside of her expanded beyond its limits and began attempting to tear itself apart.

She didn't know much about the resonance that was created when seven simultaneous cores existed at once, but she knew it was the seventh core that imploded, not the other six, so she theorized that either the seventh core attempted to neutralize itself to protect the other six, or time itself stepped in and destroyed the catalyst before the time stream could be disrupted by the simultaneous debilitation of seven temporally divided entities.

It was agony, but she was no stranger to pain, now. She kept her mind through it, holding onto all the thoughts that meant anything to her, as her magic became a destructive force once more. She supposed it was some consolation that her magic didn't *want* to hurt her, this time. She could feel it struggling against the resonance, in fact. It didn't seem to have much effect on the shock waves growing stronger and more frequent in her core, however.

What are you doing?

The voice rang from her mind with scathing alarm. What was that? Oh. The jewel, of course. She supposed it must be terribly confused. It would forgive her if she did not have the energy to spare comforting it at the moment.

Stop feeling sorry for yourself and do something!

There's nothing to be done, she thought at it irritably. *Couldn't she die in peace, at least? My core is resonating with the six others in existence. The resonance is backlashing against this core, and within minutes it will be over.*

So stop the resonance!

She frowned. Stop the...? There was no way to do that without completely destroying her core. In a wizard, the magical core was tied to one's life force. Completely destroying it would kill her anyway.

Don't destroy it, change it!

You couldn't just change your magical core. That would be like changing the signature of your magic. It was impossible. Wasn't it? She sank into meditation almost curiously. Such an idea... well, she was intrigued, despite her acceptance of the circumstances. She was met on the mountain by the construct-at least, she thought it was the construct. It didn't look anything like the boy she'd created. It had taken the form of a red-haired giant, and it shook the mountain, now grown over with yellow daisies, with its fist at her approach.

"Finally!" it thundered. "Do you wish to die, fleshling? We must hurry."

It turned from her and leapt down the side, shrinking all the way until it was a mere six feet in height. It ducked through the false illusion hiding the doorway to her lab, and she followed after it, resigned but aware that this was more interesting than waiting to die.

When the construct dropped to the tunnels below, she called after it. "You can't enter the space room. I designed you that way."

"I know that!" it roared. "If I could fix this without you I would!"

They raced through the passages together, reaching the space door momentarily. "What now?" she asked, wary. "I suppose you want to be allowed in?"

It shook its head dismissively. "No. Bring the core out."

She opened the door by thinking the password and peered inside. The situation did not look promising. Her core was vibrating so quickly that her eyes weren't able to keep track of its location. After-images appeared in every direction around it, and the entire room shook with the violence of the oscillations. "You want me to move that... out here?"

"Quickly," the construct insisted. "You must give it to me."

She scowled. "I told you I'm not giving you my magic."

The construct smirked. "Even if it would save your life?"

She sucked in a quick breath. "It-it won't. You're just trying to take advantage of my distraction."

"I can't do that-you made sure of it, remember?" The construct gazed down at her in smug impatience. "It's one of my 'prime directives.' I can't work in a way that directly undermines your best interest. Wouldn't you say your best interest is to live, instead of die?"

She damned the hope that sprang like gold from her heart. To live-yes, she wanted that badly. "Explain," she bit out, determined that if the trade somehow ended in freeing the jewel from her control, she wouldn't take it, no matter what. She would not exchange her life for the subjugation of who knew how many. The jewel could not be allowed to roam free, much less with all her magic at its side.

"You need a shield-a proper one, not these half-cracked attempts at Occlumency you've got going now," the construct said quickly. "Your core has to be hidden-transformed or kept behind a filter that will alter its frequency. Alter the form your core's output takes, and you stop the resonance. Your core will register as foreign to the other six. Otherwise, the pressure of your core exploding will kill you-there's too much magic involved for any other outcome."

"But how do I disguise it?" she demanded. "I can't change the form of my core-it's decided from birth."

The smirk crept back across the construct's face once more. "You give it to me, of course. Have you not thought it odd that I am not vibrating out of control, despite having swallowed a portion of your magic not long ago?"

Her eyes widened. How could she have forgotten? The jewel had altered her magic in consuming it-it had to have, if it wasn't being torn apart along with the rest of her magic.

"Let me consume your magic," the construct implored, holding its hands out entreatingly. "I was *made* to absorb magic and channel it through myself. Once the magic is contained within my power, its frequency will be altered sufficiently. The resonance will stop. You will live."

She was gasping, overwhelmed with the alternative just laid before her. She could live. But she had to give the Dominion Jewel control over her magic. But she would live.

"Quickly, quickly," the jewel chanted. "Your time to choose life over death is running out."

It was right. She didn't have time to debate alternatives. If she lived, she could figure it out later. If she died-well, it wouldn't matter. If nothing else, she could trust in the prison she'd built. Even if the jewel did end up getting exactly what it wanted-her magic-it still couldn't leave her head or disobey her will. What could it do with the magic, really?

Mind made up, she threw her hands toward the ball of fire, which had begun to bounce wildly about the space room, impacting carelessly with the orbs around it, all of which were thrown into disarray from trying to orbit an unstable star. The fire jerked out of her control several times, but she threw her desperation and newfound hope behind her will. She could *live*. She *would* live.

She finally caught the sun momentarily and tugged it toward her with all the strength of mind she had left. It hurled out of the space room and straight into the path of her wildly grinning construct. A jaw like a shark's expanded on unnatural hinges from the construct's head, and in the next moment, the sun was gone, winked out of existence-swallowed as though by a black hole into the gullet of the Dominion Jewel.

She watched with wide eyes, half-expecting the construct to explode into a shower of magic. It didn't, though. It breathed so deeply that its stomach bloomed out to fill the whole hallway. Then it burped, and its

form solidified into a dark-haired woman with fiery red eyes. The stamp of the jewel glowed brightly from its exposed bicep as it placed a hand on its hip.

"Delicious... hmm," the construct drawled, looking precisely like the cat who got the canary. "Feel better? I know / do."

She had to admit, the pain that had been registering vaguely from her physical form seemed to have dissipated. The construct had been telling the truth, then. "Thank you," she said slowly.

The construct smiled patronizingly. "Don't bother. I did it for me, not you. I am not ready to be buried in another tomb, particularly one as inglorious as the hovel you're sitting in."

"If you know about the prison, then you know that there's no way out of it," she pointed out, the giddy relief she felt at being alive waning somewhat as the knowledge that she still wasn't safe reasserted itself. "We probably will end up buried in here."

"Nothing is certain," the construct said. It flicked its hair, and she had to wonder how it had known to do that. Then again, how many humans had it spent time around, over the years? Who knew what sort of things its sentience had been exposed to, really? "Another day alive is another day free. Do not underestimate the gift of a single day, child."

She could not argue with that. She owed it to the life she had bought with the control of her magic, so newly and dearly won, to do everything she could to extend her time. With that thought in her mind, she let her consciousness sink back into her body once more.

Everything ached, but it was the ache of the living. She was in one piece and there were still quite a few herbs she could eat to keep her strength up. She ate little, aware that in the best-case scenario she had to hold out until Friday evening. In all honesty it would probably be longer. Unless she spontaneously became an Animagus in the next four days. She huffed a small laugh. She would put that on her

list of things to do if she survived. Right after hug Archie for ten minutes and kiss her baby sister. And apologize to Pansy. Again.

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The days passed, or she assumed they did. She had no concept of what was happening. After the first couple of days her strength was so low that a Tempus Charm sapped her powers of concentration dearly. She gave up on even Illumination Charms after a while. It didn't seem to matter, with her having memorized where everything in the little hole was by touch.

She oscillated between extreme states of mind. She took Calming Potions at turns with Pepperup Potions. A Mind-Sharpening Potion was followed by a Befuddlement Draught. She knew it was the height of irresponsibility to take so many potions in so short a time, but she was thirsty all the time now and it was all she could do not to gulp them all down at once in delirium.

She was taking Dreamless Sleep every now and then, trying to space it as far apart between other potions as she could. It would be poisonous in continuous doses, and even taking it once a day was dangerous over long periods of time. She didn't have a choice, though. And she didn't feel so weak and awful when she slept, anyway.

After a long while, the dark, cramped, staleness of the cavern was starting to drive her mad. She retreated into her mind when it all became too much, barricading herself in the space room, which was a lot more like the-room-of-lost-and-drifting-things without her sun inside to give her orbs a sense of direction. She immersed herself in memory after memory. Good times, bad times, all of it. She reminded herself over and over again that she had to hang on. When the temptation to take one of the poisonous herbs in her bag became too strong, she distracted herself with memories of her family, her

friends, Hogwarts, and all the dreams and ambitions that she hadn't fulfilled.

Even happy thoughts couldn't sustain her forever, though. She knew that when her supplies ran out it would be the end of the road. Her Fate was, for once, entirely out of her hands.

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He wondered why he assigned essays at all when the only fruit they bore was that of his own frustration. Another large red T marked an under-informed Ravenclaw's grandly titled piece of drivel. He pushed the stack of parchment rolls to the side and rubbed his temples. Clearly expecting a thirteen-year-old to deduce something for himself was asking too much.

His mind lit upon the face of a grey-eyed boy with short hair. Rigel had never produced such twaddle. He checked the clock on the wall and noted that the boy was due very soon to turn in his weekly assignments. At a knock on the door, he tucked the essays away with a slight smirk of anticipation. He was interested to see what the boy made of this week's topic. He'd tried to make it challenging.

"Enter," he said, leaning back in his chair. He sat forward with a frown, however, when it was not Rigel who walked through the door. It was his godson, looking annoyed.

"Is Rigel done ye-oh," Draco looked around in confusion as he entered the office. "Where's Rigel?"

"Are you his keeper?" Severus asked, raising an eyebrow.

The blond-haired child who looked so much like his mother flushed ever so slightly. "He was supposed to help me review for Herbology

after he dropped off his assignments. He's been gone ages, though. I thought maybe you were keeping him."

"So you thought to rescue him from my clutches?" Severus's lips twitched in amusement.

"I just came to remind you both that there are things other than potions going on," Draco scowled. "Did he say where he was going when he left?"

"He has not yet arrived," Severus told him shortly. "Have you checked his lab?"

"No..." Draco said, frowning. "He said he would meet me in the common room, though. I don't think he'd just blow me off."

Severus looked at the clock again, wondering. Rigel had no reason to be late to anything. Even if something had held him up on the way to his office, the boy had his time-turner. There was no reason he would not have used it to come back to the proper time-if not to turn in the assignment, then at least to meet his promise to Draco. The child valued the time he spent with his friends.

It was one of the reasons Severus had not pressed too hard on the details of the boy's time-turner use, despite suspecting that Rigel had been using it more than to strictly get to his classes and complete his schoolwork. If he wanted to spend more time with his friends, it would be good for him. He hadn't seemed overwhelmed by the use of the device, in any case, so there was no reason to attempt to curtail his use as long as the evidence pointed to him using it relatively responsibly.

Deciding to err on the side of caution, Severus stood. "We will check his lab."

He warded his office behind him and they walked calmly through the halls. The lab was dark and empty when they arrived, however. Severus considered his next course of action. He took out his wand

and murmured a Point Me Charm. The wand spun on his hand confusedly, like a compass near a magnet. He cursed silently. Of course it would not work if the boy was currently in two places at once.

"I think Rigel has an anti-locating talisman or something," Draco said suddenly from beside him. "My tracker didn't work, either."

"Tracker?" Severus sneered. He was not certain he truly wished to know.

Draco grimaced a bit guiltily. "I thought he was up to something, so I tried following him one time. But the tracker was all wonky. It binged a bunch of different places, even when I tried it again later."

"Different places?" He pressed his lips together. That was dangerous. No one could know that Rigel was overlapping himself in time. "Do you have the tracking device with you?"

Draco blinked. "Sure, it's just a piece of paper." He dug through his pockets for a moment, then produced it. "Here, see? It's a joke product, from Zonko's." Severus nearly groaned at the Marauders' logo tucked into the corner of the parchment. "This in the middle is us. The tracker is supposed to appear as a red dot, and the distance and orientation is determined by the radar drawn on the paper, see? Except when I use it, this happens." He gestured to the existence of two dots, one nearly on top of them, one rather far away.

Severus squinted at the numbers designating the scale, then ripped the paper from Draco's hands to look closer. That wasn't right. The far away dot was more distant than was possible if the boy was still in the castle. What would he be doing out on the grounds at this time of night? He should know better, after how poorly his last walk near the Forbidden Forest had gone.

His eyes moved between the two dots indecisively. Which one was the more current version? He didn't want to alarm a version of Rigel that hadn't yet left the castle by confronting him with an accusation.

His concern for the dot out of castle bounds overrode his hesitation, however, and he took off at a swift pace toward the nearest dot. It was just a few corridors over, and they closed in on it just as the dot began flickering ominously.

Severus sped up and rounded the corner to see-nothing. No, wait-there! The shimmer of a Disillusionment Charm near the end of the hallway. Even as he raced forward, the shimmer disappeared. He looked down to the parchment to see that the dot they'd been following was gone, as well. He took a deep breath, thinking hard.

So the Rigel they'd almost caught up to was the earlier one, temporally speaking. He had gone back an unspecified amount of time and only caught back up to the present once he was already out of the castle. Severus hadn't known the boy could cast a Disillusionment Charm, but it was not outside of the realm of possibility to think he had learned it in an effort to make his time-turning less noticeable. Why would he turn back in that moment, however? Why not turn back after turning in his assignments? And why had another version of himself not turned back after leaving the castle, that his disappearance would not be remarked upon?

It was sloppy and suspicious. Something might be very wrong after all, and even if it wasn't-there was no excuse for the boy being so far out of bounds. His action in either case was clear-he would track Rigel down and either assist in getting him out of yet another ill-conceived mess or demand answers.

"Where'd the other dot go?" Draco asked from his elbow, looking confused. "I swear this thing must be defective."

Severus sneered. The Marauders were a great many things, but they did not sell defective products. The boy was out in the woods somewhere, if he had to guess by the dot's positioning. They only had to find him.

He set off at a fast clip, leaving Draco scrambling to catch up. "Wait, where are we going? That other dot is way outside of the castle,

there's no way that's him." After a moment, Draco reassessed that declaration. "Well, it could be. Do you think he's in trouble?"

"If he isn't, he will be," Severus promised darkly. He thought about forbidding Draco to accompany him, but decided it was a moot point. If they were going into danger, he might need to send someone back for help. If they weren't, there was no reason Severus could not protect his godson from the regular dangers of the forest.

The crude map led them straight to the forest's edge and, while Draco groaned aloud, Severus did not pause. They hurried through the trees. He was watchful but they encountered no animals of any kind on their trek through. That was extremely odd but he did not have the patience to dwell on the anomaly. His student was likely in danger. Nothing else mattered until this was resolved.

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The week was almost over, thank Merlin. If he had to sit through one more of the Minister's insipid 'working lunches' that took all afternoon, he was going to resign in protest. How was he supposed to get his work done in a timely manner when he was out of the office half the day? Instead of popping home at five-oh-one with the junior Aurors, he, the head of the department, was stuck sludging through reports until his stomach rumbled disgruntledly. *No doubt Sirius will eat my share of the pie Lily promised to bake*, he thought mournfully, struggling to focus on painstakingly checking the facts of each case that his men had submitted that week. It was the last thing he had to do before going home.

It took James another half-hour to sign off on them all, and his back protested like an old man's as he stood and stretched. *Finally*. He locked up his office and made his way through the many desks cluttering the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, heading

resolutely toward the lifts. As he passed one of his detectives, George Filmont, he waved tiredly. "Any luck today?"

"No news is good news, some days," the thin man said, tucking a short quill behind his ear. "Hard to say what luck is."

James had to smile at the man's customary vagueness. He was a tightlipped fellow when it came to his cases, but that was part of what made him a good detective. He made to keep walking, then paused as a pile of unopened letters on the desk across from Filmont caught his eye. "Hey, this mail is piling up. Where's Rudvick? Isn't it his job to vet the letters that come from outside the Ministry?"

"Just the ones with no return address," Filmont agreed, shrugging slightly. "Rudvick's been out sick for weeks."

"And he didn't get anyone to cover for him?" James demanded, working his way up to annoyed. Why hadn't the head of Staffing and Personnel brought that up with him?

"He got Billowag, I think, but his wife's in hospital," Filmont told him. "He's barely getting his own work done, from what I've seen."

"Great," James sighed, plodding over to the desk and grabbing the stack of letters. There were at least twenty, some dated more than a month ago. He thought longingly of his wife and daughter, their beautiful faces so clear in his mind's eye. He dearly wanted to pretend he hadn't seen the pile of letters and get home to them. It was his responsibility, however, if one of his Aurors caused slack for any reason. He couldn't in good conscience go home for the weekend without at least going through them.

He opened letter after letter of mostly nonsense. Half were from people who thought their neighbors were dark wizards because they looked at them funny, and several were from people trying to apply for the program without going through the admissions desk. He set those aside to mark as 'do-not-hire-unless-extremely-talented.' There

was a system for a reason. He paused at that thought and had to laugh. What a crotchety old wizard he was turning into.

The next one gave him pause. ' *To Aurors searching for the Dominion Jewel*'... *wait a minute* . He scanned the rest of it quickly. It was signed 'A Concerned Citizen.' "Just like the last one," he muttered. *Peter? It can't be.*

"Something good?" Filmont asked, looking interested. He was a nosy sort, always keen to know everything he could, but that was also what made him a good detective. It was lucky he was here, in any case.

"Send word to everyone on-call tonight," James said, slipping into his Auror voice with practiced urgency. "We've got a solid lead that we need to move on now."

