

# The Futile Facade

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Harriet Potter is back for a fourth year of quietly masquerading as her pureblooded cousin in order to pursue her dream. There are those in the Wizarding World who refuse to see her fade into the background, however, and when the forces she's been ignoring conspire to bring her to the fore, it will take everything she has to see her artifice through. Alanna the Lioness take on HP4.

Status: complete

Published: 2016-04-23

Updated: 2021-01-28

Words: 475260

Chapters: 15

Rated: Fiction T - Language: English - Genre: Adventure/Drama -  
Characters: Harry P., OC - Reviews: 5,138 - Favs: 2,849 - Follows: 3,162

Original source: <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/11911497/1/The-Futile-Facade>

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# Chapter 1

A/N: Quick thanks to everyone who suggested titles for this book. I finally found one that kept with the theme of alliteration and following the letters of titles of the HP books. I know it seems very ominous, but try not to read too much into it; it's only chapter one, after all. Also a shout out to everyone who has made fanfiction of this fanfiction or fan art or contributed to the forum or left reviews or told your friends about it or anything else; you all keep this engine driving forward.

## The Futile Façade

### Chapter 1:

When Archie asked his cousin to tell him exactly what had happened in the last couple of months, he never imagined the scope of the tale that would unfold. He thought the basilisk had been the feather in the cap of any and all possible adventures, but once again he'd underestimated his cousin's penchant for walking into exactly the wrong situations at precisely the wrong time. As Harry unburdened herself in the quiet hours of the morning after they'd returned from school, Archie felt a sort of hollow horror grip his lungs. His breath stalled and stuttered at her recitation, but Harry, absorbed in her memories, didn't even notice.

The fact that she'd kept a Time-Turner from him didn't bother him, though it did make him feel better about how hard it had been for him to keep up with both his and her studies the past year. The fact that she'd knowingly put herself in danger by involving herself in an investigation that had nothing to do with her on the other hand... well, he had mixed feelings about that.

On the one hand, their ruse didn't need any more complications than already arose in the day-to-day duplicity. Harry developing some sort of hero complex wasn't going to do them any favors in the long run.

On the other hand, though... Archie had to admit he was proud of his cousin. He would never wish danger on her, but the fact that she took on unnecessary responsibilities was, he thought, a sign of her growing up. Harry had always been somewhat selfish in terms of the things she chose to give her attention to. They were alike in that, he had to admit. She was kind and loyal and a dozen other wonderful things, but she had never been what you might call philanthropic or one to go out of her way to fix problems that had nothing to do with her.

He just wished she could discover this wider humanitarian scope without causing herself so much *pain*. He watched as she admitted to being consumed by a dark, bitter hopelessness that Archie was having trouble even imagining. Harry looked straight through him, her eyes reliving some torment that he could not share. He could see the moment when the fractured part of herself that she'd been suppressing broke like shards of ice to the surface of her thoughts. Her eyes welled and, to his panicked dismay, began to overflow with slow tears. He could not remember the last time he'd seen his staunchly unemotional cousin cry.

As though the tears were a signal, she stumbled through the rest of the story in a tumble of words and short, almost eerily controlled breaths. He pulled her into a trembling hug and wondered with acute distress if this was the first time she'd been allowed to admit the full torture of the experience since it happened. He'd bet a lot of Galleons that she hadn't revealed to anyone else-teachers, Aurors, parents, friends-how awful it had actually been. Harry wasn't the type to let anyone worry about her. He knew, as sure as he knew that he would have broken his Healing Oath if Pettigrew had been in the room at that moment, that Harry had shoved the whole thing into the past and was only dredging it up now for his sake, so that he would have all the information he needed about what had 'happened to him,' in case anyone should ask.

He patted his cousin's head and wished with all his heart that it had been he, not she, who had lived those weeks in darkness and

despair. Harry always had to be the strong one, and it wasn't fair. He knew intellectually that she had handled it better than he would have. He was smart, but he was not resourceful like Harry. He also knew that she was the stronger one, though she might not look it at the moment.

"I wish I didn't have to go," Archie whispered once her words had stopped hemorrhaging. He was to leave that afternoon on an international Portkey to Turbo, Colombia. It was exactly when his cousin needed him that he couldn't be there for her.

Harry pushed herself upright and ran the back of her hand over her face in a scrubbing motion. "You have to go, Arch. You have to have time away from England to make both your changing appearance and your mental stability plausible." She said mental stability rather sharply, as though annoyed that it wasn't something she could claim with any credibility at the moment.

"I know," he said. He did know, he added mentally. They were in too deep of late. Time away from England was the best thing for their ruse. He would have a reason not to see 'Rigel's' friends all summer, which lowered the chances of one of them messing up in front of people they couldn't afford to make suspicious. It was a miracle that Remus hadn't noticed something slightly off about their switch, even considering that Archie looked exactly like Rigel while Harry now looked completely different. He really should ask exactly how old she was at this point, but now didn't feel like the right time.

"You're going to have a great time in Wizarding Colombia," Harry said after a moment, a decisive energy back in her voice. "You're going into the Darien Gap community, right? I've heard the wizards there are very secretive. Learn everything you can, okay? I want to pick your brain when you get back. And send lots of letters, if you have time."

"I will," Archie said, if only to stop her rambling. He wished he knew how to tell her that she didn't have to convince him that she was fine—that it was okay if she *wasn't* fine. He knew she'd take any

suggestion of weakness the wrong way, though. "What are you going to do this summer while I'm gone? Play Quidditch by yourself?"

Harry cracked a small smile, though there was still a lost look in her eyes. "I don't know. I suppose... I'll find things to keep me busy. Maybe I'll practice my dives so much that when you come back you'll be like a frog chasing a falcon."

"They have brooms in the Americas, you know," Archie smiled back. "I won't fall behind, even if I have to fit practice in between saving lives." He waggled his brows in an invitation for her to be impressed.

"Yes, yes, your nomination from the Chocolate Frog Commission ought to come any day now," Harry said, rolling her eyes. They were still a bit red, which somewhat ruined the effect of her irreverence. There was a calmness in her features that reassured him, though.

Harry would be okay, with time and quiet. He could already sense the resolve that would lead her someday soon to describe her ordeal in dismissive and probably cynical terms. That was how his cousin functioned. He wished there was someone in England he could tell to look out for her, but he knew that no one could ever know that Harry had gone through that, just as he knew that Harry would not appreciate him arranging a minder for her.

Archie thought somewhat despondently that for all the things he *knew*, there sure didn't seem to be a lot he could *do* .

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A certain amount of dissonance was to be expected, she told herself. Her recent transformation had been abrupt, and the past year had only accelerated the change. Still... she couldn't help but feel that she didn't know the girl in the mirror at all anymore.

She was taller, for one-significantly so. Poor Archie was nearly two inches shorter than she now. It was going to be a stretch to convince their family that he could grow that much in one summer away. Her musculature was more pronounced, reflecting both the maturation of her teenaged body and the vengeance with which she had taken back her health in the wake of its deterioration in that-

Well, she looked healthy now, in any case. Fully recovered. In body, at least. She knew her mind was less supple. Her dreams disturbed her on the occasions she neglected to leave a light on, and sometimes she found herself watching people more warily than was warranted.

Harry detached her focus from that train of thought with ease, re-concentrating on her own reflection. The light summer dress robes hid the fact that the Polyjuice kept her hips slim and her shoulders strong. Her hair was the same, short and perpetually tousled with ends that curled close to her face. The face itself... was leaning toward feminine, even for a pureblood. Her glasses helped to disguise some of it, such as the thickness of her eyelashes, but couldn't detract completely from the softening of her mouth and chin. She frowned at her reflection, and noted with some satisfaction that the expression gave her a sharper look. It wasn't a complete disaster, then. This could be Rigel's face come autumn, provided people believed that a certain measure of unconscious metamorphism was at work.

She plucked unenthusiastically at her dress robes, attempting halfheartedly to straighten the neckline. *Why couldn't Uncle Sirius have had a pool party again?* she complained mentally. She would bet that Narcissa Malfoy would have declined an invitation to her cousin's birthday party if it had entailed bathing in a flooded potions lab. Instead, Sirius was having an uncharacteristically formal celebration and, although the guest list was modest, it still consisted of enough non-family members that Lily had insisted Harry dress to impress. Or at least, she amended with another long look at the plainly styled robes, dress to underwhelm.

The party was to be on the back lawn at Potter Place, where Harry and Archie usually played Quidditch. When asked why he didn't want to host it at his own house, Sirius had muttered something about Grimmauld Place not being the most welcoming sort of venue. She supposed his choice had been in deference to one or more of his guests, though whether it was the Longbottoms, who she now knew had good reason to be wary of Sirius' old house, or his cousins, who she suspected had unpleasant recollections of the dwelling from their own childhoods, she didn't know.

Harry gave the girl in the mirror a little smile, but the far away look in her eyes made it look vague and a little sad. She settled back into a frown instead and nodded approvingly at the illusion of focus it accorded. She was tired of seeing that lost expression on her face. If she couldn't fake happiness at the world around her, at least she could fake an interest in it.

She left her room and trailed down the stairs in the direction of the kitchen, where her mother was directing the last of the preparations before the guests arrived. Addy, sitting in a high chair with a mess of what had possibly been yams at one point in front of her, waved distractedly at Harry as she walked in. Harry waved back, pleased at the attention. She and Addy got along much better now, probably because the baby was losing her sensitivity to magical cores as she matured. Even Remus got to hold Addy for prolonged periods, now, and the house was much more relaxed as her sister's once frequent bursts of irrational crying had largely subsided.

"Harry, can you move our gifts to the table outside so people know where theirs go?" Lily asked as she moved between watching some sort of raspberry sauce simmer in a pan and moving her wand in deft little curling motions that were producing a pile of delicately laced doilies.

"Of course." Harry stacked the colorfully wrapped packages from the counter and wove her way toward the back door. Once she'd deposited them on a small, round table to one side, she took a look around. The yard was charming, she decided. There were white



poles set up at intervals around the perimeter and thick, colorful ribbons stretched between them like muggle telephone wires. Affixed to the top of each pole were Never-Ending Bubble Wands, which together produced a canopy of small and large bubbles that sparkled in the summer sun as they bobbed and weaved on the faint breeze.

A wide open-fronted tent at the back of the lawn gave shade to the table on which the refreshments would sit. Currently, it held only an ordinary ice bucket, which despite its common appearance seemed to have royally annoyed her very frustrated-looking father in some way. She came up beside him, peering down into the empty bucket curiously. "Need any help, Dad?"

He glanced her way with a quick smile. "Ah, thanks, Harry, but I can't remember the Everlasting Ice spell. Don't tell your mum." He grimaced. "I may have intimated that I didn't need her help with a fifth-year spell. Only..." He tapped his wand on the bucket and said, "Glacies Aeternus." The bucket filled with ice. James muttered, "Ignis," and a small flame erupted from the tip of his wand. At its heat, the ice at the top of the bucket began to melt perceptibly. "See? It's supposed to be impervious to heat. If Lily sees it melting she's going to ask Sirius and everyone how I passed my OWLs." James laughed self-deprecatingly. "All those useless spells. They know perfectly well you're never going to use any of them."

Harry smiled up at him. "It's 'Glacia Aeternalis,' I think. The spell's inventor was a potioneer whose classical education was a bit haphazard. He was blessed with a gift for ingenuity and created the eternal ice spell to cool the top layer of his potions quickly without watering them down even while the cauldron was kept over the fire to heat the bottom stratum. He used Late Latin instead of Classical Latin, however, because he didn't really give a whit about spell-crafting conventions."

James blinked behind his glasses at her, then grinned. "Glacia Aeternalis." The bucket filled with ice. He plucked a piece and rubbed it between his fingers for a moment before inspecting them for wetness. "It's perfect," he declared, hooking an arm around her

shoulders in a grateful hug. "You definitely have your mum's smarts, Harry-and your Uncle Remus' love of complete answers. I swear he was the last done on every test we took in school, despite knowing all the material verbatim. Just couldn't resist giving backstory, our Moony."

"I have a friend like that," Harry said, thinking of Blaise. Then her smile fell slightly. Blaise wasn't her friend. He was Rigel's friend. Blaise had hardly even met *her* .

"A male friend?" James narrowed his eyes at her.

"Never," she rolled her own, shrugging out of his arm. "I'm going to help Mum move the food out."

She left her father gazing suspiciously after her. Honestly, you'd think James would have other things to worry about. Since when had she given him any indication of being interested in that sort of distraction? She also didn't know why her dad distrusted boys so much more than girls, anyway. Personally, Harry thought females were generally the more predatory species in the arena of romance. The calculating way Pansy spoke of her potential suitors was incredibly ominous, for instance, whereas Draco hardly every talked about those things, and when he did it was in a dismissive and unconcerned tone of boredom.

She made it to the kitchen but, before she could lift one of the trays of sandwiches or cakes from the work top Sirius bounded in. He was visibly excited, which was nothing unusual, but Harry thought as she watched him survey all their preparations without saying anything that he might be a bit nervous, too. It had probably been a while since he hosted a gathering of any kind. Sirius, despite being one of the friendliest people she had ever met, was a bit of a shut-in.

She didn't think he'd always been that way. What she remembered of Diana glittered in her mind's eye. They used to go out all the time; she remembered because Archie had many a time been dropped off at Potter Place for an impromptu sleepover when his parents got the

urge to drop by an event or surprise one of their friends with an invitation to dinner.

Harry had the quiet realization that Sirius must have been quite a different person back then, with different habits and enjoyments. Perhaps this birthday party was more than an unexplained desire to reconnect with old friends. Maybe it was a step back toward the life he'd led before he lost the love of his life and a large sense of his purpose with her. What had prompted it? Was it his son's ascension into society circles that encouraged him to pick up the rusted pieces of his own social life once more?

"Sirius!" Lily glided into the room, now dressed and made up for the party. "Good, I was half-afraid you'd be late. The guests should be arriving any minute now. Harry, will you man the Floo grate? Sirius, help me move this food..."

Harry abandoned her observation and settled into the Floo room to wait. She wondered vaguely who would be coming. She knew Sirius had invited some of his family members-the ones he could stand, to quote him exactly. She doubted that included Lady Lestrangle.

The first ones through the Floo weren't Blacks, however; they were Weasleys. Fred, George, Ron, Ginny, Molly, and Arthur came one after another into the receiving room, all smiling and dressed gaily.

"Harry!" Molly Weasley bustled her into a hug. "How are you? You've grown a foot, I vow. Arthur, doesn't she look handsome? I told you lot to put on something nicer," she added, shooting a disapproving look toward her brood, all of whom scowled back at her good naturedly.

"I think they look grand," Harry said, nodding to the other teens. "It's good to see you all again. The party is in the back yard. Follow me."

She led them through the winding house, fielding questions left and right.

"Do you have a Quidditch pitch?"

"How many people are going to be here?"

"Is Rigel here?"

Harry turned to smile apologetically. "Rigel has already left on his internship. He'll be volunteering at a teaching hospital in the Darien Gap community all summer."

"What?" Ron looked completely nonplussed.

"That's a little random, isn't it?" Fred added, exchanging a look with his twin.

"Rigel's always been interested in Healing," Harry said vaguely. "It was an unexpected opportunity, but he's very excited about it."

"Rigel is so weird," Ginny sighed.

"Don't be rude, Ginny," Mrs. Weasley admonished her. "Oh, that is *lovely*."

They had reached the back door, and the Weasleys paused for a moment to take in the decorations. Sirius was waiting to welcome them. "Molly, Arthur, thank you *very much* for coming. Please forgive the lack of professional entertainment."

"That's what you're here for, is that it?" Mr. Weasley smiled.

"Well that and it *is* my birthday," Sirius smiled back. He made a show of craning his neck around. "What did you bring me? Not a puppy, is it? Because I've already got Archie for that."

"For taking on walks?" Fred asked with a mischievous grin.

"For petting, surely," George disagreed. "Rigel is above-average cuddly for a Slytherin."

"For fetching me things," Sirius said, shaking his head in amusement. "You two must be the infamous Fred and George. My

son has mentioned that you aspire to a career in pranking, is that so?"

"It certainly is *not*," Molly gasped.

"Not until we finish school, of course," Fred cut in, looking slightly nervous.

"Of course," Sirius said, waving a hand as though no more needed to be said on the subject. "Now, if you like, I can give you a few insider tips on how the business works: what manufacturers are trustworthy, how to phrase your loan paperwork so the banks don't laugh in your face, that sort of thing."

Fred and George looked ready to kiss the ground beneath Sirius' feet, and Harry couldn't help but think that their admiration for the Marauders was about to grow closer to idolization.

Before he could get too involved in the conversation, Sirius turned an inquiring gaze at Harry and lifted an eyebrow with an amused quirk of his lips. "Not expecting any more guests? I do think we invited one or two more."

Getting the playful hint, Harry waved goodbye to the Weasleys and reclaimed her post at the Floo. The next ten minutes was a flurry of activity as guests arrived in twos and threes. The Longbottoms came through, bringing Neville, who looked curiously at Harry as she led them to the gift table. She realized she must have never met Neville as herself-at least, not that Neville could remember. She fought the tremor of unease that surfaced at that recently uncovered memory. Mrs. and Mr. Longbottom didn't seem to be looking at her with any amount of suspicion-but of course they wouldn't. She'd met them plenty of times when Alice Longbottom came to visit Lily. They just hadn't ever brought Neville with them, and she supposed now she knew why. Their child mysteriously falling unconscious and losing all memory of the event wasn't a glowing recommendation as far as play dates went.

After the twentieth group of guests had been escorted to the backyard, Harry stopped to get a glass of water from the kitchen. *One or two more indeed*, she thought with a small smile. Trust Sirius to jump back into society with a cannonball splash.

When she reached the Floo room, the next guests were already waiting. It was Narcissa Malfoy and, to her shock, Draco. Why would he come to Sirius' birthday party? They weren't exactly close. A moment later she kicked herself mentally. He was obviously expecting to see Rigel there. The better question was why Sirius had invited him. She supposed they were relatively closely related, by pureblood standards. Perhaps Sirius was determined to reach back toward all the areas of his life he'd been neglecting.

"Please forgive the wait, Lady Malfoy, Mr. Malfoy," she said, bowing briefly. "May I escort you through to the veranda?"

"Of course, Miss Potter," Narcissa said, smiling politely. "You remember my Draco?"

"Naturally," she said, nodding Draco's direction. "Rigel gives his regrets that he couldn't be here."

Draco's face fell slightly, though he masked his disappointment by glancing about the room instead. "I didn't realize his internship started so soon."

"He says he looks forward to taking tea with you when he returns, Lady Malfoy," she added.

"Such a thoughtful young man," Narcissa said, smiling fondly. "Tell him to owl me when he returns to England."

Harry nodded her agreement. She led them toward the sound of several dozen partygoers in high spirits and left them on the terrace with a polite, "Have a pleasant afternoon."

She returned to find Regulus Black dusting himself off despite there being no visible residue from the recently cleaned Floo. She opened her mouth to greet him, but he held up a hand forestalling her. "I know the way. Potter Place hasn't changed, I take it."

She could not tell if he approved of that or not, and she was more curious about when he'd ever been to her house in any case. He was not friends with her parents and was too young to have been an acquaintance of her late grandparents.

"As you like," she said indifferently.

He paused on his way out to look her over. "You're the Potter Heiress, then."

"We've met," she reminded him bluntly.

He seemed torn between annoyance and amusement at her rudeness. She didn't know how he expected people to be friendly to him when he was unfriendly first. "It isn't terribly proper for you to be greeting the guests at Lord Black's party, Miss Potter," he told her, eyes cold. "His own Heir should hold that role, if he insists on doing without house-elves."

"Rigel couldn't be here," she said, faking a sweet smile. "I'm just filling in."

Regulus lifted an eyebrow in disdain. "Do you think if you look and act like the Black Heir society will really see you as interchangeable? Do be sensible, girl. No matter that you were raised together, you ought to have been told by now that your place and my nephew's are worlds apart."

"Not so far apart today, it seems," she said, fighting an eye roll.

"That the house-elf often stands next to his master is no reflection on their respective stations," Regulus sneered.

She blinked slowly up at him. "Have you considered that any and everything you admire in your Heir comes from his relation to me? As you noted, we grew up together. I don't know if you're warning me off or just disapproving of my influence on Archie in general, but you should know that the Black Heir likes me a great deal more than he cares for you, and that if you insist on being rude I may decide that I don't approve of *your* influence on *him* ."

"You are a delusional child," Regulus said, eyes flashing in irritation.

"Go ahead and tell your nephew to stop associating with me, and we'll see who has overestimated their sphere of influence, Mr. Black." She held his gaze for a moment longer, then turned with cold dismissiveness toward the Floo to await the next arrival. She heard him scoff shortly before exiting the room and smiled to herself.

She really shouldn't have risen to the bait like that. If she had been Rigel, she never would have. There just didn't seem to be any point in putting up with his derision while she was herself. She didn't need a good relationship with Archie's uncle. What was the purpose of trying to foster one against the man's will? She'd rather save her energy for more fruitful pursuits.

The last group through the Floo looked around uncertainly as they arrived. The man was rather nondescript, but the woman was a very close approximation of Bellatrix Black. After a moment in which she questioned her eyesight, she realized this must be Sirius' other cousin, Andromeda, and her husband. A moment later, a whirl of robes and what appeared to be purple hair flung itself from the Floo and onto the floor.

"God. Damn. Stupid. Wizarding. Transportation." A young woman picked herself up off the floor with a level of resignation and utter lack of embarrassment that made Harry suspect this wasn't an uncommon occurrence.

"Nymphadora," the older woman sighed. "Must you?"



"Oh sure, like I do it on purpose," the young woman groused. "Wotcher," she added brightly upon catching sight of Harry. "Are you Arcturus?"

"She's in women's robes, dear," Andromeda sighed.

"No, I'm not Archie," Harry said, smiling slightly at the purple-haired witch's friendly expression. "He couldn't be here, so I'm showing people to the terrace in his stead."

"Oh," the girl looked disappointed. "Shame. I heard he had a bit of the 'morpher in him, and I really wanted to see how we matched up." Her hair changed swiftly from purple to blue and back again. "It's nice to meet you though," she said, sticking out a hand. "You'd be the Head's daughter, right? Nice place he's got here-I knew they paid the higher-ups more than they'd admit."

"Dora, dear, you're rambling a bit," the man said, glancing apologetically at Harry. "I'm Ted Tonks, Miss Potter. This is my wife, Andromeda, and our daughter, Nymphadora. She works at the DMLE under your father."

"Please don't call me that," Nymphadora put in with false cheer. "And I work very very far beneath your dad-don't expect he's even heard of me, in fact. I've heard of you, though. You're Harriett Potter."

"It's a pleasure to meet you," she said. "Just Harry is fine."

"My kind of girl," Nymphadora said, pleased. "Just Tonks for me, then."

"All right," Harry agreed, smiling.

"Anyway, you're the one who came up with that new potion they're going to let us play with, aren't you? Potter's Portable Protection Potion, right?" Nymphadora-Tonks-said eagerly. Harry had to wince at that ridiculous name. "We saw the first demonstrations yesterday. We all thought it was the Head who'd come up with it out of his little

joke line, but then I heard it was you who thought it up. Neat stuff, that. The Department of Mysteries is trying to modify it so that it'll block out sound-to use again banshees or sirens, you know-but they're having a hard time reverse-engineering it, I hear."

Harry's eyebrows rose in surprise. "Thank you. I didn't know they were trying to do that. In any case, I gave them instructions-they shouldn't have to reverse engineer anything."

Tonks clapped her hands together. "Oh, just wait till I tell the other guys that the spooks have instructions and *still* can't figure it out! That's worth a laugh."

Harry smiled indulgently at the other witch's exuberance.

"Forgive our daughter," Andromeda said with a long-suffering expression. "She forgets that as a grown witch and a junior Auror no less she ought to show a little more decorum in her bearing."

"Hey, this is a party, Mum," Tonks said, wrinkling her nose in a carefree way. "Speaking of, are we the only ones here or what?"

"It's in the back garden," Harry grinned. "I'll show you."

They joined the congregation on the lawn and Harry watched as Sirius embraced his cousin as though it had been only a few months since they last saw one another, when in Harry's estimation it had been more like six years. She couldn't remember if the older woman had been at Aunt Diana's funeral or not.

"Andy, you look great," Sirius said. He shook Ted's hand and then turned to their daughter. "Is this little Nymphadora? James told me you had joined the force but I told him you couldn't possibly have finished school yet."

"She finished the homeschooling program a year early," Ted said proudly.

"And that was a few years ago in any case," Andromeda said, smiling slightly. "You're getting old and forgetful, Sirius."

"It's a good thing I had everyone come here to celebrate one last year before I kick the bucket, then," Sirius laughed.

"You just wanted an excuse to eat cake, Uncle Sirius," Harry corrected him.

"Oh, is that why? Seems I am getting forgetful," Sirius said, scratching his head. The Tonks family all three chuckled appreciatively. "Well. Enjoy yourselves, try the lemonade, don't touch the cake-" Another laugh. "-and see if you can find Cissy in this mess, Andy, I know she'd like to see you." Andromeda didn't look at all convinced by that statement, though she nodded politely. "Harry, I think that's everyone, so I officially relieve you of your duties. Go have fun!"

"Happy Birthday, Uncle Sirius," she said, giving him a quick hug.

"Yes, yes, go find some young person to give your father conniptions over," Sirius suggested, patting her head. "Preferably one with a motorcycle."

"I think you're the only wizard in the world with a motorbike," she pointed out.

"Hmm. Well, find one with a tattoo or facial scar and I'll buy them a motorcycle," Sirius decided.

"I'm sure the look on my father's face will be worth it," she deadpanned.

"It always is," Sirius agreed, grinning. He pushed her along into the crowd, and Harry made her way towards the edges where she could observe instead of joining in for a little while. She didn't know most of the people attending, and those she did appeared pleasantly enough occupied for the moment.

Mrs. Weasley was holding Addy and cooing irrepressibly at the one-year-old's every expression. Every so often she gave her husband a pleading look, to which Arthur promptly flushed and looked regretful.

Draco was talking to Neville and Ron, gesturing with his hands in a way that made her suspect he was going over a new idea for a dueling combination. Ron and Neville both looked rapt over the discussion, and Harry longed to go over and see what the details were. She didn't know any of them well enough as Harry to do that, however. After a moment, she shifted her attention elsewhere with a small sigh. Draco would tell Rigel about it anyway, if it was a good enough idea.

James was deep in discussion with a witch Harry vaguely recognized as Amelia Bones, while her niece Susan made small talk with Ginny. As Harry wandered through the crowd, she picked up bits of conversation here and there. Most seemed to be discussing each team's chances in the upcoming Quidditch World Cup. She overheard Lily telling an older wizard in a top hat, "Unfortunately Albus couldn't make it today-I gather he's interviewing for the vacant professorships this afternoon." Soon after she passed a man saying to his neighbor, "Almost didn't come-you know the Ministry's Personnel Department looks down on Dark affiliations, and, well, the *Black* family... still, Martha insisted, and it *is* good to see the old boy looking so well..."

She wandered toward the refreshments pavilion for want of else to do, figuring she could at least play hostess a bit and make sure they weren't out of anything that could be refilled from the kitchen. The glasses near the punch bowl had been disturbed from their ordered positions, so she went about straightening them idly, wondering how long this was going to go on. She didn't begrudge Sirius his fun, but with all these people it didn't feel much like his other birthday parties had.

She was inspecting the ice bucket for signs of melting when she saw a pair of shadows moving around to the back of the pavilion. She watched them amusedly for a moment as the shadows moved

across the thin, white material. What a bold place for a rendezvous. She was turning to leave the tent when a voice from the other side of the tent wall made her stop in surprise. It was Sirius' voice.

"What is it, Reggie?" He sounded impatient. "I can't just abandon my own party like this."

"Your adoring fans will wait," Regulus said. Both their voices came clearly through the cloth to her ears, and she looked around to gauge if anyone else was near enough to notice, but at the moment she was the only one in the tent. "We need to talk."

"Of course," Sirius said, sounding weary. "I might have known you didn't come just to wish me a happy birthday. What's so important that it drove you to accept my invitation, then?"

"I need to know where you stand, Brother," Regulus said. "People are asking questions that I don't know how to answer. Are you serious about declaring for Neutral?"

"That's what you're on about?" Sirius barked a laugh. "Screw those people, Reggie. I don't give a Knut what they want to know. I'll do as I always have-whatever I wish to."

"You can't be-" Regulus made a frustrated noise that told Harry he'd just barely refrained from saying 'serious.' "Sirius, you're not a child anymore. When you were just the Heir, some flexibility in your views wasn't cause for concern. After father died, people expected your stances to firm up, but of course with Diana's passing allowances were made. Now-"

"I didn't *ask* for any damn allowances," Sirius growled. "It's nobody's business but *mine*. I'm not going to stand here and make promises to my little brother on how my Wizengamot Seat gets voted. You can tell whoever put you up to this that the Black family headship cannot be purchased or cajoled to a side. I stand with my own feelings and needs, whatever they may be at the moment. Right now, that stance takes me Neutral."

"Because of your son," Regulus said pointedly. "And what happens if your Heir turns Dark? Where will your feelings take you then?"

"I am not discussing this," Sirius scoffed. "Hypotheticals and suppositions-what good are they? Archie can do what he wants with his life. I'll still do what's best for him." Harry noted that Sirius wasn't necessarily promising to support Archie's choices-merely to look out for his best interest. "In any case, you're off your rocker on this one, Reggie. My son is as Light as they come. He wants to be a *Healer*. He cares less for politics than I do, and that is saying something. Even if he did have an interest, what do you really expect from a boy whose best friend is a halfblood? Do you think he's honestly going to support your Party's agenda? It's pure fairytale, Reg."

"You may not know him as well as you think," Regulus said, low. "Children have a way of growing to defy their parents. You should know that better than anyone."

"Don't talk about Archie like you know him," Sirius snapped. "I won't hear any more of this nonsense. You've said your piece. Now either enjoy the party or get the hell out."

She saw the shadow that she surmised belonged to Sirius start to leave, but the other shadow whipped out a hand and caught his arm. "Wait, Sirius. I'm not finished. There are other things to consider."

"Like what?" Sirius said, voice exasperated.

Harry saw a woman approaching the tent from the corner of her eye and promptly pasted a disgusted grimace on her face. When the witch glanced over at her while starting toward the sandwiches, Harry gave her a quick headshake, miming being sick while pointing at the table of food discreetly. The woman wrinkled her nose and nodded a thank you before scurrying back to the party.

Harry drifted toward the back of the tent to pick up the low conversation.

"-I'm not kidding, Sirius, it's time to consider taking another partner," Regulus was saying.

" *Never*," Sirius snarled.

"You're young yet, Brother," Regulus said firmly. "There's so much time left in your life-do you really want to spend it alone?"

"Pot. Kettle." Sirius sounded incredibly irritated.

Ignoring this, Regulus plowed on. "Things aren't the same as they were when we were young. You can marry your werewolf if you want and have a litter."

Harry had to consciously close her throat to keep from choking. Was Regulus serious?

"That's a ridiculous rumor," Sirius snorted.

"Not so ridiculous," Regulus sneered. "The Sirius Black most people know always had it coming from somewhere, didn't he? The only other people you hang around are the Potters, and the general consensus is that they aren't the type to-"

"Just stop," Sirius groaned. "I'm not getting remarried. You get married if you're so keen to continue the line."

"I can't," Regulus ground out in a low voice. There was a long pause, after which Regulus added bitterly, "You know that I can't."

There was an agonizing silence, in which Sirius cleared his throat uncomfortably. "After all these years? I didn't know. We thought it would fade..."

"Well it didn't," Regulus said bluntly. "Mother certainly knew her Dark Arts. The fact that she regretted it afterwards didn't make it reversible."

"She was so unhappy," Sirius said. His voice sounded full of regret and far away. "Whatever we did, we somehow never could make up for the ones that didn't survive."

"You gave up trying," Regulus said shortly.

"I realized that at some point I had to live my life for me, not for her demons," Sirius said heatedly. "That's what I have to do now. I gave into my own demons for too long. I'm not trying to make a political statement or start throwing the Black family weight around. I just... I want to be there for my son. Wherever he is. Archie is the world to me, Regulus."

"There's nothing wrong with that," Regulus said strongly. "I'm just asking you to think bigger. You are a good father, Sirius. Diana's death was a tragedy, but you've grieved long enough. This is a chance for you to circumvent the difficulties of a witch's second pregnancy. Start fresh. You could have another *child*, Sirius. One who will mean as much as Archie does."

"I don't..." Sirius trailed off into contemplation.

"Think of it," Regulus urged. "Your son is smart, driven, and powerful from what I hear. With two such children, our legacy would be assured." Harry winced. That was just about the worst thing Regulus could have said just then. He seemed to know it, too, for he attempted to backtrack. "Your house could be happy again, Sirius-"

"My home is fine the way it is," Sirius said flatly. "I'll thank you not to involve my son in your delusions of grandeur in the future. As far as I'm concerned, Archie can take another's name and the Black family can die with us."

"Don't be *selfish*," Regulus hissed, "This isn't just about you."

"I'm sorry you can't father your own sons, Reggie, I really am," Sirius said, voice firm. "I can't be your second chance, though. Adopt, if you're so eager. Leave me out of it."



Sirius' shadow walked off and, after a moment of frustrated cursing, Regulus' shadow slunk away as well. Harry was left with quite a lot to think about. That Regulus couldn't sire children explained a lot of things she'd wondered about, such as why he'd never married and had an heir of his own if he was so concerned with the future of the Black family. It also explained why Regulus was so interested in Archie-his nephew was as close to a son as Regulus would ever get. What kind of a mother would curse her own child? She'd heard that Walburga had been clinically insane, and now she had to wonder if she was interpreting Sirius' comment correctly in thinking that part of the reason for the woman's poor mental health was a high number of miscarriages in between her two successful pregnancies. That wasn't the sort of blow most people could shake off easily, if at all.

She walked ponderously from the refreshment tent, not going anywhere in particular. A hand snagged her elbow as she neared the gift table and she swung around to see Ginny gazing impatiently at her.

"I called your name about five times, Harry," Ginny said. "Are you deaf?"

"Sorry," she said, summoning a smile. Sometimes it was difficult for her to get used to being called Harry again after a long stint as Rigel, and vice versa. "How are you, Ginny?"

"Fine, I guess," the redhead said. "I hardly know anyone here-hence going out of my way to chase you across the lawn. You must have been thinking hard about something."

"I suppose I was," Harry agreed. After a moment in which Ginny gazed expectantly at her, Harry said, "Uh... I was just wondering about... Percy."

"Percy." Ginny narrowed her eyes in unimpressed disbelief. "What about him?"

"Well, how is he?" she asked, realizing as she did so that she was actually interested. "Last time I saw him-"

"You mean the only time you've met," Ginny muttered with rolling eyes.

"-he said he wanted to be a barrister." Harry tilted her head in an earnest way. "How's it going? Has he found a law firm to apprentice at yet?"

"Of course," Ginny said, shrugging. "One thing you can count on Percy for is setting the bar ridiculously high. He had a job lined up about a month before he finished school. Works for some hoity-toity firm that does Ministry cases. He's already passed his preliminary qualification exams and no doubt he'll be admitted to the bar the second he grows a big-boy beard."

She tried not to think of Percy in a beard, but it was too late. She snorted indelicately and closed her eyes in simple appreciation for the image Ginny had managed to evoke. "A red beard or a white one?" she asked around a chuckle.

Ginny grinned back cheekily. "Nothing intimidating about a red-bearded barrister. I bet he dyes it grey by the end of the year."

"That's horrible," Harry said, shaking her head.

"You don't know him like I do," Ginny told her. "Anyone else you're curious about? Charlie still works in Romania. Bill runs mysterious errands for the goblins all over the world. The twins have blown up their bedroom three times already since coming home. Ron does a whole lot of nothing all day, as far as I can tell. None of my brothers is in a serious relationship, if that's what you're wondering."

She couldn't stop her nose from wrinkling in surprised distaste. "I wasn't."

Ginny's eyes flashed dangerously. "Why's that? There's quite a variety-don't tell me at least one of them isn't your type."

"I really don't have a... type," she said, mystified at the direction the conversation seemed to be heading.

"So you just look down on Weasley men, is that it?" Ginny's expression was fiercely defensive.

"Of course not," she said carefully. "I don't know you all very well, but I consider you among my friends. It's just that I'm not interested in that sort of thing."

"Oh," Ginny's eyes grew wide with interest. "Are you one of those? With a preference, I mean?"

Harry sighed. "It's the opposite. I'm not interested in anything."

Ginny looked skeptical. "Everyone's interested in *something*."

"I don't have time for romance," she said flatly, quite finished with the conversation.

"If you say so," Ginny shrugged, now appearing bored. "You and Rigel are well-suited after all, it appears."

Harry peered at Ginny suspiciously. That was an odd thing to say. Unless... "You've heard about the... engagement," she surmised.

"Everyone has by now," Ginny said, smirking slightly and looking satisfied about something. "The consensus is that it isn't a very serious arrangement. Since you didn't even bring it up when I grilled you on your inclinations, I'd have to agree. The question is, which of you is the less serious about it?"

"What do you think?" Harry pressed her lips together, irritated that she'd let Ginny corner her in a conversation.

"I think both of you are treating it lightly," Ginny said, studying her. After a moment, she dropped her eyes and shrugged. "It's obvious who benefits more from it, though. I expected you to be defensive of it, in fact, but you seem even less interested than Rigel, and that is saying something. I can't tell if you're oblivious to the favor he's doing you or if you and Rigel are really so close that you can take such treatment for granted."

"The latter," Harry said shortly. "Rigel and I would do anything for one another."

"*Anything* is a dangerous precondition," Ginny said, eyes cynical. "I don't know anyone who would do absolutely *anything* for another person."

"Now you do," Harry said, smiling sweetly. "Excuse me, Ginny, but I've just noticed the punch is looking low."

"Better refill it," Ginny agreed, her own smile a shade too disillusioned to be truly innocent.

Why was it that her friends from school were easier to deal with when she didn't have to be herself? Was she always going to feel like this? Like she was seeing two sides of people and they were seeing two sides of her without knowing it? Would she ever be completely one person, or would she forever be straddling the gulf between what she was supposed to know and think and feel and what she actually did?

She was so lost in thought that she misjudged her footing and ran right into someone as they passed the other way. "Sorry," she said automatically, looking up. "Ah, my apologies, Mr. Malfoy."

"Just Draco," her friend grimaced uncomfortably, glancing around as though not sure he wanted to start a conversation with her. "And it was my own fault. I lost track of my surroundings."

"I know the feeling," she said. They stood for a moment in awkward silence until she added. "Enjoying the party?"

"Yes," he said, slight relief in his grey eyes. He always hated to be at a loss for something to say. "It's very relaxed."

"Very Sirius, you mean," she offered.

"Just so." His lips relented somewhat into an amused quirk. "My mother told me many stories of her cousin Sirius when I was young. Somehow, I don't think she exaggerated any of them."

"If anything, she probably downplayed some of them in deference to general standards of credibility," Harry guessed. "There are a few I wouldn't believe myself if I hadn't been there."

"Like what?" A mischievous glint crept into Draco's eyes. "Mother doesn't have any recent tales."

"I'm not sure I should tell you..." she teased. "It wouldn't do to defame the birthday boy at his own party."

"I won't tell if you don't," Draco said seriously.

She bowed her head in good humor. "Very well, but you must promise to believe everything I say, no matter how outlandish."

Draco chuckled a bit, and she noticed the sound was lower than she'd expected. She had just seen him on the train ride home. Had she been so distracted by her own problems lately that she hadn't noticed her friend getting older? "Very well, I so promise," he said, clearly humoring her.

She widened her eyes and lowered her voice, ready to give the story all the drama and style it deserved. "It was a dark and stormy night. Lightning splintered across the sky and thunder cackled with threatening promise in its wake. All sensible witches and wizards were safe in their homes. Save one." Draco began to smile

appreciatively, so she pressed on. "The wizard set out on this very lawn we're standing in to challenge the sky-his mission: to capture a bolt of lightning from the storm."

"That's ridiculous." Draco pursed his lips. "Not even Sirius Black is that foolish."

"Who says it was Sirius?" Harry smirked. "No, the wizard in question was considerably younger and more idiotic than my uncle. It was Archie."

"*Rigel* tried to catch a lightning bolt?" Draco looked completely incredulous. "Why?"

Harry shrugged. "At the time, he and I had the old Thunderbolt broom models, and Ar- *Rigel* got it into his seven-year-old mind that lightning was what made it go fast. He wanted to make it go faster."

"Oh, no," Draco groaned. "Of all the foolishness... wasn't anyone watching him?"

"I was," Harry said, grinning. "Saw the whole thing. It was my idea to attach a coat hanger to the end of handle." Draco's face was entirely horrified. "Our parents thought we were sleeping in my room, but we used the brooms to fly down from the window instead. Don't worry- we were very careful. Wore rubber gloves and everything."

"I'm sure it was all very scientific," Draco scoffed.

"Oh, yes." Harry nodded seriously. "We arranged the broom with the handle toward the sky, propped up by branches we stuck in the mud. It took ages for the storm to really hit its peak. We almost gave up waiting, and I headed toward the neighbor's garden to see if I could find another piece of metal to add to our configuration, but then a huge crack rang out and the sky seemed to split open in a flash of light and heat. When my vision cleared, *Rigel* was unconscious in the grass about twenty feet from where he'd been standing and the broom was blackened and twisted, the sticks around it on fire. Turns

out when you stand near a lightning strike rubber gloves don't stop the peripheral electricity from running up through your feet."

Draco's eyes were completely round. "What... what did you do?"

"I took down the other broom right quick so they didn't both get fried," Harry said, blinking innocently.

He gaped at her for a moment before his eyes narrowed. "You're joking."

She smiled. "Yes I am. I ran over and checked on Rigel, of course. He was breathing, but he didn't move when I shook him. His hair was all standing on end and he just stared up at the sky unblinking while I called his name. Finally he turned his head to me and said, 'Did we catch it?'"

"Idiot," Draco breathed, lips quirking a bit fondly. "I don't understand how this story has to do with Lord Black, though."

"I'm building up to it," Harry promised. "Once I was certain my cousin hadn't been fried completely, I ran inside to wake my parents. There was subsequently much panicking and Diana and Sirius were called over and we all wound up at St. Mungo's around two in the morning. They patched him up quick enough, but he had to stay overnight in the children's ward for monitoring. Rigel grumbled and complained about how unfair it was and despite our family's rather stringent admonitions remained quite unrepentant about the whole episode. Sirius got so fed up with his cavalier attitude that he decided to teach his son a lesson in empathy."

"I'm sure that went over well," Draco said, grimacing. "Rigel hates being patronized."

"He was just a kid back then," Harry reminded him. "And quite gullible, actually."

"I can't picture it," Draco said, clearly doubtful.

"People change a lot," Harry said dismissively. "Anyway, Sirius waits until the next morning, when Archie is taken from his bed in the general ward over to an examination room so a Mediwizard can check him one last time before discharging him. The examination rooms are really just curtained off areas that separate the patient from the rest of the children's ward. There are a series of them in a row at the far end of the ward, toward the windows. Sirius is surprisingly handy at weather charms, in case you didn't know, so he went to the window and summoned a very localized storm."

"Oh, no," Draco muttered, looking like someone who was watching a brand new broom about to crash into the Whomping Willow.

"Oh, yes," Harry said, grinning. "Complete with little flashes of lightning and thunder and everything. Sirius then positioned himself next to the curtain behind which Archie was being examined and said in a loud voice, 'Will you look at that storm rolling in! The lightning is so close!' He then summoned a bright light that illuminated his silhouette against the curtains and proceeded to scream dramatically while pretending to twitch and fall to the ground, apparently electrocuted into unconsciousness. Immediately a high-pitched scream of horror came from behind the curtain and Sirius considered his plan a flat success."

"That's a bit dark," Draco said, looking disturbed.

"The point was to make Rigel feel what Sirius had felt when James summoned him to our house and he saw his son twitching uncontrollably with burns on both feet," Harry said. "You have to remember that Rigel appeared to feel no regret at all for what we'd done, which made Sirius understandably concerned that unless he realized the extent of his actions he might do something even more reckless next time."

"I can see his intention, but I have to say Rigel's track record doesn't speak to its effectiveness," Draco said wryly.



"That's because Rigel wasn't even in the examination room while Sirius was giving his best impression of a human light bulb," Harry said, smirking. "He had slipped out to go to the bathroom five minutes earlier when Sirius was distracting the Mediwizard by sending him to fetch his son some water."

"Then... who screamed?" Draco asked, frowning.

"Well, it turns out Sirius got a bit confused about which curtain Rigel was supposed to be behind," Harry said sadly. "When he jumped to his feet and swept the curtain aside with smug satisfaction he was confronted not with a newly repentant son but with a group of eight little girls all there to receive their pre-schooling immunizations. Three of them were crying openly and the others all began screaming again at the sight of him, convinced he was now a ghost."

Draco groaned in amused disbelief. "That's terrible."

"It was," Harry agreed. "They all started panicking and throwing things at him, including a water goblet that caught him across the face and blackened his eye. A Mediwizard for the ward came charging in and found Sirius at the mercy of eight tiny witches who were all hysterically upset. It took Sirius ten minutes to explain himself to the Healer's satisfaction and calm the little girls down, and by then Rigel was back from the bathroom and had a good laugh at his father's expense. Then the girls' schoolteacher, who had been in the waiting room with the rest of my family came in to see what was taking so long and Sirius had to explain all over again. Then one of the smallest girls tugged on Sirius' sleeve and told him that he made her cry and he had to make it up to her. He asked how he could earn her forgiveness and she told him, very seriously, that she wanted one of the gold filigreed buttons on his overcoat."

Draco smiled widely. "Not the ones from Twilfitt and Tattings? Those cost a pretty penny."

"They are apparently very shiny, as well," Harry said. "As before he knew it, all the girls were demanding buttons. He agreed, of course,

feeling terrible for having frightened them accidentally. When he ran out of buttons on his coat, he was obliged to offer the ones on his shirt as well and even the golden clasp that was holding his hair back. When he finally came out into the waiting room he looked like a goose that had been plucked for dinner and then released after the cook changed his mind. He was clasping his clothes together with his bare hands and his disheveled hair hung about his rather shell-shocked expression as he stumbled toward the exit miserably. The Head Healer of the children's ward was searing his ears with admonishments and Rigel was just behind him, laughing and laughing all the way to the Floo."

Draco shook his head in disbelief. "And they still let him volunteer at the children's ward after *that* ?"

"Oh that was when he started volunteering," Harry told him. "He felt so guilty about the whole thing that he arranged it with the Head Healer as a sort of penance. Later he decided he enjoyed it too much to ever quit."

"Well if that's an average anecdote from your childhood I suppose I can see where Rigel gets some of his skewed notions of normalcy," Draco admitted, laughing softly. "Thank you for sharing that."

"Thanks for listening-I know other people's stories are never as interesting as they seem to the person recalling them." Harry smiled.

"You shouldn't be self-deprecating like that," Draco said, frowning slightly. "It was an amusing story, and making it seem otherwise won't serve you well in the long run."

Harry blinked, tilting her head slightly. "Why do you say that?"

Draco took a moment to respond, looking at her oddly. "You look so much like Rigel when you do that. It's eerie how alike you two are."

"We grew up together," Harry said shortly. "What did you mean?"

"Just that if you want to succeed in this type of social environment you need to show confidence and strength, not humility. It makes you seem as though you either don't know your own worth or you're fishing for complements," Draco said.

She thought about that for a moment, frowning. "Most people would consider it a polite deflection of an implied compliment, wouldn't they?"

"Perhaps if you were someone else," Draco said, looking a little apologetic. "I'm not trying to criticize you-it's honest advice," he added, concern in his gaze. He probably feared she would take his comments the wrong way and perhaps complain to Rigel that he was unkind to her.

"I understand," she said, nodding slowly. "As a halfblood speaking to a pureblood I shouldn't overtly undervalue myself because others will do it anyway, so it only makes it seem like I agree with their assessment and am admitting that I don't belong here."

Draco looked taken aback, as though he hadn't expected her to grasp his point so quickly or repeat it so bluntly. "Forgive me," he said, "for bringing it up like this. I shouldn't have ruined the mood. It is a party."

"I'm glad you did," Harry said honestly. "I never resent advice, especially when it's given kindly. I'm not..." she trailed off, picking through words with care, " *unaware* of the position I'm in. Rigel means a lot to me, but he occupies with ease a world that I will have to work hard to be accepted in. If I may be as blunt, I truly appreciate your civility. Others of your station have not been so courteous. Even if you are only being nice to me for Rigel's sake, I'm still grateful, and I think it speaks well of you as a wizard."

Draco looked supremely uncomfortable. "I find your company perfectly amiable, Miss Potter. That Rigel is so close to you just makes it all the more important for us to find ways to get along."

She would bet good Galleons that Pansy had put that idea into Draco's head. It smacked of her friend's social insight and long-term thinking. She didn't know how she felt about the idea. On the one hand, she was acutely aware that she would one day lose Draco and Pansy's friendship as Rigel. It would mean so much if she was able to continue that friendship as Harry, but on the other hand... it seemed an unlikely prospect. How could she have a close relationship with her best friends without eventually revealing something about the ruse? She knew too well that her guard was much lower around them. Eventually she would make a reference she shouldn't. It was too risky, and yet... she wanted this. Wanted to be legitimately included into their lives as Harry.

"I suppose we should," she said eventually. She knew it was less than overtly welcoming, but she wasn't sure yet what the best course of action would be. She would write to Archie and ask his opinion before she attempted to get any closer to Draco as Harry.

If Draco was curious as her sudden reticence, he didn't show it. Instead he gave her a polite nod and said, "I look forward to speaking with you again sometime, then, Miss Potter."

"Just Harry," she said.

"Harry," he repeated, looking searchingly at her for a moment. "How is he?"

She knew exactly what he was asking. The last he'd seen of Rigel hadn't been an advertisement for a healthy psyche. "He's... getting better," she said honestly. She could not help the shadow that drifted across her face as she reflected on the progress she'd made. "He's going to be fine. The time away from everything will do him good, I think. When he returns, he'll be the Rigel you know."

"He should be with his family and friends right now, not off in the middle of nowhere," Draco said, scowling unhappily.

"You know he likes to deal with things alone," she said quietly.

Draco pressed his lips together and nodded sharply. "You're right of course, Miss Potter. Excuse me." Then he left, weaving his way through the crowd toward where Narcissa was standing somewhat stiffly beside her sister.

"Just Harry," she muttered after him half-heartedly. She had never been more aware that she was not 'just Harry.' She was Heiress Potter. She was Harry the Lower Alley Potions Brewer. She was Rigel Black. She was highborn, lowborn, pureblood, halfblood, powerful, average, mysterious, and unassuming. She was thirteen. She was fifteen. She was fractured and whole. She was a child and a criminal, a lady and a liar. She was afraid that by the time everything was over she wouldn't be anything anymore. Just a collection of faces that hid a hollow void where there should be something real and solid and *her* .

She retreated to the outskirts of the party, then slipped into the kitchen when Sirius began opening his gifts with great fanfare. She busied herself washing up, but knew that anyone who came in would not be fooled by her slow scrubbing. As the party wound down, she pasted a friendly smile back onto her face and thanked people for coming when they glanced in her direction as they traipsed through to the Floo.

When Lily came in after the guests had departed and took over the cleanup, Harry bid Sirius one more happy birthday before changing out of her party clothes and grabbing her cloak. She needed to cheer up before her family wondered about her odd morose mood, and she could only think of one way to do that.

"I'm making a run to Diagon," she called to her parents on her way out. "Won't be too long."

"Can't it wait?" James called back.

"No," she said, attempting to sound apologetic. "Sorry, but I'm completely out of beetle legs."

"Merlin forbid," she heard her father snort as she grabbed for the Floo powder. It was nearly gone, even with their having bought extra for the party.

"I'll get more Floo powder while I'm out," she said loudly.

"Thank you!" Lily's words were the last thing she heard as she spun away to the place she had come to think of as a second home.

It was nearing dinnertime, and the more popular restaurants in Diagon Alley had begun setting up outside tables that edged foot traffic in the alley closer toward the middle of the street. She made such slow progress getting through the summer evening crowds that she wasn't surprised to find Leo waiting for her by the time she'd reached the mouth of Knockturn Alley. She slowed her impatient steps to a stop a few feet from him, taking in his ever-tanned skin and sleeveless summer tunic. His bright, hazel eyes smiled at her fondly as he uncrossed his arms and stepped in for a hug.

"It's about time, lass," he said into her hair.

She pulled away after a brief moment and scowled lightly to cover an unexplained embarrassment. "I've only been home from school a few days," she reminded him. "I'm not obliged to come down here and get my boots dirty at the very first opportunity."

"You did anyway, though," he guessed, grinning crookedly down at her. She had to frown, wondering when he was going to stop growing and let her catch up. She'd been so sure that her recent height addition was going to give her an advantage in their next duel. He was, what, eighteen now? When did boys stop growing, anyway?

"I had nothing better to do tonight," she huffed, putting her hands in her pocket. "How did your lookouts recognize me, anyway? I've changed a lot since they last saw me."

"You look the same to me," he said, eyes tracing her features in quick flicks. "My ears recognize your boots, anyway."

"My boots?" She frowned down at them. They were an ordinary pair of boots, though she supposed she did always wear the same ones.

Leo nodded once. "You take care not to attract attention with your clothes-which in itself attracts attention, by the way-but your boots are top-quality. That, and you're the only black-haired, green-eyed kid who comes to Diagon Alley alone and doesn't stop to look at any of the stores as you walk. Even when you've been gone awhile, you walk like you belong down here, and that's easy to spot out."

She considered that for a moment, then shrugged. "Well, tell your ears that I'll be buying a new pair of boots soon; the Sizing Charms are starting to wear thin on this pair."

"They'll relish the additional challenge," Leo assured her.

She rolled her eyes and began walking toward Kyprioth Court. "How are things lately? The Aurors ought to have stopped raiding now that they've got what they were looking for, right?"

"Apparently," Leo said, measuring his steps beside her. "They've gone back to just inspecting known Dark Arts dealers like Borgin and Burkes again. Things are good here. They usually are in the summer. More tourists in Diagon with kids off of school, so businesses do well, which means goodwill taxes can be collected. It also means a booming business for my pickpockets, but that's neither here nor there."

"I hope you're recruiting faster runners," she said, remembering with amusement the time a young urchin had tried to relieve her of a money purse.

Leo grinned sidelong at her. "I heard you chased one of my boys all the way to the deep alleys once. He was very traumatized by the experience, you know. Says you did some wandless voodoo on him and scolded him like his mother to boot."

Harry felt her ears turn red. "I didn't scold him. I just told him to pick someone fatter to steal from next time."

Leo laughed aloud. "I would have given the lad *my* Galleons to see that. If you're interested, I think the kid took your advice. Jack is one of our top collectors, these days."

"How nice," she said, not sure if she should feel pleased or not that a boy his age was making a decent living as a thief. She supposed it was better than imagining the boy on the street somewhere, but...

"Leo, what do children in the lower alleys do besides run errands for the Court? I know you feed and house the orphans, but are they schooled?"

"Of course," Leo said, looking surprised at the question. "We have a couple different schoolmasters who float in and out of the Court. There's always someone around to give lessons to those who'll sit still for them. It's not anything fancy, of course; there's no money to send 'em to Hogwarts and the like, even for the few who could prove themselves pureblooded. Most are mixed bloods or don't know who their parents were, and there's certainly not enough gold to send them abroad. We do what we can, though, to get training and certificates for the older ones who want to leave the alleys to do other things. Most of them stay on with the Court, or at least in the alleys, and no one around here gives a whit where you learned to count anyway."

She nodded silently, soaking in this new information. There was always so much she didn't know about the world. "Well, I'm free this summer. If anyone seems interesting in potions brewing, send them my way, will you? At the very least I can teach them how to recognize good potions from bad. You'd be surprised how few grown wizards can tell if something in their potions kit has spoiled."

"That'd be great," Leo said, voice earnest. "Most of the teachers we get specialize in basic spellwork. My mum gives an impromptu lesson every now and then at the Phoenix, but it's usually on how to detect and cure poisons."



The Dancing Phoenix was just coming into sight ahead, and Harry couldn't help the small sigh that escaped her at its cheerfully lit windows and open door, which spilled music and laughter into the court around it. "I missed this place," she admitted. "It's been a long spring."

"It missed you, too," Leo said, bowing her facetiously through the doorway. "And spring is long behind us now."

"Yes, it is," she agreed quietly, soaking in the atmosphere for a long moment before following Leo to the center table where Merek, Aled, Rispah, Solom, and Krait were all sitting. "Summer is come at last."

Mugs were raised around the table at her arrival, and a discordant sort of shuffling ensued to make room for her between Leo and Krait on one side, with Marek, Aled, and Rispah on the other and Solom pulling up a stool on the end closest to the dormant fireplace.

"There's my long-lost brewer," Krait said, slapping her on the shoulder happily. "First you send me so many potions I'm overstocked and then you drop off the map for two months! We need to have a serious chat about quantity control, Harry."

"I had a time-management issue this last term," Harry said, for the first time able to smile slightly even as she alluded peripherally to the events that still haunted her. "It'll be better this summer."

"Not doing anything with the Guild this year?" Aled asked curiously.

She shook her head. "I'll do some experimenting on my own, but I'll still have loads of free time."

"Not as much as you think," Leo said ominously, a slow grin taking over his face. "Don't you remember what I told you in our letters?"

She thought back, but after so many time-turned hours it was like trying to remember something that had happened years ago instead of months. Finally, a vague recollection came to her. "Something about a... tournament?"

Rispah began laughing. "I don't think Harry reads your letters as many times as you read his, Cousin."

"That's because I send him more letters than he sends me," Leo grumbled. "Harry is a terrible pen pal."

"Guilty," she said, nodding sadly. "So what gem did I miss in the treasure trove of your correspondence, Leo?"

"The Court is holding a freedueling tournament," Marek put in excitedly. "The first in three years. People are going to come from all over to compete."

"Freedueling is illegal," she felt compelled to point out. "How will you even advertise it without the Aurors shutting it down and fining you?" The others laughed, as she knew they would, but she was genuinely interested in how they planned to spread the word.

"Word of mouth," Aled said, shrugging. "Everyone knows someone who knows someone who wants to test his mettle."

"Or her," Rispah put in, eyeing Harry sidelong.

"That's right, it's open to all participants regardless of nationality, gender, or species," Leo said, also smirking in Harry's direction.

"I'll look forward to watching it," she said, frowning back at him suspiciously.

"I signed you up," Leo said bluntly, a cheerful smile on his face. "The entrance fee was a Sickle. You can pay me back at your leisure."

Her eyes narrowed dangerously at him. She'd pay him back all right. "You can get your money refunded when you withdraw my name from the list."

"No-can-do," Solom said, smiling into his drink. "The brackets have already been drawn up."

Harry gaped at them. It was a conspiracy. "I can't compete. I'm not even qualified."

"You passed the preliminaries," Marek said innocently. "Lots of people didn't do that much. I'd say you're plenty qualified."

"What preliminaries?" she demanded.

"Oh, you have to beat a member of the organizing committee in a friendly duel to earn a spot in the real competition," Rispah said, inspecting her nails casually. "Just to keep out the kids who could get hurt in a real fight."

"Well I didn't do that," Harry said, frowning. "It's not fair if you just put my name in because you know me."

"You beat Aled in a practice duel over winter break, did you not?" Leo reminded her, leaning one elbow on the table cajolingly. "Turns out he's part of the organizing committee, so it counts."

"He went easy on me that day," Harry said, exasperated.

"I never," Aled snorted. "You're a tricky devil, that's all."

"Not as tricky as you lot," she complained.

"If you were, we'd have to hire you," Rispah said, chuckling. "You're already dangerously savvy for one not in the Court of Rogues. You'll do fine in the tourney."

"When is it?" she groaned. It better not be something that was going to take up her whole summer.

"Just before your birthday," Leo said, smiling in satisfaction. "Plenty of time to prepare."

She sighed into the glass of milk that one of the table boys had brought over without her asking. She supposed it would be as good a reason as any to ask Leo for extra lessons in hand-to-hand

combat. She had been planning on taking her training more seriously anyway this summer. She would never be caught in a helpless position again. "All right," she said at last. "But you're training me for this so I don't make a fool of myself," she added with a stern look.

"Wonderful," Leo said, clapping his hands together. "Come to the alleys tomorrow and I'll teach you how to Apparate."

"What?" She stared at him. "I'm not seventeen."

They laughed again. Marek leaned forward and said, "Everyone else will be Apparating in the tournament. If you can't, they'll only take advantage of that."

She supposed it made sense that freedueling didn't have rules about Apparating during the duel if it didn't have rules about weapons or potions being used. Still... "My dad's an Auror, remember," she muttered in aside to Leo. "This probably isn't a good idea."

"And my dad's an Aldermaster." Leo shrugged. "But they aren't the ones participating. Your parents will never know."

"Unless I die in it." She wasn't sure what made her say such a pessimistic thing, but she didn't take it back. It was a legitimate concern, after all.

"I won't let anything happen to you," Leo said seriously. He leaned in a bit closer and added, "You don't have to, Harry. We're not really going to force you to compete. Think about it, though. You've been training under me for almost a years now. Don't you want to see what you can really do? Against real opponents? Don't tell me you aren't tired of always losing to me."

Harry elbowed him for his conceit, but had to admit he was right. It would be interesting to test her skills for real. Dueling club at Hogwarts lacked a certain amount of earnestness, not to mention it was restricted to magical means of contestation only. Then she

thought of something else. "Won't I be losing to you anyway, if you're in the tournament?"

Leo laughed, "I hope so. I have to win if I want to keep my crown, after all."

"The prize is the Rogue?" she said, alarmed.

"Of course not," Leo laughed. "Not everyone wants the job, I assure you. If I don't come out on top, though, it will lead to at least a few people questioning whether I've gone soft. They'll wonder if I can really protect the Court like I'm supposed to. It's bad enough I'm the youngest Rogue they've had in several generations. I have to make the best showing possible. The tournament is a way to reassure people as much as to cement my authority and entertain them. Not to mention the gold it'll bring in from ticket sales and vendors..."

He trailed off, clearly making happy calculations in his head, and Harry just gazed at him, wondering how someone so young could take on the responsibility of so many people willingly. She could barely take care of herself some days.

"So what is the prize?" she asked the table at large, raising her voice again to include everyone.

"Gold," Krait grunted.

"Twenty whole Galleons," Marek added, smiling dreamily. "And that's just the runner-up! The winner gets thirty, but everyone knows it'll be Leo and just go back to the Court."

"Nothing is certain," Leo said modestly. There was a glint of competitive anticipation in his eyes that she recognized from Draco's before a Quidditch game, however. What was it with boys and proving their own superiority through sport? As soon as she thought it, she flushed somewhat guiltily. She couldn't deny the fire of competition flooded her own veins on the occasions she was faced with a real challenge. Hadn't she enjoyed putting the boys in their

places during the Guild internship last summer? Who was she to think the tournament foolish?

At that moment, someone came up and tapped Leo on the shoulder with a low, "Highness." Leo's face grew serious and he nodded to them all before standing and excusing himself to hear whatever it was in private.

Rispah leaned over from across the table and said, "It's good to have you back, Harry. Leo's been under a lot of pressure this year and you just being here calms him down right enough."

"I don't do anything," she protested, surprised at the remark. "If anything I take time away from what he could spend on other things."

"Don't underestimate what your friendship means to Leo," Rispah said seriously. "Leo's never had a friend from outside of these alleys. His relationship with all his closest mates changed irrevocably when he won the Kingship. He became withdrawn, formal with his people; he has to be, to be taken seriously at his age. It wears on him at times, though. He needs someone he can spend time with irresponsibly. It makes him happy, and a happy King means a happy Rogue. Everyone here knows that-it's why our folk look after you the way they do."

"Look after me?" she repeated, confused.

"Did you think one lazy pickpocket attempt every two years was the average for people who walk at will through the lower alleys?" Rispah raised her eyebrows. "Leo's ears have intercepted half a dozen attempts on your person at least-and that's just that I know of."

Harry's eyes went wide. "Well, I feel sheepish. And much less confident. I didn't notice anything," she said, disturbed.

"We didn't let you," Rispah said, patting her messy hair fondly. "Don't look so stricken; your naïve confidence is part of your charm."

She grimaced. "Thanks." She vowed to pay more attention to her surroundings. She'd known Leo's little runners kept an eye on her progress through the alleys, but she had no idea they'd been so industrious in keeping negative attention away from her-or that their efforts were so necessary.

Krait cleared his throat from beside her and, when Harry looked over, he said, "I heard you've had some success with your potions experiments, young Harry."

"I told you about it last summer," she said, slightly confused about why he was bringing it up now.

"You told me you'd invented a new way of brewing," Krait corrected her with a scowl. "You didn't tell me you invented a whole new bloody potion. Horace Burke has been breathing down the door of every apothecary in London trying to find someone who can replicate a recipe he somehow finagled from the Guild's Department of Research and Development. He's mad to find a brewer who can make the potion work, so I tell him if he can get a copy to me, I'm sure my star brewer can attempt it. When I got it, wasn't I surprised to see my own brewer's name in the bloody title?"

She frowned in alarm at Krait, who didn't appear to notice that he'd told anyone with a little detective ability in earshot that she was Harry Potter. She looked suspiciously at his tankard, wondering how many drinks he'd had that night. "I didn't know Burke was so interested in the potion. The recipe was published in the Guild's newsletter last year."

"Well, no one can recreate it," Krait said flatly. "And Horace Burke is going to pay through the nose to be able to supply it to his customers before it gets mass produced."

"That's..." She shook her head to clear it. "I'm not sure if I'm allowed to sell it yet. The Department of Mysteries has been studying it all year, but they haven't gotten back to me about their findings, if any. Although... they are starting to use it at the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, so I guess they must have decided it was safe."

Her father had in fact already commissioned several dozen of them directly from her just before the school term ended. They were the first potions she was able to bring herself to brew without wanting to be sick. When Archie first passed on the letter, Harry had to laugh at how excited James was in making the order. He'd told her gleefully that she'd even get paid for them from department funds, and mentioned it might be a good idea for her to open her own Gringotts account with the profits. He had no way of knowing that she'd been financially capable for quite some time. It was nice to have his pride, though. Finally even he had to admit her studies were good for something.

"If the Ministry is using it in their departments they can't stop anyone else selling it," Krait said, smirking. "Come on, what do you say? Lets get rich, Harry."

She shook her head a bit in amusement. "I'll make Burke as many as he wants. You, too, Krait. Don't charge too much for them, though. I want everyone to have access to it."

"What's it do?" Marek finally piped up, looking insanely curious.

"It's like a portable ward," Harry said, fumbling to explain in a way someone not familiar with the intricacies of brewing techniques would understand. "You pour it around you or whatever you're protecting and it sets up a barrier. Only weaker than a real ward, obviously. Still, it holds up pretty well against werewolves. Dragons, too, actually. It lasts about twelve hours, unless the antidote potion is used."

"There's an antidote potion?" Krait looked ecstatic. "Burke doesn't even know about that one. I'm gonna charge him double for the set."



"That sounds impressive," Rispah said interestedly. "How do you know it holds up against such creatures, though?"

She blanched a bit before she caught herself. Affecting a casual expression that she knew didn't fool any of the players at the table, she attempted to brush off the question. "Well, there's a lot involved in the experimental process--"

"What did you do, Harry?" Came a low voice behind her. She turned to see Leo standing over her shoulder with a hand on his hip. "Don't tell me you tested those uses yourself."

She opened her mouth to lie, but stopped when she saw the sharp intuition in his eyes. Because of her unprepared acting, he already knew the answer. "I've had an interesting year," she muttered defensively.

He looked at her long and searchingly before offering her a hand. "Tell me about it."

She shook her head quickly. "No, that's okay. It's really not the sort of thing you'd want to hear."

Suddenly everyone else at the table had something very important they had to get to. Krait and Solom retreated into the kitchen while Rispah excused herself to join a group of ladies at another table and Marek challenged Aled to a wrestling match in the courtyard. Harry stood and drained her milk resignedly. She set the cup down and climbed out from the bench, ignoring Leo's outstretched hand a bit churlishly.

He walked her outside, and Harry glanced up at the sky clumsily. "Wow, it's getting late. I ought to head back. I told my parents I wouldn't be long."

"Tell them you ran into an old friend," Leo said easily, leaning back against the side of the Dancing Phoenix with a patient expression.

"That will greatly reassure my father," she muttered, turning to lame humor in her unwillingness to have the conversation Leo seemed to be waiting for.

They stood in silence for a few moments, until Harry relented and came to lean on the wall beside her friend. She could see him tilt his head down at her from the corner of her eyes. She didn't meet his gaze, preferring to look straight ahead at the sparsely populated alley. "You look tired," Leo said after a lengthy pause. "Like you aren't sleeping."

"I sleep," she said.

"Not the full night, though, I'd wager," Leo mused. "There's a strangeness in you, lass. I thought it was just your new looks, at first, but my magic's been telling me something is off all evening. You've changed in some way, somewhere below the surface."

"I'm the same-"

"You look around more, too. Wary-like. You noticed me in the shadows of Knockturn Alley much sooner than I expected you to. When we approached the Phoenix you looked like someone come home after years in the wide world, only you also took note of every face and body in the room before you came to sit." Leo turned his gaze up to the heavens and he blew out a long breath. "I wish you'd tell me what happened to you in the last couple months. You sounded busy in early spring, but fine. Then your letters just stopped coming. I thought you were busy with exams, but it was something else, wasn't it?"

She shook her head slowly, an ache from the feelings she was holding back taking root in her temples. She forced her expression to relax and said, "Nothing happened. You're imagining things."

"So I imagined your eyes going dark and troubled just before you asked for extra self-defense training?" Leo said softly.

"You must have," she whispered.

"Harry-"

"I don't want to talk about my year," she said firmly, looking over at him at last. "I'd like to put all of it behind me, in fact. I like being with you all in the alleys because nothing here reminds me of that. Okay?"

Leo's face said plainly that he didn't find it okay, but her friend was getting better at respecting her boundaries, apparently. He smiled a bit sadly at her and said, "Whatever you want. Let me walk you back to Diagon?"

"Sure," she said, standing straight once more. "Oh, I have to get some Floo powder! I told my parents I would pick some up."

"The shop might be closed by now," Leo said doubtfully, glancing up at the sun. "Why don't we Floo to your place on Dogwood real quick and you can bring home whatever you have stored there? You can buy more tomorrow to replace it."

"No, that's okay," she said quickly. "I'll just tell them the shop was out." She had no idea whether Mrs. Flint was still using her apartment or not, but Flint had intimated that he planned on letting her stay where she was settled until he had a stable enough position to support them both, so she assumed the woman was still living there for the time being.

Leo gave her a measuring look. "More secrets, Harry? These are my alleys, you know. I could find out if I really wanted to."

"Or you could respect my privacy," she said breezily. She started down the street at a quick pace, calling over her shoulder, "Coming?"

"One of these days..." Leo threatened playfully.

"Keep telling yourself that." Harry smirked. "I know you value our friendship too much to pry."

"I do," he agreed, suddenly serious again. "But, Harry, you can talk to me if you need to. About anything. I won't judge anything you're mixed up in, and I won't tell anyone your secrets."

"I know you wouldn't," Harry said, smiling wanly. "I'm not protecting myself from you, Leo." It was quite the other way around. She couldn't mix Leo up in her crimes by making him an accomplice. For all that he flouted the law down here in his kingdom, she was committing crimes under the noses of extremely powerful people who would not hesitate to round up everyone she'd ever met for questioning if her lies were ever discovered. Leo could not afford to fail a Veritaserum test on her behalf. Too many people depended on him.

"I wish I could protect you from whatever it is that's got you so scared," Leo said, clenching and unclenching one hand frustratedly as they walked. "I hate seeing you unhappy."

"I'm not unhappy," she said, smiling at him to prove it. "In fact, this is the best I've felt since coming home. Thanks for that, Leo."

"Anytime, lass," Leo said, falling back into his usual diffidently relaxed gait after a moment. "You come down this way as often as you need to-we'll be here."

He would, she knew, and he might never know how much that meant to her, having a place where she could be as close to herself as she knew how. The further her ruse carried her from the person her family expected her to be, the stranger she felt falling back into old patterns of behavior when she was at home. Here people didn't care what her name was or what her future held. The only things that mattered were her wits and her skills and, she admitted upon reflection, her friendship with Leo. She hoped Rispah was right, and she was as good an influence on Leo as he was on her.

She couldn't remember the last time she was considered a good influence on anyone, in fact, and some part of her found it a nice feeling. At the least, it made her feel less beholden to the unwavering support and generosity he'd shown her for the past two years.

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The good feeling from the alleys followed her home and into her dreams that night. She woke feeling refreshed, and thinking that she should make it a point to do something good for others this summer, since she had a bounty of free time before her. Offering to give a couple of classes on potions for the alley kids was a good start, but there had to be other ways her skills and knowledge in potions could be put to a greater use. She would make it her mission that summer to find ways to give back to the community at large.

First, though, she had to get Krait a batch of the Protective Potions, if only to give him something to gleefully hold over Burke's head for a few weeks. She would need to ensure Krait didn't tell Burke that his brewer was the potion's inventor, however. Burke had contacts all over the place, and she didn't need anyone outside of Krait, Archie, Leo, his parents, and Rispah knowing that Harriett Potter worked for a shady apothecary down Knockturn Alley in her spare time.

The potions were a cinch to make after so much practice. They used a lot of magic, but she found that she had plenty to spare these days. By the third cauldron full, she had gotten so used to the large expenditures of magic that she didn't even notice it anymore.

She did notice when a piercing headache so diverted her concentration that she lost count of how many stirs she'd given since reducing the heat. The pain bloomed deeper, to near-debilitating levels, but she was well acquainted with pain now and didn't let it consume her. She gritted her teeth and forced her brain into focusing

on setting up a stasis spell over her cauldron. That done, she groped her way toward a stool and took several deep breaths as she attempted to identify a cause.

The pain in her head didn't seem to emanate from any one point. It wasn't the ache at the base of her skull that let her know when she'd been hunched over a cauldron too long, nor the throbbing behind her temples she sometimes got from squinting at recipes for hours in the near dark. This pain pulsed through her entire head like a knife, and as she concentrated on it she began to feel a separate sensation, like a tug on her consciousness, underneath the discomfort.

Anger replaced her confusion, and she moved from the stool to sit against a nearby wall while she plunged her consciousness backwards from reality into the recesses of her mind.

She opened the eyes of her avatar to find herself completely submerged in water and very nearly closed them again in aggravation. Why did everything have to be so difficult? She looked around in what seemed like slow motion, her movements restricted by the press of water all around her. Visibility was remarkably good, despite the ocean that stretched in every direction, and there was an unnatural amount of light bending through the water that gave the scene away as magically created.

She was about a hundred feet above some sort of golden, underwater city. The metal that composed its spires and archways glittered beneath her and she started swimming toward it. She would bet all her cauldrons that the nuisance responsible for her headache was lounging on a throne somewhere in the middle of all the grandeur.

When she approached the submerged castle, she found it guarded at every entrance by selkie-like creatures that brandished spears menacingly at her as she swam near.

"It's my mind," she snapped at them in a stream of bubbles, waving away their silent challenge with an impatient hand. They let her pass,

or rather she swam straight past them with an impatient kick of her legs without waiting for a reply.

She swam into a grand entrance hall and heard muffled noises coming from the staircase to her left, so she swam upstairs-wondering as she did so what exactly the point of building stairs underwater was supposed to be-and followed a tube-like corridor to where it ended at a pair of ornate golden doors. She could hear something like music coming from the other side, so she pressed her hands against the doors and kicked her legs with all her strength until they began to open.

"No, no, no, stop!" cried a voice. She ignored it, pushing open the doors the rest of the way and swimming into the room beyond. After taking in the sight before her, she realized the voice was not talking to her.

She had emerged onto a small balcony, which overlooked the largest opera house she had ever seen, complete with rows and rows of spectator seats that were currently empty and an orchestra pit that was presently filled to the brim with selkies of all sizes, each clutching some manner of unlikely underwater instrument. There were drums made of what looked like sharkskin stretched over hollowed out coral and violins drawn taut with seaweed strings and driven by bows of mermaid hair. The amalgamation of instruments and selkie virtuosos created an oddly grotesque effect from afar.

Beside her on the balcony was a merman with russet locks that hung to his waist and a tail that sparkled gold and silver as he lashed it back and forth angrily. He pointed a jewel-encrusted trident at the band below and cried, "You call that staccato, Wavespinner? Pluck those strings like you have opposable thumbs, for Trident's sake! This is to be the premier orchestral arrangement in all of Atlantis, and I will not have you mucking up the grand finale! Do it again."

"Or don't," she cut in, scowling at the merman. He spun in the water to face her and she caught the outline of a red jewel on his right shoulder. She didn't know why the Dominion Jewel insisted on taking

such ridiculous forms when she'd given it a perfectly serviceable construct to begin with. Probably its incredibly developed ego played a part.

"What are you doing here?" he sneered. "The concert isn't ready yet, obviously. Come back later."

"You know very well why I'm here," she said, glaring. "I have a splitting headache. What are you doing to me?"

"What am I doing?" The jewel-possessed merman tossed his head of floating hair superiorly. "What are *you* doing? You've burned through an obscene amount of magic already today. I'm not going to have enough to finish this ensemble to appropriate standards."

"I don't give two Knuts about your imaginary orchestra!" she shouted, utterly exasperated. The effect of her ire was completely ruined by the stream of bubbles that seemed to be on delayed effect exiting her mouth, so that it was several seconds after she'd shouted that the bubbles finally dissipated.

"Do you like it?" he asked, smiling coquettishly at her. It was an entirely disgusting expression on a middle-aged merman. "I designed the bubbles so that anyone who came into this mindscape who wasn't me would look like a complete idiot."

She noted that no bubbles occurred when he spoke and felt like baring her teeth. Of course he had decided that emasculating an intruder by forcing him to produce bubbles every time he spoke fulfilled the order he was under to defend her mind. She rubbed her temple and refocused on the issue at hand. "You cannot debilitate me with headaches just because you don't like how I'm using my magic. It's not your decision. It is my magic and you can't stop me from using it."

"I can make it very uncomfortable, though, can't I?" The jewel-fuelled construct smiled widely.



"How are you doing that, anyway?" Harry asked suspiciously. "You shouldn't be able to affect the physical world from in here."

"I can't, but there are consequences to the things I do here," the jewel said, looking bored now. "Boys. Show the little lady how it works."

She looked over to see a pair of selkies with enormous cymbals standing at attention. As one, they slammed their metal instruments into the sides of the orchestra pit and an inhuman howl of sound rang in echoes all around the opera house. Harry cried out as a sharp pain reintroduced itself into her skull and sent her thrashing in the water until she bumped into the rail of the balcony and curled into the fetal position, clutching her head.

"Stop," she commanded sharply. "Stop it right now and don't do that again." The pain immediately receded in the wake of the fading sound and she uncurled herself slowly.

"I'll find some other way to annoy you," the construct said, yawning. "I can't allow you to simply waste our magic whenever you want."

"It's replenishable," she ground out. "And it's my magic."

"Yours, mine, ours." The jewel waved a hand unconcernedly. "The point is I clearly have to be the rational one here. If you drain it dry all the time, you'll leave us with nothing for emergencies."

"You just want it to build this stupid underwater opera house. Sound doesn't even travel well underwater," she said, rubbing her eyes tiredly. "What's the point?"

"I'm bored," the construct pouted. Also not a good look for a merman. "I need this entertainment to console myself about being locked up here away from the world."

"You pushed your way in here," she reminded it.

"Well, it obviously didn't work out like I'd planned," it snapped back. "How was I to know that you had an elaborate trap already built especially for such a situation? It's seriously weird, you know that?"

"I'm not the weird one in this equation," she said, gesturing angrily at the entire underwater spectacle that the jewel was wasting magic on for no other reason than to amuse itself.

"This is art, you plebian." The jewel threw its own arms into the air in exasperation. "Out. Get out of my Atlantis and don't come back until you're ready to appreciate the complex web of creativity I have woven here."

"You can't throw me out of my own mindscape," she spluttered.

"Watch me," the jewel hissed. It brandished the jewel-encrusted trident at her and a wave of hot water jetted across the space, like a whip of bubbles boiling in a slashing arc toward her. So shocked was she that it dared to brandish her own magic at her that she didn't move out of the way in time. The boiling stream struck her across the torso, but didn't burn her. She looked down at herself perplexed, examining her avatar. She looked and felt perfectly fine. "No," the jewel snarled, hurling another bolt of magic at her. She stared back defiantly as it splashed against her face harmlessly and dissipated into the water around her.

"That. Is. It." She was so done with this overgrown stalagmite trying to tell her what to do. There was absolutely no reason to let it keep leeching off her magic when there was no longer a Time-Turner around to produce the risk of resonance feedback. Now that she wasn't still reeling emotionally and mentally from the blows of those two weeks in captivity, she was ready to do what she should have done from the beginning.

"Don't do anything you'll regret," the jewel said nervously, floating backwards away from her a little bit.

"I won't regret it," she promised. She attuned her attention to her own magical core. It felt far away to her senses, for all that she knew she was right in front of it. It was like reaching for something familiar that you'd dropped underwater. It felt different as she groped for it, even though she knew intellectually it was the same thing. She felt it stir at her insistent mental prodding. The jewel grabbed at its stomach as though it was going to be sick.

"What are you doing?" the jewel groaned, doubling over. "Stop it."

"I'm taking my magic back," she said aloud, hypothesizing that giving the construct that contained the jewel's will an order would smooth the transition. "You can't have it anymore. *Release my core* ."

She coupled the command with a lash of her will, tugging the magic of her core toward her, not caring how the violent reclaiming affected the jewel's sensibilities. *Come back to me*, she coaxed it silently. *Come back to where you belong* .

It started as a small trickle, just a lick of flame that crept from between the construct's lips and spewed out in sputtering fits from between the jewel's beefy fingers. She tugged on the connection between the magic and her, imagining that she was reverse-imbuing a potion, drawing the magic out of its container firmly.

The tongue of flame multiplied, the fire spewing from the merman's mouth in earnest, faster and faster, until the force of it pried his jaws apart to make way for the lava and ash that spilled out into the water around them. It solidified and began to slowly orbit, a small ball of fire that grew steadily larger as she insistently pulled and coaxed the current wider. The construct was belching fire now, a steady torrent that scorched the water around them into a flurry of bubbles that streamed up all around them.

Her re-forming core grew with a fury before her eyes. She smiled in satisfaction. A part of her that she hadn't known was feeling stifled was suddenly free, as though she'd been wearing thick, restrictive armor for months on end and could breathe in deeply and fully for

the first time in too long. It was invigorating, watching her core defy all logic and understanding and form a giant ball of roaring fire a hundred feet underwater.

The fire stopped flowing from the merman's lips, and he gazed up at her weakly between wandering strands of hair. "Don't," he tried, pausing to cough a cloud of ash into the water pressing against his own face. "Don't take it all. Please."

She put a hand to the fiery core and stroked it fondly. "Take us back to the base layer of my core, jewel."

Bitterly, the merman snapped his fingers and the water world around them melted away. She found herself on the face of her old mountain and looked around to take stock of it.

The snow was gone, and she wondered if it would ever again be the icy fortress it had been. The mountain was overgrown with grasses of various shades of green, and she thought she saw a couple of trees beginning to sprout near its peak. Her core appeared to recognize the mountain intrinsically, gravitating toward the place at the very top where a piece of it had once sat.

"You can't stay out here," she told it, somewhat apologetically. She hated to shut it away in the mountain again, but she would have to at some point. The yellow-orange sun approached her slowly, hovering before her almost inquiringly. "Part of you can, for now, but in a few months I'll need you to stay inside the mountain. It's safer in there." Especially as having foreign entities traipsing through her head had become something of a disturbing trend.

Fire shifted over the surface of the sphere disgruntledly for a moment, but then the magic obediently split itself into two pieces, one significantly smaller than the other. The smaller piece soared upwards to take its place at the apex of her mindscape, where it would project a perfectly average magical aura for as long as she was Harry Potter. The larger sphere bumped her almost playfully in the shoulder, as though to say it wasn't upset at its partial

suppression, before floating toward the illusory entrance to her potions lab.

"Sycophant," a voice scoffed in disgust.

She turned to see the jewel-construct, back in the original form she'd given it and looking much diminished, sitting on the grassy mountainside in a morose attitude. "Sorry, did you say something?" she asked sweetly.

"After all you did to that overgrown bonfire, it still cozies up to you," the jewel said, grimacing. "Didn't you lock it away for, like, ten years?"

"It wasn't that long," she muttered, glancing toward the entrance to her lab a bit guiltily. "I guess it forgave me. It understands that I was young and confused."

"It understands that it should get on your good side so you don't chain it up again," the jewel sneered.

"Maybe you could learn a thing or two from that overgrown bonfire, then," she suggested in a mild tone.

"I am Dominion!" The construct leapt to its feet, bringing itself to exactly her eyelevel as it glared dove-grey eyes at her green ones. "I do not submit. I am worshiped. I do not toady to sacks of flesh."

"No one is asking you to be my slave," she sighed. "I don't even want you in here."

The jewel seethed at her. "I destroyed my physical form in order to inhabit yours. Even if I wasn't trapped in this ridiculously limited mental construct, I still couldn't leave your mind for the physical realm *now*."

"So I can't get rid of you," she surmised. With a shrug, she tucked her hands into the pockets on her avatar's brewing robes and blew

out a short breath. "Well, I'd assumed that much anyway. I suppose we'll have to learn to live with each other."

"One does not learn to live with tyranny," the jewel said, a bit dramatically in her opinion.

"My requirements are perfectly reasonable, considering that technically my mind is the victim of your invasion, which makes you the unwelcome aggressor in every circumstance," she pointed out. "All I need you to do is sit quietly up here and not cripple me with headaches whenever it suits you."

"All you need me to do is waste away without a purpose," the construct moaned. "I'm supposed to be controlling you. That was the deal."

"There was no deal," she argued. "You misinterpreted my needs for your own exploitative greed."

"Same thing," the dark-haired boy said, waving a hand dismissively.

She closed her eyes and wondered why she was bothering to argue with it. She had come here to get rid of a headache, not give herself another one. "Look," she said at last. "The bottom line is I'm in charge and you aren't. Obviously you can't be trusted to use my magic responsibly, so I'm not giving it back. You'll just have to learn to live without it. Find a new purpose."

The construct stared hard at her for a long moment, but then a slow smile bloomed across its face. "Actually... I do have a new purpose. You gave it to me, didn't you? I am to protect your mind from invasion. I need magic for that."

"You don't need magic-"

"Wasn't it you who wanted me to manage the layers of your mind in lieu of any true mastery of the skill by yourself?" The jewel leaned closer to her, smirking widely. "Something about maintaining a

complicated fiction that depended on projecting the right sort of aura at the right times? It would be such a shame if I couldn't help you out with that."

Or if it deliberately sabotaged her, she thought darkly. What she said aloud was, "I've managed fine without you."

"It's been difficult, though, hasn't it?" the construct asked, picking at its nails now. "It could be so easy-you wouldn't even have to worry about it beyond sending me a little mental nudge when it was time to switch layers. And your mind *is* safer from Legilimency probes when I'm managing its defenses."

She didn't want to be tempted, but... it had a point. She didn't know how to maintain multiple layers in her mindscape. It was an extremely advanced Occlumency technique, at least she thought it was from what little she'd been able to find out about it after first witnessing it done in Ginny's mind by Riddle Jr.'s construct. As it was, it took her a good twenty minutes at her fastest just to move her magic and manifestations back and forth between the outer and inner portions of her mountainscape. To be able to switch her aura seamlessly in an emergency... well, that could be useful.

It would also be incredibly reassuring to know that her Occlumency was good enough to withstand a master Legilimens' probing for her secrets. As it was, she had been relying on her Occlumency primarily as a warning system in the event that someone attempted to pry secrets from her mind. She wasn't sure it would stand up to a truly skilled opponent who was determined to know her thoughts.

She couldn't give the jewel power over her magic again as things were, though. It was much too unpredictable to trust. She would have to bring it over to her side... slowly.

"You're right," she said, giving the construct a frank stare. "I could leave you up here to languish but it would be a waste of a valuable resource and I suspect it would only give you time to find other ways of vexing me."

The jewel smirked. "Glad you've seen reason. Now about my magic-"

"I wasn't finished," she interrupted, smiling sharply. "I think we can come to an agreement, but it will be just that-a bargain upheld by both sides, with consequences for disregarding its stipulations."

Something like pleasure flashed in the boy's eyes. "Oh, I do love a contract of power. What's it to be then, fleshling? I have much knowledge to offer a heathen such as yourself. I can teach you how to bend the natural world to your whims, how to influence the creatures you encounter to your advantage, even how to appropriate the magic of others as your own. It will be difficult, of course, without my physical form to channel your magic through-you'll have to learn the hard way, I'm afraid. Still, it will be worth the many years of labor when you rule the seven-"

"Not interested," she groaned. "Can you just listen for five minutes? This is what I need you to do: create a second layer in my mind-not a temporary one, a permanent one that will stay as consistent as my mountain world. That will be the primary layer from now until I return to school. Then you will have to live in the mountain world as the primary layer at all times."

"Not this dreary place," the construct complained loudly.

"Build what you like beneath the mountain," she growled. "Just leave the surface of the mountain alone. It needs to be identifiable any time a Legilimens scans my shields."

"You say that as if you're expecting it to happen all the-time," the construct's eyes widened suddenly as what she'd said caught up to it. "You're giving me back the magic."

"Not all of it," she said, holding up a hand warningly. "Just enough for you to make changes around here. I'm keeping the rest of it free, and you will neither monitor nor begrudge the way I use it-that's an order. No more headaches."



"Yes, fine," the construct said, face alight with greed. "Give me the magic."

She held out her hand and summoned a fistful of magic from the spinning orb at the peak of her mountain with a single, clear thought. It flew to her immediately and danced around her fingers. She twirled it for a moment, smiling at the warm feeling it evoked in her breast, and then she held it out to the jewel. "Here. This is your allowance. Once you spend it, you'll have to wait for it to replenish itself naturally. You will not at any time attempt to consume more magic without my permission."

"That's not enough!" the jewel protested, eyes wide now with dismay. "That's barely anything."

"It's plenty if you don't use it wastefully," she said sternly. "Just build slowly and economize a little."

The construct looked *highly* offended at the idea of being thrifty with magic. It looked down at the generous ball of magic in its palm with complete disdain.

"If you don't want it..." she said, reaching out to take it.

The construct snatched its hand back and swallowed the orb whole without further delay, a petulantly defiant expression on its face as it gulped the magic down. Once it had ingested the magic, she turned to survey her mind one more time before she left to get back to brewing. With luck, she would get back to her body before her parents came down to remind her to eat lunch.

"Not so fast," the construct said smoothly, catching her by the shoulder. She tilted her head toward it with long-suffering resignation.

"What now?"

"Our deal is not yet stuck," it informed her. "I have conditions of my own."

Her eyes narrowed and she crossed her arms with a huff. "What conditions could you possibly have? I'm not giving you any more magic, and what I want you to do with the magic is non-negotiable. It's too important."

"I can see that," the construct said, stepping closer to her avatar with undisguised curiosity lighting fires in its eyes. "I want to know *why*."

She stepped back, frowning at it. "I don't-"

"I'll make it easy for you," the jewel said bluntly. "Give me access to your memories. I want to know exactly what brought you to this web you seem to be weaving. I want to know what your plans are. If I'm going to be stuck in your head forever, I ought to have some understanding of what your life entails. It sounds *fascinating*, I must say." It said the last with a slow, relishing smile.

She pressed her lips together and thought it over. The jewel was basically asking for all of her secrets. Her ingrained instincts said *no no no*, but her rationality had to point out that there was nothing the construct could do with her secrets. It was literally confined to her own head. Not to mention bound to act in a way that was in her best interests, even if it did sometimes stretch those interests to include things that suited it, like 'conserving magic for emergencies.' She could command it never to reveal her secrets, and it would have to obey. There was also the possibility that it would be much easier to deal with if it knew why she asked it to do certain things. The jewel seemed self-serving in most things, so why shouldn't she turn that to her advantage by showing it how precarious her situation was? Once it understood that a single mistake could land her-and by extension it-in Azkaban forever, it might be a little more leery of distracting her unnecessarily.

"I'll make this place into a fortress," the construct said idly. She noted that it must be dying of curiosity if it was willing to stoop to cajoling

enticements. "No one will ever be able to break through all the defenses I erect. I'll drive any intruders mad before they even realize they've stumbled into something above their pay grade."

"You sound very confident you can pull this off," she remarked, still thinking it over. "Driven a lot of people insane?"

The smile on the construct's face was not at all reassuring. "Only when they've failed me. If you're wondering if I'll do the same to you- don't. You passed the test already. You've proven your worth as a host. I could wish for a little more *ambition*, but your control certainly doesn't leave anything to be desired. Your willpower alone will take us far."

She wanted to say something contrary like 'No it wont,' but she was aware that breaking off into tangents was the last thing that would allow them to progress in this wearisome conversation. "Tell you what," she said eventually. "I'll give you access to some of my memories-only the ones pertaining to the ruse. My personal life is none of your business."