He didn't know who this anonymous tip-writer was, and the last one hadn't panned out very well; a woman at the Alchemists Guild had mentioned seeing a stone, but couldn't remember anything about the man who'd brought it in. It was more to go on than they'd had in a while, though, even if it did implicate a man James hadn't thought long about in years. Could Peter really have something to do with all this? He supposed there was only one way to know.

The headmaster wouldn't like Aurors intruding on his castle grounds so late in the day, but James had no choice. With a name and an accusation, he had to at least question his old friend.

James took the time his people spent assembling to make a quick Floo call to his wife. It looked as if he'd be home very late and he wanted that slice of pie kept out of Sirius' grubby mitts.

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They followed the map until the red dot fell squarely on the epicenter, only to find no sign of Rigel. Severus looked around the clearing warily, wand out. There was nothing except a mound of dirt to distinguish it from any other clearing. He examined the mound with suspicion. Freshly disturbed dirt.

"The locator must be above us or beneath us," Draco said slowly. He, too, eyed the disturbed dirt, and then he paled. "You don't think... buried alive?"

Or dead, Severus's mind supplied automatically. He was gripped with the truest fear he had ever known. He pointed his wand at the ground and said, "*Corpus Revelio*."

Homenum Revelio could only be used inside closed rooms or dwellings, but the Corpse Detecting Spell could be used directly over any ground one suspected to be a burial site. He waited with grave trepidation for the results of the spell to come back. A green mist rose from the ground and Severus sank to his knees.

"No," Draco said, his voice cracking. "No, Rigel can't be... he can't be."

Severus had no comfort to give the child. He felt nothing beyond the heavy maelstrom of grief that assailed him. How could it be so? The boy was reckless, but he had the luck of Felix Felicis. What had happened here? Despair welled in his heart, shot through with regret. It was too soon. He had so much left to teach him. He had so much left to learn from him. His face set harshly and he clawed at the ground angrily. He would not accept this. Rigel would not be left to rot in a nameless clearing. No sooner had his fingers penetrated the dirt than a ward sprang into place in a web across the clearing.

"What?" Draco was shaking with rage. "Someone buried him and then warded it? How dare they? What kind of monster would deny his family a body to-to-" Draco was crying, and Severus wasn't sure the boy had even noticed.

He was distracted by the strangeness of the situation, however. Why *would* someone bother putting such strong wards on an unmarked grave? He stood slowly, tightened his grip on his wand, and cast a Bombardment Hex on the ground beneath him. The ward sprang to life again, and this time he studied it swiftly.

"It's a goblin ward," he said, frowning deeply. "That makes no sense."

"That goblin did attack Rigel when they came to inspect the wards after Halloween," Draco said through his grief. "Do you think-?"

"No," Severus said, his wheels turning. "This ward isn't made to keep something out. It is designed to keep something in."

"But he's only been missing an hour," Draco protested, angry and confused. "How could anyone have done something like this so fast? Maybe-maybe he's still alive down there and the spell was wrong."

"The spell wasn't wrong," Severus said sharply. There was no sense raising Draco's hopes when the likelihood went the other direction. Draco didn't know that there was no way of telling how long it had been. It could have been days. Still... he would find a way past this ward. He would know what happened, one way or another.

"If this was a prison, there was a door," Severus said, pacing before the deceptively loose dirt. No one would imprison themselves along with their prisoner unless they were mad. And the idea of Rigel being buried alive arbitrarily didn't sit right with him, for more reasons than one. Rigel just didn't have those sorts of enemies.

Draco got hold of himself after a long moment of silence. He began pacing the length of the clearing as well, staring at the ground and trying to be useful. After a minute of this, the boy got out something from his pocket that he held before him as he searched. It was his star light, he realized after a close look. It must be lighting the ground for him.

Severus lit his own wand with a Lumos and got back to the examination. There had to be a weakness.

"Uncle Sev, look here!" Draco called from the other side of the clearing, near to the tree line. "There's a hole that goes straight down." He strode over to take a look but before he got there Draco sighed in disappointment. "No, wait, there's little prints all around it. It's probably some animal's burrow."

He examined the hole in the light of his wand. "It's too uniform to have been made by an animal. This hole was made with magic. Why make a hole so small?"

"Air?" Draco suggested.

"Possible," Severus said in a low voice. "But that implies whoever did this wanted Rigel alive." He examined the animal prints around the hole carefully. They were miniscule. "A rodent or... *no* ." He lifted his light higher and took in the many man-sized prints that led to and from the hole, before the rodent prints took over nearest the hole. "I will *skin* him alive."

"Who?" Draco looked from Severus to the hole, his star light clenched between white fingers. "Who did this?"

Severus didn't answer him at once, instead focusing his intent and casting a Patronus Charm. When the silvery mist condensed into a solid doe, he said swiftly, "Go to the headmaster at once. Tell him we need his phoenix to get through powerful wards. I am going to do what I can here. Tell him that Peter Pettigrew should be found and restrained until I return, then lead him back here."

"Pettigrew..." Draco's face darkened. "He was asking about Rigel. Rookwood told us."

Severus felt killing intent fill his heart. "Guard this clearing while I'm gone, Draco."

His godson nodded but asked, "Where are you going?"

Severus pinned Draco with a very serious glare. "Not a word of this."

"Of what-?" Draco broke off with a gasp as Severus transformed. His body liquefied and shrank until it stretched once more into the form of a saw-scaled viper. "Of... course you're an Animagus, Uncle Sev."

Severus ignored him, sending his body slithering down into the hole with no difficulty. His suspicions about the wards allowing Animagi through were confirmed. Of course he was an Animagus, indeed. He let the Marauders beat him at nothing, and he had long known of their clandestine full moon activities.

The hole led straight down about ten feet, then split into two paths. He swung his head back and forth between the two tunnels, scenting. The one on the right led deeper underground, and it smelled of death. He wound in that direction, venom dripping at the thought of what he would find at the tunnel's conclusion.

He emerged into a darkness so black that his eyes could not penetrate it. The smell of death mingled with that of wretchedness and filth. He followed the scent of rotting and came across the feet of a decomposing corpse. He steeled himself, then released his Animagus form. He stooped low as his head connected painfully with the ward around the ceiling and lit his wand. The sight before him was like nothing he'd imagined. There was a body that looked like it belonged more to a museum than anything. It resembled a two thousand year old mummy and yet it smelled putrid-fresh, give or take a week. What could have done such a thing? His heart rate slowed as his eyes roamed over it. The face was unrecognizable, but its height and proportions were wrong-the body was too big to be Rigel. Relief choked him, and he thanked the gods he'd spent his whole life damning that this corpse was not his precious student.

He put a sleeve over his nose and was preparing to turn back into a snake when he heard the hitch of a breath ever so faintly from behind him. He whirled in a low crouch, wand at the ready,

wondering if he'd walked into a trap-no, the only other thing in the small dirt cave was a crumpled form covered in filthy cloth. Could it be...?

He approached cautiously, saying, "Rigel."

There was no response. He knelt beside the body and looked it over in the wand light, brushing aside the robes it was huddled within to get a look at the face. Dirt and grime formed a layer over the features that made recognition difficult, and the hair was too dirty to be sure of the color, but he had to assume this was his student. He felt for a pulse; the weak fluttering that answered him was not much reassurance, but it was something.

"Rigel, can you hear me?" He went to lift the boy, then remembered with fury that he could not get the boy out of the cavern. It had been designed specifically to let only the rat out-he supposed after reflection that the body on the other side of the cave was probably the Creatures professor. Severus could not bring himself to regret the man's passing-not if the alternative was Rigel's life.

He looked around the cavern for anything he could use, noting the littering of empty potions vials and the boy's potion kit laying empty beside him. Oh, no. What had Rigel done? He pictured his student eating the ingredients of his potions kit in starved desperation and felt fear reignite itself in his gut. What had he ingested? He immediately fished in his belt pouch for the bezoar he carried with him at all times. He pulled Rigel's head into his lap and stuffed the stone past cracked lips. "Swallow, Rigel," he said, coaxing the boy's throat desperately.

Rigel's reflexes kicked in and the stone was ingested. He looked about for other clues as to what he could provide the boy immediately. He summoned the boy's book bag from across the room and found, to his relief, a stack of all the most poisonous herbs and potions he could think of within. So the boy had sense enough to separate them, then, at some point. There was an empty canteen, as well.

He conjured water with a hasty Aguamenti and filled the container before bringing it to Rigel's lips. He was able to coax down several mouthfuls before Rigel began to cough and thrash weakly.

"Rigel?" He pushed the boy's hair back to see his eyes. "Rigel. Open your eyes."

The boy coughed again, turning his head ever so slightly. He held the water to his lips once more and Rigel gulped it down greedily, gasping between swallows and moaning in protest when he took the canteen away to refill it.

"Wake up, boy," he muttered, nudging Rigel's cheek insistently. "Wake up."

It was several long moments before his eyes fluttered open-or tried to. There was so much built-up grime in the way that he could barely pry his eyelids apart. "Snape...?" The confusion and disbelief was evident in his scratchy voice. "Is this a dream?"

"No. I'm going to get you out of here," Severus told him while propping up his neck for another swig.

Rigel laughed bitterly, a harsh sound that didn't suit him. "You can't. Only creatures... can get in and out. This is a dream."

He scowled down at him and refilled the canteen again. Rigel's eyes followed the stream of water with sadness. "I didn't... think of that. Stupid. I drank all my potions, and didn't think of the Aguamenti... Spell. Ha. Haha." The boy coughed softly again. "And now I'm too weak... to use my magic. Weak even in my dreams."

"You are not stupid," Severus said sharply. "No doubt you were delirious from your ordeal. How long have you been down here?"

"Down here?" Rigel's face screwed up unhappily. "Up there? I... don't know. What day is it?"

"Friday evening," he said, turning the words over in his mind. Had the other path led to a second chamber above this one? What would be the point of... no, surely not.

"Two... weeks," Rigel coughed. "Almost. Pettigrew didn't know you could go back... a full week the second time. Didn't know much... about time-turners. Sorry... I let him get..." the boy trailed off into weak coughs, and Severus stared in detached horror as he realized the full extent of what Pettigrew had done.

"Do not apologize," Severus said. "I know he took you from the castle when you were on your way to my office. You did nothing wrong."

"I did... lots of things wrong," the boy said slowly, looking past Severus's bent head at the dirt ceiling above them. "I'm sorry, though. I didn't mean to hurt anyone. I just... wanted to learn Potions... from you. Sorry. I-" More coughing, but his voice was getting clearer. "I've been really selfish, haven't I? But I learned... my lesson. Really."

Severus felt like hitting something. "Stop, Rigel. I know you didn't mean for this to happen. Pettigrew's death was not your fault. It was self-defense."

Rigel frowned faintly. "I don't think... it was. Was it? It's hard to think. My head hurts all the time. I think... I'm dying. Maybe you're my angel. I wonder... if you'd let me take my bag with me? Maybe they have cauldrons... wherever I'm going."

"You are *not* dying," he snarled.

"Feels like I've been dying... for ages," Rigel panted. The boy fell silent for a moment, then his eyes began welling up with tears. "I can't take my potions kit, can I? Cause I... ate it all." Rigel hiccupped sadly. "It feels like I made a potion in my stomach. Only all it does is... hurt."

"You foolish child," Severus said, frustration building at the helplessness he felt. "Does it hurt anywhere else? Are you injured anywhere?"

Rigel blinked slowly. "Yes. In my head... there's a lot of pain."

"Did you hit it on something?" Severus began feeling the boy's filthy scalp, searching for contusions.

"No," Rigel said on a long breath. "I ripped it up a little bit... inside."

He was talking about his mindscape, Severus realized with a frown. "Is that where you were, before you woke up?"

"Am I awake?" Rigel shuddered. "I don't want to be. I was thinking of something happy, I think. Was it you?"

He must have been living inside his own head to escape his physical situation. It was smart; it was probably the only reason he was so coherent if he'd been buried in a dirt box for two weeks.

Severus searched for a way to keep his student talking and awake. "Do you remember why Pettigrew took you, Rigel? What did he want?"

Rigel grimaced. "Yes. He wanted my magic, he said. Or the... jewel wanted it, probably. I think it was... controlling him all along."

Severus froze, having forgotten completely about that damn jewel. Should he search for it? Lord Riddle wanted it desperately. He would not believe that Severus had overlooked the chance to claim the stone before Dumbledore or the Ministry got their hands on it.

"I think it killed him," Rigel said seriously after a moment. "When I woke up, he was just... like that. Mummified. The jewel used to belong to the ancient Egyptians, you know. Do you think it... mummified all of them?"

He did not know, nor did he care to. He had to wonder how Rigel knew that, however. Had Pettigrew told him before his death? He looked over at Pettigrew's corpse, wondering if the jewel was on his person. He was torn, looking between Rigel and the mummified form of Peter Pettigrew. In the end, there wasn't anything he could do for Rigel at the moment except keep him coherent. He shifted Rigel's head to the side, making to move toward the corpse, but the boy whimpered softly.

"Don't leave me. I don't want to be... alone anymore."

Severus put aside the impotent rage, saying softly, "I'm not leaving. I'm just going to have a look at Pettigrew."

"No, don't go, please," the boy begged, eyes imploring. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry for everything. I'm sorry for lying and sorry for making you worry and-"

"Rigel, I am not leaving you," Severus said, trying to penetrate the boy's confusion. "I just need to-" He broke off even trying and simply raised his wand instead. "Accio jewel."

Nothing happened, except Rigel starting to laugh. "If you want the jewel, you're gonna be... gonna be disappointed. It's gone. Ha. Gone and got just what it wanted, didn't it? Ha. In the end we were both stupider... than that ruddy hunk of rock."

Gone? What did that mean? Severus did not like the sound of it, but at least it was no longer his responsibility to search for it. He settled back, a close eye on the boy lying weak and delirious before him, to wait for the headmaster's bird to appear.

After some time, Rigel began to try to sit up, groaning all the while. Severus helped where he could, but the boy was in bad shape. "This... is this real, Professor? Is that why it hurts so much?"

"I'm afraid so, Mr. Black," Severus said. "The pain will be gone soon."

"Because you're rescuing me," the boy said slowly, almost awed. The shambled mess of his mind seemed to be reasserting itself bit by bit. "I... I hoped that someone would, but it was hard to believe you'd have any way of finding me. After a while I couldn't even focus my magic for a Tempus, and I had no idea how long I'd been down here. I thought maybe... that maybe weeks had passed and no one was coming." He began to cry again, but this time had the presence of mind to stifle the tears in his grimy sleeve. "I-" His breath hitched violently. "I can't believe I'm *alive*. I don't want to have the time-turner anymore. Can you take it?"

He stared, utterly flummoxed, as the boy shakily pointed to a mokeskin pouch nearby. He took it up and looked inside, finding Pettigrew's wand along with the time-turner, looking a bit dirty but perfectly workable. "I don't understand," he said, frowning, "Why didn't you use it to go back before the wards were set?"

A shamed look filtered into Rigel's eyes. "I couldn't go back before Tuesday. Before Pettigrew took me, I'd done Tuesday morning five times. Three times for my classes, and twice more for... reasons I now see were irresponsible. When Pettigrew took me back the second time, the resonance nearly killed me."

"Your magic," Severus breathed, appalled. Had the boy's core been maimed? Would he be reduced to Squibhood for what that rat had done?

Rigel smiled faintly. "I fixed the resonance problem, but I wasn't sure it was worth it to gamble the fix working if there were eight cores existing..." another rough cough, "... simultaneously. I was afraid the filter I put over my magic wouldn't hold."

"A filter?" Severus had never heard of such a thing. He could see the obvious leap Rigel had made-changing the way his core resonated might negate the resonance altogether. To come up with such a solution while malnourished and half-delirious from solitude and thirst, however, was nearly inconceivable. Rigel never failed to surpass all his expectations.

"Sort of." The boy looked troubled, but said no more on the subject. "Sir," he spoke after a few minutes of thoughtful silence. "How did you find me? And how did you get in here? And how are you going to get me out?"

"Draco was instrumental in my finding you," Severus admitted.

"Draco?" The word itself seemed to bring color back into the boy's face. He smiled softly. "Draco. I was... supposed to meet him for something tonight, wasn't I? Did he come looking for me?"

"He did," Severus drawled. "I believe he attached a tracking device he bought in Hogsmeade to your boot."

Rigel blinked a bit incredulously. "A teacher tracker? How long has he been...?" He sighed. "I guess I'd rather not know. I'll have to thank him for... stalking me." Rigel laughed, a much softer and less bitter sound than his earlier attempt. It relaxed something within Severus that had been half-certain the boy would be permanently traumatized by this experience.

Severus frowned at as the name finally registered. A 'teacher-tracker?' Draco hadn't mentioned the product was marketed for *that* purpose. It seemed he would have to begin doing regular sweeps of his own clothing.

Before Rigel could press for an answer to his other questions, Dumbledore's bird finally made an appearance. Rigel cried out against the flash of fire appearing just a few feet away and Severus realized belatedly that the boy's eyes would be very sensitive after so long underground. Even his dim wand light was probably paining him.

"Fawkes?" Rigel squinted against the spots in his eyes at the phoenix. "Oh. You can bring me through the wards?"

The phoenix trilled in agreement, a crooning song floating through the cavern that Rigel seemed to find comfort in, if the relaxed

expression on his face said anything. Fawkes flitted over to Rigel and landed gently on his leg. The boy was transported away in a flash of heat.

Severus collected the boy's bag and empty potions kit. He took the mokeskin pouch, and left the rat to rot.

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At the surface, he met Draco and Albus. The headmaster's countenance was drawn. "I was unable to locate Peter anywhere on the premises, Severus."

"He is below," Severus said shortly, his eyes flicking to Draco.

"Tell me," Lucius' child demanded. "What did he do to Rigel?"

Severus considered the merits of dismissing the boy, but Draco would find out the generalities from Rigel in any case. At least he could spare Rigel the pestering questions. "Pettigrew took Rigel prisoner. He is dead now, and Rigel is close to it himself. I assume Fawkes transported him to the Hospital Wing?"

"Of course," Albus said, looking pained. "You are certain of Pettigrew's... passing? Did Mr. Black say how it happened?"

"An accident," Severus lied. He would say nothing that might incriminate Rigel until he had made sense of the boy's ramblings. "His body lies below. You are welcome to examine it when your phoenix returns, but I wouldn't recommend the trip. It's a festering sinkhole. Come, Draco. We shall see to Rigel's recovery."

Draco followed swiftly at his heels, face lined with anger and stress. "Is Rigel going to be okay?" he asked.

"His recovery may be slow, but I believe he is out of mortal peril," Severus said.

"But is he going to be *okay*? " Draco pressed. "I don't understand any of this. I don't understand how Rigel could have been kidnapped and put in such an elaborate prison just in the last couple of hours. I definitely don't understand what Pettigrew would want with Rigel in the first place. Rigel said he might resent him for how he fell out with Rigel's family, but there are much easier ways to kill someone. This has the feel of a plot-and a complicated one, at that. And whatever's happened to Rigel tonight was so bad that it almost killed him? This isn't like falling off a broom. This is like... like that thing with the basilisk last year, isn't it? It's big. It's going to affect him even after he's healed, isn't it?"

Severus gave his godson points for deep thinking, but deducted them again for his blathering delivery. "It is. This goes further than you realize, Draco." He wondered how much he ought to say, but Rigel had already given up his time-turner privileges. The boy would need a friend who could understand the whole of it, too. If he had trusted his godson with knowledge of his Animagus form, he could trust him with this, he supposed. The boy was maturing quickly. "You must reveal to no one that I have told you this, Draco. The Unspeakables are not forgiving to those who possess information they shouldn't. Rigel has been in possession of a time-turner since the beginning of term-"

"What?" Draco half-shouted, gaping. "You- *why*? "

"It was necessary for the extensive curriculum Rigel has been undertaking-"

"You gave a time-turner to *Rigel* and expected nothing to go wrong?" Draco interrupted him. "How *could* you? Do you know him at *all*? He's a workaholic! If he could study in his sleep, he would! And you just-just handed the keys to the kingdom over to him, did you? Of all the stupid-"

"Watch yourself, Draco Malfoy," Severus snapped. Re-estimating the boy's maturity swiftly. "I am making allowances for your unbalanced emotional state, but I will not tolerate you questioning my authority as Rigel's Head of House."

Draco spluttered soundlessly for a moment, then clenched his fists and blew out a short breath. "Well, how long was he down there, then? I assume you're only telling me because it's relevant. Was he... was he there all day?"

Severus shook his head slowly, aware that he was about to cause Draco a great deal of pain. "I believe he was captive for almost two weeks."

"Two-but-" Draco's face crumpled. "No... why is it always him? It isn't *fair* ."

Severus couldn't help but agree with him, at that.

They made their way quickly to the Hospital Wing, entering to find Madam Pomfrey extraordinarily harried, and not at all for the reasons Severus might have anticipated.

"What is going on here?" he demanded, taking in Rigel's huddled form curled protectively into a ball on one of the many open beds, the nurse standing threateningly over him with her wand pointed aggressively into his student's face.

"This fool is refusing treatment!" Pomfrey shrieked. "Talk *sense* into him, Severus."

"Rigel," he said, approaching the bed slowly. "What is the meaning of this?"

Rigel uncurled enough to glare at the nurse. "I'm allowed to refuse if I want to."

"Why would you?" Severus asked patiently. "Don't you want to begin recovering?"

"He was well on his way, until he lost his good sense when I tried to do a basic Diagnostic Charm-" Pomfrey started.

"It was *not* a basic Diagnostic Charm," Rigel protested, sounding surprisingly firm for someone who'd been though what he just had. He spoke as if his life were newly dependent on this issue. "It was an incredibly in-depth and unnecessary Diagnostic Charm that violates my privacy."

"I need to know what's happened to you, Rigel," Pomfrey said, visibly distressed. Severus could see the signs of deep worry in the nurse's expression.

"I can tell you, if you'd just ask," Rigel said strongly. "I'm hungry, but my stomach is incredibly messed up from taking about thirty different potions in the last week, not to mention eating a whole lot of unwashed, raw ingredients. I don't have any injuries, but my skin itches everywhere, and I really want to take a bath. Or ten."

"At least let me assist you-"

"No," Rigel said sharply. "No. I don't need any help."

"Your muscles are weak with malnourishment," Pomfrey snapped. "I'm not leaving you to drown, you headstrong menace. It's nothing I haven't seen before, I assure you."

"That is not the issue," Rigel said quietly. "I have had a lot of agency taken from me recently and I would like to do this on my own. My magic will not let me drown, I promise you."

Poppy looked ready to launch a fresh protest, but Severus, who had never heard Rigel talk about his magic so calmly or assuredly, stepped in. "Let's respect Mr. Black's wishes, in this case. While he cleans up, we can discuss the regimen of potions he needs to be

taking over the next month to get his digestive tract back in working order."

"But he-"

"Has survived this long," Severus said firmly. "He can do this."

Rigel's deeply grateful look brought his gaze to Severus. Then it slid past him and landed on his blond shadow, who had been taking in Rigel's dirty, thin, wan appearance with something like shocked denial. "Draco!" Rigel's face split into a wide smile, even as his lips cracked and he winced a moment later. "It's good to see you. I heard you helped Professor Snape find me. Thank you."

"Thank you?" Draco marched over to the bed and glared at Rigel with tears in his eyes, "How about sorry, Draco, for making you think I was dead?"

"I'm sorry," Rigel began, frowning.

"Don't apologize, you idiot!" Draco grabbed Rigel's shoulders and shook the frail boy. "I was so worried, Rigel, I thought-we found the corpse and I assumed-" he broke into a wordless groan and held the dark-haired boy to him tightly for a long moment.

"You should let go, Draco," Rigel mumbled into his friend's shoulder.

"Don't tell me what to do," Draco sniffed. "I'm so glad you're alive, you have no idea. Pansy is going to hit you at least twice for this-"

"That's nice," Rigel said, amusement softly coloring his tone, "but I'm pretty sure I have fleas, so-"

"Ugh!" Draco leapt back. "What is wrong with you? Next time open with that, Rye." Rigel laughed and Draco smiled back at him.

"Seriously, though, go take a bath. I'll be here when you get out."

Rigel smiled as he slipped off of the bed on unsteady limbs. "Thanks for stalking me, Draco. Your nosiness actually saved my life."

"I'm not *nosy*," Draco spluttered. " *You're* suspicious!"

The levity left the room abruptly as Rigel hobbled into the bathroom adjoining the Hospital Wing. Draco stared after him with a deeply disturbed look on his face, and Severus wondered what he'd gleaned from the other boy's emotional state. Nothing good, it seemed.

"What happened to that child?" Poppy asked, looking heartbroken. "His smile is so brittle."

"I only know enough to say that his mind took the brunt of it, whatever pitiful state his body appears to be in," Severus said. "That said, there is little we can do for him mentally. He needs stability and security. Beyond that, counsel and support are all we can offer. His body will need help as well, however. He has been severely malnourished for upwards of a week and a half, so I recommend a full work up of nutritional supplements and repairing potions to sooth his digestive organs."

"Impossible!" Pomfrey said. "I had him in here this morning for lessons, and he looked nothing like that scarecrow of a boy."

"Wait, Rigel was in lessons with *us* this morning. How many classes is he taking?" Draco cut in, looking affronted.

"Twelve, I believe," Severus sighed.

"Were you trying to give him a mental breakdown?" Draco asked seriously.

"He was monitored closely-"

"Not closely enough!" Draco snapped.

"Are you in some way implying that my negligence is to blame for what has happened?" Severus asked, a dangerous growl in his voice.

"Of course not." Draco scowled. "Only-it was a terrible idea to give Rigel a- *what you gave him*, can't you see that? On the surface he looks very responsible and levelheaded, but it's all an act! He's a reckless idiot who pretends that it's not his fault he's always in the middle of trouble even though it's so obvious he's the only common denominator."

"You exaggerate his misfortune and turn it into a character trait," Severus argued. "Rigel Black did not ask for the world to set him apart. He must be prepared for what his life will involve, however, and the best preparation is *knowledge* ."

"So his taking twelve classes was your idea," Draco inferred. "Professor, I must respectfully disagree with you on this. What's best for Rigel is not more classwork. He needs to spend more time relaxing, so that his head doesn't explode before he's seventeen."

"I daresay I know better than you what is best for Rigel," Severus sneered.

"Why don't we let Rigel decide what's best for Rigel," Poppy jumped in. "Since you're both so keen on giving him some autonomy. You can't have it both ways."

Severus gave the argument up as a waste of time, for the moment. He needed to focus on what Rigel needed now, not in the future. They could work out next year's schedule next year. He ran through a list of the potions the Hospital Wing would have in stock and the ones he would have to make himself. "Do you have a Toxin-flushing Potion, Poppy? You may want to administer one of those before you try fattening him up, just to make sure there are no harmful poisons left in his system. I gave him a bezoar when I found him, but it's best to be certain, in this case."

"Why would he have been eating poisons?" Poppy asked, appalled.

"I cannot explain why or how, but he went nearly two weeks with only his potions kit to eat and drink, near as I can tell. He had the

presence of mind to avoid anything that would kill him outright, but I got the feeling he wasn't too picky with the things that would only make him mildly sick," Severus said, rubbing his eyes.

"Oh, Severus," the nurse sniffed. She was obviously confused, but knew better than to press for information he couldn't give her. "That's just awful. The poor dear."

"Rigel's smart," Draco said, looking both dismayed and impressed. "To go so long on just a collection of raw ingredients... it's lucky for him he's so obsessed with keeping his kit stocked. I'm not going to laugh anymore when he takes two hours at the apothecary."

"He is a clever lad," Severus agreed softly. It was probably the only thing that saved him.

"Not so clever," a voice behind them chimed in. Rigel was back, dripping water everywhere and only half-clean, though he'd abandoned his ruined clothes and donned a set of white hospital robes the nurse kept in stock for such times. "If I was smarter, I would have remembered to fill up my canteen with the Aguamenti charm before I got too weak to use my magic properly."

"That would only have bought you half a day, at best," Poppy pointed out briskly, shooing the boy toward his bed and drying him with a wave of her wand. "There's no need to critique your survival-just be grateful for it."

"Yes, ma'am," Rigel said. He leaned abruptly against the bed next to his own. "I think I may have-ah, overestimated my own strength. Can I take another bath later?"

"You may take as many as you please," the matron said. "For now, you must rest. Severus, will you draw up a list of the potions you'll be making so that I can devise a schedule?"

"Of course," he said. Turning to Draco, he told him, "Five minutes, and then you must return to your common room. It is far past curfew,

Mr. Malfoy."

"Yes, Sir," Draco said, moving to Rigel's bedside quickly.

As Severus walked toward Poppy's office, he heard Rigel saying, "Try not to make it sound like I was really going to die, when you tell Pansy."

Shaking his head at the idea of Rigel and Draco managing to put something past Miss Parkinson, who was far cleverer than either of them, Severus left them to their reunion. There would be a bloody fallout for this night, of that he was certain. Riddle, the goblins, the Ministry, Dumbledore-they would all have questions. For now, the boy should have his moment of innocence. He had certainly earned it.

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Dumbledore met them at the gates and James couldn't help but find it uncanny how the old man always seemed to know what was going on before he ought to. So many times at school the headmaster had seemed a little too forewarned before one of their pranks, even the ones they kept entirely under wraps.

"We're here with a warrant to detain your Care of Magical Creatures professor for questioning, Headmaster," James explained, holding his paperwork up through the gates so the older wizard could peer at it.

"I'm afraid there might be a bit of difficulty with that," Albus said, tone heavy with regret.

James grimaced apologetically. He liked Dumbledore, and he respected him as a political leader, but he had a job to do. "I know

you don't approve of the Ministry interfering with Hogwarts business, but I'm afraid Peter Pettigrew is implicated in a high-priority case."

"I'm certain he is," the headmaster said sadly. "Unfortunately, I do not think your questioning will yield the results you seek, at this point. Come with me, gentlemen."

The gates opened and James and his team of five Aurors filed through the wards quickly. Dumbledore relocked the gates and led them at a swift pace. After a few minutes, however, it was clear that he was not taking them up to the castle.

"Where are we going?" James asked, speeding up to walk beside Albus. "He is in the forest at this time of night?"

"He is," Dumbledore said, mouth in a grim line.

He was beginning to have a bad feeling about this. They entered the Forbidden Forest, much to the silent displeasure of the majority of his squad. All of them had attended Hogwarts, and they knew better than to traipse so casually into the dark woods.

"Is it far?" James asked, keeping his eyes peeled warily as the trees blocked out the moonlight.

"Fairly," Dumbledore said, "Your men can relax, however. I have made this trip twice tonight and have yet to encounter anything remotely dangerous. This part of the forest is currently deserted, for better or worse."

James was definitely unsettled, now. What could have happened to affect the creatures in the Forbidden Forest so acutely? It had to be related to the Dominion Jewel. Looked like their tip might be closer to the truth than he'd let himself presume. They walked a good while before reaching whatever Dumbledore was so keen to show them. He hoped it was not an elaborate diversionary tactic to give Pettigrew time to escape. That would tickle the Minister puce. He

complained daily about the pressure he was under from the goblins who managed the Ministry's finances.

Albus stopped them in a clearing full of dug up earth. His bad feeling intensified. "He's dead," he guessed, reading the cheerless expression on the headmaster's face with confusion. An image of Peter's face rose from the back of his mind as he asked shakily, "How?"

"That has yet to be fully ascertained," Dumbledore said quietly. "I have seen the body myself and it is... unnatural, to say the least. I shall tender a guess that you are here searching for the Dominion Jewel. If Peter Pettigrew had it, I'm afraid it killed him."

James paled. The headmaster really was alarmingly knowledgeable at times. Was it he who had sent the anonymous tips to the Auror Department? It wasn't his style, but *someone* at Hogwarts had to have sent the message.

"How far down is the body?" James asked, slipping back into professional mode. "I wish you hadn't reburied it, Albus. We do need to treat this as a crime scene."

"Things are a tad more complicated than you imagine," Dumbledore said mildly. "I do not recommend you attempt that spell, Mr. Filmont."

James turned his head to see Filmont with his wand out, looking annoyed. "Why's that, Headmaster?" the detective asked.

Dumbledore waved a hand at the ground and a ward matrix sprang to visibility all the way around the clearing.

"Shite," Filmont swore. "It's a bloody goblin ward. Those double-crossing little sneaks!"

"Goblins didn't do this," James whispered. He recognized the signature on the rune closest to his feet. "It was Pettigrew."

He could remember the small boy poring over runes for hours and hours, long after he'd given up studying for any other class. Peter had always been fascinated with the little symbols. It was his runes that protected the Marauder's Map from wear and tear, and they'd used his knowledge tons of times over the years designing pranks and setting up wards to keep the prefects out of their stuff. To think that his old friend was dead, buried under his own wards... it brought an ache of sorrow to his chest. They hadn't been friends for years, but all they'd been through together wasn't something you could just forget.

"He buried himself?" Filmont asked sarcastically.

James had his wand held high, looking around the clearing at the pattern of footprints and gesturing for his men to do the same. Dumbledore cleared his throat and tilted his head toward a heavily shadowed side of the clearing. "I believe what you're looking for is over there, Mr. Potter."

James hurried over and his face set grimly. There was a small tunnel, just big enough for a rat, going straight down. "It's some sort of bunker," he said aloud. "Judging by the footprints that morph into paw prints, Pettigrew was some kind of small Animagus." He ignored the amused expression Dumbledore sent him, feigning ignorance. "The wards only prevent humans from crossing them, right Filmont?"

"That's right." Filmont looked impressed. "Ruddy clever. If Pettigrew was an Animagus... well, he had himself an impenetrable hidey-hole. Do you think he kept the jewel down there?"

"How did you get a look at the body, Headmaster?" James asked quietly.

"Fawkes," Dumbledore said. The phoenix appeared in a burst of flame a moment later. "He would be happy to take a couple of your men down-only two or three, if you please. The caverns are not big enough to accommodate all of you at once."

James beckoned Filmont over. He was his best crime-scene reader. "Prepare yourselves," Dumbledore advised. "It is not pleasant."

"Death never is." James readied himself.

"I should tell you that Pettigrew was involved in an attack on one of my students tonight. That student was held hostage in the caves below. Please, keep that in mind when you examine the scene." Dumbledore looked incredibly troubled.

James felt a bit ill himself. Peter had kidnapped a kid? Whatever for? He held out his arm to the phoenix grimly and with a flash of fire found himself underground. The cavern he emerged in wasn't so small as Dumbledore had made it sound. The domed roof was tall enough to permit standing, at least. Once Filmont joined him, they began systematically documenting what they saw.

"Not to contradict the illustrious headmaster," Filmont said, tipping his head in the direction of Albus' phoenix, "but there's no body down here."

Fawkes trilled, diving toward the floor and then rising again to hover in front of them.

"Dumbledore said 'caves,' didn't he?" James clarified. The phoenix nodded. "We'll go to the lower cavern next, then, all right?"