"It's a start," the construct said, looking incredibly anticipatory. "Can I view them now?"

"Not now," she said, shaking her head. "I'll set aside some time later this week and go through them with you."

"I know how to access a memory orb-"

"And I know you're a nosy hunk of corundum," she snapped. "No, you won't be rifling through my space room on your own. I will make time soon and give you access to the ones with information you'll need to conduct yourself usefully on my behalf. You will not have access to them once viewed and at no time will you attempt to interfere with or influence any aspect of my manifestations."

"Fine." The jewel sniffed. "It seems we have an accord."

"I won't forgive any mistakes after this," she warned it seriously. "I do think you can be a useful addition to my mindscape, but if you prove yourself to be detrimental to my plans I will build a mental box and put you in it, then bury it so far under my mountain that even I won't be able to dig you out again. Understood?"

"You won't be disappointed with my work," the construct assured her silkily.

She gave it a last, measuring look before turning away from the mountain and allowing her consciousness to slip toward the mists at its periphery. As she was fading back to reality, she heard a voice whisper softly, "Don't stay away too long."

She shuddered upon awaking on the floor of her lab. It was a sad state of affairs when she felt off-balance in her own mind. Still, if she could succeed in making the jewel invested in the outcome of her artifice, she would have a valuable weapon up her sleeve. That the weapon had the potential to be double-edged only meant she had to treat it very, very carefully. Harry was no stranger to handling things with care. She cracked her neck deftly as she removed the stasis charm over her cauldron and smoothly picked up stirring where she'd left off no telling how many hours before. She smiled a little as some part of her recognized automatically exactly what she had to do next. It was so nice when things proceeded precisely according to plan.

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[end of chapter one].

A/N: Here we are again, faithful readers. As some of you may have guessed, following the pattern of books so far as alternating between a major Alanna plot line and a major HP arc, this book will give a bow to the Triwizard Tournament. It may not be quite the tournament you're used to, though, so try to keep an open mind.

Thanks again to everyone who's made it this far. Your support and feedback make the writing process so dynamic; sometimes I forget I'm writing fiction and feel instead that I'm merely relaying the inevitable conclusion to all my readers' hopes and suppositions.

All the very best,

-Violet Matter

## Chapter 2

A/N: Great responses to the first chapter! You guys are the best. This chapter gets a lot of things underway, but I have to warn you-it's the chapter of letters. Prepare for awkwardly convenient exposition. And to anyone with final exams coming up-stop right now and don't read it! Study! There, I tried. Enjoy.

### **The Futile Façade:**

#### **Chapter 2:**

When she'd finished as many of the Protection Potions as she could manage without exhausting herself unreasonably, she loaded them into a crate and left for the alleys. Unfortunately, her father caught her on her way to the Floo and stopped to stare at his daughter carrying an entire crate of potion bottles up from her lab. She stared back.

"Hi, Dad," she said, careful not to shift her weight guiltily. "What are you doing home so early?" She was certain it was not yet dinnertime.

"I came home to collect my Wellies," he said slowly, eyeing the bottles she carried with a frown. "It's supposed to rain later, and I have a field assignment."

"That's unusual," she commented. "You usually do deskwork these days, right?"

"Normally," he agreed. His eyes flicked up to hers. "What are you doing with those, Harry? I don't think the DMLE ordered any more just yet, did we?"

Of course he recognized the potion, she thought with an internal sigh. What should she say? A crazy idea crept over her and she wondered... what if she just told the truth? She was already brewing

potions for the Aurors at her dad's request-charging for them, even. Was that really so different than her work with Krait? "I was going to take them to Diagon," she said, thinking it through quickly. There was no reason James should disapprove if she worded it right. "Your department commissioning some gave me the idea that I could market them commercially. I'm going to see if one of the apothecaries in the alley would be interested in selling them. I liked your idea of starting my own Gringotts account, so..." she trailed off with affected hesitation. "Is it silly? I guess no one will want to sell something a kid made..."

"No, it's not silly," James said firmly, smiling with obvious pride. "I think it's a wonderful idea-I always knew you had a bit of your dad's entrepreneur spirit in you. Do you want me to go with you? I have a little time before I need to be back at the office."

He looked so excited; she hated to turn him down, but... she'd promised Krait he would be the first to sell her potion, and that meant she couldn't take her dad to Tate's apothecary or somewhere else respectable in order to make her story credible. "Thanks, but I want to try doing this on my own," she said, smiling to show she really was grateful for his offer. "I don't want anyone agreeing to sell them just because my famous Auror dad is with me."

"Admirable," James said, resting a hand on her head fondly. "You're going to be a great businesswoman, Harry. Have you thought about expanding your ideas and making a whole line of them? As I understand it, this brewing method of yours is rather novel, but it won't be long before everyone wants to replicate it. You could patent it, I suppose..." He scratched his head thoughtfully. "Can you patent a brewing technique? I know you can a recipe."

"I don't want to patent it," she said quickly. "I'm not trying to make a ton of gold off my ideas. I just want to get my potions out there, so people who have a need for them can have access to something that will make their lives easier."

James' face softened and his hand moved to pat her shoulder in gentle approval. "That's my girl. Still, there's no reason you can't help people and make a bit of a profit. Think about it and let me know if you need any help-I do have a bit of experience in commercializing products."

She smiled up at him. "Thanks, Dad. It means a lot that you're supporting this."

His smile faltered for a moment, but came back quickly. "Of course. I'll support anything you decide to do, my fawn." He wrapped her in a brief, if somewhat awkward because of the crate, embrace. "Go get 'em, Harry. And good luck."

She nodded, making a show of determination that had him smiling back encouragingly. He took the stairs up to find his rain boots and she made for the Floo with relief fighting for room in her gut among the guilt. She shouldn't feel bad, she told herself exasperatedly. She'd been lying by omission to her parents about selling her potions for nearly two years. It was idiotic to feel guilt *now*, as she finally told a bit of the truth.

Her father's reaction had been so earnest, though-so entirely encouraging. She knew it was because the business aspect of being a potioneer was something James could relate to easily. Her dad could see himself in her, when he pictured her selling a product she invented, and she knew that gave him a particularly acute feeling of pride. That support for her work was something she'd been looking for all along, though, and to finally have it made her warm with satisfaction. That it was tainted by her continued dishonesty about where she was selling her potions and how long it had been going on... well, it was a shame, but it couldn't be helped at this point.

She made it to Diagon Alley with little trouble, used by now to Flooing with her hands full, however unpleasant she still found the method of travel. With a thrill, she realized she'd soon be learning an entirely different form of getting around, if Leo was as good as his



word. If Apparating turned out to be more pleasant than Flooing, she might even be tempted to use the new ability unscrupulously.

Conscious of Rispa's warning, Harry kept a keener eye on her surroundings as she moved off of Diagon and onto Knockturn. She didn't see anyone paying special attention to her, but she supposed the folks of the Rogue were better at blending in than she was at picking them out.

The Serpent's Storeroom had a few customers when she nudged her way in, so Harry waved to Krait on her way to the storage area. She set her crate down out of the way and went back to the front counter to wait for Krait to finish talking to a thin young woman in dark widow's weeds. While she was waiting, an elderly wizard with a soft red cap that listed to one side approached the counter with a bottle of Cadsworth's Cough and Congestion Remedy. She stepped over to the register to ring him up and noticed a slight wheeze as he sighed over the cost. She grimaced. Cadsworth's was ridiculously expensive for what was essentially honeyed tea. After a moment of indecision-and a quick glance to make sure Krait didn't notice-she asked, "Is this for you?"

The old man looked up with surprise and opened his mouth to reply but was cut off by a phlegmy cough before he rasped, "Yes."

"Have you had the cough long?" she asked. He frowned slightly, so she added, "I don't mean to pry, but Cadsworth's Cough and Congestion Remedy is quite mild. Most of its ingredients can be found in your pantry. If you have a very light cold I'd sooner recommend hot tea and bed rest."

The elderly wizard looked troubled. "I've-" he coughed again. "I've had this cough for weeks. I tried Wheezer's Relief, but it didn't seem to be-" more huffing "-doing much, so I thought..." He trailed off into a series of uncomfortable sounding coughs. They weren't too weak, which she took as a good sign that there wasn't anything irreversibly wrong with his lungs themselves. He probably just had a mild infection.

"To be honest, Cadsworth's is only more expensive because they market it heavily," she said, glancing again to make sure Krait was still occupied. "It's not any better than homemade cough remedies." The old man looked quite dejected, scowling uncertainly. She asked, "Have you considered a stronger antihistamine?"

"Anti-" he coughed into his hand with an annoyed frown. "Antihistamine? For swelling?"

"If you've been coughing for weeks, your lungs are probably inflamed-either from the constant coughing itself or an underlying cause," Harry told him. "Did you have a sore throat when you started coughing? Or nasal congestion?"

He shook his head, looking slightly bewildered. "Just a constant cough," he said, punctuating the statement with a soft cough.

"It doesn't sound like a cold to me," she told him honestly. "If you've had a fever it could be something like pneumonia, especially if you've felt at all nauseated of late."

The elderly wizard shook his head again. "Just the cough. Some chest pain."

She frowned. "Could be bronchitis." Usually bronchitis was viral, but it could also have an environmental cause depending on what the man did for a living. Treating the cough by itself probably wasn't going to help him. "I think you should go to a clinic," she said after a moment of thought. "I know it isn't any of my business, but unless the cough is lingering from an infection you've already treated, it isn't going to get better by itself. This type of over-the-counter suppressant soothes your throat but doesn't treat the lungs themselves. Suppressing the cough can actually prolong the illness if your lungs are trying to cough up something irritating them."

He nodded slowly. "You may be right, young man. I'll-" he coughed several times, then shook his head in irritation. "I'll see if they can see me at Maywell today. Should I...?" He gestured to the bottle of

Cadsworth's on the counter. She picked it up with a cheery smile. "I'll put it back for you, sir."

"Thank you very much," he said, tottering toward the door. He waved briefly before stepping out onto the alley with prolonged hacking. Hopefully Mrs. Hurst could clear out his lungs before the day was out.

She was clearing the purchase from the register when Krait sidled over with a suspicious scowl. "Did you just talk that customer out of buying my wares?"

Harry blinked innocently at him. "Why would I do that?"

Krait huffed in disbelief. "I'm on to you, kid. You're going to scare my customers away just so you can open your own apothecary one day."

"You got me," Harry said, sighing wistfully. "In fact I poisoned all of those potions I just brought in. It may seem counterintuitive to kill off all your customers, but I'm thinking I can draw in their family and friends afterwards."

Recalling the reason she was there, Krait ignored her nonsensical words and made for the storage area eagerly. "Just one crate?" he asked, somewhat disappointed.

"These aren't easy to make," she said defensively. "It's not like a Shrinking Solution. The amount of magic I have to imbue is prohibitive to the pace."

"All right," Krait said, shrugging. "I believe you. Which ones are which?"

"These," she said, gesturing to the left side of the crate, "are the Protection Potions. They have blue labels. The yellow labels are the Ward Disrupters. There's an equal number of each."

"Perfect," Krait said, looking as happy as a clam. He rubbed his hands together with a shark-like grin. "Burke is going to wet his robes for these."

"Just don't tell them I invented them," she reminded him sternly. "I don't need people knowing Harry Potter works in your shop. Tell Burke I just figured it out or something, okay?"

"Sure thing," Krait said easily. "You keep making these babies for me and I'll tell people whatever you want. Tell 'em you're a dancing bear."

"I'm sure that won't be necessary," she said, rolling her eyes briefly.

Krait muttered to himself about prices and profits for a moment before turning to her with a measuring look. "What do these cost to produce, kid? I can give you a forty-five percent labor fee on 'em-seeing as they're so difficult to make. I'm going to sell 'em to Burke for a king's ransom, in any case."

Harry smiled slightly. "They don't cost much in terms of ingredients, actually. The base recipe is incredibly simple. I don't think the difference between the usual thirty percent and forty-five percent is going to be significant."

Krait made a face at her. "Do you want to earn gold on these or not, Harry? Just name your price."

She hesitated, then said, "I'll take the regular thirty, with the condition that if a werewolf wants one, it's free."

Krait balked for a moment. "What for? I can't eat the cost for every moon-challenged moocher that walks in."

Harry gave him an unimpressed look. "You don't have that many werewolf customers. You're going to make a tidy sum on these potions as long as other brewers have trouble duplicating them, and I don't think offering them free of charge to a few who genuinely may

need them to protect themselves and others is going to eat into your overhead-which I have just agreed subsidize for this purpose, may I remind you."

Krait made a show of grumbling, but gave in without much argument-a sure sign that he was putting up a front on principle and didn't really mind her request.

"Tell Burke the same," she told him. "He can sell them to as many rich lords and ladies as he likes, but if a werewolf should ask, he is to refer them to you at no cost."

"Yeah, all right," Krait said, not unhappily.

She smiled, feeling good about that stipulation. She was aware from what Remus had said that he felt more vulnerable on the New Wolfsbane, which made him docile and drowsy. She also knew that many werewolves, like Remus, worried about what might happen to others around them if they were not properly contained and something went wrong with the Wolfsbane. This way, any werewolf who heard about the potion could get it from Krait no matter their economic situation.

She bade farewell to Krait, promising to bring another crate of the Protection Potion, in addition to the other potions she brewed for the apothecary, later that week. When she stepped out onto the narrow alley, dusk had fallen. She swept her eyes along the street and smiled when she saw Leo loitering in a doorway across the street. She walked over to survey his eminently casual posture with a wry smile.

"How much time do you waste waiting on me?" she asked, a laugh in her voice. "What would you have done if it rained?"

"It wouldn't dare," Leo said, sticking his tongue out at the darkening sky and grinning as Harry smiled against her will at his antics.

"Besides, I don't *wait* . I have perfect timing."

Harry shook her head. "Sure. And the leaves in your hair that look like they've been drifting down from that potted plant over your head for a while are just the latest fashion, I suppose?"

Leo reached up with a hand to pat his head sheepishly, then frowned as he realized there was nothing in his hair.

Harry laughed. "So you *were* waiting. Maybe you should bring a book next time. Or, I don't know, disrupt the aura of mystery you like to cultivate and just come inside to tell me you're here."

Leo grinned sheepishly. "Ah, that wouldn't be any fun, Harry."

They set off toward where Knockturn joined up with Kyprioth Court. Newly lit torches illuminated their path as the lower alleys slowly came to life around them. It was always busier down here at night, just as the crowds began ebbing from the shops and guilds of Diagon and the other high alleys. Harry breathed in deep, appreciating the familiar sights, and Leo glanced askance at her, considering.

"There's something different about you, lass," he said musingly. "What did you do?"

She supposed he was referring to the uncanny sensing abilities his magic seemed to possess. That he could tell she'd fundamentally reorganized her core that morning didn't surprise her. "What seems different about me?" she asked, curious to see what exactly he was sensing.

Leo's eyebrows rose as he said, "You feel warmer. Yesterday there was a coldness about your magic that irked mine terribly-if my magic had teeth, they'd have been aching and on edge. But whatever that was is gone. I can feel your magic again, stronger than ever, in fact. It radiates from you like heat, except I can feel it in my mind, not on my skin." He smirked in a self-deprecating way when his explanation came out a bit odd. "What have you done, then?"

"Just sorted some things that needed sorting," she hummed, smiling slightly. She did feel different, knowing that the jewel was under control and her magic was freely inhabiting her mind once more, uncontained except by her own natural defenses.

As they approached the Dancing Phoenix she asked, "Are you really going to teach me how to Apparate tonight?"

"I said I would, didn't I?" Leo grinned. "We'll have to learn in the courtyard away from prying eyes, not to mention under the anti-Trace wards, but you don't want to go long distances until you get the hang of it anyway."

She nodded, anticipation lighting eager fires in her muscles. It had been too long since she learned something entirely novel. What better way to test the new freedom and cooperation of her magical core than by attempting a difficult and reputedly dangerous new skill?

They ducked into the pub, answering waves and greetings-Leo more than her-while making a beeline to the kitchens. They dodged the dinner staff and ducked into the empty courtyard. She knew it was not really a courtyard, the sky overhead being only an illusion of the night sky, but with an artificial breeze blowing through it to counteract the heat that built up from the kitchens, it was a convincing façade. If she hadn't already known the truth, she didn't think she would have ever guessed.

"So how do I do this?" she asked, shifting to begin loosening her muscles automatically.

Leo laughed. "Well, you don't have to be limber. Apparating is all in your mind. The usual spiel is there are three D's: Determination, Destination, and Deliberation. You have to be determined to reach your destination, and you must do it deliberately-don't rush or get distracted."

After waiting for a beat, she raised one eyebrow. "That's it? Is there at least a wand movement for beginners?" She had never seen her parents use one, but she had assumed they were simply so practiced at it that they'd dropped the wand movement.

"Oh, there's a movement," Leo said mischievously. He turned on the spot and for a moment Harry thought he was making fun of her, till he disappeared before her eyes and she felt the air displace behind her.

Whirling, she grinned up at him. "That was a lovely twirl. I'm sure my first attempt won't be half as graceful."

"Very amusing," Leo said. He nudged her toward one side of the courtyard and then walked himself to the other. He drew an X in the dirt and motioned for her to go ahead.

She eyed her landing mark for a moment then took a deep breath. She pictured the spot in her mind as clearly as she could-it wasn't hard, considering she was staring right at it. She supposed it would be more difficult if you had to rely on a visualization that came from memory or, even more challenging, a description. She felt a little foolish, turning her mind to the task of Apparation. Was she really just supposed to imagine it happening? She would have to draw on her magic, obviously, but how would she know when to release it? And what direction would she release it in?

"You're overthinking it," Leo called. "This type of magic has no wand movements or incantations for a reason: it depends entirely on your own will. Believe that it will happen, and it will."

Harry wasn't sure how to make herself believe something purposely. She remembered all the times she had seen her parents Apparate, trying to solidify those memories into an assurance that she was capable of the same. After a moment, however, she realized she didn't need to do that. She knew how to apply her will to her own magic. If that's all Apparating was, then she had learned to do it long ago.



She drew instead on the part of herself that had just that morning told the Dominion Jewel to give up control of her magic. Her will was a sharp, tempered thing, and as her resolve solidified it was almost easy to make the request. All of her focus narrowed to the X on the other side of the courtyard. *Take me there*, she thought at her magic. It was not a request. It was more like a prediction that she knew was going to come true.

She turned on the spot, and felt the world draw away from her-or maybe she was drawing away from it. It felt like traveling to her mindscape, except faster and more abrupt, and instead of her losing track of her physical body she felt as though she was shoved into a more acute awareness of its every fiber. She supposed this was important for Apparating, as without an awareness of every part of her body she might leave something behind. Then she couldn't suppose anything because she was suddenly experiencing the most bizarre sensation she'd ever encountered.

Something was squeezing her from all angles, and while it wasn't painful, it was about as uncomfortable as one could get just shy of real pain. It felt as though the universe were attempting to thread her through the eye of a needle. Her existence shrank until it had diminished to a single, self-conscious speck in the dark matter of the world. Then, just as abruptly, her consciousness was released from the grasp of time and space and the world rushed back to greet her.

She gasped and her knees buckled as they hit the earth. She braced herself on her arms and took several deep breaths to stave off the nausea. "Why," she panted, raising her head to look at Leo incredulously, "would anyone... do that... more than once?"

Leo looked apologetic as he reached down a hand to help her to her feet. "It is pretty horrible the first time. Sorry I didn't warn you, but if you knew how bad it was you would have had a harder time with the determination part."

She shook herself as though she could erase the memory of the last ten seconds. A thought occurred to her and she hurriedly checked

her body for limbs, fingers, and toes. She appeared to be in one piece, clothes and all. Laughing in relief and shock, she clenched her fists in triumph. "I did it," she said, pride in her tone. With a long sigh she put her hands on her hips and nodded firmly. "And I hope I never have to do it again."

"You have to practice," Leo disagreed. "It's only an advantage if you can do it instinctively, without time to prepare yourself and without taking long moments to reorient yourself afterwards."

She grimaced. "Does it get better after the first time?"

Leo smiled unreassuringly. "Well... you get used to it eventually."

"So that's a no," she muttered. She rolled out her shoulders in a purely self-comforting motion and set her face determinately. "All right. Let's do this."

"That's the spirit," Leo said, clapping her on the back encouragingly. "Try turning in the other direction this time."

She did. And then she did it several more times until Leo was satisfied she could traverse short distances without risk of splinching herself. By the end of it, she was mentally exhausted. She nearly tripped over her own feet making her way back into the pub's dining area to rest.

"You'll want to eventually learn to travel between significant distances," Leo was saying as they sat down at the center table. "For the tournament, though, focus on moving between short distances very quickly, until you can do it as automatically as you would fire a stunner."

She nodded tiredly, barely managing to summon a smile for the serving boy who dropped a jug of water on their table as he passed. Leo looked as if he had more advice to give, but after getting an odd look on his face he stopped talking and turned his head toward the

door. She followed his gaze, realizing abruptly that the pub had gone almost entirely silent around them.

In the doorway to the pub was a tall, thin figure with brown hair that draped about his face almost to his shoulders. His skin was papery white and his black cape trailed after him like bat wings as he stepped further into the room. His eyes, an unnatural yellow, slid over the room and came to rest on Leo, who stood up respectfully and motioned the figure forward. It was a kingly gesture, she thought with surprise. This was Leo in full Rogue mode.

As the man approached, she recognized the too-graceful way he glided across the floor and deduced that he was a vampire, not a wizard. If his movements hadn't given it away, she would have known by the rasping quality of his voice, like the sweep of cobwebs being cleared by a broom after far too long.

"Rogue," the vampire said, coming to a stop beside their table. "How does the night find you?"

"Well enough," Leo said. He glanced at the room at large and waved his hand in an indication that his people should go back to their conversations. As the noise once more picked up around the pub, Leo nodded toward the table. "Won't you have a seat, Count Aurel?"

The vampire turned his gaze for a mere instant to the chair indicated before shaking his head. "I won't be long in your nest, Rogue." He swept a thin hand into his cloak and emerged with a sizable bag of gold in his fist. "Just paying our tithe, you see."

Leo smiled, but there was an edge to it Harry wasn't familiar with. "I would have come to the Lamia later tonight," he said, not removing his eyes from the vampire count. "No need to come all this way."

"It was but a whisper of the wind," the count assured him with a slight smile of his own. "I had heard news, such that rumor may be considered reliable, in any case and wished to ascertain its truth for myself."

"What news is this?" Leo asked, a mild tone of curiosity to his voice.

"You are hosting a contest of speed and strength, are you not?" the vampire inquired, yellow eyes glittering slightly.

"I am indeed," Leo said, looking apologetic. "Unfortunately, it is scheduled during the day, in order to allow optimum dueling conditions."

"Optimum for humans, you mean," the vampire said softly. "A pity. My people move quite stunningly in the dark. I suppose no exceptions will be made? My second, Gavril, should have liked to compete."

Harry blinked at the name. Gavril-that was the vampire who'd greeted her at the Lamia Lodge, where she'd stayed for a week during the Polyjuice debacle in the spring. He was the coven's second? That sounded like a high position of leadership for someone who frequently slept slumped over the front desk during daylight hours.

"That is a shame," Leo said. He softened the refusal with a grin, however. "It may be for the best, though-I'm afraid my prestige would never recover were your lieutenant to crush me in the finals. The might of the Strigoi Shrouds needs proving to no one."

"Our eminence is certain," Count Aurel agreed easily. "Good entertainment is difficult to come by, however." He sighed long and low, seeming utterly despondent. "I suppose the werewolves will be allowed to compete. Are you not afraid of losing to them in battle as well, little king?"

Leo took the slight with good humor. "Not at all. You must admit they don't have significant advantage as humans."

"Hmm," the vampire said noncommittally, glancing around the room in a show of disinterest. "There are goblins entering, I have heard."

"Two so far," Leo said, nodding. "A brother and sister, I believe. It will be interesting to see what they can do."

"Interesting for you," the count said morosely. "I will not see it."

"I'll tell you all about it," Leo promised, his smile a bit uncomfortable.

"I thank you, though I doubt it will be the same." The vampire shrugged gracefully. "I must be returning to my nest, now." He leaned toward the table to deposit the sack of gold beside the water jug.

As his face drew level with Harry's, he paused and turned slowly to face her. She blinked at him, having to force herself not to move back in obvious disquiet. The vampire, still bent over the table, tilted his head and sniffed, his eyes not leaving her face. She stiffened slightly, but reminded herself that she had never met this vampire-she hadn't met any other than Gavril and his mate Irina while staying at the Lamia Lodge, as she only moved about during the daylight hours.

The vampire count smiled oddly at her and said, ever so softly. "You smell familiar." He retracted his arm and leaned back until he was upright, though he still looked down at her with an intimidating amount of focus. "I have smelled you in my nest," he mused.

Leo's eyes snapped to her in alarm, but Harry kept her cool. "That's odd. Perhaps it was someone who smells like me. I wear a very generic perfume." She didn't actually wear perfume, but that was neither here nor there.

The vampire flashed a fang at her in amusement. "You smell less like an apothecary this time, I admit, but I am over one thousand years old, child." She swallowed nervously. He certainly didn't look a day over thirty-five. "My senses do not get confused." He slid his eyes back to Leo and nodded once. "I take my leave, Rogue."

"Always nice to see you, Count," Leo said amiably. The vampire wandered out of the pub, and when he was gone Leo turned to her with an incredulous expression of concern. "Tell me you've never been to a vampire hotel, Harry."

"Not that I know of," she said, smiling innocently. "Vampires sure are a strange lot." Casting around for a change of topic, she asked, "So that was the leader of one of the alley covens? The Shrouds, you called them?"

"The Strigoi Shrouds," Leo said, sitting back down slowly. She noticed he didn't seem fooled by her ignorant act. "Yes, he is their leader. He's one of the more normal vampires, actually. The other clan, who call themselves the Carpathian Crypts, are much more difficult. Last year, the Carpathians tried to pay their tithe in human teeth."

"Punny," she offered, a little disturbed.

"They certainly thought so," Leo said, rolling his eyes.

"Why do they pay you a tithe?" she asked suddenly. Not to disparage Leo's leadership, but these were vampires they were talking about. She knew even the Ministry had a hard time controlling them; they were territorial and incredibly prone to rivalries between covens, not to mention the whole drinking blood for sustenance thing.

"Everyone who lives or works in the lower alleys pays the Court of Rogues a tithe," Leo said, shrugging. "It's a fair exchange. The Court uses the tithes to look after our own, and that includes everyone who resides here, not just our own members. Vampire covens who choose to live in the alleys don't have to worry about their lairs being raided by unhappy neighbors in the middle of the day when they are weak. The alleys offer a relatively secluded lifestyle, as the arm of the Ministry doesn't reach very far down here. We also supply them with blood-not enough to support them completely, but enough to subsidize their needs to the point that they don't have to kill for it or

rely on expensive, Ministry-run suppliers. It makes things easier for everyone."

Harry chose her next words carefully. "When you say supply..."

Leo laughed at her unnerved expression. "Oh, Harry, you're priceless. My mother runs the drive through her clinic."

Comprehension dawned. "People donate blood to vampires?" she clarified, slightly disbelieving.

"The vampires pay a handsome tithe," Leo reminded her, gesturing to the generous sack of gold on the table. "Their privacy and safety during the day is valuable to their way of life. This money goes to feeding and housing those who fall on hard times in the alleys. It goes to infrastructure such as waste removal, public Floo facilities, and wards for privacy and protection around businesses of a less than strictly legal nature. It benefits the community at large to have rich covens in our alleys, and as long as they don't cause trouble, they're welcome."

Harry's eyebrows rose. "Welcome?" She'd seen the uncomfortable and paranoid way the patrons of the Dancing Phoenix had reacted to the vampire's entrance.

Leo grimaced. "Well, tolerated. They *are* vampires, and the Carpathian Clan in particular is known to be a tad unforgiving to those who cross them."

She had to admit the situation was very interesting, but as a yawn nearly broke her jaw in two she smiled tiredly and said, "Thanks for explaining, Leo. I should get going, though."

Leo stood and walked her out to the street. She tried to tell him he didn't have to accompany her all the way back to Diagon, but he insisted despite the slow drizzle coming down from ominously dark clouds overhead. As they walked, she thought about something he'd said. She had no idea they had public Floo systems in the lower

alleys. All this time she'd been using the Floo in the Leaky Cauldron to come and go. It was good exercise, but she wondered why Leo hadn't mentioned there were closer ones. After a minute of thought, she realized it was because those public Floos were for people who belonged in the alleys. People who paid tithes to the Court and therefore deserved to make use of its services.

She thought about that for a little while, then said tentatively, "Leo?"

"Hmm?" He turned his head toward her questioningly.

"Should I be paying a tithe?" she asked, feeling very uncomfortable at the realization that she was likely in the wrong and had been for some time.

"What?" Leo smiled at her as though she had said something silly. "No, of course not."

She frowned. "Everyone who lives and works in the alley. That's what you said. I have an apartment on Dogwood Lane, and I work at Krait's place. I have for a while now. Why didn't you say anything? I would have paid my fair share."

Leo shook his head, looking troubled. "Harry, you don't owe the Court anything. Krait pays a tithe to the Court on behalf of his business, which includes the tax on his employees. You have that apartment, sure, but you don't use it. It's not like you're actually taking a share of the amenities and protection the Court is meant to supply."

Harry considered that, feeling slightly relieved, but then she remembered Mrs. Flint, who was living in her Dogwood Lane apartment. *She* worked and lived in the alleys, and Harry was certain she didn't pay a tithe to Leo, because Harry had asked Mrs. Hurst to keep her employment and living situation a secret. In a way she was cheating the Rogue.



"I'd like to pay a tithe," she said firmly, making up her mind to do the right thing even if she couldn't explain to Leo why it was right.

"Harry, there's really no need-"

"I don't want people saying I get special treatment because I'm your friend," she said. She made sure he could see the seriousness in her eyes. "I mean it, Leo. Whatever the normal tithe for a resident of the alleys is, I want to pay it."

Leo was quiet for a moment, then he nodded slowly. "If that's what you want. It won't be much, since you technically rent that apartment; the owner pays her own tithe on the property itself, so you'll only be paying an amenities-based tithe."

"That's fine," she said, smiling with satisfaction. She was doing well on her resolution to be more aware of the world around her.

"For someone who lives as dangerously as you do, you sure are a stickler for the rules you decide matter," Leo said, amusement clear in his voice.

"I don't *try* to live dangerously," she protested.

"I'm sure you stumbled into that vampire hotel entirely by accident," Leo said, a bit sarcastically.

She gave a sheepish smile, knowing that he had not believed her lie, but also knowing he was essentially resigned to her peculiarities at this point. "Would you believe me if I said I had?"

"I would, actually," Leo snorted. Then he frowned. "Why did you stay at a hotel when you have an apartment just up the road?"

Harry's face went blank and she turned her face toward the puddle-strewn ground, picking up her pace. "It's complicated."

"I've been very reasonable," Leo told her, as though she didn't know. "You told me to stay away from your apartment and I have, even

though I'm dying of curiosity."

"I appreciate that," she said, crinkling her eyes in his direction in a show of approval. "It must be so difficult for you, minding your own business and all."

Leo sighed. "One day, you will tell me all of your secrets."

"You have enough problems, Leo," she told him sternly. "I'm not going to add my trivial concerns to your already-heaping plate."

"If they're so trivial, they shouldn't cause me any trouble," Leo said archly.

"Good point," she said. "Oh, look, there's the Leaky. Bye, Leo." She hurried forward through the mounting rain toward the pub, waving cheerily over her shoulder as she made her escape.

"I will figure you out, Harry!" Leo called after her, seeming utterly unconcerned with how soaked he was getting just standing in the middle of the street like that.

She sincerely doubted it, but didn't say so aloud. Leo didn't respond docilely to challenges.

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That week saw an unexpected influx in mail at Potter Place. Looking through it, Harry noted with amusement that she had never received so many letters actually addressed to her. One was from Archie's friend Hermione, which she had mixed feelings about. Another was from Archie himself, which she expected, and the last... the last was postmarked from Hogwarts. She set that one aside with some trepidation to read last.

*Dear Harry,*

*How is your summer going? Have you started the summer assignments yet? It's a good idea to get started while the material from last term is still fresh. I've finished the prescribed work already, of course, but I have an ambitious outline of my own that I think will take me at least until July to complete.*

*My parents wanted me to tell you that you're welcome anytime you'd like to come over this summer. I don't know how busy you are with your independent studies, but if you have time perhaps we could meet up. I know your cousin will be gone on that internship you arranged for him most of the summer, so I thought you might be bored without anyone to spend time with. You don't have to let me meet your parents if you don't want to, but I promise I can keep your secret if you do. I really would love to meet them.*

*Hope your vacation is very relaxing,*

*Your friend,*

*Mione*

She sighed as she rolled up that letter. She would have to write to Archie and ask what he thought about the idea of her meeting up with Hermione over the break. She wasn't sure how well she could pretend to be Archie pretending to be her. She could do it for short amounts of time around Sirius when necessary, but Archie had said many times that Hermione was exceptionally clever. Could Harry really convince her that she was her friend? Maybe she could write pretending to be sick. It would buy her a little time to figure something out, at least.

She turned to the next letter, smiling as Archie's exuberant greeting fairly leapt off the page.

*Salutations Cuz!*

*The Darien Gap is everything I thought it would be-and so much more. The wizards here have contained themselves entirely from the Muggles around them. The jungle is so densely impenetrable that the wards around this place almost seem superfluous, but I suppose they've survived in such a dangerous clime by being careful. You wouldn't believe the security procedures we interns were subjected to upon arrival. They took blood work and everything! It makes sense, though-they have a real problem with the proliferation of disease here. Something about the warm air is especially conducive to incubating sickness.*

*I'm learning so much, Harry! The Healer I've been assigned to specializes in infectious disease prevention and containment. The villages in the Darien Gap are connected by way of magical transport, but essentially islands unto themselves. We got word yesterday that one of them not far from where our hospital is stationed has reported an outbreak. Since I'm interning with Healer Hern, I get to tag along with the team going out to investigate. Just think, my first quarantine!*

*It's devilishly hot, and the mosquitos look like something left over from the pre-historic age, but I couldn't have picked a more interesting place to spend the summer. I hope you're doing well, and not getting into too much trouble. I know you'll probably go out and get involved in something right away, but for my sake at least try to relax while you have the chance.*

*Missing you-but not too much (on account of all the fun I'm having).*

*-Archie*

Harry shook her head as she tucked the weather-beaten parchment away. Only Archie would think a quarantine was fun. She would have to add to her next letter to him a request that he please not catch any debilitating tropical disease, as that would rather put a damper on many of their future plans.

She fingered the third letter idly, aware that she had no other distraction to save her from whatever lay inside. Who at Hogwarts could be sending her a letter? She had a small, tentative hope that it was from Professor Snape, but she firmly told herself not to have such high expectations as she broke the seal. The chances that Snape would take Rigel's advice to contact Harry over the summer seriously were incredibly low.

As though to spite her realism, the handwriting revealed as she unrolled the letter was entirely familiar to her. It was Master Snape's. Somewhat breathless with anticipation, she whipped the letter all the way open and began to read it quickly.

*Miss Potter,*

*It has come to my attention that, despite the promise of your recent contribution to the modus operandi of our field, there appears to be a shortage of brewers currently making use of the afore mentioned innovation. As I am presently between projects and have taken a passing interest in the burgeoning subject, it occurs to me that a demonstration of your technique would not go amiss.*

*I will be at the Potions Guild this Thursday morning at eight o'clock. If you are the dedicated brewer Mr. Black seems to think you are, come prepared to substantiate your methodology.*

*Potions Master Severus Snape*

She could not help but smile at the abrupt contextualization and equally brusque 'request.' She supposed it was his design to goad her, as that seemed to her to be her professor's preferred way of sounding people out. Little did he know she had been goaded by far more insulting people than him.

She wrote her reply on the back of his own letter-let him think she paid the matter scant attention if he read into it. She rather suspected he would secretly appreciate the economy, however.

*Master Snape,*

*Looking forward to Thursday.*

*-Harry Potter*

She chuckled for a moment, imagining her Head of House's utterly annoyed expression when he read the short missive. Serves him right for being so highhanded. As if it would somehow diminish her respect for him if he were to ask her for a demonstration of her technique. She was quite excited at the prospect. Other than Master Thompson, no one had yet requested a direct demonstration of Shaped Imbuing. Unless, she supposed, one counted Master Tallum approaching Archie about it. After hearing Nymphadora Tonks mention that the Unspeakables were still having trouble with the directions, she'd expected someone to contact her for clarification, but no one had. She supposed the organization was too proud to request assistance from a schoolgirl.

*Their loss*, she thought, shrugging. She began making plans for Thursday. She would have to use one of her old potions kits for their meeting; Snape was certain to recognize the one she used as Rigel, as he'd restocked it himself. She would have to make certain he didn't catch a glimpse of her wand, either, she thought with a grimace. Archie had taken his to America for his internship, obviously, but she assumed there would be no need for her to use a wand in any case. She was underage, and couldn't be expected to do wand magic outside of school, even were it somehow to come up when they would be studying a wandless brewing technique.

She would have to assess the Dominion Jewel's progress, however. She needed a layer of Occlumency that would stand up to Snape's casual perusal, and the more distinct it was from what Snape would recognize as 'Rigel's', the better. Rigel having taught her Occlumency would only be believable if she eventually learned to make the techniques her own, after all; he would expect Harry's shields to have evolved. Harry smiled to herself as she found a quiet

spot for meditation. She was more than prepared to live up to Snape's expectations.

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The mountain was peaceful as she approached. Wildflowers were beginning to compete for space among the grass that covered its rocky precipices. She wondered, as she headed for the entrance to her lab, whether the jewel had been correct in assessing the snow and ice that used to dominate the landscape as manifestations of the repression and rejection of her magic. In retrospect, it certainly seemed anomalous for a fire core to have a snowy landscape. It was odd that she hadn't found it strange before. A symptom? Or just an accident?

The jewel, inhabiting its default form of the boy construct that looked somewhat like her Rigel persona, was sitting in a chair by the fireplace when she entered, staring into it quietly. She could almost imagine she had gone back in time to before the jewel was in her head at all, when the construct was just an incomplete project, a puppet on invisible strings.

Then the construct's head turned and it looked at her with too much intelligence for her to maintain the illusion. "You're just in time; I finished going through the last of them not long ago." It gestured to a pile of orbs sitting in the chair across from him. They were the memories she had deemed necessary for the jewel to view, a collection of critical moments spanning the past few years that would allow him to make informed decisions on her behalf.

She hadn't felt entirely comfortable leaving them with the jewel, but as the construct was forbidden from altering them or removing them from the mountain's protection, she had agreed. She certainly didn't have time to sit there and wait for the jewel to view them all in real

time. From his words, it had taken him almost a week to get through them.

She gathered the orbs with a lasso of her will and corralled them along before her into the trapdoor and along the tunnels to her space room. Her magic greeted her with a flare of welcome as she entered, and she smiled at it warmly while she released the orbs in her possession back to their peaceful orbits around the room. She spent a few minutes standing close to her magic, her hands sunk up to her elbows in its heat. She didn't know how intelligent the force was, but she did her best to send feelings of gratitude and happiness its way, in case it was attuned to her emotions in the way she suspected; it had always responded to her anger and fear quickly enough, after all.

The sun spun a little faster on its axis and expanded briefly to encompass her face and chest in light before retracting to its regular shape once more.

When she returned to the lab, the construct was pacing slowly before the fire. "I think I underestimated you," it said when she'd moved the rug over the trapdoor once more.

"Is that so?" Harry tilted her head.

"You-" The jewel broke off with a shake of its head and paced the length of the room once before stopping and turning to her sharply. "You have gone to-I would say- *unimaginable* lengths for something that started out-and forgive me if I misinterpreted something-as a childish desire to be closer to your... idol."

"I think the memories may have oversimplified the situation," she said, frowning. "It was necessary for Archie and me to achieve our goals."

The construct shook its head on a laugh that came out somewhat hysterically. "Are you sure? Because it seems like you chose the



most complicated, convoluted possible path to your goals simply because it was faster and you got to meet your childhood hero."

She winced. That assessment smarted a bit. "We didn't think it would be this complicated, when we started. I don't know if either of us really expected to get this far, but we have, and now it's... involved."

"Involved?" The jewel gave her an incredulous look. "It's so far beyond involved, now. What you have done is reckless, irreverent, foolhardy, treacherous, hazardous, and... *extraordinary*."

She blinked in surprise.

"Oh, and to think I assumed you were a goodie-goodie," the jewel cackled. "You have *ambition*, girl, and I love it. Subtleties aren't usually my style, but this kind of elaborate scheme is so-so-what's the word? Satisfying? It's electrifying. I'm not even you and yet I feel so *alive* ." The jewel favored her with a deep smirk. "I would not have guessed you had it in you, but you have been a very bad girl, Miss Potter."

"Don't call me that," she snapped, nose wrinkling. Why did he have to make her ruse sound so tawdry? It wasn't supposed to be epic or exciting. It was supposed to be secret. It was about learning and bettering themselves, not tricking people for fun.

"What? A bad girl?" The jewel leveled an assessing look at her. "Or Harry Potter? Perhaps you go by Rigel in your head, now?"

"Don't be ridiculous," she said, scowling. "I know who I am. I wear the mask, it does not wear me."

"You protest a lot," the jewel said, eyes narrowing. "Are you sure?"

"Positive," she said through gritted teeth.

"So you say," the construct said, shrugging. "How long can that last, though? Play a part long enough and it becomes part of who you

are."

She lifted her chin defiantly. "That won't happen to me."

The jewel took up pacing once more, slowly and deliberately. "We shall see. For now, we must focus on re-raveling all the loose ends lying about. Have you considered giving up the game altogether? It's better to quit while you're ahead sometimes, you know."

She couldn't believe the power-hungry megalomaniac was telling her to back down. She crossed her arms and looked down at the ground to think carefully for a moment. After a few minutes, she shook her head. "We can't switch back now. It's too late. There's no way we could explain all the changes to the people on either end who know us. All my friends and professors would notice Archie wasn't me after the first week. All his, too, probably. They'd think we were imposters even when we technically weren't. It would be a mess. To switch back would take an entirely different pretense that, I think, would be more difficult to maintain than remaining where we are. We could pretend we suddenly hated all of our friends for no reason and ruin our reputations in the process of avoiding them, but frankly my friends at least are too stubborn for that to work. We could stage an elaborate accident in which we lost all our memories of the last four years, but there are too many elements that we'd be unable to control in that event-mind healers, concerned parents, the inexplicable fact that we lost the memories of our friends but retained all of our knowledge of spells and potions... it's too much."

The jewel nodded slowly. "That is true, it would be at least as much work to switch back. You wouldn't be breaking the law, though."

"Like you care about that," she scoffed.

"Just pointing it out," the construct said modestly. "It is my job to look out for your best interests, now."

She shook her head at him. "In any case, it's out of the question. Archie isn't far enough along his track yet. The point of his going to

AIM is that he graduates at seventeen with a Healing license. If he transfers to Hogwarts now, he'll be unable to get his Healer's license until long after he finishes Hogwarts and completes a comparable training program. It would make everything we'd gone through thus far meaningless."

"You didn't mention yourself," the jewel said slyly. "You know you could walk away now and be better off. You've already got your idol's eye. Why press your luck?"

"I still have further to go," she said quietly. "Snape is going to teach me free-brewing this year-Rigel, not Harry Potter." Her desire to learn free-brewing was a slow-burning fire in her gut. "Maybe after this year I'll reevaluate, but for now... the ruse isn't in immediate danger. You're just not used to it yet, so it seems unthinkable. It's worked for years, though. There's no reason to back out when we've come this far."

"It might be that you're too used to it. I doubt this façade is as stable as you think." At her frown, the jewel shrugged. "I'm just a figment of your mind, now, what do I know? On the bright side, I know exactly what you need in the layers of your mind, now. I've begun work on your other mindscape. Would you like to see?"

She nodded. "Yes, please. As you no doubt deduced, this mountainscape will be Rigel's mind. It's the one Snape is familiar with, and he's the one we need to fool with our Occlumency shields, so it should remain unchanged on the surface as much as possible. The second one will be Harry's."

"Got it," the construct said, waving a hand unconcernedly. Its fingers moved into snapping position and, with a grin, it vanished the world around them in a blink.

When she oriented herself, she thought for a wild moment that the jewel had turned her mountain yellow. Then she realized she wasn't looking at a mountain at all. It was a pyramid. She whistled at the

sheer scope of the behemoth that rose in perfectly placed stones before her. "You built this from scratch so quickly?"

"I have a wealth of experience in the building of pyramids," the jewel said, almost modestly. I wanted it to geometrically mirror the mountainscape, because you'll tell people that Rigel taught you Occlumency. Your shields will have a similar feel on a basic level, to those discerning enough to notice, but they will be distinct in every other way. The mountain is arable, so this layer is arid; the mountain is organic, so this layer is artificial. And so on."

"You just wanted to build a pyramid," she guessed.

"I really do enjoy building pyramids," the construct sighed. "Something about the perfectly symmetrical triangle reaching upwards toward the heavens is so... what's the word? Graceful. Illuminating. Majestic."

Ignoring his vocabulary issues, she surveyed the pyramid with its surrounding landscape of barren desert thoughtfully. There was an artificial wind that kicked up sand and made it difficult to see as she squinted toward the top of the pyramid. That was where the magic and orbs she used to project 'Harry's' aura should go. If she left them in the mountainscape while the pyramid was acting as the primary layer, her aura would be suppressed again.

"How do I move things from one landscape to the next?" she asked.

"Just will it so," the jewel said, as though it were obvious. She supposed it was.

A few moments' concentration, and the manifestations of her projected aura materialized before her. The downsized portion of magic that had decorated the mountain's peak appeared soon after. It was swift work to direct them to hover above the pyramid's apex like the great illuminati eye.

"Well done," she said to the construct, meaning it. The mindscape it had created was perfect for her needs. "Can you keep this layer primary until I tell you otherwise?"

"Of course," the construct smiled widely. "I still have much work to do, after all. This place is barely fit for pharaoh's cat at the moment; by the time I'm finished, it will put shame to Tutankhamun's puny resting ground."

"No slaves," she reminded it sternly.

"What about homunculi?" the jewel inquired.

"No." She shuddered.

"Golems, then," the construct suggested, eyes wide and pleading. She frowned at the construct, wondering why the expression looked so familiar. "I had this idea for an animated sphinx with rubies for eyes that is really going to set the tone for this mindscape." It furrowed its eyebrows and its lower lip began to tremble slightly as she watched.

"Gah-okay, just stop that right now," she said, turning her face away. It was like trying to say no to a kitten that had already been kicked.

"Useful, that," the jewel said, expression dissolving into its usual smug self-confidence. "I can see why you employ it despite its humiliating implications."

"No more memories for you," she grumbled. Just which one had he picked up the Look from, anyway? She thought she'd only given him relatively important ones.

"You're really a bore, sometimes," the construct complained. "Still, you'll change your mind eventually. I can be very useful, but only if I know you as well as you do."

"I'll pass, thanks," she said. "Good work on the pyramid, but let's stick to our respective roles for the time being."

The construct shrugged and turned away. With a click of its fingers, a clipboard appeared with what looked like extensive architectural plans affixed to its slate. "Run along and play pretend, then. I'll be here if you need someone to talk to."

*Not likely*, she thought irritably. As if the jewel could talk about 'playing pretend.' The hypocrite.

"I heard that," it sniffed.

Disturbed, she let her consciousness wander toward the mists. Despite her unease at how at home the jewel was making itself, she had other things to worry about at the moment.

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Thursday came quickly. She stepped jauntily through the Floo that morning, cheerfully weaving through the Leaky's breakfast crowd. She was early, as she wouldn't put it past Snape to come early himself and then scowl at her for arriving on time and making him wait. She was dressed in her smartest brewing robes, the sleeves of which tapered to her forearms, leaving her wrists and hands free. As she daren't wear Rigel's brewing gloves, her basilisk scale ring was absent, tucked into a pocket out of sight. Her hands felt a bit naked, but at least her meticulously trimmed nails would elicit no comment from the Potions master.

She moved through the crowd, waving absently to the shopkeepers she knew. As she passed the telescope shop, Harry caught sight of a little girl with a blue ribbon holding back her hair on the other side of the street. The girl smiled mischievously around the large basket of flowers she carried as she looked pointedly down toward Harry's

feet. Harry slowed to follow her gaze and realized the young girl was laughing at her new boots. One of Leo's, then. Harry paused for a moment to cross to the girl's side of the alley with an answering grin.

"Do you like them?" she asked, waggling her eyebrows as she stuck one boot out in mock admiration.

"They're too shiny," the little girl giggled. Her ribbon swayed behind her as she shook her head back and forth.

"That's the waterproofing," Harry said, smiling sheepishly.

"It's not going to rain today," the girl said, blinking.

"How do you know?" Harry asked. The girl merely smiled again, this time secretively. Shrugging, Harry leaned in close. "You're going to tell Leo I'm in the alleys, right?"

The small girl nodded, eyes wide. "You want to surprise him?"

"Another time," Harry chuckled. "Today I'm not going to the lower alleys. I'm going to the Guild. Will you tell Leo not to wait around for me?"

The girl giggled again. "The King doesn't wait. I'll tell him, though, in case he decides to..." she scrunched up her face in thought. "... take a *rest* nearby."

Harry grinned appreciatively. The girl was clever, for all that she looked about seven. "I appreciate it," she said. Taking a small coin from her pocket, she traded it for one of the girl's pink flowers. "See you."

"No. I'll see *you* ." The little girl smiled, pretending to curtsy while really ducking down to tuck the coin into her shoe.

Harry rejoined the flow of traffic and was swept along Diagon until she reached the branch that would take her to Craftsman Alley and the Guild District. In no time she was slipping into the Potions Guild's

front lobby. She glanced around to make sure Snape wasn't loitering somewhere inconspicuous before taking a seat on one of the benches pushed to the side of the entryway.

She was only there what felt like a moment when she heard Professor Snape's drawling annoyance echo through the lobby.

"-not going to entertain the notion," he was saying, somewhat sharply. She looked around and saw him coming not from the doors to the alley but from one of the corridors leading deeper into the Guild. He must have had another appointment before he was scheduled to meet with her. After a moment of thought Harry decided that made sense-he wouldn't go out of his way unnecessarily, after all.

Accompanying him was Edgar Whitaker, the handsome-faced, even-toothed Potions master who assisted the Aldermaster in representing the Guild to the public when necessary. Whitaker's tone was long-suffering, which told Harry he'd been dealing with Master Snape for longer than he was equipped to. "People are interested, Severus. They want to know the mind behind the most important breakthrough in the last decade. Just do a small exposé for the journal-we don't have to do it in your quarters at Hogwarts, if that makes you uncomfortable."

"You won't be doing it at all," Snape said, his tone brooking no further argument. "If people are interested, let them be interested in the work. That is all that matters. If you'll excuse me, Edgar, I have another appointment." As he said this, he spotted her sitting on the waiting bench and started her way.

Whitaker sighed, but looked as though he had not truly expected Snape to agree to whatever he was after. "Merlin save our public image from eremitic brewers," he muttered. After a single somewhat curious glance in Harry's direction, Whitaker took his leave and retreated back into the bowels of the Guild's offices.



"I have booked us a lab," Snape said shortly upon her rising from the bench.

"Lead the way," she said, stepping neatly into his shadow as he made for the stairs.

He walked quickly with a long stride, but she was used to it from school and had no trouble keeping up. They descended to the level where the Guild kept their labs and classrooms and Snape led her through the corridors unerringly. The lab he had reserved was small, but serviceable for their needs, with a selection of cauldrons standing ready on one of the workspaces.

Harry immediately chose one she liked the look of and began to inspect it automatically as she said, "Which part of the process specifically are you interested in?"

"The entirety," Snape said, crossing his arms in a stance that would have looked antagonistic if she hadn't known from her lessons with him at Hogwarts that it was simply the stance he took unconsciously when he had nothing to do with his hands.

She nodded, opening her potions kit and taking out what she needed to brew a simple Modified Weightless Draught. She assumed he would be interested in seeing something other than the Protection Potion, which had been carefully outlined in the article she wrote for the Guild. She had explained the Modified Weightless Draught briefly in the notes she'd given Snape as Rigel, but he wouldn't have seen the finished product unless he had paid very close attention at Draco's twelfth birthday party.

"Have you managed to replicate the Shaped Imbuing itself?" she asked.

She heard the sneer in Snape's voice as he informed her, "It was not so impenetrable as you seem to believe. I sought a demonstration merely to cement my own understanding of the process."

She smiled over her shoulder at him as she continued to prep her station. "I didn't think it would trouble you much-Rigel says you are prodigious at wandless magic. I only ask because I think you may be the first to successfully duplicate it." Snape raised his eyebrows at her in patent disbelief. She caught it as she glanced back at him again and had to smile. "I know; it seems incredible to me, but apparently the Unspeakables have had a great deal of trouble mastering the process in any meaningful sense. I suppose they must be approaching it from the wrong angle."

Snape didn't comment, so she focused her attention on beginning the base. Immediately, she realized a flaw in her plan. She needed to light the fire, but could not use her Holly wand for obvious reasons, and she had long since ceased carrying the little fire-starter kit she'd used before mastering the spell.

"Would you mind lighting the flame?" she asked, grimacing a bit sheepishly.

Snape looked unimpressed, but pulled out his wand and flicked it at the base of the cauldron nevertheless. "When you brew at home do you require your relatives to light your fires, Miss Potter?" he asked, openly mocking.

"Sure," she said, blinking innocently. As though she would admit to performing underage magic in front of a Hogwarts professor without qualm. That said, there was no point being excessively convincing- Snape knew very well that the law against unsupervised minors using magic was inconsistently obeyed at best.

"You must keep them very busy," Snape said idly. She was immediately on guard-Severus Snape did not make idle conversation. "How often do you brew at home?"

"Quite often," she said, not looking up from her cutting board.

"I suppose it must be difficult, keeping up with all those orders," Snape commented.

She wasn't sure what he was talking about, but she played along. "The DMLE has only ordered two batches of my Protection Potion thus far. I wouldn't call the volume demanding." They seemed to be doling them out very judiciously in training their recruits to work with them. She had handed over the second crate only the day before.

Snape was silent for a moment. "The Ministry wastes little time in finding brutish uses for otherwise academic achievements." She couldn't judge what emotion had prompted such a remark, but she allowed that he would have more experience than she did, despite not knowing how anyone could find a brutish use for a *shield*. She certainly hoped the Ministry would use her invention in the spirit it had been intended, but she accepted that she had no say over what people did with her potions once they had them. There would always be irresponsible people in the world. "In any event, those were not the orders I referred to."

She glanced his way with a confused frown to prompt an explanation.

"Rumor has it you brew for Burke in your free time," Snape said, eyes assessing as she went still in surprise.

"No such rumor exists," she said, absolutely certain of that much. Even Burke didn't know she brewed for him. He was aware only that he bought from a brewer of Krait's. "Where did you hear that?"

He appeared momentarily amused. She would not have caught it if she were not familiar with his frequently minute expressions. "Do you deny it?"

"Why should I? You've given me no reason to think this 'rumor' credible enough to deserve refutation," Harry said flatly. She didn't know when it had become vogue for people she knew as Rigel to corner her as Harry but she was getting a little sick of it.

"Aldermaster Hurst relayed this fact," Snape said, no longer amused. "Will you denounce him as a liar?"

She pressed her lips together, a bit annoyed with Leo's father. She was certain he would not have said anything if he didn't think it in her best interest, but when other people made decisions about what was best for her without fully comprehending the complexities of her life it always turned out poorly. "Aldermaster Hurst was no doubt attempting to convince you of my suitability as a brewer. If you have been convinced of that already, what purpose does digging into it further serve?"

Snape's face twisted in a scowl as he demanded, "Did you put him up to that little speech, then?"

She shook her head with a slight smile. So she'd been right. "He would reveal details about my private business for no other reason."

"You admit it, then," Snape pressed.

She set down her knife and turned fully to face the Potions master. "I do. What import is it to you?"

"How did you convince him to distribute the potions of a child?" Snape asked. She didn't sense any derision when he said 'child.' He seemed to be simply interested in how the circumstances had arisen.

"He likes my Blood-Replenisher," she said, supposing it wouldn't matter if she told him that much. "After that one sold well, he began ordering a few others through me as well."

"You speak as though you have a prolonged business relationship with Burke, and yet he was surprised to learn your last name," Snape said, eyes glittering.

She grimaced unhappily. That wasn't good. "What did you do?"

"You will address me with respect-"

"What did you do, *Sir*? " If he had talked to Burke for any amount of time he had likely both informed Burke that Harriett Potter was brewing for him *and* found out about the brewing she did for Krait.

"I merely followed up on a lead," Snape said silkily. "And what a convoluted coil it turned out to be. Horace Burke was adamant that the only brewer named Harry on his staff was a gutter rat who worked primarily for an apothecary in Knockturn Alley. The Serpent's Storeroom, was it?"

He knew everything, then. Sometimes she could wish a little less of Snape's research-oriented academic drive bled over into his personality. After a moment of gathering her wits, she stuck out her chin defiantly and said, "It isn't illegal."

"I didn't say it was," Snape said.

"What are you saying, Master Snape?" she asked. "Why does the brewing I do in my free time interest you so much?"

"I simply wonder how you find the time for such things around your schooling-and why you bother, for that matter," the older wizard said, looking down at her defensive expression with disinterest that she could tell was affected.

She favored him with a look that was equal parts incredulous and questioning of his faculties. "I do it because I like to brew potions." She made sure to say it as though it were the most obvious thing in the world. She wanted him to believe her sole motivation and interest in distributing lay in her passion for the field.

His eyes did seem to soften minutely at that. His expression remained coldly blank, however, as he switched tactics. "I take it your parents aren't aware of your activities? Knockturn Alley can be a dangerous place."

"Maybe for some. I've never found it so," she said, preferring not to answer the previous question.

"Then you are a fool," Snape sneered.

"You may well think so," she said, turning slowly back to the workspace. Her knife didn't shake in her hand and she diced her root with an aplomb that would have made Narcissa Malfoy green with envy.

After a few moments of her silent cutting, Snape asked, "Aren't you going to beg me not to apprise your parents of your enterprises?"

"I wasn't aware you spend so much time with my parents that the subject is likely to come up," she shot back. After a pause, she regained her temper and added, more evenly, "You don't seem the type to go out of your way to distribute information for free, but if that is not the case, please do keep it to yourself."

She heard him snort and relaxed slightly. Amused was good. "You are as impudent as Rigel," the Potions master groused.

"Didn't he tell you I would be?" she asked, allowing her own amusement at the comparison to leak into her voice.

A few minutes later, she set aside her knife and said, "That's the prep. The brewing isn't any different from the regular Weightless Draught, so don't watch the cauldron. Watch the magic that goes into it."

"You'll be imbuing while you brew?" Snape clarified, moving closer.

"It's more efficient," she said, nodding. "I've done this one many times, so brewing it doesn't take away from the concentration I need to Shaped Imbue." She hesitated for a moment, then said, "The last time I demonstrated this, when I first showed Master Thompson last summer, I had him project his magical consciousness to my core so that he could see the magic being shaped. Since then, I've devised a better method, however." She pulled out a rolled-up piece of parchment from her pocket and handed it to Snape. "These are the

instructions for a runic ward that will temporarily make magic used in this room visibly intelligible. Can you cast it?"

Constructing a ward was a great deal more complicated than simply allowing him to view the process from the vantage point of her core would be, but Snape had seen Rigel's core too many times not to be suspicious about Harry having a core that looked essentially identical.

"Roundabout," he commented, nonetheless unrolling the parchment and scanning it.

"Thorough," she disagreed, topping it with a guileless smile when he glanced at her sardonically. "You want to view the process as objectively as possible, right, Professor?"

He frowned deeply at her and she flushed slightly as she realized her mistake. "Professor?" he repeated, slightly foreboding.

"That's what Rigel calls you," she said, biting her lip in a show of chagrin. "Sorry, Master Snape."

"Sir will do," he said shortly. He rolled the parchment back up, saying, "I am familiar with this ward. Do not proceed until it is completed."

She nodded her agreement, adding, "Yes, Sir," for good measure. He set about defining the ward's perimeter as she watched. He used a wandless version of the Point-Me Charm to determine true north, then established the first of the grounding runes at the eastern cardinal point. South was next, and so on clockwise until the diamond was complete. Once the ward was grounded, Snape began adding the secondary runes, which-contrary to their unimportant-sounding categorization-would be the runes specific to the effect of the ward on that which was within it-or without it, depending on the direction in which the runes were drawn, of course.

It was interesting to see someone casting a runic ward in an everyday context. It was a rarely used skill, which she suspected was because it took longer and used more magic than a spell did. Harry thought the runes' advantage of increased complexity was lost on too many modern witches and wizards. She had to admit to a feeling of intense, but mercifully brief, claustrophobia when the ward snapped into place around them, however. The last time she'd been trapped in a runic ward...

She shook herself mentally. This was different. She trusted Professor Snape; also, this ward wasn't designed to prevent anything from moving in or out of it. Her trepidation was irrational, and as such she brushed it away after a short internal struggle.

"It's done," Snape said when he had finished. To demonstrate, he cast a Levitation Charm on an empty beaker. The ward hummed audibly as it detected magic and then Harry could see the stream of magic that connected the beaker to Snape's wand. It was like watching ink released into a bowl of water, but instead of eventually spreading out until it dissipated, the magic retained its curling, blooming form even as it pulsed, expanding and contracting almost rhythmically between the wand and the object upon which the charm had been cast.

She had to smile watching the magic at work. It was one thing to feel magic within oneself-seeing another use it made her appreciate for a single instant the connection that ran between all witches and wizards. It was truly a remarkable gift. When Snape ended the charm and the beaker settled back onto the workspace, the magic lost its structure, loose as it was, and faded to indistinguishability in the air around them.

Taking that as her cue, Harry began to add ingredients to the cauldron one at a time, layering and stirring as was appropriate. It didn't take long to get into the rhythm, even with the distracting multicolored whirlpool of magic occurring before her eyes as the ingredients in her potion began to interact with one another, transforming their latent magic into active effects. She thought she



might have to brew under a ward like this more often-it was fascinating to see the interactions she knew intellectually had always been taking place. She'd only went to the trouble of finding such a ward so that she wouldn't have to let Snape directly view her core, but now she was imagining other uses for it...

With a mental jolt, she realized she hadn't been imbuing as she said she would, and Snape was giving her an impatient look. Smiling apologetically at him, she put her hands on autopilot and turned her attention inwards. She drew easily on her core, shaping the magic as she did so within herself, not letting it manifest physically. It was like drawing a butterfly out of her stomach but keeping it tightly contained and transferring it to a new cage before it could fly away. Except in this analogy she didn't have hands to keep the butterfly in her grasp and instead relied on containing the magic with her own will.

She watched interestedly as the magic in her core burned into visibility as she activated it. Thanks to the ward, she could see the general sphere of her core's magic through her own body, though the details of her core's primary and secondary layers remained blurred. She monitored the magic from the outside even while guiding it internally in filling the pattern for the Hover Charm. Once the magic had a solid shape, it left her core and traveled in an orange globe from her gut to her hand and along the stirring rod to the potion itself. By the time the charm had been fully shaped and imbued, she was finished with the base potion as well. She set the stirring rod aside and extinguished the flame beneath her cauldron by blowing on it sharply.

"There," she said, turning to see if Snape had any questions. "It's really the same as conscious imbuing, only you shape the magic in your core before you release it. That's why it gets imbued as a contained unit like that, instead of as a raw, continuous stream. Really it's just a way to move the stage where the magic gets shaped closer to the beginning of the process, to allow greater complexity. I like to think of it as the difference between selling ingredients and selling a potion."

Snape inclined his head slowly. "It seems very much as you described it in your original paper. I believe many may be deceived by the simplicity of the concept; no doubt when they attempt it themselves, they realize their control is not at the level required to replicate your results."

She had been worrying about that herself. She knew her control was unusual. Her strong will had been developed by necessity due to the extenuating circumstances of her magic's growth. Still... "Do you think it's going to be impossible for this technique to ever be something most professional brewers can learn? Is it going to be an esoteric branch that scant few masters even attempt? Like free-brewing?"

"It is a strong possibility," Snape said, pressing his lips together in annoyance. "This discovery, while extraordinary, will ultimately only expand the field in proportion to the number of wizards capable of utilizing it. As of right now, there are only a handful in England I would even credit with the potential."

Even hearing Master Snape call her work extraordinary didn't diminish the pang she felt as he confirmed what she'd started to suspect. Hers would never be a mainstream technique unless serious training was put toward developing brewers' wandless control. "Maybe if we started younger," she said tentatively. "If brewers were taught at once to harness wandless magic and work toward superior control..."

"It would take a revolution in the potions community," Snape said, almost regretfully. "Unless you can demonstrate that the things Shaped Imbuing can achieve are unarguably beyond what current techniques allow, it will fall under the heading of things only the most dedicated of masters bother studying."

"Like Indirect Stirring," she said, a bit morose.

Snape looked sharply at her. "Rigel taught you that as well."

She nodded, still preoccupied about the fate of the discovery she'd put so much effort into. "I'll just have to make Shaped Imbuing the only thing anyone is talking about in the potions community," she said determinedly. "It is important, and I'll make everyone see that."

When Snape spoke, there was something like a smile in his words. "You won't have to do it alone, Miss Potter." When she glanced up at him in surprise, he smirked somewhat disingenuously. "I am between projects, as I believe I mentioned. This new field of experimentation is cutting edge and infinitely versatile, it would appear. I am certain a concentrated effort to expand its applications will prove sufficiently stimulating."

She fairly beamed at him. "I'll get to work, as well. I have tons of ideas for spells whose effects would be incredibly useful if prolonged. I also want to figure out how to make a potion magnify a spell's power instead of muting it-"

"All worthy ambitions," Snape cut in smoothly. "It does not do to rush such experimentation, however. It must be pursued deliberately."

"Of course," Harry said, nodding excitedly nonetheless. She hesitated, then offered, somewhat tentatively, "We could brainstorm ideas to pursue, then collaborate on who would experiment with which leads. I don't have much experience designing recipes from scratch, so it might be a good idea for you to start developing a base that will have an exponential effect on the imbued magic while I take the lead on some of the more magically intensive spells that could be-"

"Stop," Snape said sharply. She fell silent, not at all offended. She was getting carried away, she knew, but she was so excited to be working with Master Snape as *herself* on a project *she'd* proposed. "What did you just say?"

Her mind went blank for a moment as she rewound her thought process. What had she been saying? "About the amplifying base?"

she hazarded. She supposed she hadn't explained the idea very thoroughly.

"No," Snape said. He was looking at her suspiciously, she realized, and she had to forcibly reel herself back from her excitement to take stock of the expression on his face. "You intimated that it would make the most sense for you to handle the more magically draining portions of the task." Her face drained of color as dread stole over her. Had she said that? Was she really so foolish? Snape's eyes darkened further in displeasure as he saw her poorly masked panic. "When last we met you revealed you haven't enough magic to manage more than one Shaped-Imbued potion at a time. Your aura collaborated this. Why would you assume that the magical demands would fall to you?"

She smiled in embarrassed self-deprecation. "I wasn't thinking. You're right, of course. I'll leave that to you, then-"

"It was not unthinking," he snapped, expression forbidding. "It was automatic-you took such a partition of labor for granted. *Why?* "

"I just thought to spare you the draining work," she said, fumbling a bit for a quick answer. "I mean, because I'm underage, so I can't use wand magic anyway over the summer. It makes sense for me to waste my magic in experimentation instead of you."

"You are lying," Snape growled, drawing himself up to his full height in an effort to intimidate her. "Do not do it again. Why did you say that? Is someone else perhaps donating the magic your experimentations require? If I find that you have taken advantage of my student in such a way-"

"No!" she said, a bit disgruntled that this was the conclusion he'd arrived at. She appreciated his protective stance as Rigel, but she didn't like how little he thought of her as Harry. "That's not it. Rigel isn't even here this summer-he's in South America. Anyway, I wouldn't do that to him. I respect my cousin too much to use him like a magic dispenser."

Snape seemed to decide she was telling the truth about that, at least. "My apologies," he said, somewhat gruffly. She was surprised at the admission, but supposed he acknowledged that, since she wasn't one of his students, he should be civil.

"That's all right," she said. She offered a small smile. "Rigel says he always argues with you when you jump to conclusions. I won't take it personally."

Snape clenched his teeth on a scowl. "Rigel says entirely too much."

"To me, maybe," she said agreeably. "He doesn't mean it in a critical way," she added, making sure Snape knew she wasn't being intentionally rude. "He thinks your mind works much faster than most people's, so you reach the end of your train of thought before the conductor has time to change the tracks."

The Potions master grimaced. "You have not answered my question," he reminded her after a moment's pause.

She thought for a moment, no idea what she ought to say. He had told her not to lie again, but she was fairly sure that if she marshaled her skills in a calm manner she could fool him. She just had to come up with something believable. She had barely smoothed her face in preparation for a lie when his expression abruptly changed. His eyes sharpened and narrowed as they roved over her form-no, she realized after a confused second, he wasn't looking at her. He was looking *around* her. He was reading her aura.

She stiffened and opened her mouth to say something-anything to distract him from whatever he was seeing-but he beat her to it. "Your magic levels are not depleted."

She blinked. She swallowed. "I've been working on strengthening my magic. One Shaped Imbuing doesn't tire me as much as it used to."

"You misunderstand me," Snape said silkily. "I meant your levels have not dropped at all since I scanned your aura in the lobby,

despite imbuing a heavy amount of magic into the potion."

"That's impossible," she scoffed. "You must have misread it-why were you reading it anyway? You looked at it over New Year's, didn't you? It hasn't changed."

Her comment was meant to put him on the defensive, but he turned it back on her with a sharp smirk. "Exactly, Miss Potter. It hasn't changed at all." She cursed his observant nature and her own stupidity. How had she stumbled into this pit of her own making? Projecting an aura was supposed to make him less suspicious of her, not more. Why hadn't she realized that an aura that never changed no matter how much magic she used was just as suspicious as not having one?

She attempted to shrug lightly. "That is odd. Maybe my aura is broken."

"Not broken," Snape said slowly. He had an expression of dawning certainty that she didn't like. "Artificial. You're projecting a false aura; it does not reflect the true depth of your core."

She was silent for a moment, then said, a bit defiantly, "So what? It's not a crime."

"It is in some countries," Snape said sardonically. He looked much more relaxed now that he'd figured her out. His expression settled back from its hyper-interested focus into the aloof picture of reserved judgment he preferred as his default mode. "Did you really think you could hide such a thing?"

"No one else seems to have noticed," she said, more than a little annoyed at herself.

"The vast majority of the world is composed of fools," Snape said, a dismissive note in his voice. "Tell me why you misrepresent your magic. I can deduce from your earlier comments that you have a

great deal more magic than you let on. For what purpose do you conceal it?"

"That's not really your business, Sir," she said. She comforted herself that, even though he knew her aura was fake, he still didn't know how much magic she had. He didn't have a good reason to assume she was Rigel Black. Lots of people had above-average magic.

"Then I shall take my business elsewhere," Snape said quietly. It was a threat to refuse to help her with her Shaped Imbuing project, she knew. What she didn't know was whether he was bluffing or whether he would go through with it if she refused to answer his questions. She could do the experimentation on her own, but... why should she, when all he wanted was an answer? It didn't have to be a *true* one, after all.

She smiled in a defeated way. "All right, but keep it to yourself, all right? It makes me nervous that you've discovered so many of my secrets in such a short period of time." Snape merely raised his eyebrows expectantly. Taking a breath, she said, begrudgingly, "I don't want to be treated differently because of my magic. People expect things from you when you have magic. It's dangerous."

Snape looked supremely irked. "You sound like my foolish apprentice. Did he sell you on this idea?"

"I agree with him," she said easily. "Rigel would know, after all. People started treating him differently when his magic got powerful."

"Rigel is going to be the lord of a very influential family one day. There are many reasons for the way people treat him, not all of them related to his magic," Snape snapped.

"It doesn't help his anonymity from certain groups, though, does it?" she pointed out.

"Your situation is different," Snape sneered. "Do you really think the SOW Party is going to come headhunting *you*? "

"They came for *you*," she shot back, eyes flashing behind her glasses. "The SOW Party is consistently inconsistent in their supposedly vaunted 'pureblood values' when it comes to people with great talent or great power."

"That is changing," Snape said in a low voice. He seemed contemplative for a moment, then jerked his head as though dismissing a stray thought impatiently. "Your pretense is unnecessary and foolhardy. Dissembling ineffectually will only draw more attention to you."

"I'll try harder in future," she said, smiling sweetly. At his continued scowl, she added, more seriously, "There's nothing wrong with being underestimated. I appreciate the element of surprise it gives me."

"It only makes people undervalue you," Snape argued, scowling. "That is not an advantage if you plan on getting ahead in our field."

"I think my work speaks for itself," she said staunchly.

"Then you are an idiot," the man snarled. He took a deep breath and reined his temper. "If I may be frank, you need every advantage you can take, Miss Potter. The English Potions community are not friendly to new ideas, especially when they come from young women who were educated out of the country. Power, however, talks to people louder than ideas do."

"That's not how things should be," she said, frowning deeply. "I don't want people to listen to me just because I have strong magic."

"But you *do* want them to listen to you," Snape said shrewdly.

She took a deep breath, thinking. "I'll take your words under advisement. Thank you, Prof-Master Snape," she corrected herself quickly. Why was it so difficult to stay in character around Professor Snape? She had never known herself to be particularly relaxed around him at school. Was it just that she took their relationship for granted? Was it the kinship she felt for a fellow brewer? The privilege



and pride she felt at having his interest in her project? She didn't know, but she did know she couldn't keep slipping up around the man. She would have to continue their professional association primarily through correspondence, she thought, to have any chance of fooling him indefinitely.

Snape eyed her, assessing the resolve in her face for a moment, then nodded shortly. "See that you do. I will contact you when I have decided on a preliminary research plan regarding your Shaped Imbuing technique."

"Thank you," she said, meaning it despite all the things that had gone wrong that day. This was what she wanted above all, so she would just have to get better at covering her tracks. She could learn a lot from her failures. She was fortunate that Snape had no larger agenda beyond potions brewing that might spur him to dig deeper in her life. The next person she slipped up in front of might not let her off so easy. "I'll clean up here," she offered, eager to get some time to think it all through more carefully. She had to figure out a way to adjust her aura according to the magic she used, or else just never use magic around people who could read her aura again.

Snape inclined his head once more and took his leave. She cleared the space and packed up her things slowly, ideas and their implications swimming circles around her mind. Everything was growing more complicated, she acknowledged. Every step forward on the path they wanted to take brought more problems. They were getting increasingly creative at coming up with solutions, though. She felt a small bit of satisfaction at that. All the hurdles they jumped only made them stronger. Every boulder they dodged made them faster. When they finally reached the top of the mountain, no one would ever be able to knock them back to the bottom.

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Not two days after her demonstration with Professor Snape, Harry received a letter pertaining to their meeting-only it wasn't from Snape. It was from Caelum Lestrangle.

*Halfblood,*

*My former mentor, Master Whitaker, who is to take me on his incredibly progressive research trip to Chile in a few short weeks, informs me you were seen at the Guild this week with Master Snape. What are you up to, brat? I told you I wouldn't stand to be kept out of the loop on your ridiculously unintuitive experiments. If you're collaborating with a senior master, I have a right to know. Is he looking into your research? I can't imagine what he'd want with some upstart's farfetched brewing fantasies, but I suppose it is to Master Snape's credit that he pursues every avenue of study, no matter how occult and unsubstantiated.*

*I haven't forgotten your atrocious behavior at the gala, but I understand it must be difficult for a halfblood like you to try and ape its betters, so I've magnanimously decided to overlook it. I've no interest in holding my breath waiting for a heathen to become civilized-I'd sooner have luck training a pack of grindylows to fly south for the winter. You can, however, make amends by telling me just what you've been getting up to that has a master like Snape giving you the time of day.*

*I'm not writing this for my health, Potter. Hurry up with a reply.*

*-C. Lestrangle*

She rolled her eyes at the intense combination of elite snobbery and the most common kind of rudeness that Lestrangle always exhibited. Taking out her quill, she penned a swift reply.

*Lestrangle,*

*If you're so interested, come and find out. Let's have lunch in the alleys.*

*Harry*

Later that afternoon, she was coming in from a long run when an owl accosted her at her front door. It looked like one of the fast, expensive breeds, and she wondered if Lestrangle had actually expedited his reply to her in his impatience. She wouldn't put it past him. The owl pecked at her sweaty hair impatiently as she untied the parchment so she scowled at it and said sternly, "Hold on, will you?" The owl glared back. No doubt Lestrangle had sent her the most unpleasant bird he could find.

She jogged wearily into her house and up to her room, the owl following at an antagonizingly close distance. She read the reply quickly-it was fairly short.

*Potter,*

*I am coming to press you for professional information and there will be no lunch eating.*

*-C. Lestrangle*

She snorted. So typical of the crass boy. The owl hooted at her in a harrying way, so she scratched out her reply and sent it on its way-without a treat, because she didn't feel there was any merit in rewarding poor behavior. In owls, at least. Why she was humoring Lestrangle, she didn't know.

*Lestrangle,*

*We can meet tomorrow, noon, at Sardino's Place on Aroma Alley. They have excellent pasta. If you don't remember how to get there, meet me at the Leaky.*

*-Harry*

His reply came even faster this time, and she wondered if the last owl had been kept waiting while she was on her run. She'd only

been gone an hour, but it might have had spectacularly bad timing.

Potter,

*I am not being seen in some run-down mum-and-pop-shop in the middle of the day. It's bad enough I'm being seen with you. We will meet at one o'clock to miss the lunch crowd at La Serene. If you don't know where that is, you can meet me at the Leaky. Since you're so keen to force your company on me, you can pick up the bill, as well.*

-C. Lestrangle

She sighed. Of course he would pick the most expensive restaurant on Diagon and then invite her to foot the cost. He was such a pain. She supposed she ought to have seen that coming, though. It wasn't as though she didn't have a good idea of Lestrangle's character by now.

She penned a reply agreeing to his terms, then sent the owl off with mixed feelings. It was a good thing she was doing, she told herself. Lestrangle needed friends his own age who didn't toady to him. Or at least he needed a metaphorical kick in the pants. She could provide both. It was practically a public service.

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It was too nice a day to spend indoors, and Harry hoped as she made her way through Diagon that Caelum wasn't one of those people who refused to sit on a terrace. The restaurant he'd picked was located on the main strip, which meant reservations in the evening when the crowds thinned and the alley lights turned on were impossible to procure. On a weekday for lunch she suspected it would be crowded, but not prohibitively so. There weren't as many influential people in the alleys to be seen by during the day, so,

excepting those on working lunches with their clients, La Serene generally took walk-in patrons. Provided they adhered to the dress code, of course.

As such, she had ditched her usual brewing robes and donned lightweight robes of pale green that, while feminine in cut, were not overtly so. Still, she felt a bit out of place as she stepped under the blue and white awning and greeted the hostess. "I don't have a reservation," she said, "But I'm meeting my friend here."

"Are you Miss Potter?" the hostess asked, checking her list with a cheery smile. "Mr. Lestrangle is already waiting inside."

Of course he was. She followed the dimpled girl to the back of the restaurant where Caelum sat in what looked like the booth farthest from the windows. He had a bottle of wine already on the table and appeared to be halfway through it. With a mental sigh, she thanked her good sense for bringing more gold than she'd thought she would need. Lestrangle was such a prat.

As she sat and the hostess left, Harry gestured to the wine with raised eyebrows. "I'm pretty sure I'm not allowed to pay for alcohol until I'm of age, even if it's for you to drink."

"They don't ask those sorts of questions here," the raven-haired boy assured her blithely.

"Great," she said, giving a smile so fake even he couldn't fail to notice.

"Don't be such a sour sugar quill," Caelum admonished. He nudged the menu over to her side of the table with a negligent flick of his hand. "Here, look it over. I've been here so many times I have it memorized."

She fought an eye roll and opened the folded menu, holding it up so that she didn't have to look at the blue-eyed boy's smug expression for a moment. It was all in French, she realized with surprise. Were

they so eager to seem classy that they couldn't stoop to English translations?

"I can order for you, if you like," Lestrangle said, his tone sickly sweet in its condescension.

"That won't be necessary," Harry assured him. Even if she didn't speak French, she'd rather pick something at random than let him pick for her. He'd probably order her raw snails just to be a disagreeable ass.

The waiter-or maître de, she supposed, judging by how much fancier his uniform was than the other wait staff-appeared almost out of thin air when she set the menu aside. "Good afternoon, Mademoiselle." He bowed to her much too deeply. "Are you satisfied with the fairy wine, Monsieur Lestrangle?"

"Excellent as always, Andre," Caelum said with a kind of haughty graciousness.

"Shall I bring a glass for the lady?" Andre asked with an ingratiating smile.

"I'm underage," Harry said, smiling back just as saccharinely. "Thanks, though. I'll take a water."

The waiter nodded a bit uncertainly while Lestrangle rolled his eyes at her. "You are such a plebian, Potter."

"Guilty." She shrugged. "Would you like to order first?"

Lestrangle sneered at her, but turned to Andre nevertheless and rattled off an order that, to her admittedly inexperienced ears, sounded uncomfortably rehearsed. She began to suspect that Caelum didn't actually speak French and only knew how to order his favorite dishes. Amused, she decided to test the theory. Turning to the waiter, she said, in perfectly accented French, "*I'll start with the*

*Tartelette de Chèvre Frais, followed by the Carre d'Agneau, but with the white wine sauce on the side if you don't mind."*

"Excellent choice, Mademoiselle," Andre said, looking incredibly pleased as he jotted down the modification.

" *One more thing,*" she added, smiling at Lestrangle's annoyed expression. " *If my companion orders another bottle of wine will you please pour half of it out and water the rest down before serving it? I suspect he will be a tedious drunk. Don't worry about irritating him- he won't even notice, and I'll pay for the whole bottle regardless.* "

The waiter looked unsurely between her and Caelum, but when it became clear the other boy didn't understand her, said, also in French, " *Yes, Madam. That is no problem. What shall we do with the wine we remove?* "

" *Sell it by the glass .*" She shrugged.

Andre smiled again, then bowed himself back to the kitchen to place the order.

"Since when do you speak French?" Lestrangle scowled, eyeing her suspiciously.

"A house-elf taught me," she said, knowing full well he'd never believe her.

"Get real, Potter." Lestrangle swirled his wine for a moment, then his curiosity got the better of him. "What were you saying to Andre?"

"I told him it was your birthday," Harry said, blinking innocently. "I asked if he could bring a cake with fourteen candles and he said he could get the wait staff to sing for you as well."

Lestrangle spluttered. "Fourteen?! That's not funny! You'd better not have."

"What will you do if I did?" she asked, smiling at his disgusted expression. "You can't get up and storm out-that is, if you want to be welcomed back to this establishment. By how quickly you ordered your fish I'm guessing you like this place a lot."

"Well, I'm not going to sit here and be humiliated," Caelum spat.

"Aren't you, though?" she said, letting her smile devolve into a smirk.

He opened his mouth, then eyed her smug expression and closed it. "You didn't order a cake."

"Of course I didn't," she laughed. "You're so naïve sometimes, Caelum."

"*I'm* naïve?" he sputtered again. "You're ridiculous."

"I'm fun," she corrected him. "Maybe you've heard of it."

"Why did I agree to this, again?" Caelum slumped back into his seat, taking a long swig of his wine in an attitude that was decidedly pouty.

"Free food," she suggested. Leaning forward with an enticing smile, she added, "Free information."

"Oh, that's right," he said, sniffing. He set his glass down and leaned in himself. "Spill your guts, then; what's going on with your research? And don't give me some vague shit about experimentation or exploring your options-I want to know what Master Snape is doing with your work."

"He wrote and asked for a demonstration of the technique, to make sure he was replicating it correctly," Harry said honestly.

"He's managed to replicate it?" Lestrangle looked quite surprised. "No one else has."

"Where'd you hear that?" she asked, tilting her head a little.



"I have my sources," Lestrangle said haughtily. She stared at him, going over what she knew about his family tree in her head. There weren't any other Lestranges in the potions community that she knew of. She supposed Whitaker might have told him, but then she remembered something Edmund Rookwood had mentioned once.

"Your godfather told you," she said, grinning at his surprised expression. "Augustus Rookwood is an Unspeakable, isn't that right? They're still having trouble modifying my methods, are they?"

"How did you guess that?" Caelum scowled. "You know far too much for a halfblood."

"I have my sources," she said, entirely mocking.

"Fine. Yes, my godfather asked if I had any insight into the process, seeing as I interned with you at the Guild while you were inventing it. I told him it probably wasn't as complicated as it seemed-I mean, *you* came up with it," he said, as though the very idea were nonsensical.

"That's just sad," she said, shaking her head. "I gave them very detailed directions. And samples. They're probably just sitting around complaining about how impossible the concept is instead of *trying* ." She supposed they must recruit more for brains and theoretical research ability than magical control.

Caelum eyed her oddly over his glass-which he had just refilled for what she guessed was the fourth time. Didn't he have any concept of pacing? "Potter, I hate to say this-seriously, I loathe myself for even thinking it-but your new technique is impossible. I don't know how you came up with it or how Snape managed to replicate it because it *makes no fucking sense*."

She raised her eyebrows, taken aback by his sudden fervor. "It's new, not impossible," she argued. "Of course it's difficult; if it was easy, someone would have discovered it long before I did."

"Because you're the next coming of Merlin," Lestrangle muttered, lip curled bitterly.

"I just have good control over my magic," she explained patiently. "That's all the technique requires: exceptionally good control."

"Not hard to control a half-dead pixie," Caelum said snidely.

"You're right," she said, irony playing in her mind. "I guess the Unspeakables have so much magic they can't exercise the necessary control over it. I wonder how Snape managed to make it work? Do you think he's a Squib, too?"

"Snape is a genius," Lestrangle scoffed. "The fact that he even got your stupid halfblood idea to work is a reflection on him, not you or your technique."

"If you say so," she said. She might have continued arguing, but Andre was back with a basket of bread and a rosemary oil for dipping.

"Compliments of the house," the waiter said, depositing the items with a flourish.

"Grand," Caelum said, smiling in a way that was horribly unconvincing. Had he practiced that? "Bring another bottle as well, Andre," he said, gesturing to the bottle of fairy wine on their table. She frowned at it suspiciously. When had he emptied it into his glass? Was he vanishing the stuff into his stomach, or what?

"Right away, Monsieur," Andre said, with nary a glance her way to betray her earlier request. She had to admit he was a consummate professional.

"What have you been up to?" she asked, trying to steer the conversation away from her work for a few minutes, at least. She could only listen to him disparage it for so long. "You mentioned something about an internship this summer, didn't you?"

"It's an apprenticeship," Lestrangle corrected, lifting his pale but beautifully angled face upwards-presumably so he could look smugly *down* at her despite their being on eye-level. "Master Whitaker is taking me along to Chile to search for exotic ingredients with transformative properties in the forests and lakes to the south."

"So you're officially apprenticed to him?" she clarified, though she suspected the answer. "I hadn't heard."

Caelum narrowed his eyes at her. "It's a pre-apprenticeship trip," he said. "He's going to take me on in an official capacity after I impress him."

"So it's an internship," she said, smiling at his ruffled expression.

"It's more than you have," Lestrangle said, blue eyes flashing.

"I'm thirteen," she reminded him. "And I have Master Snape agreeing to cooperate with me on cutting edge research-research driven by my own original experimentation, I might add. I wonder if he'll want to publish a paper together with our findings." She said the last entirely facetiously-there was no way Professor Snape was going to co-write anything with a teenager-but it was worth it to see Lestrangle's face turn red.

She didn't know why it was so endlessly entertaining to pester him. It should have been annoying, constantly parrying his vitriolic attempts to infuriate her. Somehow, it was fun instead. She reflected that it might be because she was so much better at being irritating than he was-that, or she was more immune to irritations. It really was a strange sort of friendship they had.

"You're so full of it, Potter," Lestrangle grumbled. Andre returned with the newly opened bottle and presented it ceremoniously. With a minute gesture, Caelum indicated that the waiter should pour. Andre didn't appear nervous at all, though he watched carefully as Caelum took a sip. The dark-haired boy frowned slightly, took another sip, and said, "Is this a different vintage?"

"Monsieur has a discerning palate," Andre said, bowing his head with a smile. "This is the better year, I am told."

Caelum inclined his head pompously, and it was all Harry could do to contain her mirth. "Very nice. Thank you, Andre."

The waiter demurred and left to collect their food. Lestrangle turned to her and must have caught some of the amusement on her face. "What?" he demanded.

"I've never heard you thank someone before, Caelum," she said, smiling innocently.

"Don't get used to it," he said.

Their starters came momentarily, and they both tucked in without delay. Her baked goat cheese tart smelled delicious and tasted even better. Lestrangle actually laughed at the rapturous look on her face. "Your French house-elf doesn't cook like this?" he teased.

"I don't have a house-elf," she mumbled between bites. It was too good to bother stopping to trade insults.

"I knew you were lying about learning French from one," Lestrangle said, looking triumphant.

"Maybe I learned from a friend's house-elf," she said, glancing briefly up from her plate.

"I bet you don't have any friends with house-elves, either," Caelum said shrewdly.

She thought about that for a moment. As Harry, she supposed she didn't. Unless Neville had a house-elf-then again, they weren't really friends. She shrugged, and dug into her tart once more, conceding the point.

"Where did you learn French?" Lestrangle insisted.

"You have the patience of a five-year-old," Harry told him. She paused with her fork raised and pinned him with a flat look. "Also, you'll never know."

"You are the most aggravating person in existence," Caelum complained.

"Oh, enough about me," she said airily. "Let's talk about you." He glowered at her. "No, really," she said, her face softening into something genuine. "How's your life other than the upcoming intern-ah, *apprenticeship*?"

"Fine," he said, suspiciously. "Why? How's your life?"

"Fine," she said.

They stared at one another for a moment, then Lestrangle said, "Let's not do that again."

"Right," she said, poking her tart. "Back to the internship."

"Apprenticeship," Lestrangle snapped.

"Whatever you say." Harry smiled. "What's Master Whitaker like? Is he as self-important as his interviews sound?"

"I'm telling him you said that," Lestrangle told her.

"Go ahead," she said. "And add that he's too liberal with the word 'legendary.'"

Caelum snorted. "He is, rather. He uses it in conversation, too, and it is very distracting."

"He must be brilliant, though," she said. "His work is always impeccably researched and full of contemporary allusions."

"He does make more references to other researchers' work than strictly warranted in casual discussion," Lestrangle drawled. "You get

used to it after a while, though. He's known my family for ages, so I've had plenty of time to-

He broke off and coughed, looking down at his wine glass with a frown. She supposed he hadn't meant to admit that. She wondered if she should go for the kill, then mentally shrugged. Of course she should-it was *Lestrangle* .

"He picked you because he knows your parents," she said, a sly smile on her face. Lestrangle's cheeks were slightly pink, though whether from the wine or from embarrassment she didn't know. "Is that why he's making you his apprentice, too? Must be nice."

"Don't even act like you didn't get picked for the internship because you're friendly with the Aldermaster," Caelum said hotly. "I know you didn't even submit an application."

"Fair enough," she shrugged, letting him off the hook. "I guess we both have good connections."

"Yours are apparently better," the pale boy said, swilling his fairy wine somewhat morosely. "I suppose that cousin of yours introduced you to Master Snape."

"He did," Harry admitted.

"Just your luck he happens to be the one master in all of England who can figure out your obscure little technique," Lestrangle said.

"You're right," she said, pushing her empty plate away. "I want to make the technique mainstream, but I don't know how to do that by myself. Master Snape is going to start experimenting with it, to see if we can expand the idea further, into something others will want to learn as well."

"Why would you want other people to learn it?" Lestrangle asked, looking genuinely confused. He poured himself another glass of wine as Andre came to take the plates away and replace them with the

main course. "I mean, if no one else can do it, you can charge whatever you want for it. Like that brewer who invented the cure for Speckled Fever before some humanitarian reverse-engineered it."

Trust Lestrage to be so cynical. "I want to better the whole world with my work. That's the point of it all. Not to make money."

Caelum rolled his eyes and jabbed his fork at her. "You didn't invent the wheel, brat. You invented..." He cast about visibly for an appropriate analogy. "The philosopher's stone. Or something like that," he added hastily when her eyebrows rose. "It can't benefit everyone because there aren't enough people worthy of recreating it."

"No one has ever recreated the philosopher's stone," she said.

"It's not an exact comparison," he said dismissively. "The point is, get over it. But teach it to me, obviously. If you won't make a Galleon off of it, I will."

"I'm not letting you patent it," she said poking at her lamb with a shake of her head.

"Who needs a patent?" Caelum laughed. "You just said no one else can do it, anyway."

She had to concede that point. "I'll teach you, but I can't guarantee it'll be easy. You need to learn wandless magic first."

Lestrage set down his wine glass and leveled her with an incredulous stare. "You're joking."

"I meant it when I said you needed good control." She shrugged somewhat apologetically.