The bird hovered contentedly near the top of the cave as he and Filmont got back to surveying it. There was a pile of niffler carcasses in one corner, a lantern whose light had burnt out, a circle of some sort that had been broken and redrawn several times, and evidence of human waste in multiple places. There was an empty burlap sack, as well, but the sum total of the random amalgamation of clues didn't make a lot of sense to James.

"Well, I'd say it's pretty clear what happened here," Filmont said, closing his notebook with a snap.

"Care to enlighten me?" James said, one eyebrow rising. "What did you do, read the past in the niffler entrails?"

"Something like that," Filmont smiled darkly. "Those nifflers were used to draw the runes in here-at least some of them. Probably the last few. These wards couldn't have been put up quickly-too complicated. My guess is our man prepared this place well in advance. Once he had his hostage in the cavern-though don't ask me how he got him through that tiny hole unless the student was also an unregistered Animagus-he killed these nifflers to finish off the wards and trap the kid inside."

James felt sick but knew he had to act with a professionalism that befitted his title. Even if it was *Peter* who had allegedly done these things. "The circle?"

"Ward of some kind," Filmont said. "Not runic-something short-term. The perp had to reapply it numerous times. From the looks of the splash marks, it was made with some kind of liquid, though I'm not sure what-"

"I know it," James said, surprised. He peered closer at the uneven way it had been drawn on the ground. "My daughter invented this potion. It's a portable ward. But... how could Pettigrew have got the potion? It's not for sale anywhere. It's still being tested by the Department of Mysteries, as far as I know."

"That's... very odd," Filmont said, a guarded look on his face. "James, your kid doesn't go here, does she?"

"No," he said, great relief in his tone. To imagine that it might have been his little girl trapped in this dark hole-just no. He would lose his lunch if he thought too much along that road. A thought struck him suddenly, however. "My... godson does, though. Harry could have given him some of the potions she'd made..." He struggled to keep his calm despite the alarm that trickled into his gut. There was no proof Archie was involved in any of this. Dumbledore would have mentioned that right away, were it so.

"Let's just get this documented and get back to the surface," James said, uneasy urgency making his fingers shake slightly as he ran a hand through his hair.

"Well, there's something that doesn't make any sense," Filmont offered hesitantly. "I mean, the headmaster said that one of his students had been attacked tonight, but there's enough human waste here for a few days, I'd say. How long does this potion ward last?"

"I think twelve hours, at least," James said.

"Why apply it so many times if it wasn't running out? Unless the kid broke it a dozen times." Filmont shook his head. "Something isn't right here."

"Nothing is right here," James muttered. "If we have everything, lets go below."

Fawkes' fire engulfed him and when he next took a breath he had to gag strongly. Bending double to control his stomach was the only thing that saved him from cracking his skull against the ceiling. He cast a Bubble-head Charm for himself, then did the same for Filmont when his detective appeared choking and gasping.

"He's dead all right," Filmont said, face distorted behind the bubble of fresh air. "Dead for a thousand years, looks like."

James took in his old friend's dead body with a numb sense of horror. The body was more gaunt than Peter had ever been in life, the features sucked clean of any resemblance to the man he once was, but James couldn't deny it was he. The coat he wore, littered with pockets and a size too big... it was Peter's signature style, even when they were in school.

"You want to search him, or you want me to do it?" Filmont asked, sounding incredibly unenthused.

James pulled a pair of gloves out of his pocket. "I'll do it." He walked, bent over, to where the body lay. Even ignoring the mummification, the actual flesh seemed to have been rotting for days. "Why wasn't he reported missing?" he wondered aloud as he catalogued the position and other details before touching the corpse. Peter's hand was frozen as though clenched around something, but there was nothing there. Had someone taken the jewel before they arrived? He couldn't let Dumbledore keep it, legally. He would have to question the student who'd witnessed this and see what he knew.

He searched the coat and clothes of the deceased, trying not to think hard about any of this until they had all the facts. Whatever the truth was, he didn't doubt it would be horrifying. Something clenched hard in his chest when he found a small green ring in one of the many pockets. Hadn't Archie worn something like that? "No jewel," he said after a long moment, straightening-as much as he could, anyway-and tucking the ring into an evidence bag. "Anything?" he asked his detective.

"A whole lot of empty potions vials," Filmont said, sounding perplexed. "Someone was either trying to kill themselves or had an extremely diverse series of ailments." He examined the residue in several of the vials and shook his head in confusion. "Befuddlement Draught, Numbing Potion, Blood-Replenisher, Dreamless Sleep... it's a whole potions cabinet worth of vials."

"Human waste again," James added, peering around the tiny cavern. "Mostly accumulated here, as though someone were too injured to move."

"Or too insane from taking all these potions at once," Filmont said uneasily. "There's a bunch of debris here, too, little stems and stalks, like someone was eating the leaves off of plants, only there are no plants down here."

"I don't like this at all," James said. "Let's get what we need and go. We'll have to take the body, if Fawkes will let us."

The phoenix didn't look pleased at the prospect, but the bird obliged nevertheless. They resurfaced and dropped the Bubble-head Charms gratefully, even as their companions exclaimed in shock at the state of the corpse they'd recovered.

"What did that?" Aberly asked with great unease. "Never seen a curse do that."

"It was the goblin artifact, wasn't it?" Greenhole guessed. "Look at his hand."

"But where *is* the jewel?" Filmont asked, looking at Dumbledore pointedly.

"According to the student who was accosted, it is gone. I don't know any more than that at the moment," Dumbledore admitted.

"We'll need to question him," James said. "Albus... who is it?" His expression pleaded for the headmaster to name some poor, unlucky kid whose name he didn't recognize. The regret in those piercing blue eyes said it all, though. " *No... not Archie* . He-is he all right? Where is he?"

"James..." Filmont said, his tone reminding him of his business here.

"Dammit, Filmont, that's my *godson*," James snapped. "Is he here or at St. Mungo's, Albus?"

"He is here, and he is fine-or as fine as one can be, after what he has experienced," Albus said sorrowfully. James didn't want his sorrow. He wanted to know how it had happened.

"Has Sirius been informed yet?" he asked. "Remus?"

"I have not spoken with the boy myself, yet," Albus said, "He was only rescued an hour or so ago. Severus took him to the Hospital Wing-"

"Snape?" James spat, furious. "Why not Remus?"

"Professor Snape saved your godson, Auror Potter," Dumbledore said firmly. "When young Mr. Malfoy noticed Mr. Black missing, he went to his Head of House and Severus acted immediately, tracking the boy down and sending for Fawkes to free him. He is in safe hands, James. I assure you."

"I want to see him," James said, mind going in a thousand directions, none of them good. He took off toward the woods, snapping orders as he walked. "Tunstin, get that body to the Ministry morgue. Aberly, when we reach the castle you will track down the Defense professor, Remus Lupin, and escort him to the Hospital Wing. Greenhole, you will use the Hospital Wing Floo to call Grimmauld Place and inform Archie's father that he is needed at Hogwarts. The rest of you stay with me until we have the full story. Once we have solid information on the jewel's whereabouts one of you will go to Gringotts to explain the situation to the goblins. The media will not be informed until we have the full cooperation of the goblin press corps, understood?"

"Yessir," came five voices at his back.

Good. Because James didn't understand *anything* . But he would, before the night was out.

The Hospital Wing was dark and quiet. "He is likely sleeping," Dumbledore said placatingly. "He had been through a long ordeal-"

"What are they doing in here?" Snape came out of the shadows and stood before them, between the Aurors and a bed with the curtains drawn. James eyed the curtains worriedly, but focused his attention on his former enemy, for the moment.

"You rescued Archie?" James asked bluntly. He saw Snape stiffen, defensive hate written all over his face, and knew the man expected James to accuse him of being an unregistered Animagus. He wasn't stupid-for Snape to have found the boy, he probably had a way through the wards, and there had been tracks suspiciously like a snake's sidewinding overlapping the rat tracks near the entrance. James was not quite that petty, however. "Thank you," he said,

sincerely. Archie was like his own son in many ways. If anything had happened to him... well, Sirius would never recover from losing his son, and that was nothing to what it would do to Harry and Lily. "Our family owes you a great debt."

"Save your debt," Snape sneered. "I care more for the boy than I do your forced gratitude."

James had to sigh. The Potions master never changed. He slipped his pocket book out of his robe and palmed a quill. "Since Archie is asleep, can you tell us what you know about tonight's occurrence?"

"Tonight?" Snape's eyes slid, fathomless, to Dumbledore.

James turned to the headmaster as well. "We found traces of at least several days worth of human waste in both caverns," he told the old wizard. "It also looks like Pettigrew has been dead several days at least. Is there something more you'd like to add to your report? Like why Pettigrew wasn't reported missing the moment he stopped showing up to teach classes?"

"He was never missing," Dumbledore said, lips pursed unhappily. "Unfortunately, you may need to speak to the Department of Mysteries before you interview young Mr. Black about what happened."

"Not the Unspeakables," Filmont groaned.

"We already know about the experimental potion that was involved," James said, frowning. "I recognized it as one of my daughter's inventions."

"It isn't that," Snape said impatiently. "Just contact them-you'll have to anyway, as one of their artifacts was involved in the crime that rat committed."

"I thought it was a goblin artifact," one of his Aurors whispered, confused.

James was starting to suspect something headache-inducing, however. He shared a look with Filmont and knew his detective was thinking a time-turner might unravel some of the mystery around the crime scene, too. "I'll Floo the Department of Mysteries," Filmont said, scowling. "Damn Unspeakables and their damned paranoid confidentiality clauses." He muttered all the way to the Floo, which Greenhole had just stepped back from. Before Filmont could get the Floo powder out of the jar, the grate sprang to life and Sirius stepped through, looking frantic in what were clearly conjured robes.

"Archie?" he asked, eyes zeroing in on Dumbledore from across the room. When he saw James there, he paled dramatically.

"There, sleeping," James said quickly, motioning to the curtains. Sirius turned toward the bed without another word and disappeared behind the curtains to see his son. "What can you tell us, without stepping on the Department of Mysteries' toes?" James asked, turning back to Dumbledore and Snape.

"Peter Pettigrew has been in possession of the Dominion Jewel for some time," Snape said, a sneer in his voice that James supposed was a permanent affliction. "According to the little that Mr. Black has said, Pettigrew held him captive in a bid to take his magic-I've not the faintest idea why," he added before Filmont could open his mouth. "I gather the man was quite mad by the end of it. Mr. Black was held prisoner until his classmate noticed him missing from the common room this evening. By a rather unlikely turn of fate, Mr. Malfoy had tagged Mr. Black's shoe with a tracking device: one of your own brand, I believe, Potter."

Snape's lip curled in distaste at the mention of the Marauder joke line, but James ignored it. He dutifully jotted down that Archie had been found thanks to an opportunely placed teacher-tracker, ignoring for the moment the implications of the Malfoy Heir attempting to keep tabs on his godson for whatever reason.

"So you tracked Arch-Mr. Black to the clearing in the woods, deduced he was underground, and sent for the headmaster's

phoenix to rescue him?" James supplied, glossing over his suspicion that Snape had gone underground after Archie in his Animagus form with professional smoothness.

"Indeed," Snape said, face revealing nothing but boredom. James suppressed an eye roll at the other man's natural sense of superiority.

The Hospital Wing doors opened before James could ask if Heir Malfoy had any information worth an interview. Remus rushed in, his hair sleep-mussed and his face etched with deep concern. "Archie?" he asked, spotting James immediately.

"He's fine, Remus," James said reassuringly. "Sirius is with him, just there."

Remus slumped in relief. "What happened?"

"We're ascertaining that now," James said. "Go see to Sirius, will you?"

"Of course," Remus said, frowning. He nodded to Snape and Dumbledore before leaving them to join Sirius behind the bed curtain.

Aberly jogged into the Hospital Wing a moment later, huffing and puffing. "Fast bloke, your friend," the Auror panted. James made a mental note to increase the physical fitness qualifications for the next annual evaluation.

Before they could continue the questioning, Madam Pomfrey came stalking out of the door that connected her quarters to the wing like an avenging angel. "What is all this ruckus?" the nurse demanded. "James Potter, are you disturbing my patient?"

"No, Ma'am," he answered automatically, taken back to his school days involuntarily.

The older woman drew herself up menacingly. "You'd better not be. That boy needs his rest."

"Can you give us a rundown of the child's injuries?" Greenhole asked, quill at the ready.

"I don't see how that's any of your concern, as the culprit behind them is *deceased*," Pomfrey sniffed. "If there isn't going to be a criminal trial, I see no reason to violate Mr. Black's privacy."

"We're just trying to get a picture of what happened," Filmont, who had finished his call to the Department of Mysteries, said in a weary tone. "Standard procedure."

"Well standard *medical* procedure is to tell nosy Aurors to keep their-

"It's quite all right, Madam Pomfrey," Dumbledore broke in, hands held up entreating peace. "It might be best if there was as little mystery to these events as possible."

The Floo grate flared to life again and Filmont muttered, "Speaking of mysteries."

A hooded Unspeakable came through and turned his faceless head back and forth along the ward. "Where is Arcturus Black?"

"He's asleep," James said stoutly, "And you won't be disturbing him."

The Unspeakable walked slowly toward their group, speaking softly. "This is no business of yours, Auror. Our artifact is implicated-"

"In a capital crime," Filmont interrupted flatly. "It's everyone's jurisdiction at the moment. So why don't you clue us in on why the crime scene that looks a week old was apparently made in the last few hours?"

The Unspeakable paused, thinking for a long moment. "Very well. It appears the facts are indisputably revealing, in this case. Everyone

present must agree to be bound by the secrecy that we hold-"

"Just tell us what happened, and we'll decide how much needs to be included in the report," James said firmly. "A child was almost killed tonight, and a man met his death in the most gruesome of ways. We're not agreeing to censor anything just yet."

The hooded wizard somehow gave off the impression of displeasure despite not having moved an inch.

"It would be best if we could all understand what happened," Dumbledore put in mildly. "I'm sure the Aurors would be amenable to giving you a copy of the full report when it's finished, in the interest of information sharing."

"Of course," James said tiredly. Inter-office politics were the worst. Especially when they interfered with investigation. *Especially* when that investigation concerned a member of his family.

The Unspeakable bowed his head in agreement. "Arcturus Black was issued a seven-day time-turner at the beginning of his school year through the sponsorship of Albus Dumbledore and his Head of House Severus Snape."

James' mouth dropped open in shock. Archie had been given a time-turner? He'd thought the Unspeakable would say that one had gone missing, or even that they suspected Peter had stolen one or applied for one. They'd given *Archie* one? "Why?" he choked out. "He's thirteen."

"At times exemplary students are selected for a special program that allows them to take more than the maximum number of credit hours in a term," Dumbledore explained. "This program is a secret kept between the student and his Head of House, and the ones chosen are expected to do all that is necessary to keep the existence of their time-turners hidden from their classmates and families. It is a precaution we take to prevent the student being taken advantage of, though in this case it is clear that it did not work."

"Archie had a time-turner." James was still completely floored by this twist in events. "Well. I knew he was a good student, but... that's..." He cleared his throat and refocused his attention. "So he was held captive much longer than a few hours, obviously. Do we know how long?"

"Two weeks," Snape hissed, rage coloring every syllable. "He was held in that hole for *two weeks* with no one the wiser until tonight."

"Two..." James could feel emotion trying to choke him. He batted it down forcefully. "Two weeks." He wrote it down with shaking fingers. "And Pettigrew was there with him the whole time, I suppose."

"Presumably," Snape said. "Mr. Black's account was understandably garbled."

"Did you recover the time-turner?" the Unspeakable asked urgently. James couldn't hide his disgust at the man's lack of tact. Was that really all he was concerned about?

"Yes." Snape looked equally disgusted as he pulled out the small golden device from his belt pouch. James examined it with interest before the Unspeakable snatched it and hid it within the folds of his robes. He'd never seen one before. It was smaller than he'd imagined. "I found the device in a moleskin pouch along with Pettigrew's wand."

"Was there anything else in the pouch?" the Unspeakable asked. So the Department of Mysteries was aware of the Dominion Jewel as well. Was nothing an actual secret anymore?

"No," Snape said blankly. James had no way of knowing whether he was lying or not. Snape had one hell of a poker face.

"Have you searched the boy?" the hooded figure pressed.

"I certainly have not," Snape snapped. "I was a bit preoccupied saving his life, if you must know."

"How... how was he?" James asked, not sure if he wanted to know. He couldn't imagine how Archie had survived such a thing.

"Not well," Snape said quietly, an uncomfortable intensity in his eyes that James found he recognized from his own gut. "He survived by consuming the majority of his own potions kit."

Archie had a potions kit? James supposed he must, if he studied Potions, but he couldn't imagine a student's kit would have much worth eating. Poor Arch.

"That's an understatement," Pomfrey huffed. "The boy was clinging to life. He had a dozen different mild poisons in his system. Intestinal damage all through his digestive tract from eating raw tubers, among other things. He has lingering delirium from overdosing on mind-altering potions-"

"The boy uses drugs?" the Unspeakable clarified.

"The boy was forced to *drink the contents of his potions kit* for its water content, weren't you listening?" the nurse snapped. "He was severely weakened by malnutrition and I don't doubt barely able to produce a spark of magic with his coils in the state they are."

"What happened to his magic?" the Unspeakable pressed, too interested for James' comfort.

"He hasn't said," Pomfrey told them, eyes narrowed in disapproval. "Something tore them up from the inside out while he was down there."

James felt too sick to wonder what could have done that to his godson, but Snape provided an answer anyway.

"The resonance," the sallow man said shortly. James had no idea what that meant, but the Unspeakable inhaled sharply.

"And he lives?" the hooded man asked, sounding breathless.

"He is a resourceful child," Snape said. The pride in his tone seemed stronger than that of a professor for his student, even a Head of House. How close was Snape to Archie?

"What is resonance?" one of his Aurors finally asked. "For, uh, the record?"

"Resonance occurs when one relives the same instant seven times," the Unspeakable answered, still sounding awed. "The presence of seven simultaneous cores creates a frequency feedback in the magic that always destroys the seventh core, in most cases killing the wizard in question within minutes."

"He should not have been using the time-turner so frequently," Dumbledore said, greatly troubled.

"He has three classes at once on Tuesday mornings," Snape said briskly. "In the course of his usual week, he was present in that time on five separate instances. When Pettigrew kidnapped him, he obviously didn't get what he wanted by the time his seven days were up. By taking the boy back another week, he set into motion the resonance that occurred when Tuesday came again."

"Is the boy a Squib?"

James glared at the Unspeakable in fury. How could he just ask that so callously? His heart shook at the possibility being laid before him. He would be grateful as long as Archie lived, but to be so maimed... it was soul crushing.

"He is not," Snape spat. "He circumvented it in time."

"Impossible," the Unspeakable declared.

James wasn't sure if he should feel relief or not. Which was he to believe? Snape or the expert on weirdness?

"You may see for yourself when he wakes," Snape said, smirking slightly. He sounded very certain. "Rigel Black is a remarkably clever boy."

It was strange to hear Snape of all people talking about Sirius' son like that. And calling him by that name, which James gathered was a sort of nickname he used at school. "Is there anything else?" he asked the Hospital Wing's matron after a long pause.

"Just this: there were traces of mind-weakening herbs still in his system," Pomfrey said, an indignant tone in her voice. "They aren't the sort that would be useful in any of the common potions, as they work potently on their own. That man was *drugging* Mr. Black to keep him complacent."

The tension in the room shot palpably high as several people, James included, suddenly wished very much that Peter Pettigrew were not already too dead to feel pain. That *bastard*. How *dare* he? To any child, but more, to *Sirius' son*? Had they ever known him at all?

"What are the readings on his core?" the Unspeakable asked after most of those in the room were calm once more.

"There are none," Pomfrey pursed her lips. "I can see his coils, but the core isn't registering on any of the Diagnostic Charms-the ones the boy will let me use, anyway," the nurse added bitterly.

"How can you be sure it was not destroyed, then?" the Unspeakable asked.

"The boy himself told me he masked his core in time to prevent the resonance from tearing it apart," Snape cut in. "You likely cannot get a read on it as the boy had altered it in some way."

"To change its frequency?" the Unspeakable seemed to be muttering to himself. "It would take an array so complex as to forbid a timely solution."

"Perhaps we should all retire for the night and continue this in the morning, when we can talk to Mr. Black himself," Dumbledore suggested. "There's no sense in prolonging our speculations past the point of usefulness."

The Unspeakable looked ready to argue that point, but he was interrupted by the curtain around Archie's bed being pushed back slowly. They all looked around to see Sirius sitting in the chair at the boy's bedside and Remus standing with his hand on the fabric. "He's awake," Remus called to them softly. "He says he'd like to get the questions over with, if that's all right."

They crowded round, though James motioned his four remaining Aurors to keep back a bit, in order to allow Archie at least a modicum of space. His godson was propped up against his pillows, looking exhausted and much too thin. His eyes were clear, however, and when he spoke it was with a coherence he hadn't let himself hope for, after hearing all that the boy had endured.

Even through the professionalism he tried to summon for the interview ahead, he couldn't help but think, *Sirius, your son is stronger than we ever realized.*

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Their faces were so expectant, and probably all for different reasons. She didn't know if her story would shock, appease, or disappoint them. She found she really didn't care. She just wanted this over with so she could go back to sleep. Why had they summoned her uncles? This would be so much easier without three members of her family staring down at her. They didn't need to hear this. Especially

when they'd be picturing it all happening to Archie-sweet, happy Archie, whose soul was so pure it was profane to imagine any of this happening to him.

How much of the truth to tell? It was a question she'd been struggling with since she awoke to the sounds of voices and all through the hasty reassurances and hugs she gave Sirius and Remus. She didn't want to be caught in a lie. Her best bet of getting out of this mostly unnoticed was in painting herself as the unfortunate victim who'd been in the wrong place at the wrong time. How could she explain Pettigrew's taking her without telling them about her powerful magic-magic that Archie did not have, and which Sirius, Remus, and James *knew* he did not have? She would have to include some of her less than honest activities, if she was to give them a narrative everyone would accept.

"It started... a while ago," she said slowly. "I'm not sure how much is relevant to your investigation, so I'll just tell you everything."

"Please do," James said, a professional mask on his face that didn't quite disguise the latent worry in his eyes.

"A few weeks ago-in conventional time, not folded time-I was walking by the forest when I heard the sounds of someone in trouble," she told them. "I followed the sounds to a clearing, where I saw Professor Pettigrew fighting a dragon."

"A what?" Remus' jaw dropped. She'd forgotten that Dumbledore had kept the dragon mostly under wraps at the school, only informing her Head of House and a couple of officials from the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. "Peter was fighting a- *what* ?"

Rigel realized belatedly that Remus and Sirius had no idea who'd done this to her, though by the lesser confusion on James' face, he had been informed. This was going to be very hard on her uncles, she thought regretfully.

"Professor Pettigrew had the dragon chained up in the clearing and was trying to stop it from roasting him by holding up this large red stone between him and the dragon," Rigel said, wincing at the furious look on Snape's face at her words. It was definitely not the story she'd told Dumbledore the night it happened, and Snape was no doubt wondering why on earth she had lied about it, but it needed to be said now. "He lost control of it, and it nearly killed both of us, but I sent up sparks and made a loud noise to get the dragon to back off. Dumbledore came and rescued us-Pettigrew was pretty badly slashed at that point-and I didn't see Pettigrew again after that except in passing."

"That would be the dragon you reported sighted on the grounds, Dumbledore?" James said, looking a bit annoyed. "You didn't tell us one of your professors was keeping it captive in the woods."

"That is because that is *not* the account Mr. Black gave on the night in question," Snape growled. "Rigel, what have you done?"

"I'm sorry," she said, "but I lied. The truth is, I've known what the Dominion Jewel was for a while now."

Shock and confusion lined every face looking back at her.

"I overheard my-uh, Uncle James asking to use my dad's library to look for background information on a goblin artifact that was missing." She pretended not to see James' frown. "I'm friends with the Weasleys-"

"Is that relevant?" the Unspeakable, who she could only assume was there because she'd violated about a dozen time-turner rules, asked sharply.

"Everything I'm going to say is relevant," she said calmly, staring into the black hood. She was not going to be intimidated by a bit of shadow magic. She had seen much scarier things in the last week. "The Weasleys' eldest son works for Gringotts. He's a curse-breaker who was assigned to the tomb that got broken into over the summer."

He was also assigned to look for the jewel at Hogwarts after the goblins were banned from the premises. It was obvious to everyone that the goblins' missing artifact had something to do with what happened on Halloween, and I guessed that whatever they were looking for was probably taken from the tomb in the first place. When I overheard Dad and Uncle James talking, it started to fall into place."

"You overhear things a lot, it seems," one of the Aurors behind her father drawled. James glared at him, but Rigel merely shrugged.

"I do, actually," she acknowledged. "I overhear enough to know that the goblins and the Aurors weren't the only ones looking for this thing, in fact. That much was confirmed when Riddle showed up at the school with a flimsy excuse about talking to the headmaster."

"Lord Riddle of the SOW Party?" James clarified weakly. He looked incredibly overwhelmed all of a sudden.

"Of course," Rigel said. "Why else would Pettigrew, a devout member of the Party, suddenly express a pressing interest to teach at Hogwarts, the one place controlled by Riddle's political enemy? He thought Riddle, his Party leader, couldn't get to him here. And why else would Dumbledore take on such an unqualified teacher, unless he also suspected Pettigrew's application to Hogwarts was either at Riddle's behest or represented some kind of break with Riddle and wanted to keep Pettigrew where he could watch over him?"

All eyes turned to Dumbledore, who looked mildly affronted. "Peter Pettigrew demonstrated a remarkable way with a variety of creatures in his interview for the position. He seemed sufficiently qualified, and we needed a professor immediately."

"That makes sense," Rigel said easily, not actually trying to offend Dumbledore. "I'm just letting you know what I assumed. My guesses contributed to the reason I didn't say anything about Pettigrew having the stone that night. I didn't know for certain who all was after

it for their own gain. If I told you, and you *were* after the jewel, it wouldn't be the right thing to do. Professor Snape is a member of the SOW Party as well, technically, and I had no way of knowing if he was reporting to Riddle or not, so I couldn't tell him, either. Including the goblins, that's three powerful players all looking for a very powerful artifact. I wasn't prepared to hand it over to any of them."

"Why is that?" James asked, frowning deeply. "Why did you think it was best to allow Pettigrew to keep it?"

"First," Rigel said, frowning, "I submitted an anonymous tip that very night to the Auror Department telling you who exactly had the jewel. I assumed the Ministry, the only neutral party in the affair that would be bound by legalities, at least, would come arrest Pettigrew, confiscate the jewel, and that would be the end of it."

Heads turned to James and the other Aurors. "We only received the tip tonight," James sighed, rubbing his temples. "There were staffing issues... well, in any case. We did not receive it in time, obviously."

Snape muttered something about Ministry incompetence, which all six Ministry officials bristled at, but Dumbledore, ever the voice of reason, spoke over their hostility. "Mr. Black, I am disappointed that you did not feel you could trust those of us here at Hogwarts, but I can understand your position. Did you think the stone dangerous?"

"He was using it to control a *dragon*, Headmaster," Rigel said, frowning. "Semi-successfully, at that. I'd been doing research on the jewel by that point, hours and hours of reading, and I knew enough to be terrified at the idea of it falling into any one person's hands, benevolent or not. Did you know it was used by the ancient pharaohs to subjugate nature and beast alike? Or that it could steal a creature's *sentience*? Or that it could be used to steal the magic of another wizard with enough control?"

"I did not," Dumbledore said, looked suddenly aged. "Such a thing..."

"Yes, exactly," Rigel sighed. "I think you're a good person, Headmaster, but you have many people who look to you for guidance. Your hands are exactly the sort the jewel is most dangerous in-leaders who have a large amount of influence, like the ancient Wizarding pharaohs did. It corrupts even the best intentions. Pettigrew wasn't an evil mastermind, don't you see? He was just an average wizard, until the jewel got its hooks into him. Imagine if Pettigrew had been someone with real power and resources right off. The damage done to our world would be inconceivable. That is why I informed the Aurors. I thought the Ministry would either destroy the thing in the interests of neutrality or lock it away in the Department of Mysteries with all the other incredibly dangerous artifacts."

"And we will," the Unspeakable said smoothly. "Where is it?"

"It's gone," she said flatly. "It was destroyed in the cave."

"How?" the hooded man demanded.

"Don't know," she said. "I was unconscious at the time." There was no way she was going to tell them it was living in her head at the moment. That sounded like a good way to be locked away for life.

"Perhaps we could back up a bit and start back at the beginning?" James asked, frowning. "We seem to have jumped ahead. So you knew Pettigrew had the jewel weeks ago. Then what happened, Archie?"

Rigel organized her thoughts. This was the part she had to sell. "I sort of... misused my time-turner a bit after that." Snape frowned forbiddingly, and the Unspeakable seemed to grow more sinister in presence. "I thought it was the right thing to do, but now I think I should have left well-enough alone. I used my time-turner to keep an eye on Pettigrew. I followed him when he wasn't in classes or in his rooms. I thought if I kept an eye on him, nothing bad could happen before the Aurors arrested him. Only, they never came, and I kept thinking it would be just one more day, maybe, and he was going into the forest a lot but I just figured he was practicing his control on the

creatures in there and there wasn't anything I could do about that and-

"Breathe, Archie," Sirius said softly.

She sucked in a breath for effect. "Sorry. I just-I can't believe I was so oblivious, even while I was watching him so carefully. He wasn't controlling the creatures in the forest anymore. He was building a prison... for me."

"Because you saw him with the stone," James realized, seeing at once where the tale was going.

"Yes," she said. That was why she had to tell them about seeing the stone that night with the dragon. She didn't want them thinking Pettigrew targeted her for a more specific reason, even though she was convinced that the jewel had steered him toward her because of her magic, not because she was a witness. "I did try to convince Pettigrew I was stupid, after he woke up from his injuries those weeks ago," she added, not wanted to appear completely careless in front of all these people, half of whom she respected greatly. "I thought he bought my act. I guess not, though."

"He took you tonight-ah, linearly speaking?" the same Auror who'd spoken earlier, the one with long hair and a short beard, said.

"Yes," she said. "I was on my way to Professor Snape's office to turn in an assignment-oh!" She looked around for her bag suddenly. "I think I still have it, Professor, in my-"

"Forget the assignment, you foolish boy," Snape said, scowling.

She sat back slowly. "All right, I'll turn it in tomorrow, then." She caught Remus smothering a small smile from the corner of her eyes.

"What happened next?" the Unspeakable prompted impatiently.

"Right," she said, sighing. She was getting to the part she really didn't want to discuss. "Well, he jumped me in the dungeons. Summoned my wand from behind, then got me with a body bind."

"Coward," Sirius snarled. He reached for her hand and clutched it tight. She squeezed back, smiling reassuringly.

"I got him good, though," she recalled. "Bloodied his nose, I think."

Sirius attempted to smile at that, but it was brittle. She turned back to James. "I tried everything to get away. I used a trick a friend taught me to get my arm free of the Incarcerous and tried to go for the time-turner. I thought if I could get it to spin even once, I'd be beyond his reach. The jewel, though... it's hard to describe. It can freeze your will completely. Like the Imperius, I guess, but it's hot. Everything feels like you're caught in a mirage, way out in the desert. It's hard to tell what's real, and the heat sort of melts your brain. He got me with it before I could get the time-turner from my shirt. He summoned it- and why in Merlin's name is there not an anti-summoning ward put on time-turners, Mr. Unspeakable?"

The hooded face looked up from a clipboard on which he was scrawling notes furiously as she spoke. "I will look into that. Normally the Notice-Me-Not Charms are sufficient."

"Yeah, it was stupid of me to play that card so quickly," she admitted. "If I was thinking clearly, I would have waited until he let his guard down. Because I drew attention to it, Pettigrew got his hands on the time-turner. He was... pleased." She trailed off darkly at the memory of his unnaturally ecstatic expression. He really had been desperate, at that point, hadn't he?

"It isn't your fault, Archie," Remus said softly, coming around to stroke her hair gently. She tried to smile, but knew it was not convincing when he added. "Truly. You did all you could. Sometimes the other bloke is faster."

She frowned at that. Next time she would be the faster one. "Well, you can guess what happened next. He used the time-turner to take us both back in time as far as it would go."

The Unspeakable paused in his scribbling for a moment. "You mean to say that this Pettigrew simply turned the dial as far as it allowed?"

"That's right," she grimaced. "I don't think he'd ever seen a time-turner before, though he had a rudimentary understanding of how they operated. He seemed disappointed when he realized it had only gone back a week."

"In future, it may be wise to place greater restrictions on the time-turners that are allotted to students," Dumbledore said, worriedly.

"If there is such a program in future," the Unspeakable muttered.

"After you had gone back in time, did Pettigrew take you directly to the forest?" James asked, returning to the point with an apologetic expression. She wondered if he'd already been to see the caverns while she'd been sleeping. Perhaps he could guess that she was reluctant to continue.

She cleared her mind as best she could, trying to see the details objectively, filtering out all the unnecessary memories and focusing on what the Aurors needed to know. "That's right," she said, her voice devoid of emotion. Sirius squeezed her hand with concern, but she could not focus on him right now. Her mind was elsewhere. "He took me to an underground cave-like structure that I gather he'd built himself either by using the power the jewel had over nature or by using it to control creatures like the nifflers into digging it for him."

She saw James exchange a look with the long-haired Auror, and decided that he had seen the place Pettigrew had kept her. She fought the shame that rose in her cheeks and forced her mind back to a weightless detachment that would help her through this.

"I didn't know there was a second chamber, at that time," she said, her voice slightly quieter. "Thinking back now and realizing that my future self was just beneath me, the whole time... it's surreal. And I thought I was used to the oddities of time." The faces around her were growing graver as she delved into the meat of her story. She supposed she should keep introspective detail to a minimum, to avoid horrifying everyone. She was horrified enough for them all. "He had my school bag with him-picked it up from the corridor where he caught me."

"Relevance?" the Unspeakable broke in sharply.

"Patience," she snapped back. After a short breath, in which she told her frayed nerves very sternly to cool it, she said, "It's important. Inside my bag there were maybe a dozen vials of Protection Potion. It's a-

"I'm familiar with Miss Potter's work," the Unspeakable said, nodding. "Very well, continue."

She took another breath, then explained. "Pettigrew used a combination of the Protective Potion and the jewel to keep me under control while he tried to figure out how to take my magic."

"He did not have full control over the jewel?" Dumbledore hazarded.

"I believe that's correct," she said, unwilling to talk about her former suppressor. "He was unable to take my magic, in any case, no matter what he tried. It did... hurt quite a bit, though. I think it did something to my coils, Madam Pomfrey mentioned."

"I thought that was the resonance," James said, sweeping his hand through his hair in a gesture so familiar it warmed her heart. She had missed her family, all those days alone.