"You learned wandless magic just so you could invent a new brewing technique?" Lestrage's expression said he thought she was mad.

"It wasn't that intentional," she said defensively.

"So you just happened to pick up wandless magic at that second-rate school in America?" Lestrangle laughed humorlessly. "I guess the joke is on us." She knew by 'us' he meant purebloods who attended elite schools. In fact the joke was on them, though not for the reasons Lestrangle thought.

They polished off their meals in relative silence, each thinking their own thoughts. Caelum poured the remainder of the bottle of wine into his glass as well, and she wondered how a boy of seventeen-or eighteen, she wasn't sure when his birthday was-had become so efficient at metabolizing alcohol. Even with the waiter watering down the second bottle, it was still a bottle and a half of fairy wine in just a couple of hours. He ought to be passed out on the floor. She had seen men collapse at their tables in the Phoenix after consuming less.

She narrowed her eyes at him, taking in his completely focused expression and the elegant, unimpaired way he dissected his fish. Something was off. Lestrangle was as skinny as a bowtruckle. There was no way he could put away that much booze without losing his lunch. He didn't notice her scrutiny, too busy dividing his fish into weirdly uniform pieces. He stopped to take a drink from his glass and then she noticed it. The wine went into his mouth, but he didn't swallow. She waited-maybe he was savoring it. No, that wasn't it. He put a piece of fish in his mouth shortly after and there was no sign of the wine when she peered past his annoyingly perfect teeth.

"You're vanishing it," she exclaimed, setting down her fork with a clank. "You-you-do you know how much that costs per bottle? And you aren't even drinking it? How are you doing that, anyway?"

Lestrangle lifted one eyebrow imperiously. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"You are such a phony," she said, thoroughly exasperated. "What is it? A localized vanishing charm? Did you carve a rune into your tongue?"

He smirked. "Wouldn't you like to know?"



"Since I'm paying for this wine you didn't drink, yes, I would." She scowled.

"It's not like I don't appreciate it," Caelum said defensively. "I taste it before it vanishes."

"I..." she rubbed her forehead. "I can't even fathom you right now. Why would you do that?"

"I was taught to always do that when I go out to eat with someone," he said, shrugging as though it were a normal thing to admit.

"Usually the assumption is that my companions drink as well, except they get drunk and I don't. Plus, it puts people off balance if I look in control after imbibing a large amount of liquor. It's a business negotiation trick."

"We... aren't business associates," she said slowly. "And you didn't imbibe a 'large amount.' You imbibed a 'suspicious amount.' Two bottles? That's a huge red flag."

"You're the first to notice," he said, looking thoughtfully at her.

"How many times have you done this?" she asked, her voice rising with her incredulity.

"You're not the only person I've ever had lunch with," Lestrangle drawled. "So sorry to burst your bubble."

She shook her head, a slightly hysterical laugh shaking her chest, and leaned back into her seat. "You exhaust me."

"The feeling is mutual," Caelum assured her with a half-hearted sneer.

Andre came to take their plates and, after a nod from her, presented them with the check. She slid it toward herself reluctantly and fought a wince at the bottom line.

"Do you have enough?" Lestrangle almost sounded a little guilty.

"Nope," she said, voice flat. "I forgot to bring my first-born."

He huffed a laugh. "Seriously, I can get the tab waived-my parents come here embarrassingly often."

She shook her head with a small smile. "Thanks, but I've got it." She certainly wasn't going to use the Lestrane name to stiff the restaurant out of two bottles of fairy wine-plus the food. It was a good thing Krait had just paid her for her usual order plus the crate of Protection Potions.

Her pockets much lighter, she stood and walked with Lestrane to the street. The afternoon was waning and the errand-running throngs were thinning to make way for the evening crowd. Perhaps it was the scarcity of people about that made Caelum amenable to walking with her back to the Leaky Cauldron.

"You are going to teach me how to Shaped Imbue," he said just before heading for the Floo. It was not a request, but Harry found she didn't mind-she was surprised he even knew what the proper name for her technique was.

"I'm free all summer," she said, a genuine smile creeping onto her face. "If you can fit me in around your apprenticeship, that is."

"I'll see what I can do, though of course I can't make any promises," Lestrane sniffed.

She refrained from rolling her eyes and reminding him that he was asking her for a favor-barely. "Don't fall off a cliff in Chile," she said cheerfully.

"Don't get kidnapped by Unspeakables for your potions ability," Lestrane said insincerely.

"So you think I have ability," she smiled broadly.

"Goodbye, brat."

"I'll miss you too," she said, waving her fingers as he reached for the Floo powder. "Don't forget to write."

Grumbling something uncomplimentary, Caelum Lestrangle Flooed away without a backwards glance. *Always the charmer*, she thought, reaching for the Floo powder herself.

The afternoon hadn't been a total loss, though. The older boy had been fairly human through most of lunch. The food wasn't bad, either. And the best part: she had a new project for the week ahead. She was going to figure out how Lestrangle had managed the wine-vanishing trick if it was the only thing she accomplished all summer.

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With the tournament approaching and the events of the previous year branded in stark relief on the walls of her subconscious, Harry threw herself into her training with Leo. If he was at all taken aback by the deadly earnest she applied to their practice bouts, he didn't say anything. Instead, he gave as good as he got. She always left with bruises and the occasional knife slice, but that just meant her Healing skills got exercised as well.

Most afternoons found her rolling in the dirt under the artificial sun of the Phoenix's courtyard, and this one was no different. She had her wand in her right hand and a simple fixed knife in a forward hammer grip with her left hand. For the moment, Leo was across the courtyard, standing still, and she was leaning against the wall, panting for breath. She pushed herself upright when he gestured her forward with his own knife, which he also carried left-handed. For the moment, neither of them was using their wands for anything other than a placeholder. The focus of this lesson was knife logistics in a wand fight.

She bent her knees and closed the distance slowly, watching his knife carefully. It was blunted-as was hers-but they wouldn't always be. She had to learn this now.

"Raise your blade higher," Leo said, eyes roving constantly for mistakes as they circled out of range of one another. "You have to protect your face and neck. Most of your attackers will be taller than you. How will they attack?"

"From above," she grunted, moving her left hand swiftly to counter the demonstration that was forthcoming. Leo's knife came slashing downwards toward her face, the momentum of his body behind it. She moved her knife across her body to intercept the underside of his left forearm. If she could make him drop the knife-

"Stop." She froze, knife tilted with the edge toward Leo's wrist as he stilled his movement just inches above it. His knife was aimed unerringly at her right eye, but it was at least a hand-span away. "What happens when we connect?"

"You drop your weapon and your left wrist tendons are severed, making you unable to continue utilizing your knife for the remainder of the fight," she said.

Leo's blank face told her she'd missed something. "What happens when I let go of my knife from the pain?"

"It..." she grimaced, eyeing the suspended weapon grimly. "Continues forward with momentum and hits me in the face."

"You made no move to dodge the results of the move you sought to execute," Leo said, nodding. "If someone comes at you from above, what do you do?"

"Catch the blade itself on my knife," she hazarded, moving her knife backwards until it was poised beneath Leo's blade.

"And if I'm stronger than you-which I am?" Leo prodded.

"My arm buckles and I lose an eye," she sighed. "I should just dodge it, shouldn't I?"

"You should," Leo agreed, backing up once more. He repeated the same move and this time Harry leapt backwards out of the way, keeping her knife between her face and his advance even as he charged several more steps toward her and she beat a continuous retreat. "Good," he said, nodding. "Don't try getting rid of your opponent's knife. It's a one in a million that an experienced opponent overextends his arm at a height you can come down on top of anyway. Just avoid it."

She nodded, getting back into a balanced position automatically, wand held out to the side of her body and the knife across her front defensively. Leo readied himself, then crouched and charged low, knife held close to his chest even as it pointed toward her gut. She leapt to the left and Leo knocked her wand from her hand as he passed her. She picked it up and pressed her lips together. She knew better than that. Before he could even prompt her, she said, "I should have jumped right and slashed at you with my knife as you passed my left side."

"Then do that," he said. They faced off again and he executed the same low charge toward her middle. She jumped right and swung the knife in a backhanded arch toward his exposed back-except it wasn't exposed. Leo twisted mid-lunge and used his right forearm to come up under her slash and knock it wide while moving his left hand to present her throat with his blade. They froze, and Harry took in their positioning with sharp eyes. Her wand was at the wrong angle to stop him before he cut her throat.

"I should have let you go by me and gotten out of the way instead of trying to retaliate," she said, blowing out a breath. Why was the answer always run away?

"Yes," Leo said, straightening. He tapped her left hand where it gripped the knife with his hilt and said seriously, "You are not a knife fighter, Harry. Repeat that."

"I am not a knife fighter." She frowned. She was trying to learn, though.

"Don't look at me like that," Leo said, grinning a bit. "You can't fight reality. I didn't put this weapon in your hand for you to use it, as counterintuitive as that may sound. A knife should always be a threat in your hand. For you, it is a method of defense and deterrence, not attack. Your strength in a duel is your magic. If you get knife happy and forget that, you will lose to more experienced knife fighters and more experienced magic users both. This," he said, tapping the knife under her fingers hard enough to make it shake for emphasis, "is to protect *this* ." He tapped her wand hand with his own wand.

She nodded slowly. He was right, of course. "I just have to keep the knife between me and my opponent. I don't have to take their knife away or attack them with my knife. I just have to protect myself from physical blows that could cripple me while my wand does the real work."

"Exactly," he said, backing into the start position once more. "Too many folk around here will rely on their weapons to control a fight. They do that because they don't have your core's endurance or the versatile repertoire of spells you do. They're used to fighting under the Ministry's radar, and that usually means hand-to-hand or blade-to-blade. You do not have to fight on their level. Unless you're an idiot. Are you an idiot, Harry?"

"No," she said, smiling a bit. "I won't be an idiot."

"Good, because idiots get killed," Leo said flatly. "Make it a magic fight, and you'll always have the advantage. That said, good duelers can also be killed by a blade they let get too close, so let's get back to it."

She readied herself, keeping everything he'd said in mind. He came at her quickly, but she was accustomed to fast-paced exchanges and didn't have trouble reacting. Each time he thrust or slashed she moved out of the way. Even when she saw an opening, she didn't

take it. This went on for several minutes before Leo's foot came out of nowhere and slapped the knife from her hand. She curled her smarting fingers in frustration as he said, "Freeze."

He was just a few feet away, while her knife was halfway across the courtyard. "Many competitors will wear armored boots for just such a reason. Watch their feet as well as their knife and wand." She didn't know how she was supposed to watch all three at once, but she didn't say so. If other people did, then so could she. "Now I have a knife and you don't. If you stay where you are I have the advantage in range and lethality. You have two choices; what are they?"

"I can get out of range or I can close and try to level the field by knocking your knife away while you're still off balance," she said.

"Choose," Leo said. She jumped backwards to a safe distance and brandished her wand at him symbolically. "Good," he said. "If your opponent doesn't have his knife tied to his wrist, you can summon it from him much more safely than you can try knocking it from his hand with yours."

"Should I tie mine to my wrist?" she asked.

"You could," Leo allowed. "If you were also planning on wearing incredibly thick arm guards. Otherwise when the ties pull the knife taut it'll just swing back into your own wrist before you can get a grip on it. Actually..." He smirked. "I've got a better trick. Do you know how to overtake a Summoning Charm?"

"Hold onto whatever they're summoning really tightly?" she guessed.

"No," he said, chuckling. "That's how you physically deny a Summoning Charm. Once the Summoning Charm takes hold, though, what can you do to stop it?"

"Nothing," she said, frowning.

"Not true," Leo told her. "You can do two things-speed it up or slow it down. To do either, though, you have to catch it."

"I'm not sure I follow," she admitted. Why would you want to speed up your opponent's Summoning Charm in the first place?

"All right, sit down," Leo said, gesturing to the dirt floor. She sank down gratefully, massaging her calf muscles as he began his explanation. "First: does a Summoning Charm work by causing the object you cast it on to animate and find its own way back to you?"

"No," she said, smiling at the idea of using something so complex as inanimate animation to summon an object. "It's just like attaching a line of magic to it and reeling it in. You don't have to be able to see the object to attach your magic to it, though that certainly helps. The spell sends out a line toward the location of whatever you're trying to summon-provided you have a complete enough understanding of the object itself in your mind-and once it 'finds' it, the line retracts along the path of least resistance."

"Which in a dueling arena is...?" Leo prompted.

"A straight line," she supposed.

"Does the summoned object move at the average speed of magic?" Leo asked.

She shook her head. The average speed of magic was the pace at which most spells moved. It was faster than a human could run, but much slower than the speed of sound or actual light, for instance. Hence why it was possible to dodge spells at all. A summoned object, however, wasn't pure magic. It had to interact with the world it moved through, which meant... "It moves slower. The object itself slows the magic down, depending on how heavy or big it is."

"That's right," Leo said. "So in theory an object that is being summoned would be slow enough for another spell to catch up to it before it reached the summoner, with me?"



"I think so," she said, nodding slowly. "A Summoning Charm doesn't create a visible light, though. You'd have to guess where the line of magic was to affect it."

"Not as hard as you'd think," Leo said. "Just aim for the imaginary line segment created between the caster's wand and the object. As long as there isn't anything in between the two, it's always a-"

"Straight line," she said, smiling. "Brilliant. What spell can you cast on another spell, though? Wouldn't it be easier to cast on the object being summoned?"

"It would, and that's how you *overpower* a Summoning Charm, by casting a stronger Summoning Charm on the same object and canceling the first one out, but people expect that," Leo said, grinning. "If you successfully *overtake* a Summoning Charm, nine out of ten wizards will assume you tried to hit the object itself but missed. They won't realize the charm has been tampered with until whatever they summoned either halts in midair or smacks them in the face."

Her eyes widened. "And if they summoned my knife-"

"It would catch up to them a lot quicker than they thought," Leo said, his grin turning a bit dark.

"That's monstrously clever, Leo," she said, a bit awed.

"I have been doing this awhile, lass," he said immodestly.

"So tell me which spells to use, Master Leo," she said lightly. An unholy glee lit Leo's face and she backpedaled quickly. "Oh, no. That was a joke, Leo, I am *not* calling you that."

"Why not?" Leo said, eyes wide with pretend innocence. "You are sort of my disciple, Harry."

"Let's stick with pupil," she said, grimacing at the idea of Leo in the robes of a Dueling master.

"Professor Leo, then," he said, leaning back on his hands to look up at the sky idly. "It doesn't sound as impressive."

"I'm not calling you that, either," she said, tossing a handful of dirt at her friend.

He looked down at the dust covering his trousers and sighed. "I just had these washed."

"You didn't either," she snorted. "You wore them yesterday."

"I had them washed yesterday morning," he insisted.

"That's not 'just' in anyone's book, Leo," she laughed.

"You're a very disrespectful disciple." He sighed.

"I get that a lot," she said, smiling at the irony. Professor Snape said that about her all the time.

"It's a wonder anyone bothers to teach you anything, then," he said airily. "Perhaps I'll keep the anti-Summoning spells to myself."

"Well perhaps when I get humiliated in the first round of the tournament I'll make sure everyone knows who my illustrious instructor was," Harry said, equally airy.

"Good point," he said. With an acrobatic bend he found his feet and waited for her to push herself upright as well before clapping his hands together. "All right, do you know Arresto Momentum?"

"Sure," she said, rolling her wand wrist briefly. "Is the slowing spell like that?"

"It, uh, is that," Leo said, scratching his neck sheepishly. "And the accelerating spell is actually just the Banishing Charm."

She shot him an unimpressed look. "What was that about keeping these oh-so-special anti-Summoning spells to yourself?"

"Just give it a go," Leo said, flapping his hands toward the other side of the courtyard. Harry obediently backed up until she faced him across a considerable distance. She held herself at the ready and Leo nodded once before calling, "Accio!"

She felt the knife tugged sharply from her hand, but her wand was already moving and her focus didn't waver. "Depulso," she snapped. Before the knife had covered half the distance, her spell caught up to it, then soared past it to intercept its magical trajectory at an angle. At first there was no visible sign to indicate whether her aim had been accurate, but a split second later the knife rocketed forward as if propelled by a blast. Leo ducked out of the way as the knife, wildly out of control, sailed past him and into the wall with a loud clatter.

Solom poked his head out of the door that led to the kitchen and shouted, "Stop throwing knives at my walls, yer Majesty!"

Leo gave an insincere wave until the old innkeeper ducked back inside, then turned to her with a grin. "Very good-work on silent casting, though. Even someone who's never seen that trick could probably guess what a Banishing Charm cast at the knife was meant to do. Now try the other one."

Practice went on until they were both tired and sweaty. By the end of it, Harry's ears were ringing with things like, "Control the edge!" and "It's not a stick, don't whack with it!" In their last bout she had been 'sliced' several times with the blunt edge of Leo's knife and had some seriously itchy scratches to show for it. Leo called the match to a close after counting up the scratches on her arms and informing her that in a real fight she would have bled out already. "Adrenaline makes you bleed faster," he helpfully reminded her as he collected her practice knife and tucked it away into one of his many pockets. "That's why you can't let them cut you at all unless you get something really significant out of it. It's like chess-you don't exchange pawns for pawns if you want to win. Only sacrifice

something small if it gains you something big. Like a king," he added with a jaunty wink.

He went to collect water from the kitchen for them while she started stretching out her tired arms. They sat with their backs against one of the walls as Leo went over what she'd done right and wrong in minute detail. She had no idea how he could be so observant in the middle of a fight, but she supposed it must be a skill you picked up over time.

"What do I do if someone manages to stab me?" she asked as his analysis wound down. "Should I just forfeit right away?"

"Well, yes," he said, looking a bit disturbed. "I don't think you'll be stabbed, though, lass. That only happens in real life."

Her eyebrows rose with her confusion. "As opposed to the fantasy world we'll be holding the tournament in?"

Leo shook his head sharply. "There's a big difference between a duel and an actual knife fight, Harry. For one thing, 'knife fights' don't happen in real life. Outside of the dueling ring, if someone pulls a knife on you they can only have two practical plans of action. Either they draw it where you can see, in which case they are attempting to frighten you off and probably don't want to use it, or you don't know they have it until they've stabbed you in the back, in the dark, in a secluded alley where no one will hear your screams."

"That's very reassuring," she said faintly.

"It's the truth," Leo said. "A knife is a lethal weapon. If it's in play in real life, someone wants someone else dead or someone is frightened for his life. No one starts a casual bar fight with a knife, unless they're insane." His face softened a bit at her tense expression and he said, patiently, "In a duel the object is not to kill the other person, it's to best them with technical skill. That's why it happens in the open, face to face, in front of witnesses. No one is looking to kill anyone-it's just a tournament. I highly doubt there will

be any stabbing. You might get cut a bit, but even in freedueling the weapons are secondary to our wands. Your opponent is just like you- he'll use nonlethal magic to end the fight, no matter how much he relies on physicality and weapons to get the upper hand in the fight itself. Using a blade to end a match is asking to become a murderer."

She nodded, feeling a bit better about the whole thing. It was silly, comparing a duel to a real life-or-death fight. The point of the tournament was to prove who was the quickest and cleverest, not the cruelest. Then she frowned. "Wait, you ended a fight with a knife once-against Marek. You summoned it nonverbally and it stabbed him in the back."

Leo grimaced. "Marek is an ass who wastes entirely too much of my time challenging me for a title he doesn't really want. Whatever his skill in the ring, he would make a terrible Rogue and I refuse to allow it. Even if it means stabbing him from time to time to remind the idiot why it's a *bad idea* to challenge me."

"So it's okay for the king to stab people, but everyone else ought to play nice," she said archly, a smile playing about her mouth.

"Lass, you can stab anyone who looks at you funny if you like," Leo said, looking supremely unconcerned as he took a swig of his water. "As long as you don't mind getting stabbed back. My folk don't take much lying down."

"I don't know," she said, musing. "They put up with *you* ."

Leo glanced at the heavens in supplication. "Why am I cursed with such irreverent subjects?"

"I'm not your subject," she scoffed.

"You pay a tithe," he reminded her, grinning.

She had nothing to refute that, so she opted to take another drink of water instead. She began flexing her feet idly, enjoying the pull of

well-used muscles. She could feel herself getting stronger every day, and she knew she had Leo to thank for a lot of that. Remus was an excellent resource-and a prodigiously talented instructor-but his expertise was in magic-only duels. While athleticism could be a factor, it was nothing next to the sheer physicality required to compete in a free duel.

She glanced over at Leo, thinking she ought to thank him again for all the time he willingly spent helping her get better, and found him already looking over at her with a considering expression. She quirked a brow in a silent question. His eyes drifted off to an indeterminate point past her face and he said, "I heard something interesting from one of my ears this week."

"Oh?" She blinked at him. "What's that?"

"One of them saw you eating pretty with a little lord," he said, voice a study in casualness.

"A little-oh, you mean Lestranger?" She shrugged, a bit nonplussed. Was everything she did in the alleys a matter of public record? First Snape knew about Krait, then Caelum knew about Snape, and then this. "We interned at the Guild together and grabbed lunch to catch up. I'm surprised your lookouts recognized me-I wasn't even wearing my brewing boots." She said the last with a self-deprecating smile, but Leo didn't smile back.

"Nice place to take a friend for lunch," he said, moving his eyes back to her face briefly.

She winced. "He's a major snob. Refused to be seen anywhere else, and I really wish I was joking." She sighed just thinking about it. "It's no wonder he doesn't have any other friends." As Leo's measuring look she added somewhat guiltily. "He's not so bad, though. Knows his potions, at least."

Leo was silent for a moment, and looked to be chewing over her words. In a thoughtful voice he said, "Fourteen is about the age you

lot start looking for mates, isn't it?"

Harry rolled her eyes. "Don't say 'you lot' like you aren't from a perfectly respectable family. You dad is the Aldermaster of the Potions Guild."

"Respectable my pa may be, but it's not because we're in the Book of Bronze. It's hard work and money earned, plain as that." Leo's face was still very relaxed, but she was getting an increasingly serious vibe. "I certainly don't have to worry about finding some powdered princess with a pedigree to carry on my line."

"How fortunate for you," she snorted. She couldn't help but think of Pansy, and how not everyone was so free. Trying to lighten the mood, she said airily, "I suppose you'll reign on high in these alleys for the rest of your days, collecting ears and besting Marek in duels until your beard grows so long you can't compete without tripping on it."

"Naw, it won't come to that," Leo said, crossing his arms and tilting his head up at the illusory sky. "One day some talented youngster will do to me what I did to the old king. I'll retire my crown and settle down with my gal and we'll live happily ever after."

Harry smiled at the image. "Maybe you and one of Rispah's ladies can turn one another honest."

"Honest is a strong word," Leo chuckled. "Besides, I've already got my eye on a lass, and something tells me honesty isn't high on her priority list." He slid an eye her way and said, deliberately. "I'm just waiting for her to come around to my way of thinking."

Harry was abruptly uncomfortable. Casting around for a response that didn't require thinking deeply about what Leo was saying, she cleared her throat and said, brightly, "Well, you'll have to win the tournament if you want to impress her. Who are you up against first- it's not me, is it? That would be an awful short run."

Leo didn't answer for a few agonizing moments, but when he did it was with relaxed amusement. "Haven't you checked the listings yet? They've been posted for three days."

She looked over in surprise. "Where? In the Phoenix?"

"At the statue on Pendragon Alley where the arena will be," he said, standing and brushing himself off. "Come on, I'll show you."

"Good idea putting the tourney close to Maywell," she commented as they passed through the Dancing Phoenix. Pendragon Alley, so named for the prominent statue of King Arthur that was its most memorable feature, intersected with the street the clinic sat on, Wormwood Row.

"We did put some thought into it," Leo said. He sent her an amused look as she scowled in response to his teasing, and they made their way through the alleys behind Kyprioth Court in companionable silence.

When they reached the statue on the corner of Pendragon Alley and Wormwood Row, it was already crowded with people curious about the tournament's setup. The alley folk made way readily enough for Leo, who greeted many of them by name as they approached. Harry was curious to see that the piece of parchment affixed to the statue's shield didn't mention the tournament by name or give a time or place or any other details she might expect to see on an event notice. It was simply a bracket that bloomed from two slots in the middle to sixty-four branches at the edges of the parchment, each of which had a name. Leo was number one, of course. She scanned the list to find herself at number fifteen. That meant she wouldn't face Leo until the fourth round. Providing she made it that far. She was listed simply as 'Harry,' while her first opponent was called... 'Fearless Frank.'

She turned to Leo with a slight smile. "Is he a pirate?"



Leo laughed. "No. Frank works at the kennels over on Long Street. Some of the competitors wanted to spice up their entry names, and alliteration appears to be a theme."

She scanned the rest of the names and saw mixed in among the perfectly normal ones names like 'Rowdy Rhonda,' 'Ben the Butcher,' and 'Dr. Doom.' "I hope Ben is an actual butcher," she muttered, shaking her head.

"Leo!"

They both turned to see Aled Flint standing across the huge intersection Arthur's statue stood watch over. He was standing next to a wizard dressed all in black, which Harry thought a bit dramatic when it was barely twilight yet. It wasn't any of her business, though, so she didn't look too closely at the hooded figure as she and Leo made their way over to the blacksmith.

"I was just telling our Ward master where the perimeter of the stage is going to go," Aled said, gesturing to the space around them vaguely. "He needs to know what kind of a crowd we're expecting, so the undetectably expanded dimensions in the outer wards will be big enough to allow them all in."

"And I need to know if you want the surrounding houses included so any residents may watch from their balconies," the cloaked man added. She recognized the voice immediately, and had to fight to keep from stiffening.

*What in Merlin's name is Regulus Black doing down here, of all places?* she thought, covering her panic with a casual pivot that allowed her to turn her back to the men in the guise of taking in the street around them. She tilted her head and pretended to imagine what the stage might look like once it was constructed, possible courses of action running amok in her head all the while. Had he recognized her? Probably not. She was dressed in street clothes, sweaty and dirty from an afternoon of training, and she'd been a step behind Leo when they walked over. Chances were he dismissed her

as an irrelevant bystander and hadn't looked too closely at her face. Lots of people had short hair and wore glasses. He was no more looking for Harriett Potter than she had been looking for Regulus Black. As long as she kept her mouth shut and didn't give him a great look at her face, she could easily remain overlooked.

She did keep her ears open, however; she was curious as to why a pureblood like Regulus would be working with the Rogue. She knew he was a Ward master, but she had assumed he worked primarily on the construction of security wards for the sumptuous summer homes of rich lords and ladies of the *ton* . For that matter, how could the Court of the Rogue even afford a master like Regulus Black? She didn't imagine he was the sort to do pro bono work for jollies.

"Just a dome around the intersection will be fine," Leo was saying. "We're going to evacuate the residents temporarily in case the wards around the arena itself fail."

"About those, I'll need the exact dimensions of the inner wards and the items you intend to use as keys as soon as possible," Regulus said, his voice a slightly bored drawl. She supposed he must build a lot of custom wards to be so unenthused about it.

"Keys?" Aled sounded a bit lost.

"The inner wards covering the actual battleground will protect the spectators from stray spells while protecting the competitors from interference from the crowd," Regulus explained. "Unless you want to key each competitor into the wards before their matches and unkey them afterwards so they can't interfere with the next match, it's easier to make a couple of items like bracelets or amulets that act as general keys and can be passed from contender to contender between matches."

"I'll need three keys, then," Leo said firmly. "Someone on the outside should have one in case those on the inside are injured or otherwise unable to get out under their own power."

"That's no problem," Regulus said. "I also understand you need these wards taken up and taken down rather quickly."

"Yes, we'd like to disrupt the lives of the residents as little as possible," Leo said. Unspoken was that the shorter amount of time the wards stood, the less chance there was of attracting the interest of the Ministry.

"The tournament lasts a week, correct?" Regulus clarified.

"Less than," Leo said. "Six rounds over four days, with awards given after the championship match."

"I'll put the wards up one day beforehand and take them down a day later, then," Regulus said. "I assume you'll want to give vendors time to set up and tear down their wares."

"Definitely," Aled said. She could hear the man's eager smile even without turning to see it.

"Very well," Regulus said, sounding satisfied. "The design will be a downsized version of the temporary awareness ward used for events like the Quidditch World Cup, but instead of repelling Muggles it'll reroute anyone who doesn't know it's there."

"Perfect," Leo said happily. "Can't thank you enough, Master Black."

"Gold is all the thanks I require," Regulus said dismissively.

"You'll get it when the wards go up, on faith that you'll take them down," Leo assured him.

"Good." She heard a couple of people moving behind her and assumed they were shaking hands. "Until then," Regulus said before she heard the swish of a cloak that meant he'd taken his leave.

She turned around to eye the back of his form as he walked briskly in the direction of the upper alleys. Leo clapped her on the shoulder, saying, "Sorry about that bit of business. Not boring you, were we?"

"Not at all," she said, smiling. "It sounds like the wards are going to be just what you need."

"They ought to be, for what we're paying," Aled said, a bit sourly.

"He's worth it," Leo said. "Master Black is known for his custom solutions and his absolute discretion."

"Have you worked with him before?" Harry asked casually.

"A few times," Leo said, just as casually. "You didn't think I designed the wards around the new Phoenix, did you?"

She shrugged. "I hadn't thought about it. Do you know him very well?"

"Not as well as you, I'd wager," Leo said pointedly. He shot a glance at Aled, but the blacksmith wasn't paying attention to them any longer. He was busy muttering measurements to himself as he surveyed the ground where the stage he was charged with constructing would sit. "Isn't he the younger brother of your dear uncle?" Leo went on. "Don't think I didn't notice you hiding your face from him."

"We've rarely met," Harry said in a low voice. "Still, better safe than sorry. He doesn't care for me much, and I don't doubt he'd relish having something to hold over my head."

Leo frowned. "Why wouldn't he like you? Isn't his nephew your closest friend?"

"That's the problem," Harry sighed. "He believes I am a poor influence on Archie."

"Well, he's right about that," Leo said with a laugh. "You brought that innocent little boy deep into the pits of the lower alleys just to run an errand at Frein's with you."

"Archie wanted to come," Harry muttered. "I'd never let anything happen to him."

"Does his uncle know that?" Leo asked pointedly.

Harry mulled that over as they headed back toward Kyprioth Court. She supposed Regulus had no way of knowing that she considered Archie closer than a brother. She would do anything for him, but Regulus only knew so far that Rigel-Archie-would do anything for *her*. Perhaps their relationship seemed uneven in his eyes. If she forced herself to be objective she had to admit that she could have been slightly more reassuring and less antagonistic.

It was funny; the first time she'd come to the lower alleys she'd felt like they were a world unto themselves, apart from everything she was familiar with. In her mind the alleys were a place that had nothing to do with purebloods and politics and the people she knew from her other life. She was beginning to realize that things weren't so simple, and that her two worlds were more closely connected than she'd ever imagined or cared to admit. It wasn't a pleasant realization, but it was, she thought, important. It meant she couldn't afford to get careless. It was time to put real thought into the future life she wanted to live.

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*Dear Harry,*

*Glad to hear from you; you seem to be doing well, all things considered. I'd like to say for the record that I totally predicted you'd get yourself caught up in something exciting and/or dangerous. Wish I could see you compete! You'll have to tell me all about it when I get back. Don't get yourself disemboweled while I'm not there to patch you up.*

*We're under quarantine at the village-turns out there was a mass outbreak of spattergroit! It's so fascinating to see procedures I've read about implemented first hand like this. Don't worry about me, though; if I were a poor enough Healer to catch spattergroit then I'd deserve every oozing pustule.*

*As for Hermione- don't blow her off! She is my very best friend and I care for her dearly. If you make her hate me I shall be very cross with you. I know you can be me being you if you try. Just relax and tell lots of jokes and try not to get into any conversations about Healing that are too complex. Try a neutral activity that doesn't require too much talking. Muggle movies are a blast. Or maybe take her to meet Addy. Girls love babies. Well, not you, obviously, but other girls do... I think.*

*Good luck with your experimenting this summer, and please please please don't alienate Hermione by saying something insensitive. She really means a lot to me.*

*Love,*

*Archie*

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[end of chapter two].

A/N: We are on a roll! So much goodness in this book, and it is just getting started. I can honestly say I've waited for this book since I started writing the series. I hope you all enjoy reading it as much as I enjoy writing it. For those of you finishing up your spring semesters, I hope these 27,000 words make you feel like summer. Your reviews have inspired me in so many ways. Sometimes I see a prediction that is so scarily accurate I think about changing the plot and other times I see something that I wish I'd thought of myself (and sometimes I steal those ideas quietly and pretend my readers are

just very good guessers). I guess what I'm trying to say is: thank you for writing them! It makes my life.

Happy Mother's Day to all the mothers!

The very best to everyone else,

-Violet

## Chapter 3

A/N: Apparently this needs to be said: I have no plans to kill off Leo. Or anyone else who doesn't absolutely have to die for the sake of the plot. I really like my characters. I'm going to try keeping them around. Speculation is great, you guys, but try not to alarm people with random death predictions in the reviews if you can help it.

Now, onwards! This chapter covers the duration of the tournament, so expect a lot of the lower alleys and lengthy (read: very lengthy) fight scenes. I promise next chapter will have more of your favorite HP characters to get the plot back on track for the book four arc. That said, don't ignore the little things in this one-they definitely come back into play later on.

### **The Futile Façade:**

#### **Chapter 3:**

She hadn't heard anything from Flint all summer and, while she didn't begrudge his mother a minute in the apartment on Dogwood Lane, she did want to know how long exactly she needed to keep Leo away from the place. After a lengthy deliberation, she decided it wouldn't be unusual for Harry to stop by and check in on Mrs. Flint. After all, they'd met during the semester and had grown into something like polite friendship during the week she'd imposed on the quiet woman. Perhaps she wouldn't mind telling Harry how her son's job hunt was going.

She left for the Leaky mid-morning, preferring to walk to Dogwood rather than surprise Mrs. Flint through the Floo. It was a beautiful summer day in Diagon; there was just enough breeze to keep smells from stagnating without having a wind strong enough to bring the ever-present dust to eye level. On her way toward Knockturn, she met the eyes of several people she recognized on sight as regular patrons of the Dancing Phoenix. A few waved or nodded, but most



contented themselves with a swift, assessing glance that was neither hostile nor curious. It was the kind of look that said simply, *I see you*, and she received it often in the alleys. The community was close-knit, even in the shadiest areas, though the closeness wasn't necessarily *friendly* .

She had just turned onto Kyprioth Court when a child's giggling caught her attention. Her eyes moved automatically to the source and found the little girl with the blue ribbon fluttering her fingers at Harry from where she sat on a doorstep. Harry paused in her stroll to alter her course and came to stand before the child. "You again," she said, smiling down at the seven-year-old. The little girl dipped a half-curtsey from where she was seated with her patchwork skirt tucked daintily underneath her. "How's the flower-selling business these days?"

The girl's laughter sent her curly red hair aquiver in its ponytail. "Good, if you like bees," she said, smirking impishly. "Sometimes they follow me for ages."

"You must be brave, to put up with it," Harry praised her.

"You must be brave, to enter the tourney," the girl said. She picked up a long-stemmed tulip and held it up to Harry with a winning smile. "Flower for good luck?"

"That worried for me?" she asked, flipping the girl a couple coins in exchange for the flower, which she tucked through her belt loop like an ornamental sword.

"The King would be sad if anything happened to you," the girl said, grinning.

"The King should be more worried about himself," Harry said wryly. He was the one who had to win the whole thing, after all. She glanced about the court, then took a seat next to the girl with a mental shrug. "What's your name, young miss?"

"Margaret," the girl said at once. "Only, everyone calls me Margo."

"It's nice to meet you, Margo," she said, holding out a hand. The girl took it primly in something that was more like the shaking out of a handkerchief than a handshake.

"You, too," Margo said, smiling so wide Harry could see the gap where her left canine had recently fallen out. "Are you going to see the King today?"

"Not today," Harry said. "I'm visiting a friend."

"I'm visiting my friend today, too!" Margo exclaimed, obviously pleased at the coincidence. "She's at Maywell and I'm going to bring her a flower to cheer her up."

"That's a good idea," Harry said, smiling slightly. "Sick people really appreciate flowers."

Margo nodded solemnly. "Maybe I'll bring her lots of flowers, then. She's very ill."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Harry said, her smile falling.

"It's okay," Margo said earnestly. "Cora is super tough. She's a juggler, and she can do four knives at once! She goes to Maywell all the time when she messes up and gets cut. Or, she used to, at least."

Harry wasn't sure what to say to that. "It sounds very difficult," she offered.

"It is," Margo agreed, shrugging. "I'm no good at juggling. Or thieving. And I don't like to run anyway, so I sell flowers. Henry thinks flower-selling is for sissies, but Cora says Henry is jealous that he's not cute enough to sell anything so he *has* to thief."

"Are... you all part of the Court of Rogues, then?" she asked.

"Oh yes," Margo said, nodding. "You should meet them-not Henry, he's mouthy, but the others. Cora would love to meet you. She almost never works in Diagon, so she doesn't catch a glimpse of you often. Jason-he sweeps up the bird-droppings at Eeylops-wants to meet you, too. He thinks you're pretty."

"I'm not, really," she said, feeling awkward and uncertain. The kids Leo used to keep tabs on her wanted to meet her? She supposed it was a natural curiosity.

"That's what I told him," Margo said proudly. "I said you're *interesting* -looking, and that's better than pretty."

"Thank you," she said, fighting a smile. "Well, I'd love to meet them. Next time they see me in the alley, tell them to introduce themselves."

"I will," Margo said, smiling brightly and setting her pulled-back hair to bobbing again as she nodded. The girl glanced up at the sky and said abruptly, "Ooh, I'm late! Bye, Harry. See you soon, okay?"

She nodded, waving as the little girl scrambled to heft her oversized basket and scurry in the direction of the Phoenix. Harry followed at a more sedate pace until she reached the alley that branched off from Kyprioth Court toward the residential districts beyond. She wound her way slowly toward her destination, taking in the smells of mobile vendors and the bright pops of color that signaled the arrival of summer in window boxes and in patches on the ground where the steady flow of pedestrian traffic hadn't quite beat the weeds that cropped up between doorways into submission.

Dogwood Lane was as tidy as ever; it looked as though the street-facing windows had recently all received a good cleaning, and several doorsteps were sporting freshly beaten welcome mats. She let herself into the small common area shared between numbers seven and eight with her spare key and climbed lightly up the stairs to the upper apartment. After she knocked, there was only a short pause before the door swung open readily-a far cry from the

suspicious eye that had greeted her the last time she'd surprised Mrs. Flint with a visit.

"Harry," the woman said, stepping backwards immediately and beckoning her into the flat. "What a pleasant surprise. Come in."

"Hello, Merriam," Harry said, nodding her thanks as Mrs. Flint closed the door behind her. "Just thought I'd drop by and see how you were getting on. Is now a good time?"

She glanced into the living room and was surprised to see a handful of boxes lying in the center, most closed tight but one still open and half-full of newspapers. Mrs. Flint was dressed in practical working clothes and her dark hair was tied up in a kerchief. Was she in the middle of a project?

"Perfect timing, actually," the woman said, gesturing to the boxes. "I was just packing." She looked happy at the prospect and more than a little satisfied.

"You're moving out?" Harry blinked, surprised. She supposed she'd got the answer she came looking for, then. "Has Marcus managed to find a suitable position, then?"

Mrs. Flint adjusted the sleeves of her tunic somewhat nervously. "I... am not sure what Marcus's plans are. He has found a temporary position working as a... talent scout, I believe, for a Quidditch team. He plans to purchase his own flat, soon, with his inheritance, but I won't be joining him there."

"Oh?" Harry had been under the impression that Mrs. Flint joining her son was the end game to all of this.

"I like my independence," Merriam said, lifting her chin a fraction. "I like working at the clinic. I want to stay in the alleys, and Healer Hurst was kind enough to help me find a modest town house close to Maywell. I work full-time there, now, so it's within my means."

"That sounds lovely. Does Marcus know?" she asked, curious.

She nodded slowly. "He took some convincing. Marcus can visit whenever he likes, though, and it's better if my hus... if Marcus's father knows he lives alone and thinks he has no idea where I've gone. Marcus was prepared to cut all ties with his father, of course, but that man is... a dangerous enemy to have." She said the last in a whisper that was choked with worry for her son and fear for the specter of a man whose memory had not quite ceased to haunt her yet.

"I understand," she said, taking the older woman's hands in her own. "I think you're very selfless, protecting Fl-Marcus like that."

Merriam smiled tremulously at her. "My dear, it is you who are selfless. The chance to start over, to stand on my own feet-it's not something I dared to even hope for. I could not have managed it without your kindness."

"You would have managed it somehow," Harry said, smiling back. This was a much more lively version of Mrs. Flint than she'd met previously. She supposed she ought to stop referring to her as 'Mrs. Flint' in her head, in fact. Merriam was nothing like that shade of a person she'd led through the Floo over the holidays.

"Nevertheless, I thank you," Merriam said, leaning forward to embrace Harry warmly. Pulling back, she added, "Please send my regards to your cousin as well. I know it was some sort of favor between him and my son to put us in touch with you, but he was very kind about it."

"I'll make sure Rigel knows," she promised. "He's over in the Americas now, but I'll certainly tell him in my next letter."

"You two must be very close," Merriam mused, her eyes soft. "You look so alike. Almost like brothers. Marcus should have had a brother, only..." The woman sighed, a sad sound that was full of regret but free of defeat. "Well." With a determined grimace, the

woman shook her head and turned toward the living room. "Here I am, prattling on, when there's work to be done."

"Would you like any help?" Harry offered automatically.

"Not much left to do," Merriam said. "I don't have much in the way of possessions: just what I've managed to accumulate recently. I admit I spent more of my earnings on patterned scarves than I ought to have, but *he* always said they were a gaudy-" She broke off, clearing her throat. Glancing apologetically at Harry, she said, "I'm getting better about that. Sometimes it just slips out."

"It's quite all right," Harry said. Casting about for a change of subject, she remarked, "You cut your hair, didn't you? I didn't notice at first with the headscarf covering it."

"I did," Merriam said, smiling proudly. Harry supposed this was probably something else she'd not been allowed to do previously, or perhaps she simply felt the need for a physical change.

"It suits you," Harry said. She tried to think of something else to say, but at that moment a blur of movement startled her into whirling toward the kitchen. A grey and white spotted cat streaked from the doorway into the living room, where it dove beneath the couch and stayed crouched there, luminous eyes blinking distrustfully up at her.

"That's Tatty," Merriam said, suddenly sounding a tad nervous. "I know you didn't say whether you minded me getting a pet, but I found it shivering in the rain one night and I didn't know how to contact you, so-"

"It's all right," she assured her. "I don't mind at all. I should have suggested it, in fact; I know how boring it is living by yourself." She'd only done it for a few weeks during the Great Polyjuice Fail that spring, and even that had been enough to drive her a bit mad.

There came a knock at the door, and Merriam glanced at her swiftly, smiling apologetically, before opening it. There was a man standing

there with his hat in his hands, looking perfectly ordinary and only the slightest bit familiar. Had she seen him before? She couldn't be sure, but there was something about the middle-aged man that tugged on her memory.

"Harry, this is Mr. Adam Quincy," Merriam said, gesturing to the man, who nodded to her politely. "He delivers medical supplies to Maywell, and he's kindly offered me the use of his cart to move my things to my new address. Adam, Harry is the one who's been kind enough to let me stay here for so long."

Harry smiled in a friendly way. "It was nice of you to help Merriam out like that," she said.

Mr. Quincy's cheeks turned slightly mottled. "Well, when I heard her Floo wasn't connected yet, I couldn't let her haul all them boxes alone. What are co-workers for, after all?"

Merriam looked equal parts grateful and slightly suspicious at his reasoning, but nodded along nonetheless. "Shall we, then? I've just about finished the last box, but perhaps Harry wouldn't mind carrying the others down with you while I wrap the last few things..."

Harry moved toward one of the boxes in response. Mr. Quincy hurried forward to heft one as well and they trailed down the stairs. When they reached the street, Harry's eyes lit on a simple, low-bearing cart waiting by the curb and stumbled slightly.

"It's you," she said, wonder in her voice at the complexity of coincidence that she seemed unceasingly to be a party to. "That day in the alley, when I caught up to the boy who took my purse-to Jack. It was your cart that stopped him."

"I'm surprised you remember an old cart horse in the face of all that excitement," Mr. Quincy said, chuckling as he moved forward to set his box down.

She followed suit and turned to face him once she'd relieved her own burden. "Well, I admit I thought you were a cauldron merchant at the time, not a general delivery person."

The middle-aged man winced as he rubbed his back exaggeratedly. "That was a tough job. My muscles remember it well."

She cut herself off from asking why he didn't use magic to lighten the load a bit by reminding herself sharply that the man who delivered supplies to the clinic was, according to Mrs. Hurst, a Squib. If he were that deliveryman, her question would be entirely ignorant and insensitive.

Mr. Quincy led the way back upstairs, where they each grabbed another box. "Should we-ah-leave room for the furniture?" he asked, looking about the apartment at all the items that were obviously not prepped to be moved.

"No, the furniture stays," Merriam said. "It's all Harry's." Harry started to open her mouth, ready to tell the woman to take anything she'd like, as it had all been a gift from Leo anyway, but Merriam cut her off. "No, it's all right. I've been saving all these months, you know. I'm quite looking forward to going shopping for the necessities."

"If you need someone to haul them home..." Quincy offered, a bit shyly.

"Thank you, Adam," Merriam said, smiling gratefully. A thought seemed to enter her head and her smile widened brightly. "Oh! One moment." She hurried to the kitchen to retrieve what looked like a basket full of various baked goods-muffins, biscuits, scones: that sort of thing. "Here, I made this for you-to thank you, I mean, for being so kind." She held the basket out to Mr. Quincy, who nearly dropped the box he held out of distraction as he reached for it.

"You didn't have to," he said, not looking at all sincere as he eyed the basket of goodies with happy anticipation.



"It was no trouble," Merriam said, waving off his thanks.

"Even so," Quincy said, hooking the basket carefully through one forearm and resituating the box in his hands. "I'll savor it."

He headed down the stairs once more, and Harry followed him, trying hard not to wonder what exactly the relationship was between the two of them. Should she tell Flint his mother had a potential suitor? She shook her head mentally. Aside from a suicidal inclination to see the look on Flint's face when she told him he might be getting a stepfather, there was no point to it. By the distrust in her eyes and the careful way she treated the man, Merriam wasn't ready for a romantic relationship in any case. Harry could sort of relate, though for different reasons, obviously. Who had time for it, really?

When the cart was loaded, Merriam handed the key she'd been given over to Harry, who used it to lock up the apartment before following the other two downstairs for the final time.

"Would you like to see the new place?" Merriam asked once they were ready to set out. Harry considered. She supposed she didn't have much else to do-nothing that couldn't wait, at least. It would be nice to know where the woman ended up settled, in case she wanted to visit again.

"Sure," she said, smiling. "Lead the way."

Merriam carried Tatty the cat in a makeshift sort of carrier while Mr. Quincy hefted the cart by its long handles until only the wheels touched the ground and set off at a steady pace behind her. The older man was stronger than he looked; he didn't appear to be straining himself at all, despite the fact that the cart alone must weigh a good amount for its size. Belatedly, Harry plucked one of the heavier boxes from the back of the cart, figuring that if she was walking over with them anyway, she might as well pitch in. She'd levitate the whole cart if she didn't think it would be incredibly insulting to a man who made his living hauling materials.

Her arms ached a bit by the time they reached their destination-a quiet little cul-de-sac tucked off of Pendragon Alley, not far at all from the intersection with Wormwood Row-but she'd carried heavier crates of potions farther.

The townhouse was a little rundown on the outside, but it was clean, and the interior appeared to be in good repair. It didn't take long to deposit Merriam's things in the empty kitchen. Harry helped her unpack her utensils while Mr. Quincy shifted somewhat awkwardly in the doorway, watching Merriam arrange the bowls and pans to her liking. The man had an uncertain look on his face, but his voice came out relatively even when he said, "Do you want to grab a bite once you've unpacked a bit? Since you haven't got much in the way of groceries yet, I mean. It'll be good to keep your strength up if you're going furniture shopping later."

Merriam stilled her movements and flicked her eyes his way without moving the rest of her head an iota. "I've taken up a fair amount of your time already, Adam."

"I don't mind," the man said, twisting his cap between his hands.

"Well, I do need to eat something," Merriam said slowly. Her eyes came to rest on Harry, who was both pretending not to listen and keenly waiting for the first opportunity to casually excuse herself. "Harry, are you hungry?"

"I had a big breakfast," Harry lied, smiling gratefully. "I also wanted to stop in and see Healer Hurst before she leaves for lunch, so I'd better be heading out, actually. It was great to see your new place, Merriam. I'm sure you'll be very happy here."

Merriam folded her into a quick hug and said, "Thank you for all of your help, Harry. Would you mind doing me one more favor?"

"Name it," Harry said easily. She liked Merriam a lot, and it wasn't as though she was actually going to the clinic.

"I made muffins for Healer Hurst to thank her for helping me find a place to rent," Merriam said, digging in one of the boxes to pull out a basket, the contents of which were covered with a tartan cloth. "I was going to take them in tomorrow for my shift, but I'm worried they'll be stale by then. Since you're going there anyway, would you mind... ?"

Harry smiled ruefully at her luck. It looked as though she'd be visiting Mrs. Hurst after all. "Of course," she said, taking the basket. "It's no trouble at all."

She bid Merriam and Mr. Quincy a quick farewell and let herself out into the street. She had taken only a couple of steps toward the mouth of the cul-de-sac when she spotted an entirely obvious figure loitering by Quincy's empty cart. "Seriously?" she said, affecting an exasperated grimace that threatened to turn into a grin at the innocent smile that was flashed in her direction.

"Well, fancy meeting you here," Leo said, entirely disingenuous. She wondered which of his ears had seen her on the way over. Then again, they weren't far from Pendragon Alley, where construction for the tournament was steadily increasing in scale. He might have spotted her himself, if he was in the area. "Didn't know you were in the market for a second place. Trying to buy up all the real estate in the alleys, are you?"

"You got me," she deadpanned. "I'm planning on building my palace complex here, and once I have all the land in a five-mile radius I can make the entire area unplottable and live out my days the sultan to an invisible kingdom. I might even get a harem." She had no idea why those words were coming out of her mouth. Perhaps the Dominion Jewel was a bad influence on her mental processes.

"Let me know when you start taking applications," Leo said, amused.

"Girls only." She sniffed, brushing past him with her basket of muffins held primly before her.

He fell into step beside her, peering at her haul curiously. "What's in there? Kittens?"

She gave him an odd look. "Why would I be carrying a basket of kittens?"

"It's no less valid than any other guess," Leo said, grinning sideways at her. "Come on, don't leave me in suspense. Is it flowers?"

"I doubt Margo would appreciate the competition," she said, rolling her eyes. "They're muffins, if you must know. I'm taking them to your mother at the clinic."

Leo's eyebrows shot upwards. He gave her a long, somewhat fascinated look, then said, "You bake."

She spluttered. " No. I don't. They're not from me."

"They'd be from the mysterious brunette whose boxes you were carrying, then?" he asked, smirking at the annoyed flush that adorned her cheeks.

"She's not mysterious," Harry said. "She's nice."

"Funny that I've never met her before," Leo said idly.

"She keeps to herself."

"She seems to know Quincy pretty well," Leo pointed out. "You, too, which is odd considering how rarely you come this far into the alleys."

"She works at the clinic." Harry sighed. There was really no point hiding anything from Leo. He always found out eventually, and since Merriam's identity had been well established at that point, she didn't need to hide her presence anymore.

Leo's bright hazel eyes lit up in realization. "I knew Ma was keeping something from me. She's been shifty when I drop by Maywell of

late. Imagine, keeping an employee secret from her own son. I'd accuse her of trying to cheat on her taxes if the clinic wasn't exempt from tithing."

Though he didn't sound seriously put out by it, she still felt it necessary to exonerate his mother from the accusation of dishonesty. "I asked her to keep Merriam's presence there quiet," she told Leo, glancing away from his intrigued expression to adjust the muffin basket. They were heavier than she thought muffins ought to be. Perhaps they were of the denser variety, like pumpkin.

"I see," Leo said, his voice a sly, musing drawl. "Would this Merriam also be the reason I've been barred from your apartment for the last six months? I noticed your cart of boxes was traveling from that direction instead of from the upper alleys."

She resigned herself to Leo being entirely smug the rest of the afternoon. His sense of superiority was always worst when he figured out the answer to something that had been puzzling him. "She's my aunt. I got her a job at the clinic and let her stay in my apartment until she had enough saved to live on her own."

"Your aunt is a Muggle, not a Squib," Leo said archly.

She didn't know how he knew about Lily's sister. Or how he knew Merriam was a Squib. Perhaps his magic had told him. Sometimes Leo just knew things about people from glancing at them-something that was likely related to his mother's ability to identify a lie the moment it was told in her vicinity, she suspected.

"As far as it concerns *you*," she said pointedly, "she is my Aunt Merriam and she is utterly unremarkable in every way."

"She's in trouble," Leo surmised, speaking quietly-almost to himself. "Ma kept her from me because she knew I'd be interested in a woman living in your apartment and didn't want me drawing attention to her with my curiosity. You could have just told me, of course, and I'd have left her alone."

"It isn't any of your business," she said sternly. "Merriam needed complete anonymity to feel safe. We didn't know who might be looking for her or how hard they would search. The fewer people aware of her, the better."

"We?" Now Leo's look was pointedly questioning.

"Don't worry about it," she said, smiling in a way she knew would annoy him. He just hated not knowing things.

"Fine," Leo sighed. Then he brightened. "This means your flat is free game again, right?"

"Why do you have such a fascination with my flat?" she asked, pausing before the door to Maywell clinic and raising an eyebrow imperiously until Leo opened the door obligingly.

"It's not the flat that interests me," Leo said, an odd smirk on his face that caused her to frown momentarily as she attempted to place the emotion that had prompted it.

She opened her mouth to ask for him to clarify his comment, but shut it once more as the tense atmosphere of the lobby they'd walked into registered in her subconscious. She looked around, but didn't see anything immediately out of place. There were no patients bleeding out on the floor, just a handful of Healers collected grimly around a door on the far side of the room-the one that led to Healer Hurst's office, in fact.

Leo started forward, wariness fighting with concern in his eyes, but Janice, who stood closest to the office door, with an ear cocked toward the crack, held up a hand to forestall any questions. Harry turned her ear toward the sounds coming through the door and made out Healer Hurst's voice ranting in an agitated manner that didn't speak well of whomever she addressed herself to.

"-must be something you can do. She's late-stage, for pity's sake, she *can't wait* that long," Mrs. Hurst was saying, her voice a cocktail

of anger and stringent disgust, laced with acute desperation. "I put her name on the list months ago. Don't tell me you haven't had any come in since then."

The voice that answered her was edged with the distinctively disembodied quality that accompanied transmission via Floo. "You have to understand, Healer Hurst; your clinic is an outreach of this hospital, and while the work you're doing is important, it doesn't contribute to the hospital as a whole. The patients here in our wards have to be given priority-"

"That's bollocks," Mrs. Hurst hissed. "Whether or not a patient can pay doesn't determine what medicines they need to *live*. Now I have an eight-year-old girl about to die of a curable disease because you gave the potion she needs to someone whose case could have waited the four months you're telling me it's going to take to get another dose in."

"That's not the-"

"Tell me which part of that is incorrect, *Healer*?" Mrs. Hurst snapped.

There was a distorted sigh, and then the voice said, a little quieter. "I'm sorry, Healer Hurst. It's hospital policy to prioritize patients in-house over those being treated elsewhere."

"It's a hospital!" Mrs. Hurst exploded. "The only policy should be saving people's lives."

"I'm sorry," the voice said again. Whoever it was sounded a little sorry, but mostly they just sounded tired. "Look, have you tried contacting Burke? I know he has sources that can procure the potion in couple of weeks or so."

"If we could afford to buy the potion from the likes of Horace Burke we wouldn't need the hospital's subsidy," Mrs. Hurst said. "I'd try brewing it myself if I could afford the bloody ingredients."

"That potion requires a license to-"

"You think I don't know that?" Mrs. Hurst shot back. She took a deep, audible breath before saying, quieter, "There must be something. Appeal to one of the big donors. Tell them there's a little girl who desperately needs an expensive potion. Tell them they could save a life. Someone will be charitable."

The voice sounded skeptical. "I'm sorry, Healer Hurst, but we don't generally approach our sponsors on individual cases. Even if we did... she's nobody, don't you see? No one is going to sponsor a nameless orphan-there's just no prestige in it."

"She's not *nameless*, you-you-" Mrs. Hurst sounded close to tears. "Her name is Cora. She has blonde hair and green eyes and she's *brave* -"

"Healer Hurst, I'm sorry but I need to get back to my station," the voice said. They sounded awfully uncomfortable. "I will contact you immediately if something changes in the wait list or the status of the backorder."

There was the sound of a frustrated growl and then silence for several long minutes. Harry, Leo, and the clinic staff slowly left their vigil by the door and drifted toward the front desk with varying expressions of disappointment and anger.

At the other end of the lobby, a door creaked open slowly and a head of red curls tied up with a blue ribbon peeked out at them, blinking wide eyes curiously. It was Margo. Harry forced a smile for the little girl, who smiled back and slipped across the room to stand among them. "What did the supply lady say?" she asked, looking up at them all with the sort of inexplicable hope that came to the young without reason. "Are they gonna bring Cora her potion?"

"Not today, Margo," one of the Healers said, summoning a brave smile for the girl.



Margo frowned in a way that was both assessing and confused. "They better bring it soon. Cora can't move so much anymore." She heaved a small sigh and shook her head back and forth. "Grown-ups never do anything fast enough." She left them to re-enter the room she'd stepped out of, the one her friend Cora was laid up in, Harry supposed.

Once the door was closed behind her, Harry turned to the Healers with a frown. "What's wrong with Cora?"

"Seifer's Syndrome," one of them said. The tone was bleak.

She winced. She had read about it only once in one of Archie's schoolbooks, but the description stuck with her, horrible even in a sea of similarly horrifying descriptions of magical diseases. Seifer's Syndrome, named for the man who first contracted it, wasn't common in adults, as it was caused by a mutation in the development of a magical core. In those it afflicted, the magical core developed fully in terms of power and stability but failed to become self-contained. Instead of remaining in a concentrated sphere as a healthy core would, the mutated core spilled its magic into the patient's physical body, in some cases, or into their mental landscape in others. Rarely, it could spill over in both the physical and mental realms, but those cases did not generally survive long enough to be diagnosed and treated.

Over time, the saturation of magic into the muscles and sinews degenerated their physical structure, resulting in the slow loss of mobility and finally in the dissolution of major organ systems. It was fatal, if left untreated, but there was a cure. A potion existed which, once introduced to the drinker's system, swept the body and collected all traces of magic from the physical cells, bonding to the magic and drawing it together into the form it ought to take naturally. The potion acted as an attractant that kept the magic consolidated once it had cohered, bringing the magic back to the core like a magnet attracting filaments each time thereafter that the patient drew the magic out to use it. She knew it acted in the mind similarly, which probably made the potion incredibly difficult to brew. Potions that

affected the mind were always more complex than those that affected only the physical realm.

From what she knew of Seifer's Syndrome, the fact that Cora had already begun to lose mobility was not good. If the magic had progressed that far... she didn't have long if they wanted to save her heart and lungs. The worst part of Seifer's Syndrome was that magic saturated the patient's body to the extent that adding any additional magic-like Healing magic-only accelerated the degenerative process.

When Mrs. Hurst came out into the lobby, she had the look of someone who was consciously stopping themselves from doing something they might regret. Harry couldn't blame the woman; she was angry, too.

"What do we do?" Janice asked. "Is that it?"

"No," Mrs. Hurst said sharply. "We find another way."

"She doesn't have much longer," another Healer, Carol, said quietly.

"I know that," Mrs. Hurst said. She frowned deeply, then said, "I'll have to contact my husband. He doesn't have a license for it, but if I ask him to he'll brew it for me. Perhaps he can convince the Guild to sponsor the ingredients without telling them what he needs them for."

"I'll donate the cost of the ingredients," Leo said, his tone brooking no argument. "It'll come from the Court's funds. We're going to turn a good profit on the tournament. We can spare the gold."

Mrs. Hurst sent her son a grateful smile. "That's a huge help, Leo, thank you."

Harry wasn't sure she should speak up-she didn't know how the potion was brewed or what techniques it might call for, and she didn't want to give anyone false hope-but she felt she owed it to her conscience to at least try. "Do you have the recipe?" she asked.

Mrs. Hurst looked regretfully at her. "We don't. I'm sorry, Harry, but I don't think you can brew this one. It's supposed to be incredibly complicated; its production is strictly limited to those masters licensed for it. I've heard it's unusually volatile and very easy to get wrong."

She nodded thoughtfully. Her reservations made sense, but on the other hand... the same could be said of Aconite's Alleviation, which she had unofficially experimented with for several months in her second year. Volatile potions could be made less so by the addition of more magic, which she had in plenty. That, combined with her unusually advanced capability in wandless brewing techniques, meant she thought it unlikely that the potion would prove impossible for her to attempt. "I'd like to try," she said, setting her chin firmly. "I'll look through the guild's archives and see if I can't find the recipe. If it looks too difficult, I won't attempt it, but if I think I can manage, I'll give it a shot. I have a series of failsafes built into my lab," she assured the Healer, who looked doubtful. "I won't be in any danger. If it doesn't work, you still have Master Hurst."

"You'll get in trouble if anyone finds out you brewed it without a license," Mrs. Hurst said, looking troubled.

"Not as much trouble as your husband would," she said, smiling a bit wryly. "They can't strip me of a mastership I don't have, and they can't revoke a guild membership I don't have. The most they can do is fine me under the Unlicensed Distribution Act, and that's assuming they find out."

The Healer sighed, her eyes softening a bit. "It's admirable of you to want to help, Harry," she said. After a long moment of consideration, she added, "I suppose I can't stop you if you want to try. Please, be careful."

"I will," she promised. "I'll go to the guild now, and owl you with the estimated completion date if I find a viable recipe." She really hoped it wasn't something like Polyjuice, which had to brew a month before it was effective. She didn't think Cora had that long.

She left immediately, Leo on her heels.

"Do you really think you can do this?" he asked, looking equal parts hopeful and concerned.

"I won't know until I see the recipe," she said.

They fell into a solemn silence as they walked up toward the upper alleys. They passed the tournament site, where construction seemed to be well underway, but Harry didn't spare the preparations a glance. All her thoughts were focused on how she was going to get the potion completed. If she couldn't do it, could she contact Professor Snape and beg him to attempt it? Would he be willing to go to so much trouble for her at this early point in their relationship? Perhaps she could approach him via letter as Rigel, and say she needed the potion for a friend. She could also try contacting Madam Pomfrey at Hogwarts, to see if she knew any Healers who had access to the potion. She could even get Krait to set up a meeting with Horace Burke and pay for the potion outright, no matter that she could imagine the outrageous price such a potion would no doubt come at after Burke's significant 'convenience fee' was taken into consideration. Then again, the voice from the Floo had intimated that it would take upwards of a week for Burke to get hold of one. If she could brew it herself, Cora would get it all the quicker.

There were a handful of people moving about in the foyer, probably on their way back from lunch. She and Leo tried to look unobtrusive as they navigated the guild's corridors; it was lucky that academics tended to ignore things that didn't relate in some way to their own pursuits, as no one looked twice at the dusty teenagers who slipped into the guild's library with innocent expressions.

The archivist was at his desk, but they simply waved him off when he asked in a bored voice if they needed help finding anything. She'd spent plenty of time in the library during her internship and knew well enough how it was organized.

The potion they were looking for was called, unimaginatively, Seifer's Solution. Potioneers did love their simplistic alliterations, she thought, almost fondly. It would be filed alphabetically under the subheading of Medical Potions, so she crouched down near the S's and ran her finger along the row impatiently.

*Sand-skin Smoother... Scooner's Remedy... Shrinking Solution?* Annoyed, she glanced down the rest of the row. They weren't out of order; the recipe she was looking for simply wasn't there.

She stood and gave Leo a worried look. "They don't have a copy."

"Impossible," Leo said, shaking his head. "They have everything, even rare and highly restricted... oh. It must be classified as restricted material. It'll be locked in a case behind the archivist's desk."

She groaned. "I suppose you have to be a member of the guild to retrieve restricted material."

"That, or the son of a very lazy Aldermaster who notoriously hates fetching things for himself," Leo said, grinning slyly.

"I knew I brought you for a reason," Harry said, grinning back.

"You didn't bring me, I accompanied you," Leo corrected her.

"You can win the argument if you get us that recipe," she said, nudging him toward the end of the aisle.

Leo pasted on his most ingratiating expression and approached the archivist with a self-deprecating smile. "It looks like I need your help after all," he said, affecting a conspiratorial grin. "My father sent me to procure a copy of a recipe, but I can't find it in the general stacks."

"Which one?" the archivist asked, blinking eyes that looked as if they'd spent too many hours straining in low lighting.

"Seifer's Solution," Leo said, managing to sound both confidently informed and utterly uninterested at the same time. "He's researching the socio-economic impact of using cost-ineffective ingredients in vital medical cures and realized he doesn't know the exact quantities of ingredients needed for this one-I reckon it's pretty notorious for being expensive, cause Dad says his survey would be incomplete without it."

"He's right, it's well known for its costly preparation," the archivist sniffed. "The recipe is restricted, however. I can't give it to non-guild members."

Leo raised an eyebrow and spoke slowly, as though he questioned the archivist's intelligence. "It's not for me. It's for my father. The Aldermaster. He's in the middle of a very important experiment that absolutely cannot be left unattended."

The archivist frowned. "Even so, it's not protocol to release restricted materials to unaffiliated people."

"You're not releasing it to me," Leo said patiently, "You're releasing it to him. I'm just carrying it. You can release restricted material via owl post if a master currently abroad requests it, can you not?"

"Well, yes," the archivist said.

"Well, it's the same," Leo said, his expression clearly conveying how obvious he found the situation. "I'm just the owl this time. He's authorized me to sign in his name and everything, so your records won't even be wrong."

They would, in fact, be wrong, but the archivist didn't know that and he looked a little reassured at the prospect. "I suppose... if he really can't be interrupted from his experiment... "

"You know how he is," Leo sighed. "Always working. The number of times I've had to come in here and fetch his documents... well, I suppose allowances must be made for genius."

The archivist smiled in a way that said he commiserated with Leo's situation. "That's true. You're a very supportive son, Mr. Hurst."

"Just Leo," he said, now affecting a sheepish shrug. "I'm sure we'll be seeing a lot more of each other by the time Father's project is complete."

"No doubt," the man said, reaching into his belt pouch for a set of keys.

Not five minutes later, they walked out of the library with a copy of the potion tucked safely in Harry's bag. She couldn't quite believe that had worked, but Leo, the cocky player, was *whistling* as they exited the guild.

"Stop that," she said, swatting him in annoyance. "That's the most cliché sign of wrongdoing ever."

"What was that?" Leo cupped a hand to his ear. "Did I hear a 'thank you, Leo'?"

She had to smile at that. "Thank you, Leo."

"You're welcome, Harry," he said. He glanced around them, then ducked into a little side alley before they reached the junction with Diagon. "Shall we see what the fuss is about, then?"

She pulled out the parchment and unrolled it, grimacing when it revealed itself to be much longer than the average recipe. She could see a diagram toward the middle of the text that depicted a cauldron divided into three distinct horizontal levels. Layered brewing meant Indirect Stirring-no wonder it was considered difficult. She scanned down a few more paragraphs and saw yet another cauldron divided into two separate parts. She frowned, skimming to the final few steps where there were instructions for combining the two cauldrons into a larger cauldron before the last step. "Simultaneous brewing," she said, feeling like whistling herself. That was not something she'd seen before. She flattered herself that she was relatively

experienced at brewing multiple potions simultaneously, as she found it maximized her time in the lab, but there was no doubt she would have to memorize the steps and timing verbatim before even attempting it. There would be no time to double-check the recipe once she began this monstrosity.

"Bicorn horn," Leo groaned. "Dragon's teeth, a *phoenix feather*? Does this make a potion or a wand?"

Her eyes flicked up to the ingredients, grimacing as she read the first few and began mentally calculating cost. "I suppose the potion requires a large concentration of magically saturated ingredients in order to make the potion even close to brewable for the average wizard. The alchemical equation they reference for calculating imbuing durations has one of the highest coefficients I've seen outside of complex transfigurations."

"I'm not going to pretend I understand what that means," Leo said, eyeing her sidelong. "I understand this, though." He pointed a tanned finger to the last ingredient listed and her heart skipped a beat.

Basilisk scale. The potion called for a *basilisk scale*. No wonder it was on backorder. Even with the immense influx of basilisk parts recently on the market, they were still hoarded jealously in the knowledge that it might well be the last influx this century. The guild had what scales they'd decided to purchase at her discounted rate a year ago, but she doubted they passed them out like confetti at a parade. She didn't even know how many they had purchased, in fact. She hadn't ever asked Snape, who had been put in charge of the allocations.

"My da says there are some basilisk parts set aside at the guild for experimental use, but there's a lengthy application process for masters to get access to them," Leo said.

"It's okay," she said. "I have one."



Leo frowned, but then his eyes lit up with remembrance and landed on her hands. "The ring... "

"It's a full scale, so it will work," she assured him, fingering the place it rested through her gloves. She didn't need it anymore, she told herself. She had begun wearing it to remind her of the price of prideful magic, but now she had a demented megalomaniacal rock living in her head-she didn't think she was liable to forget anytime soon. It would do more good in this potion than it did on her finger.

"We just have to get the rest of the ingredients, then," Leo said, taking a deep breath. "It says it takes thirteen hours to complete. Can you work that long?"

"Sure," she said, steeling herself. She hadn't ever brewed so many hours in a row, not even using the time-turner. She could stay awake much longer than thirteen hours, however, so she told herself she could do this, too. A lot of the time would probably be monitoring the potions as they simmered, in any case. It wasn't impossible.

Leo looked at her determined expression and smiled fondly. "I'll help." At her surprised look, he huffed a laugh. "My father is the Aldermaster, Harry. I do know a thing or two about potions. Even if this one is hideously complicated, I can at least chop and shred and take direction."

"A second set of eyes would be great," she admitted, already imagining the difficulty she was going to have in monitoring two unfamiliar brews at once. If she made a mistake, she could ask Snape as Rigel for a couple of the basilisk scales he'd set aside for her-or ask to use one of the scales he'd been given for experimentation, even. It would be a costly delay, however; she'd rather get the thing right the first time.

"Let's track down the ingredients today, then, and after a good night's sleep we can tackle the potion tomorrow," Leo said, his eyes swiftly tracing the ingredient list in a way that told her he was memorizing it.

She nodded. As much as she wanted to jump into the potion as soon as possible for Cora's sake, she knew it was irresponsible. She needed to be fully charged if she was going to set her mind to something for so many hours without break.

They set off for Tate's apothecary, though Harry was not optimistic enough to assume that would be their only stop that afternoon. The list of ingredients was as varied as it was extensive. There was no way Tate could have everything they needed, especially as a couple of the ingredients-such as mermaid tail skin-were decidedly uncommon in strictly savory shops.

It was a long afternoon by the time they finished chasing down unlikely ingredients in the seediest of Knockturn Alley's supply stores. They got all they needed, in the end, though Harry was still wincing at the prices on some of the items. She was certain the acromantula fang was overpriced even considering the danger involved in procuring it.

Harry went home to begin familiarizing herself with the convoluted recipe while Leo took off toward the lower alleys to make sure the right people knew he would be unavailable for most of the following day. Things could proceed apace without his direct involvement, but only as long as the key members of the Court of the Rogue's inner circle were well informed in his absence.

She told her parents over dinner that night that she was going to be working on a project in her potions lab with a friend tomorrow and that it was very important they were not disturbed.

James eyed her with all the suspicion of a career Auror and said sharply, "What friend would that be?"

"Leo," she said between hurried bites of green beans. "It's a potions project, and we think it'll take about thirteen hours to finish, so I could really use his help."

"Oh, you're just going to be spending thirteen hours alone in the basement with an older boy, is that all, Harry?" James asked, the sarcasm not saving his almost terrified expression.

"You can come watch if you want, Dad," she said, a bit cruelly. "Oh, wait. You'll be at work. I reckon you'll miss all the fun, then."

He choked and coughed into his potatoes for at least two minutes, which was well worth the spluttering demands to know what had happened to his innocent little fawn that poured from his end of the table for the rest of dinner.

"Add and I will check on them throughout the day," Remus said, not seeming too concerned. "Just to make sure they eat and drink," he added at Harry's unimpressed look.

She smiled and shrugged. "As long as you don't interrupt the brewing process," she allowed.

"Is that what they're calling it these days?" Sirius muttered into his pork.

That, of course, set James off again and Harry had to wonder why her family was made up of such dramatic idiots. Gryffindors, she supposed, pushing the remainder of her vegetables into her mouth thoughtfully. She swallowed, wiped her mouth with a napkin, then stood. "I've got to finish memorizing all the steps tonight," she said, picking up her plate to take it to the kitchen. "Thanks for dinner, Mum, Sirius."

She hurried up to her room and got back to work, making extensive notations on a spare piece of parchment about what order she ought to prep ingredients in and how she ought to stage the two cauldrons so that the entire process could be streamlined efficiently. It was a tedious task, but by the time she turned out the lights she felt at least reasonably confident that she wouldn't get lost in the recipe the next day. It might take all of her impressive powers of concentration

and every hard-earned skill she had under her belt, but she would complete this potion to perfection. Nothing else was tolerable.

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Leo Floored into her house at seven am sharp, dressed for the first time that she could recall in actual brewing robes complete with gloves, sleeve-catchers, and a face mask dangling from his belt-in case the whole thing quite literally blew up in their faces, she supposed.

"Are those fire-retardant boots?" she asked, looking down at his feet with approval.

"I just asked the store clerk which brand Harriet Potter prefers," Leo said modestly.

"Very funny," she said with a half-grin. "Come on, I'll show you the setup. I've arranged everything in a double-assembly-line fashion so that we won't be stepping on one another's toes while moving ingredients from workspace to cauldron. I'll go over the process with you in detail before we begin, but basically I'm just going to be testily ordering you to do things all day, so sorry in advance for that. I've been told I become very single-minded while brewing, and I don't want you to take offense if I seem terse."

Leo chuckled. "You won't scare me off, lass. Just make sure to yell at me before I mess up-I'd rather my ego be bruised than the potion be jeopardized."

She smiled gratefully. "Thanks. It's right this way."

They passed James on their way to the basement stairs. He was on his way to the kitchen for breakfast, but he paused to eye them forbiddingly as they descended. "Be careful," he called after them.

"We will," she called back. "You can check in when you get home from work-I don't doubt we'll still be at it."

James mumbled something about her saying such things on purpose before sulking his way into the kitchen. She sometimes wondered how her father had become an Auror when he was just a giant child, but then she thought maybe he played up his childish nature on purpose when he was at home. Perhaps it was a form of relaxation therapy after eight or nine hours of complete seriousness at his job.

Refocusing her attention on the task at hand, she ushered Leo into the basement and closed the door to minimize potential distractions. The last thing she wanted to do was upend something by mistake because Addy or Remus had made a loud noise upstairs.

"Your dad doesn't seem to like me much," Leo commented.

"He doesn't like any boys who are friends with me," she said, waving off his concern. "Unfortunately you're the only one besides Archie, so far, so you bear all of that protective animosity squarely. I'm sure he'll like you better once I make other male friends."

Leo sent her a look that was hard to decipher, but didn't comment. Instead, he cast his eyes around the room to note the placement of everything she'd set up. "Shall we get started then?"

She explained everything that was going to happen and which order it needed to happen in, so that he would have at least some idea as to what the potions should be looking like at various stages. She had to explain what the tubes affixed to the insides of the cauldrons were, as Leo had apparently not progressed far enough in his studies with the Aldermaster to have learned about layered potions, but he picked up the concept quickly enough. She had already cast the transparency charms over the outsides of the cauldrons, so that they'd be able to monitor all five layers-two in one cauldron, three in the other-without difficulty. She thought wryly that it was a good thing she had so much linseed oil on hand. Honestly, who'd ever heard of a five-layered potion before?

With a prolonged Tempus Charm hanging in the air above the cauldrons, they began. At first it was the same as any other potion; she whipped up the base and added ingredients at an easy rhythm, keeping an eye on the clock but otherwise unstressed. Once she was a ways into the first potion, she began the second, adjusting the heat on each cauldron as necessary and calling out the next ingredient to Leo as she went. He supplied her smoothly with everything she asked for and even anticipated the switching of stirring implements where necessary.

As she began building the layers, however, things became more challenging. While the two cauldrons were within easy reaching distance of one another, the stages that required both cauldrons to be Indirectly Stirred at the same moment were still incredibly awkward. It took a ridiculous amount of concentration to focus the wandless magic in her left hand in a clockwise motion while making the layer she was affecting with her right hand move anti-clockwise. If she hadn't spent a good half-hour practicing that exact feat the night before with a couple of bowls of water, she was certain she would have messed it up royally.

Apart from the stirring issues, keeping the layers straight in her head was more difficult than she thought. It would help if the layers were a significantly different color from one another, but they all ended up a greenish-greyish haze despite the linseed oil keeping them from mixing. If she ever annotated the recipe in her own compendium, she would suggest brewers add a harmless food coloring to the different layers in order to make the mental compartmentalization easier. As it was, she had to stop herself twice from putting ingredients into the wrong tube in the three-layered cauldron. In retrospect she ought to have labeled the tubes with the color corresponding to the food coloring she ought to have added to the layers so that she didn't almost accidentally add the fairy wings to the middle layer instead of the bottom layer.

Leo was a lifesaver. He adjusted the heat underneath the cauldrons a dozen times over in between handling ingredients, and without him

there to provide emergency warming or cooling charms she didn't know how she'd have been able to adjust the speed at which the different layers were evolving so that their reactions all came to a close within the same fifteen-minute window.

They worked until their arms and fingers ached, and then they kept working. Remus came down to feed them lunch at some point, but Harry barely remembered eating a sandwich mindlessly out of someone's hand as she feverishly counted the pulses of wandless magic she was sending into the bottom and middle layers of the cauldron before her. She only remembered how her neck ached as she craned it awkwardly away from the cauldron while she chewed, acutely aware that one accidental drop of her spittle in the cauldron meant the entire process had been a waste.

At the nine-hour mark, she slowed her briskly robotic motions and allowed herself to breathe deeply, blinking the cauldron smoke from her green contacts. "We're out of ingredients," Leo said. She looked over to see him leaning tiredly against a stool.

She smiled, equally exhausted. "That's it," she said, stepping back from the cauldrons almost regretfully-like a mother stepping away from her child at its first play date. "The potions are entirely in synch now. They have to be kept at constant heat for the next two hours, then the layers are dissolved and they simmer another hour, then the two cauldrons finally get combined. After an hour of letting the mixture fully evolve, it gets taken off the fire and the brewing process is officially ended. It has to set up overnight until it congeals, so as long as everything is smooth sailing from here, it should be ready to drink at about eight o'clock tomorrow morning."

Leo smiled slowly. "You did it."

"We did it," Harry corrected him. Nevertheless he was right. The hard part was over. It was just a matter of monitoring things from there on out. She stretched her arms and shoulders, then cracked her neck and back with a grimace. "I can see why no one ever brews

this thing. It's a monster. I'd charge a fortune for it, too, if it wasn't a life-saving cure to a disease that affects *children* ."

"Don't worry about that now," Leo told her. "You did it. Cora is going to be fine."

She still scowled unhappily at the idea that other kids could die of something curable just because the treatment was difficult to make. She understood on some level that the Ministry couldn't just force all the talented potions brewers to spend their days making grueling potions like this for the betterment of society-no one would aspire to become a skilled brewer, if that was their fate-but on another level she found it very sad. When she had recovered from the ordeal of making Seifer's Solution, she would do research on what other potions were hard to come by simply because they were difficult to make. Maybe she couldn't force other Potions masters into slaving away over a cauldron for charity, but she could certainly do her part. She had promised, after all, that she would try to make more of a difference in the world.

Speaking of... "Leo, I was serious about teaching the alley kids Potions, you know," she said, glancing over at him again.

Leo favored her with a grateful look. "I thought you might be. I've talked with the ones who've shown an interest, and I thought after the tournament was over we could set up a class at the Phoenix. Nothing fancy, just an informational session to anyone who's interested in learning some good-to-have knowledge about potions in general. You may get some adults there, too."

"Sounds good," she said, nodding. "Just give me a time and place." She looked over the cauldrons once more, adjusted the fire slightly on one of them, then nodded again, this time to herself. "Leo, I think I can take it from here." When he looked ready to protest, she held up a hand. "No, I mean it. I know you have things to take care of in the alleys this close to the tournament. I'll finish up the tedious parts and bring the potion down to the clinic tomorrow morning, first thing."



Leo looked torn, but he could see the sense in her words. There was no reason for both of them to waste their time doing what one person could do well enough. "All right. Thank you, Harry. I'll see you tomorrow morning at Maywell."

He picked up his mask and gloves from where they had been discarded early on and headed for the stairs. "Sorry I can't see you out," she called. She wasn't so confident that she'd risk leaving her cauldrons unattended.

"I remember where the Floo is," he said. Looking back over his shoulder, he added, "If you hear a scream, though, just assume I met your dad on the way out."

She chuckled after him, but it was interrupted by a fierce yawn. Time for a Pepperup Potion, it seemed. She downed one from her personal stash, claimed a stool, and sat, watching the cauldrons simmer with a sort of bored attention for an hour or so. Footsteps on the stairs made her look over and smile when she saw her dad coming down with a plate of food.

"Brought you some dinner," he said, looking curiously around at the mess they'd made. She supposed she should have been cleaning some of the workspaces while she waited, but she was tired. "Your friend leave already?"

She smiled. "You only brought one plate when you thought he was still here?"

James grinned. "I don't know what you mean. So, how'd it go, then? Save the world?"

"Something like that," she said, grinning proudly. "It's not finished yet, but in my expert opinion it qualifies as a success."

"Is it another one you invented?" James asked, peering at the two cauldrons with a distant sort of interest. "I've never seen someone do two cauldrons at once-do you really need so much of it?"

"I didn't invent this one. I'm making it for a friend. And it's actually two different potions at the moment," Harry said, shaking her head.

"They're just similar in color. You have to make the layers separately, then add them together at the end."

"Like when you make spaghetti," James said, nodding seriously. "So which is the noodles and which is the sauce?"

She laughed. "I'll let you know when I figure that out."

"All right, well, I won't disturb your important work," James said, setting down the plate. He fished in his pocket for a moment and came out with a letter. "This came for you while you were down here. In case you have a spare second to give it a read. I think it's from that friend of yours-the Muggleborn."

"Hermione," she murmured, accepting the letter with a frown.

"Thanks, Dad. I'll write a reply once I'm finished down here." She supposed it must be an answer to the letter she'd sent agreeing to meet up with the girl.

He left her to her work, and Harry checked on the cauldrons once more before tearing open the letter with her fingers.

*Dear Harry,*

*I'm so glad you got my last letter. You took longer than usual to reply, so I wasn't sure. I think meeting up in Diagon Alley is a fantastic idea; I don't very often make the trip, and when I do it's primarily for school supplies. It would be lovely to just explore the shops at a leisurely pace and see what we find.*

*How's tomorrow at eleven o'clock? I know you mentioned getting ice cream, but I thought we could walk around a while first and then get lunch. I'll meet you at Fortescue's all the same if you aren't busy.*

*Your friend,*

## *Hermione*

Harry sighed as she folded the letter and tucked it away. She had suggested meeting in Diagon for ice cream as a sort of neutral activity that wouldn't involve anyone's parents or family-the fewer people she had to act like Archie around, the better. Although Archie had suggested distracting his friend with Addy, Harry wasn't quite ready to stoop to using her baby sister as a social shield.

She debated writing and telling Hermione that tomorrow wasn't a good day, but she honestly wanted to get the meeting over with. She was dropping off the potion tomorrow at nine, anyway, so she'd have plenty of time before eleven to psych herself up for the appointment. She mentally composed a quick note of acceptance while she scarfed down her dinner. She wondered briefly if she ought to warn Leo that she would be meeting a friend in Diagon tomorrow, but, really, why should she? Her friends were her own business, and just because he'd seemed a bit put out at her having lunch with Lestranger without telling him first didn't mean she had to give him a heads up whenever she was in the alleys for any reason. It was a public space, after all.

She turned her attention back to the potions, noting that it was about time to dissolve the linseed layers. She just hoped, idly, and in an unacknowledged part of her mind, that the location of their meeting didn't come back to bite her in the arse. She had enough problems at the moment without Leo deciding to become curious about Archie's friend Hermione as well.

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The potion had turned out perfectly. It was unappetizing as anything to look at, but that didn't stop her eyeing the sludge as though it was a brick of gold as she bottled it. After clearing her station and stowing the bottles safely in her bag, she was ready to go. It was about eight

thirty, so her parents had both left for work by the time she ducked into the kitchen to grab a roll and an apple to munch on on her way to the clinic.

She didn't hear Addy's distinctive and increasingly incessant babbling from the other rooms, so she assumed Remus was watching the one-year-old at his place that morning. She felt a mild disappointment that there was no one there to share her success with, but she supposed that was for the best; she couldn't explain what the potion she'd been working on was for without explaining that she was venturing much farther from the upper alleys than her parents suspected. She was certain they assumed she spent most of her time at the Potions Guild or near to it. It was thanks to the discretion and understanding of Master Hurst that they were not disabused of this notion, and for that she could forgive the Aldermaster for his well-intentioned tongue wagging in the presence of Master Snape.

The alley was bustling as always in the morning, but Harry scarcely noticed the people pushing past and around her as she walked. She was in too good a mood to care about other people's impatience, and her thoughts were utterly occupied with pride and a kind of smug satisfaction that she hoped she could be forgiven for, considering what she had achieved the day before. No longer would she say that Wolfsbane was the most difficult potion she had ever participated in brewing. Seifer's Solution made Wolfsbane look like a NEWT potion.

If she hadn't been so caught up in self-congratulation, she might have paid more attention to her surroundings. She might have noticed the girl with curly brown hair who stopped and turned as Harry walked by the bookshop. She might even have been able to give the girl the slip before she caught up with her in the crowd-if she had seen her in time to manage any sort of avoidance whatsoever. As it was, the small hand that caught her by the elbow also caught her completely by surprise.

She turned and blinked into large, brown eyes that were just a shade too dark to be called honey. The rest of the girl's face was rather

overwhelmed by the riot of brunette curls that cascaded over her shoulders where they were not held precariously back from her cheeks with a light blue headband.

"Harry," the girl said, looking into her eyes with so much familiarity that she could only be one person.

"Mione," Harry said, letting her face relax into a smile even as her brain whirled with confusion. "What are you doing here so early?" She made a show of looking up at the sky, if only to escape the girl's firmly assessing gaze, which slid over her in a way that was more like a Healer cataloguing a patient's condition than a girl reacquainting herself with a friend she hadn't seen in a while.

"I had some errands to run that I thought you'd probably find boring, and then I was going to spend an hour or so at Flourish and Blotts," Hermione said, shifting her weight from one foot to the other even as her head cocked curiously at Harry. "What are you doing here already?"

"Same," she confessed, affecting Archie's sheepish grin with the ease of long practice.

The brown-eyed girl looked fondly at her, and even though Harry knew she was seeing Archie-as-Harry, not her, it was still a bit unsettling. Was this how her cousin felt when he played Rigel at the gala? She felt as though she were an understudy unexpectedly asked to perform a part she'd memorized but never truly played before. "How alike we are. I've really missed you, Harry. How has your summer been? You look so different I almost didn't recognize you. Have you outgrown all of your robes in the last month?"

"Just about," she said, seizing on the explanation as to why she was wearing soft breeches and a tunic rather than true Wizarding robes. "It seemed wasteful to order new ones until I had to in the fall."

Hermione looked a little surprised. "That's surprisingly economical of you. Usually you say something like 'Even a robe worn only once is

worth buying it if it's beautiful."

Harry fought a grimace. That sounded exactly like something Archie would say; he was every bit the fashionably wasteful heir his father had raised. "Reckon you're rubbing off on me, 'Mione. Anyway, there's no one to see me looking stunning over the holidays, so it seems a wasted effort." She sighed in a slightly melancholy way that she knew embodied her cousin's sense of drama perfectly.

"Well, since we're here, should we just run our errands together?" Hermione asked, flashing very white teeth in excitement. "I won't mind going with you if you don't mind coming with me."

Harry was abruptly torn. She had very strict instructions to do nothing that would offend, annoy, or raise the suspicions of Miss Granger, but the potion for Cora felt like a lead weight in her bag, reminding her that she'd promised Leo and Mrs. Hurst to be at the clinic that morning. "I don't mind accompanying you, 'Mione, but can we meet up in about forty minutes? There's something I have to take care of really quick and then I'm free for the rest of the day."

"Well, what is it?" the other girl asked, smiling a bit exasperatedly. "I'll just come with you."

"It's... " she honestly had no idea what to say. "It's just a personal errand, that's all. It won't take too long."

Hermione frowned at her. "What's wrong, Harry? Is it embarrassing? Because I've seen you sing along to the Weird Sisters, so I rather think we're past all that. If it's a shop you don't want me to come in, I'll just wait outside."

Harry supposed the girl thought she needed to go underwear shopping or something. She started to open her mouth, even though she had no idea what words were going to come out, but was interrupted by a soft tug on the side of her breeches. She looked down to see the boy who sometimes worked at Eeylops-Jason, the

cook's son-looking up at her with thinly contained excitement and impatience.

"Hi!" he chirped, smiling a bit shyly at Hermione before turning back to Harry with an expression of fierce hope. "I'm Jason. Margo said it's okay if I say hi now. Do you have the medicine for Cora? Margo said you're gonna save her."

Harry fought the urge to close her eyes as she saw Hermione's gaze sharpen in her periphery. She leaned down so the boy didn't have to crane his neck up at her and said, very solemnly, "Can you keep a secret, Jason?" He nodded vigorously, hands twisting in his shirt with the nervous energy of a child. "Well, I have Cora's medicine right here," she told him, patting her bag gently. "Would you like to help me take it to her?"

She was tempted to just give him the bag and tell him to run it to the clinic, but as mature as she was sure the waifs of the Rogue were, she wasn't prepared to turn over a potion that had taken her the better part of a day and a month's worth of wages from Krait to brew to a kid. Even if taking it there herself did mean rousing Hermione's curiosity. She couldn't even be annoyed at the boy for coming up to her while she was with Hermione; she had told Margo specifically that it would be okay if the kids who kept eyes on her introduced themselves next time they saw her.

"You have medicine for someone?" Hermione asked, looking incredibly interested-and why wouldn't she be, training in the Healing track as she was? "Is that the errand you have to run?"

She nodded, attempting to look apologetic. "I told them I'd bring it by first thing, so I really have to get it done now. I promise I'll find you as soon as I'm back, though."

The curly-haired girl looked taken aback for a moment before her face set into an expression of stubborn insistence. "Can't I come with you? I had no idea you were delivering medicines in your free time, Harry. Do you work at an apothecary?"

"Sort of," she said, wishing she were anywhere else at that moment. Why did everything have to be complicated? She was supposed to drop off the medicine and meet Hermione at eleven. Trust Archie to make such a troublesome friend. "You don't need to come, though. It's some way from here, and-"

"Why don't you want me to come?" Hermione asked bluntly. She seemed the type to cut straight through nonsense to the heart of a matter. On second thought, she could see exactly why Archie needed a friend like that.

Harry firmed her expression. "It isn't in a good part of the alleys, Hermione. I'd feel better if you stayed here."

"All the more reason for me to come with you," Hermione said, frowning now. "You know I'm better than you in Defense class. What is this, misplaced chivalry?"

"I just don't think your parents would be happy with me taking you where I'm going," she tried.

"If you're going, I'm going," she said stoutly. "My parents don't have to know."

"She'll be okay," Jason piped up, looking between the two of them somewhat impatiently. "I'm Leo's, and so are you. Nobody is gonna bother us-'specially not with the sun out."

Hermione was looking very intrigued, now. Harry tried, but she was having trouble coming up with an argument that didn't amount to 'I just don't want you to come.' Noticing her struggle, Hermione said, "What's really wrong, Harry? Are you hiding something from me?" She didn't look hurt, exactly, more resigned, and Harry felt a familiar pang of guilt. It was the same way Draco sometimes looked at Rigel: as though she'd slammed a door in his face.

"Of course not," she said, realizing that this was only going to end one way. "Come if you want; I just think it'll be boring for you."



Looking eminently satisfied, Hermione smiled kindly down at Jason. "Lead the way, young sir."

Laughing, the boy scurried off through the crowd, only the occasional flash of his red shirt indicating that he hadn't abandoned them completely. He wasn't exactly the best of guides, but he likely knew Harry could get there without his help.

When they turned down Knockturn Alley, Hermione shrank imperceptibly closer to her side and whispered, "You weren't kidding. Who are you taking it to? They really live down here?"

She shook her head and took Hermione's hand gently, so that anyone who caught sight of them would know unmistakably that the girl was under her, and therefore Leo's, protection. "It's quite a trek, actually. This is just the only way to get there from the main alleys."