"The resonance was later," Rigel said. "After Pettigrew wasted the week trying unsuccessfully control my magic, he decided he needed more time. I tried to explain the laws of time and I even tried to

appeal to his sense of purpose by letting him know that going back that far would kill me and make controlling my magic ultimately fruitless, but he was quite insane, by that point; at least, he was beyond the reach of logic."

"Why was he so fixated on controlling your magic?" the Unspeakable asked. "What gave him such a specific focus in the first place?"

"There was a prophecy," she said, frowning. "I forgot about that."

The Unspeakable shook his head. "There are no records of a prophecy regarding one Peter Pettigrew."

"It wasn't made by a witch or wizard," Rigel explained, "It was a centaur prophecy."

James pinched the bridge of his nose as the long-haired Auror muttered, "Of course it was. Bloody stargazers."

"How did he come by such a thing?" the Unspeakable demanded. "Centaurs do not deign to tell humans their foretellings."

"He used the jewel," Rigel said, wondering if anyone was paying attention to the important bits. "He's been practicing on the creatures in the forest all year. He forced the prophecy from a centaur in an effort to gather more information on how to use the jewel-I'm guessing that's why the herd moved to other parts of the forest, actually."

James slowly wrote that down as well, sheer disbelief in his gaze now. She supposed the whole thing did sound rather outlandish, told all together like that.

"Anyway, the prophecy said something about one having to control the jewel by controlling others, and it was incredibly vague, so I suppose Pettigrew could have interpreted it any way he wanted to," Rigel said. "I think the jewel is a rather single-minded artifact. It's sentient, to a degree, and its controlling purpose seems to be

controlling others. So Pettigrew was completely fixated on this one thing, except it wouldn't work, and instead of trying anything else he just... persevered. After he turned us back the second time, the jewel must have sensed his ultimate incapability. It turned on him, I think, and killed him, destroying itself in the process."

"And you were... asleep during this," the Unspeakable said, sounding unconvinced.

"I was meditating, but yes, I was unconscious," she told him. "I was busy trying to figure out a way to prevent the resonance from killing me." That was a complete lie, but they didn't need to know about her magic snapping and her having to get a hold on it, or about the long period of time she spent in an unrecognized memory. It was irrelevant to their goal of finding out how Pettigrew died.

"How did you?" It was an Auror who asked the question, but she couldn't help noticing the Unspeakable's intent stillness as she considered the answer.

"I changed the frequency of my magical core," she said slowly. "So that it would no longer resonate with the others."

"How?" the hooded wizard pressed.

"I filtered the core through something else in my mindscape. I happened to have an extremely complex magical structure I had already built lying around, so I modified it using Occlumency and encapsulated my core within it." There. That was both informative and incredibly vague.

"What does... that even mean?" one of the Aurors asked.

"It doesn't matter how," she said, trying to sound dismissive. "I doubt I'd be able to replicate it, anyway. I was just desperate for any way out of... well, death, at that point."

Sirius could no longer keep quiet. "That rat deserves worse than he got," he snarled. "How dare he? He put your life at risk half a dozen ways. What kind of a man-"

"I don't think it was entirely his fault, Dad," she said quietly, stroking Sirius' hand firmly. "He was driven quite out of his senses by the jewel. From the moment he came into contact with it, he was doomed. It exaggerated his ambitions and distorted his view of logic, of right and wrong. I think all he could think about was pleasing the stone."

"He should have resisted," Sirius spat. "He should have *died* before he put a child at risk."

"It doesn't matter now, Dad, can't you see?" She did not like seeing Sirius so angry. "The jewel took back everything it gave. It left him mummified, like the pharaohs of old. He can't hurt anyone anymore." *And neither can it*, she thought vindictively, hoping the busy little construct in her brain heard her loud and clear.

"You forgive too quickly," Snape said, cold anger in his voice. "He left you to rot, Rigel. In the dark. Without food or water or even fresh air to breathe-"

"I know," she snapped, her anger igniting quickly and then being snuffed out just as quickly by the part of her who just wanted to get through this conversation and go to sleep. She softened her voice. "I know what happened. I also know why and how it happened. I'm not going to paint Pettigrew as more evil than he was to make myself feel better. He was weak-willed and greedy, but not evil. He wanted everyone to see him, to respect him, probably. Lots of people want that. Without the influence of the jewel, he never would have acted on his ambitions. We can't blame people for the desires they don't act on-it isn't fair."

"Very wise," Dumbledore said, nodding slowly. "You show grace where most would have room for only hate."

"Hate never helped anybody," she mumbled, feeling the exhaustion catch up with her, now that her report was finished.

"He should rest, now, if you have everything you need," Pomfrey said immediately.

"We have a lot of things to verify," James said, nodding shortly. "Archie can get some rest. We'll stop by if we have any further questions."

The Aurors readied to leave, no doubt going to explain to the goblins that the artifact they'd been so long in searching had disappeared. James gave her a long hug before he left, and she leaned into his broad shoulders with a deep sense of peace. She was okay. Everything was going to be just fine. "Take care, Arch," he said. "We'll see you at home soon."

Home, she thought longingly as she settled back into her pillows. There was a nice thought .

The Unspeakable attempted to stay, insisting he needed clarification on several points, but a combination of glares from James, Sirius, Remus, Snape, and Pomfrey changed his mind. He muttered something about drawing up preliminary reports and Flooed out with the others.

"I'm gonna sleep, Dad," she said, making a token attempt to sound a bit more like Archie. "Okay? Will you stay a while?"

"As long as Albus will let me," Sirius said, leaning forward to kiss her forehead gently. "I'm so glad you're all right, Son. So glad."

"Me, too," she said, smiling a bit. "Night Dad. Night..." She yawned. "Remus."

"Sleep tight, Pup," Remus said. "We'll guard your sleep."

She closed her eyes and reveled in the soft mattress, the clean sheets, the warm air and the knowledge that all would still be well when she woke. All night long a wolf howled and a dog brayed in her dreams.

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Sirius could not stay forever and Remus had duties to attend to for his classes, but she had a string of visitors throughout the weekend to keep her company. Draco and Pansy were there first thing the next morning, worried and quiet, but seeming to understand that she didn't want to talk about anything to do with what had happened. She assumed Draco had filled Pansy in on the highlights, as the girl would slip into pensive worry every now and then when she thought Rigel couldn't see.

She helped her friends distract her by asking all about the things that were going on in her absence, not that anyone was doing much besides studying and gossiping about her, of course.

Pansy and Draco stayed as long as they could, but Rigel tired easily and had to nap on and off throughout the next few days. The rest of her friends came to visit, of course, in ones and twos (or in the case of the Weasleys, fives). Most of them simply could not fathom what had happened. The story circulating was that Pettigrew had attacked her and she'd killed him in self-defense. It made her sick to think that she was associated with murder, and she tried to explain to as many people as she could that Pettigrew died in an accident, but people still believed she'd slain a live basilisk, so she supposed she was fighting a losing battle. She would have to consult her PR team, as Fred and George were still calling themselves, on what to do about it.

She'd thought originally that she could sleep for years and never feel rested again after what had happened, but that wasn't true. By the

middle of the following week, she was going stir-crazy, and she'd taken to pestering her friends to bring her books to read or to collect her homework, at least.

The professors weren't giving her any homework, though, and Dumbledore had said something about exempting her from end of year exams that frankly concerned her. Was she supposed to do nothing until school got out a few weeks from now? What nonsense. She didn't survive so much soul-scarring drama to sit in a room and stare out the window. She wanted to do something.

When Snape came to visit her near the end of the week after her rescue, she was ready to beg.

"I am losing what mind I have left," she said, exasperated into hyperbole. " *Please* assign me some work to do. Or bring me my cauldron. I'll-" she paused, frowning. What could she do with a cauldron? She had nothing to brew with.

Snape began to smile slightly and she tensed, blinking up at him from her bed. "What?" she said, suspicious. "What's so amusing, Sir?"

The Potions master fished into his robes and pulled out her *potions kit*. Awed, she reached for it with trembling hands. "You recovered it. Thank you."

"Open it," Snape said, still amused.

She raised an eyebrow and pried it open curiously. It was... entirely stocked. She gaped, opening drawer after drawer and pouch after pouch. Everything had been replaced. There was more than had been there before, even. All the potions vials had been replaced, as well, and there was an entire collection of potions already made. She read through the labels in disbelief, laughing a bit when she noticed most were survival potions, and tearing up when she recognized Snape's spidery handwriting.

"You made all these?" she asked, touched.

"A potions maker should never be unprepared," Snape said archly. "Especially one so prone to trouble. I added a few potions that you would be unlikely to come across in your average medicine chest. Things to help if there is ever a next time. Offensive potions, and a few bottles of water, as well-just in case."

She laughed, wiping her streaming eyes hurriedly. "Thank you. I don't- *thank you*, Sir. This is... perfect. It's just what I would have done, if Pomfrey would let me out of this bed. I'll take it everywhere, I promise."

"See that you do." Snape looked pleasantly satisfied at her reaction to his gift.

"Professor," she said, hugging the potions kit close and blinking up at him imploringly. "Can I leave the ward, soon? I'm going to be fatter than I was to begin with if Madam Pomfrey is in charge of my diet much longer." That was pure exaggeration. She was still on the thin side, and her stomach was still pretty messed up. It hurt to eat anything that wasn't entirely bland, but there was no reason she couldn't eat porridge in the Great Hall just as well. "I want to get my strength back up," she added. "I can't do that sitting here all day, right?"

"It is too soon for you to be-"

"It's too soon for everyone else!" she exclaimed. "Sorry, but it feels like everyone around me is much more affected by this than I was. I'm okay, Professor, really. I wish everyone could see that."

Snape was quiet for a long moment. When he spoke, she could see the care he was taking not to upset her. It annoyed her, but she supposed she ought to expect such a thing. He cared about her, she reminded herself sternly.

"You have not fully processed what has happened to you, yet," Snape said. "This illusion of functionality will not last. It's important for you not to force your recovery; in the long term, hurrying back to classes won't help."

"I need the daily routine to feel normal again," she said. "I don't need to sit and think any longer. This wasn't some lightning-fast event that I barely had time to process before it was over. I sat for days and *days* and did nothing but think and come to terms with the situation over and over again. I'm done thinking. I just want to live my life again."

She couldn't pretend to be broken to fit someone's expectation of a victim. She'd done enough pretending in her life, she decided. Sure, she had nightmares at night, and yes, her body still reminded her daily of the abuse that had been heaped on it, but she didn't see either of those things changing just because she thought about them more.

"Think how you would feel," she pressed, sure that Snape was the sensible sort of person, like her, who would rather move on than dwell uselessly. "Have you ever done nothing for a whole week? It's *horrible* ."

Snape's lips quirked in amusement and she counted that as a victory. He was coming over to her side. "Unfortunately, it's out of my hands. Madam Pomfrey has final say in all matters pertaining to her prey-ahem, her *patients*, that is."

"Traitor," she sighed, looking up at the ceiling despondently.

"I'll leave you to your wallowing," Snape drawled, making his way toward the exit.

"Thanks again, Professor!" she called after him. She really was grateful for all the time he'd put in on her behalf. She smiled down at the kit in her arms. She was going to add a few things of her own, as well, starting with a blade. In fact, she might start carrying one on her

person. If she'd had a knife when she punched Pettigrew, her first hit would have been the only one necessary.

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Madam Pomfrey kept her in the wing all that week before finally relenting on the condition that Rigel come in and let her check her over twice a week for the rest of the term.

Before she was released, however, she had a most unexpected set of visitors.

"Mr. Malfoy is here to see you," Pomfrey said one afternoon as she watched Rigel finish her after-lunch Potion.

"Draco?" She sat up straighter in her bed. "Isn't he in class?"

Lord Malfoy came around the curtain and Rigel blinked in astonishment. "Good afternoon, Lord Malfoy," she said. "How is your wife?"

"She will drop by in a little while, if that's acceptable," Malfoy said, looking down at her with a sort of guarded weightiness. "I finished my meeting with the Board of Governors early, so I thought I'd come ahead. How are you, Mr. Black?"

"Very well," she said, smiling slightly. "Madam Pomfrey says I can be released this evening, in fact."

The matron snorted and swept off to her office disgruntledly. It had taken *much* pleading to be released even on good behavior.

"Quite the ordeal you had," Malfoy commented, shifting his gaze to rest on the cards and presents people had been sending her. His

eyes lingered on the stuffed toy that the Weasley twins had somehow managed to make look like Mrs. Norris.

"It all happened so quickly," she lied. "I hardly even remember it now."

"How fortunate," the blond-haired man said, eyeing her as though he knew she was bluffing. "I suppose you've grown accustomed to being thrown into unusual situations, have you not?"

"I have had prodigiously poor luck these three years," she agreed readily enough. "I have high hopes for next year, however." Then again, that was what she'd said about *this* year.

"School ought to be a place of safety," Malfoy said, disapproval in his voice. "To think that a Hogwarts professor was responsible for such a willful attempt on a student's life... well, perhaps we ought to have more stringent employment requirements for our most illustrious center of education."

"Is that was you were talking about with the Board of Governors?" she asked, wondering what kind of guidelines he had in mind.

Malfoy smiled thinly. "I'm afraid our discussions are confidential. You needn't worry for your uncle, however; the Defense curriculum is the most comprehensive the school has seen in years, and test scores are expected to be particularly high this year."

"That's great," Rigel said. "Professor Lupin won't be teaching next year, though."

"Why is that?" Malfoy asked, eyes sharpening.

"Everyone knows there's a curse on the position," she said. "When Remus agreed to take the professorship, he designed a contract that would only allow him to teach for one year, after which he would be forced to retire. He wanted to teach, but he didn't want to take a chance with his life, or with the safety of others."

Her uncle had confessed in one of their tea times that if he didn't have her and Archie and their parents to think of, he might have taken the job without worrying overmuch about the curse. As it was, Remus couldn't bear to think of losing any of them, or of putting himself in a position where he might be lost to them.

"A cautious man," Lucius said, inclining his head respectfully. "That is a reassuring trait, in one of his affliction."

"It comes more from living with my father and Uncle James," she joked. Malfoy smiled politely but didn't appear terribly amused. She cast around for something else to say, then realized there was something she had wanted to convey. "Mr. Malfoy, I wonder if you might give your..." what could she call him? "your *friend*, Mr. Riddle, a message from me?"

Malfoy raised a curious eyebrow. "Of course."

She smiled gratefully and related the message carefully. Malfoy's expression narrowed at her words, but he didn't say anything. He merely nodded. "I will tell him that."

"Tell who what?" Lady Malfoy had arrived, and she breezed in to buss Rigel on the forehead. "Rigel, how are you? We came as soon as we got Draco's letter about what happened. He couldn't tell us everything, of course, but we're so glad you're all right."

"Thank you, Lady Malfoy," she said, a warm feeling in her chest. "Your family is, as always, too kind to me."

"You are our family, Rigel, you know that," Narcissa said, patting her hair worriedly. "We would be devastated if anything happened to you. Do be more careful, won't you?"

"I am beginning to think I shouldn't go anywhere without Draco and Pansy," she said, smiling. "I don't believe I've ever gotten into too much trouble with them by my side."

"As long as you recognize that," Narcissa teased. Her face fell as she grew serious, asking, "Will you be released soon? No permanent damage?"

"Tonight," she reassured the kind woman. "I've been fully recovered for a while. Madam Pomfrey just likes to fuss."

"I heard that, Mr. Black!" the matron called from outside the curtain.

The Malfoys chuckled at her wince.

"Well, we merely came to assure ourselves of your continued well being," Narcissa said, tucking her blankets into the mattress absently. "Will we see you for the garden party this year?"

She frowned. "I'm so sorry, but I don't think I'll be able to make it this year. I've made plans to go out of the country for an internship, and I believe I'll be kept too busy to Floo home."

"I see," Narcissa looked intrigued, but simply said, "Send us a note when you get back to England, then, and we'll arrange tea."

"I would like that," Rigel said. "Thank you for coming to see me. It was very thoughtful."

"It was the least we could do," Malfoy said, holding the curtain aside for his wife. "Get some rest, Mr. Black."

"Can't avoid that, around here," she told them, waving wryly as they departed. Sure enough, Madam Pomfrey was there a moment later, taking away one of her pillows so she was forced to lie flat. She grumbled at how annoying it was that she fell asleep so easily in the middle of the day. When was she going to be able to relegate her sleep to strictly nighttime again? She supposed when she stopped nodding off after each meal she would know she was fully healed.

She just hoped her body would hurry up with it, that was all.

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She had been excused from all exams. Her assurances that she was fine and that she'd really prefer to take them went unheard-or at least unheeded. While her peers sweated furiously over a History of Magic essay-based final, Rigel went down to the lake and stared at the water. She had taken to spending a lot of time outside, lately, no longer being the fan of closed in spaces that she once was. She took her books outside and read rather than stay in the dorm room, and she hadn't successfully brewed anything since she was released from the Hospital Wing.

She would, she told herself, she just... needed a little time away from potions ingredients. The smell of certain things took her back to the cavern, and quite ruined the experience, she'd found. The memories would fade, she assured herself. Everything faded, eventually.

It was there by the lake on a sunny day in late May that Dumbledore found her and sat down beside her on the grass.

"Afternoon, Headmaster," she said, cocking her head at him politely. "Nice day, isn't it?"

"One of the nicest I've seen," Dumbledore agreed, his beard ruffled slightly by the breeze off the water.

They sat quietly for a little while, until the headmaster said, "I've been thinking a great deal about what you said, Mr. Black, about keeping the specifics of the jewel to yourself in an effort to be responsible. I've come to think perhaps the reason you are sensitive to the ideological conflict between Mr. Riddle and myself is because you fear being pressured to choose a side."

Rigel thought about that for a moment. "I think I already have been," she said eventually. "A lot of people assume things about what I think or support, either because of who my family are or who my

friends are. Mr. Riddle has taken an... interest in my development. It unsettles me. I have no interest in becoming another cog in his Party machine. Ideologically, my views are closer to the platforms you support, Headmaster, but I don't want to be a face for your political agenda, either."

"Many people remain neutral in both politics and society," Dumbledore said mildly. "You are so young. There's no need to feel pressured to choose just yet, or at all."

"You say that, but reality is not patient," she told him. "I suppose you've guessed my magic is a little unusual."

"I know you are a special boy," Dumbledore said easily. "I believe there is more to the story of what happened in that cave than you told the Aurors, and I want *you* to know that if you ever need help with something, whether it be guidance or more substantial assistance, you are free to ask, and it would not constitute choosing a side, so far as I am concerned."

She was unexpectedly moved by his words. It was not often that someone offered something free of strings, she knew. "Thank you," she said, her voice a little thick. "I have been having difficulties, but it came to a head recently and... settled, for better or worse."

"Your magic has changed," Dumbledore observed. "Madam Pomfrey has been quite bewildered by its lack of signature, though she tells me you have no difficulty with it."

Rigel nodded. "What I did to stop the resonance... it transformed my core, in some ways. It's better controlled, ironically, but it feels a little like Pandora's Box, at times. I know it's contained safely, but it still feels very vulnerable."

"Many things in life are like that," Dumbledore said slowly. "The things we want to protect often feel the most vulnerable, for all our efforts in protecting them." She took that in thoughtfully. He was right. Everything she did to secure their ruse, for example, only left

her achingly aware of how fragile it all was. Dumbledore looked over at her consideringly, then said, "Did you know I had a sister?"

She shook her head slowly.

"She was in a terrible accident," Dumbledore said, sadness coloring his tone with deep, raking hues. "It left her magic locked inside of her-except when it would escape. She lived a troubled life, and a short one. It is not my intention to intrude on your privacy at all, but I do worry about you, Mr. Black. When a thing is repressed long enough, it has a way of breaking free with sudden and life-altering violence."

He had known about her suppressor all along, she realized. She swallowed shakily. "I have recently come to the same conclusion, Headmaster. I'm very sorry about your sister. I think... I'm going to try believing other people when they tell me they can help. I was so afraid of becoming beholden to someone or something, so convinced that a step in any direction would send me into quicksand, that I ignored resources that were there for me all along. I'd like to think that I learned something from all this, at least."

"I'm certain that you have." Dumbledore smiled ruefully, a lifetime of experience in his gaze. "It is a great injustice of the world that our worst experiences often change us the most dramatically, but there is consolation in that usually we are changed for the better for having endured them."

She wasn't sure she felt better as a person, exactly. Sharper, maybe stronger, and certainly wiser, but not necessarily *better*. There were still many angry, bitter parts of her that wished it had never happened. She wondered if one day it would simply seem another chapter in the narrative of who she was, unpleasant, but instrumental to her character in the way Dumbledore seemed to be describing. She had a feeling Dumbledore was speaking from personal experience, however. She wasn't sure if *her* experience was one that promoted growth or not, yet. She supposed only time would tell.

"You should write a book," Rigel said after a while. "You could fill it with wise advice."

"I find that when one tries too hard to be wise in a general sense it lacks a feeling of genuineness, relevance, and immediacy that causes the advice to fall flat," Dumbledore mused.

Rigel smiled. "I think that's the same reason we decided Professor Snape shouldn't bother writing down his insults. When it comes naturally in the moment, it means more, is that it?"

"I shall have to remember that comparison," Dumbledore said, chuckling appreciatively. "Yes, it seems insults and wise advice are similar in that regard."

"It's good to have such expert sources among the living, then, in case I ever need either," Rigel laughed.

"Living sources are always preferable to books, I find." The headmaster inclined his head, gazing at her over the top of his half-moon spectacles. "And that is saying something, Mr. Black, for a good book is a near-priceless thing."

"I agree." She drew her knees in to rest her chin on them as she turned her gaze out to the water once more. When she was in the cavern, it wasn't books she was thinking of, however much she loved knowledge and reading. It was the people she would miss, and their faces that reminded her over and over again that life was worth hanging onto. She felt she'd lost that perspective somewhere along the road of her ambitions. She would not forget again.

"Alas, I must be returning to my duties," Dumbledore said on a long sigh. "Pray, enjoy your youth, Mr. Black. The clock turns all too swiftly."

She watched him go, wondering if he felt as old as he looked, or older. She felt old, sometimes. She did her best to be the person her

friends and family knew, the person she wanted to be, but sometimes she felt like someone else.

She frowned, wondering exactly how old she was, anyway. Probably at least... fifteen, she realized, blanching. Was that right? It was two months until what would have been her fourteenth birthday. Since her thirteenth birthday, she had done August in normal time, then compressed at least a year before her Modified Polyjuice wore off between September and January. That was thirteen months. About five months of regular time after that. Plus whatever folded time she'd experienced between January and now. She added a month spent brewing Polyjuice. If she assumed she'd doubled her time since January with the time-turner (which was a conservative estimate, she had to admit), then she was currently at... twenty four months since her thirteenth birthday. At least.

Was that why she felt old? Because she was fifteen? Maybe. More likely it was just her chronic exhaustion coupled with a sense of dissonance with reality that only seemed to be increasing, rather than decreasing, the longer she spent 'recovering.'

Her mind turned to the implications of her ageing. What would they do over the summer? All three of the men in their family knew what she looked like at the moment. Archie couldn't pretend to have a sudden growth spurt in the next two weeks. Her mind whirled and clicked, eager for something challenging to do. She began mentally composing a letter to Archie-probably one long overdue.

Real life was about to catch up to her very quickly, she realized. When she went home she would have to be completely recovered, because her family would be looking for changes in Archie, not Harry. She was suddenly grateful for her imposed period of rest and recuperation. It would give her time to reestablish her personality on an even keel.

She met with Snape before the end of term to discuss her schedule. They had to adjust it, as she was certainly not going to be issued a time-turner again, even if she could bring herself to use it.

After thinking about it seriously, she decided to drop Magical Theory, which she reasoned she could read up on herself, and Ancient Runes, which no longer appealed the way it once had. Snape told her the headmaster had agreed to move her Alchemy class to one evening a week, and Pomfrey had suggested she was advanced enough to move her into the fourth-year Healing class (next year's fifth years), which she would share with two other students. Her Potions studies would have to be relegated to the weekends, but she was okay with that if Professor Snape was.

She thanked the professor when they had finished working it all out, but he stopped her from getting up with a hand gesture.

"There is one other thing we must discuss, Mr. Black," he said. There was a look in his eye that said he was preparing to do something he didn't want to.

She tensed, and straightened. "What's that, Sir?"

"I would advise you to be very careful, this summer," Snape said, voice measured. "The generalities of your ordeal have not gone unremarked upon outside of these walls. Certain parties may feel that this experience has made you vulnerable."

Rigel blinked slowly at him. "You mean Riddle, don't you? What does he want with me, really?"

"I believe he means to bind you to him in some capacity-politically, if he can," Snape said. She was surprised at the candor he showed her. "If you decide to throw your lot in with Riddle, it should be when you are fully prepared to make such a choice. For now, be careful. He will take every advantage of your weakened state-"

"I'm not *weakened*," she protested.

"Your Occlumency has been all over the place since your attack," Snape told her sharply. "Your shields fluctuate constantly, reading differently every time I see you. You need to settle your head, Rigel. Preferably before you meet Lord Riddle again."

She frowned. She hadn't done anything with Occlumency lately. The fact that her shields were noticeably changing was rather concerning news, considering her mindscape's... new addition. "I'll be careful," she promised distractedly. "I'll be out of his reach anyway, most of the summer. I'm going abroad for a Healing internship." Archie was, anyway.

"I suppose that means our apprenticeship is on hold for a few months," Snape said, affecting a grumpy tone.

She hadn't realized the apprenticeship was meant to continue over the summer, but she grimaced apologetically in any case. "Sorry, Professor. I thought I needed to fill the summer to keep busy. If you need help with any of your projects, though, you should ask my cousin Harry. She'd love to help, and she's *always* free." She said the last with a bit of cheek, just to see him roll his eyes.

"Perhaps I will," he drawled sarcastically. "I could use an apprentice who still respects me."

"You mean one who's afraid of you." Rigel grinned. "I can't help you with that, though. Harry isn't afraid of anything."

She was sure she'd never told a bigger untruth.

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She had been studiously avoiding going into her mindscape for any reason or even thinking too hard about the state of her magic in general. She knew she couldn't neglect it forever, however, particularly if her shields were undergoing significant alterations in her absence.

With a deep sense of reluctance, she found a quiet spot in the library the next morning and delved into meditation. It was laughably easy. She could barely remember a time when Occlumency came to her with difficulty, at this point.

When the landscape of her mind materialized around her consciousness, however, she had to wonder if she'd taken a wrong turn and ended up in someone else's head, somehow.

Her mountain just... wasn't there. She'd materialized instead on the banks of a river so blue it hurt her eyes to look at it for very long. There were smatterings of trees here and there, and downriver she could see a very large boat of Egyptian design. The air was hot and when the breeze picked up around her, she felt grains of sand brush against her cheek.

Incensed, she looked around for the culprit. It took a moment but she eventually spotted a large form walking out of the trees with a pile of mangos in his arms. Did mangos grow on the Nile? She shook her head and focused. The form was a heavily tanned, overly muscled man with a white cloth around his waist serving to preserve his modesty, and she marched his way with a scowl, saying, "What do you think you're doing up here? You can't just change everything. It took me ages to build that potions lab, not to mention my space room-where *is* it, even?"

The large man didn't stop or even look at her. He just kept carrying his mangos up the beach.

"Hey," she said, catching up to him. "Stop ignoring me. I want to know just what you-"

"Please stop harassing my slave," a voice rang out across the mindscape.

She whirled and saw another figure, smaller and swathed in gold, lounging on a chair in the artificial sunshine. "You." She jogged over. "What have you done with my mindscape?"

"Whatever I like, fleshling," the construct, which was currently fashioned crudely after one of the old pharaohs, informed her. It turned to look at her and its headdress glinted somehow despite there being no actual light source in the sky. "I told you. This is my domain, now."

"If I order you to change it back, you'll have to," she said, frowning at it.

"What, don't you like it?" the construct asked. It looked up at her indolently as the large man began peeling one of the mangos and feeding slices to the richly adorned construct one after another in a slow march of lavish ridiculousness.

"Where is my space room?" she demanded.

"Calm yourself, child, I haven't touched your precious... seriously? 'Space room'? That's a terribly unoriginal term. I've been calling it the Universe of Your Mind." The construct looked awfully pleased with itself. "In any case, it's right where you left it, see?"

The world replaced itself in an instant and she found herself in her potions lab, which was largely the same as she'd left it. A moment later, the vision was gone and she was back on the riverbank. "What?" She blinked and shook her head in confusion. "What was that?"

"The other layer of your mind," the construct said. "Obviously. Haven't you ever seen Occlumency done in layers? This is an illusion that masks the truth of your mental landscape. You charged me with protecting your mind, remember?"

"Oh, yes," she said, gesturing at the mango-peeling man sarcastically. "I'm sure you did all this for me."

"Are you always this tiresome?" The construct sighed.

"Are *you*? " she spluttered. Since when did the jewel get so cheeky?

"I am as I am," the construct said slowly. "I am Pharaoh. I am Dominion. I am-"

"Delusional," she muttered, rubbing her head in annoyance. She had a megalomaniacal sentient object making itself emperor of her head. This couldn't possibly go wrong. "Okay," she said after taking a mental breath. "We need to come to an agreement about some things. Item one-"

"I'm going to stop you right there," the construct drawled. "Here are my conditions. You leave me in peace, and I won't actively attempt to stop you from using your magic whenever and however you please."

She rolled her eyes. "You can't stop me from doing anything. I've programmed you otherwise."

"Are you sure?" the construct asked, affecting concern. "You programmed this body to be unable to access your magic, too, didn't you? How's that working out?"

"I consciously overrode that directive," she ground out.

"You *think*," the construct smirked. "Look, I respect you for trapping me-that was unexpected and rather refreshing, in all honesty. I haven't had a host work *against* me in a long time. That said, don't overestimate this prison. I control your magic now. You can try to give a laundry list of directives that covers everything I can and can't do with it, but because your magic can only go through me, every restriction you put on me is a restriction on how you can use your magic as well."

She paled. Was that true? Would the construct be able to do anything she could do with her magic? She had a brief vision of herself forced to give up all magic and live in the Muggle world in order to prevent the jewel from accomplishing its goal of world domination.

"Don't be dramatic," the construct said, bored. "I'm not unreasonable. This domain is interesting. It responds much faster than reality. Takes less effort, too. As long as you don't put unreasonable restrictions on me, I won't put unreasonable restrictions on you."

She frowned. "I'm not sure I want to know what you consider 'reasonable' restrictions. No-don't tell me. Just listen for a second. I don't know how much you've managed to glean from my mind about my actual life-"

"Practically nothing," the construct complained, "It's all locked away in the Universe of Your Mind, and that is very annoying, just so you know."

"Well, it's very complicated," she said patiently, "and if any of the complications go wrong, I will be thrown in Azkaban for the rest of my life. I will go insane. And this will no longer be a fun place for you to live, get it?"

The construct looked fascinated. "Interesting. What did you do?"

"You don't need to know," she said sharply. "You just need to understand this: sometimes I need my mind to look a certain way, to certain people. If you fluctuate my Occlumency shields all the time, some very powerful people are going to notice inconsistencies in the lies I'm telling, and that will be bad for both of us."

"Well that's easy enough," the construct shrugged. "Just give me a heads up before you see these people, and I'll switch the order of the layers so that your world is on the outside and my world is underneath."

"Can't you just switch them now and leave them that way?" she asked.

"No," the construct said. "The world a consciousness occupies is the one on the surface-I'm not spending any more time in your dreary mountainscape than I have to."

"It's not that bad," she argued.

"It's stark. And lifeless. And a symbol of the repression you inflicted on your own magic for over half your life." The construct ticked each point off on his fingers.

"How do you know that?" she asked, frowning. "You said you couldn't get into the-"

"Oh, you left this one out," the construct said, smiling as he took a familiar black orb out of his belt sash. "Fascinating study. I wish I knew what happened next."

She flushed angrily but refrained from trying to snatch it away. He had already seen it, after all. "May I have that back? I'd like to put it with the rest of my memories."

"Maybe later," the construct pouted. "I have nothing else to look at when creating and destroying things gets boring. Besides, I'll protect it from any intruders-that's my job, remember?"

She gave up trying to talk to this infuriating compilation of intention-gone-awry and sheer happenstance. She turned to go, then paused. She should at least try giving it a direct order to make sure it worked, right? "No slaves."

"What?" the construct sat up, alarmed. "Why?"

"It's considered evil, these days," she informed him blithely. "Also, it's my mind, and I say so."

It narrowed its eyes at her, then sneered. Producing a couple of golden coins from thin air, the construct tossed them carelessly in the direction of mango man. "There. Now he's a servant. Happy?"

"Ecstatic," she growled, abandoning her meditation altogether. She would put that overgrown mineral in its place when she had more energy.

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The reply from her cousin came not in a letter but in a box. Inside there was a book on what looked like Magical Theatre, of all topics, and a bottle of plain old Polyjuice Potion. Unlike her Modified Polyjuice, which went bad rather quickly after it was finished thanks to the way the natural magic of the amber stone interacted with the other ingredients, regular Polyjuice could be kept for months. She didn't know what he expected her to do with just one dose, though she suspected it had to do with their disguise problem.

When she wrote him originally, she'd glossed over the events of a few weeks ago, dedicating most of her missive to the problem of their appearances. She'd regretfully informed him that there was no believable way her appearance could change suddenly at this point, which meant they would have to stage an incredibly potent growth spurt during the fall. She was interested to see what solution he'd come up with. Archie's reply was, like Archie himself, unexpectedly devious, yet brilliant.

Rigel,

For once, your obsession with all things Potion-related is to your detriment. There are other ways of achieving what we want, this time. Here's the plan: I have oh-so-preparedly arranged with Hermione for her parents to invite me to dinner the night we get back from AIM. I'll go home with her folks, then tell them I have to pick up

something in Diagon Alley for my dad on the way home. You will meet me at the Leaky and we'll switch. When that happens you will use one of the glamours outlined in the book I've enclosed to take on the appearance of what you will look like when you have time to brew and take the next dose of Modified Polyjuice. I know what you're thinking-how will I know what the next dose will look like? Well, that's why I've included two strands of hair plucked at the same time. One you'll use now to combine with yours in the ritual and then add to the regular Polyjuice. When you transform, you'll have an hour to memorize those features-I suggest you take a picture, personally. You need to get good enough at glamours to keep one up around our parents until the Modified Polyjuice Potion is finished.

As for me: I told you about the internship I secured to appease Dad's idea that I've grown unusually fixated on you, right? Well it starts just a couple of weeks into the summer vacation and lasts nearly two full months. That will work easily as my 'growth-spurt period,' won't it? Until I go away, I'll keep the face we've been wearing, then change my appearance to match your new appearance before I return.

As a bonus, this will actually make our parents more certain that our looking alike is some kind of unconscious magic on my part, because you'll appear to grow naturally, and I'll appear to have magically 'caught up' over a shorter, but still gradual, period of time.

Don't think I haven't noticed you keeping something huge from me lately-your last letter especially was unsuccessfully blasé. I've already had a letter from Uncle James, and we are overdue for a long talk. Speaking of which, Hermione sort of figured some stuff out and we should probably talk about that some time, too. The important thing to remember is that everything is fine!