Brown eyes turned her way with unsuppressed curiosity, and Harry thought she could see what Archie liked so much about the girl. "Does the Wizarding part of London extend so far? I knew there were a couple of alleys that intersected with Diagon, like Craftsmen and Knockturn, but I didn't think there were alleys that led off from *them*, too."

Harry smiled. "I had the same reaction when I first came here. The alleys are much bigger than most people realize. The upper alleys, as most folk around here call them, are just the commercial district, really. It extends a fair way past Craftsmen Alley, since that's where almost all the English guilds reside, but that's nothing compared to how far the alleys extend in *this* direction."

They reached the end of Knockturn and turned down Kyprioth Court, where they spotted Jason waiting with pent-up energy for them to catch up. He led them at a fair distance through the patchwork of small back alleys that led from the cul-de-sac to the residential district beyond. When they turned down the first well-kept street, Hermione gasped. "It's a whole community," she said wonderingly,

looking around at everything with rapt attention. "With market stalls and neighborhoods and-how many people live here?"

"More than live in Hogsmeade, if that gives you some clue," she said. She wasn't sure of the exact population, herself, but she could make some guesses.

"So what sort of medicine is it?" Hermione asked, linking her hands together behind her as she walked. "Am I allowed to ask, or does it fall under patient/junior-Healer confidentiality?"

"It's a potion," she said, not sure how much to tell her. She didn't know Cora, so she couldn't say whether the child would mind her illness being discussed, but if Hermione was coming with her she'd see soon enough anyway. "I'm not the girl's Healer, so I suppose I can tell you. She has Seifer's Syndrome."

Hermione gave a little "oh" of dismay. "Is it... progressed?"

"Very," Harry said, grimacing. "The potion is going to cure her, though."

"Seifer's Solution," Hermione said, nodding seriously. "That's an extremely difficult potion to make, isn't it? Did you get it from St. Mungo's? Is that who you work for?"

"Not exactly," Harry said. She sighed, then paused in walking to give the other girl a searching look. "I know you've said that you would keep my secrets, but I need to know how far that promise goes, 'Mione."

Hermione frowned at her with a searching look of her own. "What are you talking about, Harry? This isn't like you. You know I'll always keep your secrets."

"I broke a law to procure this potion," she said gently. "I know how strong your moral code is, so I have to ask: are you okay being a

party to this? I can take you back the Diagon and meet up with you afterwards, if you'd rather not be involved."

"This is why you didn't want me to come," she guessed, eyes widening. "Harry, what did you do? Did you... did you steal it?"

Harry kept her gaze level. She wasn't going to admit to a specific crime without an assurance, no matter how much Archie trusted this girl. "Hermione, tell me now. Are you willing to tolerate my secrets even when they stray from the north of your moral compass? This isn't like keeping quiet about my being a girl. I broke the law, and I need to know if you trust me enough to look the other way."

Hermione's eyes flashed, and when she spoke her voice was hot and choked with indignation. "I certainly won't *look the other way*, you idiot! If I'm not looking, I can't *help you* ." As Harry's eyebrows rose with surprise, Hermione threw her arms around her in a fierce hug. "I can't promise to keep my mouth shut if I disagree with you, Harry, but I will never betray you. If you do something you think is morally questionable I want to know about it, so I can help you figure out another way, if there is one, or support you, if there isn't." She released Harry from her hug but kept her at arm's length by her shoulders to say, "Now stop being dramatic and just tell me what's going on."

Harry let her mouth relax into a smile and began walking again. Yes, she could see why Archie liked this girl. "The place we're going is a clinic called Maywell, and it services those of the lower alleys who can't afford to go to St. Mungo's for their care. While the Healers there are very dedicated to their patients, they just don't have the resources the bigger hospital does, and that can make it difficult to get medicines that are expensive or rare."

"And Seifer's Solution is both," Hermione said, grim understanding in her eyes.

She nodded. "St. Mungo's subsidizes or provides the medicines when they can, since Maywell clinic is actually a charity project

funded in large part by the hospital itself, but in this case they weren't able to get the medicine Cora needs in time to save her."

"So you stole it," Hermione finished, nodding sadly. "I wish you hadn't, Harry, but I completely understand why-"

"I didn't steal it," Harry said, huffing a laugh. "Honestly, 'Mione, you think I'm that good a thief? This stuff is guarded better than goblin gold, and that's if you can find it."

"You didn't... ?" Hermione swatted Harry's arm sharply. "You beast. Making me worry like that. Honestly."

Harry laughed again, but it faded when she glanced sidelong at the girl and confessed, "I brewed it."

Her mahogany gaze shot to Harry's face in shock. "Really? But that's so impressive, Harry. I knew you were better than average at potions, but that kind of skill is amazing. Oh, I'm just so *proud* of you for using your talents to help those less fortunate. I don't understand, though. What's wrong with brewing some medicine for a little girl? Is it because you're not a licensed Healer?"

"I'm not licensed to brew Seifer's Solution," she corrected, impressed that Hermione had come so close to guessing right. "There's a hefty fine for distributing it without leave."

Hermione waved her off with a relieved sigh. "I understand your caution, Harry, but next time please don't give me a heart attack unless you've committed a crime you can be sent to Azkaban for, all right?" Harry kept her face very relaxed and her eyes very still. She reevaluated her opinion of Hermione's guessing abilities and wished that Archie had become attached to someone slightly less clairvoyant. "Anyway, you can just get a license now, can't you? I mean, obviously don't tell them about this one, but then the next time someone needs it you can make it for them without feeling guilty, right?"

She nodded, a determined grin on her face. Hadn't she thought something similar? She would ask Master Hurst the next time she saw him what the procedures were for becoming licensed in difficult potions. As long as they didn't require a mastery, there was no reason she couldn't start expanding on her range of difficult potions while she had free time in which to do so.

"How did you get involved, anyway?" Hermione asked. "If you don't work for St. Mungo's, I mean."

"The woman who runs the clinic is married to the Aldermaster of the Potions Guild," Harry explained. "I know their son, and when the two of us stopped in to say hello to his mother the other day, we learned of Cora's predicament. So I offered to take a shot at it."

"That's really decent of you, Harry," Hermione said, eyes admiring. "I love the idea of a free clinic, too. We have things like that in the Muggle world, of course, but I'd never heard of a strictly charitable hospital for wizards. No one's even mentioned it as a career possibility at AIM."

"This is the only one that I know of," Harry said. "It's pretty small. I know there are a couple of general charity organizations, such as the Widows and Orphans Fund, that do offer subsidized medical treatment as part of their services, but that's done through St. Mungo's itself, not a separate facility."

"This makes so much more sense, though," Hermione said, walking slightly faster as she got more excited about what she was saying. "I doubt St. Mungo's takes a loss on services through a fund like that, which means the healthcare itself isn't any cheaper, it just gets paid for through the donations that people make to the fund, right? I'll bet that's a huge drain on the charity; if they could refer their recipients to a facility that was itself subsidized or discounted they'd be able to increase the effectiveness of their programs overall by diverting the funds that would have gone to paying premium prices for Healing at St. Mungo's to other, equally worthy endeavors."

"Maybe you should just re-design the whole Wizarding world," Harry said. It was hard to disagree with anything the other girl was saying.

"Maybe I will," Hermione said, amused. "You have to admit the inefficiency is staggering at times. I mean, having magic is one thing, but there's no excuse for wasting resources and not doing everything possible to economize and capitalize on the magic in the first place. "

"I think it has to do with wizards' natural inclination to resist change and preserve the mystery that magic represents," Harry said, having been struck by similar observations in the past. "I think some people are afraid of treating magic as anything less than a sacred blessing from the gods. It must be honored and preserved, but not manipulated or taken advantage of beyond a certain acceptable extent. This applies to magical society as well. Change in the form of progress must come so slowly that it's almost unnoticeable. To transform the world too quickly is to admit that something about it is wrong." At Hermione's blank look, Harry grimaced. "I know how it sounds, but you have to remember that a lot of wizards believe they were chosen to wield magic because of a quality that is innate in them, not because of a happy accident of genetics. They think there's something perfect about magic, something indelibly pure. To people who think that way, the idea of making magic and the world of magic *efficient* is unattractive; deciding which parts of their glorious tradition are useful and which are superfluous feels like playing god. The only time they accept sudden change is when it's a reversal of progress-suddenly barring Muggleborns from attending Hogwarts, for instance. If it's couched in a way that feels like a decisive act of *restoration* to the purity of the past, people can get behind it. Otherwise... every well-reasoned argument just sounds to them like an upstart indoctrinate telling a senior priest how to worship his god properly."

"But that's so insane," Hermione moaned, tugging on her own hair in frustration. "You can't treat real life like a religion. There are actual consequences in the physical world around them for their stubborn ignorance. Consequences for people like *me* . Like *us* ."

"In their minds, they don't have a duty to protect us," Harry said quietly. "They only have a duty to protect magic itself and preserve the wise practices passed down by the great magic users of old. Individual lives don't mean anything in the scope of the ten-thousand-year tradition they imagine themselves to be heir to."

"Even the oldest families in the Book of Gold don't go back more than a thousand years," Hermione grumbled. "Don't they realize that even the purest of families, the purest *magic*, has to start somewhere?"

"Oh, they do," Harry said, smiling wryly. "In a perfect world the Muggleborns would have their own community, and marry one another until their children were sufficiently halfblooded, at which point they would marry other halfbloods until eventually their line became pure by definition, after which they would live in relative obscurity, a faceless, nameless family of pureblooded witches and wizards who listened to whatever the oldest and purest of families told them. Very few purebloods are fanatic enough to want to shut Muggleborns out of society completely. The wiser ones even recognize that they need fresh blood to survive in any genetically competitive sense. They'd still like to see outsiders integrated slowly, however, preferably with as little impact on the society at large as possible. What they fear above all is a Muggleborn or halfblood coming into their society for seven years and then, whether by skill, hard work, or accident, ascending to power rapidly and enacting widespread change in the culture at a pace that their traditions can't combat effectively."

"So they shunt us off to schools outside of the country where we can make no connections, so that when we enter the workplace-at those places not discouraged from hiring anyone schooled abroad-we are at a permanent disadvantage compared to our pureblooded coworkers," Hermione said, something like pained fury on her face. "It's rather brilliant, I have to admit. A few years ago I would have said no one would spend so much time and energy actively fighting to keep someone else down when they could be spending it on

building themselves up, but... well, the Wizarding world has been nothing if not full of surprises, I suppose."

"Not all of them bad," Harry said, nudging the girl softly. She hadn't meant to get involved in a conversation about politics while they walked. They were nearing Pendragon Alley, anyway, and there was no need to take a bad mood into the clinic with them.

Hermione smiled with the right side of her mouth. "Not all bad," she agreed. After a deep breath, she added, "Nothing can stay bad forever, anyway. Look at what we're doing now. You're going to take a potion to a little girl and make her healthy again. I firmly believe there's a cure for everything, if you look hard enough. We'll find the cure for the Wizarding world, Harry. I know we will."

She found a light blinking faintly in her chest that was something like hope and marveled at Hermione's ability to make an arguably impossible task sound like something the two of them just hadn't got around to yet.

Jason had reached the entrance to Maywell long before them, but he waited patiently for them to arrive before bursting through the doors with a whoop.

"Harry's here! Harry's here, Miss Eleni!" he called into the lobby.

Janice came around the front desk even as Mrs. Hurst poked her head out of a patient room and gestured her over with shaky expectation in her eyes. "In here, Harry. Did it work? Leo said you were entirely confident when he left."

Harry smiled widely as she and Hermione crossed the foyer. The good feeling she'd woken up with was back. "It turned out perfectly," she told the Healer. She carefully extracted the bottles from her bag and handed them over to the witch, who grasped the containers as though they were spun sugar rather than thick, sturdy glass.



"Thank you," Mrs. Hurst said softly, settling a very grateful gaze on her face before turning and moving back into the room. "Come see Cora-she wants to meet you. Your friend, too."

They followed her through the door into a space that looked smaller than it was, probably because of all the people crowding around the little bed that stood in the center. Leo was there, lounging in a corner so as to be out of the way of Healer Carol, who was monitoring the little girl's vitals. The blonde-haired child in the bed didn't appear to be paying the Healer any attention, though. She was blinking wide green eyes at Harry and Hermione, somehow managing to convey a sense of boundless energy without moving a single muscle. She had to wonder with a pang how long the poor child had been confined to a bed.

"You're Harry," the girl said. She was propped up on a number of pillows, and her gaze flitted around the room fast enough to compensate for her motionless body. "I'm Cora. Margo said you were nice."

"She said you were nice, too," Harry told the girl.

"Who're you?" Cora asked, her eyes landing on Hermione's wildly curly hair with something like fascination.

"This is my friend, Hermione," Harry said. "She wanted to come and make sure you got better. Hermione, this is Cora."

"It's lovely to meet you," Hermione said, the kindness in her eyes far outshining any pity she may have felt for the child.

"Harry and Hermione brought you a present, dear heart," Mrs. Hurst said. She had uncorked one of the bottles and scooped a dram of the congealed potion into a little cup. "It's going to make you better."

"It looks like garbage sludge," Cora said matter-of-factly.

"Just pretend it's pudding," Jason said encouragingly. "That's what I do when I have to eat mashed peas."

"You drop your peas on the floor and everyone knows it," Cora said absently, still inspecting the cup of greenish-grey medicine suspiciously. "I think it's troll boogies."

"I'll turn *you* into a boogie if you don't eat it," Mrs. Hurst threatened.

Gulping, Cora gingerly tilted her head back and allowed the Healer to squeeze the contents of the cup into her mouth without further delay. She shuddered and grimaced but nonetheless swallowed the full dose.

"How long until it takes effect?" Leo asked from his corner. She didn't miss the way he eyed Hermione with undisguised curiosity and began brainstorming ways of putting that meeting off as long as possible.

"She'll have to take one dose an hour for the next twelve hours," Mrs. Hurst said briskly. "We'll know it's working when she can wiggle her fingers and toes; it'll pull the magic out of the extremities first."

"So I'll be able to juggle again, soon," Cora said, eyes lighting up. "I'm almost up to five knives at once!"

Hermione looked vaguely alarmed, but kept her thoughts to herself at Harry's reassuring look. Mrs. Hurst was not so circumspect. "No knife juggling for at least two weeks," she said sternly. "When your muscles are completely recovered you may start with balls and pins only." Cora groaned as much as she was able without moving, but Mrs. Hurst would not be moved. "You'll have to relearn some of your dexterity before you're back in top form."

Cora sighed, but appeared altogether satisfied that she would at least be back to her old self eventually. Seeing that all was well, Harry said a quiet goodbye to Cora and Jason and took Hermione back out to the lobby. She was hoping to declare their errand

complete and get the Muggleborn girl back to Diagon without delay, but when Mrs. Hurst followed them out, Hermione latched onto the older woman immediately, rattling off questions and soaking up their answers like a somewhat worshipful sponge.

"But why haven't I heard anything about places like this before?" Hermione bemoaned. "Even our professors at AIM never mentioned the possibility."

"AIM?" Mrs. Hurst blinked, looking at the girl more carefully. "Are you in the Healer track then?"

"That's right," Hermione said, smiling brightly. "I'm in the same class as Harry."

Mrs. Hurst looked a little confused, though she attempted to hide it as she delved into a discussion on the difficulties facing charitable projects in the Wizarding world. Harry recalled with a mental cringe that Mrs. Hurst had never believed her story about attending AIM during the school year. She must be very perplexed as to why a girl was now claiming to be her schoolmate. She wasn't worried about the Healer prying into the facts of their relationship; Mrs. Hurst was discreet, and there was nothing incriminating for her to find in any case. She did wonder if it would make her less suspicious of Harry's backstory or more suspicious of Hermione's, though.

It seemed as if their discussion was winding down, which was good news for Harry. She really wanted to get Hermione back to the upper alleys before Leo got around to meeting her. She was just about to suggest they get going when the brown-eyed girl uttered a question that nearly made her groan aloud in frustration.

"Do you need any part-time volunteers?"

"Volunteers?" Mrs. Hurst repeated, looking intrigued by the idea. "We've never had an intern before." A shadow crossed her face a moment later. "It's very kind of you to offer, my dear, but no. It's not safe for you to traverse the alleys if you aren't familiar with them."

"I could Floo in," Hermione insisted, looking quite eager. "You have a Floo, don't you? My parents' house is connected. They'll be thrilled at the idea; they work in a branch of the Muggle healthcare system, and they're very keen on the virtues of public service."

"Well, I don't know," Mrs. Hurst said, looking torn. Harry could see she liked the idea of having a young would-be Healer to train. It was probably only the reluctance to expose the girl to the lower alley way of life that kept her from agreeing immediately.

"I'll work very hard, Ma'am," Hermione assured her. "I'm the top of my class-well, sometimes Harry is, but I'm sure I can be of use in complementary ways. Harry is excellent with blunt trauma and with potions, of course, but I'm told I have a very delicate touch with soft tissues."

Mrs. Hurst laughed softly. "You certainly sound well-qualified. I suppose... if you're sure you want to."

Harry was hard pressed to hide her horror as the two finalized the arrangement. They had just met and suddenly there was an air of deep camaraderie between them. How had events spiraled so quickly out of her control? There was no way she could keep Leo and Hermione from meeting if she was spending an unknown amount of time at Maywell. How long until they started comparing notes on her?

She could feel something like despair creeping up on her even as she kept a pleased expression pasted on her face for the sake of her 'friend.' Somehow when she'd analyzed the idea of bringing Hermione along in order to make the errand seem less suspicious she had been entirely focused on the possibility that Leo would become curious about a friend of Harry's from school. Somehow it never occurred to her that *Hermione* might be curious about something in *Leo's* world.

The only saving grace was that Leo stayed in the patient room keeping Cora company until Harry managed to drag Hermione away

from the clinic. At the least, that interaction had been postponed.

Hermione chatted the whole way back to Diagon, speculating about the types of cases she'd be likely to see and how much broader a range of experience it would be compared to what they were exposed to at AIM. Harry hummed agreeably in all the right places, but Hermione seemed to know that her placidly interested face hid a deep discomfort.

"Have I upset you, Harry?" Hermione asked abruptly, interrupting her own train of thought as she glanced over and caught a glimpse of something in Harry's eyes that derailed it.

"No, not at all," she said, putting a greater effort into projecting a relaxed sort of cheer. "I had no idea you'd be so interested in the clinic, or I would have mentioned it before."

She frowned. "I'm not stupid, Harry. It's kind of obvious you were reluctant to share that with me. Is it... is it because they think you're a boy here, too?"

"Some people do," Harry admitted. "And almost no one knows my last name is Potter. I have a kind of... anonymity here, I suppose, that I value. Maybe I was afraid that if I brought someone from my normal life down here I would lose... something. I'm not explaining it well. I wasn't trying to hurt your feelings."

"I know," Hermione said. "I understand that you probably need somewhere you can be yourself over the summer, away from your family, I mean. I want you to know that I wasn't trying to force my way into this part of your life, even though it might seem that way. I mean, I want to be part of your life, obviously, but if it makes you uncomfortable I'll keep to the clinic and you'll hardly ever see me."

"You are a part of my life," she said, casting about for a sentiment she thought Archie would exhibit. "The best part."

Hermione looked slightly uncomfortable, but Harry couldn't tell if it was because she could detect the note of insincerity behind the words or if there was some other reason. She really didn't know enough about Archie's relationship with Hermione to make this work properly.

"Well," the other girl said after a long moment of silence. "This was certainly more than I expected from our outing today. Wait until mother hears that I went out for ice cream and came home with an *internship*."

"I'm sure she expects nothing less of you," Harry said, attempting the teasing tone that she might use with her own friends. "You have already finished the summer assignments, after all. Even your no doubt ambitious reading list won't be able to fill your whole summer. In fact," she mused, tapping her chin thoughtfully, "I wouldn't be surprised if your parents were rather relieved."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Hermione demanded on an amused huff.

"Just that a Hermione Granger with too much time on her hands can't be good for the household equilibrium," Harry said innocently. "You do enjoy projects, don't you, 'Mione?"

"Are you insinuating that I meddle in other people's lives in order to fill a boredom-induced-void that otherwise aches in the absence of constructive work to satisfy my industrious nature?" Hermione squinted at her in a way that was as intimidating as a baby squirrel.

"I thought I'd said it pretty bluntly, actually," Harry said, inspecting her fingernails.

They exchanged affected looks of suspicion and nonchalance respectively before breaking into matching grins.

"Let's get ice cream, Harry," Hermione said, linking her arm with Harry's happily. Harry relaxed into her grip, feeling content that she'd

at least been able to smooth things back into a semblance of companionship. She thought that with a couple more meetings like this, she'd have a good enough handle on the Muggleborn girl's personality to get on well with her. Hermione certainly wasn't overbearing or rude, which is more than she could say about many of her other acquaintances. On the other hand, a large part of her hoped she never got the chance. As impractical as the sentiment was in the long term, she wished she could just leave the other girl to Archie.

Shaking her head internally, she berated herself. Being friends with a smart, well-meaning girl was far from the worst thing she would do in the course of their ruse. Who was she to complain? She was lucky to get the chance to solidify her cover at AIM in such an unassuming way. Hermione would be a fountain of information and small details—the kind that really sold a lie, the kind that she would need if she were ever asked in detail about her experiences in America. With that in mind, she shook off the uneasy feeling that lingered at the idea of Hermione traipsing around the lower alleys unattended. She had to take advantage of this opportunity while she could.

Pulling herself out of her own thoughts, she bent her mind more readily to the girl beside her. Archie was counting on her to keep his relationship with Hermione strong. She'd done a poor job of it so far, having been caught off-balance from their first, unexpected encounter. She could do better. She would have to, for both of their sakes.

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Between pursuing her independent research and training with Leo, the long summer days passed swiftly. Before she had even grasped how quickly the time was moving it had already slipped through her fingertips. The first day of the lower alley tournament arrived, if not unexpectedly, at least impetuously soon.

She woke early, taking care to eat a small but dense breakfast of grains and eggs. She left before her parents even woke, scratching a note on a spare bit of parchment in her lab for her mother to find in case she thought to look for her. Aside from her wand and knife, she carried nothing in her pockets. Her clothes were... sturdy, for lack of a better description. The plain red tunic was sleeveless and belted close to her waist to minimize any loose material that might snag at an inopportune moment. Her breeches were tucked snugly inside her trusty boots, and she thought, as she caught her reflection in the kitchen window, that even if she didn't look intimidating, she had an air of general competence about her. The determined look in her eyes didn't hurt. She was ready to finally get a real feel for her abilities.

Before she ducked into the Floo, she tucked her hair under a soft brown cap and added a pair of thick dueling goggles to the top of her head. They were much less likely to be broken in a scuffle than her usual glasses, and the slight tint they afforded her eyes had the added use of disguising their color to the casual observer. She wouldn't call herself paranoid, but knowing that Bill Weasley, Regulus Black, and Hermione Granger were all wont to traverse the lower alleys made her reluctant to advertise her presence in the competition overtly.

If the goggles themselves had a few spells embedded for clear sight and long-distance magnification, well, it was anything goes in a freedueling tournament, wasn't it?

By the time she'd reached Kyprioth Court, she could feel the excitement mounting in the air of the lower alleys. Even if she hadn't known about the tournament, she felt it would be obvious that something was going on. There were many more people about than usual for the early hour, and the people she saw wore smiles and anticipatory grins more often than not.

The closer she got to Pendragon Alley, the more overt the signs became, until she was walking through a wide swath of tents and stands selling food, drink, flags, and souvenirs. Some stalls had



simple games set up with prizes for the skilled and lucky. From others came music in every form imaginable, all lively and energetic. She shook her head a bit, wondering if they thought the Ministry was really so unobservant. She supposed anyone not here for the tournament wouldn't have reason to come down this way, but still... the atmosphere was positively alive with exhilarated expectation.

The large intersection over which King Arthur's statue presided was conspicuously empty compared to the myriad booths that surrounded it. At least, she thought it was. It was difficult to look at the intersection for very long, and she gave up after a few moments when her head began complaining at the effort. She had to hand it to Regulus-those were some powerful wards.

She wove her way toward where a pair of huge flags-one blue one red-were planted in the dirt at slanting angles, forming an archway through which a slow trickle of people was moving. There were a couple of youths wearing the Rogue's sigil standing next to the entryway and collecting admission fees in exchange for golden bracelets. She assumed they would allow one to pass in and out of the wards for the duration of the tournament-or perhaps they would charge admission each day and vary the colors of the bracelets. She wouldn't have to worry about it-as a competitor she had been given a patch to sew to her clothes that designated her with the number fifteen. When the guards caught sight of it, they waved her through.

A zinging sensation, and then she was hard-pressed not to gape at the sight before her. If she didn't know how internal expansion wards worked, she would be tempted to believe she'd just been transported to another place entirely. The enormous square before her was dominated by a rectangular platform raised about five feet off the ground. She estimated it to be fifty meters long and perhaps thirty wide. It was immense, at least compared to the little dirt courtyard in the Phoenix she'd been practicing in all summer. She had to wonder what they were supposed to do with all that space. Run away, perhaps?

On either side of the dueling platform rose stands that towered over the stage like looming goliaths. Were they really expecting so many spectators? She shied away from the implications of so many rows of bleachers. She had played Quidditch in front of this many people at school. It was no different, she told herself, ignoring the little voice that was pointing out that there she had been one of fourteen people on the Quidditch pitch, not one of two.

Behind the stands on both sides were more tents, belonging to those lucky vendors who'd been allowed or could afford a spot inside the wards. Concessions abounded between more stands with flags and souvenirs. She wondered why all the flags were red or blue-those weren't exactly the colors of the Court of the Rogue. As her eyes caught sight of a grand board set up on the far end of the stage, however, she realized it was by design; the bracket for the tournament was blown up in huge lettering, and next to each name or blank space was either a red dot or a blue dot. Walking closer, she scanned the list for her name and spotted it next to a crimson circle. She grinned, fingering her tunic. That was certainly lucky. Looking around at all the people carrying red or blue flags, she realized it was a clever way to give people a competitor to cheer for in the event that they didn't know either one personally.

Behind the bracket board, next to a green tent with a large medical cross on the top, there was an immense pavilion with the words 'Duelers' Tent' on a sign across the front. She wasn't the first one there, but it was far from full. Sliding her goggles over her eyes, she meandered her way inside and took a look around.

Leo wasn't hard to spot. He was surrounded by people asking questions and complaining about various things, demanding he attend to this problem or that. Beside him, his cousin Rispah looked quite irritated at the clamoring.

"Leave off, will you? I told you, take it all up with Aled Flint!" the rouged woman shouted. "Leave Leo be, you vultures, he hasn't got time for it today."

"I must prepare for the competition myself," Leo said, raising his voice just enough to be heard without sounding strident. "I'm certain that the tournament organizers can handle any issue that arises. You will know them by the sigils on their shirts."

Gradually, the group disgruntledly dispersed and Leo was left at a small round table with Rispah and Marek, who was also competing. She made her way over and took a seat, grinning as it took them a moment to recognize her.

"That you, Harry?" Marek said, looking amused. "Trying to seem mysterious?"

"That's right," Harry told him. "Today it's 'Harry the Hidden.'"

"That's awful. How about Harry the Hollerer? It sounds like you have a war cry." Marek wagged his eyebrows unhelpfully.

"How about you, then?" Harry asked. "Are you Marek the Magnificent?"

"I want to be 'Marek the Mighty.'" He laughed.

"What about Leo?" Rispah asked, eyes amused. Leo rolled his eyes, prompting the woman to suggest, "Lionel the Listless."

"Leo the Loser!" Marek cackled. "Today you bow to Marek the Mighty!"

"More like Marek the Misguided," Leo smirked. "I'll be... "

"Leo the Lovesick," Rispah cut in, a wicked smile curling her lips.

"Oh, that's a good one," Marek said seriously. "I bet the favors will pour in for such a romantic-type hero. I should have thought of that."

"Marek the Mopey?" Harry wondered.

"Mooning Marek," Rispah said, nodding with insincere approval.

Marek made a face. "Never mind, then. That just sounds wrong."

Rispah stood with a feminine flick of her fingers. "I've just decided which bet I want to place," she said, glancing out of the large pavilion to where Harry supposed someone was taking wagers. "Marek Swiftknife gets pantsed before the tournament is out. I'll personally reward anyone who manages it with my favor, in fact."

"Oi! You can't do that." Marek scrambled after the woman, leaving Leo and Harry to laugh at the ignominy of their friends.

"Feeling ready?" Leo asked. He eyed her attire with approval, hazel gaze easily picking out the imprint of the knife at her waist and the wand along her thigh.

"If I'm not prepared by now, I've no business being here," Harry said, attempting to sound optimistic. Somehow it came out slightly worried, instead.

"You'll do great," Leo said firmly. "You're better than you think."

"Two matches for each competitor today, right?" Harry clarified.

Leo nodded. "For the ones who defeat their first opponents, at least. Then two tomorrow, and one each the following two days-those matches will be harder, so it's best not to tire out the final two competitors by making them finish it the third day."

"That, and you can bring in more gold if there's a grand finale on the fourth day," Harry said.

"Also we can make a *lot* more gold," Leo agreed shamelessly. "Did you eat?" he asked after a moment.

She nodded. "Couldn't sleep, so I just decided to get going and head over."

"Let's get you a pint, then," Leo said, making to stand. "It'll calm your nerves."

"It's seven in the morning," Harry said, rolling her eyes. "I'm not drinking before the matches."

"Oh, matches, is it? You're pretty confident after all," Leo said archly. "I suppose you think you can lull me into going easy on you if you play the nervous rookie card."

"As if we'll even get to fight," Harry scoffed. She did stand, though. "I'll have a glass of milk, I suppose-if you're buying."

"Oh yes, I'm sure that will make a big difference," Leo said drolly.

"Milk is very soothing, actually." Harry sniffed. "We give it to my little sister all the time to help her sleep."

"Are you planning to snore your competitor to defeat?" Leo asked, amused.

"I might drool on him," she said thoughtfully. "I don't want to reveal too much of my strategy beforehand, though."

"Mother forbid," Leo said.

"Speaking of mothers, where's yours?" Harry asked. "Is she working the Healers' tent?"

"That's right," Leo said, nodding. "She's left the clinic in very capable hands today-you're familiar with them, I think."

"Hermione?" she guessed, trying not to wince. She'd seen the girl a couple of times around the clinic, though she hadn't exactly gone out of her way to visit. She seemed to be enjoying her volunteer work immensely. At least she was working at the clinic and not at the tournament today. She could just imagine how that particular conversation would go.

"Mhmm," Leo hummed. "Interesting girl, that Hermione. You've got a good friend in her; she adores you, judging by the frequency with which she references you in casual conversation."

"I know," she said. After deciding that sounded arrogant, she added, "I mean, we are very good friends."

"You don't visit her often," Leo said, an idle tone to his voice that didn't fool her for a moment.

"I'll see her all day, every day at school," she said, shrugging a bit. "We're both quite busy this summer, in any case."

"She doesn't seem to know what you're so busy with, though," Leo pointed out.

Harry had to give him that. The other girl knew neither that she was training for the freedueling tournament nor that she was working on experimental potions research in correspondence with Professor Snape. "We'll catch up at school," she said again. Leo let it go, knowing without her having to say or do anything obvious that she didn't really want to talk about it anymore.

Outside one of the concession stands, a girl with vibrant curls tied up on top of her head caught up to them with a large smile. She curtsayed, and it was surprisingly graceful despite the basket she carried. "Good morning, Highness. Morning, Harry."

"Margo," Leo said, nodding his head gravely. "I see you are up with the sun as usual. Very industrious. How are your flowers today?"

"Unsurpassable," Margo said, stifling a giggle in an effort to look solemn. "I shall have this basket emptied by lunch."

"See that you do," Leo intoned. After a moment in which he and the little girl gazed sternly at one another, they both relaxed into grins. "Are you excited for the show? Will you cheer for me?"

"Of course!" Margo said, bouncing a little on her heels. "And for you, Harry," she added, smiling impishly. "Would you like another flower for good luck?"

Harry smiled. "Why not? Which one is lucky?"

Leo leant forward and picked out a short-stemmed red flower while dropping a coin in Margo's pocket. "This one," he said, presenting it to her with a flourish. She immediately recognized it as a common ingredient in Headache Relief Potions.

"That's a chrysanthemum," Margo said, giggling as Harry took it carefully. "Some people think it's unlucky, but actually it's a really strong kind of flower. Know why?"

She shook her head, shooting Leo an amused look. Trust him to pick the only unlucky flower in the bunch. "Why?"

"The chrysanthemum blooms in the fall," Margo told her earnestly. "Lots of spring and summer flowers are really delicate-if a strong wind comes, they blow right off the branch! The chrysanthemum won't, though, and that's why it can grow in a season when most flowers just die."

"I didn't know that," Harry said, folding the stem flat against the back of the flower and tucking the many-petaled bloom into the fold of her hat. A quick murmured Sticking Charm saw that it wouldn't fall out while she fought.

The little girl tilted her head, causing her curls to spill over her cheek as she added, thoughtfully, "That's also why it's a symbol of love. 'Cause it hangs on even when other flowers let go."

Harry kept her smile firmly in place and very pointedly did not look in Leo's direction. At all. "You sure know a lot about flowers," she remarked calmly.

"Of course," Margo said primly. "It's my *job* to know. Good luck in the tourney, Highness, Harry." She skipped off toward a group of people deliberating over a selection of turkey legs.

"Precocious, isn't she?" Leo said, drawing her unwilling attention. She didn't know why she was so embarrassed-it was just a flower, and he'd probably picked it at random. Or to make fun of her. That would be just like him.

"Very," Harry agreed lightly. They'd reached the front of the line, so Leo ordered an ale-"it's watered down, stop looking at me like that, Harry,"-and Harry asked for milk. She was told politely that they didn't sell milk, much to Leo's amusement, so she settled for a cup of water.

They returned to the Duelers' Tent, which was slowly beginning to fill with people. It wasn't cramped, exactly, but with sixty-four competitors there weren't a lot of empty seats, either. She caught sight of a burly-armed man wearing the number sixteen and had to smile at his white tunic and blue bandana. He really did look a little like a pirate.

The crowd outside steadily grew louder. Leo nudged her into limbering up as the opening ceremony began. Rispah had apparently been in charge of the entertainment, and while Harry couldn't see exactly what was going on up on stage, the spectators certainly seemed to be... entertained.

Leo had the first match, and he stepped out onto the platform to riotous applause. He took it amiably, if not entirely humbly. Harry moved to stand under the bracket board with the other competitors to watch the tournament begin. If anyone was hoping to see a spectacular match right off, however, they were to be disappointed. Leo won almost embarrassingly quickly. Before he'd even broken a sweat he was descending the steps and handing the armband that let him through the platform's wards off to one of the next competitors.

He sauntered over to her with a grin that was entirely entreating. "So?" he said, crossing his arms as he came to a stop in front of her.

She pretended to think. "Your opponent had good footwork."



His face slid into a playful scowl. "Not as good as mine."

"Hmm? I didn't notice," she shrugged.

"You're the worst, Harry," Leo sighed.

She let herself smile. "Great match, Leo. Do try not to humiliate your next opponent too much."

"Don't you want me to do my best?" Leo asked, affecting a wounded expression.

"Don't you want to make money from this thing?" she shot back. "No one wants to watch a shut-out."

He smirked. "You're right. It's almost unfair that I'm even competing."

She shoved him in the direction of a water cooler. "Go cool down, Highness."

"You aren't allowed to call me that," Leo complained over his shoulder.

She turned her attention back to the arena without bothering to respond. The next match was already underway, which she supposed made sense, as they had a whopping forty-eight matches to get through before it ended today; all the winners of the first thirty-two bouts would have to compete again before the day was out. While most of the first matches were short-lived, this would still be easily the longest day of the tournament. Once the numbers had been whittled down, she was sure each match would begin with a great deal more pomp and ceremony.

Her turn came before she had time to make herself too nervous. She accepted the somewhat sweaty armband from competitor number thirteen and put it on. As she stepped through the wards, the noise of the crowd dampened considerably. That was rather considerate, she thought, wondering if it was something the organizers had

requested or if Regulus simply had a lot of experience erecting arena-style wards.

She pulled her mind back to the moment as her opponent took a ready stance. She palmed her knife in a reverse hammer grip and settled her wand comfortably in her right hand. They waited for the sound that would signify the start of their match, watching one another carefully. Fearless Frank seemed to be living up to his moniker, at least. He looked not the least bit afraid, and she wasn't sure if that should make her nervous or not. Then he grinned at her, and it wasn't anything like a pirate's grin. It was friendly and open, the grin of a man who was looking forward to having fun. That was when she realized his lack of nerves stemmed from a disinclination to take the match too seriously, not from complete confidence in himself.

The gong went off and Harry moved diagonally at once, both closing the distance between them and attempting to flank him. He turned with her and shot off a Tripping Jinx that she simply sidestepped while firing a Tarantallegra back at him. He conjured a simple shield instead of dodging, so she darted even closer while he was unable to attack. Realizing his mistake, he dropped the shield and retreated, only to raise it hurriedly once more as she shot off two stunners in quick succession.

The shield rippled after the first stunner struck it but reformed before the second could slip through. She had been advancing all the while, and because he couldn't or wouldn't move while his shield was up, she was now close enough to bombard his defenses physically. Her knife came stabbing down at the shield on the left side while her foot lashed out in a roundhouse kick to strike on the right. The shield rippled from both points and, where the ripples met, destabilized completely.

Her wand was in motion even before his shield fell to her bastardized physical improvisation of a Ward Disruptor. Before he could blink the surprised look from his face she had him utterly trapped in an

Incarcerous. She summoned his wand for good measure and straightened from her dueling crouch.

"Winner: Harry!" came the call over the roar of the crowd. She grinned, unable to believe it had been so easy. She released her opponent and handed him back his wand once he'd straightened.

"Good match," she offered as they walked toward the stairs.

"It were indeed," the big man said, nodding jovially. "Not sure how you knew to ripple my shield like that, but it were right clever, lad."

"Thanks," she said, grateful for his good sportsmanship.

They handed off their armbands to the next set of competitors and shook hands before going their separate ways. On her way back into the Duelers' Tent she saw a couple of other men catch up with 'Fearless Frank' and rib him good-naturedly about his loss. He didn't seem much bothered by losing to someone as young and small as she, merely smiling cheerfully and shrugging in a what-can-you-do-sort of way.

Leo pressed a cup of water into her hand when he found her. "Not bad," he said. "Not bad at all. What did you think of your first real duel?"

"It was surprisingly easy," she said, frowning a little. "He didn't seem to have any hand-to-hand experience, and his casting was pretty slow." Very slow, actually, compared to some of her friends from school. Compared to Remus, well... it wasn't even a contest.

"I told you," Leo said, shaking his head. "You're better than you think. He was just an amateur, anyway. Your next opponent will be more interesting."

"Fourteen, right?" she said, glancing at a table not far away. A pair of goblins sat with tankards in front of them, both clad chin to toe in golden armor and carrying swords. It was difficult to tell with goblins,

but she thought one was male and the other female. She'd watched the female's match while waiting for her own and knew that her opponent favored a defensive style and was much quicker than she ought to be in such heavy-looking armor. Her first match had lasted all of five minutes before she'd landed a nasty gash on her competitor's wand arm and he'd forfeited ruefully.

"Greystrike and Goldflame. They're brother and sister," Leo said, eyeing the pair subtly as well. "Twins, maybe. Those swords they carry aren't just for slicing people open-they can deflect spells with them."

She nodded. She'd seen the female goblin reflect a stunner right back at her opponent and send him scrambling to dodge. It wouldn't be a simple matter of bombarding the wandless goblin with magic. She'd have to be smart about how she fought.

"Time for that later, though," Leo said, clapping his hands together decisively. "Let's grab a bite. They're only half through the first matches, so we've got time before I need to be back here."

They left the pavilion and made their way through throngs of cheerful people. Every now and then someone would catch sight of their numbered patches or recognize Leo and wish them good luck in the next round. They found a stall outside the wards selling sandwiches and ate them as they walked about the alley, Harry marveling at the sheer energy of the crowd around them and Leo looking entirely satisfied at the amount of business even the outer booths seemed to be doing.

When they returned to the pavilion, they found Merek sitting alone at their table.

"I can't believe you didn't watch my match!" he exclaimed when he caught sight of them. "You should be sizing me up! Don't take me lightly this time, Leo, I-is that for me?" He snatched the sandwich from Leo's outstretched hand with a gleeful grin. "This is why we're

still friends despite your grossly arrogant disregard for the threat I represent, Highness."

Leo sighed. "I've already seen you fight a thousand times, Marek, against better opponents than that fellow I'm sure you pummeled into the dirt, too. I wasn't going to learn anything new about your style watching that match."

Marek appeared mollified. "That's why I didn't watch your first match, either."

Harry and Leo exchanged an amused look that Marek missed, being very involved in devouring the chicken sandwich in his hands. Marek certainly had watched Leo's first bout, and the both of them knew it.

After a lengthy intermission following the match between numbers 63 and 64, Leo was called for the beginning of the second round. Harry and Marek found a good enough vantage point and settled in to watch. She sincerely hoped it would last longer than the first round had.

It did.

Leo must have been a dancer in a previous life-that's all she could think. He wove around his opponent as though he'd known every move she would make ahead of time and had choreographed a routine to take full advantage of her every aborted gesture. His reaction time was so swift one could almost imagine him living three seconds in the future at all times. He carried two knives instead of the usual single knife and wand, almost as though his magic was something superfluous to his real skills. The way his movements resembled an art form, she could almost believe it was true.

There was something off about the knife in his right hand, though. It wasn't a flat blade, but a long triangular prism made of some kind of crystal and likely reinforced with runes. She'd seen him fight with it once before-when she witnessed Marek challenging him for the Kingship last year-but she still didn't know what was special about it.

The shape was such that he constantly adjusted his grip on it, spinning the three edges into different positions with clever dexterity as he met his opponent's blade again and again. The man he fought had a wand but didn't seem to rely on it much. Was that why Leo wasn't using his? Did he know his opponent preferred weapons to wands? It would be just like Leo to play on another's terms simply because he could.

He slipped around the scant few spells his competitor shot off and, while his quick movements should have looked frantic, instead he made them look easy-cool, even, if she was being honest. After the bout had gone on long enough to get the energy in the stadium fevered once more, a jet of red light came from nowhere and struck the man in his chest. His legs collapsed beneath him and Leo relaxed into a casual pose as the magnified voice rang out. "Winner: King Leo!"

"The knife is hollow," Marek said, chuckling at her flummoxed expression.

She tried to get a good look at what he was talking about, but Leo had already stowed his blades. "He can keep his wand inside of it?" she clarified.

Marek nodded. "He only uses that knife when he's fighting seriously, and he only conceals his wand inside it when he's fighting *very* seriously. I suppose he can't take any chances on losing in this tournament. The crystal it's made from is stronger than dragon scale, I'd wager. It magnifies the magic that passes through it, as well; hideously expensive, but it's saved Leo's life more times than he'd probably admit."

She considered that for a moment and decided she was impressed. It was exceedingly clever to encase the wand so that it was not only defended against physical attacks (always a weakness for even those wands made of the strongest wood) while simultaneously making it into an offensive physical weapon in its own right. Add in

the amplification factor, and it was a tool to be reckoned with-for those wizards who could use a knife in combat, at least.

Leo strode jovially over to fish for his usual allotment of compliments. Harry wasn't even stingy this time-it really had been a good bout. There were two matches in between Leo's and Harry's, and she found that was barely enough time to warm up her body once more. She took her armband key distractedly, mind racing with inane reminders that wouldn't help her at all. If her body didn't know what to do by now, no amount of telling it what to do with her brain was going to make up for it.

The sun was still high overhead when she and the female goblin took the stage. The light glared on the polished gold of her opponent's armor, making her glad she wore goggles that filtered the light efficiently. The goblin gave her a grin that was almost cruelly anticipatory before donning her helmet and drawing her weapon. The sword she carried wasn't long-the goblin's arms would be too short to support a true broadsword-but it was wider than she'd expected. Most of those entered in the tournament carried only knives or occasionally clubs as auxiliary weapons. With only those weapons to contend with, there was no need for a competitor to wield a sword of such breadth. Perhaps it was simply the only weapon the goblin had trained with.

She lowered herself into a ready stance, a little lower than she normally would, for the goblin was much smaller than her usual opponent-and Leo was not a giant by any measure. When the gong sounded, the goblin sprang forward, sword tip outstretched. She moved as if the armor she wore was nothing, cementing Harry's suspicion that she herself wouldn't be able to win the match with superior speed alone.

*So much for favoring a defensive style*, she thought as she leapt backwards out of range. The goblin must have been holding back in her first match. *Well, so was I.*

She sprang away in a series of backwards leaps as the goblin moved through a vicious-looking combination of slashing arcs. Harry let her set the pace at first, concentrating on getting a feel for the speed at which the goblin could maneuver. It was more difficult to avoid the long range of the goblin's sword than it was to dance around Leo's knife in the practice ring, but it was not impossible. She just had to keep one eye on the length of the blade. She was lucky the goblin needed two hands to wield her sword and could not use a wand in any case-facing an opponent with a blade so large *and* magic would have been beyond her, she suspected.

She tested the goblin's strength a couple of times, meeting her blade for blade with her left hand. As she feared, the goblin had a grip like stone and struck with the momentum of a sledgehammer. She would never be able to match her force for force, but with the right consideration of angles she found she could push the blade away from her without losing an arm. That was something, at least. Once satisfied that she could avoid the goblin's sword even without her entire focus devoted to dodging, she brought her magic into play.

She skipped sideways to avoid a biting side-sweep aimed at her right side and pushed off of her left foot where it landed to twist around behind the goblin. The goblin spun with her, twirling on intricate footwork to face her-but she'd already let loose an Impedimenta at point blank. The goblin had no time to avoid it, instead bringing up her sword instinctively to protect her. Harry grinned-she'd been counting on that. The Impedimenta would slow the goblin's sword to a non-threatening speed until it wore off. That would give her time to- *what?*

The spell struck the flat of the goblin's sword and dissipated with a fizzle even as the entire blade lit up with what looked like dozens of runes. Not static runes, either-they moved over the weapon's surface, as though they were swept on a rowdy breeze rather than etched in immutable metal.

Harry barely scrambled out of the path of the goblin's retaliation. The sword had certainly not slowed in the slightest. *The blade doesn't*



*just reflect offensive magic, it absorbs general effect magic, too*, she thought, frowning behind her goggles as she went on the defensive once more. *That's... inconvenient*. She supposed she ought to have guessed that a goblin wouldn't enter a dueling competition if it didn't have some way to circumvent all aspects of a wizard's magic.

She'd just have to work around the sword, then. She watched the pattern of sweeps as she dodged, noting the time it took the goblin to switch the direction of her sword once it was in motion. Magic moved faster than metal. If she timed it right, she ought to be able to slip a spell past the goblin's ferocious guard. After several attempts, however, she was forced to admit that the goblin was better at catching her spells than she had anticipated. Every time she thought she'd found an opening, the sword moved faster and intercepted the magic. She wondered briefly if the goblin was toying with her, but decided it was more likely that she simply couldn't keep up that speed for a long period of time, and so was reserving bursts of speed for those times she could not move out of the path of a spell.

Resigned to doing something stupid, Harry moved to close with the goblin. She braced her right forearm against her left wrist and met the goblin's blade with all the strength of both arms. They locked and Harry grunted in exertion even as the goblin pressed forward, sensing an advantage, no doubt. Careful to look as though all her attention was on keeping the goblin's sword away from her chest, Harry readied a spell and twisted her wand arm at the last moment, sending the bolt of a Bombardment Hex directly into the goblin's chest plate. Doing so undermined any pressure she could have continued to bring against the goblin's sword, so she disengaged and ducked into a dive-roll to escape the blade's rapid descent. She straightened a few meters away, expecting to see the goblin blasted back to the other side of the arena. Instead, she was leaping right for her.

Harry leapt out of the sword's path again, thoroughly bewildered. There was not a single scratch on the goblin's armor, but she knew the spell had connected.

As she bent low beneath a sweep that could have divested her head from her shoulders, she heard the goblin growl with gravelly amusement. "You think I wear this armor for fun, boy?"

*Of course the armor is impervious to magic, too*, Harry thought, annoyed at herself for not having considered that possibility.

She put on a burst of speed to get more space between them, then tried a spell she'd been reluctant to use in a friendly match.

"Confringo." She put a fair bit of magic behind it, confident that, if it did connect, the runes would muffle its effects. With luck, just enough explosive power would get through to knock the goblin to the ground. A disadvantage of armor was how difficult it was to fall gently while inside it.

The goblin caught the spell easily, and while her sword shook slightly as it absorbed the magic, it didn't reverberate enough to loosen the goblin's grip. Harry and the goblin both paused for a moment to catch their breath, the distance between them not one that could be closed in an instant. Now what? She could try an even more powerful spell, but she didn't really want to hurt the goblin. This wasn't a fight to the death, and escalating the power involved would only look like an admission that she couldn't win on skill alone.

She decided to try a little ranged action. With the distance between them, she finally had enough time to pull off more complicated magic. Time to get creative. She whipped her wand to the fore, moving it as fast as she dared without sacrificing the exactness necessary for the spell. Rocks were conjured into existence from the ground beneath her, hovering like a loosely constructed wall before her chest. The goblin was dashing near, but Harry was already banishing the first few toward the goblin's approaching form, bombarding her with Quaffle-sized rocks that forced her to slow and either avoid them or strike them out of her way. From the ringing of sound as stone met metal, she deduced that the armor was not spelled to repel physical attacks the same way it dissipated magical ones. That meant she still had a chance.

The goblin fought through the rocks impressively fast, closing once more in hand-to-hand-or rather, knife-to-sword-combat. Harry was starting to feel her muscles complain, but she still had a little while before they would go on strike and abandon her completely. Judging by the way the goblin kicked up some of the dust that had accumulated on the stage deliberately the next time they turned around one another, she was tiring as well. Leo said most people would start resorting to dirty tricks once they were sufficiently fatigued-it was a sign of haste and meant the fighter was hoping to end things quickly.

Unfortunately for the goblin, Harry's goggles were spelled for clear sight. No amount of dust in the world would cloud her vision. She slid under, over, and around the goblin's blade with the ease, causing the goblin to grumble something in annoyed Gobbledegook under her breath. As Harry turned her next stroke aside with her knife, the goblin kicked out unexpectedly and caught her right between the legs. She stumbled backwards with the force of it, but recovered to flawlessly twirl around the thrust that followed and go in for an attack of her own aimed at the goblin's vulnerable neck gap.

The goblin leapt backwards easily, but Harry caught the growl of frustration from beneath the golden helm. She smirked in response. It would have been a punishing move, had she had anything between her legs to debilitate. As it was, she'd probably be incredibly sore there later, but her brain hadn't shut down involuntarily as the goblin no doubt expected.

The crowd was booing, but both of them ignored it. All was fair in freedueling, after all. There was no referee to step in and politely reprimand her opponent for 'ungentlemanly conduct.'

They kept on, Harry largely on the defensive. She was hoping she'd be able to tire the goblin out. It was probably sweltering in that armor, and Harry knew that stamina was one of her strengths. If she could draw the match out long enough, she might be able to overwhelm the goblin at the end. In theory.

The goblin was obviously not planning to carry this on much longer, however. She came at Harry with an overhead slash, but even as Harry sidestepped it, the goblin let go of her sword with her left hand, wielding it one-handed for the first time. Her other hand went to her belt and drew a small knife, the sheath of which had been very effectively hidden until now. Harry attempted to bring her knife up to bat the little blade away before the sword could change direction and come back around, but the goblin twisted the tiny knife at the last minute and swept it up toward her face. Harry flinched away from it, but felt a burning trail of cold fire across her cheek-she hadn't been able to avoid it completely.

She retreated instinctively, the back of her hand coming up to her face to check the damage. Before she'd taken two steps backward, however, she felt a sliding sensation across her cheek and her vision went black. Blindly, she rolled out of the way of what she was sure would be a swift follow-up attack, fumbling to remove the obstruction from her eyes as she hastened as far from the sound of clinking armor as she could.

The strap of her goggles had been severed, and she belatedly realized the true reason for the goblin's slash at her face as she detangled the remains from her face and tossed them aside. When she looked up, the goblin was further away than she'd thought she'd be. She realized why when she saw her opponent readying the small knife in her left hand for a throw.

Several things went through her head in quick succession. The goblin had cut away her goggles because she assumed Harry needed them to see clearly-not a bad assumption, as they were the type of goggles usually used in place of glasses in a duel. She had no way of knowing that Harry's vision was corrected by the Modified Polyjuice she was always under, which meant her goggles were merely for the benefit of those who knew Harry *should* wear glasses. The next thing she thought was that the goblin must assume she was nearsighted. That was why she kept her distance. She was going to throw the knife and take advantage of Harry's blurry vision;

if her vision was sufficiently bad, she'd be helpless to dodge the projectile. The last thing she thought before the knife was released was that this was the chance she'd been waiting for.

Harry kept her gaze unfocused, moving her head back and forth slightly as though disorientated. She stumbled forward a couple of steps, then back again, unsurely. She eventually settled into a defiant stance, her head turned to a spot several feet from where the goblin actually stood. She knew she looked utterly idiotic-the groans and gasps from the crowd, even muffled by the barrier, were enough to tell her she presented the picture of a deer about to be run down by a carriage.

It was hard to hold back a grin as she watched the goblin line up her shot almost lazily. She kept the knife in her peripheral vision even as she frowned and squinted into the empty air with a frightened expression. She brandished her wand in the goblin's general direction, whispering a Summoning Charm at a register too quiet for anyone to hear. The goblin didn't react to the wand, no doubt assuming the lack of visible magic meant Harry hadn't done anything yet. The helmet on her head probably muffled the sounds around her-if she was right, the goblin wouldn't notice the effects of her spell until it was too late.

The goblin released the knife, and it soared in a beautifully straight line toward her torso. If Harry didn't move at all, the knife would strike her in the left shoulder. It made her think better of the goblin, that she wasn't aiming to kill her supposedly blind opponent. That didn't mean she was going to let the goblin win, however.

It went against her every instinct to stand perfectly still as the knife flew toward her. She was trained to take out threats as soon as she could, to give herself time to react to whatever came next, but in this instance she waited until the very last moment before dropping her own knife to the dirt and plucking the goblin's little blade out of the air a hairsbreadth from her chest. It was the work of an instant to fling the knife back at the goblin, pushing a Banishing Charm in its wake without pause.

The crowd gasped and cheered dramatically, but Harry couldn't spare a moment to be gratified by their surprise. She scooped her knife up and ran full tilt toward the goblin. Her opponent had her hand up to catch the knife, but when the Banishing Charm caught up to the projectile it rocketed forward with a sudden burst of speed. Shocked, the goblin ducked backwards hastily to avoid the terrifyingly fast-moving weapon. Harry was there in its wake, however. She came in fast, sweeping her knife out before her like a viper. The goblin retreated to recover her balance, but thanks to Harry's earlier Summoning Charm, she backed into the path of several large rocks. With a grunt of surprise, the goblin stumbled wildly, unable to find stable ground. In that moment, Harry tackled her, using her superior height and the leverage of her sure footing to topple the goblin to the dirt.

The goblin attempted to bring her sword to bear, but Harry, by virtue of being literally above the goblin, now had the advantage of position and momentum she needed to knock the blade back. She knelt on the goblin's arms and came to a stop with her blade and wand crossed in clear threat at the goblin's exposed neck. The goblin froze for a long moment, then growled angrily as the announcer's voice cried out, "Winner: Harry!"

They both relaxed, Harry just managing to move off the goblin before collapsing tiredly on the ground. She was completely out of breath and every inch of her ached. She thanked the gods this was her last match for the day-there was just no way she'd be able to muster the energy for anything beyond scarfing down some food after this. Groaning at the effort, she forced herself to stand up and stow her weapons properly. The goblin was sitting up, struggling to remove her helmet with arms that were obviously weak from exertion.

When she had it off, she stood with a clanking sigh and glared up at Harry. "You tricked me, *girlie*," she spat. "Twice."

Harry grinned a bit apologetically. "To be fair, you assumed I was a boy on your own."

"You entered under a male pseudonym," the goblin scowled, sheathing her sword and starting toward the stairs.

"It's a nickname," she told her, catching up and holding out a hand. "Short for Harriett."

The goblin considered her, then slapped a mailed hand against hers briefly. "Goldflame."

"That's a lovely name," Harry offered.

"It's an exceedingly common name, for a goblin," her defeated opponent drawled.

"Harry is pretty common for humans, too," Harry said with a smile.

The goblin scoffed. "There's nothing common about you, girly. You're as tricky as a sphinx."

"Thanks?" she rubbed her dirt-encrusted neck awkwardly.

They descended from the stage and passed off their armbands to the next competitors. Goldflame's brother-Greystrike, she remembered Leo saying-clapped his sister on the armored shoulder with a clang. "Good bout, Goldflame."

"Nothing good about losing," Goldflame snorted. She stalked off toward one of the water dispensaries with a last, annoyed glare at Harry.

The other goblin paused before going after her. He looked at Harry appraisingly, then said, "Don't mind my den-sister. She hates to lose. Still, it is better to lose to cunning than to be outclassed in skill."

Harry didn't think she'd been particularly cunning so much as she had simply taken advantage of the assumptions of her opponent, but she nodded in any case. "It was a difficult win. I'm glad to have fought your sister."

"Good luck in your next match," the goblin said gruffly, heading off to join his sister.

"You as well," she called after him, waving tiredly.

"Making new friends?" Leo had come up behind her some time while she was talking to the goblin siblings.

"Hey," she said. The greeting was almost a sigh, she was so exhausted. "How was that?"

"Terrifying," Leo said, ducking down to haul her right arm over his shoulders. He began walking slowly toward the Duelers' Tent, hauling most of her weight. "You never told *me* you can see just fine without your glasses. I thought she was going to impale you, and my promise about you not getting stabbed would be dust in the wind."

Harry smiled apologetically. "Didn't mean to worry you." She stopped walking suddenly, causing Leo to stumble as he took her full weight without warning. "My goggles... "

"Here," Leo said, pressing the remains of her eyewear into her hands. "Aled collected it from the arena when he cleared it for the next match. Don't know why you bother, though-you obviously don't need them." Aled must be who the third ward key was given to, she thought idly as she turned the goggles over in her hands. They were dirty and a bit scuffed, but the lenses looked okay. She would repair the strap when she had more energy.

She tucked them away into her pocket and let Leo escort her the rest of the way, mumbling, "They're spelled to magnify long distances. Plus, they make people underestimate me."

"Not after today," Leo chuckled. "Your next opponent is going to be very wary, I daresay."

"They should be," she muttered halfheartedly. "I'm ferocious."



"As ferocious as a kitten at the moment," Leo said, shaking his head as he deposited her at a table under the pavilion. "I'll get you a water."

She lifted her head to thank him, but he was already gone. She blinked tiredly around her and caught sight of Rispah sitting across from her. "You're not a competitor," she said blankly.

Rispah laughed. "I'm the entertainment," she said, looking very out of place lounging in her tightly laced corset amidst a group of tired, dirty freeduelers. "Anyway, there are plenty of seats, now. How does it feel-making top 16?"

She grinned at that. She had, hadn't she? "Feels... unexpected," she said after a moment of poking her brain until it came up with an adjective.

"Unexpected?" Leo was back, with a full cup of water that she half-drunk, half-spilled over herself. "Give yourself a little credit, Harry-or rather, give me a little credit. I trained you, after all."

"You gave her the knife skills," Rispah said with a languid smirk. "The cleverness is all our Harry, though-devilishly tricky, she is." Harry made a noise of protest at the female pronoun, but Rispah waved her off with a pitying look. "Little late for that now, Harry, dear. The whole stadium saw you haven't got the bollocks to back that up."

Harry had to laugh at that. She supposed her little deception was well out of the bag, now. Ah, well. It had been useful while it lasted. Hopefully the others wouldn't treat her any differently knowing she was female. She thought Marek might be a bit miffed at the way she and Leo had yanked him around over her gender, though. She'd have to make it up to him, somehow.

She stayed until the other matches had ended, by which time she felt recovered enough to make the trip home. She knew she garnered a few looks as she trudged back through Diagon Alley to the Floo; she was filthy, too tired to bother hiding her slumped posture, and she

probably reeked to high heaven. The only saving grace was that it wasn't quite five o'clock yet, which meant she would have time to shower the filth from herself before her parents got home.

She stumbled into the Floo room and barely caught herself before she tipped headfirst into the mantelpiece. The house was quiet, so she didn't think to be quiet herself as she dragged her way toward the stairs.

"Harry?"

She bit back a curse and swayed to a stop. What were the odds that today Remus decided to watch Addy at their house? Sometimes Sirius watched her, so... one in three? She shook the vague calculations from her head distractedly and turned to see Remus observing her from the kitchen doorway.

"Hi Remus," she said, cocking her head casually. "Where's Addy?"

His eyes swept her from head to boot. "Still napping-she had trouble getting to sleep today after Sirius slipped her a sugar wand at lunch. What happened to you?"

She shrugged. "What do you mean? It was just really dusty in Diagon today, so-"

"You look like you've been in a brawl." Remus' voice was flat.

"Oh, that," she said, smiling sheepishly. "Well, I was practicing my dueling with a friend-I'm getting really good, Remus!"

"I know, I see you in action every weekend," Remus said, alluding to their training sessions while looking unimpressed with her explanation. "That looks like a knife cut," he said, gesturing to her face.

She winced, bringing up a hand to finger the dried blood awkwardly. She'd forgot that was there. "Oh."

"An explanation, please," Remus said, deceptively mild. "And don't bother lying."

"I don't know what to say," she said. She was really too tired to think up a convincing explanation.

"Allow me, then," Remus said softly. "You spend most of every day out of the house, ostensibly running errands in Diagon or spending time with your friend Leo. Most days you don't come home with any packages or shopping bags. This isn't the first time you've shown up sweaty, dirty, and tired. Judging by the annoyed expression on your face when I mentioned it, your face is cut up because you simply forgot it was there and so neglected to heal it before coming home, not because you've never been injured before. Just what are you up to, Harry?"

"Just practicing with Leo," she said. "Honest. He's been helping me with my dueling, too."

"Does his help involve you spending the entire lesson in the dirt?" Remus asked.

"He has a... unique style of dueling," she said, a bit helplessly.

"Not-" Remus broke off, searching her face and eyeing the cut on her cheek in particular. "Freedueling?" The last was a bare whisper. His expression said he was both shocked and concerned. "Harry, that's... well, it's illegal, for starters."

"Technically only tournaments are illegal," she said weakly.

"It's also very dangerous," Remus said, his voice a little stronger as his visage grew sterner. "If you don't know what you're doing, you could get really hurt. You shouldn't be messing around with that sort of thing."

"I'm not," she promised. "Leo is really good. He'd never let me get hurt." Remus gazed pointedly at the blood on her face. She flushed.

"That was someone else. It was a practice bout against a... friend. I won," she added, grinning with pride.

Remus sighed. "Your parents are not going to like this."

"We don't have to tell them," Harry said quickly. "They don't know about our dueling lessons, right?"

"Of course they do," Remus said slowly.

"Oh," she said. "They... never mentioned it."

"Neither did you, apparently." Remus sighed. He rubbed his temple somewhat forlornly. "Harry, you really ought to communicate better with your parents. Do they have any idea you're putting yourself in harm's way so cavalierly?"

"I told you it isn't like that," Harry said, frowning. "I'm just learning a new skill from my friend. Leo is an expert at this stuff. I'm learning a lot, okay?"

"But why?" Remus pressed. "What's the point if you can never use it in practice? As you said, freedueling in any formal sense is illegal."

Harry looked away. "I'm not learning it for its formal virtues, Uncle Remus. I'm learning for self-defense. Same as my training with you."

"Why this concentration on self-defense?" Remus asked. "I know I asked you before, when we started, but you answered a little vaguely."

"It's just... common sense, isn't it?" she said. She had no real reason to give Remus, at least no reason *Harry* could give him. Rigel on the other hand... he had plenty of reasons to want to be able to defend himself.

Remus looked as though he wanted to press her, but in the end decided on a different angle. "Where are these lessons taking place,

exactly? Are you at his house every day?" She could tell he was thinking ruefully that James would throw a fit if that were the case.

"Not exactly," she said. "I really do go to Diagon every day. There's a place there where we practice."

"In Diagon Alley?" Remus looked incredibly skeptical.

"Nearby," Harry confirmed vaguely.

Remus stared at her for a long moment. "Harry, I'm not trying to get you in trouble. You know that, right? This isn't about busting you for anything. I just want to know you're safe. You come home looking like you've lost a bar fight and I... well, what am I to think?"

She grimaced. She wasn't trying to be unreasonable, she just didn't know how to explain what she'd been doing without revealing everything about her activities in the lower alleys. Her uncle looked like he knew she was holding back quite a bit and was debating forcing her hand. She held up a hand to let him know she needed a moment and slumped against the wall, thinking hard. Should she tell him? She didn't think he'd be thrilled, exactly, but... it was Remus. Not Sirius, who never took anything seriously and wouldn't understand why she needed this. Not James, who was so overprotective he wouldn't even hear her explanations out before forbidding her from going back. It was *Remus*. Remus, who already supported her learning self-defense: Remus, who taught dueling and encouraged self-betterment in any form: Remus, who understood about the darker places a person's mind could take them to, whatever the reason: Remus, who knew all about personal demons and how to keep them at bay. Maybe... he would get it.

She looked up at him cautiously, consideringly. "Remus... if you had a choice between knowing something but having to keep it a secret from your friends or not knowing and being able to say honestly that you didn't know... which would you choose?"

"Is this your way of telling me that you'll only tell me what's going on if I keep it from your parents?" Remus asked wryly.

"Subtle, I know," Harry smiled weakly. "So? Which way do you want it?"

"What makes you think I won't ask you to tell me and then turn around and tell your parents anyway?" Remus asked, a curious glint in his eyes.

"You respect people's confidences," Harry said immediately. "It's one of your principles. When Uncle Sirius had to go see a Mind Healer after Aunt Diana passed, you covered for his absences until he was ready to talk about it with Mum and Dad."

"You knew about that, huh?" Remus didn't seem too surprised. She simply nodded and waited for him to make his decision. He grimaced lightly. "I feel like you've put me in a tight spot, here. In the end, though... I'd rather someone know what you're up to. Then if you need help, you have someone to come to without having to worry about explaining yourself first."

Harry searched his face, but he seemed certain, so she let out a long breath. "Okay. I need to shower, and then I need to eat all of the food in the kitchen. After that, we can talk."

Remus nodded his acceptance and retreated into the kitchen to wait. She hauled her aching body up the stairs and into the bathroom to clean up. As she scrubbed away the dirt, she tried to organize in her mind the things she'd tell Remus. He didn't need to know everything she'd ever done in the alleys, and she could probably be vague about the timeline in most instances. She also didn't want to reveal too much about the Court of the Rogues-for all that Leo was a huge part of her time in the alleys, he was also technically a criminal, and her father was technically the head of the Auror Department. There was no need to put Remus in an even more uncomfortable position than he already was.

Part of her debated the wisdom of getting into all of this with her uncle, but he made a good point. It would be nice to have someone she could go to, if she or someone she knew needed help. It also meant that if something happened to her while she was in the alleys, at least one person would have an idea of where to look. When Archie came back, it would be two people; that was practically a safety net.

She entered the kitchen to find that her uncle had been busy while she was upstairs. There was a veritable spread of food on the table, and it was all she could do to refrain from falling on it with an embarrassing amount of eagerness. When she'd put at least half of it into her stomach she slowed, then stopped and turned her attention to Remus, who was waiting very patiently in the chair across the table.

"So, I suppose you've guessed I'm not spending all my time actually in Diagon Alley," she began, pausing to swish a gulp of milk down her gullet before continuing. "How much do you know about the lower alleys?"

Remus frowned slightly. "No more than necessary. It's home to all sorts of less than savory characters, and James often has to send a team down that way to raid shops suspected to be operating on the black market."

"Anything else?" she prompted when he stopped to think.

"It's also the site of a good amount of low-income housing, I believe," Remus said, a bit unsurely. "I think I've heard there's a coven that claims part of the territory as their own, as well."

"Two, actually," Harry said, "but the majority of the residents are low-income humans, like you said. There's a high percentage of Squibs and orphans, compared to the general population statistics. There's the shady part of the lower alleys, off of Knockturn, which is what most people think of when they hear the term, but beyond Knockturn there's an entire community of Wizarding folk who just want to keep

to themselves. They have their own shops, markets, neighborhoods, and sense of citizenship. There's a loose educational system in place for children, a clinic that sees to their healthcare needs, and a sort of... government that they all contribute to. It makes sure the streets are clean, sets up public facilities like Floo and Apparition points, and keeps the peace when it can."

"How do you know all this?" Remus asked, leaning forward across the table on his elbows. He looked torn between being fascinated and overwhelmed.

"I've sort of become a... peripheral member of this community," she said carefully. "I know a lot of the people who live there, and some of my friends help contribute to the organization that keeps the whole thing self-sufficient."

"Leo?" Remus looked skeptical again. "Isn't he the son of the Aldermaster of the Potions Guild?"

"He is," Harry said, attempting to shrug off Leo's exact role as unimportant. "His mother runs the clinic in the lower alleys, though, so they know almost everyone there. Mrs. Hurst used to work in the children's ward at St. Mungo's, which is how she got the hospital to subsidize a large part of the clinic's expenses-she even knows Sirius."

"That sounds like a respectable endeavor," Remus said. He looked a little relieved that there were parts of her explanation he could check himself.

"It is," she said, trying to give him every reason to accept her activities as not-that-dangerous. "My friend Hermione-from AIM-even volunteers there as an assistant Healer."

"Really?" Remus looked mildly surprised. "My, this new generation is certainly more altruistic than we were at your age."



"It's important to help people when you can," Harry said seriously. "That's what the lower alley community is all about. Everyone helps one another however they can. Bakers and grocers donate food, which is then redistributed to those in need. People with special skills donate their time to teaching the alley's children. Everyone looks out for one another. I know when people think about the lower alleys they think thieves and cutthroats, and I'm not saying none of that ever happens, but it's mostly outsiders who are in danger down those alleys. If you contribute to the community, the community looks out for you."

She was laying it on a bit thick, not to mention glossing over the entire sub-community of violence and crime that existed inescapably wherever poverty and desperation did, but she thought it was working-Remus at least seemed to be considering what she was saying.

"What do you contribute, then?" he asked. "Why would they look out for you, as you say, if you are an outsider?"

"Ah, right," she said, looking a bit sheepish. "I actually have a job at an apothecary there, and my employer pays a tithe on my behalf that goes toward the community. Also, like I said, I know a lot of people through Mrs. Hurst and her son. Everyone comes through the clinic eventually."

That was slightly misleading, since the reason she knew so many people was because Leo ran the Court, but he didn't need to know the exact progression of events, just the outcomes.

"You... have a job?" Remus appeared to be stuck on that point.

"I brew potions," she said, nodding cheerfully. It was nice to say it so candidly.

"James mentioned that you were going to try marketing your creations commercially," Remus said, looking a little confused. "He just brought it up recently, though."

"That's true," she said, a bit sheepishly. "I've just started letting my employer sell the Protection Potion, but in truth I've been working for him for a while. It's not that I need the money," she said quickly, interpreting Remus' expression as largely bewildered. "It's just satisfying, using my skills for something other than practice. It's how I got Master Hurst's attention, actually, and since then Horace Burke has started commissioning some of my potions, too, so it's actually been really good for building up experience and credibility in the potions community."

"Slow down, Harry," Remus said. He looked both amused and exasperated. "Is that why you spend so much time in your lab? You're brewing as a full-time job?"

"Not full-time," Harry said thoughtfully. "I'm a pretty efficient brewer, so it doesn't take me nearly that many hours a week to fill my quota. Anyway, don't look at me like I'm wasting my youth; I like brewing. I'd be brewing potions all the time anyway, and this way I can make some gold and establish a name for myself."

"How have we not heard about this?" Remus asked. "It's not exactly usual for a thirteen-year-old to be running her own brewing company."

"It's nothing so involved," she said, chuckling a bit. "I just brew a few potions and pass them off to others. They do all the distribution work. Anyway, it's not unusual for people to start working young in the lower alleys."

"Do they know who you are?" Remus asked next. "I know they're your friends, Harry, but... your family is in the Book of Gold. And they have a lot of gold. For some, that might be temptation enough. Add to that your status as Heiress to the line and..."

She shook her head. "Most people don't. Leo, of course, and my employer. That's about it. I just go by Harry there."

His lips quirked. "At least you aren't entirely foolish."

"Don't pass judgment yet," Harry said, a mischievous grin coming to her face. "I haven't told you about the friends I made in the vampire coven yet."

Remus blanched, but recovered when he saw the joking smile on her face. "That isn't funny, Harry. You're going to give me grey hairs." After a moment's pause, he said, "You still haven't explained about the freedueling."

"Well, it is dangerous to walk around the alleys if you don't have some form of self-defense," she said reasonably. "One of the first things that happened when I joined the community was Leo teaching me hand-to-hand and then knife fighting."

"Knife-"

"We practice with blunted blades," Harry said quickly. "It's really quite safe. And educational." Her uncle gave her a look that said he was not impressed with her attempt to appeal to his occupational sensibilities. "Anyway, lots of people in the lower alleys learn freedueling, so it's nothing unusual. Actually, between Leo's lessons and yours, I'm getting pretty skilled. I won both of my matches today and-"

She broke off with an awkward cough, mentally kicking herself for getting excited. She could have skipped that part without alerting Remus to anything untoward, but no, she had to get carried away, didn't she? This was why it was better to just keep all of your secrets, because as soon as you told one the others got easier to spill somehow, the way taking a couple of stones out of a wall could cause the whole castle to come crumbling down.

"Go on," Remus said, tone deceptively light. "You were saying something about matches. I'm very curious to know what, after you attempted to convince me earlier that freedueling wasn't *technically* illegal as long as it wasn't practiced *formally*."

"Well, I may have misled you about what I was doing today," she admitted with a wince, "but this is the first time! Before this it really was just practicing."

"Harry, your father will have to *arrest* you if he finds out about this," Remus groaned, putting his head into his hands and rubbing his eyes.

"So it's really great that I have such an understanding uncle who supports his niece's hobbies even when they conflict with certain family members' oaths of office," she said, laughing nervously. She didn't think Remus would really say anything about the tournament to her dad, since it would mean turning her in to be charged as well, but she really hadn't meant to so carelessly reveal *that* card.

"Is it over now, at least?" Remus asked, lifting his head to reveal a pained expression on his face.

"Almost," Harry said brightly. "I have two matches tomorrow, but the second one is against Leo if I win the first one, so it's very unlikely I'll still be in after that."

"What's ironic is that all of James' irrational fears about Leo being a bad influence on his precious little girl are completely vindicated, but for reasons even he couldn't have imagined," Remus said. Harry thought he was taking it all rather well, if he still had time to find the dramatic irony in the situation. "What time is the first match?"

Harry verbally backpedaled as fast as she could. "Oh, it's really early. You wouldn't want to come, it's quite a hike and they don't really welcome outsiders to this kind of thing. Security is probably pretty tight, too, and you shouldn't get involved in anything illegal anyway, in case my dad does find out. It would be a shame if Addy lost both of her favorite people in one fell swoop." That was sheer exaggeration. Addy adored Remus these days, but was largely indifferent to Harry's presence-probably because she was never around.

Remus waited patiently for her to wind down, then asked again.  
"What time is it?"

"Mine's the second match," she admitted ruefully. "I'll have to get there when it starts at eight. Don't you have to watch Addy, though? She won't like all the noise."

"Sirius has her tomorrow," he said, narrowing his eyes at her. "You won't leave without me."

"I really don't think you'll find it interesting-"

"You won't leave without me." Remus's quiet certainty was as intimidating as if he'd shouted.

"Right," Harry said. Really, she knew better than to argue with Remus. Anyone else she could talk into or out of almost anything she wanted. Remus, however, could be *very stubborn* when he wanted. "I'll just meet you in the Leaky Cauldron, shall I?"

"We may as well," Remus said, looking troubled once more. "No need to prompt your parents to ask awkward questions like *where are you going* and *what are you doing* and *who are you doing it with*, is there? That would be entirely too normal."

"I think avoiding those questions is incredibly normal for a teenager," Harry said thoughtfully.

"And James still thinks you're the responsible one." Remus sighed.

"He's easily bored by me," Harry corrected the man. "And he equates boredom with rule-following and risk-aversion and maturity. That's why it was so easy to blame Archie for everything when we were young. Sirius and James both expect troublemakers to be boisterous and emotional, because that's how they are. They understand the kind of mischief that makes your eyes laugh and your toes tap with impatience. They don't understand the kind of trouble you can get into *quietly* and *methodically* and *carefully* ."

Remus looked at her, and it wasn't the amused understanding she'd expected. Usually he appreciated dry observations about the relative immaturity of their most playful family members. This time, he only looked regretful. "You call him James," he said quietly.

She blinked. Had she? "Not all the time," she assured him. "Just when it's 'James and Sirius.' They're like a paired set, right?"

Her uncle didn't return her smile. "I don't think your father is bored by you," he told her seriously.

"Not me personally," she said, shaking her head. He was twisting what she'd said. "Just my interests bore him. You know he hates Potions."

"That's not..." Remus looked unsure how to explain. "It isn't as simple as simply disliking the subject. It carries a lot of negative connotations for him, from school, and it's hard for him to think about it without thinking about other things, too."

"I know," Harry said, frowning. "He hates Master Snape for something to do with Mum that no one ever bothers to really explain beyond the fact that they were friends and then suddenly everyone hated one another." She waved off Remus' uncomfortable look. "I'm not asking for the details. It's not my business. I'm just saying I get it. I don't blame Dad for his opinion on the subject. That doesn't mean I don't see it when it affects me, though. I still remember him 'accidentally' using my first stirring rod as a fire poker and twisting it beyond recognition."

"Not his finest moment," Remus admitted with a grimace.

"Look, it doesn't matter," she said. "I love my dad. He has a lot of great qualities that make him an excellent father and role model. I just... see him clearly. It's not a bad thing. I think it means more to love people for who they are-maybe even despite it-not because of some ideal you have of them in your head. I think caring about

someone after you've seen the flaws is an advantage. It means you can love them without ever being taken by surprise."

"Maybe you're right," Remus said. He leaned back, and seemed to cast around for something to lighten the mood before settling on, "What are my flaws, then?"

"You're too observant," she groaned at once. "All summer I've got away with my excuses, and then you take one look at me and tear my misdirections to pieces."

"It was a great deal more than a single look," her uncle laughed. "This realization has been a long time coming. I just didn't have the final piece until today."

And she'd handed it over without a fight, of course. Every time she thought her deceptions had grown to a level that was nearly impenetrable, something like this happened to remind her that, for all her experience in weaving illusions, there were those who had at least an equal capacity for unraveling them.

"Mum and Dad should be home soon," she said, glancing at the clock on the wall. She looked at the decimated remains of food on the table regretfully. "They're going to wonder why I ate right before dinner."

"I'll tell them you didn't feel well," Remus said, reaching for the dishes. "Just go upstairs and rest-you look exhausted."

She frowned. "I don't want you to lie for me, Remus. That's not why I told you."

"I know," her uncle said, waving off her attempts to help him clear the dishes. "I'm the adult, though, and that means I get to decide which circumstances to involve myself in. Let me take care of things tonight."

It felt... odd, she decided. She felt guilty that he would go to the trouble on her behalf, but also strangely gratified. "Thanks, Remus," she said. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"See you tomorrow," he agreed.

On her way out, a thought struck her. "It might be a good idea to wear a disguise," she said thoughtfully. "In case Regulus Black shows up or something."

"What?" Remus' voice called after her with panic lacing every syllable. "What does that mean, Harry?"

"Shh," she frowned at him over her shoulder. "You'll wake Addy. It probably won't happen, but just in case, okay?"

A defeated-sounding groan was her only answer. She headed upstairs and collapsed on her comforter with a tired sigh, letting go of the cheerfully unrepentant attitude she'd been channeling. She thought she'd done a good job convincing her uncle that her activities in the alley were harmless-the thoughtless adventure of a teenaged kid, rather than a deep commitment to a world that freed her from the pressures of maintaining multiple façades at once.

Things had grown both more and less complicated in the past hour. More, because she'd involved Remus in a part of her life she was starting to see could never have remained entirely separate from her regular existence. It would have been too easy, she supposed. Things were also less complicated, though, because as the two spheres merged, the lies she told became fewer. She could count on Remus' help now, too, and that was not something to be counted lightly.

She buried her filthy clothes in the laundry hamper and set about repairing the strap on her goggles for the next morning. It was a simple bit of magic, and before long she was able to close her eyes and drift off into a well-earned sleep.



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Her nervousness the next morning easily rivaled the anxious excitement she'd felt the day before, but it was for entirely different reasons. She glanced sidelong at the scruffily dressed man walking beside her through Kyprioth Court. Uncle Remus had opted to don a faded black over-robe that hung open lazily to reveal plain grey trousers and a white T-shirt. He'd left his face uncovered apart from where his sandy brown hair fell across his brow, but she supposed the odds of someone recognizing him were pretty slim. It wasn't as though he was going to be up on stage; it was astronomically unlikely that someone he knew would happen to pick him out of the crowd.

His reactions were subtler than Hermione's had been-sharper, too. He seemed to take in more than just a visual impression of the landscape his eyes were soaking in. From the outside he looked unassuming enough, she supposed. With a relaxed, hands-in-his-pockets posture, he strolled leisurely, as though it were a walk he took daily rather than a trek through unfamiliar terrain. He didn't react when a pair of dusty children wove between him and Harry on their way to the tournament grounds. When one of them called, "Hiya Harry!" over his shoulder, Remus ignored that, too. Unlike Hermione, he asked no questions and appeared to require no explanations.

Upon reaching the outskirts of tents and stalls, Remus did perk up with interest slightly. His eyes moved a little faster and his mouth relaxed further into a pleasant smile. She had to break off her careful observation when she heard her name called from the shade of a nearby fruit stand. She glanced apologetically at her companion and motioned for him to wait a moment while she went to see what Mrs. Fairlay wanted.

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He watched curiously as Harry trotted off to converse with the middle-aged woman running one of the many stands that surrounded them. Harry laughed softly at something the woman said, looking both embarrassed and pleased as she was handed a pair of apples. His niece attempted to exchange a coin for the fruit, but the stall keeper waved her off with an admonition that it was for good luck.

Harry ducked her head in an endearing show of gratitude and jogged back to where Remus was standing. "Sorry," she said. "Mrs. Fairlay is rather insistent. Want one?" She held out an apple. He took it with a smile, holding it up in a 'cheers'-ing motion that made Harry laugh and clink her apple to his before taking a large bite.

"Quite a crowd here," he commented, taking a bite himself. It was surprisingly good for an apple that had been given away for free.

"This is nothing," Harry said, eyes alight. "Up ahead, see the flags? That's where the real fairgrounds are."

Remus peered in the direction she'd indicated and felt his eyes attempt to drift without his impetus. A ward, then. *Subtle*, he thought, fighting against the compulsion to ignore it as he adjusted his Sight to see the magic itself. He could feel it pushing back against his concentration and admitted to some difficulty keeping track of the patterns of magic his perception afforded him. A ward that disrupted even the attention of those actively bending their minds to paying attention to it—that was no easy feat.

A suspicion crept over him. Hadn't Harry mentioned Regulus Black in a glaringly facetious manner the previous evening? Had she been serious about his involvement in this? The quality of the wards they were approaching said yes, most probably.

"Oh-there's an entrance fee," Harry said, looking suddenly uncomfortable.

"I brought my money," he assured her, amused. His niece was not usually so scatterbrained. She was either very nervous or very focused on something else.

He paid for his wristband, noting how one of the guards waved Harry through without even glancing at her competitors' patch. Did he recognize her on sight because of the matches she'd been in the day before or because he knew her? Harry didn't seem to pay any attention to the man, eyes turned ahead and already scanning the interior of the wards with anticipation.

Remus shrugged off a shiver as the magic in the wards slid over him and whistled low as the stadium itself was revealed to him. It was nothing compared to many professional Quidditch stadiums he'd visited, but that wasn't to say it didn't make quite a statement against the backdrop of otherwise quaint streets and alleys. To say he was surprised at the sheer scale of the operation wouldn't quite do his opinion justice. He was having a hard time wrapping his head around the level of organization the intricacy and scope of the spectacle around him suggested.

He followed a pace or two behind Harry. Despite his admittedly parental reasons for accompanying her, he didn't actually want to embarrass the girl by appearing to be hovering. He knew how sensitive teenagers could be about associating with family members while around their peers. Take Archie's near-avoidance behavior the previous year while Remus taught at Hogwarts; if any kid could have been immune to such embarrassment, it ought to have been Sirius' son. Instead, he'd hardly seen his nephew in the nine months he'd been his instructor.

Harry was stopped several more times as they walked around the back side of the stands. He was amazed to realize she hadn't been exaggerating when she said she knew a lot of people around here. One older gentleman even thanked his niece profusely for some

advice she'd apparently given him on a chronic cough. That was a point in favor of her spending time around the clinic as she'd said. It wasn't that Remus didn't trust Harry, exactly. It wasn't easy to take everything the girl said at face value, however, especially after learning that she had in fact been essentially misleading them for... actually, he wasn't sure on the exact timeline. Somehow she'd manage to explain things without him noticing that oversight until now.

He supposed it served the Marauders right to end up with such mischievous children. Clearly Lily's influence was mitigating at best.

"This is the duelers' pavilion," Harry said, gesturing to the large covered area behind the stage. "There are only sixteen competitors left, so we can bring friends in if we want." He nodded easily. It didn't matter much to him where they went. "You can meet Leo," the girl added, and the open, somewhat hopeful look on her face told Remus exactly why James' face turned sour whenever the young man was mentioned.

He had to say that the youth who materialized at Harry's shoulder not five minutes later was both everything and nothing like what Remus had expected. The young man had looks enough to tempt, he supposed, and the charm was hard to look past, it was true, yet... how James had so completely misclassified the threat this boy represented was utterly beyond him.

"One of Harry's infamous uncles?" Leo gave up a grin that was as much challenge as invitation. "I'm honored. Come to see our Harry compete, have you?" His stance radiated energy despite its laidback posture. He rested on his heels as if to dare the world to take its best shot. Remus had not missed the way he said 'our' Harry, either. It was a subtle but strong reminder that his niece now belonged to a world her family, for all its wealth and connections, had no place in.

Oh yes, James was right to worry. Not for the reasons he thought, however. Certainly Leo was taken with Harry-any fool could see the way his eyelids lowered slightly when he looked at her, as though

her presence alone was enough to relax him-but that fact should have been eclipsed by the presence and authority the boy let off unconsciously. He moved like a fighter and held himself as a leader did. This was no ordinary young man. The fact that James had described him to Remus in terms of his ostensible designs on his daughter's time told him that the Auror had let his fatherly paranoia cloud his ability to judge a man's character.

"The honor is mine," Remus said, amiably enough. "When I heard Harry had found herself a supplementary instructor, I had to see what the fuss was about. Looks like quite a show."

There. Let the boy take that as it was meant: a warning that, no matter whom Harry chose to associate with now, her family would always be the foundation upon which her future was built. If Leo sought to sever that connection and bring Harry into his sphere irrevocably, he had severely underestimated her family's tenacity.

"The show hasn't even started yet," Leo said. His voice was entirely causal, but Remus could tell his message had been received loud and clear. "I hope you see something worth the trip, Mr. Lupin."

"Please, call me Remus," he told the boy. "After all, I feel as though we'll be seeing a lot of one another from here on out."

"I hope that's true," Leo said, holding out a hand to shake his firmly.

Harry looked as though she could tell something had passed between them but couldn't quite grasp the import of the interaction. "Your match should be starting soon, Leo," she said after a pause. "Are you ready?"

"What do you think?" Leo asked, tilting his head in a teasing manner.

Harry rolled her eyes. "Don't take it so lightly. By now, the competition should be really serious."

"Worried for me? I'm touched." It was said in a way that suggested he knew just how to get a rise out of his friend.

"Touched in the head if you think I'm going to the trouble of finding a new sparring partner when you die," Harry shot back. "It would be easier to reanimate your corpse and use it for target practice."

Leo winced, and Remus could sympathize. His niece had always been sharp in her banter-it came from growing up with Lily, James, Sirius, and, he admitted, himself-but at some point she appeared to have grown a tad macabre in the imagery she invoked.

"I'll just, ah, not die then, shall I?" Leo was attempting, and failing, to regain the conversational equilibrium, so Remus took pity on him.

"Is mortal injury likely?" he asked. "Harry came home with quite a nasty cut yesterday, so you can understand my concern."

Leo's posture straightened slightly and he looked directly into Remus' eyes when he said firmly, "Very unlikely. The most serious injury so far was a bloke whose wand arm was disabled by a sword stroke, and Harry already beat the goblin responsible for that. Everyone remaining in the tournament has enough experience to avoid hurting their opponents unduly. The prize is a pretty penny, but it's not worth anyone killing for it. Harry will be fine. If anything happens, we have a team of Healers standing by."

"That's good to know," Remus said, relieved that things did appear to be well in hand. He'd been imagining some sort of back alley knife-fighting club, to be perfectly honest, so the obviously well organized and provisioned event came as a pleasant surprise. Harry hadn't mentioned that goblins were involved, however. Just how big an event was this? "Please convey my respects to the tournament organizers."

Leo's face smoothed into a deceptively blank expression and Remus immediately wondered what he'd done to prompt such a transformation. Leo inclined his head easily enough, however, and,

after flicking his eyes briefly in Harry's direction, told him, "You'll know them by the insignia on their shirts. They'll be glad to know all their work is appreciated."

A warning bell went off somewhere over the stands, and Leo bowed to the two of them briefly. "That's my cue. I must warm up. It was a pleasure, Remus. I hope we can talk more after the matches."

"Good luck, Leo!" Harry called after the older youth. She turned to Remus and smiled. "Come on, let's get a good viewing point. The opening entertainment should be starting now."

He followed her to a place beneath a large board depicting the progress of tournament brackets. There was an elevated platform that gave a good view of the raised stage. By the plurality of people with numbered patches on their clothing, he supposed it was meant for competitors who wanted to watch the matches without climbing up into the stands.

Music began to play and his eyes lit on a group of women making their way onstage. Dancers, he decided, as the handful of them took up their positions. The music leapt into a complicated melody that set the women to stepping and twirling in a set of exquisitely choreographed moves designed to ensnare the imagination of all red-blooded men in the audience-and there were quite a few, if the raucous response from the stands was any indication.

He had to admit, they were talented. One in particular seemed to draw the eye without any overt attempt on her part to stand out from the others. There was something subtle to it-just the slightest suggestion of intent in her expression that had Remus thinking she knew exactly what she was doing.

"That's Rispah," Harry said softly from beside him. He turned his head toward her but had trouble tearing his eyes away from the scene before them for a moment longer.

"What?" he asked, finally sparing his niece a glance.

"The one in red," Harry clarified, and Remus realized she was talking about the lead dancer. He wasn't sure if he ought to be embarrassed that his niece had noticed him watching that woman in particular or not. As Harry went on, Remus supposed he could as easily assume she had pointed the woman out for her own reasons. "She's Leo's older cousin. Don't let her pretty face fool you. In addition to being an incredibly talented player, she heads the organizational responsibilities for all the women of the lower alleys."

"Hmm." He acknowledged Harry's words but came up with nothing to say in response. His eyes stayed on the woman in red-Rispah-however. If nothing else, she really was one hell of a dancer.

The entertainment didn't last as long as the crowd might have wished, but their disappointment was fickle. As Leo and his competitor took the stage, tension built back up to a fever pitch. Leo seemed to be the crowd favorite, and it was easy to see why. He was young and eager, all relaxed confidence to his older opponent's rigid stoicism.

As soon as the match began, it was clear who held the advantage. To the casual observer, it might seem that Leo was letting his opponent control the pacing, merely responding passively to whatever moves his larger counterpart made. Remus could see the truth, though. Leo's every response determined the next move his opponent would have to make. The young man drew the match out admirably, no doubt aware that everyone here had paid for a good show, but that's all it was-a show. He could see after the first few minutes why Harry's friend carried himself with so much self-possession. He was incredibly skilled for his age. It was no wonder Harry had sought him out as an instructor.

"Your friend certainly does seem to know what he's doing," Remus commented as Leo's opponent began to flag.

"He's the favorite to win the whole thing," Harry said. There was pride in her voice, and Remus could tell she admired Leo Hurst greatly. Whether that admiration would ever evolve into anything else



was unclear. He doubted Harry had any interest in such things as yet. She was more than old enough, of course, but it was more a personality barrier than a physiological one in her case, he thought. He quickly turned his thoughts back toward the match with a grimace. There were some things he just didn't need to be contemplating, and his niece's love life was one of them.

He knew James would try to skin him if he ever found out that Remus had essentially sanctioned what Harry was up to, but Remus found he couldn't begrudge her this little slice of freedom. Who was he to say whom she ought to befriend, really? If she didn't want to spend her time in high society, well, she'd probably be better off for the things she experienced in this world. Many young ladies of her station would never consider involving themselves in a sphere that hadn't been tailor made for them. To be unsatisfied with the station life handed you-to carve out your own place in the world-was no bad thing, in his mind.

When Leo finally finished toying with his opponent and ended it, Harry jumped lightly down from the platform to meet her friend as he descended the stairs. Watching her, it occurred to Remus that Harry moved a bit like a fighter, too. When exactly had that happened? He found himself looking forward to seeing just what his niece was capable of.

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Things were going well, she thought. Remus and Leo seemed to be, if not getting along like old friends, at least amiably interacting. Not that she'd expected otherwise-everyone liked Uncle Remus. He simply never gave anyone a reason not to.

Leo won his match almost ridiculously easily. She wondered briefly if the bracket had been stacked in his favor, then swiftly dismissed the idea-he was just that good, rather. She tried to psych herself up by

telling herself that, as his pupil, she must have picked up some of Leo's skill. It was hard to take that sort of argument seriously, though, especially once she'd laid eyes on her opponent.

He was huge. Not Hogwarts gamekeeper huge, of course, but certainly bigger than the average man at six-foot-four. His shoulders spanned an impressive breadth and the only thing keeping him from being completely intimidating was the sort of nervous energy he exhibited, bouncing in place on the balls of his feet and shifting and fidgeting in a show of incurable restlessness. When he caught her sizing him up, he grinned, lifting his chin in a friendly challenge. She merely raised an eyebrow and waved a bit halfheartedly.

"Is that your opponent?" Remus asked. There was an odd note in his voice that made her look up at him questioningly.

"Yes," she said. "I haven't been watching his matches, so I'm not sure what to expect. He has at least two knives on him that I can see, and the fact that he's got this far means he has some skill, at least. He's big, so maybe I can out-pace him."

Her uncle shook his head slowly. "I don't think you should assume he's slow, in this case."

She eyed him sharply. "You know something."

"I suspect he may be... like me," Remus admitted, eyeing the man carefully. "I can't tell for certain without getting closer, but my intuition is growling at him, if that makes sense."

"All right," she said, grimacing. "I'll assume he's both fast and annoyingly resilient, then." A quick calculation told her it was nowhere near a full moon. His human body would be at full strength, then. She supposed it would be a bit beyond the pale for her to procure a silver knife before the match and be done with it. There had to be some way for her to take advantage of this information, though. His senses would be acute, but there were ways of turning that into a weakness. She settled her goggles over her eyes with a

grim smile. If she'd known beforehand that she would be fighting a werewolf, she would have brought a few of the Marauders' stink pellets and a flashbang or two. As it was, she'd have to work with what her wits could provide her.

Leo handed over the armband and gave her shoulder a quick pat for luck. Remus smiled encouragingly. She summoned her determination and smiled back. She ascended the stairs first, followed closely by her opponent. According to the brackets, his name was Ralph. Well, it actually said 'Rabid Ralph,' but she thought it was safe to assume he'd got creative with the first part.

They faced off under a thousand eyes, both breathing slowly and deeply to center themselves for the fight to come. "Don't think I'll go easy on you, little miss," her opponent said, dark eyes amused. "I caught your fight with that goblin yesterday-you'll have a harder time tricking *me* ."

"That's good," she said, a smile playing on her lips as she dipped into a crouch. "I like a challenge."

He chuckled appreciatively and took up his stance as well, unsheathing a knife from his belt and drawing his wand with his left hand. She gritted her teeth. Of course he would be left-handed. This was going to throw off all of her knife stances. The only southpaw she'd practiced against was Old Solom, and he never took their bouts too seriously.

The gong rang out and she was leaping back from a horizontal slash before she'd taken her next breath. She dodged two follow-up strikes with quick, efficient movements. It was lucky Remus had warned her, or she would have been taken completely off-guard at the man's speed and agility. It shouldn't be possible for such a large man to maneuver his body so rapidly, but the proof was in front of her, pushing her to retreat. It was a matter of moments to decide that she did not want this to be a close-range fight.

He pursued her tenaciously, likely knowing the advantage was to him if he could keep close enough to press her physically. Annoyed, Harry tossed a low-powered Reducto at the ground between them, stopping him in his tracks as wood exploded and the floor fell out from under his feet. She darted backwards as far as she could while he circumvented the large hole in the stage. From a safe distance, she fired an Impedimenta and a Sticking Charm in quick succession. Her best bet was to slow him down first and then see about taking him out.

She expected him to shield against the first spell-it was why she'd cast the second, almost invisible spell in its wake, with just enough time between them to tempt him into releasing his shield after the first one connected. Instead, he ran right into it. A moment later, she saw why-it hadn't affected him at all, unless she counted the annoyed shudder he gave as he continued running toward her. The sticking charm gave him momentary pause, but he wrenched free of it ridiculously fast, shaking it off like a dog snapping a frayed leash.

Cursing, she twisted away from his lunge and used the turning motion to send herself into the tube of Apparition with a grunt of discomfort. She really hated resorting to the shudder-inducing new skill, but the discomfort was worth not getting disemboweled, she told herself firmly. She reappeared on the other side of the large stage and barely stopped to blink before firing off an Incarcerous across the field at her opponent. His eyes narrowed in on her position, and then he had Disapparated with a crack, avoiding the spell easily and reappearing to her left. She propelled a shield charm into existence between them and skipped away. The werewolf barreled right into the physical shield charm and apparently just shouldered his way through it, as though it were a very heavy door rather than the solid wall it was supposed to be. Clearly the basic shields were not going to cut it here.

She Disapparated again, appearing on the other side of the stage and reading her next spell in transit. When her opponent appeared before her a moment later, her wand had already begun to emit an

extremely over-powered Lumos Charm. Something like a miniature sun burst into existence between them and the werewolf hissed in pain as he shut his eyes and stumbled backwards. Her goggles absorbed most of the light automatically, so Harry didn't pause a whit in darting forward and zeroing in on her target. She slammed the inside of the man's right wrist with the butt of her knife as hard as she could. It would have broken the wrist of a normal man, but the werewolf merely lost control of his grip momentarily. It was all she needed. She had summoned his knife before he could even blink the tears from his sensitive eyes to see where she was, and even though he lashed out with his empty fist in blind retaliation, he only clipped her shoulder as she leapt backwards out of reach.

She Disapparated to a safe distance and tossed the knife down the hole she'd created earlier in the stage. Hopefully if he didn't know what she'd done with it, he wouldn't be able to summon it back to himself-most people needed to know the general location of the thing they were summoning, at least for a Summoning Charm to work over any significant distance.

Her opponent was rubbing his sleeve against his streaming eyes in frustration on the other side of the arena. Part of her wanted to attack him from behind while he couldn't defend himself, but that felt a little cheap. It was bad enough she'd come dangerously close to blinding him with that spell. Still, that didn't mean she would waste the time she had now to prepare.

Quick as a snake, she crouched and etched with her wand the smallest possible runic circle she could into one of the floorboards. It was incredibly simple, consisting of runes requiring no more than a stroke or two each, and she had connected the cardinal points and imbued it with a sliver of magic before her opponent had fully recovered. She scuffed her boot in the built-up dust on the stage beside her runic configuration, hiding it from casual sight. Then she made careful note of its location and promptly charged the werewolf as he turned to glare at her from across the stage.

It was less than terrifying, as he was squinty-eyed and had tear tracks on both cheeks, so she smiled innocently in response before dropping abruptly into a leg sweep meant to send him stumbling backwards. Instead, he kicked his own foot sideways and stopped her leg in its tracks, jarring her hip muscles something awful. She rolled, relinquishing her position before he decided to step on her, and came up with an arching slash of her knife to keep him at a distance.

She thought he would be at a disadvantage in the fight without his knife. She was mistaken. He caught her left forearm as though it was a twig, squeezing hard enough to let her know he could have broken it if he'd wanted to before shoving her backwards with the force of an avalanche. She hit the ground hard and rolled away with a groan. *Message received*, she thought wryly. She was certain the next time she tried to cut him he would break her arm.

Back on the defensive, she brandished her wand sharply and erected the strongest shield she felt comfortable using in a friendly match-it was no Depasco, but she wasn't willing to use a barrier that would dissolve the man's arm if he wasn't familiar enough with it to keep his distance. The Fortis shield was no pushover, though-it was the one she imbued in her Protection Potion, which meant that while many wizards would have difficulty maintaining the high-level shield for longer than a few moments, she was *incredibly* practiced in casting it efficiently.

Ralph came to a stop on the other side of the shield, either recognizing it or being sensitive enough to magic that he could feel the power radiating from the visible barrier. "Bet you can't hammer your way through this one," she called out, a sly grin on her face.

He smiled back slowly. "Why do I feel that you would like me to try?" He shook his head, tilting it slightly to consider the shield with intense concentration. He tossed a couple of offensive spells lazily at the ward between them, tensing after the first time in case it was a reflection shield that tossed his spell back at him. The shield simply absorbed the spell, however, without even a ripple of interest.

"Powerful," the werewolf acknowledged. He lashed out with a spinning kick without warning, but it simply bounced off the shield gently. He frowned, but slowly relaxed. "You cannot keep that up for long. It will tire you immensely. The longer you stay in there, the easier you will be to beat when you release it."

She pretended to think about that. Normally, he would be right. Anyone with average levels of magic would already be shaking with the effort of maintaining the shield against three powerful attacks. She was not most people, however, and she had a feeling that Ralph didn't know what the biggest advantage of this particular shield was. She lunged toward him without warning, as though she were going to break through the shield herself from the inside. Instead of her coming up against the barrier, however, the shield moved with her, crashing into the unsuspecting man with a *crunch*. He was knocked backwards into the dirt, cursing and growling and he rolled out of the way of her oncoming dash.

It was difficult to maneuver the shield around her, but unlike her Protection Potion, which tied the shield to the potion it was imbued within and therefore created an immovable barrier once the potion was poured, this Fortis shield was centered on her wand. As long as it moved, the ward would move. She couldn't move as quickly with it as she could without it, of course-it was a bit like dragging a large balloon around behind her; there was a noticeable lag, and a lot of forward force was lost in resistance, but that didn't matter when the shield itself was what amounted to an unstoppable force. It would run over anything in its way, simply because its magical properties absorbed all attempts to push back against it.

Ralph discovered this quickly the first time he attempted to stand his ground against her shield's assault. He crossed his arms in front of him and braced his feet, but it didn't matter. The shield's implacability combined with Harry running as fast as she could toward him meant that his strength was nullified, outclassed completely as he was thrown backwards once more.

She admitted to having more fun than she should, herding him about the arena from the safety of her little bubble. She wondered how absurd it looked from the audience's perspective. There was a purpose behind this, however, beyond driving her opponent mad as he retreated over and over before her crushing onslaught. She had the stage mapped very carefully in her mind, and by the time the werewolf was glaring at her as if he regretted not breaking her arm after all, he'd already been maneuvered to precisely where she needed him.

She pretended to sway slightly, as though she was running out of steam. In fact she felt as though she could do this all day, but that wouldn't get her any closer to *winning*. Ralph readied himself, poised to strike the moment her shield fell. She shook her head in dramatic denial, affecting a desperately determined expression and taking a single step forward. The werewolf took one step back, caution warring with impatience. She stumbled forward another step and he mirrored her again-stepped backwards directly onto the runic circle that had been lying in wait.

The trap configuration activated on contact, sparking beneath his foot and popping with a loud bang that let off a burst of smoke and fire. It was nothing dangerous-she had underpowered the fire-starting configuration, and instead of a bonfire springing to life around him it looked more as if he'd stepped on a firecracker. The loud noise it produced coupled with the sudden heat was more than enough to take him completely off guard, however.

He yelped and stamped his feet frantically, likely wondering why on earth the floor beneath him had just experienced spontaneous combustion. In that moment of distraction, Harry dropped her shield and sent an Incarcerous straight toward his chest. She put as much magic as she could without the structure of the spell falling apart. His instincts had him looking up in time to see the spell coming, but there was no time at all to avoid it. Ropes sprang up around him from all angles and converged, shrinking to force his arms into his side and his legs together.



He toppled backwards even as Harry sprang forwards with her wand outstretched. This was the moment. If she could just get the tip of her wand to his throat, the duel would be-

The werewolf shifted his weight as he fell, rolling somehow despite the ropes that should be constricting even the smallest movements. Before she could get close enough to end it, he seemed to shrink all of a sudden, pulling in his arms in a sharp movement that she recognized as the trick Leo had taught her for getting out of that exact situation. He'd managed to puff up his form enough to fool the ropes before they caught him, then.

She aborted her lunge and backpedaled quickly, barely getting out of range before he shrugged an arm out of the ropes and swiped his fist at her face. She felt the rush of air as her nose avoided a nasty break by a hairsbreadth. She steadied her footing, hoping to recover before he could counterattack, but the werewolf was fast. He had palmed a knife-the one she'd seen tucked into his sleeve back when she first assessed him, the second knife she'd been waiting for him to use since she relieved him of his first-and sliced through the ropes as if they were old and frayed already instead of new and magically reinforced.

The incredibly annoyed look on his face as he regained his feet-now singed around the edges-did not bode well for her. She Disapparated.

He followed. She Apparated three more times in a row before she was too dizzy and disoriented to continue. She caught him with a stunner as he appeared in front of her, but he shrugged it off and kept coming. She evaded a series of merciless slashes courtesy of his back-up blade and focused all her energy on keeping away from his strikes and planning her next move. She was running out of tricks to try, and as he barreled through a Tarantallegra she thought it was looking increasingly as though he would be able to shrug off whatever she threw at him. The only spells he even bothered wasting energy to dodge were area-effect spells that his superior physical resilience wouldn't protect him from.

Her eyes widened as something occurred to her. The reason he could afford to take spells directly was because he recognized which ones wouldn't hamper him unduly and *chose* not to avoid them. To hit him with something that could actually take him down, she had to make him think it was something else.

She risked another string of Apparitions while she ran through her repertoire of spells as fast as she could. She needed a spell that could get around a werewolf's spell-immunity and then a spell that wouldn't, but which looked the same.

Her muscles were burning with fatigue and sweat dripped from what felt like everywhere on her body, but she managed to keep the pace up long enough to settle on two spells that ought to work. She shot a Trip Jinx at the werewolf's feet to make him hop backwards, giving her enough distance for her next play.

She had never tried something like this before, but there wasn't time to wonder if it could work. She opened her mouth and cried, "Flipendo!" The Knockback Jinx was not the spell she summoned her magic to cast, however. She separated her attention into two parts; one half of her focused on enunciating the Knockback Jinx oh-so-clearly. The other was weaving a Vertigo Jinx and releasing it with enough power to make even a werewolf lose his lunch. Both spells would emit a blue light when cast, and while the Vertigo Jinx typically travelled through the air with a distinctly twisting trajectory, it would take an extremely experienced dueler to pick out the physical discrepancy when his ears had already told him which spell his opponent had cast.

Ralph was a skilled and fierce combatant, but he relied heavily on his knives and fists in a duel. His wand work was supplementary at best, limited to a couple of high-powered offensive spells for emergencies. He took the spell coming for him entirely at face value and didn't give it another thought beyond bracing his muscles for the impact-until it struck his shoulder and, instead of pushing against his body, launched an assault on his *mind* .

He stumbled sideways with a slack expression on his face and lurched drunkenly in a clumsy attempt to catch himself before he fell. It probably felt as though the world had tilted sideways beneath him, however, as he barely managed to land on his knees without collapsing in the dust. His face betrayed the nauseating sensations the spell was inflicting on his perception.

Harry allowed herself a grin as she cautiously approached. A werewolf might be blessed with near-immunity to physical spells, but the curse had the opposite effect on their minds. Unless a werewolf worked tirelessly to bulk up his mental resilience through lengthy meditation sessions and the dedicated study of Occlumency and the other Mental Arts, he would always be more susceptible than the average wizard to magic that affected the mind.

Most people wouldn't know that, of course, but Harry had made a dedicated study of lycanthropy both through her investigation of the Wolfsbane Potion and through simply living with Remus her whole life. Ralph had made an unlucky draw for an opponent.

She caught up to the man quickly, despite the attempts he was making to stumble away from her. Having been under the Vertigo Jinx before, she knew it had the effect of making one's limbs seem to be in all the wrong places. It was difficult to coordinate any sort of movement, and harder still to summon the mental acuity to cancel the spell on your own. A quick Expelliarmus divested him of his wand and knife, and Harry closed in with her wand outstretched to level it between his eyes. Crossed and unfocused as they were, he seemed to recognize the situation he was in, for he froze.

For an instant, she thought she'd won. Before the match could be called, however, her opponent jerked his left hand up between them, palm flexed, as though to ward her off with his bare hand alone. She frowned and opened her mouth to demand his capitulation when a hissing noise erupted from the werewolf's sleeve and a cloud of noxious gas came spitting into her unsuspecting face.

She'd inhaled before she had even registered what happened. Coughing and gasping on the burning cloud, she stumbled backwards as quickly as she could and attempted to wheeze up as much of whatever she'd inhaled as possible. She narrowed her eyes at the werewolf, who was coughing a bit himself, though nowhere near as violently as she was. He was still fighting off the Vertigo Jinx, so she turned her wand on herself and cast a quick diagnostic charm on her lungs.

Definitely poison, she grimaced. It wasn't highly toxic, however. She monitored her vitals while her opponent struggled to his feet. It looked like the Vertigo Jinx was wearing off. Her diagnostics were telling her what she could have guessed. Her heart rate was fluctuating and her respiratory system was being forcibly suppressed. Her potassium levels were also elevated. The low-level of toxicity combined with the sluggish dizziness that accompanied a depressed central nervous system pointed to one thing: sleeping gas.

It was clever, she had to give him that. As a werewolf, he had a much greater ability to physically overcome the gas, so what would be a double-edged sword in anyone else's arsenal was a guaranteed advantage for him. She wasn't out of tricks just yet, however.

She directed her magic carefully to her lungs. Sleeping gas wasn't difficult for the body to metabolize naturally, as long as the dosage wasn't too high. Since she wasn't under a constant inundation of the gas, there was little risk of her actually falling unconscious. It would slow her down immensely, however, and all but eliminate her ability to keep fighting if she didn't speed up the process significantly.

The process at a chemical level was relatively simple. She only had to convert the sleeping gas into carbon dioxide and exhale it—it was the same thing her lungs would do on their own, given enough time. Granted, some of the poison had already been absorbed into her system, but metabolizing the rest of it would certainly help. Her magic got to work, and she divided her attention between it and her opponent, who had regained his equilibrium at last, it seemed.

He was walking slowly toward her, wheezing slightly. She could tell his breathing was already beginning to level out, however. She wondered at the speed of his recovery, even allowing for werewolf physiology, until he smiled a bit ruefully and said, "Sorry, kid. That wasn't meant for you, but you've pressed me harder than I expected." He took a deep breath and let it slowly out, coming to a stop above her. "Don't worry if you're feeling sleepy-it's not deadly. Just a little knockout gas. I've inoculated myself against this particular mixture, as you may have noticed. I remember how it feels, though. Really drains you, doesn't it?"

She favored him with an annoyed look. Who inoculated themselves against poison just so they could use it freely against others? "What are you, a professional assassin?" she grunted between coughs.

He looked surprised. "It's very impressive that you can still talk."

"I can do... more than talk," she huffed. Summoning her strength, she stood shakily, forcing her body into a ready position. She would be slower, that was inevitable, and she couldn't use her wand on him as long as she needed it to flush the toxins from her lungs, but she'd already disarmed him entirely, so they were even in that regard.

He regarded her uncertainly. "It would be best to forfeit at this point. The toxin is in your bloodstream by now; soon all aspects of your nervous system will be compromised."

Well, at least he was well informed about the poison he carried around. He was less well informed about her, however, if he really thought she would just forfeit. She brought her knife up in her left hand, the familiar reverse hammer grip making the blade a clear threat as she brought it across her body in the guard position. "You'll have to finish this the old fashioned way, I'm afraid," she told him.

"So be it."

He lunged. She twirled past one fist and turned aside the second with the flat of her blade. His foot kicked toward her knee but she slid

her leg inside of his and knocked it off course with her hip. Her other leg came up toward his groin-a feint, not that he knew that-and forced him into leaping back.

He seemed bewildered that she was still on her feet at all, a frown marring his normally open features as they traded blows. Well, more like he took her hits with barely a wince while she avoided letting any of his blows connect at all costs. She wasn't able to defend herself well enough with one hand tied up healing herself, so it wasn't surprising that she took a series of glancing hits to her torso. Her legs were begging her to just sit down and give up, but it wasn't in her nature to stop just because it was becoming increasingly clear she fought a losing battle. If she could just hold out a few more minutes, until her lungs were clear, the outlook would be less bleak; with her wand back in play, she would have the advantage again.

She swept her knife toward his side, hoping to make him overbalance when he turned to block. Instead, he caught her arm in one hand and twisted her wrist until she dropped the knife with a grunt of pain. She abandoned healing her lungs in favor of getting her wand between them, but she wasn't fast enough. He used the arm he held as leverage and jerked her forward. His head came toward her, almost like he was going to buss her brow, but it was moving too fast and the angle was all wrong. A starburst of pain erupted in her forehead and the world cut out like the signal had gone-

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She found herself lying on a golden sea, the sun warm on her skin and bright against her eyes as she blinked them open slowly. The sea moved beneath her lazily and she turned her head slightly to take in its roiling movements. It wasn't a sea, she realized dimly. It was sand. She pushed against it, struggling to sit. She was lying on the crest of a large sand dune. What on earth... ?

She struggled to her feet and squinted against the bright landscape, looking for some sign as to what exactly was going on. There in the distance was a shape, triangular, she thought, though it was hard to be sure with the mirage-like haze that blurred its edges to her sight. What... oh. She sighed. It was a pyramid. She was just in her mindscape. Thinking back to what she could remember, that must have been a hell of a head butt. She rubbed her forehead ruefully. No doubt that was going to hurt like the dickens when she woke up.

"Have you come to see my progress?"

She turned to see the Jewel-construct standing on the dune behind her, hands in its pockets and a tilt to its head that was eerily familiar. It was getting better at mimicking people, she noted. "I actually got knocked unconscious and ended up here by accident. Sorry," she added as the construct's face morphed into a petulant scowl.

"Go on, then," the boy construct said, scuffing his foot in the sand with an annoyed huff. "If you stay unconscious too long they'll send in the Mind Healers, and then you'll have quite a bit of explaining to do, I'd imagine."

"You mean it isn't normal to have voices in my head?" she asked, affecting an innocent tone that was belied by the ironic twist to her mouth. "Anyway," she said, dropping the tone as easily as she'd donned it, "I'll come check out the new additions, soon. Scout's honor."

"You are not a 'scout,'" the construct said, voice unimpressed.

"I promise, then," she said, waving him off distractedly. She focused carefully on willing her avatar toward the conscious realm.

"Why did someone knock you into oblivion, anyway?" it asked, unable to stifle its curiosity.

She spared it a glance as her consciousness began to drift back to reality. "I lost a fight."

Her vision faded to mist, and then she could hear her name being called over and over. "Harry." "Harry." It sounded like different people, she thought absently, still fighting her way back to the physical realm. "Harry, come on, you can't sleep all day. You'll miss my match." That was Leo. Trust him to twist her injury into some kind of passive aggressive attempt on her part to annoy him.

"Shutup, Leo," she slurred. The pain hit her sharply as she came back to herself and opened her eyes. "Ow," she commented. "Why is it always the face?"

Hands helped her sit up and she blinked blearily at Remus and Leo, then past them to where Rispah and Marek were hovering anxiously. She was in the Healers' tent, she reckoned, taking in the pallet she was lying on and the wrinkling her nose at the smell of especially harsh cleaning charms.

"All right, there, Harry?" Remus asked, giving her a look that was only mildly laced with concern. She supposed the Healers must have already told him she would be all right.

"Headache," she complained on a sigh. "Otherwise, I'm fine." She patted her pockets for her wand, though; it wouldn't hurt to run a quick diagnostic just to be sure.

"Here," Leo passed her the wand, along with her knife and her goggles, which she realized belatedly were not in fact on her face. Mrs. Hurst must have taken them off.

Speaking of, the woman ambled over from the back of the tent to bless Harry with a disapproving expression. "My child," she said, exasperation in every syllable. "When you inhale poison, the recommended course of action is to *seek immediate medical treatment* . Not continue a pointless fight of attrition until a blow to the head does what the toxic gas couldn't quite manage on its own."

Harry smiled sheepishly. "I did immediately give myself medical treatment, though," she said. "That has to count for something, right?"



I almost had all the gas out of my body when he caught me on the noggin. If I'd had just a few more minutes... ah, well. I'd only have lost to Leo in the next round anyway, I suppose."

"I'll wipe the floor with that man," Leo promised cheerfully.

"Please don't seek revenge on my behalf," she said seriously. "It was a good match. I don't begrudge him the win."

"You were quite spectacular, Harry," Remus said, pride in his gaze as he ran a hand over her hair gently. "Your strategies were ingenious, if a little unorthodox at times."

"You didn't like the bubble of doom?" Harry chuckled. "Tell me truly, did it look as funny as it felt?"

"More," Rispah piped up with a laugh. "It's a shame you lost in the end, as I've no doubt you converted a good number of spectators to your side with that particular maneuver."

"Oh, good," Harry said, sighing in facetious satisfaction. "I live to entertain."

"As long as you live," Leo said, frowning slightly. "You were pretty reckless a time or two, lass."

Harry shook her head slowly, so as not to upset her headache any more than necessary. "He wouldn't have really hurt me."

"Don't be naïve, Harry," Marek said.

"Really," she said earnestly. "He was competing on the same level I was-we were trying to win, but neither of us wanted to seriously injure the other."

"Is that why you underpowered the rune set?" Remus asked curiously. "I thought I recognized the array for a good sized fire, but all it did was spark a bit."

"Didn't want to burn down the stadium," she said, chuckling a bit. "Bad enough I blew a hole in the floorboards. Did they fix that?"

"We're currently in intermission until they get it patched up," Leo said. He didn't look upset with her, though. That was good.

"In that case, I need food," she decided, levering herself up off the pallet. "I'm cleared to go, right, Mrs. Hurst?"

The Healer warned her not to strain herself and to come back if she noticed any symptoms of a concussion, but in the end let her leave the tent. Rispah and Marek, assured of her continued health, left to attend to the festivities and prepare for their upcoming match, respectively.

Ralph-the-incredibly-hard-headed-werewolf was waiting outside the tent, anxiety all over his face. It morphed into a sort of awkward relief when he saw her emerge and he stepped over to look her up and down carefully, as though making sure he hadn't accidentally broken her.

"Good match," she said, offering a hand.

He took it gently, peering down at her with something like grateful confusion on his face. "It was. I admit I underestimated you."

"I get that a lot," she assured him. She couldn't be too upset about her loss when she was so exhausted and sore. She had no idea how the winning competitors were expected to fight another match that afternoon, and she could honestly say she was kind of glad she didn't have to try. "I'm Harry," she said as she released the large man's hand. "It's nice to officially meet you."

"Ralph," he said, smiling almost shyly. "I, uh, wanted to ask you-are you a werewolf?" It came out bluntly and a bit hurried, as though he were embarrassed to ask but still eager to know the answer.

She shook her head slowly. "What makes you think that?"

He shrugged, visibly disappointed. "You're pretty fast, for your age. And you threw off that poison like it was nothing-even I had a lot of trouble getting my body used to it. I just thought... well, never mind. Thanks anyway, Harry."

She eyed him for a moment, then sent Remus a sidelong look. He returned it with a resigned expression that she knew was as good as permission, so she said, "Remus is, though."

"Is what?" Ralph blinked, following her pointed finger to where her uncle was standing.

"Is a werewolf," she said, a slight smile in her voice. The big man's eyes lit up with something like disbelieving hope.

"Ah-really? That's great! I mean, it's not great, obviously," he faltered, shifting nervously as he babbled. "I'm new. I mean, as a werewolf. I was turned a year ago and I haven't met any others yet, or at least I don't think I have, but it's kind of hard to tell because my senses are a little confused still-"

"That will settle about two years after the initial bite," Remus said quietly, drawing the man a little way away to give them a semblance of privacy. "Eventually, you'll be able to tell other werewolves by their scent alone, and if you have good instincts, by sight alone... "

"So," Leo said, drawing her attention to his curious face. "Your uncle, huh?"

She flushed slightly. "It would have been impossible to mislead him after he saw the knife cut on my cheek. He's not going to tell my parents... I think."

Leo nodded slowly. "I think it's good. You should have someone in your immediate family who knows what you're up to. I keep things from my da for his own good, but my ma knows all about my life here. It's important to have people you can depend on when you need them."

"Remus said something similar," she murmured, watching her uncle speak soothingly to the werewolf beside him as though he were giving a lecture to a very large child.

"First Hermione, now Remus." Leo laughed at her somewhat sullen expression. "I feel like I'm meeting a whole new side of you this summer, Harry."

"From here it just feels like the world is collapsing around my ears," Harry sighed despondently. "I used to think I was so good at keeping secrets."

"You keep the ones that count," Leo said, a shrewd look in his eyes. "I don't doubt if you ever had something really worth concealing that it would never see the light of day. This," he gestured to the spectacle around them, "is not in itself a secret worth trying too hard to keep. Its existence, and your place in it, are well established in casual knowledge. You don't need me to tell you this, though. The fact that you told your uncle about all this without revealing my position here tells me you understand well enough the difference between secrets and knowledge that other people simply don't happen to have yet. I will tell you not to worry so much, though. It'll give you grey hair."

"I'll just wear this hat so you can't see it," she said, shrugging.

"Please don't," Leo said, looking pained. "I didn't want to say anything, but... that hat is horrible, Harry. That shade of brown doesn't go with your skin tone at all. Plus it's, you know, droopy on one side. It looks even more ridiculous with the flower."

"You're the one who picked out the flower," she reminded him.

"I didn't know you were going to pair it with that headpiece," he groaned. "Promise me you'll take it off after the tournament is over."

She hesitated. "You just want to be able to ruffle my hair when you tease me," she accused.

Leo shrugged. "My motivations have no bearing on the ugliness that is the limp brown sack currently nesting above your eyebrows."

Her eyebrows rose. "I see you feel very strongly about this, Leo."

"I do."

"I'll take it under consideration," she assured him dryly.

"I'll buy you a new hat," Leo said fervently. "A dashing cap in black or maybe white that you can wear anytime you're trying to look less like yourself."

"You spoil me, truly." She rolled her eyes.

Remus finished his conversation with Ralph, who waved again to Harry as he wandered off, and came back to them. "So. Apparition, Harry?"

She winced. Right. "Sorry?" she tried. His blank expression prompted her to try again. "I only use it for dueling?"

He sighed quietly. "Acceptable, I suppose. It did serve you in good stead today. Just please don't get arrested for Apparating without a license," he begged her.

She smiled in a way she was sure came off reassuring, no matter what her uncle's expression said to the contrary. "I promise not to get caught Apparating without a license."

Remus grumbled something about karmic retribution for teenaged hijinks, but didn't press further on the subject of illegal skills. She supposed he knew that the penalties for participating in a freedueling tournament were harsher than Apparating without a license, in any case, so harping on about that transgression in particular was rather missing the mark.

They went to find food, and afterwards she and Remus left Leo to prepare for his next bout while they found a seat in the stands to

watch the rest of the matches. Harry grabbed a red flag (to support Leo), while Remus bought a blue one and they had a lot of fun staging a wild cheering competition over the participants they didn't know.

Marek won his match fairly handily. He was fast and ruthless as a fighter, always seeming to know exactly where his opponent's weak spots were. Harry had been dumped on her butt more times than she cared to admit while sparring with Marek.

Leo's match with Ralph was frankly a bit brutal. For all that the werewolf was enormous, he was clearly fatigued from their earlier fight, and Leo seemed to be having a little too much fun cutting him down to size. She had to shake her head ruefully as her friend executed a perfect running flip over the werewolf and knocked the legs out from under him on the landing. The knife was poised over Ralph's throat from behind before he quite knew what had hit him. It seemed to Harry that Leo took a little longer than necessary to help his opponent to his feet, but she knew Leo was much more competitive than she was. It made sense that he would lose himself a little in the heat of the exchange.

She and Remus left as the sun began to set, bidding goodbye to a good number of people who hailed her on their way out-some of them Harry wasn't even sure she knew, but she had expected to obtain some level of notoriety if she made it far enough in the tournament. It was why she bothered with her disguise, after all. She returned every greeting regardless on her way back through the alleys. More friends could only help her, at this point.

As they neared the Leaky, she asked Remus what he thought of it all, after seeing it first hand. He thought about it for a long moment before saying, somewhat cautiously, "I think you're growing into a very interesting young woman, Harry."

She smiled softly. "Well, what did you expect? With such interesting influences, it was sort of preordained, don't you think?"

"I can't deny James deserves you, if that's what you're saying," Remus said dryly.

She paused for a moment, then grinned slyly. "Does this mean you guys are going to start teaching Archie and me how to become Animagi soon?"

Remus spluttered. "Not likely!"

She brought out a pout Rispah had taught her personally. "But Remus, weren't Dad and Sirius our age when they started learning?"

"They were incredibly irresponsible," Remus said, frowning. "If I'd known then what they were up to, I'd never have allowed it."

"I see," she said, feigning understanding. "So it's James and Sirius we need to ask."

"That's not-" her uncle broke off as he caught the amusement in her gaze. "Must you attempt to give me a heart attack, Harry? Have we not had enough surprises today?"

"I suppose I can wait a while before springing the next one on you," she said, a reasonableness to her tone that she knew would make Remus incredibly suspicious. "It's not as though you need to know about... hmm, yes, it would be better to wait."

"Stop it." His eye twitched helplessly. "You're a cruel kid, Harry."

"There, there." She patted his arm. "Would you like me to help you through the Floo?"

He grimaced. "And now the old man jokes. Remind me why you're my favorite, again?"

"Because I keep you on your toes?" she guessed.

"No," he said flatly. "I really don't think that was it."

She laughed and sent him through the Floo ahead of her. Whatever he pretended, she thought Remus had had a lot of fun in the lower alleys. The gleam in his eye as he watched the matches spoke of a man fully engaged in an activity near to his heart. Maybe she should get him tickets to an exhibition match on the formal dueling circuit for his next birthday. He certainly deserved a reward for being so understanding and supportive; he didn't even freak out when she managed to get herself knocked unconscious-heck, he'd befriended the man who'd done it afterwards.

As she whizzed through the Floo, she considered the day a success, despite the fact that she'd been bumped out of the tournament. The next two days of matches would be even more intense than what she'd witnessed for far, she knew, and that level of fighting was just not something she was comfortable with yet.

She whistled as she made her way through the house to her room to shower before dinner. The pressure of participating in the tournament had finally melted away, and now she could enjoy the rest of the summer in a more leisurely fashion. She would have more time for her potions research, which was coming along very nicely, if she did say so herself. She even had time to work out what to get Archie for his coming-home-birthday-present before the end of July.

She smiled as she wrung the dirt from her hair and watched the water around the drain turn a greyish brown. She just loved having free time.

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The matches on the third day were marathons. Both were exhausting to watch in their own way-she couldn't imagine what the participants themselves must be feeling. The crowd around her seemed to enjoy the protracted violence, but Harry found she personally couldn't keep her blood up for so long. It was fun at first,



but after a while she just wanted it to end. Perhaps she wasn't a very good spectator, she decided as she congratulated Leo on his fifth win. She certainly hadn't got sick of it when she was the one fighting.

Marek lost his match, which meant the two Rogue favorites wouldn't be facing off in the finals as they'd hoped. The boisterous knife fighter left the stadium immediately after his loss, so she didn't have the chance to tell him that she'd thought he fought well, though privately she thought he wasn't as focused as he ought to be. His opponent, a masked outsider who called himself 'Scar,' had simply taken advantage of his inattention.

The fourth and final day of the tournament started with a bang. As the festival was on its last legs, nothing was spared in making it a show to remember. The entertainment went on for what seemed like hours before the final match, and in the Duelers' Tent the bout was preceded by a round of raucous pre-gaming for the fighters and their friends. Leo and a number of the regular members of the Rogue drank and caroused in high spirits. Harry stepped into the jovial atmosphere with amused disbelief, immediately zeroing in on the merry king and eyeing his cup with open disapproval.

"What?" Leo asked, poking her in the forehead as she made to sit down. "What's with this frown? Aren't you looking forward to the match?"

"I'd like to see a decent fight, not just you keeling over drunk," she hissed. "How long have you been drinking?"

Leo laughed. "Harry, this is why you're my favorite. I suppose if it was up to you there'd be nothing but warm milk and bickies in this tent, eh?"

She narrowed her eyes at her ridiculous friend. Milk and bickies indeed. "Your opponent doesn't appear to be partaking. Do you think that's because he has a *lick of sense*?"

They both glanced over to the corner of the pavilion, where the man with a cloth mask that covered his entire face sat alone, a cup of tea on the table in front of him the only sign that he was even staying hydrated, much less celebrating prematurely like *certain people* .

"I bet if he had any friends he would be," Leo said. His tone was perfectly reasonable but his eyes held too much mirth to be taken seriously.

She sighed and let her head drop to the table with a thump. "If you lose your crown because of this overconfidence I shall not be responsible for the state into which your kingdom plunges," she muttered.

Leo patted her head. "There, there. Don't fret for your king, dear maiden. You see, this is all... " he leaned in close, "a ruse." She opened one eye and waited for him to continue. "It's important that the king appear relaxed and confident before the big joust, yes? He must be seen nonchalantly making merry with his entourage. It's good for morale. Plus, it intimidates his enemies."

"So... you're not really drinking?" she clarified, sitting up. She felt a bit sheepish knowing it was all for show. She had to admit it was an effective ploy, however, if she'd bought it so readily.

"Oh, I am," Leo said, his grin wickedly teasing. At her affronted look he laughed again. "Kidding, Harry, honestly. Take a whiff."

She leaned in and sniffed. "That's rum."

"It does smell like that, doesn't it?" Leo hummed happily. "This stuff has no alcohol in it, though. It's all flavoring. Every time I dramatically call for more spirits, one of the kitchen lads from the Phoenix refills it from a special pitcher just for me." He took a large gulp and sighed ostentatiously in satisfaction. "Getting to drink piss-flavored toilet water while all your friends get steadily more drunk around you and then going on stage to get beaten up for half an hour in front of hundreds of people. It's great to be the king."

"Yes, yes, we all feel very sorry for you," she said absently, her eyes looking around the pavilion carefully. "Where's Marek? He fought this Scar fellow yesterday-he should be here giving you the inside scoop, shouldn't he?"

"Haven't seen him yet," Leo said, losing his fake blissful expression to be serious for a moment. "I'm afraid he might be taking yesterday's loss pretty hard."

She frowned. Marek was generally vocal in his disappointment, but he wasn't one to sulk. She stood. "I'm going to look for him." Leo gazed imploringly at her, but she only rolled her eyes. "I'll be back before your match."

She left the pavilion and began a methodical search of the grounds within the wards. Whatever Marek's mood, there was no way he'd miss the finale. He had to be around somewhere. She asked any mutual acquaintances she came across if they'd seen the man, but although a couple thought they'd seen him in passing, no one could say where he was now.

Eventually she found Aled overseeing the stage inspection-attempts at sabotage were apparently not uncommon-and asked if he'd seen Marek.

"Swift?" Aled nodded distractedly. "Said he was headed over to Knockturn. Had to follow up on a lead for... something. I don't think he mentioned exactly. He should be back soon, don't worry. The final fight is in ten minutes, and he wouldn't miss Leo's bout for anything."

She nodded, vaguely troubled. What business would Marek have all the way over in Knockturn Alley on a day like today? It must have been urgent to make him cut his timing so close. She made her way back to the competitor's tent, and felt more than a little exasperated when she saw the very man she'd been looking for at Leo's table, head bent close to his king in intense conversation.

She wanted to say something pithy about his irreverent timing, but the words died in her throat when she got a look at Marek's face. It was wan and tense, his bloodshot eyes underlined by dark circles that hinted at what sort of night he'd had. She couldn't believe he'd really taken the loss so badly. It was only a tournament, after all.

"-telling you, Leo, this is serious. He's not who he says he is. I've tracked his appearance as far as the Cesspool, but the trail vanishes after that. It's like he came out of nowhere." Marek was speaking with deadly earnest, but Leo didn't seem to be listening very closely.

"The Cesspool?" Leo wrinkled his nose. "Hate that place. Why'd you go there? Why would anyone go there? Should've burnt the whole district to the ground years ago."

Harry had vaguely heard reference to a series of dingy streets called collectively the Cesspool that branched off of Knockturn's many side alleys. It was by far the poorest and most violent of the areas considered part of the lower alleys. She had never had occasion to go there, only venturing as far as the tangential alley the Lamia Hotel called home.

"Leo, listen, you can't trust this man," Marek said urgently, reaching out a hand to forcibly catch Leo's wandering attention by snapping in his fingers before his face. "He won't fight fair. He's got some sort of... of power. He doesn't say any spells out loud, but he can make you see things that aren't there. Shadows, and twisting lights that blind and confuse and... Leo, be careful, are you listening?"

Leo blinked slowly at his friend. "Why are you being so serious, Marek? It's a party. Have a drink."

"Damn it, Leo!" Marek slapped his hand on the table and upset Leo's drink, which spilled all over the floor.

"Look what you did," Leo sighed morosely.

"I think you've had enough to drink," Harry cut in, gently placing her hand under Leo's elbow and prying him out of the seat. He was really laying on the drunken king routine a little too thick. "Marek, help me get him to the stage; his match starts in a few minutes-look, Scar's already left."

Marek shot a look to the corner where Leo's opponent had so recently sat. He looked both frustrated and terribly worried. He helped her haul Leo out of the pavilion. "What is wrong with him?"

"I believe he's lulling his opponent into a false sense of security," she said wryly.

Marek frowned at his friend, who was stumbling and weaving between the two of them. "Leo, is that true?"

"Is what what?" Leo looked confused for a moment, then smiled. "You worry so much, Marek. It'll make you-make you-something."

Harry frowned as well, now. "Leo, that's enough. You need to start warming up."

"Mmm, warm me up, Harry," he slurred, throwing his arms around her shoulders abruptly.

She spluttered. "That's not funny, Leo. Come on, you've made your point. Everyone thinks you're relaxed and confident. Now you have to get serious."

"I am serious," Leo said, his face very close to hers. "I'm very serious about-about you."

She blinked at him, wide eyed. "Marek, I think there's something actually wrong with him."

"No shit!" Marek growled, taking Leo by the shoulders and shaking him. When that only served to make his head flop back and forth he

proceeded to slap his king several times. "Snap out of it, Leo. What has he been drinking?" he demanded of Harry.

"Nothing but fake rum," she said, seriously troubled. The five-minute warning had already been given and the spectators were settling into the stands. "Wait here."

She raced back to the pavilion and searched the floor until she came to the cup Leo had been drinking out of. She brought it to her nose and sniffed. It wrinkled reflexively at the smell of stale rum, but... there was something else there, too. It hadn't been there before, she was sure of it. She dipped a pinky in the residue and brought it to her tongue-it was reckless and stupid, but she had no faster way of determining what Leo had been dosed with.

She grimaced as she recognized the taste of the foreign additive. Ephedra. Probably a very potent extract, if she was going by the extent to which Leo had been affected. She pocketed the cup as evidence and rushed next door to the Healers' tent. "Mrs. Hurst," she called urgently. "Mrs. Hurst, do you have a Sobering Potion?"

"Do we?" Mrs. Hurst huffed wryly. "With the amount of ale being sold at this event, of course we have-"

"Accio!" Harry snapped, catching the bottle deftly as it flew into her hand. "No time to explain now, thanks!"

She ran as fast as she could back to the stairs, where Marek was propping Leo up awkwardly. His masked opponent was ascending the stairs nonchalantly, so Harry slowed down and pasted a cheerful, utterly undistressed look in her face and made a show of wishing Leo luck until Scar was out of earshot. She uncorked the Sobering Potion and shoved it in Leo's mouth, pinching his nose closed until he swallowed unhappily.

"What's that for-ouch!" He clutched his head and gasped, blinking his eyes rapidly and wincing as they watered slightly. "What the bloody hell, Harry?"

"You've been drugged," she said quickly, snatching the competitor's armband as Aled came over with it and dragging it up Leo's bicep to disguise the real reason she was leaning close. "Someone put Ephedra extract in your drink after I left. It mimics a relaxed, drunk-like state, and the dose was unfortunately too high to completely cure with the Sobering Potion. You're going to feel a little off-balance until your system processes it completely, and unfortunately I do not have time to metabolize it for you with magic. You have to compete now, do you understand?"

"I-yes," he said, hissing out the word slightly. She knew he had a hell of a headache now but that couldn't be helped. It was better than sending him out to fight utterly trashed. "Who?"

"It doesn't matter now," she said, "Concentrate on the match. Marek, tell him now what you were trying to tell him earlier-quickly, before he's disqualified."

Marek nodded, looking grim. "Leo, Scar doesn't play on the level, got it? He uses illusions to trick your eyes into misjudging the position of his hands and feet. Don't look him in the eye-he can get in your head-and don't be fooled by anything that doesn't look real. He'll try to distract you with visions of things. Sometimes other people, sometimes creatures or just shadows. Keep telling yourself nothing is real unless you feel it. Keep him close-you'll only know where he really is if you keep hitting him."

Leo still looked pained and slightly confused, but his eyes were focusing hard. He set his mouth in a determined expression and nodded once to Marek. "Thank you."

"Leo, you must go," Aled said, gesturing to the stage.

Leo took a steadying breath and ascended the stairs. He was slightly unsteady, but Harry knew the effects of the ephedra would lessen as the match went on-the exercise would help burn it off faster.

She and Marek hurried to the viewing platform, both scowling openly with anger and concern as they watched the competitors face off in the center of the arena. The announcer dove into a dramatic introduction of the two competitors, throwing around flowery and amusing epithets for each fighter to hype the crowd further.

"Who would do something like this?" Harry asked in a low voice.

"Scar," Marek said shortly. "It's an alias, and not for some random outsider. He's from around here-I know it. He knows the alleys too well to be a stranger. He comes out of nowhere, somehow hears about the tournament despite supposedly being an outsider, wins a spot-nearly killing the organizer he fought to qualify, mind you-and then moves into the shadiest part of the alleys, changing locations every two weeks, always in places in or around the Cesspool, never giving any information beyond the name Scar. It's suspicious as hell, and he's too good a fighter for no one to have heard of him before. He's disguising himself so we don't recognize him."

Harry let out a shaky breath. "How did he get that into Leo's drink, though? I saw him; he was sitting in plain sight on the other side of the pavilion. There's no way he wouldn't have been noticed approaching Leo in front of all those members of the Rogue. Leo said his cup was filled separate from the others in the tent, anyway-by a boy from the Phoenix's kitchen staff, no less."

"The inn has taken on a lot of new people this week, to keep up with the increased traffic around the alleys and to help run the Phoenix's concession stall," Marek said darkly. "Any one of them could have been a plant."

"We'll figure it out after the match," she said.

"Yes," Marek agreed, a lethal promise in his voice. "We will."

They fell silent then, because the introductions were finally finished. The signal rang out and the match began, and there was nothing left to do but watch and wait. And pray.



It was clear from the start that this match would be different from all the others. Scar set the tone with a stabbing lunge that brought his knife plunging toward Leo's right eye. Even though Leo parried it, the crowd still booed and grumbled at the play. Going for the eyes in a spectacle match was a level beyond even kicking toward the groin. Scar was aiming to maim, at the least, and that meant Leo was in serious trouble.

Her friend radiated concentration, but Harry could tell it was the hyper-focused tension of someone compensating desperately and not the calm, collected determination it should be. He was impossibly fast, as usual, but he was rigid in places he ought to be loose, and it was obvious he was forcing what normally came naturally.

"He's all over the place," Marek muttered unhappily.

She looked closer, and realized he was right. Leo's strikes and counterstrikes were quick and strong but lacked precision. Every so often his limbs reacted in a way that didn't make any sense at all, and she could tell by the annoyed way he shook his head sharply when it happened that they were either moves he had not meant to make or he was reacting to something that wasn't entirely real, as Marek had warned him might happen.

Leo stumbled, but managed to recover lightning fast and turn the clumsy movement into a surprise weave and bob that landed him a solid slash to his opponent's wand arm. Scar's grip held firm, but she noticed the number of times Leo reacted incorrectly to Scar's movements decreased sharply. The little tiny wand twitches the masked man had been exhibiting must take a great deal of muscle control, then.

"At least he's unpredictable," she said weakly. Even mentally compromised, Leo was a formidable foe. It was hard to be confident in his ability to win, however, given his opponent's unconscionable ferocity. Every strike seemed to be aimed at disabling or killing Leo, and Harry's hands shook as she witnessed a dedicated attack for the

first time. This was not a tournament match any longer. Scar was fighting to kill, and that changed everything.

It wasn't the flashy, impressive match the crowd had been expecting. It was ugly and brutal as the weapons clashed over and over. Scar was using his wand solely for something only Leo could perceive, and Leo seemed to have decided to disregard his own wand completely. He wielded the crystal knife like any other blade, not bothering to position it in a way that enabled casting, just slicing and blocking and stabbing as though that was the only thing left in the world he could understand.

The crowd was discontent at first as the audience realized the competitors weren't showing off like they ought to. The disgruntlement settled into something like disturbed fascination after a while, however. The whole stadium grew quiet and solemn as the two men on the stage hacked away at one another in the most primal and ancient of contests-survival.

Harry was terrified for Leo, not only because his opponent was so obviously trying to kill him, but also because the King of Thieves was visibly struggling to maintain his alertness. He seemed to be running on reflex and muscle memory, only occasionally showing signs of the brilliant and devious tactical mind she knew he possessed.

The two fought so closely that it was difficult for even those nearest to the wards to see exactly what was going on. At one point it looked as though Leo had deflected a stab at his stomach only to suddenly drop back a step, face contorted in pain as his other hand made an aborted movement to defend the area. He had lunged back toward Scar a moment later, though, his face a blank study in focus as he followed Marek's advice and kept his opponent as close as physically possible.

It didn't seem possible for a purely physical fight to last so long. Even in free dueling, there was normally time for each dueler to recover physically by switching over to a long-range magic-driven contest periodically. The spectacle in front of her was pure madness, though.

Both men drove their bodies beyond advisable limits, muscles straining at every pass, postures communicating a stone-like detachment from the pain and punishment they were inflicting upon themselves and one another.

Finally, the tide turned. Scar brought his knife in a quick sweep toward Leo's right side. Instead of deflecting it, Leo turned his back toward the blow and absorbed it with a growl, using his two free knives in a deadly crossed formation to trap and decapitate Scar's wand ruthlessly before the man could free his knife to stop it from happening. They disengaged and Leo stumbled backwards, a darkly satisfied grin on his face. There was no doubt his back was bleeding, even though it was hard to see blood against his red tunic, but his opponent's wand was cut in two, utterly useless now.

Scar howled, tossing the wand pieces aside and charging Leo with reckless hate. Leo was visibly weakened by his injury, so perhaps Scar thought he still held the advantage, but it was obvious after the next few exchanges that the masked man could not keep up with Leo in terms of skill without his illusions and mind tricks. The fight was already decided, and Harry let out a slow breath of relief as Leo herded his opponent into position and then disarmed him deftly, finally ending the horrific show with both knives at Scar's jugular.

The crowd roared its approval, but Harry couldn't hear anything but the sound of her own breathing and heartbeat as she rushed toward the stairs. Scar stormed off the platform, and Aled had to physically hold Marek back from going after him. The armorer was saying something about needing proof first, but Harry wasn't listening to that, either.

Leo descended the stairs with slow, even steps. His body language was strong and relaxed, but the paleness in his face spoke of blood loss and nausea. She approached with her wand out, ready to do a diagnostic spell and figure out how bad his injuries were, but Leo waved her off with a sharp look. He walked past her, smiling stiffly and waving to those who called out to him or cheered. His mother

waved him toward the Healers' tent sternly, but he grinned and shook his head.

"I'm going to the Phoenix to celebrate!" he called out, loud enough for everyone in the immediate vicinity to hear. "First round is on me!"

A cry went up, and word quickly spread that the after party would be at the Dancing Phoenix. Leo put on a good show of leisurely making his way through the crowd. The mass of people exiting the wards moved incredibly slowly, and after the third time someone slapped Leo on the back and he covered a wince, Harry stepped in.

For the sake of his ridiculous pride, she made a show of throwing her arms around him gleefully. "You won!" she yelled happily. "I knew you could do it."

He groaned quietly as she looped an arm around his waist, subtly pressing on his back wound as she leaned into him as though too pleased to let him go. In reality she was applying pressure to the gash in hopes that stemming the bleeding would allow her friend to get himself as far as the Phoenix under his own power.

"What are you doing?" he complained quietly, still smiling, though it was more like a grimace at this point.

"Keeping you alive until you sit your stubborn arse down," she hissed. She palmed her wand inside her billowing sleeve and hid its movements by turning her body towards his with a sappy expression on her face. She muttered numbing spells through her smiling lips and watched as the stress lines on his face relaxed slightly.

"Thanks," Leo said, grinning down at her.

"I haven't fixed anything yet," she warned him. "You can't feel the pain, but that doesn't mean you aren't doing damage to yourself with every step you take, so take it easy, ok?"

"Yes, Mother," Leo said.

She sniffed. "You'd better come up with something better to say to your actual mother when she realizes you went for a stroll with a shredded latissimus dorsi."

"She'll understand," Leo said. He was short of breath, but she knew anyone close enough to notice would assume he was still worn out from his fight, not bleeding out onto the pavement. "Image is very... important."

"Except when it gets confused with reality," she said drolly.

Leo grimaced. "Yes, it was rather bad of me act so inebriated that I actually allowed myself to be drugged into inebriation. In my defense, though, it's a wonder he even bothered-my acting is phenomenal, you know."

She ignored his nonsense, knowing that he was probably woozy with low blood pressure by now. "You're certain it was Scar who arranged to have you poisoned, then?"

He nodded tiredly. "Seemed much to annoyed and surprised when I could stand without falling over. Thanks for the save on that, by the way. I can't say I'd recommend the transition, but that potion saved my life, I think."

"We wouldn't have let you compete in the state you were in," Harry said. Did he think they would just shrug and send him off to embarrass himself? If the sobering potion hadn't worked, she would have knocked him unconscious with a sleeping spell and pretended to scream shrilly that he'd been poisoned until there was such a fuss raised they postponed the match. At least, that had been her backup plan at the time.

"No choice," Leo said, shaking his head. "There's a heavy penalty for those who don't show up to their matches."

"What?" she asked. "No one told me that."

Leo huffed a weak laugh. "I knew you'd show. It's to dissuade people from chickening out; the crowd paid good money to see a show, after all."

"What is the penalty?" she prompted when he trailed off.

"Let's just say it's as humiliating as getting your arse handed to you in front of hundreds of people would be and leave it at that," Leo muttered.

She sighed. Boys and their stupid rules. Not to mention their stupid pride, she added as Leo stumbled slightly and elected to pretend he was hugging her rather than leaning on her for support. She was practically the only thing propping him up by the time they made it to the inn. There was a table of honor by the empty fireplace with a plush chair at its head that was upholstered—thank the gods—in red. She steered Leo subtly toward it and let him sink bonelessly into the cushion while she pulled a chair close beside it and set about subtly casting diagnostic charms while his Highness smiled and accepted praise and ordered drinks for all those who wanted them.

Solom seemed to have anticipated a crowd, because tankards were already being passed from the kitchen. Soon the party was in full swing and Harry was hard at work patching up the worst of Leo's wounds, all while pretending to be relaxing in the seat beside him, curled up as though drowsy to better hide her wand movements. Leo made a good show of chatting amiably with everyone around them even as she wove skin and muscle and sinew back together.

Her half-lidded eyes hid the unfocused glaze they'd taken on as she focused her senses on what her magic was telling her. He had a fairly deep puncture wound in his belly that had thankfully not significantly perforated any of his intestines. The gash along his back was awful, jagged and deep. She could handle both given a little time, though, and the rest of his bruises and cuts were nowhere near life threatening, so she'd leave those for his mother to fuss over. It was difficult to heal through a person's clothes, but by no means

impossible. It just meant you had to rely more heavily on the picture your magic mapped out in your head as it seeped into the patient.

By the time Leo had descended on his second helping of shepherd's pie with ravenous attention, she was finished. She uncurled herself from the chair and feigned a yawn, stretching one hand up lazily to distract from the way she tucked her wand away with the other.

"All better?" Leo asked mildly. To anyone watching, he could easily have been inquiring after her.

"No major malfunctions," she said, lips quirking.

He smiled widely. "You're good, Harry. I knew there was a reason I kept you around."

"Whatever will you do without me?" she drawled.

"If the heavens smile on me, I'll never have to figure that out," Leo said.

She laughed. "Unfortunately, I have greater ambitions than King's lackey."

"It wouldn't be like that," Leo protested, grabbing her wrist suddenly. He looked uncommonly serious.

She extracted her hand gently with a raised eyebrow. "It was a joke, Leo. I'll be your personal plaster provider as long as you want." She stood, rolling her neck to get rid of its soreness. "I'm going to see if Solom has any milk."

The common area was packed with people. The door to the street was wide open and she could hear a riot of celebration noises outside as well. It was hopeless to think of flagging down a kitchen boy in the mayhem, so she reckoned her best bet would be to duck into the kitchen herself and try to snag a glass without getting underfoot. As she wove through the crush, she kept her eyes peeled.

A crowd of happy drunks was likely a great temptation for any cutpurses not aligned with the Rogue itself.

Because of her vigilance, she spotted Regulus Black before he saw her. In a smooth movement that didn't draw any odd glances, Harry slipped her goggles out of her pocket and donned them. She'd left her hat at home that day, since she no longer had to worry about being up on the tournament stage, but the eyewear should be enough to disguise her features as long as she was just one face in a sea of many.

She was almost to the kitchen door when a man in a black hooded cloak stepped in front of her, cutting off her path. She tilted her head and peered into the folds of his hood, but even her goggle-enhanced vision couldn't penetrate the shadows. There was some sort of spell involved, she supposed, which blurred and twisted the air around his face. Like the Unspeakables, only less... professional.

"Yes?" she said after it became clear he was waiting for her to speak first.

"We saw your match," the man said. His voice was deep and carried easily through the noise around them.

*Oh good, she thought, what I really need right now is a mysterious royal we.*

"We noticed your talent," the hooded man went on. His voice held a mild tone that didn't sit with his whole surreptitious image. "It was a cheap ploy that werewolf employed."

She honestly didn't know what to make of this. A ploy that was employed? She had met so many sinisterly well-spoken bad guys that this one's plebian speech patterns were more disappointing than anything.

"It was a fair win," she offered, shrugging a bit. "I don't mind."



He was silent for a moment, as though her response had derailed some imagined track the conversational train was supposed to take. "My... patron is very interested in talent like yours," the hooded man said eventually. She was relieved he'd dropped the weird 'we' thing, but disturbed by what exactly his words were driving at. "There could be opportunity for someone of your skills. Gold, too. You could put your gifts to use for more than petty entertainment."

She held back a scoff and said, as politely as she could manage, "My skills? You mean fighting. That's not a skill anyone should be looking to use in real life."

"Sometimes fighting is necessary." The man sounded perplexed. She supposed he might be a little slow. "You learned this for a reason, didn't you?"

"For self defense," she said shortly. "If you're looking to hire a mercenary, you've got the wrong person."

"Your loss," the hooded man growled, turning to stalk away through the crowd.

"I'm sure," she muttered, annoyed. She'd have to tell Leo someone was trying to recruit tournament participators for transparently nefarious purposes. Her good mood had taken a sour turn. She knew the world had a lot of problems. There would always be people with unhappy natures looking to take advantage any way they could. The only thing for it was to avoid those miserable souls where possible and work against them where not.

For now, she would simply enjoy the company of her friends. One of the benefits of coming into contact with shitty human beings was that it made it so easy to appreciate the good ones.

A/N: Whew, this was a doozy. Sorry it took so long to get out, but I wanted to get all of the tournament in this one. Next time: the Quidditch World Cup! Thanks to everyone for reading this (admittedly a bit overwhelming) chapter! Boy, 47,000 words just flew by, eh?

I know my sister has hinted there may be a time in the near future when I'll have to take a three-month break from writing due to some personal circumstances. Nothing to worry about, I'll come back and finish the book! There just may be a longer wait than usual between chapters four and five (I predict). I fully encourage everyone who likes the story to take a stab at writing some fanfiction about the characters they like or something they want to see happen in the mean time. It'll fill the void for everyone if there are other stories to read about Rigel and her friends. For those of you who don't know, there are some really good ones already out there that you can find either through the forum or just via google search. Anyway, thanks to everyone for supporting the story this far!

All the best to everyone out there who is reeling from the Pulse massacre, as well. I hope everyone who has loved ones in the Orlando area found them safe and sound.

-Violet Matter

## Chapter 4

A/N: I'm back, and really really sorry for the long wait (and I know that isn't good enough but I have nothing to offer except this chapter).

### A Futile Façade:

#### Chapter 4:

Late July brought with it a storm of letters, blown in from various corners of the world. A weathered envelope encased in sterilizing spells, a wrinkled roll of fire-proof parchment sprinkled liberally with stray splotches of ink, a pristinely embossed scroll on sumptuous official letterhead, and one endearingly impatient scrawl on embarrassingly expensive personal stationery. Their formats were diverse and their tidings varied, but all found her unerringly in the midst of her experimental research. Looking back over the days she spent cloistered in her lab, those letters seemed the only notes of disunity against a melody of simmering cauldrons and fevered dreams.

*Harry,*

*I'm so sorry, but it looks like I won't be back for our birthdays after all. I can't give you all the details. They don't want to cause an international panic, and you know how sensitive people can be about pandemics. Oh, I guess that wasn't too reassuring, was it? Don't worry; I'll be home before you know it. They think just a few more weeks until the quarantine will be lifted. I don't have much time to write, since they need all the hands they can get here, so I'll just say I miss you and I hope you're spending time with my dad. He sounds a bit lonely in his letters. Hermione, on the other hand, sounds extremely pleased with herself in the letters you've forwarded to me. Something about volunteering at a clinic for the underprivileged? Just what have you drawn her into, Harry?*

*I'm glad to hear you made a good showing in the tournament. Please tell me Hermione doesn't know about your participation in the fights. I really don't have the wherewithal to learn freedueling in my free time.*

*Anyway, I really must dash.*

*Best,*

*Archie*

She felt a slight pang at the thought of spending her birthday without Archie. They'd never had separate birthday parties, as far as she knew. It was good for Archie to have something of his own, though. She couldn't begrudge him his American adventure. Her reply was understanding and cheerfully encouraging. She promised to keep Sirius entertained and apologized for complicating his relationship with Hermione. She also mentally adjusted the timeline for finishing his birthday present-she'd have to factor in the time it took for international owl mail, apparently.

*Miss Potter,*

*I have made recent progress on developing the amplification base you requested. Rather than the single, all-encompassing augmentation that I set out to create, however, the results of my experimental process have delinearized our task somewhat. Instead of a general enhancement, I am now working to design a variable base. I realize the original intention was that the imbued magic itself would be the variable, but I now believe our purposes would be better served if at least one major ingredient in the base was matched with the intended effect of the magic imbued in it. It is in this way, via the pairing of key ingredient with magical intention, that the effects of the entire concoction will be magnified exponentially.*

*Thus, the recipe for my proposed variable base is enclosed. Where it calls for the 'signifying ingredient,' one may substitute what one likes. The recipe is built around the optimization of that ingredient,*

*whatever it may be. I have thus far used basilisk scales to great effect in augmenting certain protection spells. Before you begin a well-meaning but misguided protest to the effect that potions reliant on basilisk scales are largely irrelevant to posterity due to the scarcity and dearness of said ingredient, consider what such a potion might be worth to those rich enough to both afford the brew and to be in possession of such valuables as would be worth spending a small mountain of gold to protect. The money to be made on a handful of such potions alone would go far toward funding more meaningful research down the road. But I digress.*

*Kindly reply with your thoughts on the variable base, including suggestions for further avenues of experimentation regarding key ingredients and their shaped imbuing pairings. As you've no doubt surmised, by developing a system of shaped imbuing rather than offering an open-ended concept, the idea becomes considerably more enticing as an area worthy of study in the potions community, particularly to that breed of mentally commercialized toddlers currently masquerading as the Guild's public relations team.*

*Regards,*

*Master Severus Snape*

Snape's letter brought with it all sorts of new ideas. They picked at her brain, lulling her away from reality while she sat amidst her family at dinner and jerking her out of deepest sleep to shout insistently until she transcribed them into immortality with blind scribbles in the dark.

The idea of a plug-and-play method of a customizable imbuing base intrigued her. It was simple, yet brilliant: the sort of idea that marketed easily-like a doll with a hundred different accessories that you could mix and match. As long as you had the base, you could evolve it to your liking, to suit whatever purpose you had in mind that day. That is, if you knew how to shaped imbue. This system would be the key to making the concept attractive, she knew. Snape had certainly come through on what he set out to do for the burgeoning

field. It made her all the more determined to make her own mark on it, as well.

*Dear Miss Potter,*

*Our warmest regards! This letter certifies the completion of your third-year coursework for the Sphinx Correspondence School of Magic. You have passed into the fourth year curriculum for the following subjects:*

*Defense Against the Dark Forces*

*Herbology*

*Household Spells and Charms*

*Transfiguration*

*Potions*

*The administrators were once again impressed with the thoughtful quality of your responses to the essay topics. In addition, your practical casting test was one of the few that received full marks. We would like to urge you to reconsider your decision to take only core courses. It is our belief that a mind as keen as yours, Miss Potter, would benefit greatly from the stimulation of more challenging elective courses. We offer a summer tutorial for those wishing to test into fourth year electives. Please consider carefully, as a good education is something that never stops paying dividends.*

*Sphinx Correspondence School of Magic thanks you for your continued dedication to the pursuit of knowledge.*

*Most faithfully,*

*Headmaster Earnest Callaway*

*Sphinx Correspondence School of Magic*

She was more than embarrassed at the correspondence school's frequent entreaties that she not let her intellect go to waste. She suspected part of it was simply that they wanted her to pay the extra tuition fees for elective courses, but she admitted they probably had few academics of her caliber in their scattered student body. It wasn't anything to brag about-she'd simply already learned everything they were 'teaching' her. In truth, she rarely even looked at the materials they sent her each month. Compared to the combined curriculum of Hogwarts and AIM, the expectations of the owl-correspondence school were something of a joke. She had to feel a bit guilty; she wasn't really self-taught, as the other students in the program were. She had a ridiculous advantage and it was no wonder it showed in her work.

She wouldn't be swayed by the idea of elective courses, however. She only wanted to pass the bare minimum of classes so that she could legally still carry a wand even if the whole ruse went to pieces. She'd be carrying the wand all the way to Azkaban, more likely than not, but the principle stood.

As for the quality of her practical work, well, it wasn't exactly a rigorous grading curve. The curious little orb she had to cast into for her practical exams either recognized the spell as the one called for next in the sequence or it didn't. There were no partial marks as far as Harry could tell. As long as the spell met some arbitrary threshold of 'recognizability' it was considered correct. She supposed that would be a downside for inexperienced castors. A serious enough mistake and no credit was given at all, whereas in a real classroom setting the professor would be allowed to recognize the things a student did right while deciding their final grade.

And the potion they'd asked for? Please. They were clever to choose one that was non-transferrable after it cooled, so one couldn't simply buy the potion and pour it into the school's vial. Because of that restriction, however, the difficulty of the potion itself was closer to a second-year's level than a third-year's. At Harry's level, it was almost embarrassing to be brewing a Swelling Solution. She had much

more important potions to be attending to, in any case. The letter was stuffed into a drawer somewhere in her lab, forgotten amidst the myriad scraps and spare bits of parchments whose discarded ideas died slow, dusty deaths in obscurity.

The last of July's letters came convolutedly. It went all the way to the Darian Gap and back before ever being opened. Archie opted to pass along all of Rigel's correspondence without reading it, correctly assuming that anything he needed to know she would convey to him in ways that made more sense than her blond friend's semi-coded chatter.

*Rigel,*

*When are you coming back to civilization? Mother says too much tropical weather can have ill effects on the constitution. Are you wearing sun protection? What are they feeding you there? Pansy keeps writing to ask me if you're eating enough. I told her to ask you herself, but she doesn't want to bother you or something. So pretend I asked with appropriate subtlety and please write to Pansy if you need her to send biscuits.*

*You will be back for the World Cup, won't you? Father has tickets in the Top Box. He said he heard from a colleague that your father has tickets as well-that means you'll be there, right? You better be. You already missed my birthday party, which I have magnanimously forgiven you for, and made me look quite a fool showing up to your father's birthday party only to realize that you were nowhere to be found. Did I tell you I tricked your cousin into doling out serious blackmail on you? Get it? Black-mail. I didn't even notice that until I wrote it down, but it's quite clever isn't it?*

*I'm rambling again. Mother hates it when I deviate from my point in letters. She wishes to remind you that you must accept an invitation to tea the very moment you step foot inside the country. Don't forget or she will presume that I forgot to remind you.*

*Tell me when you're coming home!*



*-Draco*

Her friend's letter would go into the drawer of her bedside table, under lock and key with all other such important and/or incriminating correspondence. She had to chuckle at his sheer cheek-tricked her indeed! She would have to make sure Archie wrote him as soon as he knew when he was coming back to England, though. Her pureblood friend sounded positively stir-crazy. She supposed two months was about as long as Draco preferred to go without seeing his friends. Some pang of foreboding filled her chest at that thought. There would eventually come a day when Draco never saw Rigel again. Was she prepared for the fallout that would come from that storm? Probably not, she admitted, but there was nothing for it now. She turned her attention back to her cauldron. Some things could still benefit from her present attention.

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Her birthday party was held at Potter Place, on the thirty-first of July, since their usual practice of straddling the dates between Archie's birthday and hers would be pointless without Archie there to celebrate with them. It was an unavoidably lively affair, and normally the overkill on festivities didn't bother her but, with her cousin's absence, the entirety of her family's exuberance landed squarely on her own shoulders.

"I don't think I can eat all this," she said, looking down with bemusement at the mountain of cake on her plate. It looked as if Sirius had cut her a slice and then decided it wasn't enough and dumped another piece on top of it, then stuck fourteen candles haphazardly on top.

"You won't know until you try," Sirius said cheerfully, looking pleased as anything with his pink oven-mitts propped on lean hips.

That was true she supposed, and yet... "Usually Archie takes my cake." She sighed.

"Ah-choo!" Addy piped up from her highchair. She had already turned her cake into a frosting smear.

"That's right, Addy," James said proudly, patting his toddler on the head gently.

"I think she sneezed," Remus said.

"Nonsense," James said. "She's a genius."

"Even if she is, there's nothing for you to be bragging about." Sirius guffawed. "Gets it from Lily, doesn't she?"

"She could get it from me," James protested.

"That's right," Remus said, mockingly serious. "Why, I heard James sneeze yesterday and it sounded just like-oi!"

"We can't be throwing food already," Lily moaned. "Harry hasn't even blown out her candles yet!"

It was true; the wax was beginning to drip, in fact. She couldn't think of a good wish, though.

"It's kind of funny how far your standards have fallen, Lils," James said, his grin a bit smug. "When we first married, you yelled every time we threw food at one another, and now you only want us to wait until it's not a fire hazard."

"Keep talking, Potter," Lily muttered darkly.

Deciding to eliminate the point of contest, Harry hurriedly sent off a request for new brewing gloves to the birthday gods and snuffed the candles with a sharp exhale. Addy clapped enthusiastically, garnering the attention of the adults.

"Presents!" Sirius declared, leaping into action to collect a handful of packages from the other room.

"She hasn't eaten the cake yet," Lily reminded him, following Sirius out of the kitchen in protest.

Harry slid half her cake onto Addy's highchair with a small smile. The little redheaded toddler seemed to be having more fun mashing the cake into a moldable medium than she predicted she'd have eating it.

"I'm not sure that's... ah, never mind," James said, watching Addy swipe her hand into the cake like a queen rejecting a suitor. The cake fell to the floor just as Lily came back in, somehow having been talked into carrying half the presents.

"Oh, *honestly* . You do know that parenting is not a spectator sport, Darling?" Lily said, stepping pointedly around the cake to set the colorful packages down in front of Harry. Sirius was a beat behind her, piling his on top in a precarious stack that invited her to start unwrapping before it toppled into her lap.

Harry smiled her thanks and began picking presents from around the edges. There was an assortment of sweets that pretty much came standard on any occasion with her family. Then came the personal gifts. From her mother, a pair of delicate hairclips-"for when you feel like growing your hair out." Sirius got her a book on animagi, to the tune of Remus' soft groan of despair. Her father's gift was surprisingly endearing: a set of potion bottles with custom labels. She peered at the label on one and had to smile widely when she took in the depiction of a little fawn peering unafraid at a growling mountain lion through a shimmering blue shield. The words 'Potter's Protection Potion' hung above the picture against a starry sky, and on the back was a short description of the potion's use.

"I'm drawing up ones for the cancelling potion, but they aren't finished yet," James said, a little unsurely.

She stood to give him a hug-not a brief perfunctory squeeze but a real embrace, complete with slow, deep breaths and awkward smile as she pulled away. "I love them. I'm going to use a Duplication Charm and bottle all my Protection Potions in them from now on."

"Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Magic," Lily said halfheartedly.

"By which I mean I'll be asking a responsible adult to duplicate them for me," Harry said smoothly.

"Good luck finding one around here." Sirius laughed.

"I think I qualify," Remus said, looking offended.

"You got her dueling gauntlets," Sirius countered. "That's the opposite of responsible."

"She hasn't opened that one yet," Lily said, dropping her head into her hands in exasperation. "I am so sorry, Harry."

"I honestly couldn't imagine a birthday any different," she said, laughing at her uncles' sheepish expressions.

"Forget unwrapping Remus' then," James said, reaching into his robe pocket. "We actually have another gift for you-this one's a joint gift, from Sirius and me." He pulled out what looked like a regular hand mirror-the kind a noble lady might use to peer at her reflection, in fact. Its rounded edges were adorned with silver roses and on the back a stylized 'P' dominated the engravings.

"It's lovely," she said. She had to wonder how her father had hit the mark so spectacularly on his first gift and fallen so far from the target on his second. What was she to do with a mirror, even a portable one?

James must have read her thoughts, for he laughed at her. "It's a communication mirror, Harry. One part of a two-way link. With it, you

can talk to the other mirror any time, day or night, no matter the distance between them."

She reappraised the delicate item. "Who has the other one?" she asked, a grin playing on her face. If it was as she suspected, her life just became a great deal simpler.

"Archie, of course," Sirius said, bouncing slightly in his seat out of excitement. "I mailed it to him last week. We-your father and I-had a pair in school, and we mostly used it for making jokes when we had separate detentions. With you and Archie spending so much time apart, though, we thought... you ought to have your own pair. We know how close you two are, and sometimes letters just aren't enough."

He looked a little downhearted at the last, and Harry was abruptly touched that Sirius would think to make a mirror link to Archie for her, rather than keep it for himself. She knew how much he missed his son when he was away. Her less than stellar pen pal habits at Hogwarts didn't help close the distance any. "I'll cherish it," she said honestly. They couldn't possibly know how useful such a thing was going to be. They'd have to switch mirrors, of course, as she didn't doubt Archie's would have a 'B' embossed on the back and be significantly less feminine to boot.

"Try it out," James encouraged.

Harry hesitated. If the mirror worked as she imagined, it would show Archie's face in its surface once her cousin answered. If her calculations were correct, his Modified Polyjuice would have completely faded by now. Their family seeing his true face now, just weeks before he returned home, would put a dent in their plans. He was supposed to ostensibly have unconsciously altered his appearance to match hers over the last couple of months, after all.

In the end, there was nothing for it. She'd have to trust that Archie could handle the surprise. She supposed he ought to be expecting

her call in any case, if he'd received any explanation at all with his mirror.

She brought the glass close to her face and called tentatively into it. "Archie? It's Harry. Are you there?"

There was a long pause, but then a picture blurred into view. Her cousin grinned at her through the hand mirror, even waving a bit to show that the picture was live. She was too shocked by his appearance to return his friendly smile at first; she'd expected him to look different, but somehow she hadn't expected him to look older. Bright grey eyes peered out of an angular face that was unhesitatingly male. He'd cut his hair close to his scalp, probably in deference to the heat, and it brought the masculine promise of his features into stark relief. He winked at her and she silently despaired. *He's going to be as handsome as Sirius. There will be no living with him after that.*

In the instant she spent reflecting on his features, they twisted and smoothed until it was as though she looked into a mirror-rather, an unspelled mirror. Amused, she said, "I don't think the mirrors work, Dad. It's just me in there."

"Oi!" Archie called through the glass. "Dad, she's saying I look like a girl again!"

The others all left their seats to crowd over Harry's shoulder. Sirius sighed gustily as he got a look at his son's morphed features. "Well, you look like a girl again."

Archie mimed dissolving into tears.

"He even cries like a girl," Harry commented.

"I thought I was tuning into my birthday party, not some kind of intervention," Archie grumbled.

"Archie," James said soberly, "we've all been very worried about you. This craving for the feminine mystique is taking you down a bad road."

"We don't even recognize you anymore," Remus added solemnly.

"As your friends," Lily said through a smile, "we feel that it's our responsibility to tell you that things have reached a certain point. From now on, we can't support your unhealthy obsession without feeling as though we're enabling your self-destruction."

"I think you mean self-reconstruction." Harry snorted.

"All right, all right," Sirius said, a pained grimace on his face. "You know he can't help it."

"Don't worry, Uncle Sirius," Harry said, a cruel smile on her lips. "One day, years from now, Archie will let go of his childish obsession with me and fall in love with some other young lady. Then he'll start to look like *her*."

They all had to laugh at that. Poor Archie bore up under it well, but then, she knew he would. It was why she'd made light of his appearance in the first place: to deflect attention from the awkwardness and strangeness of the phenomenon to the humor in it. She knew Archie understood. It was just impossible for them to have different appearances. They needed to be able to switch places at a moment's notice. Something could go wrong without warning. Any unexpected occurrence could give them away if they looked significantly different: a photo unknowingly taken and put in a school yearbook, an accident that required their parents to come to one of their schools shortly after term began, or even a family emergency that called them suddenly home.

Archie could change his appearance at will, of course, but Harry couldn't. Maybe it was a weakness in their current ruse, but it was the way things were unless they came up with something that was more flexible than the Modified Polyjuice without sacrificing the ease

of maintenance that the long-term potion afforded them. At least with the potion, Rigel didn't have to worry about losing concentration due to injury or infirmity and letting her disguise dissipate unconsciously. She worried all too often if allowing Archie the flexibility of using his metamorphism was worth the added risk.

" *Anyway*," Archie said, clearing his throat loudly once they'd had their laugh. "What's been going on at home? Have I missed anything important?"

"You mean besides Sirius renting out your room to a troupe of circus performers?" Harry pretended to think about it.

"A whole troupe?" Archie clarified. He looked appropriately skeptical as to the logistics of such an idea.

"Well, technically it's a flea circus," Sirius put in, scratching his head idly.

Archie's expression shifted from confused to deadpan in an instant. "You're telling me my bedroom has fleas." When there was an awkward pause in which no one confirmed nor denied the statement, Archie sighed sharply into the glass, fogging it momentarily. "Put Addy on the mirror. The rest of you can go jump off a bridge."

Harry smiled winningly. "I missed you, Arch. Without you around, they make fun of *me* . Can you imagine?"

"Somehow, I'll find a way to visualize it." Archie huffed. "Really, though, what have I missed?"

"Addy can say your name now," Harry said, turning the mirror to face her little sister's highchair. "Say 'Archie,' Addy."

"Ah-choo," Addy gurgled obediently.

"Did she just sneeze?" Archie's nose was wrinkled when she turned him to face her again.



"The jury is still out," Harry said. "Enough about us, though. What have you been up to? Why aren't you home yet?"

Archie grimaced. "The sickness is more virulent than we thought. We're fixing it where we can, but it spreads faster than we can cure it. The Quarantine has been expanded across several villages now. We hope it'll be enough, but we'll be playing catch up for another couple of weeks at least."

Sirius poked his head into the frame to pout at his son. "But then you'll miss the Cup match, Arch!"

"Sorry, Dad," Archie said. It was obvious how genuinely dismayed he was to be missing the World Cup game. Sirius and James had scored the tickets months ago, planning to take Harry and Archie and camp out afterwards. "Uncle Remus can have my ticket, okay?"

Sirius swiveled his head to look at Remus with a small grin. "What do you say, Moony? Up for a re-creation of grad night?"

"Maybe Lily would rather go," Remus demurred. He was always one to let others have fun first.

"Hmm," Lily pretended to consider it. "Stay home and babysit a one-year-old or go out and babysit two of them? How's a girl to choose?" She laughed at James' put out expression. "Don't bother denying it, Dear."

"Wasn't going to, Doe." James shrugged, pulling his wife into an embrace. "I fully intend to have the time of my life, then come home and put that memory to shame in the loving arms of my wife."

Lily started to murmur something back but Archie coughed awkwardly through the mirror to break up the embarrassing scene. "So, anyway, I should be home just after mid-August, if my mentor's predictions are correct."

"We'll meet you at the international Floo point," Sirius promised. He gazed warmly at his son through the glass. "I'm very proud of you, Archie. It's a good thing you're doing."

"Thanks, Dad." Archie beamed.

"What are you doing today?" Sirius prompted after a moment. "Have you opened your gifts yet?"

"I didn't want to open them alone," Archie admitted, tilting the mirror so they could see a stack of small packages on the floor beside him. "Shall I?"

To a chorus of approval, he set his mirror at a distance that allowed a broader view of the room he was in. More of a tent than a room, actually, she corrected herself as her eyes took in the details. There was a small pallet pushed to one side and several bowls of water that she supposed were for washing in or drinking from. Pinned to the fabric of the wall directly behind Archie was a map with bright red pins splattered like freckles across the landscape it depicted. Several stacks of books littered the corners of the tent, making her think the only surface in his quarters was the little round table whose edge came into the bottom edge of the mirror's view.

"First one is from Harry! Ah, sorry I didn't get you anything, cuz," he said, laughing sheepishly.

"You've been busy," Harry said, shrugging. "Just don't die and we'll call it even."

"Deal!" Archie happily ripped away the paper to reveal a box of homemade chocolates. "Suspiciously wholesome," he commented, squinting at them. He found the tag and read it. "Fizzling Fourberies. Well, that's a perfectly innocent identifier. Am I meant to eat these or torture others with them?"

"What's a fourberie?" Sirius stage whispered to Remus.

"It's French." Remus sighed.

"Fancy," Sirius said, nodding with an impressed moue to his lips.

"You can eat one if you want," Harry said, smiling slyly.

"Did you make them yourself?" her cousin asked warily.

"Dad helped," she said, blinking innocently.

"Definitely not eating it, then." Archie laughed. "What's it do?"

"It fizzes," Harry said seriously.

"Like a fizzing whizbee?" Archie guessed.

"Well, they don't make you levitate," Harry hedged.

"But they *do* fizzle," James added helpfully, having a hard time suppressing his grin. He'd had a grand time helping her test out the coating she'd cooked up to paint over the chocolates. It fizzled upon contact with saliva, filling the mouth with a crackling sensation not unlike a mild electric field. Unlike most sweets, whose effects faded after swallowing as the stomach acid broke down the physical components to the enchantments, however, the fizzling fourberies *kept* fizzling. All the way through the stomach and into the intestines. James swore the one he ate was still fizzling when it hit the toilet on the other end, but she'd decided to simply take his word for that instead of investigating further.

The feeling was like someone tickling you from the inside out and, because it was potion based, not even a Finite aimed at a person's guts could still the eerier sensation of your belly vibrating as though you'd swallowed a wind-up toy. She thought it was just the sort of mildly gross prank Archie would have a good laugh over.

"I'll save those for a day I'm feeling slightly masochistic, then," Archie said, shaking his head with amusement.

"Just don't give them to anyone with ulcers," Harry recommended. Archie promised to keep that in mind and moved on to the next present. Harry handed the mirror off to the others so they could see him open their gifts and simply soaked in the atmosphere of having all of her family sort-of-together once more.

Addy squealed a little and muttered nonsensical things in protest of being ignored for so long, so Harry pushed some more of her cake onto the girl's tray. Addy blew a few spit bubbles in an eloquent show of gratitude and Harry smiled. There was something to be said for people who were easily pleased.

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James stared at her. She stared back. They were sitting across the kitchen table, eating a light Saturday lunch of corned beef sandwiches. She was chewing slowly, methodically almost. The calm patience she radiated contrasted sharply with the disturbed disbelief that furrowed her father's eyebrows. A mouthful of corned beef hung half-chewed between gaping jaws. After a long moment he collected himself. Swallowed. Cleared his throat. Said, "You want to... invite a Lestrangle... to our house?"

She nodded slowly.

"To Potter Place?" James clarified, as though she might have declared some other residence her homestead in the last five minutes.

"For potions brewing," she confirmed.

"Is this going to be a thing, now?" James demanded. "You-just bringing older men over to 'brew potions' in your lab all the time?"

"I don't think twice ever qualifies as 'all the time,'" she said reasonably.

"How do you even know a Lestrangle? How old is he?" James sounded increasingly strident.

"No older than Leo," she said, pretending to count on her fingers.

"That is *not reassuring*, young lady," James hissed.

Harry had to laugh. Perhaps she was having too much fun with James' overprotective instincts. Was it petty? Yes, yes it was. But it was fun, too. "I interned with him at the Guild, remember? He's... " Well, she couldn't say *nice* . "Very interested in learning to shaped imbue."

"Why can't you ever bring that Hermione girl over to brew potions?" James complained, hanging his head forlornly. "She seems nice."

"You've never even met her," Harry said, rolling her eyes. "You only think she's nice because she's a girl. May I remind you that I'm a girl, too? Do you think I'm nice?"

James gave her an odd look. "Of course you're nice, Harry."

She sighed, thinking he'd quite missed the point. "Well, as long as you don't freak out when he comes through the Floo-"

"I thought you were asking my permission!" James exclaimed.

"Oh," she said, shifting awkwardly. "No. I was... just letting you know." A clear ping went off from the other room. She stood, brushing the crumbs from her mouth. "I expect that's him."

James spluttered. "He's coming over now?" She nodded, starting toward the Floo room. James followed, trailing protests and complaints. "He's a Lestrangle, Harry, not some lost puppy you can bring home and house train-"

"Dad," she said sharply. They'd rounded the corner to see Caelum Lestrangle brushing off his robes with a disgruntled scowl.

James pulled up awkwardly and looked torn between apologizing and saying something even worse. Lestrangle waved him off, though. "Don't worry about it, Potter. My mother had the same reaction when I told her where I was going. Only she threw a vase at me," he added, plucking a piece of porcelain out of his hair idly. "Missed."

The fight went out of James almost at once. "Let your mother know if we'll need an extra place for dinner," he mumbled, retreating to the kitchen with only one last, sour look in Lestrangle's direction.

Harry led Caelum to the basement stairs, saying over her shoulder, "Believe it or not, it's not personal. My dad hates all boys regardless of surname."

Lestrangle sniffed. "As if I would lower myself to court the halfblood daughter of a--"

"Yes, yes, consider me insulted," Harry said, stalking into the lab and plopping down on a stool. She edged a spare stool toward her guest with a nudge of her foot. A small smile crept over her face as she said, in a cheesy salesman's voice, "So you want to learn to shaped imbue."

"You're going to make this as difficult as possible for me, aren't you?" Lestrangle sneered, wiping the stool's seat with his handkerchief before deigning to sit.

"It's difficult enough on its own," Harry reassured him sweetly. Since Lestrangle had first insisted on the lesson, she had thought a lot about how she should approach this. In the end, she decided to start with wandless magic in general and build from there. She pulled the copy of *A Treatise on the Wielding of Wandless Power* that she had sort of pilfered from the Come And Go Room at Hogwarts and passed it to her would-be pupil. "This is the book about wandless magic that made the most sense to me. You can read it at your

leisure, but the main point the author gets at is the density required for successful wandless casting."

Lestrangle fingered the worn cover fastidiously, his nose wrinkled slightly. "How old is this thing? Where did you find it, Borgin and Burke's?"

"You wouldn't find a gem like this in that bin of trash." Harry snorted. "Anyway, haven't you heard don't judge a book by its cover?"

"Only people who sell tatty books would say such a thing," he said. After a moment, his eyes narrowed. "And how would you know what sort of books they sell in Borgin and Burke's?"

"It's twenty feet into Knockturn Alley," Harry said dismissively. "Not exactly off the beaten path."

The older boy narrowed his eyes but let it go. "Returning to the point. You really couldn't find any modern books on the subject? How do I know this information is even good?"

She lowered her lids at him in annoyance. "Were you listening? I said this is the best book I've come across. I've read quite a few, and most go on about the importance of willpower without explaining what exactly the magic is doing differently when you cast without a wand."

Lestrangle grimaced thoughtfully, deigning to open the cover at last and flip through the short table of contents. His eyes raced restlessly down the pages. After a snort, he commented, "This language is entirely antiquated. It's like reading a commentary on *Mordred's Book* that was written contemporary to its original circulation."

Harry thought that was a convoluted way of admitting he found the text impenetrable. "Don't worry; I can summarize it for you."

He shot her a dirty look. "Half of this is about learning to wandlessly channel magic. I already know how to do that-any halfwit with a

decent Potions instructor can consciously imbue. Don't know how you managed it, considering that backwater hovel of a school you attend in the wilds of the Americas, but still."

She rolled her eyes. "You've never left the country, have you, Caelum?"

"I attended school in *Durmstrang*," he reminded her, scowling fiercely at the idea that she hadn't been paying attention to his backstory. "I just got back from an internship in Chile with Master Whitaker. Not to mention my family's businesses operate internationally and I've been paraded at grand openings and fundraising events for as long as I can remember. I bet I've been more places than you could ever *dream* of going."

That she couldn't actually argue with. "How funny that you should be the close-minded one, then. Isn't travel supposed to make a person more tolerant and empathetic toward the unfamiliar?"

"Only if the traveler is a moon-struck ninny like you." Lestrangle sneered. "I bet you get all aflutter with romantic feelings when you read about foreign cultures and famous sites of interest in your dusty books. In the real world, strangers are not generous folksy locals just waiting to guide you through the most gilded parts of exotic new worlds. If they aren't cheating you or stealing from you, they're insulting you behind your back."

She affected a deeply sympathetic look of pity. "Oh, Lestrangle, were you terribly disillusioned when you met your first stranger? Was it ever so shocking when the other kids at *Durmstrang* didn't fall down at your feet and beg for your attention?"

"Shut. Up." He growled at her and flipped pointedly to a chapter halfway through the book. She noticed the tips of his ears had turned slightly red and had to wonder just how close to the mark she'd got on that last barb. The pureblood had probably been spoon-fed lies about his own consequence from the moment he was weaned.

"What is this nonsense about the spatial density of magic, anyway?"



I've never heard of any such thing." His voice came out caustically, but she could read the underlying embarrassment his criticism was meant to cover up.

"That's the information most texts leave out," she said, leaning forward on her stool with an eager smile. "See, wandless magic is an entirely different method of utilizing magic without the wand acting as a channel. It's as if your wand is a garden hose and the water is magic. Without the hose, it just pours out of the faucet, powerful but directionless. Wandless magic means your magic has to act as both the water and the hose if you want to get anything done. That means a lot more magic is required to perform a spell without a wand."

"Not to mention more control," Caelum mused, losing his perpetually pinched expression at last. "I have to compress the magic until it holds the shape a wand's movements would normally provide. How do you make magic more dense, though?" Harry was about to suggest that it was a matter of making your own will the mold and simply filling it when Lestrangle let out a short chuckle. "Of course, I see now. The water faucet-you just turn it to full blast, right?"

She blinked. Was that right? "I don't think-"

He held out his hand toward the ground in front of him and braced it with the other at his wrist. Ignoring her concerned noise of disagreement, Caelum growled out, "Fortis."

The shield burst into being before his hand and then kept expanding, bigger and brighter until, with a bang, it exploded outward, meeting the basement floor with a thunderous crack. Only Harry's own hastily conjured shield saved their faces from the backlash of debris as the uncontrolled shield put a sizable dent in the stone beneath their stools.

"Remember that thing about control," Harry said dryly, dropping her shield with a flick of her fingers. She had to admit she was impressed at the sheer power Lestrangle had been able to conjure,

however. She suspected he was more versed in wandless magic than he'd been letting on.

Caelum eyed her hands with poorly veiled interest. "Control. Sure. So were those reflexes something you picked up along with shaped imbuing or were you deeply traumatized at some point?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Harry lifted her nose, brushing a bit of dust from her robes nonchalantly. "Maybe try a Bubble-making Charm the next time you think you've discovered the secret to wandless magic within five minutes of cracking the book open."

Lestrangle shrugged his shoulders disagreeably. "I have you here to protect us though, don't I?"

"Perhaps I'll stick to defending our vital organs next time and leave your pretty face to its fate," Harry suggested.

"So much petty jealousy," Lestrangle said, tisking his tongue with false disapproval. "You could have a face like mine, too, if you stopped wasting your gold on potions ingredients and put it toward procedures that would actually do you good." He began eyeing her critically, dark amusement shadowing his otherwise nonchalant expression. "I know a witch with a gift for permanent transfigurations who could slim down your shoulders and take some of the sharpness out of your jaw line. Probably even fix those eyebrows for free as a public service."