Learn a convincing glamour, and try to stay out of trouble until I see you again.

-Harry

She didn't know why he bothered signing the letter 'Harry,' when the rest of its contents were so completely incriminating. She also didn't know why he accused her of holding something back and then threw in a line about his friend knowing more than she should like it wouldn't make her blood pressure skyrocket if he wrote it fast enough.

She had to admit his staggered appearance-altering plan was solid, though. As long as she learned the glamour before school got out. It wasn't as if she had anything else to do, she thought wryly. Thinking about the hairs Archie had sent, she decided to combine them with hair samples she'd taken from herself in January. They would be almost a year old, so the change would be less dramatic overall. Then she could catch up her appearance with the next dose.

They wouldn't be able to switch places and pose as one another until Archie got back from his internship, but she supposed they wouldn't *need* to, with Archie out of the country anyway. This would also prevent Remus from being confused about which of them was which; if Harry's appearance was significantly different, he would think nothing of Archie's behavior being a bit different from Rigel's.

Overall, she was just glad the year was over. She was more than ready to go home. She would work on her correspondence courses, tinker with new ideas for Shaped Imbuing, and have a generally quiet summer. She hoped.

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[end of chapter fifteen].

A/N: So ends book three, dear readers. Was it predictable? I felt like a lot of the work on this chapter consisted of following the strands of everything I'd introduced in previous chapters to their logical, inevitable ends. I couldn't tell while writing if this was going to be boring or suspenseful, annoyingly angsty or poignant. I trust in my fabulous readers to make what they will of it, but I'm generally

satisfied with how things turned out. If it seemed unnecessarily trying at times-the whole book, not just the chapter-I share your feelings. That said, Harry grew a lot. The next book, she will be noticeably different, I think.

There will be an epilogue after this chapter, but I'm posting it as soon as it's done, instead of waiting until the next book. I don't know when the next book will be out, as I honestly haven't done much work on it yet. I'll let you all know on my profile when I begin making progress. Until then, stay amazing everyone! Special thanks to my sister for 'hying,' as she calls it, and to Mary for polishing the rough edges (this time I said 'head to tow' ^^).

All the best,

-Violet Matter

Epilogue

The Ambiguous Artifice:

Epilogue:

[LmLmLm]

Lucius was beginning to deeply regret agreeing to pass along the boy's message. At the time, it had seemed a harmless enough role, but as he traversed the short distance between his lord's Floo room and the grand reception hall in which Riddle took his callers, there was a feeling of disquiet growing louder in his gut.

Lucius was often the bearer of news, being his lord's right hand in most matters, and frequently the news was much worse than what he had to relate that day, but the source of the message combined with its tone... well, he would have to couch the missive carefully, wouldn't he?

The door to the reception hall was always open. It was so Lord Riddle could see clearly anyone foolish enough to loiter outside in hesitation or fear. Lucius knew better; to show fear was to give that fear power. He was not such a fool. He strode through the doors with studied diffidence, approached to precisely halfway down the delicate silk carpet that ran the length from the doors to Riddle's throne, and bent double in a bow that ached along his spine more than he'd care to admit. Perhaps it was time to resume his erstwhile dueling practice. He was much too young to be feeling the effects of aging so acutely.

The countless candles hovering about the room sent shadows, restless and flickering as the candles themselves, dancing across the floor below him. He narrowed his eyes against the sight. The candles wavered and shifted in such a way that the shadows they

produced could easily make an unsuspecting wizard dizzy with vertigo. He had seen it happen to many a would-be sycophant.

"Rise, Lucius. Approach me," Riddle said lazily. "What news from Hogwarts-has there truly been a death on Dumbledore's watch?" There was deep amusement and anticipation in Riddle's face. Lucius felt at once disturbed by the obvious glee the powerful man's eyes revealed and gratified that he should be so trusted as to be shown his lord's honest inclinations.

The emerald-studded throne was as gilded and gaudy as ever, Lucius thought on his approach. It never ceased to add a certain ironic levity to his interactions with his lord. He knew that others who sought an audience with Lord Riddle would take it just the opposite-a grand statement of the man's power and wealth. Lucius knew Riddle better than that.

"Grave news indeed," Lucius told the dark-haired politician, relishing the interest that glinted in Riddle's eyes. This was the advantage of being the news-bearer, no matter how unfortuitous the information sometimes was. Good or bad, he was assured his lord's undivided attention. "Hogwarts has regrettably lost a fine educator to the maw of death: one Peter Pettigrew, odious in life, yet unexpectedly useful in demise."

Riddle smirked, and it transformed one side of his face into a landscape pocked and dipped in shadow. "It amazes me how Fate at times steps in and solves a problem with such alacrity and precision that I could not have arranged matters better myself. What of the jewel? I presume either Dumbledore or the Ministry has cloistered the object for further study-not that the fools will get very far. If it's the old man, I'm almost tempted to let him keep it. Imagine, Lucius, the damage that might result were the venerable headmaster to suddenly desire power to the detriment of all else. It would certainly make things interesting once more, don't you think?"

"I'm sure it would, my lord," Lucius said carefully. "Unfortunately, the jewel is no more."

"Say again?" Riddle slowly straightened in his throne. "You do not know where it is, perhaps?"

"It was destroyed, I believe," Lucius said evenly. "My contacts have affirmed that the Ministry believes it gone for good. The Department of Mysteries is quite up in arms over the loss of such an ancient power source, apparently."

"Impossible," Riddle snapped. "Dumbledore must have gotten to it first. He has it hidden."

"An eyewitness account says otherwise," Lucius said, a delicate cough allowing him to avert his gaze from Lord Riddle's furious glare.

"Whose account?" Riddle sneered.

Lucius took a slow breath, wondering how much his lord wanted to know. The burning impatience in the powerful man's eyes said *everything*. "They have kept it from the papers in order to preserve the boy's privacy, but Pettigrew's death was not the accident the Ministry is portraying it. My son has written to me, telling me what little he knows of the circumstances and after much persuasion I was able to acquire a copy of the official report. The Aurors have classified it, but I have many connections in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement-"

"Yes, yes." Riddle cut across him. "Get to it, Lucius. I will praise your efforts later."

Lucius bowed his head shortly. "Of course. Rigel Black was-"

A furious curse broke from Lord Riddle's lips and magic expanded tangibly into the air around him. " *Of course* that brat is involved." After visibly collecting himself, he gestured impatiently for Lucius to continue.

"Yes, well, Mr. Black has been involved longer than you might think. He apparently discovered the jewel's presence at Hogwarts independently, and took it upon himself to... watch Pettigrew carefully."

"How could he possibly have sussed out the jewel's presence? Only we were aware of Pettigrew's mission in Egypt. The goblins knew the bare facts of its existence, and the Department of Mysteries may have guessed at some of its powers, once they were informed of the investigation, but no one could have guessed that Pettigrew of all people would have it." Riddle drummed his long fingers on the arm of his chair in a swift roll. "Did Snape-" The politician cut himself off before he could make an accusation he might regret.

"The report suggested the boy had some contact with a member of the Gringotts team assigned to locate the jewel," Lucius offered. "Between that and the access he had to his uncle's less than discreet investigatory style, the boy was purportedly able to gather enough information to make a series of unlikely guesses that turned out to be exactly correct."

"Clever fool," Riddle muttered. "He is all that is wrong with this new generation. Consorting with Weasleys. Sticking his nose into the business of his elders. Fumbling his way through intricate webs with all the grace of a blind hippogriff. They forget how far we have come, how much we have sacrificed for their sake. That will change. Soon, they will be reminded of the duty they owe their own and of the filth that lingers never far from the palace of privilege we have build for them." Riddle trailed into silence, lines of thought etched into his brow. Lucius stood silent, patient, and attentive. Within moments, his lord was speaking again. "So the boy dove into waters that turned out too deep, did he? I suppose Pettigrew became aware of Mr. Black's attention."

"Perhaps," Lucius allowed. "Pettigrew certainly took note of the boy. He took him hostage-an ill-considered scheme to either silence him or exploit the boy's power, I believe. The boy was... damaged considerably in captivity, according to the attached medical records."

"How long?" Riddle asked, looking perturbed. "The rumors I've heard tell only of Pettigrew's sudden demise. There is no mention of a protracted incident."

"I am not certain," Lucius said. He hated to admit to not knowing something, but even his best sources had not been able to uncover this detail. "Large sections of the report were classified above the level of the common Auror, even. The spellwork over the report suggests the involvement of the Department of Mysteries. In any case, certain details are irrevocably obscured."

"The very fact of its concealment tells me all I need to know," Riddle said, eyes alight with deep fascination. "There was a time-turner involved in this affair."

"Surely not the boy's..." Lucius was more than a little incredulous. You couldn't just purchase a time-turner, after all.

"You think Pettigrew was afforded the privilege?" Riddle sneered. "Doubtful. But a young boy, studious, hardworking, responsible, with the favor of his Head of House and abilities bound to catch Dumbledore's eye? Oh yes, I can see such a thing transpiring. You say the boy is damaged; how apparent is it? Is he changed? It might have been a long imprisonment, depending on the strength of the time-turner he was given."

Lucius felt a bit sick imagining such a thing happening to a boy his son's age, but he swallowed his discomfort with the ease of long practice. "He hides his emotional state well, but the flawless nature of his performance is revealing in itself. There is *something* changed, something that disturbs the boy himself enough to stringently conceal it. What that may be, I cannot say. He functions eerily well, even looking up from a hospital bed."

"You visited him," Riddle said, a sly taunt in his voice.

"Naturally," Lucius said easily. "My son considers Mr. Black his closest companion. My family owes him a debt of life, as well."

Ignoring his recent tribulations would be unconscionable."

"House Malfoy never forgets its debts, is that not so?" Riddle said idly.

"Never," Lucius said, frowning. Was his lord questioning his loyalty? Lucius did not forget to whom he owed much of his current prominence.

"Good," Riddle said. There was a musing quality to his voice. "We need Rigel Black on our side, Lucius. He has too many connections to the Light side of society. We must bring him closer into the fold. We must do this quickly-before he grows too independent to control."

Lucius was of the opinion that it was a little late for that-the boy seemed incredibly independent to him. More so than Draco, he had to grudgingly admit. How strange, when what he knew of Lord Black would have him expect an entirely relaxed style of upbringing to have been Rigel's lot. What had made the boy so frustratingly headstrong? He supposed it didn't matter why. Lord Riddle would have his hands full trying to control the loyalties of the Black scion, at any rate.

"I will do what I can to foster the relationship between young Mr. Black and our more loyal Party supporters," Lucius said after a moment of contemplation. He knew Riddle did not want to hear that the boy was likely intractably attached to the Light already.

"We may need to distance him from Severus, as well," Riddle said softly.

Lucius could not stop the surprise that flickered in his eyes. "I'm not certain such a course would be... possible, at this point, my lord." Not to mention to sheer *unwiseness* involved in attempting to separate Severus from his long-awaited protégé.

"Anything is possible," Riddle said, flicking his fingers dismissively. "I can see your worry-it won't come back on us, however. I will arrange

it as a matter of circumstance. Severus will not suspect."

Lucius fervently hoped that was the case. He and Severus shared mutual respect and admiration that had over time solidified into a strong friendship, but that bond would not save Lucius from the Potions master's ire should the man discover that Lucius had been party to meddling in his mentorship.

"Returning to the point-what became of the jewel, Lucius? I presume Mr. Black had something to say about its sudden disappearance," Riddle prompted.

"He told the Aurors that Pettigrew and the jewel in effect destroyed one another," Lucius related. "The reports indicate some sort of power struggle-unsurprising considering Pettigrew's general ineptitude. The boy was knocked unconscious at some point-most of this section is blacked out by DOM security spells-and when he woke Pettigrew was dead and the stone disintegrated."

"It sounds more like the boy does not know what happened to the jewel," Riddle mused. "Still, the powers of the stone do not include teleportation, as far as I am aware. If it was simply not there following Pettigrew's demise, it is possible that a clash of magic caused some sort of recoil powerful enough to destroy the artifact." Riddle frowned slightly, drumming his fingers once more. "These vagaries displease me. Speak to Rookwood and see if you can't squeeze a few details around his Unspeakable oaths."

"I will owl him this evening," Lucius agreed.

"At least the Ministry does not have the jewel," Riddle said, his chest rising and falling in what was almost a sigh. "It's my own fault for entrusting the task to that rat. If my animagus form were smaller..."

Lucius privately felt the same. That the rat had been sent on such a valuable and important mission was galling. He would have to see about seeking animagus training in the near future. It was said to be prodigiously difficult, but if Pettigrew could do it... well, there was no

need for him to allow another to usurp a task he could do himself. It would only make him more valuable in his lord's eyes.

He could see Riddle's attention turning inward, and knew that the window for relaying the message from Rigel Black was growing smaller. Soon Riddle would be in no mood for discussion. He would want to retire to his study to consider the changes that had occurred in the political landscape with a teacher found dead on Hogwarts grounds.

Lucius cleared his throat softly and met Riddle's expectant eyes with a self-deprecating grimace. "I have been tasked by young Mr. Black to relate a message to you the next time our paths crossed."

"Put you to work, has he? My, how bold the snakelet grows," Riddle commented. Suddenly a light of triumph entered the other man's eyes. Riddle began to chuckle low, and Lucius wondered what he found funny about the situation, exactly. Lucius often carried such messages to his lord, and there was certainly nothing demeaning about it. "So he's finally reconsidered my offer. Cutting it a bit close, but I suppose better late than never." Riddle laughed again. "I can teach him proper manners given enough time."

Lucius was getting that uncomfortable feeling again, this time for a different reason. "My lord, I fear that this may not be the message you were expecting..."

Riddle frowned as the amusement bled from his mouth. "Tell me."

Lucius reminded himself firmly that Lord Riddle had yet to shoot a loyal messenger. "It is in two parts. The first: he wishes you to know that Pettigrew was your loyal servant, and had no intention of betraying you before he obtained the jewel. Black says the jewel was a corrosive influence on Pettigrew's mind from the very first and that the artifact erased any motives that conflicted with its drive to control and subjugate, including any impetus Pettigrew may have had originally to bring the jewel to you."

Riddle's lips tightened. "The boy assumes much. How did he come to discover that the hand moving Pettigrew toward the Dominion Jewel was mine?"

"I don't know," Lucius said. "Perhaps Pettigrew let it slip at some point while he held the boy captive."

"How did the rat even manage such a thing? Rigel Black has more than enough power to escape any prison he might devise." Riddle curled his lip derisively. "No doubt the child was too frightened to use it. There is more to the message?"

"Yes," Lucius said. It was the next part that he dreaded. "He says..." Lucius cleared his throat when it closed around the words. "He says he forgives you."

"What was that?" Riddle's hissing tone was a warning Lucius wished he could heed.

"He says he... forgives you... for sending Pettigrew to get the jewel and inadvertently involving Hogwarts in another of your..." Lucius gulped. "Reckless power plays." Riddle was deadly silent. Lucius rushed on, figuring it was best to get it all out at once. "He says he assumes you had no idea what would happen, but asks that, as your inability to foresee the outcome of your own plans has become a pattern, in the future you not make long term plans at all."

Riddle's face turned corpse-white and it was a long, still moment before he began to breathe again. Lucius watched somewhat mistrustfully as a cold smile crept with brittle edges across Riddle's face. "Impertinent whelp. If he disapproves of my circumspection, we shall see what he makes of my more direct plans. He will learn just which side he is on, one way or another. This fantasy of his-the neutrality, the sympathy for his poorer-blooded relations, the rejection of his birthright-it ends shortly."

Lucius said nothing. He was certain he did not want to get in the way of whatever sinister machinations Riddle was now mulling through.

He regretted that such a bright boy had gotten on Lord Riddle's bad side, but Riddle was, as usual, in the right of it. The Black scion had no business cozying up to Light-sided ideals. Whatever his father's aberrance, the House of Black was still expected to do its political duty. The boy's uncle and aunts could not be expected to uphold the Black prestige on their own indefinitely. Rigel was mature and intelligent; it was time he bore a grown wizard's responsibility. He only hoped for Draco's sake that the boy acknowledged his path before Riddle attempted to force him onto it. A clash between the two of them would not end well for the boy. And if they worked together... Lucius let himself imagine for a moment a bright future. Rigel Black, carefully groomed to stand at his lord's side, influential and engaging, just as Riddle himself was. Draco, there beside him, Rigel's second in every matter, as Lucius was to Lord Riddle. The next generation rising gracefully to take the place of those who'd paved the way before them. Lucius sitting in his wife's tea room, looking out over a grassy lawn, where a fair-haired child played carelessly with the garden fairies.

He retreated from this image slowly, reluctant to let it go, but realistic enough to recognize that such a future was a long ways off, if indeed his line should be so blessed. For now, there were plans to make. He had an appointment with Ludovic Bagman shortly, and the blustery man was prone to restless nervousness if left to wait too long.

He left his lord to his thoughts and retired to the hall.

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[end of epilogue].

A/N: Hey all! This wraps up the third book. Going forward, I'm going to try tackling two simultaneous projects: writing book four and re-writing parts of books one and two. I think my writing has evolved in the past years, so I'd like a chance to give the whole series a more streamlined sense for new and old readers (no major plot changes will take place, so you don't have to reread the edits ^^). Badgerlady,

my recent editor, has agreed to help me edit old chapters one at a time to take the whole series to a higher caliber of writing. Don't worry, though, book four is one I'm excited to write, and I won't be prioritizing the editing over new writing. It'll just be something I work on when I get stuck. Not sure when book four will be out, but I'll do my best!

-Warmest regards,

Violet