"Is that who you used, Lestrangle?" she asked, feigning interest. After a beat of thoughtful silence she added, "I'm surprised you'd recommend her services, considering..." She gave him a dismissive once over that had him bristling. Really, it was too easy to turn his barbs back on him of late. It was almost like he wasn't trying.

"I'm being serious, Potter," Lestrangle growled. He actually looked offended. "She'd give you a discount if you mentioned I referred you."

She had to blink at that. He was seriously trying to convince her to undergo transfigurative surgery to make herself more attractive? She wondered what he'd say if he knew she'd attained her current looks from a form of semi-permanent transfiguration in the first place. Fighting a smile, she shook her head slowly. "Thanks, but I'll wait a few years before I resort to such drastic measures. Who knows? Maybe I'll grow into my looks."

Lestrangle sighed. "It'll be too late by then, you ninny. At your age, prospective matches have already begun looking, and given the legislative wheels currently in motion you should be very concerned with the heads you turn-or those you don't, rather. You don't want to be left with no options when the marriage law gets pushed through, do you?"

That was... almost kind, coming from Lestrangle. Still, his concern was wildly misguided, in this instance. "I'll take it under advisement," she said diplomatically. Quite ready for the conversation to shift back to ground on which she could get her footing, she cleared her throat. "Try wandless casting again, only this time hold the spell inside you as long as possible before letting the magic manifest."

"As usual, you make no bloody sense, Potter," Lestrangle muttered, twisting his neck elegantly in a show of gearing himself up once more.

"Learning how to cast wandlessly is part of the process," Harry said patiently, "But it isn't the final goal. You want to start working backwards as soon as possible so you don't get so comfortable with wandless magic that you can no longer conceptualize what you're doing-that will make it harder to reverse-engineer. Shaped imbuing is about shaping the magic *without* releasing it. It's going to go against most of your instincts at first, so it will take time to overcome that."

"How long did it take you to learn?" Lestrangle demanded.

She coughed a bit awkwardly. "Oh. Actually, I did it by accident. I didn't realize it was odd until Master Thompson told me it literally

wasn't possible."

The older boy stared at her for a long moment, then let out a short huff. "Every time I decide you might be a fire-starting genius you say something like that and I realize you're just a village idiot who found a box of matches."

"There are many paths to greatness," she said solemnly.

"Sometimes you battle your way to the top of the castle, through dragons and dementors and the lot, and other times you step on a loose tile and find a secret passageway that leads exactly where you want to go."

"And sometimes you fall through a trap door and die," Lestrangle said, frowning. "Do you have any idea what you're teaching me, or am I going to blow myself up before I figure this out?"

"No way of knowing until we try," she said honestly. "On the bright side, no one that I know of has blown themselves up learning shaped imbuing."

"Only one other person has ever tried, and that was *Master Snape*," Lestrangle said.

"And he's doing just fine," Harry said soothingly. "Got a letter from him just last week saying he was having the time of his life shaped imbuing."

"Oh you didn't either," Lestrangle grumbled. Nevertheless, he held up his hands and began gathering magic to them with a look of fierce concentration on his face. She could sense the power coiling under his skin. His hands trembled slightly as he struggled to keep control of the magic without releasing it. On a bite of frustration the power slipped away from him, manifesting in a torrent of bubbles at first, but quickly dissolving into pure power output that sent air rushing through the lab in uncontrolled bursts.

"Good," she said. "Now do it again, only better."

"Professor of the year, you are," Lestrangle grunted. Nevertheless, he did try again. Then several more times until she could see the strain of magic expenditure on his pale features.

"That's enough for today," she said, standing from her stool and twisting her back to stretch out the kinks. "You've got the gist of the idea, I think. Just practice until you can shape magic without releasing it, and then send me an owl and we can work on shaped imbuing."

"At that point it's just a matter of directing the magic without releasing it, right?" Lestrangle clarified. "I'm sure I can figure it out."

"Suit yourself," Harry said, shrugging. "Keep the book, though, and let me know if you have any questions."

"I'll let you know when I've improved upon the process," the pureblood said, the haughty tilt back to his chin.

"I'll await the news with bated breath," she assured him. She escorted him to the Floo, pretending not to notice James casually eavesdropping on their stilted farewells.

She sincerely hoped the boy didn't manage to blow himself up, not only because it would look bad for the burgeoning field of shaped imbuing, but also because he had turned out to be a surprisingly entertaining acquaintance. It would be a shame to lose all the civilizing work she'd put into his personality at this stage in their friendship.

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After so many days up to her elbows in cauldrons, lulled by the staid, predictable patterns of recipes and routine, it was almost surreal to touch down in the middle of unbridled chaos, but that's what the

Quidditch World Cup amounted to. The landing point for their Portkey was overrun moments after they cleared the circle by a gaggle of witches from Romania all sporting Bulgarian-themed face paint.

"See?" Sirius gestured with both hands to the witches as they passed. " *They* dressed up."

James, wrapped in an Irish-green sweater and matching scarf, sighed gustily. "For the last time, I *am* sorry I forgot the body paint, Sirius, but you have to admit it's freezing out."

"Are you a wizard or *not* ?" Sirius demanded, planting his hands on bare hips indignantly. Harry thought he looked a little ridiculous with half his torso painted glow-worm green and the other half exposed to the evening air, but judging by the sidelong glances a couple of the Romanian witches flashed her uncle as they passed, team spirit was not the sole motivation behind his eye-catching look.

James grimaced. "The skin dyeing spell doesn't last as long. I'd just be bare-arsed in the breeze when it wore off."

"I don't believe Sirius was asking you to paint your arse, Dear," Lily said mildly.

"Though if you're offering, I think it could score us a pair of omnioculars," Sirius put in helpfully, eyeing a blonde witch at a nearby souvenir stand whose speculative glances in their direction were enough to make Lily straighten slowly.

Her mother placed a possessive arm around James' waist and pulled him pointedly in the direction of a rival stand. Harry thought she was the only one close enough to hear the redheaded woman mutter "mine" under her breath as she passed.

Harry gave Sirius a reproachful look as the two of them trailed her parents. "That witch was looking at you, not Dad."

"Was she?" Sirius didn't seem terribly concerned with this fact. He was newly distracted by a headset that advertised a live audio feed to the players' boxes. "Well this seems a bit easy to take advantage of."

"I hope you're not planning on gambling, Sirius." Lily made a face in the small mirror affixed to the hat rack and discarded the emerald top hat she had tried on with a shrug. James tucked a green flower behind her ear instead and they smiled at one another in a way that seemed to briefly shut the rest of the world out.

"Used to hate it when they did that," Sirius commented to Harry in an undertone.

"And now?" she asked, feigning detached interest.

"I guess it's cute," Sirius said, wrinkling his nose a bit. "In small doses."

"Who knew you were such a hopeless romantic?" Harry affected a deadpan expression that set her uncle to chuckling.

"If I'm a hopeless romantic, then you're a cynic, my dear niece," Sirius informed her.

"Realists are always called cynics by optimists," Harry said, not at all insulted by his words.

Sirius fingered a talking button absently. "Sounds like something a cynic would say."

Harry smirked sideways at him. "You would know, Uncle."

Her godfather had to grimace at that. "Aren't you supposed to have a rose-colored image of your role models?"

"At my age?" Harry pretended to think about it. "I think I'm supposed to be recently disillusioned and largely mistrusting, actually. Maybe I should pout."

If there were a facial equivalent of backpedaling, Sirius would have perfected it just then. " *Please* . Don't."

It was Harry's turn to chuckle. "Then don't complain about my pragmatic outlook. Only think how much worse it could be."

"We really lucked out with you and Archie, didn't we?" Sirius reflected.

Harry had to fake the smile that passed between them at that. Had they? He might think differently, if he only knew all the trouble she and Archie had been courting. It was the sort of trouble that could follow a family for generations. The sort that stained everyone it touched. They tried, she and Archie, to shield their family from the mess they'd made, but some of the waste was frankly radioactive at this point. There was no telling how far the consequences would reach if things went bottoms up at this stage.

They shopped at the various overpriced stands until Sirius tried to get into a fire-breathing contest with one of the jugglers, at which point James casually mentioned having had firewhiskey delivered to their campsite.

"Well why didn't you say so?" Sirius exclaimed, throwing an arm around James' shoulder and snagging Lily's waist with the other. "Come along Harry. It's time you learned how to get properly sloshed."

"That isn't funny, Sirius, she's fourteen-"

"And we were thirteen when we brought that case of butterbeer up to our dorm room and proceeded to toss our wits off the Astronomy tower," Sirius reminded James.

"I recall vomiting spectacularly off that tower if that's what you mean," James said drolly.



"That's what I said." Sirius grinned. "And now it's time to pass that legacy down to-"

"Corrupt your own kid," Lily said sternly. "Harry will have no part of that, will you, Harry?"

"I *am* a bit thirsty," Harry said, blinking innocently over at them. She waited until James' eyes had grown wide with dismay before adding. "Do you have milk at the tent, Dad?"

His eyes grew moist as his tense shoulders sagged in relief. "I will find you milk if it is the last thing I do, Harry."

He set off happily in the direction of the nearest refreshment tent and Harry turned to Sirius with a smile. "And that's how you stay Daddy's little girl," she said, saccharine smugness in every syllable.

"You-you-" Sirius whistled.

Lily just laughed and patted Harry's cheek fondly. "That's my girl. Let's collect your father and get him to the tent before he works himself into any more states, shall we?"

Sirius sighed as he trailed after them. "James used to be so *fun* ."

"Don't pretend you aren't having fun riling him," Lily said.

"It's not the same," Sirius complained.

"It's exactly the same." Lily laughed. "Maybe you're the one who isn't fun anymore."

Sirius could not have looked more affronted if Lily had doused him in cold water. Harry couldn't help but suggest, "That sounded like a challenge, Uncle Sirius."

Before Lily could utter a word of repentance, Sirius was crowing. "I am the funnest of them all! You'll rue the day you questioned the merrymaking capabilities of one Sirius Black!" He grabbed for his

wand and shot dozens of green sparks into the air one after another, like an American cowboy shooting his weapon boisterously into the sky. "Don't wait for me!" he cried, striding toward the blonde-haired stall keeper without further explanation.

"Well done, Harry," Lily said, grimacing. "We've done it now. We'll be following his path of destruction all evening."

Harry shook her head on a laugh. "We won't either. He's a grown man, Mum. Let him have his fun. Now you and Dad can go do couple things and I can have some peace and quiet in the tent."

"That doesn't sound very fun for you," Lily said, doubtful.

Harry reached into her pocket and pulled out a slim tome on South American poisons that Archie had sent her. "I brought my own entertainment. Anyway, I'm really here for the match. You guys have fun with the revelry makers and don't worry about me. We can all meet up when the stands start filling."

Lily thought it over. "You have a map to our camp site?"

She produced it with a flourish. "X marks the spot."

Her mother nodded. "All right, then. You're more than old enough to look after yourself. Just keep a watchful eye on your purse, Harry, and don't do anything that... Remus wouldn't do."

Harry grinned. "Had to think for a moment to come up with a good example, didn't you, Mum? That's sad."

"Oh, go on then." Lily waved her away with an exasperated huff. She spotted James coming their way with a cup of milk in his hand and smoothly intercepted him, taking the cup and sipping from it with a playful smile of thanks.

Harry waved cheerfully and set off into the crowds, weaving through throngs of Wizarding folk all dressed in wildly impractical

amalgamations of clothing. The inundation of red and green everywhere gave the effect of a Christmas party gone terribly wrong. The sense of gaiety was not the right tenor for a holiday party, either; there was a wild edge to the crowd that she recognized from the dueling tournament in the Lower Alleys. The energy was intoxicating-or would be, if she didn't consider herself slightly apart from it. She was not the sort to surrender her consciousness to an atmosphere, no matter how enjoyable. She preferred the role of observer. It was no less enjoyable, and she valued the control it afforded.

Past the concession stands were rows and rows of tents-though the term 'row' might be a rather forgiving description of the way they were arranged. There *were* pathways between and around the hundreds of canvas dwellings, but they twisted and turned sharply about themselves, giving the impression that no sort of organization existed at all. The haphazard manner in which the occupying wizards comported themselves and their belongings further complicated the path she took on her way to their designated tent. She stepped over blankets and chairs, skipped around the occasional stray toddler, and several times ducked hastily to avoid a poorly aimed firework.

"Harry! Harriett Potter, over here!"

Speaking of poorly aimed fireworks. She turned her head to see Fred and George Weasley waving excitedly at her from the next row over. She picked her way toward them with a polite expression of curiosity on her face. "Well met, you two. How long have you been here?"

"Nearly all day," Fred said, leaning down from his not inconsiderable height to speak to her. "Our family caught one of the first Portkeys in this morning. You?"

"Just arrived," she said, gesturing vaguely behind her. "My parents are wandering about the stalls, and Uncle Sirius is causing trouble somewhere. I was just going to relax in our tent for a while before-"

"I'm going to stop you right there," George said, holding up a hand. She blinked patiently at him as he cleared his throat and continued, in a grander tone. "Young maiden, we, Messrs. Weasley and, incidentally enough, Weasley, will be your escorts for the evening."

She turned her nose up primly. "And what qualifies you two scoundrels to escort a hoity toity lass like meself?"

"Apart from our dashing good looks and natural charm?" George pretended to consider it. "Can't think of a thing. Fred?"

"We know Rigel," Fred said brightly. He paired the sentiment with a broad smile.

"You forget I know very well what sort of people Rigel hangs about with," Harry said. She looked them over in their wildly patterned Irish pride gear and made an unconvinced face. Lowering her voice, she added, "You haven't got fleas, have you?"

George scratched absently at his ear. "Why? You got something against blood-sucking parasites?"

"Doesn't everyone?" she asked, raising her eyebrows.

"Actually vampires are quite in vogue at the moment," Fred told her gravely. "There's even a new vampire bar in Hogsmeade that serves the diurnally challenged."

She wrinkled her nose. She was almost afraid to ask, but... "What's it called?"

"Fangtastic Fancies," Fred drawled.

"Oh it can't be." She made an ill face.

"Don't listen to him." George shoved his brother away with disgust. "It's a restaurant, not a bar, and it's called Bloody Good Bites."

She snorted. "That's even worse. Where do you two come up with this stuff?"

"It's a gift," George sighed.

"We aren't proud of it," Fred agreed.

"Except when they are," a new voice cut in. The three of them turned as Ginny Weasley, decked gamely in green trousers and a white jacket, joined their group. "Evening, Harry. These two weren't bothering you, were they?"

"What will you do if they were?" she wondered.

George clapped a hand over her mouth as Fred gasped dramatically. Both turned fearful eyes on their little sister, who began cracking her knuckles ominously.

"Please don't-"

"Not again-"

"We promise-"

"-to be good!"

They fell to their knees with loud sobbing noises as Ginny picked her fingernails idly. People began turning to see what all the fuss was about and several onlookers stopped walking and stared uncertainly at the twins before Ginny shooed them away with an eye roll.

"Honestly, you two, must there always be a scene?"

Fred popped lightly to his feet and George stood with an oh-so-casual stretch. "Yes," Fred said plainly.

"It's in our contract," George clarified.

"Consider yourselves terminated," Ginny said. She turned flat eyes toward Harry. "What were you doing before these airheads waylaid

you?"

"I was going to read a book in my tent," Harry said, shrugging at the grimaces of pity the twins shot her.

"Lovely," Ginny said. She linked her arm through one of Harry's and tugged her in a random direction. "Let's do that. Tell Dad I'm with the Potters," she added to her brothers.

"But-" George frowned after her.

"You aren't..." Fred trailed off with a defeated sigh as Ginny pointedly pulled Harry around the corner of a large tent.

The redheaded girl dropped Harry's elbow once they were out of sight and smiled somewhat sharply at her. "Sorry to use you so shamelessly when we aren't very good friends yet."

Harry smiled back and shook her head. "No apology necessary-we females must look out for one another."

Ginny frowned. "I don't need looking out for."

"But your family feels differently," Harry guessed. "Are you really going to come with me or did you just say that to get away?"

"Are you really going to go read a book or did you just say that to get away?" Ginny shot back, tilting her chin in a challenge.

Harry felt her eyes narrow of their own accord and a smile played across her lips. She sometimes forgot why she liked Ginny, but other times the redhead brought a thrill to her stomach that made her think Ginny was the sort of girl she wished she could be-maybe even the sort she would have been, if her deceptive lifestyle didn't warrant caution and placidity at every turn.

Even though it absolutely had been her intention to find her tent and read the book in her pocket, she found herself saying boldly, "I'm sure we can find *something* more interesting to do around here."

"Well, maybe," Ginny said, shrugging. "It's only the Quidditch World Cup."

They eyed one another with twin expressions of forced boredom until Harry cracked a grin and they both dissolved into hearty laughter. "Let me leave a note at my family's tent so they know where I've gone," Harry said after regaining her breath. "Then we can find something to catch our interest."

"Or some *one*," Ginny suggested.

Harry looked askance at the Gryffindor. "Aren't you a little young to be on the prowl?"

"You're never too young to practice," Ginny said, blinking big brown eyes innocently.

Harry considered the girl critically. "I can still see your smile when you do that," she said, gesturing with a finger to the corner of Ginny's mouth. "Try thinking of something that confuses you when you make those eyes-it'll add a dimension of genuine naiveté to the expression that might detract from the enjoyment you partake in making it."

Ginny gaped at her. Then her face morphed into a positively predatory look of glee. "Show me."

Harry allowed her features to fall into an expression of dismayed apology. With wide, regretful eyes she demurred. "Oh, I couldn't possibly pull it off. I was just-" She flapped her hands unsurely. "-just suggesting, that's all."

Ginny stared harder at her. After a moment, Harry dropped her pretense with a lazy grin and Ginny started to chuckle softly. "I thought you were a stone-cold princess when I met you, Miss Potter, but I am quickly reevaluating that opinion. *Where* did you learn to do *that*? "

"As a child I was left alone a lot. I used to stare at myself in the mirror for hours," she confessed, her eyes going distant and sad. "I made hundreds of faces at myself, willing the girl in the mirror to change, to become someone interesting or likable. A person worth being."

Ginny shifted a bit uncomfortably. "R-really?" She cleared her throat awkwardly, visibly gearing herself up to say something reassuring.

"No." Harry sighed, dropping the character like a heavy coat. "Not really. I just lie a lot."

Ginny huffed exasperatedly and shoved Harry's shoulder to show her displeasure. "I'm not falling for that again."

"Two sickles says you will," Harry said archly, setting off along the path once more.

"You're on!" Ginny fell into step hastily. "And you will teach me how to do that."

"I'll consider it, though I'm not sure you need any more weapons in your arsenal," she told the younger girl. "Your brothers already stumble over themselves to please you."

"That took years of work, though," Ginny complained, unabashed. "You spun me up in five minutes."

"I worked many years to be able to," Harry cautioned her. "It does actually take a lot of practice-the thing about making faces at myself in a mirror was closer to truth than is unembarrassing to admit."

"I told you already I don't mind a little *practice*," Ginny assured her. There was a lioness behind the grin she gave next, and Harry sincerely pitied any person on the receiving end of Ginny's manipulations. She suspected the girl would excel at emotional artifice, given half a chance.



They found her family's plot fairly quickly. It was positively modest in comparison to some of the opulent tents around them, but the Marauders logo on the entry flap was unmistakable. The Black family name had bought them a spot in the shadow of the gargantuan stadium, sandwiched between such illustrious patrons as the Macmillans and the Raifsnyders. She saw the Malfoy pavilion dominating the skyline further down the row, its crest a glittering totem of wealth and circumstance. She wondered briefly if she would see Draco that evening, then realized that she certainly would, considering they'd both be in the Top Box once the match started.

After the note was left for her parents, she and Ginny set off to explore the event grounds. Harry was certain she'd never seen so many witches and wizards in once place. It was more crowded than Diagon and Hogsmeade put together, and the diversity of nationalities and even species was not something seen in the average Wizarding community. Ginny charmed a pair of ice creams from an adolescent stall keeper and Harry tried not to feel guilty as she enjoyed hers. She would have bought them both, if she weren't familiar with the stubborn reality of Weasley pride.

They stumbled across an acrobatic show and paused to watch a pair of young jugglers exchanging knives at increasingly reckless speeds. At the final trick, in which the smaller of the two leapt between the knives her partner juggled the crowd burst into applause and the two young artists turned to face them, bowing deeply. When they straightened, Harry's eyes caught a pair she recognized with a jolt of surprise. The small performer was Cora, and she looked to be completely recovered from her bout with Seifer's Sickness.

Cora winked a bright green eye at Harry, who smiled back warmly. Ginny had caught the exchange, but there was no help for that when Cora wove her way toward them at the show's conclusion and said, "Miss Harry! Leo didn't say you'd be here."

"He didn't say you'd be here, either," Harry said, tilting her head at the girl consideringly. "Did you run away to join the circus?"

Cora laughed heartily. "You can't make money at a circus, Harry, everyone knows that. This is my troupe! We're the best juggling act in London, and Leo managed to get us passes to perform here at the Cup. Didn't know I was a professional, did ya?"

"I don't know how I missed it," Harry said. "You're quite talented. Are you taking donations, then?"

"Not from *you*," Cora said, rolling her eyes at Harry. "You only saved my life. Healer Hurst told me so."

"What about from me, then?" Ginny asked, holding out a Knut with a small smile of her own.

"Depends," Cora said slowly. "Who're you?"

"This is my friend, Ginny," Harry said. "Ginny, this is Cora."

Cora stuck her hand, still in its fingerless padded gloves, out toward Ginny smartly. As they shook, the blonde-haired girl said brightly, "You look like Curse-breakin' Will."

Ginny glanced at Harry with a questioning face, but Harry just shrugged with a vacant smile. She wasn't about to spill the beans on Bill-they had an arrangement of sorts. "Well, you look a bit like my classmate, Luna," Ginny offered.

Cora smiled widely and dropped her hand, subtly pocketing the Knut Ginny had passed her with a nod of thanks. "I'd better go-the next show starts in a few. See ya around, Miss Harry!"

They waved as the girl trotted back to her troop, then meandered on their way toward the souvenir stands.

"Cora looks like a gutter rat," Ginny said in her usual blunt way of conversing.

"She looked pretty presentable today, actually," Harry said.

Ginny shot her a look. "You know what I mean. She lives off the coin she makes juggling, doesn't she?"

"Among other things," Harry admitted. "Why?"

"How did you meet her? And who's Leo? Is he her pimp or something?" Ginny's tone was placid but her eyes were sharp with curiosity.

Harry winked her nose. "Goodness, no. Leo is just a mutual friend. I met her in Diagon Alley by chance."

"And you saved her life during this chance encounter?" Ginny pressed.

"Nothing so dramatic," she assured the girl. "Saving people is rather Rigel's thing, don't you think?"

Ginny seemed willing to turn the conversation in that direction. "His record does work against him in that respect. Was he always like that-I mean, you grew up together, right? Did he save you all the time?"

Harry couldn't help but laugh at that. "No, not really. Rigel was entirely unassuming until he went to Hogwarts. He liked to read and play Quidditch and do the same things other children do. Hogwarts has been a poor influence on him I daresay."

"He claims to be unassuming still," Ginny said, shaking her head bemusedly. "He walks around like all the ridiculous things that happen around him aren't his fault."

"Well, they aren't *really* -"

"Don't defend him," Ginny said sternly. "Rigel's oblivious attitude is what gets him into half those dramatic situations, you know. If he admitted he was special people would stop bothering him about it."

"I'm not sure that's what would happen," Harry said, grimacing. "Rigel isn't oblivious, but he's wary of the sort of people who would *start* bothering him if it came out he was as unusual as people seem to think." It was painful to be so honest about herself, but if she could appease people like Ginny as Harry it would make her time as Rigel that much easier. "It's better if people believe he's just very unlucky, don't you see?"

"So you admit he is special?" Ginny said, a sly grin on her face.

Harry blinked. Had that been the entire purpose of Ginny's remarks? She had to smile appreciatively. It was rare that she lost control of a conversation these days. "I admit nothing," Harry said, "but I understand that reality is subservient to perception in a case like this. Regardless of what Rigel is or isn't, it's still important that people think him to be innocuous."

Ginny sighed, lacing her fingers behind her back restlessly as they walked. "I comprehend his intentions, but I must regretfully inform you of the plan's incontestable failure. The game is up! Everyone knows Rigel is different. Now the only question is how deep do the differences go?"

Harry made an exasperated noise. "That, right there, is the problem. You phrased it all dramatic and mysterious and anyone overhearing that is going to be inevitably intrigued. If everyone would stop drawing attention to my cousin he could live his solitary academic life in peace."

"Oh yes," Ginny drawled, a smirk tugging at her lips. "I'm certain it was the gossips' fault that Rigel saved everyone from the sleeping sickness. And they probably pushed him into saving that old wizard at the Cow Party Gala last winter-oh yes, I heard about that-and that time he almost singlehandedly stopped the spiders from infiltrating the Great Hall was definitely because-"

"Okay, I get it," Harry groaned. "Stop please."

Ginny, satisfied that her point was driven home, linked their arms once more and towed Harry toward a pennant stall to look for a miniature Bulgarian flag. "We can talk about something else. What do you do for fun, anyway?"

"I brew potions," Harry said, fingering a green streamer idly. The wrapper said it was twenty feet and would never tangle.

"Even I know that," Ginny said. "What else?"

Harry thought. "I read books-"

"About potions?" Ginny guessed. "You need some serious social stimulation, my friend."

"Doesn't this count, then?" Harry wanted to know.

"No. I forced my company on you, remember?" Ginny batted her lashes at her sarcastically. "You have to seek it out for it to count."

"Who is making up these rules?" Harry muttered.

"We can start now," Ginny said suddenly, grabbing her arm and pulling her around the stand abruptly. "See those two German boys? They think we're pretty. Let's strike up a conversation."

"About how pretty we are?" Harry frowned. A swift assessment told her that one of the young men in question did think Ginny was pretty and was currently attempting to convince his bored-looking friend to accompany him in trying to talk to her. She also noticed that the boy looked about sixteen and swiftly reversed the grip Ginny had on her arm. Now Harry was towing her friend away from the two Germans with a steady stride.

"What gives?" her redheaded friend protested.

"He's too old for you," Harry said firmly. Before Ginny could get offended, she added, "Anyway did you see his teeth? Yellowed and cracked. Three Galleons says he's addicted to Hagsweed."

" *Ewww.* " Ginny shuddered. "Good call, Harry. A girl's got to have standards."

"In her playthings?" Harry finished dryly.

"Well, exactly." Ginny began turning her head this way and that as they walked. "Who should be our next victim-hey, look, it's Cedric Diggory! He lives just over the hill from us in Ottery St. Catchpole. He used to cry when Charlie and Bill beat him at Quidditch, but he's certainly grown up the last few years, hasn't he?"

Harry followed Ginny's gaze to where a good-looking wizard with golden-brown hair that would make Lockhart envious was standing. He looked familiar. "Is he a seventh-year?" she asked. She felt like she'd met him at some point, but couldn't put her finger on where. Had his been one of the many minds she walked back in first year?

"Sixth year," Ginny said, edging the two of them slowly toward the unsuspecting wizard. "Hufflepuff. Quite talented, if you believe his Head of House. If you believe his father, he's the second coming of Merlin."

Harry cast amused eyes on a shorter, older wizard standing beside the sixth year in question. She had an idea of who he was. "Amos Diggory," she said, glancing at Ginny to confirm it. "He works for the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, right?"

She had seen his name on several key initiatives for the reclassification of fresh-water Selkies from 'semi-sentient' to 'near-intelligent.' The change was sending the exotic fur market into a tizzy, as the hunting of 'near-intelligent' creatures required a license and was limited to certain population-based quotas in most regions. Many believed that 'near-intelligent' creatures should not be hunted at all, seeing that the category included mermen, centaurs, and other civilized beings, but on the other hand it included Acromantulas, dementors, and lethifolds as well, and no one seemed worked up about protecting those species from extermination.

"Yes," Ginny said absently. "He and Dad have lunch together pretty regularly. No idea what his wife does, but she's not around the house much. Isn't he cute?"

"Amos?" Harry asked, just to see Ginny scowl at her. Harry turned a considering look on the younger Diggory to appease her friend and shrugged. "I suppose his face is rather symmetrical."

"Don't be a bore," Ginny complained. "Gush with me."

"No, thank you," Harry said politely. Gushing was not on her list of things she would do to humor friends.

"Oh, all right," Ginny said. "At least come meet him, then." Before Harry could voice her disinclination to do that, either, Ginny was waving and calling out, "Cedric! Over here!"

The bronze-haired boy turned and caught sight of Ginny's broadly waving arm. He raised a hand in friendly acknowledgement and excused himself from his father's company to jog over and say hello. "We meet again, Ginny. Where are your brothers, then?" He seemed well aware that her family was not wont to send her off on her own.

"Who cares?" Ginny said, tugging Harry closer in a possessive way. "This is Harriett Potter. She's my minder for the evening, and much better company than those dolts in any case."

Diggory extended his hand with a gentlemanly smile. "It's very nice to make your acquaintance, Miss Potter."

Looking at him up close, she was able to place where she knew him from at last. He was the Seeker for the Hufflepuff house team, and he was also the boy who'd found her at the scene when Wates had been petrified in her second year. Not her finest moment, but there was no need to be embarrassed about it as Harry. "Pleased to meet you as well. Ginny tells me you're neighbors."

He nodded readily enough. "Just over the hill. My father and I caught a Portkey in with the Weasleys this morning, in fact."

Harry shot Ginny a glance that said, *oh, really?* Ginny smiled unrepentantly back. "That must have been fun growing up. I had cousin Rigel to play with, but it isn't the same playing Quidditch with just two people."

Diggory's eyes lit up. "You play Quidditch? I'm on the house team at school. Learned everything I know from this one's older brothers."

Ginny pouted prettily. "I taught you a few tricks too, didn't I?" She tilted her head down slightly so that she was looking up through her thick lashes. It was a good trick, but only because she'd adopted a critical expression that made the look cute rather than creepy.

"You taught me how to recognize cheating," Diggory said dryly, not appearing the least bit interested in Ginny's eyes.

Ginny laughed, and Harry noted she had pitched it at a lower register than usual. Clever, if she was attempting to downplay her youth. "Cheating is a time-honored tradition in Quidditch. It's only to be expected, with passions running so high."

"That's true enough," Diggory said, rubbing his neck thoughtfully and completely ignoring the subtle emphasis Ginny had put on the word 'passions.' He was either very oblivious, very good at dissembling, or so used to thinking of Ginny as a child that her attempts to steer his focus didn't register. "No one is expecting a clean match tonight, that's for certain."

"Speaking of, we should get going if we're going to meet our folks before it starts," Harry put in, smiling politely at Diggory to soften her abrupt withdrawal from the conversation. She couldn't let Ginny continue to embarrass herself in good conscience, no matter how amusing it was.



The Hufflepuff smiled his understanding and bade them a kind farewell before making his way back to his dad. Ginny sighed at his leaving but shrugged with equanimity as they headed back toward the Weasleys' tent site.

"Didn't seem too keen," the redhead commented. She didn't seem bothered by this fact.

"He sees you as a little sister," Harry told her.

She nodded sagely. "He looked at me like Bill does. Still, we must practice where we can, yes?"

"Just what are you practicing for?" Harry asked, despite not being entirely sure she wanted to know.

Ginny gave her a disparaging frown. "Even you aren't that aloof, Harry. I may be the seventh child of a disgraced family but I'll be expected to marry too one day. I'm not dense. I know it's going to be an uphill battle. I lack both personality and circumstance, but at least the former I can fake, if I use elements of distraction and capitalize on my physical attributes."

Harry, disturbed at the idea of a thirteen-year-old using physical assets to social advantage, allowed her gaze to slide into frank honesty. "You do have personality, Ginny. It's not one that complements everyone, but that's good. You have the personality of... curry. It's spicy, but interesting."

"I have the personality of a stomach flu," Ginny said, grimacing. "There's no need to be polite about it. I'm extremely rude and I don't generally apologize for it. I like making people uncomfortable. I enjoy putting them off balance. Now I have to learn the sort of likability that people marry for, though. I'm not complaining-everyone has to learn it, near as I can tell. I'm just behind schedule. Any help would be appreciated."

Harry thought about that as they walked. She supposed social nicety was a good skill for everyone to have. "Okay. The first thing you should work on is using your age to your advantage. It might seem counterintuitive to your eventual purpose to downplay your sexuality, but at this point boldness will work against you and draw attention to the sharper aspects of your personality. Your goal should be to soften the edges people perceive instead. Speech patterns will go a long way toward this, as will a tiny bit of projected uncertainty. People expect females to lack confidence in any case, so a small dose of self-deprecation will slot you neatly into most people's expectations-they won't notice even relatively obvious slip-ups once they've categorized you. People are mentally lazy like that..."

She gave all the advice she could think of that might be useful to Ginny's purpose. By the time they reached their destination, she had only one last suggestion.

"Talk to Pansy Parkinson," she told her earnestly. "My cousin says she's an expert at this sort of thing."

Ginny raised a skeptical eyebrow. "Parkinson? But she's so... soft. Delicate. Sweet. I don't know. She just doesn't seem the type to need anything like this."

Harry smiled slightly. "She might surprise you."

They stopped before a tent with the name 'Perkins' printed on the flap. "We borrowed it," Ginny explained, not an ounce of embarrassment in her voice. She ducked in and Harry followed, emerging in a very spacious multi-room tent with vaulted ceilings and a multitude of beds crammed into all available spaces.

"There you are, Ginny," Mr. Weasley stood from the kitchen table and smiled at Harry. "Thank you for returning my errant child, Miss Potter."

"She was excellent company, Mr. Weasley," Harry said, smiling back. "Thank you for letting me borrow her for a couple of hours."

"Is your father working security for the Minister tonight?" he asked.

"Not if he can help it," Harry said. "It's his day off."

"He best steer clear of the Top Box, then," Arthur chortled. "The Minister can be quite insistent, and Lord Potter is his favorite Auror."

Harry grimaced. "We're actually sitting in that box."

"Really?" Ron popped his head out from behind one of the dividing curtains. "We've got tickets there, too! Dad got a favor out of Ludo Bagman, and he got us all seats!"

Harry politely masked her surprise with a broad smile. "That's excellent. We can all watch the game together, then."

"Is Rigel with you?" Ron asked, coming out to plop down on a stool beside where Ginny stood.

"Still in South America, I'm afraid," Harry said. "You probably won't see him until the school term starts."

Ron shook his head bemusedly. "Trust Rigel to pick learning over the Quidditch World Cup."

Harry smiled but didn't defend her cousin. Or was it herself? She wasn't sure.

"I expect your parents will be looking for you soon, Harry," Mr. Weasley reminded her.

"Yes, you're right. Thanks for hanging out with me, Ginny. See you all in a bit." She ducked out of the tent and had to swerve sharply to avoid colliding with George on his way in.

"There's the sister-knapper!" he cried jovially.

"Not having second thoughts are you?" Fred ruffled her hair in a patronizing way. "No refunds or exchanges."

Harry stepped out of his reach. "Too late. She's your problem again."

"Ah, but soon we won't have any problems at all, will we Freddie?"

"No, indeed, Georgie," Fred agreed heartily. They had an air about them that spoke of grand plans and world domination.

"What are you two up to?" she asked, squinting at their too-satisfied expressions.

"Up to?"

"Up to?"

"I'm hurt."

"I'm deeply offended."

"You're mental, the both of you," she sighed. "Just try not to break the universe. Some of us enjoy living in it."

"No promises, Harry," the chorused. She wondered if they had any idea how alarmingly foreboding that habit was.

Darkness was falling, so she made her way back to her family's plot with due haste. She could see a light on inside so she readied an apology for returning so late before pushing her way through the entrance. When she stepped into the common area, however, her mother scarcely glanced at her beyond a smile and a quick, "Oh, good, you're back." She was too preoccupied tending to Sirius, who was slumped on one of the couches with a bag of ice pressed to one eye and the fingers of his other hand kneading the back of his neck carefully.

"What happened?"

"I was attacked," Sirius groaned.

James stepped in from the kitchen with more ice and laughed. "He picked a fight with a Bulgarian chap twice his size-without drawing his wand, mind you."

"He insulted me," Sirius protested.

"He wasn't even talking to you," Lily said, openly exasperated.

"He called Krum the greatest seeker alive," Sirius said vehemently, wincing around a split lip as he did so. "That's an insult to everyone who's ever heard of Josef Wronski."

"Wronski doesn't even play for the Grodzisk Goblins anymore," James pointed out.

"He's still *alive*," Sirius stressed. "It's the principle of the thing. Can't just go around making comments like that willy-nilly. Not for some seventeen-year-old with a couple of broom endorsements, anyway."

He continued to grumble as James helped him position the other bag of ice over his split lip. Lily favored Harry with a dry look and said, "What was that you said about grown men not requiring other people's supervision?"

Harry sighed sadly. "I'm so disillusioned."

"None of that," Sirius complained. "James, your daughter is cynical and depressing."

James dropped the ice with an affronted sniff and Sirius yelped as the cold pack landed in his lap. Harry laughed and took out her wand. "Let me fix it, Uncle Sirius. Otherwise your whole face will be numb by the time the match starts."

"You can't do underage magic outside of school," Lily protested. Her eyes were sympathetic as she gazed at Sirius' pitiful expression, though.

"What will Mr. Malfoy say if Lord Black shows up at the Top Box looking like he lost a fist fight?" she mused aloud.

James grimaced and Sirius groaned. Lily gave in with good grace. "All right, but we tell no one of this."

Harry grinned a bit. "Hold still, Uncle. It'll only hurt if I make it worse."

His expression went from relieved to apprehensive in an instant. Once she began the healing process, however, he relaxed entirely with rueful gratitude. Cuts and bruises were nothing to her skills, and before two minutes had passed Sirius looked like his old self. She paused as the last of his split lip closed together and asked her parents, "What do you think: should I make his nose a little more crooked?"

Sirius placed a protective hand over the appendage in question and leaned away from her so fast his chair tipped over. From his sprawled position on the ground he pouted. James chuckled as he helped his friend up. Sirius brushed himself off regally and said, with as much dignity as he could conjure, "Well? What are we all standing about for? We better get a move on if we don't want to miss the start."

They warded the tent for theft and started toward the stadium. They weren't alone by any stretch of the imagination. A sea of bodies lay between them and the entrance, so they shuffled slowly along with the sluggish momentum you might expect from a herd of cattle. Vendors pressed in on all sides, desperate to sell their last wares before the match got underway. She couldn't help but wonder why a stadium so large would have only one major entrance. Security, perhaps, though she didn't know what, short of depriving every spectator of his or her wand, could be done to eliminate the risks posed by having so many witches and wizards gathered in one place.

Once inside the stadium, they made better time. For a small fee, Sirius secured them passage to the topmost level of the stands via

private lift. They stepped out onto a metal platform that wound its way precariously along the outer rim of the stadium. Doors along its length led to various private boxes that sold for a spectacular amount of money to the right bidder. She wasn't surprised to see signs endorsing the names of notoriously wealthy families from both Britain and the European continent on the doors they passed en route to the Top Box.

She didn't know why or how Sirius had secured them seats in the same box that the Minister of Magic would be sitting in, but she suspected he had been more involved in politics of late than he let on to even her parents and Remus. At times she found newspaper clippings on his desk in his family's library instead of in the rubbish bin, where the paper usually wound up after being gutted for its Quidditch section.

After showing the security wizard at the door their tickets, they were allowed entrance. Harry had to blink sharply at the eye-watering décor before her brain let any other details about the box penetrate her consciousness. It, like the rest of the stadium, was constructed of lightweight wood that was nevertheless reinforced with a suite of stabilizing and strengthening spells to keep the cheaply made structure robust. Unlike the rest of the stadium, the Top Box was reinforced with layered shield charms and other protective wards to protect those within from stray balls and players.

As though in protest of the perfectly practical frame, the interior of the box looked as though a gilded lily had been violently ill all over it. Gold and purple seat cushions that were obviously more decorative than comfortable cluttered the chairs. A banner with some sort of ugly abstract depiction of Quidditch players in unlikely poses proclaimed 'International Magical Cooperation' in proudly flashing cursive. The only thing gaudier than the decorations was the pattern on the Minister's robes. He had made the unfortunate decision to attempt a show of neutrality by combining the Irish green and white with the Bulgarian team's burgundy and black. The overall effect was that of a drawing room curtain gone wrong.

He seemed not to notice the wincing his attire was drawing, however, as he sprang toward them upon their entry and clapped James on the back with eager gratitude. "About time, old boy! I was beginning to think Dawlish's relief would never come. Thank goodness it's you and not that other bloke-what's his name? The one with that horrid cough?"

"Ah, Minister," James interrupted, grimacing apologetically. "I'm not actually here as part of your security detail tonight."

"Not..." The Minister looked very put out indeed. "Well, what are you doing here, then?"

"He's my guest, I'm afraid," Sirius said, reaching out to shake the portly wizard's hand briefly. "Couldn't find anyone else last minute; you know how it goes."

"Lord Black!" The Minister was all smiles again. "Good to see you. So you've put those tickets to good use after all. I was beginning to wonder-the match is due to start any minute."

"Wouldn't miss it," Sirius assured him. "You remember Lady Potter, of course."

"Naturally." The politician clasped Lily's hand solicitously. "This rickety contraption positively shines with your presence, my dear."

Harry struggled to keep her eyebrows from rising in amusement. Is that how Rigel sounded when he complimented people? She might have to cut back on that a bit.

"It seems sturdy enough," Lily said, deflecting the compliment easily in favor of looking around the box.

"Yes, well, we've the younger Black brother to thank in part for that," the Minister said jovially. "Fine work, he does." If Sirius was surprised to hear that Regulus had been the architect behind some of the stadium's infrastructure, he didn't show it.



"The Black family delivers only the best," a voice from behind the Minister put in. Harry leaned sideways a bit until Narcissa Malfoy came into view. Her husband and son were standing beside her, in the corner of the box where a table of libations had been artfully tucked.

"When they can be convinced to stir themselves at all," Mr. Malfoy added with a slight drawl that indicated he was making a joke.

"What have you contributed lately then, Malfoy?" Sirius said, not entirely without humor.

Before Malfoy Sr. could return the barb, the Minister spoke enthusiastically on his behalf. "In fact, Lord Malfoy has recently made a *sizable* donation to St. Mungo's Hospital. Yes, very charitable, don't you think?"

"It's lovely," Lily said, after an awkward half-second in which it became clear James and Sirius had nothing to say on the subject of Lucius Malfoy's charitableness. "Where will the money be going?"

"The children's ward," Lucius said silkily. His expression gave the impression that no one ought to be able to find fault with that. Harry was suddenly very tempted to try.

"What a relief for them," she said, smiling up at Mr. Malfoy as though he'd just hung the moon.

"Oh?" The Minister looked down at her and affected an exaggerated look of realization. "Miss Potter, I remember you. Quite a scare at the Gala, wasn't it? We are so fortunate that our youngest generation is coming along so nicely. I suppose you have an interest in St. Mungo's, eh? Going to work there one day? You'll be grateful for patrons like Lord and Lady Malfoy when that day comes, I daresay."

"No doubt," Harry said, eyes wide with earnest fever. "With Mr. Malfoy's donation, perhaps the children's ward can restock some of the potions they've been out of. Is it going toward medical supplies?"

The Malfoys and the Minister all looked at her as though she were a bird out of its natural habitat. After a pause, Narcissa said, "It's going to a new wing, actually."

"Yes, yes, the Malfoy Memory Wing," Fudge said enthusiastically. "To treat those poor children afflicted with maladies of the mind, you see."

"Oh, I do see," Harry said, nodding in patient understanding. "That's a very noble gesture, Mr. Malfoy. I suppose the funds for correcting the shortage of life-saving potions will have to come from somewhere else, though."

Even Sirius and James were staring at her uncertainly now. The Minister faltered for a moment, clearing his throat delicately. "I-ah-am not aware of any such shortage, my dear. I assure you the children's ward is well provided for."

"I'm sure it's very difficult to provide the more expensive treatments to children in need," Harry said, nodding along with the Minister's uncertain words. "It's a sad fact that the most serious illnesses are often the most costly to cure. And of course the underprivileged are more likely to contract such illnesses, aren't they? If a few of the children can't be saved... well, it isn't really anyone's fault, is it?"

Lady Malfoy looked visibly disturbed. "If there are more pressing needs, our donation should of course be applied to those areas first. We can't allow children to go untreated in favor of erecting structural changes to a building." Draco looked up at his mother with surprise, and his father glanced sideways at her with patient resignation.

"Indeed," Mr. Malfoy allowed. "I'm certain our donation can be re-appropriated if there are children in need."

The Minister looked wide-eyed and dismayed. "No, no, there aren't. Miss Potter, I'm not sure where you got this idea-

"Why, I met one of them," she said, blinking innocently. She could tell by the looks James and Lily exchanged that they were not buying her act for a moment, but the others all wore expressions of perturbed fascination-all except Fudge, who looked like a man barely treading water. She hoped he could see the waterfall approaching fast. "A little girl, not yet old enough to attend Hogwarts." Not that she would, but they didn't need to know that. "She had the most rambunctious nature; at least, she did until she contracted Seifer's Syndrome."

"How awful," Narcissa murmured.

"Well, even modern magic cannot cure some things," the Minister said uncomfortably. "As you said, Miss Potter. No one's fault."

"Seifer's Solution does have a cure though," Lily put in helpfully. She met Harry's eyes and blinked slowly in response to the look of appreciation she found there.

"A potion, isn't it?" Sirius added, almost idly.

"A very expensive potion," Harry said, nodding sadly. "Her family couldn't afford to hire a Potions Master to brew it. They turned to St. Mungo's for help, but the hospital was out."

"Out?" Mr. Malfoy repeated carefully.

"And had been for months, apparently," Harry went on blithely. "It's just too expensive to keep in stock without an immediate need, they said. They put her name on the waiting list, of course, but left alone, the disease progressed to its later stages. The poor girl was bedridden, unable to even lift her head from her pillow by the end."

"The hospital did not set about procuring the potion in the meantime?" Narcissa asked, looking close to outrage.

"Perhaps they did," Harry said, shrugging slightly. "The girl's family could not pay for the cure, however, so it is likely her name was

passed over in favor of more wealthy clients who, though their need may not have been as dire, could compensate the hospital for the use of such resources."

"There should be a fund in place for just such a circumstance," Narcissa said stiffly. "Lucius, we must look into this."

He inclined his head regally, though his sharp eyes found Harry's and did nothing to disguise his annoyance. "Of course, Darling. Perhaps we can make a separate donation to the Potions wing."

"I'll match it," Sirius said firmly, clapping his hand on Harry's shoulder and squeezing to let her know she'd said enough.

The Minister's face shifted from despair to utter disbelief. He shook Sirius's hand with a slow-blooming smile, looking like a child who'd been told he would have two birthdays that year and wasn't sure whether to believe it or not. "Well, now... yes, that's a fine idea. Splendid, really. We must take care of the children, I always say. No magical child perishes of a curable disease in Magical Britain! No, sir."

"What should the fund be called?" Draco spoke up at last from beside his mother. He addressed the group at large but his focus narrowed to her as he added, almost challengingly, "Did this little girl have a name? Perhaps it can be in her honor."

She narrowed her eyes for a moment, trying to suss out his expression. Then she realized: he didn't believe her for a moment. His eyes said clearly he thought she'd made the whole thing up. "It's Cora," she said, smiling slightly. "And I'm sure she'd be delighted to hear she had a whole fund named after her."

"She's... alive?" Draco's face said he was aware of how callous the question was, but there was no better way to put it.

"Oh, yes!" Harry said brightly. "Someone donated the cure at the last moment and she recovered completely."

"That's wonderful," Narcissa said, her face relaxing ever so slightly. "It should never have been jeopardized to such an extent, of course, but at least the child has not paid for our oversights. I'm certain we can help the Ministry see that such an accident never occurs again."

"Indeed," Mr. Malfoy said. He didn't even attempt to sound enthused.

"Well, now, that's settled then," the Minister said. He wiped his hands on his robes nervously. "I hate to step out, but I really must see what's become of the Bulgarian delegation. Can't start the match without them, you know. Be back in a jiffy."

He fairly ran from the box, closing the door rather sharply behind him. Auror Dawlish sighed visibly before trailing after him.

"Was that entirely necessary, Harry?" her mother asked, looking torn between amusement and exasperation.

"Think of the children, Mum," she said, widening her eyes once more and even summoning a bit of moisture to them for effect.

"Just go find your seat before you scare the Malfoys away, too." Lily gestured tiredly toward the half-dozen rows of gilt-covered chairs that took up the front half of the box.

"We're not easily deterred, Lady Potter," Draco said promptly. He followed Harry over to the rows of seats, but didn't say anything for a long moment. She wondered if he was waiting for her to entertain him until he turned to look at her and asked, "How's Rigel?"

"Enjoying himself," she said. She might have known that's what he wanted.

"He must be, to stay so long," Draco said, turning away from her to frown out at the crowd. "I was sure he told me he would be back for this."

"He did plan to be here," Harry said, tone apologetic. "The timetable turned out to be less flexible than he thought."

"Hmm." Draco lapsed into silent contemplation and Harry took the opportunity to look out at the massive spectacle going on below them.

The stadium was so big and their seats were so high that it was like peering down into a fish bowl-if the fish bowl were overrun with ants and all of the ants were in a state of utter delirium, that is. The delay in start time appeared to be causing minor riots in several sections of the stands. She watched as Aurors in brightly lit vests bee-lined through rows and rows of spectators toward trouble spots. They looked from her height like flickering lamps lost in a forest of restless red and green leaves.

"Did you send him a birthday card?" Draco asked abruptly.

Harry pulled her attention back to the box and nodded. "Along with a potion I thought would amuse him."

"What did he think of it?" he pressed. His attitude was just casual enough to be suspicious. Why did he care what Rigel thought of his birthday present from Harry?

"He seemed appropriately wary and intrigued," she said. As Draco's eyelids shuttered in response to her words, her eyebrows rose. "Why the interest?"

Her unknowing friend affected a shrug that didn't fool her for an instant. "No reason. He didn't say anything about the trinket I sent him, so I wondered if he might be too busy to send an owl. Guess not."

She didn't have to be an empath to feel the hurt emanating from Draco's closed off expression. She assured him quickly. "Rigel loved the holster you sent. It was a joint gift from you and Miss Parkinson, wasn't it? He told me the engravings are exquisite." It was a far cry

from any mere 'trinket,' and that she knew simply from viewing it through the two-way mirror. She was certain it would prove even more handsome to behold in person: all soft leather and embossed fastenings.

Rather than the smirk of self-congratulations she expected, Draco frowned at her. "If he liked it so much, why didn't he tell us? Pansy is half convinced we need to get him something else before term starts."

Harry grimaced. "He can't send letters anymore. The quarantine has been tightened. He can receive mail, but nothing is to leave the affected area until the disease is eradicated. Including Rigel."

"What?" Draco's alarm was palpable. "They can't just keep him there. I'll talk to my father. I'm sure we can arrange an international Portkey. I'll smuggle it in my next letter if that's what it takes-"

"Hold on, Draco; calm down," Harry said, now alarmed for a different reason. She certainly didn't need Archie being whisked unaware to the Malfoys' manor. The blond aristocrat paused in his wild planning, perhaps only in surprise that she'd used his given name. She generally avoided it as Harry, despite having been given permission to use it. "Rigel is fine. He doesn't need to be rescued. He's just going to be there a little longer while they ensure no asymptomatic cases have been left untreated in the villages." The final stages of eradicating an illness were the most critical. Complete quarantine was necessary to ensuring it couldn't take hold somewhere else.

Draco scowled at her lack of urgency. "If he can't communicate outside of the quarantine, how do you *know* he's fine?"

"We have... another way of communicating," she admitted carefully. "It doesn't fall under the quarantine's restrictions, as it doesn't involve the exchanging of any physical item in or out of the wards. I promise, he's perfectly healthy. And he really does love your gift."

Draco looked both mollified and slightly disappointed. She supposed he might appreciate the chance to have Rigel come back sooner, regardless of the circumstances.

The door to the walkway opened and six fiery-haired Weasleys poured jubilantly into the box.

"There you are, Arthur!" Sirius exclaimed. He greeted the older man with a fiercely fond embrace. "Planning on missing the opening ceremony?"

"Heard a rumor they'd lost the Bulgarian delegation and had to postpone," Mr. Weasley said, chuckling wryly. "I thought the less time my animals were let loose in here the better for everyone." They turned to see the twins pretending to push Percy over the front lip of the box and Mr. Weasley winced. Turning with visible effort away from the sight, he greeted the Malfoys with stiff courtesy. "Lord Malfoy. Lady Malfoy. Good evening."

"Weasley," Mr. Malfoy returned. After a lengthy pause, he added, almost laughably insincere, "So good of you to come."

"Wouldn't miss it," Mr. Weasley said. His voice was painfully upbeat.

"You almost did, though," James put in cheerfully. "How *do* you lose an entire delegation of foreign dignitaries?"

"You'll have to ask Ludo when he gets here," Mr. Weasley said, shaking his head with exasperation. "He seemed under the impression that Crouch was minding them, but when we saw Crouch he was looking everywhere for Ludo. Said he was supposed to bring the Bulgarian officials to the players' tents for a meet and greet, but never showed."

Harry exchanged a look with Draco. "Not very organized, are they?" she commented quietly.



Draco turned away from the adults' conversation with an unimpressed huff. "The Ministry couldn't organize a picnic for ants."

"Aren't all picnics for ants?" Ginny plopped down on Draco's other side and gave him a sarcastic smile when he frowned at her.

"From the ants' point of view, maybe," Ron sat in the row behind them and was quickly joined by Percy, who put Ron pointedly between himself and the twins. Fred and George seemed unaffected by his show of mistrust, and opted to stand at the wooden railing and look over the field instead of sitting.

"I'm surrounded by Gryffindors," Draco muttered.

"It's probably not contagious," Ginny said blithely. "Unless you're allergic to fun."

"I'm allergic to nonsense." Draco sniffed.

"You do seem to be coming down with something," Harry said, blinking with affected concern at his complexion.

Draco shot her a betrayed look. "You're one of them."

"So are you," she said earnestly. "You just don't know it yet."

Draco's expression of suppressed horror was enough to send both Harry and Ginny into poorly muffled laughter. Just when she thought perhaps the blond pureblood was going to abandon his aloof demeanor and crack a smile, his father called him away.

"Draco, come and meet the Head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation," Mr. Malfoy said, gesturing to a man with salt and pepper hair and a greying mustache who had just entered the box. A younger man closer to her father's age with a heavy likeness to the first man trailed his footsteps somewhat slowly.

"That's Mr. Crouch," Ginny said quietly to Harry, leaning slightly closer to keep the men on the other side of the box from overhearing

and gesturing to the older man with her eyes. "He's a sour old geezer, but he planned this entire thing almost singlehandedly."

"I thought the tournament was Mr. Bagman's department," Harry commented.

"If you'd ever met Bagman, you'd know he isn't exactly the planning sort," Ginny said, caustically admiring as only she could be. "He's personable enough, and he raised a dragon ton of Galleons in some way or another, of course, but Crouch is the brains behind the whole operation."

"You make it sound sordid," Harry said, shaking her head wryly.

"You haven't seen the Veela yet." Ginny's face smoothed into something deadpan.

Harry rather hoped she was joking. They couldn't have actually contracted Veela for the event... could they?

"Barty! There you are!" Ludo Bagman himself positively steamed into the box, the overwhelming force of his personality enough to nearly eclipse the dozen others who entered in his wake. "I've tracked down the Bulgarian party, as you can see." He gestured grandly to the burgundy-draped wizards as though they were a set of chessmen he'd stumbled across at an antique shop rather than a group of highly distinguished witches and wizards representing the entirety of Magical Bulgaria. "With your leave I do believe we are ready to begin-hang on. Where's Minister Fudge?"

"He left in search of you, not long ago," James relayed. Smiling politely, he offered his hand to one of the Bulgarian delegation members and said, "Welcome, friend. I am Lord Potter, and this is my wife, Lily. Lord Malfoy is-"

"Don't bother, old boy," Bagman said, shaking his head. "They can't speak a word of English. You may as well be talking to the air."

James frowned thoughtfully, still shaking the hands of the Bulgarian party one after another. "I'm afraid I don't speak any Bulgarian."

"Why would you?" Bagman sighed. "I'm quite prepared to hand them off to you, Crouch, if you don't mind. I do have a game to kick off, after all."

Crouch bristled, visibly grasping for poise. "I hate to inform you of your duties again, Ludo, but as Head of the Department for Magical Games and Sports it falls in your purview to..."

Harry stopped listening and turned back around in her seat. It was almost embarrassing to listen to elected officials bluster like schoolboys. Draco rejoined them not long after, a disturbed look on his face. At Harry's mildly questioning glance he muttered, "I can see why Crouch never talks about his son."

Harry rolled her neck as though stretching it and subtly took another glance at the man who'd followed Mr. Crouch into the box. Her earlier impression of an average-looking male in his late thirties wasn't far off. He had a forgettable face, though the expression on it...

"Why does he keep licking his lips?" she asked, sotto voce.

"Because he's twitchy and weird," Draco said, wrinkling his nose in distaste. "I swear to Salazar, all politicians have creepy children." He shuddered in remembrance and she supposed he was imagining the infamous Miss Fudge.

"Your dad's sort of a politician, isn't he?" Ginny commented. The implication was there in her smile.

"Why didn't your parents drown you at birth?" Draco asked, almost conversationally. "Surely six children is enough for even the most industrious of population-crisis cultist."

"Such jealousy is a bit petty among friends, don't you think?" Ginny said sweetly. "I know I'm the seventh child of a seventh-born child and your family hasn't had more than two children a generation in over a century, but there's no need to let it affect our relationship."

Draco actually stared at the redheaded girl for a long moment before replying. "I'm not sure where to begin. We are not friends. We do not have a relationship. You're the seventh born of a line so tainted by Muggle blood you might as well be *Americans*, and my family *doesn't need to have seven children before one turns out to be magically capable* -"

"Let's go talk to your parents, Draco," Harry said quickly, cutting the boy off mid-rant and hoisting him up by an elbow.

"So you admit I'm magically capable?" Ginny called after them.

Harry sent Ginny a look that said *you are not helping* and firmly prevented Draco from whirling back around to argue with the younger girl. "You really shouldn't let her rile you like that. What would Pansy say?"

"I know what Pansy would say," Draco said, frowning at her. "But how would *you* know?"

Harry rolled her eyes. "Haven't I told you Rigel tells me everything?"

"Why does he keep secrets from us and not from you?" Draco complained as she led him toward the table of refreshments.

"Maybe because I don't pester him about said secrets," Harry suggested wryly. "The surest way to make Rigel clam up is to appear interested in his life in any way." She paused as it occurred to her that she was currently giving her friend advice on how to undermine her own boundaries. What was her life coming to?

They poured themselves drinks from a bowl of green-colored punch. Crouch's son was loitering near the table as well, but he didn't look

interested in partaking of anything. He had adopted a rather closed off posture of crossed arms and downturned chin and was somewhat sullenly observing everything around him through hooded eyelids that flickered restlessly. She wondered if he was uncomfortable in social settings, annoyed at his father's frequent troubled looks in his direction, or just didn't like Quidditch that much. Whatever his affliction, she'd seen teenagers less petulant. It was unbecoming on a man his age.

Lily was now attempting to smooth things over with the Bulgarian delegation. In delicately accented French, she welcomed them to the event, introduced everyone of import in the box, and apologized for their Minister's absence. When the Bulgarian Minister of Magic exclaimed in French, "Finally I meet an Eenglesman with an appreciation for culture!" Mr. Crouch's ears turned red. He stuttered out in broken French that he had not thought the Bulgarians would speak any language other than their own. "And why would we not?" the Bulgarian Minister replied haughtily, his French nearly textbook. He then devolved into a long string of what sounded like Italian.

Narcissa Malfoy smoothly took up the conversation, shortly followed by, to Harry's mild surprise, Sirius. Apparently the last generation of Blacks had exposed their children to Italian for enough years that a grasp of the language followed them into adulthood.

"Mother likes to spend a month in Venice with Aunt Bella every spring," Draco told Harry quietly.

She wondered whether her curiosity had been palpable to him. "Perhaps this year she should invite the Head of the Department for International Cooperation," she murmured back. Crouch was now fumbling through a few disjointed sentences in choppy Italian, but it was obvious he was not entirely sure what he was saying.

"It is a bit embarrassing," Draco admitted, talking beneath his breath so the man's son wouldn't overhear them.

They heard the man snort derisively beside them nevertheless and she glanced his way to see the flicker of a sneer twist his already twitchy mouth. She didn't know if it was directed at them or at his father, whose neck was now turning red as well as his ears. Regardless, she and Draco exchanged a look and agreed silently to return to their seats with measured haste.

"Done making pretty with the politicians, Harry?" Fred asked as she reached her seat and discovered him lounging in it irreverently.

"Why? Got a better offer?" she asked, nudging his legs so she had room to walk past him to the seat on his other side.

"For you?" Fred waggled his eyebrows in a way that made him look incredibly foolish. "Always."

"I bet you say that to all your distractions." She pouted, flicking her eyes at George, who was sneaking up behind an unsuspecting Draco in a manner most sly.

Draco whirled and George put his wand away so smoothly even Harry doubted whether he'd had it out. "Malfoy," he said cheerfully, putting a proprietary hand on the aristocrat's arm and maneuvering him into the seat on Fred's left. Draco muttered something uncomplimentary about Gryffindors manhandling him but did not seem to realize he'd allowed himself to be cornered until George plopped down on his left and turned to him with a shark-like grin.

"Says something that the witches are the only ones pulling their weight in international relations, doesn't it?" Fred said airily, drawing Draco's attention from George's predatory expression.

Draco stole a glance at the adults before saying, in a quietly superior voice, "My father speaks both French and Italian, actually. Spanish, too, and a smattering of German. He's just not foolish enough to volunteer as translator for the rest of the match."

"And your mother is?" George asked teasingly.

"Mother is enjoying making the officials look foolish," Draco admitted easily.

"I daresay she'll look pretty foolish herself when it turns out the Bulgarian officials speak English in the first place," Fred said, laughing.

Draco looked scandalized. "They can't possibly. They wouldn't risk insulting the British Ministry like that."

"Ten Galleons say they would." George grinned at the scowling pureblood.

"You're way off," Draco said stoutly.

"Care to put gold on that assumption?" Fred tilted his head in a silent challenge.

Draco looked back and forth between the two of them. There was a frown on his forehead that said he knew something was wrong, but he stepped into the neatly laid trap nonetheless. "Can you even afford such a bet, Weasley?"

"We'll make it an even hundred, if you only play for high stakes, little Drakey," George said, his tone indicating that he expected Draco to decline such an outrageous figure.

Draco, the proud idiot, said, "It's nothing to me, but what will *you* put up as collateral?"

"A hundred-Galleon idea," Fred said. He whipped out a piece of parchment and unrolled it before Draco's eyes. "This, my young snake, is a one-of-a-kind invention by yours truly. Guaranteed to make you a clean Knut at any honest purveyor of pranking goods."

Harry silently willed Draco to realize he was being maneuvered. He ought to know that the Weasley twins couldn't afford such a bet, and therefore wouldn't be making it unless they thought it a sure thing.

The fact that they had such a blueprint on hand was also incredibly suspicious. Draco, however, was studying the parchment with interest. With a haughty sniff, he smiled at Fred and said, "Very well, Weasley. If the invention doesn't mean that much to you, I'll take your outlandish wager."

"Wicked," the twins chorused. Fred and George appropriated a hand each and proceeded to shake Draco between them.

"Idiots." Percy scoffed from the row behind them.

"What's that, Percy?" Fred pretended to cup his ear in confusion. "You *don't* want us to spend part of our winnings on a new family owl so Errol stops embarrassing you at work? Don't worry. We won't."

Percy's ears turned red and he rose with an annoyed huff. He stalked off to stand near Mr. Crouch's son. She wasn't sure which of them appeared more peeved at being there.

"WELCOME! WELCOME, ONE AND ALL, TO THE QUIDDITCH WORLD CUP!"

Bagman's magically amplified voice rang out through every corner of the stadium. A roar of approval followed his pronouncement; the crowd was so loud in its excitement that Harry could almost feel the spells surrounding the Top Box struggling to keep the noise from overwhelming them. The dampening charms held, but Harry suspected that was due to the incredible integrity of their magic, not the spectators' lack of trying.

The adults meandered to their seats and Harry left her friends to sit beside her family. A clap of thunder shook the coliseum and the whoosh of wind that followed in its wake wasn't wind at all—it was the sound of dozens of the world's fastest racing brooms all whooshing past them at once. The teams had taken the pitch. They zoomed past in green and burgundy comets, and it took Harry a moment of focusing the clear-sight spells on her glasses to see that it wasn't just their speed making them look like shooting stars: the tails of the



players' broomsticks were emitting clouds of colored smoke that hung suspended behind them. As she watched, some of the riders slowed enough to write words with their bright trails.

Well, perhaps 'words' was a bit generous. The Bulgarian players appeared to be coordinating their efforts to draw a picture of the Irish team captain in an unlikely position with a goat.

"That better not make the front page," Fudge groaned from the row behind Harry. She stifled a laugh at the thought of the red smoke drawing prominently featured on every *Prophet* in London.

The riders in green responded by twisting through the crimson fog in a series of acrobatic stunts, both distorting the offensive picture and recapturing the crowd's attention with their spectacular moves. The Bulgarian riders soon followed suit and the audience cheered as each successive trick escalated in skill and recklessness.

"Which one is Krum?" Percy asked Ginny on the other side of the box.

"None of them, obviously," Ron said loudly, rolling his eyes a bit at his older brother. "These are only the trick riders. You wouldn't waste the real players on stunts like this right before a match!"

Whatever Percy was going to say in response was lost in the roar that came next. The crowd had noticed the Irish mascots pouring onto the pitch. Like a green tide rolling into the stadium, a flock of locust-like creatures flooded the field. They were leprechauns, and there must have been thousands of them. Harry's eyes widened as she mentally calculated the number of known leprechaun settlements still in existence and the approximate population statistics listed in the *Compendium of Creatures* back in Potter Manor. Had the entertainment coordinators rounded up every last leprechaun in existence? No, they couldn't have, she realized after peering a little closer through her magnified lenses. The diminutive green beings below were all male.

They rose into the air en masse, held aloft by some magic of their own making, and began making rounds of the stadium, like a great green thundercloud. From the storm of leprechauns there rained down thousands of glittering gold pieces into the waiting hands of witches and wizards below.

Harry brought her hand up automatically to catch a coin that came toward her face, plucking it from the air and examining it curiously. It looked just like a Galleon. Except it couldn't be. The goblin nation didn't give gold to creatures not classified as beings. She looked toward her parents in confusion. "Do the goblins know the leprechauns are single-handedly destabilizing the magical economy tonight?" she asked, mildly concerned.

Lily laughed at her and held up a coin between her fingers. "These aren't real Galleons, Harry."

"I know," she said. "That's sort of the problem." She was imagining the damage this amount of fake currency inserted into the international Wizarding community could do in a relatively short period of time. Inflation, for starters, and probably-

"It's leprechaun gold, Harry," James said, smiling reassuringly. "It disappears in a few hours."

She nodded her understanding, noticing from the corner of her eye that the Weasley children were looking abruptly less enthused about the coins they'd collected. The disappointment was temporary, however, and quickly forgotten in the wake of what happened next.

"What... what are *those*? "

The question rippled through the box, echoing the murmurs ripping through the stadium as a whole. The noise level dipped abruptly as thousands of people stopped what they were doing and just... *stared* . There was something happening down below them, something *beautiful* .

Harry felt herself stand to get a closer look, but no matter how close she came to the edge of the box, she couldn't see clearly enough. There was a haze over her eyes, such that she didn't even know what she was looking at. She just knew that it was wonderful.

No, that wasn't right. Her mind was itching, a familiar feeling that drew her back from the edge of some precipice and sharpened her consciousness into fighting back. She slammed mental defenses into place, willing her senses to dull and reason to take hold once more. She thought she heard the distant sound of laughter and supposed the Dominion Jewel was enjoying her disorientation. When she came back to herself fully, she was gripping the railing with both hands, staring down with dry eyes at a formation of lovely women with white-gold hair and sinuous forms dancing in a way that was something like what Rispah's ladies had put together for the alley tournament, and yet nothing like it at the same time.

She pulled her eyes away to see chaos raging everywhere else in the stadium. The pitch had been overrun by witches and wizards alike, all of whom were desperately trying to get closer to the dancing women-no, she realized after a moment of rational thought; not women. Veela.

She slowly stepped away from the box's ledge and looked around for her parents. They were sitting calmly in their seats-too calmly, in fact. Their eyes were vacant and their expressions slack. She took a worried step toward them before noticing Sirius had his wand out and pointed at his friends. When he noticed Harry approaching, he grimaced. "All right, there?"

She nodded. "What are you doing to them?"

"Bit of a counter-trance, if you will," Sirius said distractedly. After a few delicate passes with his wand, he put it away and watched with a satisfied smile as Lily and James blinked and looked around. Their expressions were confused, but focused.

"What on earth?" James muttered, gripping Lily's hand with a frown. He took in the spectacle occurring on the pitch and stood with a groan. "Bloody Veela." He rushed toward the Minister of Magic, who was standing on tiptoe and waving merrily to the magical beings below. James shot a spell at the Minister that had him stumbling backwards and shaking his head sharply, pawing at his ears.

"Thank you, Sirius," Lily said, drawing Harry's attention back to her uncle.

Sirius shrugged. "It's a bitch if you don't know the thrall is coming, eh?"

"How did you fight it off so quickly?" Harry asked, impressed.

"Dated a Veela once," Sirius said, a devilish grin on his face. "Had to learn to resist it if I wanted any say in the relationship. Doesn't affect me at all anymore."

Harry looked around at the box, which was still full of people practically falling over one another to reach the railing for a better view. "They're going to start climbing over that in a moment," she said fearfully, eyeing Ron in particular. "What do we do?"

"Watch your father," Lily said, indicating James, who was leaving officials clutching at their ears in his wake. "If you block the ears, it helps a person fight off the influence."

"I can't hear their singing, though," Harry said, frowning.

"The sound they give off is not at a pitch your mind can make sense of, but the magic still gets in through the ears," Lily explained. "Go help your friends, won't you, Harry? I'll ask Mr. Bagman if he can't get the mascots under control."

Harry picked her way toward the Weasleys, noting with a small amount of humor that Mr. Weasley appeared unaffected by the Veela, but was nevertheless having a good laugh at his children's

expense even as he subtly prevented them from doing anything too dangerous.

Her amusement fled when she saw Draco. The blond was hunched over in his seat, clutching his head between his hands. He hadn't been hit with one of her father's ear-ringing jinxes, though. His face was screwed up in acute pain and sweat beaded on his forehead and neck. It was his empathy, she realized with growing horror. It was overwhelming him with so many people gone effectively mad in such close quarters. While the spells on the box would likely diminish the emotions he felt from the crowd as a whole, there were still far too many people within the Top Box currently out of their minds with dazed lust and extreme disorientation.

She looked around for his parents, but Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy were still struggling to throw off the influence themselves. Mr. Malfoy looked largely clearheaded, but his attention was on bringing his wife back to full self-awareness and he hadn't noticed his son's predicament.

Harry sank onto the floor in front of Draco and put her hands over his ears gently. He flinched away from her but she caught him with a sharp, " *Shh* ." He froze as she bent her will toward consolidating her own emotions in a near-meditative state of calm. "Focus on me, Draco. Can you tell where my edges are? Let my emotions block the rest out, then find the part that's you." It was a technique they'd often used to separate Draco from his gift, back before he'd gained a marked control over its filtering.

His shoulders trembled slightly but his breath slowed and after a long pause the tendons in his neck relaxed. It was only a minute more before he lifted his head and assumed a posture that was almost normal. "My parents," he said. She could tell he meant it to be a question, but he was still a bit removed from reality.

"They're fine," she said, still projecting the same steady calm. She lowered her hands from his head and rose to sit in the chair beside him, affecting casualness for the sake of his dignity. She glanced at Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy and saw that they were observing her sharply

from across the box. She smiled reassuringly. They did not smile back, but neither did they come to remove Draco from her presence. No doubt they realized that if she didn't know about Draco's gift already, their coming over to panic over him would give something significant away.

"What. Happened." His voice was mildly irritated-a sure sign that he was coming back to himself quickly.

"The Veela enthralled everyone," Harry said. At his confused frown, she realized Draco had never even seen the beautiful beings. He'd been crippled by the collective emotions of those around him before he knew what was happening. "Bulgaria's mascots," she clarified. "Most people weren't expecting them, it seems."

She did glance over at Ginny, who was smiling a bit too smugly at the chaotic scene below them, and wonder how the girl had known there would be Veela when even the Minister was taken by surprise. Mr. Weasley must have been prepared for them, too, for him to be so unaffected. Perhaps Mr. Bagman had told him something and Ginny had overheard. Harry supposed Ginny's Occlumency must be fairly progressed for her to remain in control of her faculties, even considering that she may have been expecting the assault.

"Whose idiotic idea was that?" Draco sneered. Harry had to smile at that. She was privately wondering the same thing.

By then, most everyone in the Top Box had regained their composure and those not utterly outraged by the turn of events were chuckling with self-deprecating humor and applauding the still-dancing Veela with bemused appreciation.

Mr. Crouch was speaking harshly with Mr. Bagman, who had his hands spread in the universal gesture conveying 'Well, what do you want me to do about it?'

Harry's father sent a stag patronus galloping down toward the pitch, where efforts were being mounted to persuade the Veela to stop

dancing while simultaneously corralling those spectators still swarming from the stands.

"And the game hasn't even started yet," she muttered, amazed that wizards could be simultaneously coordinated enough to put together an event of such magnitude and yet still so disorganized where it counted.

James had Mr. Bagman over the Sonorous Charm now, attempting to calm the crowd. After a few unheeded platitudes from the Head of Magical Games and Sports, her father simply cast a spell that caused a tone like a broken radio to emit from his wand and into the Sonorous Charm.

Witches and wizards everywhere fell to their knees and clutched at their heads in pain, but the dazed and desperate atmosphere that had filled the stadium dissipated like fog in the wake of a sharp wind. Harry winced, clutching her own ears as reality settled into focus for those around her once again. Down on the pitch, the Veela were being escorted from the stadium by scores of security wizards with what looked like metal earmuffs on.

The Veela didn't go quietly. They summoned fireballs from their hands and shot them off irritably at the security team. The fire only singed at the wizards' coats, so Harry supposed the Veela weren't really trying to hurt them. She had read that, in their bird forms, Veela could create fire that burned nearly as hot as Dragon fire, and had to wonder again who had possibly thought it was a good idea to concentrate so many of them into a stadium of this size, much less without setting proper filtering wards in place around the stands.

"Well, now, wasn't that exciting?" Bagman said, laughing in a somewhat forced manner to the box at large. "Ahem. About time we got the game going, yes?"

"Just get the players out here before the leprechauns start up again," Crouch said, rubbing his temples.

"Right." Bagman cleared his throat before renewing the Sonorous Charm. "AND NOW: THE TEAMS!"

All mayhem was forgotten as the crowd refocused on the actual reason they were there. Cheers went up and spectators regained their seats as the Irish national team was called forth from their box.

"HERE'S RYAN! QUIGLEY! CONNOLLY! TROY! MULLET! MORAN! AANNNNND LYNCH!"

The Irish players burst through the dense fireball smoke the Veela had left in their wake, flying in a tight formation that marked them as seasoned professionals, well trained and stylistically compatible.

"IVANOVA! DIMITROV! LEVSKI! VOLKOV! VUNCHANOV! ZOGRAF! AAAAAAANNNNND KRUUUM!"

The tenor of roaring from the crowd changed pitch noticeably. Harry didn't follow international Quidditch very closely, but even she knew that Victor Krum was the youngest Seeker to play on a national team in well over a century. She had heard he was still in school but had also heard he was eighteen so she wasn't sure how that could be true. However old he was, he was undeniably the crowd favorite. Even some of the Irish spectators seemed to be enamored with his legend.

Ron whooped in encouragement when the Bulgarian teen dove spectacularly, the steepness of his decent appearing more like a plummet than a controlled swoop until the professional player pulled up in a graceful twist that she was certain required more effort to pull off than the smooth way Krum executed it implied.

To tumultuous applause, the teams took their starting positions above the rather meek-looking referee. She zoomed her omnioculars in on the little man with some amusement; he didn't look as though he'd have the constitution for a professional match of any length of time. Did the officials not expect a long final? Perhaps Krum was just that good.



The match kicked off with a cyclone of movement. The first few moments of a Quidditch match were always dreadfully disorienting, but this was something else. She could only follow so many of the players at once, but what she could see looked like someone playing a masters game of wizard chess at high speed. Maneuvers and counter-maneuvers passed before her eyes so quickly that sometimes she discerned the result before the strategy and had to reverse-engineer the plays in her head with an awe that likely only scratched the surface of what a consummate fan would be able to appreciate.

It became clear early on that the Irish team outmatched the Bulgarians in nearly every way. Their Chasers were a seamless wall of talent, steamrolling past the poor opposing Keeper in play after play. The Bulgarian Chasers were no slouches, but they always seemed to be a beat behind the relentless pace the Irish set. Ireland's Beaters, too, monopolized the Bludgers fiercely, though she noted the Bulgarian Beaters were significantly faster to attack their targets on the rare occasion they stole control of the balls. They were also considerably more pitiless in choosing said targets. It was not twenty minutes in before a substitute Keeper had to be brought on for Ireland, their starting player having suffered a punishing break to his left clavicle in a hit that knocked him clear off his broom.

"Oh, not Bliggly," Ron moaned, both hands tugging at his hair agitatedly. "He can't track overhead shots for his life."

Even if that was true, it didn't seem to matter to the Irish: they never let the Bulgarians have the Quaffle long enough to make a decent attempt on goal in any case. The score climbed higher in Ireland's favor and the Bulgarian fans gradually focused more and more of their attention on their Seeker. The young player's name spilled out in an almost continuous chant as play escalated, though the focused way the Bulgarian Seeker played suggested he didn't notice. She didn't know a ton about the specific strategies associated with Seeking, but to Harry his search pattern seemed erratic. Sometimes

he doubled back over the same ground twice or three times before moving onto other areas of the pitch.

She was not the only one who noticed. "Why isn't he going about it more systematically?" Ginny asked, poking Ron in the side until he deigned to pull his eyes from the pitch and glance her way.

"He's Krum, he can do what he wants," Ron said dismissively, turning back to the match eagerly.

Ginny huffed at the non-explanation, but a moment later Draco of all people spoke up from his seat and said, "It's because Lynch is shadowing him. He wants space to maneuver, so he's purposefully disregarding accepted search patterns in the hopes that Lynch will leave off in favor of making his own grid."

"It isn't working," Ginny noted wryly. Lynch was so close behind Krum he could probably count the hairs on the back of the young man's neck.

Draco nodded. "He'll have to try something else soon, or put Lynch in a place his Beaters can-"

He broke off as the crowd gasped collectively. Krum was diving, a dive so much faster than the one he'd displayed at the beginning of the match that it was clear he'd only been warming up before. Lynch tore after him, reckless in his need to close the distance between them. Harry searched the area before them with her omnioculars, but couldn't see the gold flicker that would confirm a sighting of the Snitch.

"It's a feint!" Fred said suddenly.

"How do you know?" Percy demanded.

"He isn't adjusting course as he dives," George said, grinning with excitement. "The Snitch moves constantly-you'd have to make minor

adjustments to follow its trajectory even if it stayed in the same relative place."

They were right, Harry realized, watching Krum closely. In her lenses she could see the expression of concentration on his face, but his eyes weren't fixed on anything but the ground. Unless the Snitch had lost its flight spells and was lying motionless in the grass, he was feinting.

They waited for him to veer off, to pull up, but he didn't. The two players plunged toward the earth with deadly speed. "They're going to crash!" Ginny cried. She seemed more excited than dismayed at this prospect.

"Lynch is," Ron said, grimacing.

Draco nodded distractedly, but the rest of them were too entranced by the scene before them to offer any more commentary. The Seekers were seconds from crashing, falling faster than gravity, and Harry thought surely Lynch would realize, this close to the ground, that they weren't chasing anything after all. His attention seemed to be completely focused on keeping pace with Krum, however. Didn't he see the ground coming up to meet him?

There was a sickening crunch as Lynch attempted to abandon his dive too late and careened into the dirt in a spray of grass and splinters. Krum, on the other hand, spun out of the dive with a move like a corkscrew, turning his downward momentum into a spiral that carried him parallel to the ground until he'd shed enough speed to pull up into the air once more.

Ireland called a timeout as medical personnel rushed onto the field with a stretcher. They would have a few minutes for their medic to patch him up enough to continue or else bring on the reserve Seeker.

Many in the Top Box stood and stretched their legs, some migrating to the refreshment table while others discussed the first part of the

match with vigor.

"-waste of a good broom, I'd say," Sirius was saying cheerfully to James and Lily.

"-not going to matter if Bulgaria can't score with the Quaffle!" Ron and Draco were in a heated debate over the outcome of the match, with Fred and George egging each on in turn with ridiculous irregularity.

Crouch was attempting to draw the Bulgarian delegation into a conversation by praising Krum's performance in rudimentary French. He seemed somehow oblivious to the dark glower his son was sending him from his seat, which he hadn't bothered to get up from. Bagman was reading out a series of advertisements over his Sonorous Charm with a bored expression on his face. Fudge conversed happily with the Malfoys, who returned his conversation with somewhat less obvious enjoyment.

A knock on the door preceded one of the security wizards sticking his head in and saying, "A Lord Flint here to see you, Minister."

Sirius looked around with interest and stood as Fudge waved for the pureblooded lord to be allowed in. The dark-haired man swept into the box with an expression of poised indifference, eyes flickering over the company in a way that was neither friendly nor dismissive.

"Good evening, Minister," he said respectfully, sweeping a bow as elegant as any she had seen.

"Flint! Good to see you," Fudge said, coming forward to clasp his hand jovially. "Might have known I'd see you tonight. Where's your boy? Never see you at a game without him." The Minister chuckled and didn't seem to notice the flicker of unease that crossed Flint's expression as he replied.

"Marcus could not get the time off work, unfortunately. Now that he is out of school, I see considerably less of him," Flint Sr. said, his

features settling into a study of wistfulness that was, to Harry's eyes, passably convincing.

"They do grow up so fast," Fudge said sympathetically. "Why, my own daughter is approaching her maturity, and I fear she is developing an independent streak a mile wide. But you ought to have brought your wife! I have not seen the lady in ages, it seems."

Flint's smile was regretful, but it did not reach his eyes. "My darling wife is ill and has been for some time, Minister Fudge. She rarely can summon the energy to leave her bed at present. If the Medi wizards do not find some cure soon... I fear for her."

The Minister looked stricken. "Merlin, Flint, I am dreadfully sorry. Please convey to her my sincerest well wishes."

Flint inclined his head gratefully and took a moment to compose his face into something more stoic before turning the subject to more neutral matters. As Sirius stepped forward to greet the wizard he and Archie had often shared Quidditch matches with, Harry marveled at the man's audacity. Was he really going to maintain a fiction of his wife's grave illness until he found her? Or perhaps... she narrowed her eyes and considered the clever way Flint Sr. had laid the ground for grief and sympathy from his fellow wizards. *He's going to fake his wife's death*, she marveled. It wouldn't be hard, if the knowledge of her supposed illness became common enough.

She suppressed a huff as she turned her eyes away from the spectacle. The galling thing was that if she didn't know any better she might believe him, too. He was fairly convincing, if you weren't looking for a lie. How could someone so normal-seeming hide such terrible secrets? An abusive marriage, a runaway wife, and a son that hated him, and there he stood, bold as brass, making himself out to be the sympathetic party. She was tempted to go and introduce herself, perhaps rudely inquire as to the exact nature of his wife's illness, but she held herself back with the knowledge that Mrs. Flint might in fact be best served by the fiction of her own demise. If

Mr. Flint were not concerned with searching for her, she could live the remainder of her life without fear.

It still rankled that his crimes would likely never be revealed or penalized. She knew that this was somewhat hypocritical of her. Who was she to resent another's secret crimes? She, who did not show her true face to the world. She, who hid behind a wall of carefully laid deception and used emotions to her advantage whenever she pleased. She wanted to believe she was different, that she was not hurting others the way Flint Sr. had, but was that strictly true? She was neck deep in lies and could no longer say with confidence that she grasped every consequence to her actions. Could she really count herself so different from Lord Flint?

The play started up again with a wobbly Lynch taking the air on a fresh broom, and those in the box regained their seats. Play resumed in much the same way, but the atmosphere in the Top Box began to liven considerably as the match wore on and the spectators grew somewhat restless. The Weasleys were soon shouting over one another in an effort to make their criticisms and predictions heard, and Draco couldn't hold back the force of his opinions very long before he was obliged to argue them at length between plays. Sirius and James jumped in with their own comments and even Mr. Malfoy was not above a scathing remark when the Irish beaters blundered a good shot.

Despite the eclectic group of people, it was *fun*. The game seemed to draw them outside of themselves, making everyone forget their social considerations for a little while. All that mattered was the match-for most of them, at least. Harry saw Crouch Jr. stalk out with a scowl after a time, evidentially fed up with the animated atmosphere, as though the good spirits of those around him were personally offensive. Harry didn't dwell on the man for long-she was having too good a time to ruin it by over-analyzing the negativity of one person.

When the Bulgarian Beaters singled out Moran and attempted to remove him entirely from play through a combination of Blurting and

Blagging, the crowd roared its disapproval, but no protest was heard more loudly than that of the Weasley twins, who jumped at Ludo Bagman and yelled into his Sonorous Charm, "THAT'S RUBBISH!"

Mr. Weasley looked mortified, his ears a startling shade of red, but then the Bulgarian Minister began laughing loudly and Fudge sent Mr. Weasley a grateful look. He therefore refrained from giving the twins a harsh talking to, but did take out his wand and charm their butts to stick to their seats, which were in turn bolted to the floor, much to the continued amusement of the Bulgarian wizards. She supposed this was more entertaining than the match for them at this point, as the Bulgarian team was losing badly to the Irish Chasers. The score was now 170-10 Ireland, an unrecoverable figure so late in the game as the players were losing steam and pressure increasingly turned to the Seekers to bring the match to a close.

All eyes were on Krum, but it was Lynch who saw the Snitch first. He took off desperately for the golden ball, but the Irish Seeker was in bad shape after multiple collisions and Krum maneuvered right around him to snatch the little thing out of the air. He held it triumphantly as the stadium erupted with noise, smiling grimly as his team congratulated him. Bulgaria had lost, 160-170, but they had ended the game on their terms, at least. Prolonging the match would only have made Ireland's lead more audacious.

The players gathered in the center to shake hands in exhausted good sportsmanship, Lynch even grinning ruefully at Krum and insisting he keep the golden Snitch despite the fact that it was traditionally presented to the winning team. The Irish mascots were somewhat... less graceful in their victory celebration.

The swarm of tiny green creatures raged about the stadium, showering everyone again in fake Galleons and, after several passes, obscuring even the players on the field with the deep green smoke they emitted- *wait, that isn't right*, she thought. *Leprechauns don't emit smoke like that*. It wasn't the bright, kelly green of sparklers but a deep, grey-green smog that emanated from nowhere

in particular and yet was slowly filling the entire stadium with clouds so thick they seemed to dampen the very energy of the crowd.

"Dad..." Harry said, tugging on James' sleeve without taking her eyes off the darkening smoke. Little crackles of lights were starting to flicker ominously in the center, like quiet lightning. "I don't think that's supposed to be happening."

Her parents turned to look at the rising smoke. "Mr. Bagman," James called over to the official. "Is this smog part of the show?"

Bagman broke off from his conversation with the Minister to crane his head around toward the pitch. "Ah, I'm not really sure... well, no. Not exactly."

James looked toward where Auror Dawlish was standing watch at the door and said, "Get a unit on the pitch to find the source of this smoke."

The Auror left with a nod, and James turned back to examine the smoke with narrowed eyes. Lily put a hand on James's arm uneasily. "Disgruntled fans?" she asked.

"Maybe." James's tone was noncommittal.

Harry didn't think he believed that any more than she did. The smoke was condensing, almost black now in its density. It was garnering notice from the rest of the stands; she could hear the strangely muted sounds of people shouting, though she could no longer see the stands on the other side of the stadium through the smog. The dark smoke writhed abruptly, coalescing into the center of the pitch and roiling.

"It's making some kind of symbol," Lily surmised.

There did appear to be a kind of purpose to the smog's development. After a few moments in which those in the box watched silently, the smoke took on a faintly intelligible shape. It was



a skull, with hollowed out spaces of darkness to suggest eyes, nose, and mouth, the later of which was stretched wide in the facsimile of a scream. From the open mouth, more smoke poured, twisting itself into the image of a snake as it stretched outward.

"Whatever is that supposed to be?" Fred asked, a tone of somewhat forced sarcasm biting its way through his words.

George lent deadpan to disgust in answering. "It looks like a corpse sucking on a-"

The head of the smoke skull exploded outward without warning, rocking the stadium in a wave of pure pressurized magic. People who'd been standing hit the deck involuntarily as the stands trembled under the violent pressure. Audible cracks echoed like cannon fire through the air.

"The foundations-" James bit out, but there was no time for anyone to do anything.

In the next moment the snake, the only part of the smoky image that hadn't dissipated with the pressure wave, lashed out. Its tail came down like an anvil to score the pitch in a raking movement that left a trail of charred and decayed grass in its wake. They had only a moment to register the symbol burnt into the pitch-a more sophisticated version of the snake-eating skull-before the snake's tongue whipped like an arc of lightning their way.

The tongue of smoke had the appearance of intangibility, yet it connected with the wards around the Top Box like several tons of heated steel. The protective magic held for a second, then buckled ominously. James dove toward the Minister of Magic-the obvious target of the precision attack-and Lily pulled Harry bodily to the ground with a strength she'd had no idea her mother possessed. Even braced between the rows of seats, Harry felt it in her bones when the shielding wards shattered and the remnants of the attack connected with the box itself.

The crunching blow that followed took her breath away. She felt the stabilizing charms go next under the strain of damage done to the box's infrastructure. The box began to sway. Harry experienced a lightheaded sense of disorientation not unlike the vertigo that set in at the top of a very high tree on a windy day.

As soon as she gathered her feet, Harry stood to survey the damage done. There was a gaping hole where the center of the railing used to be. Politicians and dignitaries were strung like discarded dolls about the box, but other than one wizard who was nursing a gash to his left elbow there didn't seem to be any injuries beyond bruises.

She took a single step toward the injured man, a half-formed idea of healing him in her mind, but lost her footing as the box groaned and swayed drunkenly beneath her. Even as she grabbed for a handhold, she heard the roar of wood giving way to failed engineering and gravity.

The Top Box split down the middle with a sickening squeal and half of what once had been a level surface became a broken incline with a gaping chasm at its conclusion. The other side of the box remained in place, but was in the space of moments several feet above them. She could see the horrified faces of those on the other half of the split, Ron and Percy's included, as her side fell sharply down and away. Harry was closer to the breakpoint than she was comfortable with, but her reflexes were catching up to her shock and quickly suppressing it to functional levels. She braced bent legs on either side of the aisle she was in, keeping her back flat against the incline even as it began trembling against the laws of physics to remain aloft.

Levering herself carefully upwards to see over the rows of slanted chairs, Harry spotted her mother further up the incline, looking down at her fearfully even as she hooked her arm between two chair legs still bolted to the platform. "Harry," she called unsteadily. "Are you all right?"

Harry nodded her head and gestured to where James was struggling to hold a panicking Fudge a couple rows over. "Help Dad," she called back. "I'm-"

"Ginny!" Mr. Weasley's frantic shout drew Harry's head around with a snap. The man was struggling to find a way down from the elevated edge of the broken box, which jutted out over their side like a cliff, but there was a good six feet between the intact half and the half Harry was on. Any attempt to jump down would likely result in a roll off the broken end to whatever gut-wrenching fall waited below. She spared a moment to pray that there hadn't been anyone directly below the box when it cracked in two, then refocused on what she could do now.

Harry adjusted her footholds so that she was nearly standing between the chairs, leaning sharply away from the incline to keep her balance. Ginny was in the front row, lying flat against the sloped platform, so close to the end that her feet dangled over open air. She held onto a chair leg with her left arm, but her right dangled at such an angle that Harry knew immediately it was broken. The girl's face was pale and she panted visibly against the pain she was in.

Fred and George were two seats left of their sister, and had somehow managed to remain sitting upright despite the shocks that had sent everyone else sprawling-no, she realized, they were still affected by the Sticking Charm Mr. Weasley had put on them earlier. She eyed the empty space where the railing had once been in front of them and decided those charms had probably saved their lives. Now, however, they were rendered incapable of moving to pull their sister away from the edge.

Harry grasped the chair to her left firmly and kicked off with her right foot to hoist her leg over until she was straddling it. Thus positioned, she relinquished one of her handholds to retrieve her wand from an inside pocket. If she could get a clear line of sight to the girl, she could levitate her out of harm's way. Before she'd got through half the incantation, however, Ginny was already moving. The redhead screamed as her legs and torso became airborne, but she wasn't

sliding-she was floating. Someone else had the same idea Harry had. She looked around, but no one else on the broken side of the box had their wands out.

"Let go, idiot!"

Harry whipped her head up toward the ledge above them, where Draco's head and torso glared down at them. His hand held a wand steady on Ginny's partially floated form with white knuckles. Ginny seemed to hear him, but couldn't move her head around to see well enough to be comforted; she hesitated on letting go of her desperate hold on the chair. Harry shuffled down a chair until she came into Ginny's line of sight and called, "It's all right, Ginny! We've got you!"

She added her levitation charm to Draco's; she trusted the blond boy, but lifting a human body with the spell was more difficult than he likely knew. Ginny let go with a tremulous gasp of fear and squeezed her eyes shut as her body left the angled floor entirely. Harry kept a steady flow of power to support the girl's weight and let Draco control the motion on his end. The pureblooded boy was a study in concentration as he guided Ginny up the remaining feet to the intact half of the box.

Harry let her levitation charm drop and scanned about her for any more pressing disasters. Seeing no one in immediate danger of falling, she hefted herself nimbly over another row until she could reach the twins. "All right, there?" she asked, breathing somewhat heavily with exertion.

Fred scowled down at the chair he was stuck to. "We don't know the countercharm," he growled, attempting to hurl himself out of the seat without success.

George put a hand on his brother's shoulder with grim patience. "Don't do that, Freddie-only think what would happen if you succeeded."

Fred looked at the gaping lack of railing in front of him and swallowed. "Right. Well, do we saw our arses off or what?"

"Can't your father cancel it from where he is?" Harry asked, peering up toward where Mr. Weasley was attempting to split his attention between Ginny and the twins.

"Broke his wand, I think," George said. "Saw him toss it aside when it didn't work before he tried to climb down to us."

Harry didn't know the countercharm for a sticking spell either. But she knew someone who did. "Sirius!" she yelled, looking around for the dark-haired wizard.

"Over here, Harry!" It was her mother. She was wedged in a kneeling position near James and the Minister, and on the slanted floor between them was Sirius, looking very much unconscious.

"Sirius?" she said again, her voice less firm. There was blood about his head, fresh and glistening.

"He'll be okay," Lily called. There was a confidence in her voice that was reassuring. "Can you three make it over here? We'll starting levitating you up to the others."

Harry shook her head. "We need the counter to the Sticking Charm," she told them, gesturing to Fred and George's predicament.

"I'll do it," James said, holding the Minister down even as he shifted himself up to get a clear sightline. "Tell me when you're ready." The twins quickly grasped the arms of their chairs and braced their legs for the release. Harry sent a thumbs up to James, who responded with a vigorous, "Liberacorpus!"

Fred and George let out shaky sighs of relief as their backs separated from the seats at last. The three of them picked their way over to the adults, checking aisles as they climbed over them for anyone else trapped or unconscious. They found no one else, and

Harry hoped it was because the rest had been thrown to the side of the box that didn't break away, not because they had slipped over the edge before anyone had regained the wits to notice.

There were four or five ministry officials huddled near where Minister Fudge was curled up under James' watchful gaze. Adding in her family and the twins made about a dozen people who needed moving. First Sirius needed tending to, however. Harry took out her wand again and crouched beside her uncle, using her knees to brace herself in the mouth of an aisle so her hands stayed free.

"Here," Fudge protested weakly from where he huddled against the platform. "No underage magic-"

Lily interrupted. "I think this falls neatly under the exception for dangerous circumstances, don't you? Do what you must, Harry."

She nodded, choosing to take that as blanket permission to do whatever magic she deemed prudent until they got out of this mess; she had a feeling the night was far from over. A stream of diagnostic charms told her all she needed to know about Sirius' condition-he'd cracked his head hard enough to put his lights out on impact, but his brains were in no danger of coming out his ears. It was the work of minutes to fuse the thin skin at the back of his head together neatly and reduce the swelling. There was nothing she could do about the headache he would have upon waking, but she deemed him safe to rennervate after a final check.

Lily smiled at Harry proudly, a small moment of warmth in a chilling situation, and woke Sirius directly. The prone wizard inhaled sharply as his eyes flickered open and he groaned like a man hung over. "Why's the world tilted?" he garbled out between moans.

"The box split in two," James explained shortly.

"My head feels split in two," Sirius grouched. He attempted to sit and hissed at the dizzying sensation the movement caused.

"Here, Uncle Sirius," Harry said, reaching deep into her pocket. She'd thought it might seem odd to carry her potions bag into the stadium with her, so it was miniaturized in her pocket. She would never be without it, but that didn't mean she didn't know how strange it looked to carry it at a sporting event like the Quidditch World Cup.

Her uncle took the potion she handed him without question, knocking it back and grimacing at the taste. "Aren't you prepared," he said wryly.

She huffed. "What's the point of an emergency supply of anything if you don't have it in an emergency, Uncle?" She peered into his eyes in an attempt to judge his coherency.

Sirius waved her off and took stock of his surroundings. He peered about the steeply listing platform, taking in the splintering wood and whining metal where the high end of the slope was still connected, albeit precariously, to the box's original frame. He then looked up toward the ledge above them, grimacing resignedly. "I suppose the door to the stairs is up there, eh?"

"What a talent for summation you have," Lily said, letting out a shaky laugh. "Yes; we have to get everyone up there before we can evacuate this death trap."

"Don't suppose those wankers up there stuck around to see what became of us," Sirius said, sounding not at all hopeful about the prospect of rescuers.

"Our father is up there with Percy and Ron," George reported. "His wand is broken, though, and Ginny is hurt."

"Best get you two up first, then, so you can help your sister," Sirius said, reaching for his own wand.

"Send Harry up first," Fred said, shaking his head. "She can heal Ginny. We're useless either way."

Harry settled the argument before it could gain steam, simply brandishing her wand at Fred and catching him in a levitation charm before he had the sense to resist. She ignored his offended yelp and let her magic carry him surely up to the platform above them. She saw several pairs of arms reaching out over the ledge to guide the redhead in the last foot or so and released her spell when she felt a tug against her control on the other end.

"You're next," she warned George, who was looking at her in equal parts exasperation and gratitude.

"I've got him, Harry," Lily said, putting a hand on her arm. "Rest your magic. You may need it again before the night is out."

She didn't know how to tell Lily that she could have lifted all of the others to the platform twice before feeling the drain on her magic, so she let her mother lift George with a simple nod of acquiescence. Sirius turned his wand on Harry, but the Minister's hand shot out and grasped at the Black Lord's arm pleadingly.

"Send me up," Fudge said, voice shaking. "I must see to-that is, the people need to know I've survived. I must find the Bulgarian Minister. We must make a statement-"

Sirius removed Fudge's clawing hand with restrained impatience. "Minister, we will send you after Harry. Surely you see that the children must go first."

"The children..." Fudge trailed off uncertainly, but looked around at his retinue and nodded quickly. "Yes-ah, that is, of course. Send her along, then, and I'll follow just after."

Harry suppressed the urge to roll her eyes at the severe distortion of priorities from which politicians appeared to suffer. She looked at her parents as Sirius' spell caught her weight and said, "I'll wait for you," before they could give her instructions to the contrary. The magic hoisted her upward on a tide of invisible power, and a moment later



she was touching down on the upper ledge in a space that had been cleared for the purpose.

There were more people still in the destroyed box than Sirius would have guessed. The Bulgarian party was still there, from what she could see. They were in the midst of a furious argument-in English, no less-with Mr. Crouch and Mr. Bagman, both of who seemed to be completely at a loss as to what they were meant to be doing. Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy were standing protectively close to Draco, whose eyes locked onto hers as she looked their way. "How many more?" he asked. His voice was steady but his face held a pallor that didn't bode well for how his Occlumency was holding up under the panicked emotions of so many shocked and terrified people.

"Nine," she said. "They may need help levitating everyone up." Here she looked meaningfully at all the grown witches and wizards standing about uncertainly. "The Minister and his retinue are still down there." Mr. Crouch sprang to the ledge-or at least to a space near the ledge from which he could peer down to the party below anxiously. He was almost knocked aside as Fudge came weightlessly flying over the edge and onto the platform. The portly man clutched at his chest as he found his feet and looked around. Zeroing in on the Bulgarian party, he stumbled over and began haranguing them about international incidents and unforeseeable disasters. Crouch followed him to mitigate and the group once again dissolved into uselessness.

Harry turned from the scene with disgust. She could be useful, at the least. Ginny was sitting in one of the chairs nearby, looking collected and annoyed at her family's hovering. "Come to patch me up?" Ginny asked as Harry knelt before her. "Just a numbing spell will do until I can get-ow!"

Harry ignored the girl's startled yelp as she magically twisted the bone back into place with a deft turn of her wand. She had done it on animals a number of times and knew that the spell prevented the nerves from sending most signals during the re-setting. It hadn't hurt

much, but the sensation of muscle and sinew moving without one's conscious control was unpleasant nonetheless.

"I'm gonna be sick," Ron said, averting his face from his sister as her arm twitched and shuddered under the magic's insistent nudging.

Once the arm was straightened to the spell's content, Harry set about actually Healing it. This was a much more gentle process, and Ginny's face relaxed under the warmth of the magic. Knitting the bone and surrounding tissues back together also took longer than simply setting it did, so Harry settled in for the time being.

"What's happening with the rest of the stadium?" she asked Mr. Weasley as she worked.

He shook his head slowly. "Nothing good. Ours was the only portion of the stands directly attacked, so nothing else has collapsed. People are panicking, though. I fear the security wizards will have their hands full preventing a stampede."

Harry wondered that everyone hadn't already cleared the stands, but after casting her mind back over the events since the end of the game, she realized not as much time had passed as she'd assumed. It had been the rush of action and her own hyper-awareness slowing her experience of the event. That, and there probably weren't enough exits to the stadium for any sort of expeditious exodus.

At the periphery of her awareness, she could hear Bagman attempting at last to calm the crowd. At what she suspected was the Minister's urging, he had a Sonorous Charm going full blast, saying, "LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, PLEASE DO NOT PANIC. THE MATCH IS NOW OVER. THERE IS NOTHING TO FEAR. PROCEED IN AN ORDERLY FASHION TO THE NEAREST EXIT AND NO HARM WILL BEFALL-"

Bagman's platitudes were drowned out by an unearthly howl that seemed to fill each corner of the stadium. It started as a wind, whipping through her ears so intimately it set her skin crawling. The

white noise fell away by degrees until she could hear words, spoken as though emanating from just over her shoulder. *What kind of spell is this?* she wondered with unease. It was a terrible whisper of a voice, almost unrecognizable in its inhuman, echoing lisp. More terrible still were the things it said.

" *LIES*," the spell whispered-shouted into her ear. She couldn't help but flinch at the way it filled her mind with harsh syllables. She kept her concentration primarily focused on Ginny's healing, but she could not block out the voice entirely, and it rose and fell like an overbearing symphony in the fringes of her consciousness. "THERE IS MUCH TO FEAR. This is the advent of a new age in the Wizarding World. A WAR AGAINST THE LESSER IS BEGUN. Tonight we reclaim our world from the stain that desecrates it; we come to purge the poison that infects the weakened whole. CONSIDER THIS A WARNING. Mudbloods who leave our world will be spared. ALL WHO REMAIN SHALL BE HUNTED. True wizards associating with filth will be CLEANSED ALONGSIDE IT. Choose your side, wizards of the isle. JOIN US OR STAND ASIDE. THE DEATH EATERS DEVOUR ALL WHO STAND AGAINST THEM AND DELIVER THE SOULS OF THE UNWORTHY TO THE FIRES OF THE DARKNESS."

The message ended, but the words seemed to be stuck in Harry's mind, like the echoes of a bad dream that took too long to fade upon awakening.

"What the bloody hell was that?" Ron muttered, white-faced and shaking.

"Never mind that now," his father said firmly. "As soon as Ginny's arm is well enough to move, we are leaving this stadium. Fred, George: Ginny is your responsibility from now until we set foot inside the Burrow, understand?"

The twins gave resolute nods, the stubbornness in their chins just daring Ginny to protest. She didn't, for once, instead frowning fiercely and snapping at Harry, "Is it fixed yet?"

"Almost," she said. She wasn't about to send the girl into a volatile situation with a half-healed arm.

"*Dad*," Percy hissed suddenly, naked fear in his voice. Mr. Weasley whirled to look at something out of Harry's line of sight and inhaled sharply.

"Get down, all of you!" he yelled.

Harry didn't think twice about pulling Ginny down by her good arm and shoving them both into an aisle. Ginny growled as her still-tender arm was jostled and Harry reached out with her Healing magic automatically to soothe it while at the same time twisting her head as much as she was able to look for the threat. "Did you see?" she asked Ginny.

"Masked riders," Ginny panted. "Black robes. On brooms. Came from above, I think. That's all I saw before you attacked me."

"Saved you," Harry disagreed.

She flinched as something touched her head but it was soft and fluttering-it was a piece of parchment, and it was followed by a half a dozen others. What on earth...?

Ginny pushed at her and they both moved into crouches. They risked a look out at the stadium and the scene that met Harry's eyes was so surreally unexpected that it didn't immediately register as intelligible. There was indeed a swarm of black-robed figures in silver masks, and they were on brooms, but whatever she'd imagined them doing-throwing spells or curses, maybe-it didn't predict them throwing what looked like bundles of newspapers down into the stands.

The masked riders tossed the stacks of papers and then shot simple dispersing spells after them: the stacks then exploded into hundreds of leaflets that rained down harmlessly onto the crowd.

"You saved me from a paper cut," Ginny said dryly. "Thanks ever so."

Not amused by the redhead at that particular moment, Harry pulled the girl's arm toward her and Healed it as fast as she could manage safely. Faster was more uncomfortable, but she thought they were beyond such concerns at this point. Ginny hissed at the pins and needles sensation, but sighed with real relief when Harry let her go at last with a satisfied nod. Ginny tried out her arm, gingerly at first and then with more vigor as it held up to her motions.

"Thanks, Harry," the girl said, momentarily sincere. Her face relaxed into cynical lines a moment later. "Now let's get the hell out of here."

"Go with your family," she said, turning Ginny over to Fred and George's protective care. "I'll see to mine."

"Be safe," George called after her, eyeing the leaflet-tossing wizards with cold apprehension. Unburdened, the masked assailants had begun to flee up and out of the stadium into the night.

She returned the sentiment distractedly and sought out her parents. James had procured Aurors from seemingly nowhere and was taking charge of the situation unequivocally now that everyone had been retrieved from the broken portion of the box.

"Dawlish, contact HQ and tell them we need immediate backup," James barked. "Stepson, go down to the locker rooms and confiscate the players' brooms. Get Squad C airborne and after those masked wizards. Granby, find the wardsmen on call tonight and tell them to take down the anti-Portkey wards around the grounds, then the anti-Apparition wards. People are going to want to leave quickly and we don't have enough Portkey stations standing by to make any kind of speedy evacuation."

"That's gonna take time," Granby protested. "Hours, maybe; them wards are anchored in a dozen places."

"Well, get every ward master in England on it," James snapped.

"The anti-App wards were anchored by Master Black himself!" Granby snapped back. "I'm telling you, our guys can't just unpin 'em on a whim."

Meanwhile Bagman had decided to be useful again and was announcing over the Sonorous Charm, "ALL PLAYERS REPORT TO THE TOP BOX WITH BROOMS IN HAND, BY ORDER OF THE MINISTER OF MAGIC!"

A glance over at the respective Ministers of Magic showed the pair of them utterly uninterested in any such order, being preoccupied in an argument over whose respective fault the current circumstance really was.

"Winborne, take Murphy and escort the dignitaries out of the stadium," James said when he could be heard once more. "Take them directly to the perimeter of the wards and use the emergency Portkeys to get them off the grounds."

"Why can't we take the brooms to the Portkey stations?" Fudge broke in, abruptly distracted from his political machinations.

"There aren't enough for you all," James said uncomfortably. "We need to acquisition the majority to get our men in the sky to oversee the situation and provide close air support if events escalate further."

"Just the two of us, then," Fudge spluttered, grasping his fellow minister like a lifeline.

James visibly fought a grimace and lost. "All right, Minister. If you and the Bulgarian Minister would like to wait, I can escort you to the perimeter myself by broomstick shortly."

Lily met James' eyes and smiled resolutely. "Harry and I will do just fine, Dear. We'll be waiting for you when you come home."

"I'll look out for them," Sirius added, clapping a hand on Harry's shoulder hard enough to make her stumble a bit.

James shook his head slowly. "I have a job for you, Sirius."

In a blur of crimson, the Bulgarian Seeker, Krum, touched down in what was left of the Top Box. He made straight for his minister, spurring a short and one-sided conversation in which the Bulgarian Minister gestured from Krum's broom to James and back.

Krum handed over the Firebolt XP without so much as a wince. James passed it to Sirius a moment later.

"Get to the edge of the wards and Apparate to your brother's house," James told him.

She'd never seen Sirius take a broom so gingerly. "We aren't on great terms at the moment."

"Still, he'll come if you ask him," James insisted. Harry thought he was probably right. Whatever Regulus thought of Sirius, he respected the position of Family Head unequivocally. "No one else can get the wards down fast enough," James concluded.

Sirius looked at Lily and Harry, frowning. "I don't like this. At least let me take Harry."

James shook his head staidly. "She'll slow you down. People are panicking already. Go now, Sirius."

With a final, uneasy glance at Lily and Harry, Sirius turned and leapt off the edge of the box, rocketing into the night on wings of urgent resolve.

Winborne and Murphy began herding the ministerial delegations briskly toward the door, which had been knocked partially askew during the box's splitting. The majority of those remaining who were not directly affiliated with the governmental parties nevertheless

followed close behind, likely judging the Auror-escorted group to be a relatively safe option amidst the chaos. Harry had the disturbing thought that standing next to high-ranking officials in the midst of a politically motivated attack was phenomenally ill advised, but with only one exit from the box there was no choice.

She stuck near to her mother, falling into step behind the Malfoys, with the Weasleys pressing close behind them. On the metal landing outside the box, their progress was stymied. Witches and wizards were attempting to evacuate from every box along the narrow walkway, to the point that passage between their box and the nearest lift access was impossibly congested. Judging by the frustrated shouts coming from that direction, Harry wasn't sure the lifts were even functioning at this point.

She looked the other direction, toward the junction with the rickety metal stairs that wound their way back and forth around the outside of the stadium like trails in an overly ambitious ant farm. "Mum," she said, pitching her voice over the crowd with difficulty. Lily followed her gaze and grimaced, but nodded.

"We're never going to make the lifts," Lily called to those around them. "We should take the stairs."

Lady Malfoy looked unenthused by the prospect. "It's little more than scaffolding," she pointed out. Harry could barely hear her cultured voice amidst the noise. "-not designed for serious traversal."

"Unless you've got brooms up your sleeves, we've few options," Mr. Weasley said firmly. Eyeing the crush of people all pressing toward the lifts, he directed Percy and Fred, who were the furthest back, to shift sideways. "Boys, make a path to the stairs-carefully. George, keep hold of Ginny." To Lily and the Malfoys he added, "Let's keep the children to the center."

Harry was unceremoniously put between her mother and Draco, who was bracketed by his parents on the other side. Ignoring the ignominy of being treated like the bumbling ministry officials, Harry



began the slow plod toward the stairs. The only thing that made their passage possible was the fact that everyone else was eager to move in the other direction. Room was made as witches and wizards wriggled forward into the space they vacated.

It wasn't until they reached the first stair and Draco nearly stumbled that Harry realized he was not holding up as well as he pretended under the overpressure of so many heightened emotions. He clutched the side railing with white knuckles and attempted to descend despite the glazed, half-focused look in his eyes that told her he was processing too much empathic data to be fully cognizant of his physical surroundings.

Without hesitation, she propped her right arm under his left elbow and steadied him. " *Focus*," she said, a bit sharper than she intended. Her worry gave her words an edge. "Find my emotions and forget the others."

It was a sign of the enormous pressure overloading his gift that Draco clutched blindly for her wrist with the hand that was not holding the rail, seeking the skin-to-skin contact that heightened and narrowed his empathy markedly. She knew from helping him learn to control his gift that his ability to sense a person's emotions was influenced by proximity, and that if he touched a person, his perception of outside emotions diminished to almost nothing. The trade off was that the emotions of whomever he was tuned to became hyper-magnified, easily overwhelming if not managed properly. For that reason, anchoring, as they came to call it, only helped his control if the person he touched held their emotions extremely static. Harry's Occlumency allowed her that control, and she exercised it ruthlessly as she directed Draco subtly down the stairs.

"How are you... so damn calm?" Draco hissed out between long, deliberately even breaths.

Her serenity was exaggerated as she projected complete placidity for his benefit, but even beneath her mental shields she wasn't,

truthfully, too ruffled by the situation. It was the plain truth that she had been in worse circumstances than an overcrowded stairwell. To Draco, she simply said, "I am calm because I need to be."

"Why can't everyone do that, then?" Draco grumbled with annoyance. His eyes were clearer, now, and he seemed less likely to fracture into pieces any second.

Harry couldn't help the short thrum of amusement that passed through her at his words. How like her friend to resent others for their unintended effect on his empathy. No doubt he would happily require Occlumency be added to the standard Wizarding curricula if it meant he wouldn't be inconvenienced by other people's excitability.

The blond wizard let out a burst of involuntary laughter, then shuddered and glared at her. "Keep it to yourself," he snapped.

Apologetic, Harry reinforced her Occlumency more firmly, tamping down on all superfluous emotion rather than simply the tension-causing ones such as worry and paranoia. Draco's face smoothed out and he nodded at her gratefully. He stood a little straighter, no longer leaning against her for support, though his left hand didn't release her wrist as they continued downward.

They were not the only ones to think of using the stairs, and their progress slowed incrementally the closer they got to the ground. Each time they were unable to move forward, they had to fight to keep from being crushed by those behind them. Their group was forced closer and closer as they lost space to the desperate press of bodies caught up in forward momentum.

Harry recalled with disgust the single entrance to the stadium she'd passed through hours before and hoped there were those on the bottom floor with enough sense to blast alternate exits from the other ends of the stadium. Then she imagined the effect such uncontrolled efforts might have on the overall stability of the temporary magical structure and thought better of it. With any luck, Sirius would have

Regulus Black on hand shortly and they could all just apparate home.

During one of the long pauses in their headway, Harry looked down over the edge of the railing to judge their progress. They were just above the tallest treetops, but in a couple of levels they would be close enough to considered jumping over the railing. The more compressed their group became on the stairway, the more she thought getting trapped in the bowels of the stadium trying to reach the main entryway would be a bad idea. People were going to get trampled or crushed unintentionally at the rate things were going.

The line of bodies moved and she turned away from the rail-but a flicker of strange light caught her periphery and she whipped her head back around with a snap. Draco let out a sharp breath and she belatedly smoothed the ripples in her emotions. He had already leaned around her to see what had alarmed her so, however, and when he, too saw the orange light past the tree line he cursed.

"The tents are on fire!" someone shouted from above them. She wondered exactly how stupid a person had to be to literally scream 'fire' in the midst of an already panicked crowd, but a moment later she had no time to care. The weight of the crowd around them became frenzied with stymied panic and Harry was knocked into Mr. Weasley's back with a grunt of surprise as Mrs. Malfoy lost her balance on the stairs behind them.

"We've got to get off these stairs," Draco said, voice tight as he attempted to brace himself next to her against the rail.

"Still too high to jump," she told him. "A hundred feet, I think."

"There has to be another way down," he said, almost to himself. He frowned at her for a long moment, and then she realized he wasn't looking at her-he was looking at her potions kit, which was unshrunk and pressed tightly to her body, cushioned from disruption only by the built-in spells that protected the vials within from jostling.

She put a protective hand on her bag, knowing where his thoughts were headed. She had told him as Rigel that her cousin Harry had been the one to develop the Modified Weightless Draught. "I don't have any modified ones..."

"But you have regular Weightless Draughts?" Draco asked, triumph lighting his expression.

She frowned, mentally calculating her current store levels. She was going to use them in an experiment over the weekend for her project with Snape, so she did have a handful of regular Weightless Draughts. "Six," she said after a moment. "Not enough for all of us."

"Enough for your family and mine," Draco pointed out. She didn't even have to say anything before he shrugged. "Just saying," he muttered.

Harry was too busy doing calculations in her head to entertain his callous suggestion that they abandon the Weasleys. "If the six heaviest of us take the potion and the rest of us use levitation charms on one another to slow our falls..."

"It'd be too uncontrolled," Draco said. "There's no way we could keep levitation charms steady while falling. And it's too dark to maintain line of sight from up here."

"What if the spell could be steadied?" she spoke aloud even as she tried to remember how many base potions she had in her bag that could be shape-imbued. At least a dozen, she was certain. "If I put a Levitation Charm in one of the neutral base potions... it won't make the drinker feather-light, but it will reverse the pull of gravity nonetheless. I just don't know if it will be too much-we might end up floating up into the sky uncontrollably."

Draco's face was a study in concentration as he tried to follow her thinking. "We could pair up-one Weightless Draught with one Levitation Charm. The anti-gravity of the Levitation Charm would be balanced by the controlled fall of the Weightless Draught. A

Levitation Charm powered for one person can't lift two, even if the other one is very light. Should make for a very slow fall between the two."

"In theory." She grimaced. He nodded unhappily, wincing as they were both pushed forward again as a surge came inexplicably from further up the stairs.

"I'll take theory over being crushed," Ron said from ahead of them. They looked up to see him craning his neck to see over his dad's shoulder. "I didn't catch all of that, but let's do *something* ."

The others around them were looking down with mixed trepidation and determination at Harry and Draco. Lily, half-wedged between the rail and Mrs. Malfoy, gave them a grim smile. "If you've got an idea, now would be the time to try it."

Harry's hands flew into her potions kit, drawing out vials from various pockets with the ease of intimate familiarity. She passed them off to Draco and Mr. Weasley as she ran out of hands. "The Weightless Draughts go to Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy, Mum, Mr. Weasley, and the twins." She knew without a doubt that Fred and George weighed more than their older brother-where he was skinny and lanky, like Ron, the twins had the build of true Beaters, broad-shouldered and well muscled.

When she was left with five vials, held between her and Draco, she closed her eyes for the barest of seconds, her core awareness pulsing out until she'd connected a cord of her magic with each of the vials. She'd never simultaneously imbued along multiple connections before, but the amount of magic required for each vial was negligible for her, just enough to levitate one human-sized object, and since it was the same type of magic going through each one she didn't foresee any issues.

The vials lit up with the speed and force with which she imbued, molding her magic into the form of Levitation Charms and pushing it down into the inert solutions as rapidly as she dared. The entire

process took her perhaps a minute, and by the time Draco had let out a surprised yelp at the heat that passed into the potions she was already taking all but one of them from him, passing three up to Percy, Ron, and Ginny.

"When we take ours, our feet are going to leave the ground," she warned them loudly. "Wait until your partner is ready to jump."

"This seems rather reckless," Mrs. Malfoy said, eyeing her vial dubiously. At Harry's patient look, she said, "It's not that I don't trust you, young lady, but this is my son's life you're asking me to risk. There is no guarantee that your... potion-Levitation Charm will last until we reach the ground."

Harry nodded. "I'll go first, then."

"No-" Draco bit off the rest of his exclamation, scowling as Harry raised her eyebrows at him. "That's stupid. Let an adult go first." Harry wondered if he was worried about losing his emotional anchor, but surely he realized that getting away from the crowd would help more than anything else.

Lily struggled to reach Harry and managed to get a hand on her shoulder after a moment. "There's no use dithering further. We will send green sparks when we reach the ground, so you know it is safe to follow." Before anyone could protest further, Lily downed her vial of Weightless Draught and pushed her way to the railing with unexpected strength. She swept her feet over the edge and made room for Harry to climb up beside her. Harry wrapped an arm tightly around her mother's waist and gulped back the hastily imbued potion without hesitation. It went to work after a moment's delay, and Harry felt gravity desert her as her mother's arms closed around her torso. Lily waited to make sure the magic keeping Harry aloft was stable, then pushed strongly against the rail.

There was an eerie moment of horizontal motion as Harry and Lily drifted out over open air, away from the stadium. Before they had gone too far toward the tree line, their bodies decelerated and they

began to drop, ever so slowly, toward the ground. While normally a Weightless Draught would allow one to sink at a safe pace straight down through open air, the combination of a Weightless Draught with Harry's self-levitating form made the two of them into an awkward balloon of sorts. Their path to the ground zigzagged in a difficult to predict pattern so that, when they did touch down at last, it was much later and further from the stadium than Harry would have originally anticipated. They were almost in the forest itself when they landed, somewhat removed from the mob of people pouring out of the stadium's entrance in every direction.

Lily let go of Harry with a smile, which abruptly fell away as Harry began to float upwards again. Her mother grabbed for her arms with a choked laugh. "I suppose casting Finite won't do the trick on this either?"

Harry remembered when Lily had first attempted to spell away the blue tint to Archie's hair that resulted from one of her first experiments with shaped imbuing. She smiled back as her mother tugged her back to the earth. "Sorry, but I'll have to imbue the counter-charm. Didn't think of that."

Lily anchored Harry with a half-embrace while she fished her wand from her sleeve and shot a bevvvy of green sparks into the sky toward the stadium. While her mother kept an eye on the sky, Harry awkwardly dug five additional vials of the base potion from her bag. She hesitated before imbuing them. "Is there a specific counter-spell for the Levitation Charm?" Normally one would simply stop using the charm to negate it.

Her mother frowned thoughtfully. "No reason a simple Finite Incantatem shouldn't work," she said, tentatively. "At the least, it won't hurt you."

Harry nodded and closed her eyes to focus on shaping the cancellation spell without letting the magic manifest. She hadn't done this one before, but it didn't strain her abilities noticeably. When the vials warmed with the added magic, she drank one and coughed on

reflex when the world imperiously exerted its will upon her once more mid-swallow. "That was fast," she said, blinking as her muscles all began working at once to keep her upright once more.

"There's George and Ginny," Lily said, relief coloring her voice as she picked out their drifting forms against the sky.

Harry squinted in the direction she pointed. "Fred and I think Ron, too," she added. The others must have come one after the other once they'd seen the sparks. Slowly they were drifting into view out of the dark, like little boats set adrift through the sky. Mr. Weasley and Percy were close behind, and eventually all three Malfoys came into view, falling noticeably faster than the others as the combination of two Weightless Draughts worked against one Levitation Charm. Still, it was by no means a dangerous plummet; the family of three touched down a little ways short of their group, and Harry jogged over to give Draco the counter-spell potion before he could drift off again.

It took another minute or so for the first of the Weasleys to land, Ginny pushing away from her brother almost before her cancellation potion had been fully consumed. Harry was looking around for where the next pair would land when a jet of red light flew out of nowhere and caught Fred square in the chest. He and Ron were spun wildly off-course by the force of the spell-a stunner, she told herself to keep the panic at bay-and Harry lost sight of them as they were swallowed up by the night sky.

Another red jet flew toward Mr. Weasley, but Percy somehow managed to get a shield up around them both before it impacted. They landed a few moments later, breathless but intact. Harry pressed a potion to Percy, who spluttered as it kicked in and said, "Who in the blazes was shooting at us?"

"Some panicked evacuee who thought we were the masked assailants returning," Mr. Weasley said, worry keeping his voice clipped. "We've got to find your brothers. Did you see which direction they were knocked?"



Percy shook his head, but Draco spoke up. "They were diverted North-Northwest," he said. After a moment of hesitation he added, reluctantly, "Toward the tents."

Mr. Weasley's face went white, but he straightened at once, not an ounce of fear in his expression, and said, "Boys, watch your sister. Do not leave this spot."

"Dad, you haven't got a wand," George protested. "Let one of us find them."

"I'm not losing any more of you in this crowd," Mr. Weasley bit off sharply. "We've no time to argue. *Stay put*."

Harry had never heard the man more resolute. Still, she thought it folly for him to go off searching for Fred and Ron on his own. Even if he could have performed the locator charm, there was no telling what sort of trouble he might run into along the way.

"I will go," Lily said suddenly. Harry turned to look at her mother, whose voice was fierce with earnestness. When Mr. Weasley began to shake his head, Lily put a hand on his shoulder gently. "I have use of my wand, Arthur. I will find your youngest sons. Harry, stay with the Weasleys."

"I can help," she said, but her mother cut her off with a brisk hand gesture.

"You have helped enough, Harry. Hold this for me." Lily dropped a delicately engraved bracelet into Harry's open palm. It was her suppressor. When had she taken it off? The air around Lily seemed positively charged with energy. Her hair floated just a bit too far from her head to be purely windborne. She seemed to glow with an unearthly vitality as she touched Harry's head and said, "If the wards drop, use your emergency Portkey to get home. Otherwise, stay here until I return."

"I will watch over her," Mr. Weasley vowed, worry fighting with gratefulness on his face.

"You have enough children to keep safe." Mr. Malfoy stepped up and placed a hand on the back of Harry's neck. She gaped up at him like an idiot for half a second before her poise caught up to her surprised disbelief. "We will look after Miss Potter," he continued. "It is the least we can do, after she liberated us all from the stadium's confines."

Lily looked hard at the impassive pureblood for a long moment. When she nodded, it was slow and deliberate. There was acceptance in her eyes, but also a warning. Only the hint of a smile gracing Mr. Malfoy's mouth revealed his awareness of the unspoken threat.

With a last look at Harry, her mother took off in the direction Ron and Fred had been blasted. The smoke coming from the burning campgrounds had drifted in the wind, and Lily's jogging form was swallowed in hazy darkness before long.

Their group huddled together in the night air somewhat awkwardly, at first. The Weasleys were to a one pale and worried. She could easily read the helpless frustration on their faces as they waited while two of their own were potentially in danger. She could just as easily read the Malfoys' polite attempts at not noticing the Weasleys' distress. The combination was both unhelpful and painfully charged.

Finally, Draco broke the tension. "Those two are clever. They'll find somewhere safe to wait, keep an eye out for help. Ron is handy with a wand, too. They'll be all right."

Mr. Weasley nodded his thanks for Draco's words, and said, "No doubt we will all see the night out safely."

No sooner had the words been uttered than an explosion rippled through the night, far from where they stood but nevertheless alarming in its sudden appearance against the sky. It was in the direction Lily had been running, somewhere amidst the burning field

of tents. The initial explosion was followed immediately by a series of bright flashes and bangs, almost in mockery of the situation's severity.

People screamed and fled into the tree line rather than attempt to skirt the spreading flames. There was little hope of anyone getting to the Portkey and Apparition points beyond the wards at this point—all such locations were on the other side of the fiery camping grounds. Harry's group pressed closer together to avoid being separated by the flood of witches and wizards rushing into the woods around them. It was several minutes before the whistles and bangs ebbed to the point that conversation was possible again.

"Some fool's firework stash caught fire, no doubt," Mr. Malfoy deduced.

"It won't be the last," his wife added. "There will be many with such piles in their tents, awaiting the end of the match celebrations."

"That's not the only thing in those tents," Ginny said, eyes bright despite the darkness. "I saw at least a few crups as we were walking around earlier, and pets aren't allowed in the stadium."

Harry grimaced, and, cruel though it was, silently hoped that crups were the worst of the casualties that would be revealed in the aftermath. With this many people in a state of fearful distress, there was a high risk of people getting trampled in the haste of others.

"Who would do something like this?" George asked, shaking his head a bit helplessly. He was visibly uncomfortable with his brothers' disappearance and seemed to be looking for a topic to distract himself.

"Radicals," Mr. Weasley said shortly.

"Anti-Muggle renegades," someone nearby added sharply. Harry couldn't see the speaker; there were a number of groups huddled close along the tree line like they were. The woods had grown quiet

as the stadium slowly emptied and people settled in to wait for the wards to go down or the Aurors to gain control of the scene.

"It doesn't concern us," a witch said, her voice huffy and dismissive.

"It does when they attack an international sporting event!" someone else loudly interjected. "This is going to take weeks to mop up. We don't even know how many were injured or-Merlin forbid-killed tonight."

"Purebloods, some of them, I don't doubt," Mr. Malfoy pointed out. Harry frowned upon realizing the conclusion of that train of thinking.

"You'd think they'd pick their target more carefully, if it was Muggles they're after," Draco snorted. Harry moved her eyes slowly over her friend's face, wondering what exactly he found so amusing in all of this.

"It wasn't Muggles or even Muggleborns they were after," Harry said, voice flat. Those around them grew quiet at her proclamation. "It was everyone else."

Draco frowned at her, discomfort in his expression that was probably caused by the riot of emotions she was struggling to keep contained. "That's what I mean," he said slowly. "Attacking a mixed event like this means the majority of affected aren't the ones they claim to be against. Why?"

"They're laying the foundation," Mr. Weasley said suddenly. He was looking at Harry with disturbed realization.

She nodded. "This attack was meant to scare, not actually injure or kill many people directly. That's why they dropped pamphlets. It was aimed at those who *associate* with Muggleborns, which includes a great number of halfbloods and purebloods. Like my uncle. Like my cousin. Like me. Like you," she added, raising her chin challengingly at the Malfoys. At the unease she caught flickering through their eyes she tilted her head. "You sat in the Top Box with my mother and

shook her hand, didn't you? And now you're scared, because that fleeting association might make you a target next-or at least that's the obvious conclusion these people want you to draw, isn't it? The point of tonight was to scare as many people as possible into not associating with Muggleborns. To make people retreat from those they might have spoken for out of fear for themselves."

"And when they do start attacking Muggleborns and their families, the rest of the Wizarding world will stand by and do nothing," Mr. Weasley said grimly. "It's the same tactics Grindelwald's supporters used before launching their war. First they terrified the sector of society they didn't have a grudge with, just to keep them out of the way. Then they moved to exterminate the undesirables-the Squibs, the less popular species of magical beings like hags and goblins, vampires and banshees. Those groups were unlikely to receive popular support from the wider public anyway. When they moved on to Muggleborns and eventually Muggles themselves, the magical communities of Europe were numb to the killings, too afraid for their own families to mount even a token resistance."

After a moment of stark silence, a shaky voice came from the trees behind them. "Surely you aren't suggesting this is the start of a war?"

"It's just a political demonstration gone awry," someone else said, a forced chuckle attempting to lighten the air. "Probably drunks, looking to let off a little steam."

"If these so-called Death Eaters can be believed, we'll find out soon enough, I'd wager," Mr. Weasley said darkly.

The Malfoys didn't add anything else to the conversation. Harry peered at Mr. Malfoy and couldn't help but wonder if the SOW Party had anything to do with the attack. She was tempted to think that it wasn't really Riddle's style, but then again what did she really know of the man? He was hard to predict.

It was only a short while later that Lily, Fred, and Ron emerged from the sea of choking smoke and stumbled toward them. Harry

wondered why the three were hobbling so awkwardly, until she realized Ron was being towed between the other two-his Levitation Charm potion hadn't worn off yet, evidently. Harry had a dose already prepared, and in short order Ron was laughing weakly in relief as his feet met the earth.

"Thanks, Harry," he said, grimacing at her. "No offense, but your potions are kind of scary."

The gangly redhead was caught in an embrace by his father, who checked him over briskly for injuries. Fred, meanwhile, was receiving the same treatment from his twin.

George clapped his hands on Fred's cheeks and gasped in dismay. "Freddie! What've you done?"

Fred frowned, lifting a hand to his face as though to check it was still attached. "What-?"

George shucked his jumper and the thin T-shirt beneath, then began shredding it into long strips without pause. Mr. Weasley looked at Fred with alarm, but there was no obvious cause for panic, just a small, already-scabbing cut on his right temple. He sighed. "Son, there's no need to-"

"I'll save you, Freddie!" George pounced. He had three and a half strips wrapped around his twin's head like a makeshift turban before Fred managed to escape. Everyone had a good laugh as it became clear George was having them on.

Ginny punched George in the arm with a scowl. "Don't scare us like that!"

"That was not amusing," Percy said, sniffing.

"Not clever, either," Draco said, smirking. As the Weasleys looked over uncertainly, he added, "Should've had Potter heal him, unless you'd like people to be able to tell you apart now."

Twin looks of horror bled quickly to pleading as they whipped toward Harry's amused face. "I can fix it," she assured them, gesturing for Fred to unwrap his bandaged head. She held her wand mostly in her sleeve as she sealed the cut. She didn't put it past Draco to notice she was once again using 'Rigel's' wand, if he saw it up close.

As she finished, a tremble beneath their feet caused several people nearby to shriek. Harry smiled, however. "That'll be the wards going down," she said.

"Which ones?" Ron asked. "Portkey or anti-Apparition?"

"Hopefully everything but the Muggle-repellers," Mr. Weasley murmured.

"One way to know," Narcissa said, placing her hand on her son's arm. "Try your Portkey, Draco."

Draco gave them all a last look before pulling his Heir's watch from his pocket. "Safe travels," he told them, somewhat awkwardly. "Manor de Malfoy." He vanished with a pop. With a short nod at the rest of them, Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy turned on the spot and disappeared as well.

There were shouts of joy as people throughout the forest realized they could Apparate and Portkey out. Pops crackled through the trees like firecrackers as witches and wizards left in droves.

"Thank you for finding my boys," Mr. Weasley said, clasping Lily's shoulders in a brief but heartfelt exchange. "Get home safe."

"You as well," Lily said. She held out a hand for Harry to take and the last thing Harry saw as she was side-along Apparated was the Weasleys crowding around a small handkerchief.

The world re-materialized on her front lawn. Lily led the way back into the house, though the look on her face suggested she didn't expect to find James home just yet. Harry stepped into the living

room to see Remus setting aside a hefty book and rising from the couch with a slight frown.

"Addy is asleep upstairs," Remus said. "What's going on? Sirius came running in an hour ago and practically jumped through the Floo, ranting about paranoid younger brothers with unplotable estates. Where's James?"

"He's fine," Lily said, distractedly glancing at the ceiling in the direction of Addy's room.

"I'll explain," Harry offered. "Go check on Addy, Mum."

Lily nodded gratefully and swept up the stairs. Harry sat and ran through the events after the Cup match with her uncle. By the time she'd finished, Lily had whipped up a pot of hot chocolate and brought mugs of it into the living room as they settled in to wait for James' and Sirius' return. Harry caught a whiff of something sharper than chocolate as her mother's mug passed her nose, but she didn't comment on it. She wasn't old enough to drink, but that didn't mean she didn't understand the appeal. In times of stress she developed an acute longing for a Calming Potion.

The long evening, warm fire, and sweet chocolate drink all conspired to make Harry drowsy. She found herself dozing off as the night wore on, and it was some time later that a noise from the Floo room drew her awake with an unpleasant lurch. She winced at the crick in her neck from where she'd laid it on her chair's arm as she rose.

James was there in the doorway, Sirius close behind him, both looking exhausted and drawn, but altogether unharmed. After hugs and health checks all around, the two men sat and related the long and short of it.

"The Ministry is wound tighter than a top over this," James said. "Only, it's for all the wrong reasons. Officials are running around babbling about press releases and international political fallout but no one is stopping to ask themselves how this happened. Security



was nothing to sneeze at in that stadium. These assailants slipped in, with Merlin knows how many smuggled or stolen brooms, and they evaded every patrol and pursuit. This was not some drunken accident-it was well planned and expertly executed."

"Do we know how the camp grounds caught fire?" Harry asked. It would have been difficult for the fleeing attackers to stop and orchestrate without being caught.

"No," James said wearily. "The arson brigade is still investigating. We're lucky everyone was still in the stadium when it happened. If the fire had been later, after people got back to their tents for the night..." He didn't need to finish that train of thought.

"At least Sirius managed to find Regulus and get the wards down," Lily said. "We didn't see any major stampedes. It could have been much worse."

"They might have been down sooner, if Reggie didn't think I was roaring drunk when I found him," Sirius said, somewhat bitterly. Harry supposed showing up in nothing but trousers and body paint, pouring out words about an attack on the World Cup would make anyone cautiously skeptical-and Regulus Black's opinion of his brother was lower than most.

"No one was killed in the evacuation," James said, shaking his head. "There were incidents of near-tramplings and a few were injured in the crushing crowds, but the deaths we know of so far all occurred after the initial attack, when the stands became destabilized. The Top Box suffered the most damage, but surrounding areas were affected, as well. We found a half dozen people in the scaffolding below, either too close to the rails when they shook or the victims of falling debris from above."

Lily squeezed his arm and glanced meaningfully at Harry, who blew out a long breath. She'd known since seeing the Top Box split in two that it was unlikely no one had been seriously injured as a result. She just hadn't been dwelling on it. Now, there was nothing else to

think about. People had died that night-people not so removed in time and space from where she had been. She had seen death before-in the Lower Alleys, in the Chamber of Secrets, in the Forbidden Forest-but never had it seemed so... meaningless. Those people had nothing to do with whatever statement the masked wizards or witches had been attempting to make.

Why would anyone cause such reckless suffering? It was so *thoughtless*, so *unnecessary* . She could feel her magic stirring restlessly beneath her skin and had to fight to keep from letting her parents see how upset she was becoming. It wasn't for the reasons they would assume, and she wasn't sure she could explain properly. Words had taken a backseat to emotion, currently.

"I'm going to bed," she said, standing and collecting the mugs from the table. "I'm glad you're home safe, Dad, Uncle Sirius. See you in the morning."

Her parents hugged her one last time, both troubled but wise enough to realize she didn't want to talk at the moment. She wanted to sleep. Not to forget-she would never forget-but to regroup her mind and come to terms with all the changes that would be wrought on the world in the aftermath of that night. The battleground was shifting, and she had to decide how to move with it.

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The next morning's paper displayed an image of the stadium mid-attack, the skull-and-snake emblem an ugly stain across the sky.

### ***TERROR AT THE QUIDDITCH WORLD CUP!***

*Last night's sporting event was marred by a vicious assault on the stadium itself as masked renegades stormed the winning team's*

*celebration and bombarded the field with inflammatory pamphlets supporting blood discrimination at its most extreme.*

*Witnesses say the assailants appeared like ghosts from the night, striking at the Minister's box and nearly causing the deaths of dozens of government officials and foreign dignitaries. Minister Fudge admits, "I barely escaped with my life." Wizarding communities across the world are outraged at this blatant terrorist attack against Magical Britain and her allies. Aurors report at least a dozen deceased as a result of this attack. The families of those brave witches and wizards are demanding answers, and so far the Ministry seems at a loss to explain how the most elaborately publicized and extensively organized event of the year was subject to such poor security practices that an unknown number of miscreants were able to wreak havoc with impunity upon innocent bystanders.*

*Also unclear is who exactly these assailants were. Was it an act of terrorism? Of war? Or just a political rebellion gone awry? All that is clear at this time is that the so-called Death Eaters are a serious new organization willing to take political views outside of the realm of politics and into the lives of ordinary citizens regardless of affiliation.*

*Ministry press releases state that in the future, alcohol sales at public events will be curtailed and all spectators subject to more thorough inspection, and in some cases searching, prior to event entry. Whether this will be enough to stop another such incident is something only time will tell.*

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[end of chapter four].

A/N: This has been a long time coming. Sometimes, my reality overtakes the time I'd rather spend here, in the world of creation, but I am overruled. My new job is very demanding, both in time and in mental energy. It took me quite a while to find a way to balance it

against my own pursuits, but I think I'm figuring it out. I apologize to everyone who waited much too long for this chapter. I thought I could finish it before my vacation in October was up, but I was wrong, and it got put on hold for much longer than I anticipated in the wake of everything else. I can't make an estimation for the next chapter, but now that I'm writing again I do plan on pushing forward. This series will never be abandoned, as it always burns in the back of my mind, but it may be slow going to be perfectly honest.

Anyone still reading has my heartfelt thanks, once again, for unearthly patience and passion for the characters. I thank everyone who works on side stories, drabbles, art, and other contributions to the Rigel Black universe in the absence of updates. You all are the real heroes of this series.

Very best,

Violet

## Chapter 5

A/N: Here's the edited version for chapter five! Thank you to everyone whose patience was doubtlessly saint-like over the past year. Fear not, I have started on chapter six.

### The Futile Façade

#### Chapter 5:

[RbRbRb]

To say that Regulus Black was having a bad week was an understatement equal to noting that the Wizarding public was perturbed by the recent events of the Quidditch World Cup. The truth was somewhat nearer to mass hysteria, and the Ministry dullards seemed keen to place the blame solely on the tournament orchestrators; Crouch and Bagman were in the political doghouse, and Regulus had rapidly spent every ounce of social capital his name afforded to avoid the same fate. *Never mind that this entire fiasco was a security issue*, he thought bitterly.

After days of official memorandums and demands of explanation, days of gratingly polite replies that he was only tasked to keep *Muggles* out of the arena and reminders that the structure's wards weren't designed to do anything other than support the physical integrity of the stadium's foundations under normal, predictable live loads, Regulus was ready to blast his own fireplace to pieces if it meant an end to the Undersecretary's belligerent Floo calls. No one seemed to care that there was no way for him to anticipate the stadium's needing to be protected from powerful magic; even if there was, he had not been *commissioned* to do that. His wards were crafted to repel the occasional Bludger, not shelter thousands of people from a terrorist attack.

In any case, it had been the Aurors who decided to seal so many of the stadium's exits to make security checkpoints more manageable. They assured Regulus' team that the exits would be unsealed after the match's conclusion to facilitate the ensuing exodus. Apparently, the Aurors who had been tasked with that particular function had been reassigned in the chaos of the attack. Not that anyone was laying blame at Potter's door. The Minister attributed his narrow escape to the Head Auror and looked for culpability elsewhere.

Now, after a hellish week in the black hole that was the public's disapproving eye, Regulus was summoned to Lord Riddle's side to make a report on his errant nephew. He could not imagine a subject he cared less to discuss with his lord than Rigel Black. The boy was an ambiguous piece on a game board much larger than he seemed to realize. Both sides intended to use him, but, maddeningly, he had a talent for shying just out of reach. Regulus knew Riddle looked to him to exert influence on the boy; he was in Regulus' house, and thus in his sphere of responsibility. Regulus was not under any illusions as to the Heir's susceptibility to his machinations, however. He was also nowhere near foolish enough to imagine Lord Riddle would be pleased at this state of affairs.

As he stepped into the capacious hall that served as Riddle's receiving room at his remote estate, Regulus wiped the disgruntlement from his features and cleared his mind with the ease of rote practice. He knew better than to arm Lord Riddle with the knowledge of his displeasure. He walked down the center of the room slowly, his footsteps soft on the long, silk rug that marked the straight path toward the dais.

His bow was low and respectful but unhurried. He would follow this wizard unhesitantly, but he would not trip over himself to grovel. The opulent display of candles and gilded, emerald studded throne might impress some of Riddle's underlings, but wealth was nothing to Regulus. The power that radiated from the man upon the throne, however... was a different matter.

"Rise, Regulus," Riddle said after an unnecessary increment. Regulus did not need a stiff spine to remind him where his loyalties were owed. "Tell me what has occupied young Rigel these past months."

Regulus met Riddle's eyes briefly, then flicked his gaze to the man's left ear instead. "My nephew is recently returned from abroad. His internship in the Darien Gap community was extended due to some sort of outbreak, and he returned to England yesterday."

"So he truly did have plans for the summer," Riddle mused. Regulus said nothing, as the comment was not, he thought, intended for him. He had to wonder when Rigel might have made Lord Riddle aware of his summer plans, however. As far as he knew, his nephew hadn't seen Riddle since the New Year's Gala, at which point he had not yet secured his internship. "You have not seen him yet, then?" Riddle tilted his head at Regulus, disapproval in his voice.

Regulus bit back his first response, which was to tell his lord that he'd been *extremely busy* over the past week, certainly too busy to fabricate an excuse to visit his elder brother at their family home. His simmering temper and sharp tongue had not endeared him to Riddle in the past. Apparently only Severus brought forth Lord Riddle's amusement in that way.

"I have not," Regulus admitted evenly. "I have spoken to Lucius, however. His wife has invited Rigel to tea this Saturday afternoon. I may be able to secure an invitation-"

Riddle cut his hand in a short, horizontal movement that stilled Regulus' lips. "Don't trouble yourself, Regulus," Riddle said softly. There was a dangerous smirk tugging across Riddle's face. "I will endeavor to drop in on Lucius that afternoon and gain a first-hand appraisal of the boy. Well done."

It was faint praise, but Regulus still felt his shoulders relax without his impetus. Then he remembered the other task he had been appointed and they tightened once more. "About Heiress Potter," he

began. Riddle's eyes sharpened and the smirk dropped as his lips pressed together in mild irritation. Regulus had mixed feelings about revealing this information to his lord, but he was not a liar-well, not today, at least. "She may be a bigger threat to your plans than we thought."

Riddle released an elegant sneer. "She didn't take to your advice, then?"

"Not in the least," Regulus confirmed. "She is at least as attached to Rigel as he is to her. Her influence over him is, I admit, greater than my own, and she's made it clear she brooks no attempt to separate the two."

"Arrogant girl," Riddle murmured. Regulus wasn't sure about that. Harriet Potter was stubborn, yes, and certainly spoke above her station, but Regulus didn't think she had an inflated opinion of her power in this particular situation.

When Riddle let the silence go unusually long, a dark scowl on his face, Regulus offered a rare piece of unsolicited advice to his lord. "You may consider involving Severus," he said. As Riddle's eyes locked onto his once more, Regulus silently asked his halfblood friend for his forgiveness. Severus would not thank him for what he was about to reveal. "He's been working with Heiress Potter this summer. I have no hold over the girl, but Severus... well, her goal is to become a Potions Mistress. It would be difficult to achieve with one of the most respected Masters of the field standing in her way."

The laugh that followed his suggestion was entirely pleased. "Regulus, your insight never ceases to inspire me. I have been treating this girl as I would a lion-a sharp smack to the nose and she ought to have flinched. Perhaps she requires a more serpentine approach." Riddle trailed his fingers back and forth on the arm of his chair, his face closed in thought. "Yes," he said at last. "The girl's ambition will be her downfall."



The note of finality in his voice didn't speak well for the girl's chances, but Regulus didn't pity her. He'd warned her to distance herself from his nephew, told her flat out she didn't belong in the circles he was being elevated into. That she didn't heed him was her own misfortune.

Riddle drew his hands together in a steeple. Over their tips, he said, "What of the tournament's preparations?"

Regulus was taken aback by the question. "My lord, you are... proceeding with that, in the wake of recent events?" He honestly assumed the grand scheme would be cancelled or at least postponed. The Wizarding World was up in arms over the travesty of the World Cup. It didn't seem wise to Regulus to present their indignation a large and ostentatious target.

"I'm certainly not going to write off months of work because a few masked imbeciles decided to lose their minds for an evening," Riddle said sharply.

"I only fear it may be seen as politically incendiary," Regulus said carefully. "Given the current atmosphere."

"It is incendiary in the way we need it to be," Riddle said, lowering his lids in a way that precluded further argument. "Our spectacle will refocus the community on what is important. It will look reasonable, compared to the manic fanatics at the Cup. Our legislation will be a natural extension of the point we prove. In any case, the Ministry's Department of Magical Games and Sports is now desperate for revenue to recompense the claims of property loss currently being levied against it. I couldn't stop our little show if I wanted to."

"And I suppose Messrs. Bagman and Crouch will be so eager to see its smooth execution that your every demand will be satisfied," Regulus guessed. If he was not certain that his lord had nothing to do with the attack on the World Cup, he might wonder at the convenience. *No*, he mentally chided himself. *Not convenience*. *Riddle simply takes every advantage the world affords him.*

The seated wizard smiled, and it was edged with dark satisfaction. "Indeed, Regulus. We may be moving in Dumbledore's jurisdiction, but this time I will have complete control of how the year plays out."

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When Archie returned from the Darien Gap, it was to relieved smiles and concerned glances. Sirius especially hovered the first couple of days, scarcely letting Archie out of his sight except to sleep. When Harry and Archie were at last afforded some time alone, Archie was half-exasperated, half-saddened by the family's doting.

"It's like he didn't expect me to come back," he said, tracing invisible patterns in his green bedspread. "He keeps looking at me like he isn't sure I did come back. I haven't changed that much, have I?"

Harry knew he didn't want to hear it, but he really had changed. The Archie who came back from the Americas was solemn eyed and too mature, slower to laugh and quicker to fall silent. She knew he'd seen a great deal of suffering over the last few months, and she suspected the only reason the stress of that wasn't more visible was because of his metamorphing. Underneath the face that looked like hers, were his features wan and drawn? Were there lines across his brow, bags under his eyes? He gave off an aura of exhaustion, even if his physical form didn't reflect the underlying state. She had to smother her own concerned glances more than once, confident that he would not appreciate her worries.

"It's not just the internship," Harry reminded him. "Sirius can't forget what happened at the end of last year. He's afraid letting you go abroad just after such an experience was the wrong choice. He needs reassurance that you're healing, that so much time away, amidst tragedy and death, hasn't stunted your recovery."

Archie sighed. "I know, and I understand, but I can't pretend to be carefree and naïve just for the sake of it. I can't un-see what I saw, Harry. So much pain, so much senseless suffering. I thought I understood, after Mum, how short life can be, how quickly it can change; I didn't understand anything." His expression transitioned to

something self-mocking that didn't suit her cousin at all. "I thought I was living life to the fullest, taking risks to achieve my dreams, but I haven't lived at all! I'm just cautiously creeping through the world, planning every step and every day as though I have thousands left. There aren't any guarantees, Harry."

Her eyes widened as he spoke. Was he saying... did he regret their ruse? She had always known, in the back of her mind, that it was a possibility. It wasn't something she'd planned for, however. Archie had always seemed so certain, at least as sure as she had been at every turn. "Do you-" She swallowed before continuing. "Do you want to stop? Go back to being ourselves?" Harry ignored the pang in her heart at the very thought. She carefully did not consider why it was not her potions career that flashed through her mind at the thought of abandoning their pretense, but Draco and Pansy, Rosier and Ginny, *Professor Snape* .

Archie looked at her and smiled softly. "No, Harry, I wouldn't do that."

"It's okay," she said, keeping her breathing steady by force of will alone. "It's your life, Archie, I've only borrowed it for a little while. Maybe it's time. Maybe we've gone as far as we can."

Archie took her hands and pulled her forward until his forehead touched hers. "I know you don't believe that, Harry. We aren't through yet. Anyway, I'm not saying I want to quit. I just... I want to do *more*, Harry. I'm going to take on another specialty this year. Advanced stage disease treatment is still my passion, but I want to learn a wider, more applicable field as well. I want to help as many people as I possibly can. Our ruse has given me this opportunity, but I haven't been taking full advantage of it."

"That-" She didn't know what to say, caught between acute relief and miserable guilt that she was so happy to keep living Archie's life. "If you're sure..." she said weakly.

"I'm more certain than I've ever been," Archie said. He pulled away and began to pace the room, growing more animated as he spoke. "I

want to help you with your potions research. I know there's a way to tailor your invention to the medical realm. I want to go on a long vacation, just my dad and me. I want to teach Addie how to say my name properly. I want to kiss Hermione. I want-"

"Woah," she said, startled out of her dazed state. "When did you decide that?"

"Months ago," Archie said, waving his hand distractedly. "I decided it was too risky to tell her how I felt, but I'm not afraid anymore."

Harry thought ruefully that some fear might be a good thing. Was he really planning on starting a relationship with Hermione as Harry Potter? "Don't you think you should wait a little longer to-"

"No! No more waiting for me, Harry." Archie's face was alive with the force of his declaration. "I'm going to live with no regrets." After a moment in which they stared at one another, Archie blinked and relaxed slightly, a smile tugging at one side of his mouth. "Well, maybe I'll wait until we start school again. From her letters, she seems pretty focused on her clinic work right now. Thanks for that, by the way." He scowled playfully at her, and Harry could see a bit of the old Archie still glowing inside him.

"You're welcome," Harry said primly. After a beat, she added, "She's pretty great, your girl. Mrs. Hurst sings her praises to anyone who will listen."

"She's not my girl yet," Archie said, his smile dopey in its sweetness.

"Come on, lover boy." Harry stood and looped her arm through his. "Let's go see if Sirius wants to toss the Quaffle."

Archie's face relaxed into solemnness once more, but his eyes conveyed his contentment and gratitude. She bumped him playfully with her hip. He bumped her back, and she knew they would be fine. They were still a team, and whatever storm came their way, they could weather it together.

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The Saturday after Archie returned, Rigel Black was cordially invited to Malfoy Manor for a mid-afternoon tea on the veranda. Archie gave Harry as thorough a debrief on the subject of his internship as possible, but Harry still felt underprepared to answer detailed questions about the experience. If pressed, she would intimate that she was uncomfortable talking about the suffering she'd witnessed. It felt cheap, but she was not above it.

Archie, as Harry, was spending the day at Hermione's house. She hoped he didn't do anything impulsive while there, but her cousin was nearly a grown man and could make his own decisions. She had other things to worry about, in any case. As she prepared to Floo from Grimmauld Place, she felt strangely disoriented, and not just because she dreaded using the clumsy form of magical transport. She struggled to put herself in Rigel's mindset, but the mask was harder to don this time. It was like a pair of shoes she hadn't worn in a while-like re-acclimating her feet to winter boots after a long summer in loose sandals.

She shook herself impatiently, brushing the feeling off like a physical thing. She'd already paid the Dominion Jewel a visit to see her aura repressed in preparation of resuming her role as Rigel. It really shouldn't be this difficult, after three years of practice.

*I am Rigel Black, she told herself. I am a fourteen-year-old boy in Slytherin House who has spent the summer caring for diseased tribes in the Americas. I am going to my friend's house to catch up with his family and assure them that I am whole and healthy and mentally stable.* Yes. She nodded. That would do.

She stepped through the Floo and stumbled out the other side with inevitable fanfare. She climbed to her feet from where she'd landed sprawled on the Floo room rug and rubbed absently at her elbow as

she looked around. There was no house elf to greet her, this time; instead, Draco was waiting impatiently on a settee. He stood slowly as she divested herself of the last of the fireplace dust and walked toward him.

"Draco, it's good to see you." She smiled and stepped closer, intending to hug her friend, but he didn't step forward to meet her so she stopped, somewhat awkwardly close, and tilted her head slightly in confusion.

"Rigel." Draco acknowledged her with a long look, straight-faced and serious. "Good to have you back." If Rigel hadn't seen as Harry how Draco missed Rigel over the summer, she might think from his greeting that he hadn't noticed her absence at all.

"Thank you for inviting me to tea," she said, falling back on polite formality in the wake of her bemusement.

"Mother invited you," Draco reminded her, still acting odd. Almost rude, in fact.

"Where is your mother?" Rigel asked.

"She's with Father," Draco said, finally turning toward the door. "Tea will be in half an hour. They wanted us to be able to catch up, first."

"That's kind of them," Rigel murmured, following her blond friend out into the hall. He led her through the maze-like mansion, up a very long flight of stairs and down another hall until they reached a door with a magnificent dragon carved and painted in exquisite detail on its surface.

"This is my room," Draco said, somewhat unnecessarily. He pushed the door open and led her inside before closing it again with a firm click.

She took a moment to look around. Draco's room was closer to a suite, really. She could see a connecting bathroom and double doors

leading to a large closet on the far wall. To the right, a handsome four-poster bed sat overflowing with covers and pillows; none of the patterns really matched, making her think Draco had accumulated them in pieces over a long period of time. In addition to the set of claw-foot dressers and bedside tables, the room was dominated by a large desk and matching hutch, which was overflowing with books and parchment. The only decorations visible were a dozen brooms that had been mounted along the walls horizontally, at varying heights. The models were all different, with some looking to be quite old-much too old to have been Draco's as a child.

"I collect them," Draco said, his cool demeanor breaking momentarily as some embarrassment crept into his tone. Leave it to the Malfoys to let their child collect hideously expensive sports relics as a hobby.

"They suit the room," Rigel offered. The brooms were the only sign of personality in an otherwise stark space. It looked like the room of a boy who had recently outgrown childish things and subsequently got rid of them, yet hadn't had time to acquire new things. Her friend made a meaningless noise that was neither agreement nor disagreement. She sighed and said, "What's wrong, Dray?"

He scowled at her. "You really have to ask?"

"I'm not being deliberately obtuse, if that's what you're asking," Rigel said, her voice a bit dry. She wished Draco would just come out with whatever was bothering him. She couldn't fix it if she didn't know.

Draco's expression was both annoyed and incredulous. "You told your cousin about my empathy."

"I did," she said, blinking. "I tell Harry everything. You know that."

"So every secret I tell you is going to be passed along without consulting me," Draco bit out.

She hesitated. The answer was 'yes, absolutely,' but she knew that wasn't what her friend wanted to hear. She couldn't help that Rigel

and Harry were the same person and she couldn't explain to Draco that there was no 'telling' involved at all. She supposed she could pretend as Harry to not know things about Draco, but wasn't that more dishonest?

He must have seen the answer in her eyes-or perhaps felt it from her emotions-because he growled and actually reached out to shake her by the shoulders, as though the movement might facilitate her understanding. "Rigel, I trusted you. Don't you understand why I'm upset?"

She nodded slowly, but still said, "If you trust me, you trust who I trust. You trust Harry."

"That's not how secrets *work*, Rigel." The blond threw his hands up in exasperation. Rigel allowed herself a small smile when he wasn't looking. If Draco was resorting to such dramatics, he wasn't really all that angry. She suspected he just wanted her to apologize.

Instead, a contrary instinct told her to needle him further. "Don't you tell Pansy everything you find out about my secrets?"

"That's different!" Draco had his theatrical outrage on a roll. "Pansy is friends with you, too."

"You could be friends with Harry," she suggested, only realizing after she said it that she was half-serious. Oh, the longing that simple idea invoked. Impossible, of course, but a worthy fantasy. "Here," she said after a moment of allowing him to glower at her unhappily. "I'm sorry I told Harry without consulting you. I should have at least warned you that she knew, so that you weren't surprised. I had hoped it wouldn't come up, honestly, but the World Cup is a madhouse. Since I couldn't be there, I wanted someone who could help to be nearby. Harry's Occlumency is almost as good as mine." The guilt that rose at the lie didn't even faze her. She had long become accustomed to the gnawing feeling in her stomach.



Draco's expression softened, then hardened again in suspicion. Draco was smart like that. "Which is it, Rigel; you would tell Miss Potter my secrets regardless or you did it for my own good?"

"Both." She smiled faintly at him.

"Then we're back to where we started." Draco rolled his eyes.

"You're mad at me again?" she clarified. Summoning a serious expression, she said, "I'm sorry, Draco."

"Sorry you betrayed me or sorry I'm mad at you?" Draco asked. When Rigel began to smile again he cut her off with a glare. "Don't say 'both.'" She closed her mouth but kept her smile. Draco scowled at her lack of repentance. "Why is it so difficult to stay mad at you? I used to be very good at being cross, but you drain it right out of me."

Rigel recalled an evening studying for a Transfiguration exam in which Draco had snarled at Theo for breathing through his mouth too loudly. Somehow she didn't think Draco had lost his ability to be annoyed.

Her friend's mouth twisted into a dissatisfied moue. "And the worst part is I know you haven't agreed to change the thing that upset me in the first place. Somehow I always just end up going along with it."

"Maybe it doesn't bother you as much as you thought," she suggested, not entirely helpful.

Surprisingly, Draco huffed an agreeing laugh. "Could be. Your cousin wasn't actually too overbearing about it. The worst part was explaining to Father how Potter knew." His silver eyes took on a worried sheen. "I told my parents it came up at your dad's birthday party, but I don't think they believed me."

Rigel winced inwardly. Draco had covered for her, to preserve Rigel's standing in the Malfoys' eyes at the expense of seeming indiscreet.

She did not deserve such friends. That much had always been clear, but it had never ached so much.

She knew a more heartfelt apology was warranted, but before she could say anything a discreet pop signaled the arrival of a house elf. Not Dobby, who she recalled had been relieved of service to the Malfoys last summer as Draco's empathy asserted itself in the form of a sympathetic madness.

Instead, an older house elf with venerably long ears bowed briefly and said, "Tea is being served on the terrace, Young Sir."

Draco raised an eyebrow that was almost Snape-like in its dismissive annoyance. "Already?"

The house elf bowed again, blinking slowly as though to communicate that no additional words were necessary.

"Right." Draco shooed the servant into disappearing and grimaced apologetically at Rigel. "We'd better go directly."

Rigel didn't like to leave things unsaid between them. She supposed there would be time after tea to repair their friendship properly, though.

She followed him through the convoluted corridors, wondering vaguely whether Malfoy Manor had been designed to purposely drive invaders insane. They certainly were not taking the same path that they had coming to her friend's room earlier. It was only upon nearing the doors to the Manor's spacious lawn that she began to recognize her surroundings somewhat.

The terrace stone gleamed with a fresh polish as they stepped out into the late summer sun. While previously Rigel had only seen the veranda open and empty, it now featured a charming wicker and glass table shaded by an assortment of large silk cloths that had been artfully charmed to undulate above the seating in overlapping waves. Stepping nearer, she realized the spelled silk would also

produce a gentle breeze as it moved over the heads of those at the table. Very clever.

Her appreciation for the arrangement took a sharp dive when she realized just who was sitting at the table. Her eyes skipped over the two Malfoys and locked with ominous incredulity on a coal-black head of neatly arranged hair. The man beneath it looked up and predatory blue eyes met her own Polyjuiced grey. It took every steel nerve she possessed to keep walking calmly toward the group. By the time they reached the table, her face betrayed nothing of the inner unpleasantness that was churning her stomach.

This was the man indirectly responsible for Pettigrew's presence at the castle last year. The man who'd set the search for the Dominion Jewel into motion, if the words of a deranged kidnapper could be believed. She did believe it, though. A savage sort of satisfaction went through her at the thought that she had foiled him. The Dominion Jewel was now beyond the reach of physical reality. Pettigrew was dead. She hoped Mr. Malfoy had indeed delivered her little message to Riddle at the end of term. She would have paid several galleons to have been there when it was delivered.

As Mrs. Malfoy rose to greet her, the two men rose from their seats as well. Mr. Malfoy was a mask of cool pleasantness. Riddle simply looked satisfied. *He thinks he has me right where he wants me*, she thought, allowing a caustic thrum to rush through her. *Someone really ought to take him down a peg.*

From the corner of her eye, she could see Draco's head turning slowly to regard her, a frown pinching his brow into confusion. She tamped down on her emotion belatedly. She hadn't meant to reveal to her friend how much she disliked the unexpected addition to their tea party. Thankfully, Draco was distracted when he noticed the tarts piled on the center of the table. They were blueberry. He sent his mother an absolutely betrayed expression, which she countered with a quelling look of her own before turning her attention to Rigel.

"Welcome home, Rigel," Mrs. Malfoy said, coming forward to lightly embrace her around the shoulders. The warmth in her smile belied the gentle courtesy. "We are very glad to have you, and fortunate that Lord Riddle happened to drop by on some business for Lucius just as the table was being set."

She would bet her favorite cauldron that it hadn't been a coincidence. Rigel summoned her manners like a blanket to cover the icy irritation that Riddle's presence had stirred up. She smiled back at Narcissa with the strength of genuine regard. "I have not truly returned to England until this moment, my Lady. Thank you for your kind invitation."

"Nothing like a civilized gathering to wash away the ignoble remnants of foreign barbarism," Mr. Malfoy said. The slight ironic tilt to his mouth was the only thing that saved his comment from indecorous xenophobia.

"The world is vast and varied," Rigel said, hoping that sounded appropriately seasoned. Having never traveled much herself, she had no clue what other civilizations were like. She was not entirely convinced that an English tea service was the pinnacle of all human society, however. It seemed statistically convenient.

"Indeed," Riddle put in, holding a hand toward her imperiously. "You simply must regale us with tales of the Central American natives."

She reciprocated the gesture slowly. Handshakes were not terribly common in pureblooded customs, particularly after initial introductions had already been made. As her palm made contact with his, she had to clench her stomach against a sudden disquieting sensation. Her eyes widened as she recognized the feeling of magical core resonance. She clamped her throat against reflexive bile and broke the handshake quickly.

What in Merlin's name was that? There was absolutely no reason for her magic to resonate with Riddle's. Resonance only happened when sufficiently identical magical cores came into contact. She had

never heard of it happening between two different people. The disgust she felt at the thought that her magic could be at all similar to Riddle's colored her words when she said, belatedly, "It wasn't all that interesting. I spent most of my time in sickrooms, not integrating with the tribes much at all."

"Draco mentioned some kind of quarantine," Mrs. Malfoy said sympathetically as they all claimed seats around the table. Rigel sat next to Draco, across from his parents with Riddle at the head of the table. "It must have been a very trying summer for you."

"I like to keep busy," Rigel said, bringing a small smile to her face. "Helping people is satisfying, and I learned a lot. Not a bad way to spend a few months. I didn't have anything better to do, in any case."

Riddle's expression was blank, but she could see the annoyance in his eyes when she blithely referred to his offer to 'train' her in magic as not worth considering. It wasn't as though she needed it, after all. The disaster of a few months ago had at least forced the confrontation with her magic to a head.

"That charitable attitude will serve you well as Head of House Black one day," Mr. Malfoy said approvingly.

"My cousin mentioned your own recent contributions to charity," Harry said politely. "House Black will be hard put to match the generosity of House Malfoy."

"Miss Potter is an interesting young woman," Mr. Malfoy observed. "Our interactions with her at the World Cup were... memorable."

"You look so much like her," Narcissa added, her eyes roving over Rigel's face almost incredulously before turning back to the tea service as she poured for all five of them.

She had expected this, and so her affected embarrassment was entirely practiced. "I can't really help it," she said, rueful sheepishness in every syllable. "My father thinks it's unconscious. I

just end up looking like Harry, no matter what I do. It starts to drift if we don't see one another for a while, but then it accelerates once we are together again."

"That's why you always look so weird after you go home for winter or summer break!" Draco said, looking vindicated even as he doctored his tea with sugar. "Pansy and I thought you had highly irregular growth spurts."

Rigel laughed. "I'm just grateful my cousin isn't too feminine-looking."

"That's unkind," Mrs. Malfoy chided. She did not disagree, however.

Draco appeared to have just had a realization. "So this... isn't what you really look like?"

Rigel pretended to think about it unconcernedly for a moment as she took her first sip of the tea. It was black but laced with a subtle citrus, and not noticeably poisoned, which was always reassuring. "I suppose it's not what my genetics would project. I can't change it, though, so in effect this is my real appearance... for now, in any case." She diverted the subject before anyone could dig any deeper into her supposed-metamorphism. "I'm sorry to hear about the difficulties you encountered at the end of the World Cup match. The way Harry describes it, everything unfolded quite abruptly into chaos."

She could still recall the panicked energy of the crowd as it surged around her and the horrified fascination that bloomed at the sight of that snake-eating skull. She did her best to portray a clinical concern, however; as though she'd only heard the story second-hand.

"It was a shocking turn of events," Mrs. Malfoy agreed, shuddering delicately.

"An unforgivable lapse in security," Mr. Malfoy added, not seeming to notice the implied insult toward Lord Potter. "The more so as those responsible have yet to be apprehended."

"It is only a matter of time," Riddle asserted. "The miscreants will attempt another scene and tip their hand."

"Let us hope they are stopped before it comes to that," Mrs. Malfoy said, her voice a tad uneasy. Her gaze strayed to Draco and Rigel knew she was remembering how badly he'd been affected by the chaos and terror of that night.

"In the meantime, let us hope the country backs away from the edge of collective hysteria its been teetering toward," Mr. Malfoy drawled. "The *Prophet* is utterly out of control, printing sensationalist eyewitness accounts and wild speculation into the motives of those madmen."

"I suppose the Ministry is under a lot of pressure to do something about it," Rigel said. Her father certainly looked a lot more stressed when he came home from work these days.

"There's talk of legislation banning group protests," Mr. Malfoy said. He seemed amused, and Rigel supposed that was because a ban on protests was unlikely to have much effect on the group who made shambles of the World Cup. Likely the only result would be a decrease in people protesting the Ministry.

"That's convenient," Draco said, likely thinking the same thing.

"What is *not* convenient is the rash of anti-pureblood sentiment cropping up all over the place," Mr. Malfoy complained. "Our agendas are becoming associated with these anti-Muggle radicals and our legislative efforts have been blocked across the board since the incident. A total standstill on half a dozen projects, with no foreseeable compromise until these ruffians are brought to justice."

Riddle gave Mr. Malfoy a quelling look. "Mere reactionary nonsense," he assured the other man. "It is a question of narrative, and we shall give them a new one, won't we, Lucius?"

Mr. Malfoy inclined his head in acknowledgement. "The public will be distracted soon enough. Are the plans going forward, then?"

Rigel exchanged a look with Draco, but her friend seemed equally out of the loop. Were they talking about pushing legislation forward? They'd just admitted to being stymied in that area, so it must be something else. Whatever Riddle had planned would have to be pretty sensational to distract people from the historical catastrophe that the World Cup had been.

Mrs. Malfoy caught Rigel and Draco's questioning expressions and smiled. "You'll find out soon enough, boys."

"What does that mean, Mother?" Draco asked, eyes narrowing. "Why not just tell us now, if that is true?"

"And ruin the surprise?" Mr. Malfoy smirked. "Just you wait, Draco. It's going to be a very interesting year for you."

Rigel was getting a bad feeling in her stomach again. Riddle had promised. He had assured her that he would stop involving Hogwarts in his schemes. Surely she was misunderstanding, and he could not be planning something like that *again*. "I for one have had enough interesting years at Hogwarts," Rigel said, somewhat pointedly. "A quiet year would be nice, for once."

"No doubt," Riddle said smoothly. "A shame events are not always in our control. The Ministry as a whole has been organizing this year's upcoming entertainment for some time. Our allies are merely going to take advantage of the distraction to highlight some of the more convincing aspects of our party's platforms."

She didn't believe that anymore than she believed the smile on his face. Riddle was behind whatever it was. He was using the Ministry as a shield to get around their agreement. There was nothing she could do, she realized, except watch and wait and, if the necessity arose, attempt to undermine the man's plans once more. So she pasted an encouraging expression on her face and said, "Good luck



with your endeavors this year, then. The SOW Party could use a bit of good press, I'm sure."

Mrs. Malfoy shot her an alarmed look, and Mr. Malfoy blinked at her in slow disbelief. Riddle merely smiled at her, though it no longer reached his eyes. "With Rigel Black supporting us, I'm sure our goals will be met posthaste."

Narcissa swiftly took control of the conversation, inquiring as to Draco's plans for his Dueling Club in the coming year. Rigel sipped her tea as her friend outlined the curriculum he'd come up with over the summer months. She lost the thread of discussion as her mind chased down various suspicions and theories about whatever it was Riddle and the SOW Party had in store for them. It was infuriating that Riddle thought himself so secure as to taunt her with the knowledge of a plot she could not prevent. He was looking for a reaction from her-why else come here, why even bring it up in front of her? He wanted something from her, and until she knew what that was she risked playing into his hands unknowing.

She would ask James, she decided. If the Ministry itself was truly involved in whatever it was, other people would know about it. The Auror Department was likely to be included in planning any large-scale event, particularly in light of the recent security incident on everyone's mind. She would not rise to Riddle's bait and press him for information-she had far more trustworthy sources.

She was drawn back into socializing when Draco asked if she minded his making Pansy the Dueling Club's deputy manager. She assured him that Pansy would make an excellent assistant coach. "You know I don't have the integrity for teaching," she added, joking.

"I wouldn't have imagined such a vice in you," Narcissa protested, smiling. She clearly expected a jest.

"Oh Rigel always cheats," Draco said, giving his mother a resigned look. "That's why he gets paired with Edmund so often-he doesn't mind being dumped in the dirt."

Rigel smiled winningly. "He shouldn't get so close to me. I can't help it if he's clumsy with his feet."

"It is amazing how many people become clumsy when *your* feet get too close to *theirs*," Draco said, shaking his head in mock censure.

"I just like to keep people on their toes," Rigel protested.

"Or *off* them," Draco shot back.

She couldn't deny that, so she merely sipped her tea again while the others laughed politely. The rest of the tea service proceeded surprisingly smoothly. Riddle kept his comments to neutral, non-provoking observations. Draco even deigned to eat one of the abominable non-strawberry tarts. When all the tea had been consumed, compliments were exchanged and the group rose to part ways.

"We look forward to hosting you again soon, Rigel," Narcissa said, resting one hand on Rigel's shoulder in a fond gesture.

"The anticipation is mine, Lady Malfoy." Rigel bowed briefly to Mr. Malfoy and nodded to Riddle somewhat stiffly. "Thank you for the scintillating conversation today, gentlemen. I am honored by the tolerance extended to an impertinent young man like myself."

"Enjoy the upcoming term," Mr. Malfoy said, a mysterious smirk coloring his words once more.

"Perhaps we shall encounter one another again soon," Mr. Riddle added. His polite expression was distant, but that didn't stop Rigel from getting the impression that his words were a promise. Or perhaps a warning.

"I'll walk Rigel to the Floo," Draco said, subtly tugging on Rigel's robe sleeve until she tore her gaze from Riddle's mockingly blank face and followed him back inside.

They walked for a few moments before Draco turned his head and frowned openly at her. "You really don't like Lord Riddle."

"I detest him," she said flatly. Draco had probably guessed as much already from what his empathy would be telling him.

"You shouldn't make it so clear," the blond boy admonished. "He is dangerous, no matter what you think of him personally."

"He already knows what I think of him," Rigel admitted. "Pretending won't make him less dangerous."

"I'm getting this 'don't stand too close to Rigel' instinct," Draco said, looking unnerved. "I hope you know what you're doing."

She didn't really. But she would as soon as she figured out what Riddle was up to. "Don't worry, Draco. I'm always careful."

"And yet it never does you any good," Draco muttered.

Rigel didn't disagree. He was almost depressingly correct. Despite the trouble she'd run into over the years, however, she had learned. She had grown. She was smarter, stronger, and no longer the naïve girl whose only wish was to study potions under Master Snape. She would not be controlled any longer by those who thought they could take advantage of her inexperience and youth. If Riddle sought to test her this year, he would be unprepared for the results.

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The last days of summer passed too quickly. She had a dozen projects she wanted to finish before the train in September and not enough time left to please her. One task she made plenty of time for was the potion lessons she'd promised Leo for the Rogue's children.

After a couple of questions it was clear that the children knew almost nothing about potions beyond the names of the most common ones available for purchase at the average apothecary. She asked Rispah to organize a three-class series the second week in August and when nearly all of the children who'd attended the first class showed up at the third, she considered the program a tentative success.

They met in the courtyard at the Phoenix, Harry standing against one of the walls with a table of vials, each unlabeled and containing a sample of various good-to-know potions. The children sat on little stools in a semicircle facing her and each had been given a small chalkboard and a piece of chalk. Since this was their final lesson, they were playing a game.

Harry passed the vials around, each labeled one through eight, and the children took it in turns inspecting each vial and writing down which they thought was which. She collected the vials once more and then lined them up on the table so the labels were easy to see.

"Who thinks they know what number one is?" Harry asked.

Margo, easily her most eager student, raised her hand high. When Harry pointed to her, the curly haired girl said, "Cough syrup!"

"That's right," Harry said, smiling a little. It was actually Wheezer's Relief, but she wasn't wrong. "How did you know?"

"I remembered you said it was thick 'cause of the honey but red 'cause of the clover." Margo beamed.

"Very good." Harry pointed to the next one. "Who knows what this one is? Jason?"

Jason bit his lip but picked his head up bravely from where he was staring at his chalkboard and guessed. "Is it poison?"

Henry laughed loudly, but a look from Harry turned his laugh into a cough. She turned back to Jason. "Why do you think it's poison?"

"The cork is all shiny. You said the extra shiny corks are to make extra sure nothing gets out as shouldn't." Jason did not sound very sure of this, but his big hopeful eyes were devastatingly entreating.

"I did say that, good memory," Harry said. "A tightly sealed cork is a good clue. There's one other type of potion that people put really tight corks on, though. Do you remember?"

Jason shook his head sadly. Henry was quick to laugh again. Harry raised an eyebrow at the boy. He'd been the most restless student in her class, and even now his feet bounced impatiently against the dirt and his fingers drummed on his chalkboard. At her look, Henry stopped bouncing for a moment and said, "The expensive ones, right? Nobody wants to spill a potion that costs a galleon a drop!"

Harry nodded. "Exactly. This is Dreamless Sleep. In a way, Jason was right, too. Dreamless Sleep can be very bad for you if you take it too much. It is also very expensive, so for both those reasons it is usually tightly sealed. Also, you can tell it's Dreamless Sleep by the way it shimmers when you hold it up to the light, see? Very few potions will make a rainbow like that when the light goes through it."

She walked them through the rest of the potions slowly. They surprised her with the amount of information they remembered from just a couple of classes earlier in the week. Children could absorb knowledge at an astonishing rate. She thought it was a shame that formal schooling didn't start until eleven for most Wizarding children, and not at all for some, like those in her class. The tutoring system just wasn't enough, especially at the rates some charged for their services.

Harry and Archie had Remus, of course. He'd tutored them in most of their informal childhood education. Lily had taught her to read, but Remus had taught her History, Maths, Social Organization, and, of course, had introduced her to Potions. These kids didn't have a Remus. Maybe they should.

Leo walked into the courtyard just as they were finishing up for the day. He was met with a chorus of 'King Leo!' and 'Your Highness!' by the excitable class. Leo looked around with exaggerated surprise and planted his hands on his hips. "What is this?" he demanded. "A coup!?"

"Noo!" Cora laughed so hard she rocked back on her stool.

"We're in class, silly," Margo told him, giggling behind one hand.

"Well, if that was true, then you could tell me what you learned," Leo said, grinning down at them.

"Go on." Harry laughed. "Tell Leo your three-Cs."

"There are seven seas, Harry." Leo shook his head in exaggerated despair. "Honestly, what are you teaching them?"

Jason came to her defense at once. "The three Checking Cs!" he exclaimed. "The three things you have to check to figure out what potion it is."

"And what are the three Cs?" Leo asked.

"Color, consistency, and cork!" the children chorused perfectly.

"And what do you never, ever do with a potion you don't recognize?" Harry prompted.

"Smell it!"

"Touch it!"

"Taste it!"

"You all pass," Harry declared. "Good work, everyone. This is our last class for the summer, so I'll see you all in the winter, ok?"

The children cheered and scrambled toward the kitchen door. Leo snagged Cora's collar as she passed and held her behind. She pouted briefly, but managed to clasp her hands in a semblance of patience as Leo said, "Any word from the Ministry?"

Cora scowled. "They aren't gonna pay. Seil says the Games and Sports people says they only have to pay for the guests' stuff. Since we didn't have tickets to the match, our caravan doesn't matter!"

Leo nodded. "All right. I thought they might say that. Tell Seil to come by the Phoenix this week and the Rogue will give the troupe enough to buy a new caravan."

"Really?" Cora's green eyes lit up in her small face. "Thank you, Highness!"

Leo held up a hand. "It comes with a condition. Seil's troupe will pay double taxes starting next year and continuing until the cost is paid back."

"Okay! I'll go tell him right now!" Cora saluted Leo sharply and ran into the kitchen with a wide smile.

Harry waited until the girl had disappeared inside before asking, "Did her caravan burn in the fire?"

"And everything they owned inside it," Leo said. His face was shadowed as he shook his head in disgust. "The Ministry is trying everything they can to get out of paying reparations for the personal property damaged or lost in the World Cup fiasco. The Department of Magical Games and Sports is nearly bankrupt, and the slew of sponsors pulling their support in the wake of public outrage isn't helping. They can't even afford to refund the tickets they sold, much less replace all that was consumed by the flames."

"So the Rogue is helping out?" Harry smiled. "That's nice of you."

"It's only a no-interest loan," Leo said, shrugging. "We can afford to do that much. The tournament this summer was more successful than we hoped. A lot of the proceeds have been invested into projects to see us through the winter comfortably, but there's enough coin left over for unexpected trouble."

Harry nodded, thinking it was lucky that the Rogue had organized the tournament when they did. Leo's position would be doubly secure, having demonstrated his ability to defend the Lower Alleys both physically and economically in times of hardship. He really did make a good king, for all that it seemed absurd for a young man of his years to take on such a title.

Harry returned the potion samples to her kit and Leo helped her carry the table back through the kitchen and into the Phoenix's main dining area. Solom was at her elbow with a glass of cold milk in his hand before she'd even brushed the dust from her hands.

Leo looked pityingly at her as he accepted a mug of ale from the old innkeeper and sat down to kick up his heels on the bench. "When will you let your hair down, lass? Everyone around here knows your secret, after the tournament. You could relax for once."

"I am very relaxed," Harry assured him, taking the seat across from him. She rested her chin on one hand in pointedly languid repose and drank deep from her cup with the other. "And everyone only knows I'm a girl now. They don't know who I am, who my family is. Or do you think no one would care that my father is the man responsible for the periodic raids on their homes and businesses? I'd be branded a spy, and your job security would probably take a hit just for associating with me."

Leo winced. "That may be overstating it."

"Not by much." Harry smiled. "Besides, I don't need that stuff to unwind."



"How do you know if you've never tried it?" Leo asked, teasing again.  
"Maybe you've never truly unwound in your life."

"Most mechanisms intended to be wound work best when they *are*," Harry pointed out.

"But not too tight." Leo countered.

Harry shrugged. "Depends on how much pressure the spring in question can withstand, I suppose. It would surely take an inordinate amount of tension to wind a thing too far."

"If anyone could..." Leo held up a hand to ward off the drops of milk she flicked his way. "All right! Sorry, Princess. I'll leave you to your milk."

"You can't fool me, anyway," Harry said. "I know you only drink ale to look more mature to your constituents. Once I caught you switching your glass for Marek's empty one when he wasn't looking."

Leo's eyebrows rose. "Did you now? It seems I am the one who shouldn't relax around you."

"You can never relax," she said, grimacing apologetically. "But then, you signed up for that." Leo toasted her words silently. Changing the subject, she asked, "Have you had any luck tracking down the man I told you about the night of the finals?"

Leo put his cup down and leaned across the table to speak more quietly. "Not luck as such. Marek's been investigating relentlessly. He's like a dog with a bone, convinced that everything is connected to Scar."

"Did you manage to peg him for drugging you?" Harry frowned, remembering her friend fighting for his life in such a state.

"No proof," Leo said. "One of the lads hired for serving in the dueler's pavilion was gone by the end of the match, but his references turned

out to be falsified. Scar hasn't surfaced at all since the match, though that doesn't stop Marek looking."

Harry nodded, falling into a pensive silence as she swirled the dregs of milk around the bottom of her cup. The lower alleys had had their share of difficulties in the last couple of years. Claw. Scar. The masked man recruiting fighters. Was it fanciful to imagine that it could all be connected? Perhaps. Would it be worse if it turned out the events were connected, and they missed it? Assuredly.

"I could ask my father to look into-"

"Please don't." Leo's gaze was understanding, but firm. "Any Auror-types poking around down here is more likely to cause us trouble than our enemies."

Harry allowed the matter to drop. It didn't mean she couldn't keep her ear to the ground, though. If she had developed one thing over the last three years, it was an instinct for secrets.

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Her evening dueling lessons with Remus had taken a rather intense turn after he'd learned of her participation in the Rogue's tournament. When Sirius deigned to join them, Remus stuck with the usual formal style, though he ramped up both the speed and intensity at which he cast. On the evenings it was just the two of them, however, Remus revealed just how many tricks he'd been holding back. Those nights, Harry didn't leave his flat feeling anything less than pummeled.

After the World Cup, however, the lessons changed again. Harry was in the kitchen at Potter's Place one evening, filling up her water bottle, when her mother came downstairs dressed in the lightweight shirt and shorts she normally reserved for gardening. "Harry," Lily said, smiling a bit awkwardly. "Would it be all right if I come to your

lesson with Remus tonight? I've been thinking that it would behoove me to get back into shape, if you don't mind making room for me."

Harry blinked in surprise, but nodded. "Of course, Mum. It'll be fun."

They Flooed through to Remus' condo and descended the stairs to the basement. In the home gym they found not only Remus but Sirius and Archie too. Archie laughed at Harry and Lily's surprised looks. "We had the same idea, Aunt Lily," her cousin said. Harry wondered if hearing about what had happened at the Cup had inspired Archie as well, or if it was the fear of Hermione learning that Harry had participated in a tournament that summer. Either way, she was glad of it. The world was not as safe as many people assumed, and Harry knew that better than most.

Remus smiled broadly at them all and said, "Ready to warm up?"

Harry thought she was the only one who looked appropriately wary at the sandy-haired man's smile turned anticipatory. "Weights or no weights?" she asked. Lately they had been focusing a lot on speed and agility, and Harry almost always had to duel with weighted boots and gauntlets. Remus claimed she would be able to dance out of the way of spells once she took them off, but Harry had been too exhausted by his regimen to test his word.

"Let's start with bodyweight exercises, and see how our new charges do," Remus said. So that was his game. Harry now doubted whether they'd get to duel at all. She vividly remembered her first encounter with what Remus considered an adequate starting point. "Harry, you lead. I'll watch everyone's form."

She nodded and took a spot on the edge of the clear space in Remus' basement that they used for practice matches. Lily, Archie, and Sirius made a line in the rest of the space and looked at her expectantly. Harry dropped into a push-up position gamely and turned her head to make sure everyone was ready before lowering her elbows to right angles and rising again. "One." She kept the pace slow and steady, focusing on form more than speed. On "Twenty"

she turned her head and grinned to see Archie lying on the ground with his chin in his hand, grimacing at her. Lily was still pushing, though her arms shook with the effort, and Sirius... was doing one-handed pushups. "Show off," Harry said.

"Finish up, Harry," Remus said, shaking his head slightly. "Lily, that's enough for tonight. Try to do as many as you can once a day until you can do at least forty. Archie... did you just stop because you were tired?"

"And my arms hurt," Archie said, blinking. "Was I supposed to keep going after it hurt?"

"Generally, yes," Remus said, smiling slightly. "It's supposed to be uncomfortable. If you ever get to the point that it isn't hard, you're probably ready to move on to something else."

"Hmm, this isn't going to be like Quidditch, is it?" Archie looked resigned, but not too disheartened.

"Don't tell me you never did this sort of thing while you were on the House team," Sirius said, laughing at his son. "I know James did while we were in school. Team workouts can't have changed that much."

"That was ages ago," Archie said, waving a hand dismissively. "I'm sure it'll come back to me. What's next?"

"Squats," Harry and Remus said together. They exchanged an amused look. In a way it was heartening to see the level at which Archie performed and realize how far she'd progressed. Now they just had to get the others there.

After thirty minutes of mildly grueling warm-up work, Remus split their group. "Lily with Sirius. Work on getting back into the rhythm, Lily. Harry and Archie, you're against me."

Harry went to the equipment racks and put on her weighted boots and belts. When Archie cocked his head questioningly at her, she shook hers. "You won't need one yet."

"You won't need a wand, either," Remus said cheerfully. "We're dodging today."

Harry suppressed a groan. If she never got hit with another stinging hex, it would be too soon.

"Is this going to hurt?" Archie asked, eyeing Harry's slumped shoulders apprehensively.

"Only if you're slow," Remus said.

"Why do you do this again, Harry?" Archie shot her a puzzled glance. "It isn't fun at all."

"Oh I don't know," Harry said, pretending to think about it. "Remus seems to have fun."

"This is punishment for spending the summer in the Americas, isn't it?" Archie sighed as he faced off next to Harry against their uncle's wand.

"Think of it as a reward for a lifetime of indolence," Harry suggested, shifting her weight to her toes and widening her stance.

"A lifetime? I'm fourteen!" Archie protested.

"Pay attention!" Remus barked. Two stinging hexes left his wand and there was no more time for banter.

When they wrapped up for the night, sweaty and, in Harry and Archie's case, nursing a number of tender spots, the two cousins exchanged a wordless glance and deliberately hung back while Lily headed for the stairs. "I'll meet you at Grimmauld Place for dinner," Harry told her mother. "Got to ask Remus something real quick."

Lily smiled tiredly and thanked Remus and Sirius before Flooing home, presumably to shower and change for supper. As Sirius finished stretching and made his own move toward the stairs, Archie cleared his throat and said, "Dad, could we, ah, talk to you too for a moment?"

Sirius raised his eyebrows and looked curiously at Remus, but the werewolf simply shrugged. "Don't ask me," Remus said shrewdly, eyeing Harry and Archie's too innocent faces. "These two seem to have something besides dueling on their minds."

"As you know, Harry and I are starting our fourth year in school," Archie said. "Many witches and wizards our age are coming into magical gifts and family magic, and it's a great time, developmentally speaking, for us to begin training in more advanced magic."

"Is that so?" Sirius had a lazy grin on his face, but appeared to be humoring them so far.

"Oh yes," Harry said, earnest hope just shining from her wide eyes. "Archie and I have been thinking that it's high time we began honoring the family tradition and really growing into our place as the next generation of Marauders."

Remus was looking at her with dawning suspicion. "Harry, this better not be about-"

"Please teach us to be animagi!" Archie cried. He fell to his knees before Sirius, arms clasped over his head in a facsimile of prayer.

Belatedly, Harry sank to her own knees and smiled winningly up at her uncles, though Remus' frown was not encouraging. "Please, Uncle Remus, Uncle Sirius. We want to make you proud. I'm sure Archie and I are up to the challenge."

Sirius was beginning to frown, too. "Animagus training is tricky stuff. Not to mention dangerous."

"Which is why we didn't want to start looking into it on our own," Harry said quickly. "That would be irresponsible when we have two competent adults to supervise our training."

"Three," Remus reminded her sternly. "And don't think we haven't noticed that you chose to ask us after your mother left the room."

"James and Lily are going to be a hard sell on this," Sirius admitted. At the look Remus shot him, he held up his hands. "I'm not saying yes! But if we did-"

"We are *not* ."

"- *if* we did, James probably shouldn't find out right away," Sirius said, blinking innocently at Remus. "I mean, it's his job to arrest them if they succeed."

"Sirius you cannot be considering this." Remus was visibly exasperated. "They are too young."

"James and Dad were our age when they did it," Archie helpfully reminded him.

"And they were incredibly irresponsible," Remus said. "I cannot in good conscience be a party to this."

Archie stood slowly and Harry followed suit. With another silent glance they both smiled and began nodding reluctantly. "We understand, Uncle Remus," Archie said. "Sorry to worry you."

"We'll shelve the idea for now," Harry added. They collected their towels and water bottles and headed up to the Floo. Their first attack had been a failure, but that didn't mean they were giving up. They would just have to approach Sirius on his own. The loss of Remus' support wasn't ideal, but in the end it was Sirius who had the actual animagus experience. Remus was brilliant at magical theory, and probably would have good understanding of the process, but Sirius' insight was what they really needed.

They could be patient. It was practically in their nature, by now.

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Krait was running through her Protection Potion (she refused to call it 'Potter's Portable Protection Potion' no matter what the glaringly lurid posters advertising it in the Serpent's Storeroom windows proclaimed) as if the world was running out of Wardsmiths. The base it relied upon was one of the simplest potions in existence-a second-year could brew it, she didn't doubt. Still, her ingredient kit was not bottomless, and weeks of experimenting combined with a shocking rise in recent sales meant she needed to restock her lab with basics.

She set out for Tate's midmorning, planning to get her shopping done by noon and miss the lunch rush. She had a couple of things on backorder that might not be ready until later in the day, but more often than not Tate overestimated the time it would take to fill. Her potions kit hung from her shoulder, as it would be easier to stock her new purchases straight into the expanded compartments rather than lug them all home in bags.

Jason waved at her shyly from Eeylops and she waved back with a smile. He was a good kid, though she doubted he'd ever be particularly gifted at potions. None of the children she'd been instructing in the alleys had a real flare for the subject, but then the same could be said of her classmates at Hogwarts. Potions wasn't a subject that drew many people to it on its own merits.

She stepped into Tate's shop and paused for a moment to just inhale the smell of earth and preservatives. Not a pleasant smell by most standards, but Tate's was a home away from home for her and had been since the first time she sneaked away to explore it while her uncles were mooning over a Quality Quidditch display. It seemed much smaller, now, the shelves no longer intimidating shrines to the exotic but rather as familiar to her as the halls of Potter's Place.



She plucked a basket automatically from the stack on her way toward the sale shelves. Plenty of ingredients were still useful even after they'd lost the blush of life and become brittle or even brown. Some things had to be fresh to be potent, but for others the magic lingered even in the early stages of decomposition.

Besides, if they weren't purchased they'd be used as compost-a waste.

She took a bundle of the ginseng almost reflexively. She had plenty in her kit. Still, though. The Queen Anne's Lace looked all right, too. She took a disposable napkin from the pile kept on the shelf for the purpose of casual handling and turned the small clusters to check for rot. Satisfied, she stacked any bundles with a good amount of flowers in her basket. On the fifth bundle, her hand froze and she narrowed her eyes at the little white flowers. They looked very similar to the rest of the plants, and yet... there was just a hair too much space between the petals. It was hard to tell because of the way they'd been tied together, but the umbels also didn't look quite right in the way they branched.

Harry scoured the shelf and pulled out one other suspicious-looking bundle, carefully using the napkin to protect her skin as she carried them down the aisle and over to the front counter. The proprietor wasn't there, so she called, "Mr. Tate? Do you have a minute?"

A cheerful voice called out from the back room. "Just a moment!" She'd just set her basket down when Tate rounded the doorway behind the counter, wiping his hands on his apron absently. "Miss Potter! My favorite little customer!"

"Not so little anymore," Harry reminded him.

Tate waved her words aside with a smile. Today his curly brown hair was escaping its ponytail in every direction. He looked energized and his brown eyes creased at the edges as he said, "Guess who else paid me a visit today?" Harry shook her head, bewildered. Tate

raised his voice toward the back room, "Boy, leave those fangs alone and come say hello to your friend!"

"We're not friends."

Harry recognized the elegant drawl and suppressed a groan. Her day had been so promisingly uneventful. Caelum Lestrangle appeared behind the counter as if he had every right to be there, never mind that the last time she'd seen him in the apothecary he'd been storming out of the place.

"Lestrangle, always a pleasure," Harry said, summoning a smile with only a little effort.

"The lad's finally come to pay his tab." Tate clapped Lestrangle on the back and positively twinkled at him. Harry felt her eyes go wide and wondered if anyone had ever touched Caelum Lestrangle with so much familiarity. The handsome boy certainly looked a bit like a dog trying not to bite the hand that fed it.

"Indeed," Lestrangle said, scarcely a sniff detectable in his voice. "Mr. Tate was just showing me some of his more unusual ingredients."

Harry felt a slight twinge in her chest. Tate... had a secret store of special ingredients? And he'd shown them to *Lestrangle*? She felt a little betrayed. The expression on Lestrangle's face said he could tell, and he was enjoying her disappointment. "You can't beat the quality here," she said, deciding not to engage the question hanging in the air between them.

"Yes, well." Tate at least looked a bit uncomfortable. "Every so often I come across an oddity that doesn't much appeal to mainstream brewers, so... I just keep it off the shelves until someone with a particular interest happens to drop by."

Harry read the truth in Tate's worried brown eyes. He had ingredients of questionable legality or morality in the back. She supposed it really didn't matter if he hadn't ever offered to show her because she

was a young, naïve-looking girl or because her father was an Auror. Either way, she likely wasn't going to get to see them today.

She gestured to the bundles of flowers she'd pulled from the shelf and said, "I just wanted to let you know I think some hemlock was mixed in with your Queen Anne's Lace."

Tate's face grew worried for an entirely different reason. "Surely not," he said, pulling a pair of gloves out of one of his apron's many pockets to protect his skin before picking the flowers up gently. He turned them this way and that, a frown slowly overtaking his countenance. "It's difficult to tell with the stalks and leaves cut off," he muttered.

Harry nodded. Most of the obvious differences between the two lay in the lower parts of the plant. The flowers were almost identical. "Compare them to these," she said, bending to retrieve one of the actual Queen Anne's Lace clusters from her basket.

Lestrangle, who never doubted that his opinion was wanted, took it from her and pulled the flowers down and away from the center. "See this?" He indicated a single, tiny red flower in the very middle of the white clusters. "This is how you know it's Queen Anne's Lace. Like a drop of blood in the center."

Tate untied the suspect flowers so that he could better pull their umbels apart. The bundle fell naturally into a much wider, rounder shape once free of the string. "Good Merlin, it is hemlock," he breathed. Dropping the poisonous flowers, he discarded his gloves hurriedly and retrieved a thick logbook from under the counter. "I got that shipment last week. Didn't sell much, went to the sale shelf this morning..." He began paging through the book with feverish intensity. Every now and then he scribbled something down on a scrap piece of parchment. After a few minutes in which Harry exchanged a series of silent, awkward glances with Lestrangle, Tate stood up straight and wiped his brow with the back of his wrist.

"Five people purchased Queen Anne's Lace since that shipment," Tate said. "Mr. Lestrangle, I'm sorry, but I will have to continue our discussion another day. I must contact these customers immediately and pray that no irreparable harm has been done." His eyes moved down the short list and he sighed in obvious dismay.

"What is it?" Harry asked, frowning slightly as well. She had hoped she was just being paranoid. Hemlock was extremely dangerous even in small quantities, and Queen Anne's Lace was used in a few fairly common contraceptives. It reacted entirely differently from hemlock in a potion, of course, but an inexperienced brewer might not notice.

"I have contact information for only three of these customers," Tate said. "One I have a name for, but no address, and the last..." He gulped visibly. "It was a vampire. Merlin preserve me if I poisoned a vampire."

"Which vampire?" Harry asked, peering at the list upside down.

Tate shuddered. "Was too nervous to ask for his name. I remember this one. He came in last Tuesday evening, just after I'd put the fresh shipment on the shelves. Those yellow eyes gave me the willies."

The list just said 'tall vamp with dark hair,' which probably described eighty percent of vampires. "Did you see a cloak?" she asked. "A black one or a grey one?"

"Black, I think." He didn't sound too sure, but it was a good starting place.

"A black cloak in these alleys means he's probably a member of the Strigoi Shrouds," Harry reasoned. "If he was a Carpathian, he'd have had a grey cloak. The Shrouds all live in the same compound, so a message there will reach whoever bought the Queen Anne's Lace, if he really was a member. If not, they may at least know how to find a random vampire or to get the word out about the mix-up."

Tate stared at her for a moment. He seemed unenthused about the prospect of being in any sort of contact with vampires. Lestrangle was more pointed in his critique. "If he shows up in a vampire den and admits to accidentally poisoning one of them, they will drain his blood in forfeit. Idiot."

She thought the insult was a bit uncalled for. "It was an honest mistake, and it was the supplier's error, not Mr. Tate's. I'm sure if you explain, Count Aurel will understand."

"How do you know one of their names?" Lestrangle gazed at her with mounting incredulity. "You sound like you hang out with those... those inhuman *things* ."

Harry rolled her eyes. "Careful Lestrangle, your upbringing is showing."

Before Lestrangle could snap back, Tate leaned forward to ask, most earnestly, "Miss Potter, are you saying you know how to contact these vampires? You could get a message to them?"

"Well..." Harry had really planned to do other things that day. Still, it was potentially a matter of life and death, so she couldn't exactly refuse. "I can make a trip that way, sure. Is it okay if I leave my basket here? I'll come back for it after I deliver the message."

Mr. Tate nodded quickly. "Of course, Miss Potter. Perhaps you could take Mr. Lestrangle with you, if you're going somewhere unsavory."

Harry tried not to smile. She did eye Lestrangle's skinny build briefly before shaking her head, just to see the older boy flush in annoyance. "Thanks, Mr. Tate, but I can handle myself. Besides, you should send Lestrangle to Gringotts with the name of the other customer. The goblins may be willing to part with some contact information for you if you explain the dire circumstances. If nothing else, the goblin nation likes to have wizards in their debt." Tate grimaced, but had to agree it was the best course of action for the last name. Lestrangle looked mutinous, but Harry spoke again before

he could protest. "We can meet back here after and you can tell me how your Shaped Imbuing is coming along."

His fine features froze in indecision before he sneered. "I hope you have all afternoon. I've made ample progress in the necessary exercises."

"It's a date," Harry simpered. The splotchy anger that bloomed on Lestrangle's face was more than worth the indulgent smile Tate gave them.

"It is *not* -"

Harry left the shop before Lestrangle could work up too much steam. She had been in the apothecary long enough that the crowds were beginning to swell in Diagon. As she turned toward the branch with Knockturn, she spotted Margo under an awning with a basket of purple flowers that sort of looked like daisies. "Asters?" she asked, coming closer and peering into the basket.

Margo smiled toothily. "They bloom best in late summer," she confided.

Fishing a couple knuts from her purse, Harry exchanged them for a flower. "Can you carry a message to Leo for me?" she asked, looping the Aster through her belt. "It's pretty important."

The red-haired girl nodded, curls bouncing. "Definitely. Right now he's..." she pursed her little mouth into a moue of thought. "Probably meeting with the shops owners. What's the message?"

"There was a mistake at the apothecary and a vampire was sold a dangerous poison by accident. I'm going to the Lamia Lodge to talk to whoever is there about it, but Leo might want to know in case the Shrouds get upset." Harry tilted her head at Margo. "Got all that?"

Margo nodded, though she looked a little uneasy. "Leo won't like it if you visit the vampires alone."

"I'll be okay," Harry promised. Margo bit her lip but nodded and hefted her basket up so the handle rested on her shoulder and the bottom was cradled close to her side. As the girl took off, Harry realized it was a practiced posture-she was fast.

Harry walked slowly, mentally trying to compose an explanation for the hemlock that didn't put Tate in any danger of retaliation. She was also a little worried about missing the turnoff. She'd only been to the Lamia Lodge once, after all, and it was over a year ago in linear time, considering how much she'd folded with her time-turner the last few months of the term.

When she found the right building, she recognized it without needing to glance at the crookedly hung numbers above the knocker. All the narrow windows at street level were boarded up-not in a neat, preparing for a bad storm sort of way, but in a deliberately creepy, haunted house aesthetic. The boards crisscrossed haphazardly and left gaps, though the glass behind the boards was clearly blackened so that no light would pass through regardless.

She approached the ugly grey door, ignoring the scratches dramatically framing the doorknob, and grimaced as she swung it open and the hinges once again produced that horrid squeal she remembered. If she ever had reason to come to the Lamia Lodge again, she vowed she would bring oil for those criminally neglected mechanisms. The carpet in the entryway was faded and let a small puff of dust escape at her every step. She didn't know how anyone-even vampires-could live this way, but she supposed they didn't have to breathe in any case.

The lobby looked, if anything, slightly shabbier than the last time she'd been there. The desk still stood in one corner of the room, but it was missing a leg now and listed to one side. Its angle of incline did not appear to bother Gavril, who slumped in a mimicry of sleep over the desk. He might have been there all day, were it not for the dust floating through the air around him to slowly re-settle where it had been recently disturbed.

"Good morning, Mr. Gavril," Harry said. She waited patiently as the thin vampire roused himself with exaggerated lethargy. His long, flat hair parted around his waxy features as his head lifted, and his black eyes finally latched onto her with a faintly surprised expression.

"It's you," he breathed, his voice both a rasp and an echo. In a matter of moments, he had abandoned his theater and rounded the desk to stand in front of her. Gavril was still ridiculously tall, looming over her with a height that was just unnecessary. Leaning down to inspect her, he said, "Wearing your young skin today? At least you smell better than last time."

Harry didn't bother answering his implied inquiry-it wasn't any of his business why she had taken an aging potion while she stayed at the Lodge. "Alas, I cannot say the same for you, sir." As she expected, the vampire laughed; Gavril found endless amusement in the world. She pointedly did not eye his gleaming fangs as they flashed in the dim lighting.

"Have you come to stay with us again, child?" Gavril looked almost hopeful, though she told herself she was imagining it. "Irina will be so glad to see you."

"Don't put words in my mouth, Gavril." The redheaded vampiress herself appeared at the head of a staircase that led down to a lower floor. Today her deep red locks drifted in soft waves behind her as she moved unhurriedly to join her mate. "You again? Don't tell me this is your preferred vacation destination."

Harry shook her head. "I've actually come to speak to Count Aurel. It's a matter of some urgency."

"Nothing is urgent to us," Irina said, her low voice unconcerned.

"It may be a matter of life and death," Harry said, frowning slightly. Come to think of it, could vampires be poisoned? Even if not, they surely wouldn't appreciate a perceived attempt, she reasoned.



"How interesting." Gavril turned his head at an unnatural angle, presumably to better observe her blank expression. "Unfortunately for you, the Count is not here."

She nodded her understanding. "Then perhaps you could help me, Mr. Gavril. You are his deputy, right?"

By the way the two vampires sank into eerie stillness at her words, she thought perhaps that was not the sort of thing that random humans were supposed to know. Before she could wonder whether her chances of being eaten had just risen sharply, she heard the awful, cringe-worthy screech that signaled the front door to the hotel opening. Harry turned around to see Leo stepping briskly into the lobby and couldn't prevent relief from softening her posture at the sight of his confident stride.

"Harry, there you are," Leo said, smiling in a way that was just a tad practiced. "I wondered if you would go ahead without me."

Gavril drew back ever so slightly from where he'd been hovering over her. "You neglected to mention that your business for the Count was from the Rogue."

"I was just getting to that." Harry's smile was sweet as Leo came to a stop beside her. Irina flashed a single fang at her in a returning smile. Harry made a mental note that vampires didn't like surprises.

Leo's hand on her shoulder made her jump slightly, so focused had she been on the vampiress's vaguely menacing smile. "Why don't you tell them why we're here, Harry?"

She relaxed into the story she'd rehearsed mentally on the way over. "I happened to be in the apothecary on Diagon this morning when Mr. Tate discovered that he'd received a duplicitous shipment the week before. What had been sold to him as Queen Anne's Lace actually had a small amount of hemlock mixed in. He was quite concerned for his customers' safety, and began contacting anyone in his logs who had bought the tainted shipment at once. Unfortunately,

he did not have contact information for a male vampire who patronized his shop last week. Mr. Tate recalled that he wore a black cloak." She eyed the black fabric draping around the two vampires meaningfully.

Gavril and Irina lost some of their unnatural stillness, and Gavril inclined his head as he finished speaking. "So you've come to look for him here."

"We wanted to ensure that your coven was informed of the mistake at once," Leo said. "I would hate to see a vampire caught up in an accident if it could be prevented."

"And it would be a shame if the mistake were discovered by Count Aurel later, and offense taken at the carelessness of this man," Gavril said. She thought she could detect a small hint of amusement in his eyes despite the grave tone of his voice.

"Just so," Leo said pleasantly.

"There are many vampires in our coven." Irina sounded unenthused. "Are we to question them all?"

Gavril's thin shoulders floated upwards in a shrug. "The Count will want this settled before he returns." Turning to Harry, he asked, "Did Mr. Tate happen to recall anything else about this vampire?"

She cast her mind back and reeled in the memory easily. "Dark hair, yellow eyes."

The vampires exchanged a wry look. "Must be," Gavril said, his breath escaping on the words almost reluctantly. Turning back to Harry and Leo, he said, "The vampire you seek is indeed here. Would you like to speak to him directly?"

"I would appreciate the opportunity to issue a personal apology," Leo said agreeably.

"Come this way." Gavril led them toward the staircase as Irina took a seat on the dusty front desk. Harry supposed she would be watching the door.

As they reached the first stair, Harry couldn't help asking, "Isn't the kitchen down this way?" She dreaded to think of the consequences had the vampires been *cooking* with hemlock.

Gavril tossed his head back in a laugh that reverberated around them unnaturally before fading. "We aren't going to eat you, if that's what you're worried about."

"I wasn't," she muttered, though perhaps she should have been. Leo cast a reassuring look over his shoulder at her. If she followed him a bit too closely down the stairs, her friend didn't seem to mind.

When they reached the bottom of the stairs, blackness met them. She could barely see Leo's face and he was standing right beside her. She could hear the faint rustle of Gavril's cloak as he continued moving, but Leo's hand on her arm dissuaded her from continuing to follow. "Could we trouble you for a light?" Leo asked, all politeness.

Gavril's chuckling met them before he reappeared in the small pool of light at the bottom of the stairs. "But of course. We never have humans down here-I'm afraid I'll have to fetch a candle."

He was gone before they had time to blink, leaving them in the near-darkness. "Should have just used my wand." Leo huffed, and it was an exasperated noise. "I can't believe you came in here without me."

"I didn't know you were coming," she said softly, well aware that any vampires around would be able to hear them anyway.

"You thought when Margo ran into my meeting with the Business Association and started babbling about vampires and poison and *you* that I would, what? Nod my head and go back to the discussion on grocery subsidies?" She couldn't see his expression clearly, but the incredulity came across in his voice just fine.

She admitted that, if she really thought about it, there was no world in which Leo would have stayed away. "Thank you for coming," she said after a pause. She certainly wouldn't rather be standing in the dark in a vampire's basement by herself.

"I'll always come when you're in trouble," Leo said. There was nothing but honesty in his voice.

Harry had to smile. "I wouldn't say I was in *trouble* -"

"You were."

She jumped as Gavril's voice sounded just over her shoulder. His laugh told her the vampire had definitely seen it. With careful dignity, Harry turned her head slowly to glare at where she assumed the vampire was hiding in the shadows. "That's mean," she told him. The vampire only laughed again.

There was the swish of a match and then a small flame bloomed into existence. Seeing the vampire's face lit from below by the flickering candle, Harry wasn't sure whether the light was a mercy or not. Gavril looked distinctly alarming with his bone structure thrown into sharp relief. "Come, my guests," Gavril said, carrying the candle left down a narrow passage that was now barely visible in the candlelight.

Harry and Leo followed the light down the passage, passing several doors before coming to one with the word 'Distillery' barely legible. Fighting sudden images of vampires drinking hemlock infused spirits, Harry held her spine straight as they entered a mid-sized workroom. From what she could see in the minimal illumination, it was a little smaller than her potions lab at home. There were several counters along the walls at what was, for Harry, chest height, and a small cauldron burned on the farthest one, the blue flames beneath giving off enough light to see the figure beside it turn toward them as they entered.

"Gavril, what is it?" This vampire's voice was sharper than the others she'd heard. It still had a hint of the leaves-in-the-wind quality that she now associated with his kind, but it sounded... younger, for lack of a better descriptor. More alive. She could make out his arm gesturing toward her and Leo as the vampire added, "I'm not hungry, so tell Grandfather to let me alone."

Gavril's voice was definitely exasperated when he replied. "They aren't here to donate, idiot. They're here to see you." The vampire inclined his head toward Leo, his curtain of hair momentarily obscuring the candle's flame, and said, "This is the Rogue, Lionel Hurst, and this is his... Harry." Harry blinked at being referred to in such a way, but let it pass.

"If you think you can influence my grandfather's politics by making nice with me, you are sadly mistaken," the vampire said sharply. "Aurel values a great many people's opinion above my own."

"If you would stop sniping long enough to listen, Newborn, you could cease making such a fool of yourself," Gavril drawled. He seemed not at all impressed with what Harry could only deduce was a familial relationship between the younger vampire and the Count.

"We're here about a recent purchase you may have made from an apothecary on Diagon Alley," Leo said, keeping his voice friendly. "There is a chance you were sold a mislabeled ingredient, and the shopkeeper is most eager to tender his apology and ensure that no harm has come of the mix-up."

That seemed to take the vampire aback. At least he paused a long moment before answering. "This is about the hemlock? I bought it fair, and I've no intention of returning it."

"You knew what it was?" Harry hadn't considered that possibility.

"Of course I did." The vampire sounded offended now. "That's why I bought it. Such a reasonable price for a poison of its potency. I

couldn't believe it; I picked out all the specimens that smelled fresh, though it was more than I required for my work."

Harry couldn't fathom their luck. Not only had the vampire *meant* to buy hemlock, but it sounded as though he'd taken most of what had been mixed into the Queen Anne's Lace as well. Leo didn't sound quite as relieved as she felt when he asked, "What work might that be?"

*Oh*, she thought, *right*. They should probably be concerned with what the vampire *wanted* hemlock for.

"Kasten has an interest in essences," Gavril said. His tone did not communicate a matching interest in the subject. "It's all he does-all he has done, since he was reborn."

Kasten did not seem embarrassed by his hobby. "My ambition is to collect the purified essence of every substance on this earth. Everything has a purified form. I must continually perfect my techniques to increase the potency of my collection. This decade I am focused primarily on toxins, poisons included."

"That's a fascinating aspiration," Harry said, her mind racing. How many things had he distilled in this manner? Could he truly capture the essence of such things as minerals? Animals? She suppressed a shiver. That was an unpleasant thought, actually. "How long does it take you to condense something to the level you want?"

The young vampire must have been taken aback at her question. He was somewhat hesitant in answering, though his voice gained momentum as the explanation was related. "It depends on the substance in question. Some specimens can be quite resistant. A tetrodotoxin secreted by red salamanders, for instance, gave me some trouble several years ago, as it is particularly resistant to-

"Heat," Harry muttered, nodding along. She had looked into neurotoxins back in her first year at Hogwarts, after the incident with Lee Jordan.

"Yes," the vampire agreed, a slight excitement to his tone. "As you can see, I finally succeeded, but it required alternate methods of separation." He had moved an arm to gesture to something behind him, but she couldn't make it out in the dim lighting.

"I'm sorry, I can't actually see," Harry said, regretful.

"Ah." Kasten said. There was an awkward pause. "Gavril, would you allow this human use of her wand for a moment? Just so she can see my work."

Gavril sounded long-suffering as he said, "Go on, then. Make yourself a light."

"I've got it," Leo said firmly. "Harry is still underage." That had never stopped him encouraging her to use her wand before. Harry wondered if Leo would rather he be the one to essentially brandish a weapon in the middle of the coven's nest, in the presence of its second in command.

Leo's Lumos hurt her eyes for a brief moment, but once she'd adjusted she marveled at what had been revealed. The moderate-sized workspace actually had a ceiling at least twice the height of its width, and filling every length of wall all the way from the counters to the ceiling were shelves. The shelves were filled entirely with vials, each labeled and carefully aligned. Harry actually held her breath as she took it all in with wide eyes. It was a *library of ingredients*. Her heart squeezed with envy and admiration. "Amazing," she said softly.

"Thank you," Kasten said. She could see him properly now, and his resemblance to Count Aurel was slight, but distinct. He had yellow eyes, and his hair was cropped close to his head, but the color, she thought, was similar to that of the ancient vampire she'd met in the Dancing Phoenix. "I have made good progress since my turning, though I still have far to go."

She looked at the vials again and realized they weren't ingredients; they were essences. Every vial was a substance the vampire had

already distilled down to its purest, most potent form. Her respect for him rose, as did her wariness. Who knew how many dangerous things sat, unassuming, on the shelves around them?

"It's a very impressive collection," she said, honestly amazed that a library like this existed.

"Yes, and we're very glad to know that you purchased the hemlock knowingly," Leo said. He glanced at her as he added, "Since there's no harm done, we can put this incident behind us."

"Certainly," Gavril said, quickly seizing on Leo's rather obvious retreat. "If everyone is satisfied, I will escort you back upstairs. The Count will be very grateful that you took the time to personally see to his grandson's wellbeing." He started toward the door, and Leo followed.

"Harry." Leo gave her an insistent look, and Harry withheld a sigh of disappointment. She knew that she couldn't reasonably hang around in a vampire's distillery and ply him with questions about the specimens he'd collected over however many decades he'd been roaming the earth, and yet... she really wanted to.

"It was lovely to meet you, Mr. Kasten," she said, giving in with good grace. "Thank you for showing us your work. Maybe I will see you at Mr. Tate's sometime."

"Yes, perhaps." Kasten lifted a graceful hand in an aborted gesture of farewell, letting it drop again too quickly and watching them leave the distillery with a strange look on his pale face.

Leo let his wand light fade and holstered it once more as Gavril led them back to the lobby. Irina hadn't moved from the desk, but she rose weightlessly at their return. "Thank you for coming all this way, Rogue." The vampiress cut a look to Harry, adding, "And you." It could not have escaped Irina's notice that her name was Harry. Clearly it was in the nature of vampires to be vexing to wizards.



"It was no trouble at all," Leo said, smiling with a politician's charm.

"Sorry for the false alarm," Harry added, grimacing slightly. How foolish she must have seemed, thinking a creature whose senses far outstripped her own would be fooled by a flower's appearance.

"It speaks well of your intentions," Gavril assured them. "I will be sure to appraise the Count of the Rogue's good will."

"Much obliged to you for your hospitality and understanding," Leo said, bowing slightly in a show of respect. Harry hesitated, then did the same. As she straightened she caught Irina's eyes, and the vampiress gave her another of those fang-flashing smiles. She was sure the redhead was mocking her, Harry just wasn't sure how exactly.

They left the Lamia Lodge, and outside in the sunshine the air seemed cleaner, the world happier. They paused for a moment on the street to adjust their eyesight before walking back toward Knockturn's main alley.

"Guess I pulled you away for nothing, Leo," Harry said after a minute of silent walking.

"Don't apologize," Leo said, reading her mind. "You made the right call. I need to know about this sort of thing. The Carpathian Clan has been more restless of late, harassing humans who stray too close to their nest. Count Aurel helps to keep Countess Maricara in check, and the Rogue needs to stay in his good graces."

"The Carpathians are led by a woman? Is she a real countess, or is that just what coven leaders are called?" Harry asked, fascinated despite herself.

"The latter," Leo confirmed. "And yes, Countess Maricara has been running that coven for nearly fifty years, or so I'm told. She's rather mercurial. Some years her coven doesn't cause much trouble, but other years they're almost a pestilence." Harry digested this for a few

minutes. Her train of thought was derailed when Leo looked over at her sharply and said, "So... 'never been to a vampire hotel,' wasn't it?" Harry stumbled in surprise at the change of subject.

"Well..." She stopped talking. She really had no explanation that would make sense to him.

"Was this while your 'aunt' was staying in your apartment, by any chance?" Leo pressed. He was so smug sometimes.

"Sort of," Harry admitted. She really needed to keep the timeline vague on this one.

"And was there a reason you couldn't stay, I don't know, at your house? Where you live?" Leo deserved an award for the superiority in his voice. It was truly inspired.

"Ask me no questions, Leo, and I'll tell you-well, *fewer* lies." Harry laughed at her own joke.

"Yes, yes, you're very mysterious." Leo waggled his eyebrows at her. "If you won't talk, want to spar?" They had reached Knockturn now, and Leo looked poised to turn toward Kyprioth Court.

Harry shook her head. "Sorry, Leo, but I promised another potioneer I'd meet up to talk about Shaped Imbuing."

"Huh. The pretty one?" Leo asked, face expressionless.

"You wouldn't find him pretty after talking to him for thirty seconds," Harry said, laughing.

"Why help him, then?"

Harry grew serious for a moment. "Honestly? He's the only one besides Master Snape to even ask. He's a good brewer, behind all the nastiness that is his default personality."

"All right." Leo lifted his hand in a casual wave as he began to walk backwards toward the lower alleys. "Stop by tomorrow and we can spar then."

Harry grinned. "You're on."

She headed back to Diagon, walking into Tate's apothecary just as Lestrangle was walking out. He stepped back upon seeing her, giving her space to come fully into the shop. "Were you leaving?" she asked, a bit put out that he would ditch her even after agreeing to wait.

Lestrangle sneered as easily as he breathed. "I assumed you'd been eaten, since you were gone well over an hour. It only took me twenty minutes to get the information from the goblins, and ten minutes of that was reminding the nasty things just how much gold my family has buried beneath their bank."

"Sorry to disappoint you," Harry said. "Thanks for worrying over my poor head, though. It means so much." The pureblood scoffed but didn't rise to the bait. Maybe he could be taught. She walked to the counter and greeted Mr. Tate with a smile. "Found the vampire who bought the Queen Anne's Lace. His name is Kasten, and he says he knew it was hemlock when he bought it-he thought you gave him a great discount."

"A discount?" Tate shook his head on a relieved laugh. "Well, hemlock is expensive, not to mention a controlled ingredient. If he bought it on purpose he did get a good deal! Thank you for doing that, Miss Potter. You've got your father's courage."

"And his idiocy," Lestrangle added under his breath.

They both ignored him. Tate told her that with the help from the goblins, he'd managed to get in touch with all of the other customers, and none had found any hemlock mixed into their purchases. Harry thought Kasten had probably taken most of it for himself, and could only be glad that things had worked out.

"May I have my basket back?" she asked.

Tate pulled it from behind the counter and said, very solemnly, "Anything you want is half off today, Miss Potter."

"I couldn't," she said, embarrassed.

"It is the least I can do," Tate insisted. "Besides, you have a credit from that other time still." After a moment of confusion, she realized he was referring to last summer when she'd covered Lestrangle's debt. It was kind of Tate not to remind the proud boy of the incident.

Harry could tell Lestrangle was getting impatient, but she wasn't about to forget the reason she came to the apothecary in the first place. Plus, a 50 percent discount? That was nothing to sniff at. She collected everything she needed, and a few things she didn't, and packed her purchases away in her potions kit. "Thank you, Mr. Tate," she said as she returned the basket.

"No, Miss Potter, thank *you* ."

She left with Lestrangle on her heels. "Should we go to the Potions Guild?" she asked. "We could probably find an empty lab to use."

Lestrangle appeared to think it over for a moment before shaking his head slowly, almost hesitantly. "No... you should come to my house."

Harry was massively taken aback at the suggestion and couldn't hide it. "That sounds like a terrible idea. Your parents hate my family."

"I could say the same," Lestrangle pointed out. "Anyway, the Guild isn't really obliged to provide rooms for random wizards off the street. Your lab is depressing, and you don't have any good ingredients."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Harry asked, fairly offended. "I have everything."

Lestrangle favored her with a pitying look. "Seriously? Your lab is a commoner's paradise. All the basic, boring ingredients and none of the rare, interesting ones."

Harry's eyes flashed. "By rare you mean illegal."

"I mean hard to get," Lestrangle said smoothly. "I know your opportunities in this area are sadly stunted by your father's position, but aren't you a little curious? My lab has a host of powerful ingredients you don't see every day. Ever worked with selkie skin?"

She hadn't, and he knew it. "Selkie skins are black-listed. There's a treaty forbidding their harvesting because of the cruelty inflicted in the process."

"And that is a shame, but my family has a few. You don't even have to feel bad," he added, correctly reading her disapproving expression. "As far as you know, my ancestors acquired them before that treaty was put into effect. Now they're just sitting under preservation spells, not doing anyone any good."

She stared at him, her mouth tight as she thought. Selkie skin was probably the least of it. She had to admit she was curious. There were plenty of old potions texts that alluded to potent concoctions that could only be created with the rarest of components. She was also aware of the fierce moral debate that had upheaved the potions community in the last few decades. There was a stronger focus in modern times on how ingredients were collected and what processes could be considered sustainable and humane.

Still... Lestrangle already had these ingredients. It's not like she was going with him to pluck Aubrey chicks from their nests. What good were they doing sitting in a lab, unused? What if, somewhere in the older boy's collection of forbidden ingredients, there was knowledge to be gleaned that could benefit others?

She could feel her potions mania slowly overcoming her good sense. She cast about for other reasons why this was a terrible idea. "I don't

think your parents will want *me* having access to all these amazing ingredients you claim to have."

"They won't even know," Lestrangle said quickly, clearly sensing her indecision. "Mother and Father are at an S.O.W. Party function this afternoon. The monthly meeting always turns into a social affair after, so they won't be home until late." When she frowned, he scoffed at her. "What are you, scared? Don't worry, Halfblood, I won't let them bleed you."

She made a face at him, but couldn't deny that she was tempted. *I'm just going to look*, she told herself virtuously. Aloud, she said, "All right, we'll go to your house. First, we'll work on Shaped Imbuing. If we have time after, you can show off your collection."

Lestrangle smiled widely, and Harry wished he wouldn't. It made his face absolutely beautiful, which in turn made her want to hex him with boils. Why was she going with him? Her father would have an aneurism if he found out. Not to mention what Archie would do to her. "We can Floo from the pub," Lestrangle said, setting off at once, probably hoping she would follow before she regained her senses.

She did follow him. Maybe it was the events of the day that made it so hard to refuse Lestrangle's offer. Something about not getting to see what Tate had in his backroom and then not getting to stay and talk with Kasten about *his* collection had left her supremely unsatisfied. Anyway, if she were going to be a top Potions Mistress someday, wouldn't she need to be familiar with all possible ingredients? Even unsavory ones? There was only so much she could learn from books.

Lestrangle paused at the Floo and said, "Give me five minutes before you come through."

Harry narrowed her eyes at him. "So you can take down the blood wards?"

"Unless you'd rather burn to ashes in the grate," Lestrangle said. He paused as though waiting for her to make up her mind, then let out a sharp laugh. "Relax, brat. I've done this before."

"For all your other halfblood friends, I'm sure." Harry ran a hand through her hair agitatedly. This was such a bad idea. What was she doing? *Selling my soul to the potions devil*, she admitted internally.

"Five minutes," he reminded her sternly, then stepped into the grate with a loud, "Dartmoor Castle!"

Harry's eyebrows rose against her will. A castle? She supposed the Lestranges were in the Book of Gold, but castles were rare even among old families these days. She did wonder how they'd built a castle in a moor, but she supposed it wasn't *all* bogs. When six minutes had passed, she Flooed through to the same destination, her potions kit held close to her side to protect it from jostling as she unerringly fell out the other side onto her butt.

"Graceful as ever," Lestrangle mocked, watching with no move to help as she regained her feet.

"It's almost like your Floo doesn't like me," she said, not willing to admit to Lestrangle that she was just inexplicably terrible at Flooing.

"It has good taste," he said, pulling out his wand. She tensed slightly, but he only waved it at the Floo, muttering a string of Latin too soft for her to hear. She felt the wards spring back into place, and tried not to feel trapped. He gave her a once over, flicked his wand at her boots to remove the dust clinging to them, then nodded, apparently satisfied. "This way."

She took in her surroundings silently as they moved through his home. Where Malfoy Manor was subtly elegant, with wealth gleaming quietly from every carefully designed corner, the Lestrangle castle was stark, with accents of unimaginable value stuck seemingly at random throughout otherwise large and empty rooms. The beautiful rug of what looked like woven Acromantula silk that

seemed to continue endlessly down the passages they traversed still did nothing to disguise the bare stone floor beneath, which was crumblingly ancient. She suspected magic had a hand in keeping the rooms comfortable, as the cavernous spaces and dated masonry were just asking for a draft.

When they climbed the first spiraling staircase, Harry was surprised. They climbed two more before emerging in a rounded room that she realized from the small window must be in a tower of some sort. The view looked out over the moor, and she supposed the landscape had its own sort of beauty. "You know," she said, looking around slowly, "I've never been in a potions lab that wasn't below ground before." Traditionally, ingredients were stored in basements and dungeons because the air was cooler down there, and better for longevity, but with the right climate control spells there was no real reason for it. "I like it," she said. She imagined the window came in handy aerating the room after a particularly pungent brew. Not to mention the benefits of natural light.

"So glad you approve," Lestrangle said, the acridness of his tone indicating he couldn't care less what she thought. Somehow, she didn't believe it.

She noted the beautiful curved bookcase that fitted perfectly to the round wall. It was filled with texts, scrolls, and journals. Seemed she wasn't the only one who hoarded old Guild periodicals. The rest of the wall space had been fitted with solid granite counters. There was an intimidating tool rack beneath the window with more knives and stirring rods than even Harry owned. She walked to the center of the room where four gleaming cauldron stations reigned, and realized the floor around the brewing station was *soft*. She bounced up and down on her heels, wondering if she was imagining things.

"You are so childish," her host said. He did not sound truly annoyed, though.

"Why is it squishy?" she asked, bewildered.



He gave her an odd look. "Haven't you ever noticed how your feet and back hurt after standing over a cauldron for a few hours?"

"Sure," she said, shrugging. You just got used to such things, if you were a brewer.

"Well, they don't have to," Lestrangle said, giving her a look that said he thought her the worst kind of plebian.

"I see. That is brilliant," she said, bouncing a bit again. It did feel pleasantly supportive, yet comfortable beneath her boots. "Is it a spell or did you get the floors done in a special material?"

"Do you really want to talk about my floors?" Lestrangle asked. Harry shook her head, albeit reluctantly. She was definitely going to look into that when she had a moment.

"First, wandless magic," she said, claiming one of the stools by the bookcase for her own. "How are you coming along?"

"I've got the trick of it," Lestrangle told her, raising a hand with a showman's flourish. The air around his appendage condensed and began to spin until a tiny cyclone was balanced in his palm. "It's really not that hard, once you know how," he mused, staring at the twister until it dispersed.

Lestrangle's face was serene, as though wandless magic came naturally to him. She almost bought it, except there were beads of sweat on his forehead and the room was quite comfortable. It was so like the older boy to think trying was beneath him. She had to admit he'd certainly got the hang of it, though.

"That's wonderful," she said, feeling a bit like she was praising one of the Rogue's kids for answering a tricky question correctly. "Elemental magic is the easiest kind of wandless magic, though. Can you do a spell?" She smiled at the affronted look he gave her. "Let's see one, then."

He turned his hand palm down, this time. His face seemed to contort against his will, but a small shield did materialize on the ground in front of him. She recognized it as a basic Protego and clapped her hands slowly. "That's perfect. It seems you've definitely mastered the concept, Lestrangle. Nice work."

"There are still a few spells I can't do wandless," he said, probably thinking his words passed for modesty.

"You've plenty to work with for shaped imbuing, though," she said cheerfully. "Have you given it a go?"

Lestrangle frowned. "It's not the same as wandless magic at all. You said one skill translated to the other, but I can't cast wandlessly through a stirring rod."

"It's not exactly the same, but wandless magic is necessary for the next step," Harry explained. "Right now you're using your hands to channel the magic instead of your wand, but you don't need to do that. You don't have to send the magic anywhere. You can create a spell without ever casting it. That's the trick to shaped imbuing."

The older boy just stared at her. He blinked slowly and shook his head. "You said that before, but it still doesn't make sense. Explain it some other way."

Harry sighed. No one ever believed her without proof. "I can show you, if you know how to project your consciousness to my magical core."

Lestrangle scowled. "Now I am to learn mind magic, too? Just how many disciplines are you mixing, Potter?"

"This type of mind magic is useful in potions," she said, a bit defensive. She wasn't trying to make the task difficult just for the sake of it. "Here, imagine what it feels like when you consciously imbue. Describe it to me."

"It's like a river, flowing from me to the cauldron," Lestrangle said. Harry had never imagined it that way, but if that's what worked for him, that's what she would use.

"So right now you're just pouring water into the river and it's ending up in the potion, right? That river is the key. You don't have to just send water down the river, get it? You can send ice."

"Ice." Lestrangle did not appear to be having a moment of clarity.

"Yes, ice, as in water given a specific shape. The spell is the ice." She was starting to doubt her own explanation, the way he kept staring at her.

After a time, however, he fixed his eyes on the wall behind her and said, slowly, "You're saying my core is the head of the river. What I have to do is apply wandless magic as close to the wellspring as possible, so that by the time the magic is even released down the river, it's already become a spell."

"Yes." Harry could see it clicking in his expression.

"But I can't even feel the magic until it's already on its way out of my body," Lestrangle said flatly.

"Oh," Harry said. "I suppose some meditation might be in order after all."

The boy groaned. "What have you got me into? Learn wandless magic; it's no big deal. And then we'll just learn some Occlumency while we're at it. Sure, all in a day's work. How the *hell* did you manage this in two months?"

"I didn't!" She was quick to assure him. "I already knew this stuff before I started experimenting for the Guild."

"Of course you did." Lestrangle laughed, and the sound was a bit hollow. "Because I forgot this is standard curriculum for second

years. *Just what are they teaching you in that backwater school of yours?* "

Harry frowned. "You seem upset. This was your idea, I'll remind you. You certainly don't have to learn Shaped Imbuing if you don't want to."

"And have an entire new branch of potions forever out of my grasp? I think not." The dark-haired teen took a breath and steadied his nerve. "Fine. Meditation. What do I need to do?"

She explained the concept behind projecting his consciousness into becoming aware of his magical core. "Once you can see the core in your mind's eye, you can differentiate between the inner and outer layers of your core, and when you get the hang of it you become aware of your core all the time. For instance, I can tell right now how much magic I've used today based on how my outer layer feels in my mind's eye."

"At least this won't be a waste of time if it doesn't work," Lestrangle said, nodding.

Harry went on without acknowledging his pessimism. "When you reach that level of awareness of your own magic, it's easy to form a spell without releasing it outwardly. You'll recognize how a certain spell feels when your core forms it, if you use it enough times. Then it's just a matter of reverse engineering the instinctive process of casting a spell until you can recognize the feeling of each step separately. Once you know where the forming stops and the casting begins, you can just not do the second part. Instead, send the formed magic into a potion via conscious imbuing."

The pureblood nodded, looking overwhelmed. "Fine, then. I will work on that if I have time around my apprenticeship." He went to the bookcase and briskly made a series of notes on a spare piece of parchment before tucking it into a drawer and turning back to face her. "It would appear we've exhausted the topic of Shaped Imbuing

for now," he said, smiling in an anticipatory way that was not at all reassuring. "Why don't we have some fun?"

"You just want to show off," she accused, nevertheless standing from her chair at his gesture.

"And you want to let me," he said knowingly. "Come, Halfblood, and see how the other half brews." Maybe it was wishful thinking, but he sounded as though he even meant the insult ironically. Lestrangle left the room and doubled back the way they'd come, stopping one door down and opening it with a grand sweep of his arm. "After you." He grinned at her as she passed, and she couldn't help grinning back. No one was ever *excited* about potions with her. It was nice having someone to be embarrassingly academic with.

Lestrangle's potions cupboard looked a little like a mausoleum in an overcrowded cemetery. Floor to ceiling drawers surrounded them, and Harry was delighted to see that it was perfectly alphabetized, with the As beginning on the left of the entrance at the top of the column and continuing clockwise around the room. Every drawer had a neat label. "Are they all filled?" she asked. She couldn't help the low register of her voice. It felt like being in a shrine to one of the old gods. Sacred.

"No." Lestrangle's voice was quiet, too. "I've done my best recovering the sorry state of this collection since coming into my majority, but some things it may take years to find. Sphinx feathers. Griffin talons. Things like that."

Harry nodded. Those were exceptionally rare ingredients. She hadn't heard of a potion being made with either in several years at least. In fact, all of the labels she could see were for ingredients at the very least expensive or dangerous. She suspected he had a separate storage room for the more mundane ingredients. There simply weren't enough drawers to hold every substance that could be useful in a potion.

"Grindylow webbing?" Harry wrinkled her nose. "What is that used in?"

Lestrangle looked pleased to know something she didn't. "It's a thickener. It'll coalesce a potion into more of a paste, which makes it good for use in salves."

"So... it does the same thing as plant gum," Harry said.

"Essentially."

"How much does Grindylow webbing cost, exactly?" Harry asked, a smile tugging at her cheek.

"More than gum, is that what you want to know?" Lestrangle snapped. "Why do you ruin everything?"

"I'm sorry," she said, smothering her amusement. "It's truly an impressive collection. You must have excellent connections to acquire so much in so short a time."

Lestrangle considered her for a moment before deciding she was at least semi-sincere. "I do. A lot of it is who I am, however. Procurers tend to be blasé about selling me dubious ingredients once they learn my last name."

"Couldn't imagine why." Harry had never considered her family's good reputation to be a hindrance before, but she could imagine she would have more difficulty than Lestrangle did in acquiring exotic, unregulated ingredients of interest. On the other hand, she wouldn't be on the lookout for Grindylow webbing anytime soon. Perhaps many of the so-called rare ingredients weren't as useful as their legends suggested.

Lestrangle didn't acknowledge her cynicism. He studied the drawers around them in a manner that was too casual to be uncontrived. After a few moments he ran his fingers across a couple of the rows, idling brushing over a few labels before moving on to another

section. He glanced at her sidelong, still trailing his fingers of his right hand here and there. "We should brew something," he suggested. Did he truly believe he came across as unconcerned?

"Oh?" Harry had no problem playing along. "Anything in particular?"

"Doesn't matter to me," Lestrage said. His fingers paused in one of the M-columns. "Ever used mermaid fluke?"

"Can't say that I have." It was hard to keep the dryness out of her voice. "Thinking of making a cure for hypothermia?"

Lestrage looked surprised. "You know more than most for someone who's never used the ingredient."

Harry was not. *ever* . going to admit to having read *Mermaid Hunting for Fun and Profit* . Instead, she smirked at him and adopted the superior expression he was always throwing at her. "It's basic anatomy. The tail fluke regulates body temperature, allowing merfolk to live comfortably underwater in all climates. It stands to reason it would be used in thermoregulatory medicine."

"That is true, but what *anatomy* won't tell you is that mermaid fluke, if dried until warped, is the main ingredient in Coquere Cerebrum." Lestrage raised an eyebrow at her, as though inviting her to find that fact equally interesting.

"No." She could not believe he would even suggest it. Though she told herself she should have suspected something when he insisted they go to his lab to collaborate.

"It's a technical masterpiece," Lestrage argued quickly.

"It's a *torture* potion. You think I don't know what it does? I am not helping you make a potion to *cook someone inside their own skin* ." She took a slow breath and let it out carefully. To think, she assumed he only wanted to show off. Coquere Cerebrum was nearly

impossible to brew without an assistant. Not to mention the magic required in the imbuing phase.

"It's not like I want to *use* it." Lestrangle had the gall to sound offended at her refusal. "I just want to see if we can do it."

"Just having that potion is a class C felony, not to mention brewing it without an experimenter license from the Guild." Harry leveled him with look that said *just how dumb to you think I am?* Even if she hadn't read that awful book from Borgin and Burke's, she'd still know that Coquere Cerebrum's only use was to continually raise a person's internal temperature until their brains became scrambled eggs.

"It was only a suggestion," Lestrangle said, somewhat bitterly.

Harry cast her gaze around the room for an alternate suggestion. Something appropriately challenging, but ultimately harmless. Something that called for the sort of ingredients Lestrangle would take pride in providing. Something that could also be finished in a day. Something like... "Liberespirare."

"You're kidding." Lestrangle shook his head.

"You seem so fond of mermaids, though," Harry said, her grin a taunt. "Why not make a potion that lets you pretend to be one?" In truth, Liberespirare was a potion that let you breathe in any environment. It worked underwater, but also in heavy smoke, high altitude, and even through poisonous fumes. It was a pretty useful potion to have on hand, and she couldn't see an obvious way it could be misused. It was also incredibly difficult. She had never brewed it herself. The timing was too tricky for one person to attempt without risking an explosion.

"It takes three hours," Lestrangle complained. "And who is going to keep the potion when it's done? The recipe in Prince's Potions only makes one dose."



"We can make a double batch," Harry said. "It won't take any longer than the regular recipe. And besides, haven't you wanted to give it a go since that article two years ago arguing for its inclusion in the top forty most difficult potions of the modern age?"

"A double batch? That's twice the necessary magic. Are you trying to kill us?" Lestrangle looked unconvinced, but Harry was warming to the idea.

"I'm sure it won't be that bad," Harry said.

"For freaks with more magic than sense, maybe." Lestrangle sneered.

Harry only smirked at him. "You are so lucky I'm here. Let's see." She began pointing out ingredient drawers in the wall. "You've got siren hair, Grindylows gills, and look! You've even got dragon lung. I didn't even know they still sold dragon lung in England."

"They don't." Lestrangle clenched his jaw in visible annoyance.

"What's wrong? Unless... all these drawers are empty?" Harry couldn't help but smile as Lestrangle pinned her with a menacing glare. "Well, what's the problem, then?"

She could see him considering it, however reluctantly. "I would be in charge of the stirring, of course," he said, the challenge in his voice daring her to argue.

"Naturally," Harry said with a winning smile. "I do recall how precise your stirring technique was in the Guild's classes."

"And you would have to take over imbuing while I did that," Lestrangle added, his face stern. It was almost endearing.

"Yes, definitely," she agreed. "You won't be able to concentrate on both at once." Plus, she sort of doubted he'd be able to imbue a double batch of *Liberespigare* without passing out.

Lestrangle nodded once. "Fine. Go get the recipe from my bookcase and I'll start collecting what I can remember from here."

Harry was happy to do that. She really had been interested in this potion since its feature in *Potions Quarterly*. She had never been able to justify the expense, even if she could have found an assistant for an afternoon. This way, she would walk away with a valuable new potion in her kit and she could still sleep at night knowing that she hadn't jumped into the Dark Arts at the first invitation. She shivered at the thought of even attempting to brew something like Coquere Cerebrum. There was no academic argument worth bringing that gruesome concoction to life.

While she was waiting for him to return from the storeroom, she also took the liberty of picking out the appropriate cauldron and applying the necessary oil to the bottom and sides. She was just lighting the fire when he returned with an armful of neatly wrapped packets.

She pushed the open book toward her brewing partner while she selected a stirring rod that met the specifications in the recipe's prelude. Lestrangle began rooting through cabinets below the counters and compiling the remaining ingredients onto a clear workstation.

At first it was somewhat awkward working with Lestrangle. He was clearly used to taking the lead, but then, so was she when she brewed at home. Twice they both started on the same step at the same time. After the third time they bumped elbows, Harry decided to take a back seat. "I'll prep," she offered. "You take over the cauldron for now, and when we get to the third stage we can alternate adding ingredients." The third stage was the time crunch. She would endeavor to get all of the ingredients staged before they got that far, so that they could take turns tossing them in one after another.

Lestrangle inclined his head and took over tending the potion confidently. She tried to pretend he was Professor Snape, and she was assisting him as she often did at Hogwarts. It didn't help that the

older boy grunted in satisfaction every time he got a step right. Snape had certainly never done that. She wondered how it didn't drive Master Whitaker spare.

After the first hour, she was almost used to their dynamic. It was easier once she understood the rhythm of the potion itself. By the time they reached the second stage, she was handing Lestrangle ingredients before he even asked for them.

"That's it for ten minutes," Lestrangle said, setting aside the stirring rod and wiping his brow carefully. "It's not that difficult, so far."

Harry nodded. It really hadn't been. The potion didn't even have layers. The only tricky part was going to be stage three, she thought. The sheer speed at which they would have to add components was daunting. "I think we should count aloud for the next phase. Every second has to be exact, so we have to have our timing synched."

"You count the seconds, I'll count the stirs." Lestrangle stretched his neck. Harry rolled her own shoulders in sympathy.

"I like these floors," she said. "My feet don't hurt at all."

"Now I know what to get you for Yule." The derisive smirk on his face made her doubt any such gift was forthcoming.

Harry spent the last few minutes of reprieve separating the ingredients into two lines on their workspace. "This is your row," she told him, gesturing to the far line. "They're already in order, so don't think about what you're adding, just dump the next pile in when I say so."

Lestrangle nodded, concentration taking over his face. He picked up the stirring rod and looked at his watch to judge the exact moment he needed to continue stirring. As soon as the rod hit the potion's surface and began to turn, she began counting aloud. "One. Two. Add." Lestrangle scooped the first pile of components into the cauldron one handed while continuing to stir, counting rotations

under his breath. Harry picked her own pile up. "Four. Five. Six. Me." She sprinkled the contents in a single pass. "Eight. Add." Lestrangle moved the next of his ingredients line into the potion. And so it went for three minutes straight. By the time they reached the end of their respective rows of ingredients, Harry was adding everything herself, sprinting back and forth between the counter and the potion as Lestrangle could no longer reach that far while keeping one hand on the stirring rod.

"Merlin," she gasped, leaning against a counter to slow her heart rate while Lestrangle finished the required stirring.

His eyes on his watch, her cohort merely hummed in agreement. His wrist snapped up at precisely the moment the potion needed to simmer and the rod lifted clear of the surface with nary an errant drop. "You're up, Brat."

Harry had already established a connection to the potion. Now she tugged on her core and started pouring magic down the pathway. Lestrangle was just looking at her, somewhat expectantly. "What?" she asked.

"You have to imbue it," Lestrangle snapped.

She raised an eyebrow. "What do you want me to do, close my eyes and stick out my tongue? I am imbuing it."

Lestrangle frowned. "You don't need to touch the cauldron? Or the stirring rod?"

Ah. She did used to do that when she imbued. Harry vaguely remembered learning that it was easier that way to begin with. "It's not necessary," she told Lestrangle after a moment. "It's just a matter of channeling the connection through the air with your mind instead of your body."

"Whatever, Freak." Lestrangle took the recipe book and began reviewing the instructions for the final stages. Harry let him do that

and focused on her awareness of the potion. It was starting to feel satisfied, but it wasn't quite full.

It was another few minutes before the potion was saturated with as much magic as it could hold. "Done," Harry said, breaking the connection with a thought.

Lestrangle checked his watch. "We still have five minutes. Keep channeling."

"It can't hold any more," Harry said firmly. "Just let it simmer for the rest of the time, then begin the final stage.

"How do you *do* that?" Lestrangle was outright aggravated with her now. "This recipe is for a single dose, meaning the simmer time is allotted to give brewers enough time to add half the amount of magic you just put into it. Your rate of magic expenditure has got to be *insane* ."

"My magic moves fast," she said, shrugging. "Why complain? We're ahead of schedule."

The pureblooded boy growled his irritation, but didn't argue further. He took up stirring again without hesitation when it was time, and by the time Harry had cleared away the workstation and packaged any leftover ingredients, Lestrangle was finished.

"It's done," he said. A wave of his hand snuffed the flame beneath the cauldron and together they separated the finished result into two equal portions.

Harry held one of the beakers up to the light and smiled in satisfaction. "It's perfect. Murky-blue with a hint of violet. Well done, Partner."

"You did well enough, *Assistant* ." There was no heat in his taunt. He was too busy labeling his dose with a sure hand.

She corked her half and tucked it into her potion kit with a thrum of pleasure. Not bad for a day's work. Harry picked up the cauldron and was about to ask where the sink was when a sharp pop broke the air in the lab and a house-elf more ancient than any she had ever seen at Hogwarts appeared near the door.

"Hestin, good, this cauldron needs-" Lestrangle began. At the old elf's slow headshake he blinked. "What is it?"

"Young Sir's parents is being home. Hestin is notifying Young Sir as instructed." The house-elf popped away again, leaving a gaping silence in the room. Lestrangle was the first to break it.

"Fuck." His eyes darted to Harry, who had frozen with the empty cauldron in surprised uncertainty. The pureblood looked downright scared, which was not doing much for her own nerves in the least. "*Fuck*," he hissed.

"What do we do?" Harry said, setting down the cauldron and slinging her potions kit across her chest securely. Lestrangle was staring into space with a distraught expression, so Harry snapped her fingers in front of his face. "Lestrangle. What's the quickest way out?"

"I can't take down the wards while they're at home," he said, his voice sounding flat. He was panicking she realized with dismay.

"That's okay," she said, using the voice she'd try to calm a wild animal with. "We don't have to use the Floo. There are other ways out of the house, right?"

Lestrangle braced his hands on the countertop and took several short breaths before looking over at her with clear eyes. "Yes. There's a door to the garden. You can hop the fence and run to the edge of the wards then- *shit* . You can't Apparate. Mordred *damn* it. Do you have a Portkey?"

"Yes," Harry said quickly. Her parents had made her a new emergency Portkey after the Cup. Also she *could* Apparate if she

had to. What was he going to do, report her? Not after what she'd seen in his potions cupboard today. "Take me to the garden."

"Right. Fine." He crossed to the door and stuck his head out warily before gesturing her to follow. "Not a word from here on, Potter. If you think my mother will let you out of here unscathed after catching sight of you..." He let out a laugh that sounded just a tad hysterical. "Just run if you see her, ok? What the *hell* are they doing home early?"

She didn't think he was talking to her, so she offered no guesses. Instead, she took a moment to spell her shoes silent and wished she had her dad's Invisibility Cloak on her. Perhaps she would make a permanent home for it in her potions kit instead of simply carrying it around at Hogwarts.

Lestrangle noticed her boots shimmering for a moment as the magic set in and grunted. "Good idea." He muffled his own shoes, then beckoned her into the hallway.

Harry didn't bother trying to keep track of where they were going. They took a completely different set of stairs down and crept through a passageway so small and dusty that she was almost certain it had been used by servants at some point in the castle's history. At the end of that passage, they stole through a library where all of the books were secured with chains. Harry tried not to think about the implications of that as she crept down another corridor after her guide.

He stopped abruptly, forcing her to still her momentum or bump into his back. After a moment of suspended motion in which she hardly dared to breathe, she heard what had stalled him. There were voices coming from up ahead.

She poked him in the shoulder, and when he turned around she mouthed, "Is there another way?"

He shook his head, grimacing. Pressing his back to the stone wall, he inched forward toward where their corridor intersected a wider one. Harry had no choice but to creep close behind him. The voices floating around the corner weren't necessarily familiar to her, but the context identified them for her. Rodolphus Lestrangle was arguing with his wife. Heatedly.

"-said you *weren't* interested."

Bellatrix's laughter rang through the castle corridors like a bell that had been dropped from its tower. It was disjointed and so unmelodic it sounded forced. "What's wrong, Rudy? Can't handle a little competition?"

"A man should not have to compete for his own *wife* ." Lestrangle senior did not sound as though he was entertained by his wife's humor in the slightest. "I want you off the council."

"Well, you'll have to kill me then, won't you?" Bellatrix spat.

If this ultimatum upset her son, he didn't show it. When Harry glanced at his face, it was as closed off as she'd ever seen it. He might have been listening to a poor rendition of a play he hadn't cared for, for all the emotion he displayed.

There was a thud that Harry recognized as a body impacting a hard surface, followed by a truncated gasp that she thought might be indicative of someone choking. She moved forward a step without consciously telling her feet to do so, something inside of her instinctively rebelling against becoming a bystander to this, but Lestrangle shot out a hand and gripped her arm tightly. She looked up at him, her face mulish. He shook his head slowly, eyes softening just enough to let her see his plea. He didn't want her to get involved.

The next sound was a man's pained grunt, followed by another broken-bell laugh from Madam Lestrangle. This laugh had a hiss to it,



though. "Don't kid yourself, Luv. You could never take me. And you'll *never* control me."

"Control you?" Now Rodolphus was the one laughing, a slow, sinister sound. "I *own* you."

Bellatrix scoffed. "You don't know what it means to possess a woman. Now Lord Riddle on the other hand..."

"You insolent *bitch* -" Footsteps tapped out a staccato on the thin rug, but to Harry's utter relief they were fading in the opposite direction. Bellatrix's laughter was the last sound to fade before Lestrangle let go of her arm and seemed to relax.

"They'll have gone to the East Wing; nothing valuable in those rooms," the boy muttered. She was not sure whether he was talking to her or himself, but when he began to move again, Harry followed. She was quite eager to get out of this castle and back home.

They stole along the larger corridor until it dead-ended in a wide staircase. The stairs led down to a set of stained glass doors that let in the setting sun and refracted the light in crystal patterns across the floor. Lestrangle eased the knob and one of the doors swung silently inward. He motioned for Harry to slip out first, then shut the door behind them just as quietly. It struck Harry that he was good at this. How much practice had he had sneaking around in his own house?

Harry turned away from the house and found herself in a walled enclosure that was more jungle than garden. Lestrangle led her off to the left, around tangled patches of flora and the occasional moss-laden tree. When they approached the wall Harry saw the door-it looked like the poor wooden thing had been waging a persistent war against an insurgency of vines, but the hinges were clear enough that it opened at Lestrangle's hand without protest.

Beyond the door was the moor. Miles of green spread out over the rocky countryside like a damp blanket. "See that wooded valley over to the East?" Lestrangle drew a line with his finger toward the

horizon, indicated a dense copse some mile and a half distant. "You can't see it through the trees, but there's a river there that marks the edge of our property on this side. On the other side of the river, you can Portkey out."

Harry looked sideways at him, just to check that he was serious. He looked apologetic, which was so surprising in itself that Harry simply blinked. Lestrangle, feeling bad about making someone else uncomfortable? She was too impressed with his show of humanity to be properly annoyed at being made to trek across the moor and... actually, how was she meant to cross the river? "Is there a bridge?" Harry asked, already resigning herself to the answer.

"Sorry, Potter." Lestrangle sounded like he meant it.

Harry summoned a smile for his sake. It wasn't the boy's fault his parents had come home early from the Party function to squabble. "I missed my jog today anyway," she said, shrugging. "And I can float across with one of my Modified Weightless Draughts. The real question is; are the wards going to try to fry me on the way out?"

The dark-haired boy shook his head slowly. "They're anchored one-way, unlike the Floo," Lestrangle said. He sounded sure, at least. "As long as you don't try to re-enter the wards once you cross the boundary, there won't be an issue." He glanced back at the castle distractedly. "I should go before I'm missed."

Harry nodded. She adjusted the potions kit so that it hung close to her body and held it steady with her left hand while holding her right up to give the older boy an ironic salute. "I'll get going, then." She let her hand fall, but hesitated before taking off. She couldn't help but worry a little. "Caelum," she began, wondering whether he would really be okay.

His face closed faster than a trap. "Get going, Halfblood. Don't strain your brain thinking about things you don't understand."

Harry held his gaze for another moment, but knew futility when it planted itself before her. "Thanks for brewing with me today, Lestrage. Good luck with Shaped Imbuing."

She took off at a steady pace and didn't look back.

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The last week of summer break, Harry sent a letter to Master Snape indicating that she had made sufficient strides on their new concept for Shaped Imbuing and requested a meeting to pool their ideas before she left for school. In preparation for the resulting appointment, Harry spent an afternoon tucked in her bedroom meditating. She had felt the jewel at work over the past couple of months, and had even stopped in briefly before going to see the Malfoys, but hadn't had time for a proper check up. Now she wanted to ensure that, despite the changes, her Occlumency and aura would pass muster both as Harry Potter and as Rigel Black.

The first thing she felt was heat. The mists faded into mirage, and the eyes of her avatar narrowed against the hazy glare of sunshine reflecting off a million grains of sand. The wind buffeted her form as she moved forward across the dunes, and it was all she could do to pull her sinking feet from the landscape with each step. She couldn't see anything ahead of her, and grains of sand came flying up to sting her face no matter which way she turned it. Had the jewel created a sandstorm in her mind?

She must have been struggling through the dunes for ten minutes before laughter she recognized twisted through her ears and made her halt, looking around wildly. "Are you going to fool around all day, Girl?"

Harry lifted an arm to cover her eyes while she searched for the magical construct, but it was nowhere to be seen. "Where are you?"

"Where you want to be," the jewel said. "But first you must defeat my illusion."

She frowned. An illusion? The sand and wind felt so real. Something about her stymied progress reminded her of something, though. Ginny's mind. That first time Harry had dropped in, she'd flown for ages through the air, only to find that she had never moved. That had been an illusion, too. Now she marshaled her thoughts and imagined herself at the center of her mind. The storm around her disappeared and the wind dropped to a gentle breeze against her face. Harry was at the base of a pyramid, but one so elevated and adorned that she could scarcely compare it to the basic structure she'd seen the last time she'd been present in her mindscape.

"Like it?" The jewel, wearing the guise of the dark-haired boy still, appeared beside her.

She gave it an appreciative grin. "It's a bit gaudy, isn't it?"

The pyramid had been lifted such that the original triangular structure was now sitting atop a base of massive stairs. At the apex of those enormous steps was a great entryway flanked by exquisitely carved sphinxes in repose. Jewels glinted where they had been embedded seemingly at random all over the monument, in every third block or so, emeralds and rubies that all seemed to be redirecting the light back into her eyes as she gazed in no small amount of awe at the work before her.

"The word you're looking for is *distracting*," the jewel said, pride in every syllable. "Look at the detail; admire the craftsmanship. Let the beauty dull your wariness and approach."

Harry had to smile at that. "It certainly looks real, you know? Not like it's a decoy layer of the mind at all."

"Exactly," the construct said happily. "No one would ever imagine that so much time and thoughtfulness would be paid to an illusion."

"I don't know; that sandstorm was pretty convincing."

"That's because it's real," the jewel said, turning to gesture over their shoulders.

Harry turned around and had to stare for a moment at the landscape below them. They'd been standing on a raised mound of land that she'd assumed was the bottom of her mind, but stretched out below her were the makings of a whole civilization. A city of adobe structures littered the space at the true base of the pyramid. Something like streets broke up the cramped housing and at the far edge of the little village she could see an imposing city wall with heavy golden gates. If she squinted past the gates, toward the horizon, she could just make out towering clouds of dust and wind at the edges of her mindscape. She supposed the mists would be beyond the ring of storms, but she couldn't see anything through them at this distance.

"The illusion was the perception that you were walking through the storm." The construct looked very pleased with itself. "Actually, the storm was moving around you. While you managed to will yourself out of it, that's mostly to do with it being your mind. An intruder will be stalled much longer," it assured her.

"Very nice," Harry said, approving. "And even once across the desert, a stranger would have to navigate through the winding city streets before they made it to the pyramid. Have you opened it up inside?" She turned back to give the entrance a closer look. The slabs that formed it were at least twice as tall as she was.

"Come and see," the construct said warmly. As it began the trek up who knew how many stairs, she couldn't help but think that it seemed happy, content with what it had built. "Stop thinking sappy thoughts." The jewel's face took on an admonishing look that somehow still conveyed rueful amusement. It was *really* getting good at simulating humanity.

"How do you know what I'm thinking?" she asked, a little unnerved. "That's not the first time you've been able to tell."

"I can catch the gist of your thoughts when they are about me," the jewel informed her. At her uneasy look, its features took on a reassuring cast. "It's a good thing. If you work at it, you'll be able to communicate with me without having to meditate and project your consciousness inward."

Harry nodded. She did want to be able to do that, in case she needed to switch personas quickly. "Can I hear you, too?"

The construct nodded, pleased. "Yes. If you let me, I can warn you when your mind is under attack. Then, even if you're distracted or the attempt is very subtle, your secrets won't be vulnerable."

They'd reached the top of the stairs at last. The view was really incredible, she had to admit. There was something oddly beautiful about the desert. She took a step toward the shadowed entrance, remarking, "No door?" Before she could approach any closer, the sphinxes on either side of the passage sprang into motion and barred her way. The large red stones set into their eye sockets gleamed at her as she froze. "Are they sentient?" she asked, trying to remember if she'd allowed that or not.

"Not precisely," the construct admitted. It took her wrist and held her hand toward the sphinx on the right. "They won't tell riddles, if that's what you're hoping. I have given them an attacking instinct that is much like the real thing, however." That did not ease her nerves as her avatar's fingers were placed gently on the sphinx's temple, just between its eyes. She could feel the warmth of the magic that was animating the creature. It thrummed under her touch, and she recognized it as her own.

The sphinxes both smiled and for a moment she could see past the blood-colored eyes to the lovely feminine features that nevertheless came across fierce and wild in stone. Each rose from its menacing crouch, and sat tall, their lioness bottom halves no less graceful for

the rough material from which they'd been hewn. "Weren't the Egyptian sphinxes male?"

"Anachronism is half the fun. Don't overthink it. They will protect your secrets and maim your enemies," the jewel said, patting one fondly on the cheek as it passed the golem toward the pyramid's entrance.

"If they scare intruders as well as they surprised me, I'll be very impressed." Harry *was* impressed. The Dominion Jewel had accomplished much with limited resources and not insignificant patience, she deduced.

"That was them playing nice," the construct laughed. "They just wanted to say hello. Normally they would greet with claws and teeth."

Harry made a mental note to not bring anyone into her mindscape without considerable preparation. They passed through a stone archway adorned with a mix of hieroglyphs and runes that she couldn't decipher at one glance. Only a few steps into the pyramid, all light seemed to vanish. Even the sound of the wind outside was gone. She couldn't see the door anymore, though she knew she hadn't moved that far from it. Another illusion? She willed a light into existence, and fire lit in the palm of her hand to illuminate the room around her.

Her guide was nowhere to be seen. Instead, she was in a small stone chamber no more than five feet across. It was empty, and there were no doors or windows of any kind. She turned slowly in a circle. She wasn't sure how she could have come to be there, though she was pretty sure she could will her way out. It was still her mind, no matter what the jewel had done to the place.

She walked toward a wall and began feeling along it for cracks or anomalies that would reveal a hidden passage. There was nothing. "All right, I give up. What am I supposed to do now?"

The construct appeared beside her in an instant and grinned. "Do you like it? A trap for any who make it past the guards."

"How did I trigger it?" she asked.

"You didn't," the jewel said. "I did. It's not a physical trap, so there's no way to avoid it. I simply swapped the layers of your mind."

Her eyebrows rose. "So this is my mountainscape? I didn't notice the transition. Shouldn't I be in my lab, then, or the tunnels beneath?"

The construct shook its head. "I offset the two layers. Now, your position in one does not necessarily correspond to your position in the other. I can move people in and out of rooms with no exits, crush them under the mountain itself, or pop them back out into the sandstorm, all depending on where they wander inside the labyrinth that is now your mind."

"Amazing," she said. "Is there anything in the pyramid besides traps?"

"Of course. I do reign here when it's the primary layer," the jewel said. With a snap of his fingers, they were back in the entryway to the pyramid. Now she could see the light coming from the doorway behind them. Her construct raised its hands grandly and a number of torches ignited on sconces before them. The torches led the way down a long corridor. Harry walked until the passage ended in a golden door. She reached for the handle, but the construct stayed her hand. "It's a decoy. Nothing but a pit of vipers that way."

"Snakes?" Harry wondered if she was destined to be surrounded by them.

"They aren't sentient," the construct assured her. "They can't be persuaded to do anything but bite. You do have an enemy who speaks the serpent tongue."



She didn't deny it. Harry watched as the construct drew a single rune on the wall to the right of the golden door. The wall rumbled and a section of it sank into the floor, revealing another corridor, this one with steps leading up.

"Most of the passageways in the labyrinth will lead the intruder down. The dangers increase as each is surmounted. Some rooms contain unlikely traps, some straightforward threats, and the very bottom level is designed to collapse as a last resort if necessary." The jewel explained all this as they climbed and paused when they reached a landing. "Any passages leading up are well hidden."

It opened another door, this time in the low ceiling. When the stone above their heads moved aside, a ladder descended just enough for the jewel to reach the first rung and hoist itself up. Harry climbed up after it and emerged in an enormous square hall with a tapered ceiling so steep she figured they must be near the top of the pyramid.

In the center of the grand space was a raised pedestal and on it sat a carving of a woman with a lioness's head. The animalistic face conveyed both strength and wisdom. A poised cobra sat atop her brow, and a disk of gold illuminated the statue's head from behind. Harry was drawn to the statue, though she couldn't say why.

"Who is she?" Harry asked, trying to remember what she'd dug up on Egyptian culture the previous year while researching the Dominion Jewel.

"That is Sekhmet," the jewel said softly, circling the statue in a slow, thoughtful way. "Daughter of Ra. She protects the pharaohs in times of war. It is said that Sekhmet's breath created the desert."

"She sounds fierce," Harry said, studying the stone features with interest.

"Sekhmet is a warrior goddess, but also a goddess of healing. Her sign is the sun. It seemed... fitting." There was an almost

uncomfortable look on the construct's face, now. She wondered that it seemed capable of awkwardness.

"Very fitting," Harry agreed. She liked the idea of a lioness protecting her mind. "Thank you for building all of this. You've done wonderfully." She focused for a moment and willed a ball of her magic to manifest separately from her core. It bloomed into being on her fingertips, and she held it out toward the jewel with a smile. "Here."

With an awe-filled gaze, the construct moved forward to take it reverently. It consumed the little sphere of fire with an expression close to rapture. "Thank you."

"You earned it... Dom." She grimaced a bit at the startled look it gave her.

"A name?" The jewel had the oddest of frowns.

"It's less pompous than calling yourself Dominion," Harry said, turning her grimace into a smile. "And I can't keep calling you 'jewel' in my head."

"Dom..." the boy-for he was a boy, in seeming and in persona, no matter what he'd been before-smiled faintly. "Very well, Harriet."

It was progress. She left her sentient construct with instructions to practice getting her attention while she wasn't meditating. Soon she would have to see to the suppression of her aura once more, but she had one more thing to take care of as Harry Potter first.

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The last time Severus Snape had seen Harriet Potter, the stubborn girl had been an enigma wrapped in a mystery, covered again in a

glaringly obvious white sheet. Her prevarications had been prickly and her self-assurance weak. Looking at her now as he collected her from the Guild's lobby, he knew something had changed. The would-be potioneer held her head higher, her back straighter, and the confidence that she had once stacked through sheer willpower upon her shoulders had settled into a true mantle sometime in the past two months.

"I've booked a lab, though this meeting is primarily to discuss preliminary research findings," Severus told the girl.

She nodded once and followed him toward the stairs with a simple, "Thank you for coming, sir."

As they descended into the laboratory levels, Severus allowed his mind to pick through his observations about the girl thus far. His initial impression of the Potter chit had been that she and Rigel were entirely different in nature. Potter was blunt where Rigel was polite. The girl's face was open and arrogant, as though she expected others to like and accept her without reservation. His student, on the other hand, was always more reserved, his face closed and his actions more careful than not.

After multiple interactions, however, Severus was beginning to see more similarities than he expected. She and Rigel both craved recognition, regardless of whether they admitted it. Both young brewers had a tendency to lie first, equivocate second, divert the conversation third, and only when faced with absolutely no alternative begrudgingly part with a modicum of truth. The two young adults hoarded secrets as if they were diamonds, and Potter, just like Rigel, had seemed genuinely surprised and offended at the idea that anyone would attempt to pry those secrets into the light.

Little things tugged at his memory, too. When brewing the Modified Weightless Draught at their last meeting, Potter diced her stalks from root to tip, without discarding any of the ugly bits as many brewers, even professional ones, often did. It was natural to discard the gnarled ends and stringy tips from ingredients when preparing, as

one did when cooking, but Potter cut to the very end of her roots. Rigel cut to the end of his roots, too. Severus did not know what it meant—that they were as close as each implied, perhaps. They certainly must work closely with one another, as it seemed to him that even the angle at which Potter tilted her head when she stirred had been similar to Rigel's favored brewing posture.

Severus reached no new conclusions about the girl and her relationship to his protégé before they arrived at the small lab he'd secured for the hour. It was a teaching lab, with a decent sized chalkboard and plenty of spare parchment should they require it.

He pulled his research file from his pocket and enlarged it so that his gleanings could be spread on the central workstation between them. Tapping his finger on the topmost sheaf, he said, "I've revised the recipe for our enhanced variable base, reordering certain steps in order to take into account your suggestion that the signifying ingredient and the shaped magic be added simultaneously to the cauldron. You are correct to theorize that this will focus the amplification on the property of the signifying ingredient that best aligns with the type of magic being imbued."

The girl nodded slowly, a slight smile that she didn't seem to notice pulling at her mouth. "That's good. Now we aren't limited to signifying ingredients that have a single, straightforward magical property. If someone wanted to use mermaid fluke, they shouldn't have to wonder whether the variable base would amplify its hyperthermic or hypothermic properties."

He raised an eyebrow, but made no comment on the unusual example. "Indeed. As long as the magic that is Shape-Imbued speaks to a certain property, that is what the recipe will now choose to augment." He gestured to the rest of the parchment on the counter, "These notes represent the extent of my current experimentations with basilisk scale, and the comparative effectiveness of using more common alternatives, such as dragon eggshell, in its place."

He watched the girl's face as she scanned through his file at a rate that told him she was accustomed to deciphering cramped penmanship. "I have a couple of ideas on enhanced protection potions, as well," she said, still reading even as she addressed him. "My father told me the DMLE wants to buy the patent rights to the disruptor potion I've been selling as an antidote to the protection potion. Apparently they think that if the protection potion reaches mainstream notice, criminals will begin carrying around the disruptor potion just in case."

Severus scowled. The Ministry never missed an opportunity to leverage creative breakthroughs to its advantage. "You refused, of course." He wouldn't put it past the DMLE to attempt to outlaw the sale of the potion altogether if they were unable to procure exclusive rights to it, but if the girl had the sense to stall they had time to get ahead of the issue.

Potter shrugged. "I never patented it, so it's a moot point. It got me thinking, though, that there is a serious market for a protection potion that *can't* be negated with the general counter-potion. Like a true ward, what if we could tie an individual protection potion to the user?"

His mind raced ahead of her explanation; he was nodding before she'd even finished. "Each set of protection potion and disruptor potion could be custom made as a pair. Many would pay extra for a whiff of real security." An endeavor like that could fund the rest of their research, and was certainly worth exploring.

The girl looked up at him with hesitation glinting behind her spectacles, but whatever she saw in his face loosened her tongue. "I hadn't considered trying to create differently matched sets for each commission. I was thinking more along the lines of still mass-producing the potion, but reworking it so that the signifying ingredient was tied to the individual. I was thinking... what if it worked with blood?"

She could not have surprised him more if she'd suggested they use puppy tails. "Blood," he repeated. "You think this is going to be palatable to the DMLE?"

Potter was aware enough of the fine line she walked to wince at his drawling cynicism. "It seems a bit... unsavory on the surface, but after all the research I've done, it makes the most sense. Blood contains trace magic from a person's core, and as such can be matched to a person exactly, like a fingerprint. All the best permanent home wards are at least partially blood-based. Using it in the protection potion means that when the shield is erected, the person whose blood went into the potion can walk in and out of the shield at will."

"I am aware of how blood identification works," Severus reminded her.

She nodded impatiently. "Then you understand the implications. If we can get the process right, the new potion ward will recognize an individual's magical signature once formed, and one wouldn't have to remain inside the shield until a disruptor was applied. They can put it up around whatever they want to protect and come and go repeatedly. And," the girl added, warming up to her argument with glowing fervor, "since the potion is basically a miniature blood ward itself at that point, a generic disruptor potion like the one I've been using wouldn't be able to dissolve it. You would need the same exact blood or magical signature to undo it."

"You're still talking about making blood magic accessible to the masses," he said flatly. "This type of ward is dangerous."

"Only because people don't understand what they're doing," Potter said, not seeming to comprehend that the advanced, complex nature of the theories she was playing with was exactly the prohibitive barrier that dangerous magic *should* have. "I'm talking about doing the hard work *for* people. Like with Polyjuice, it'll be a matter of 'just add X' and the average witch or wizard can erect secure, flexible protection around whatever they want, with the added benefit of

being able to undo those protections at a whim as long as they put the same blood into both the protection potion and the disruptor. Not even real wards can be undone on the fly. You need a Wardmaster both to set up and tear them down." When he simply stared at her, caught up in his thoughts on the potential of such an idea, the messy-haired chit had the nerve to plant her hands on the countertop and lean over the workstation toward him as though she could intimidate him into agreeing with her via sheer proximity. "It's no different than the trunks they sell down the street that come with configurable theft protection-some of those spells use blood identification, too!"

Severus narrowed his gaze and the girl hastily retreated to her own side of the counter. "I don't deny that such a thing will appeal to certain sects," he allowed after a pointed pause. In truth he wondered if she'd had purebloods in mind when she envisioned the result. A portable blood ward was inspired; there was no question of finding a market. There was also no question that a product like the one she described would be misused in every way imaginable. The real question was whether the girl had the stomach to go through with it anyway. "Have you considered the consequences? Blood wards are nigh impenetrable when properly generated. You are putting this ability into the hands of Aurors and criminals alike. At least when a Wardmaster erects wards, he can be tasked to take them down should a warrant for such dissolution be procured."

Potter blinked at him. "Are you suggesting that I am responsible for all who use my potion? Anything can be misappropriated, but I think the potential good uses outweigh the evil. I see what you mean about it creating a kind of cheat for the protection of illegal goods or deeds. Do you think I should build a failsafe into the product? I should think that, if it ever became known, such a vulnerability would make the potion much less valuable."

"I suggest nothing," Severus said. His tone conveyed greater unconcern than he felt, but this was not his choice to make. The girl would have to navigate the perils of invention by herself, if she was

truly to make her mark on the field. "I am merely ensuring that you account for all potential ramifications should you choose to go ahead with this project. If you require my honest opinion, it is this: you will make a fortune off this idea, if you can execute it as you claim." She would make enemies, too, but he suspected the girl was smart enough to figure that out for herself.

"I shall think more on it then," she said. Her hand ran through her fringe in a gesture that was so like Rigel it sent a spark of *déjà vu* down his spine. "For now, though, I did have one more idea. This one, at least, will be hard to find nefarious use for." Potter reached into the bag at her side and pulled out several scrolls before weighing them down flat on the table for his perusal. The first was a drawing of what appeared to be a small box with expandable sides, not unlike a fisherman's tackle box. Notations down the side and continuing onto the next several pages described its contents.

"A first-aid kit?" He skimmed down the potions she'd listed in the margin but didn't recognize a single one. They weren't potions, he realized after brief consideration, but healing *spells*. His breath caught for an instance. "Inspired." The word escaped him before he could check it. She wanted to imbue advanced healing magic into their variable base, paired with a signifying ingredient with related properties, in order to provide emergency medical aid in lieu of a Healer. It was impossible, and yet... what if it wasn't? It would revolutionize the medicine cabinets of every household in Magical Britain. None of the spells or proposed products she'd enumerated currently existed in potion form. A wizard might keep a painkiller or Blood-Replenisher around the house for any chance injuries, but most maladies still required a trip to St. Mungo's to get properly healed. "This might be impossible," he said. There was no need to get carried away in what-ifs just yet. "Have you experimented with any of these yet?"

Potter nodded, pushing one of the pages closer toward him. "The epidermal salve was almost easy. I used the old base, so it can be made more effective later, I think, but the way magic is shaped for



knitting and regenerating skin is consistent no matter what type of injury it is. I've healed a lot of cuts and scrapes and even burns, so the Shaped Imbuing didn't take much practice to get right."

She took out a jar containing a thin, watery substance from her pocket and opened it. Before he could think to stay her hand, she'd palmed a small knife from seemingly thin air and pricked her finger with it. The knife vanished with a twist of her wrist and Severus had to push his questions on that to the side as the girl poured a small trickle of the clear liquid over her injured finger. Potter held her hand perfectly still for a few moments, then wiped her finger clean on the hem of her sleeve and held it up to his gaze. The skin was unblemished. It was not the most ostentatious of demonstrations, but Severus felt the wind leave his lungs on a long exhale nonetheless. This discovery was going to ripple through a number of communities, of which Potions and Healing were only the beginning.

"I know I need to add a thickener, if it is to be distributed as a proper salve," the girl was saying. How could she prattle so blithely after upending a stone of this magnitude into the pond of innovation? "I wanted to get the recipe right first, though. With your new base, I think I can use something like unicorn hair to good effect as a signifying ingredient. The more powerful concoctions might need something stronger, though. Phoenix tears, maybe? Those are hard to preserve, though, aren't they?"

Severus ignored the girl's query and looked her dead in the eye. "Have you shared this idea with anyone else?"

"Just Rigel," she said, blinking at him like a bespectacled owl once more. "I got some of the idea from him, actually, after he came home from his internship and described how difficult it was to get quality health care to people in remote areas."

"Fine," he said. "Tell no one else. Continue to research and I will inquire *quietly* about the licensing requirements for creating medical products such as you propose."

"So you do think it's a good use of Shaped Imbuing?" Potter smiled at him in a way that told him she had no idea the kind of attention she was going to receive if this worked.

"It will certainly generate interest in the field," he drawled.

"Great! As that was the primary purpose of our experimentation this summer, I shall consider our first collaboration a success, Master Snape." The girl was beaming now as she began stacking the parchment on the workstation. "Can I keep these notes on protective signifying ingredients? You can have the ones I brought on blood protection potions as well as what I've got so far on the advanced healing kit. I'll owl you if I get a solid breakthrough, but barring that... would you be open to meeting again over the winter holiday? I understand if you're busy with the term starting again and all-"

"That is acceptable." Severus cut the girl off before she babbled his sanity away. He needed to focus on the myriad possibilities he'd been presented that morning. Their endeavor required more research. And a solicitor, no doubt. At Potter's expectant look, he paused his racing thoughts long enough to say, somewhat stiffly, "An excellent start, Miss Potter. I expect to see at least as much progress when we meet again. Expect my owl as I uncover more information about the regulations this experimentation may face."

"Just Harry is fine," the girl said. Her eyes were thoughtful as she added, "We'll have to arrange human trials, won't we? And acquire some sort of liability insurance, too?"

"I will take care of that, Miss Potter." Severus was certainly not going to call the girl by her first name just because she was poised to utterly upend the magical medical industry in a single swoop. "Just focus on research and application."

"All right," she said, smiling brightly at him again. He could not remember the last time someone had bared their teeth in his direction so unreservedly. "Thank you for all your guidance and collaboration, sir. I look forward to seeing you again this winter."

She left, carrying a bag full of revolutionary ideas with her, and Severus simply sat, and thought, and let the ideas spill forth from his quill for the next twenty minutes. He had expected to spend the morning carefully explaining his summer research and firmly advising the Potter girl on what boundaries of the field she'd scratched out the year before should be focused on for expansion. Instead, she'd surprised him again. Rather than solely attempting to improve that which she'd already created, she came to him with new ideas. Insane ideas. Contagious ideas.

If this was the sort of mad ingenuity the girl could come up with when her interest was invoked, he would fuel the fire of her creativity for as long as she allowed. Let the girl keep her newfound confidence. From what he'd seen today, Potter would damn well earn that pride.

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Harry rode the high of her successful meeting with Snape for several days. She was a bit embarrassed to catch herself humming cheerfully as she completed the last of Krait's summer brewing quota, but she was too happy to help it. The day before she and Archie were to leave for the start of term, Harry loaded her arms with crates and made her way to Knockturn Alley for her final delivery.

She was in such a good mood she took a moment to really thank Krait for all he'd done for her. "It's hard to believe it's been three years, but it's really meant a lot to me to be able to brew and have my potions taken seriously," she told him. She had to smile at his gruff embarrassment as he coughed uncomfortably and averted his eyes.

"I didn't do anything except make a profit."

"You took a chance on an unknown brewer." Harry let her gratitude show in her eyes as she waited for him to glance back at her from

over the counter. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." He let his expression settle into something like fondness for a moment, then sniffed and turned back to the ledger he had been balancing. "Best take a crate of empties when you go. You know you'll be wanting to brew when you get home on holiday."

Harry agreed, and grabbed a crate of empty bottles from the backroom before leaving the shop. Knockturn Alley wasn't particularly crowded that afternoon, so it was easy to spot Leo's loitering form under an awning across the way. She thought back to the first time they'd met, in that very alley, before she'd understood the dangers of the world she had unwittingly joined. Leo hadn't changed all that much. The same handsome face that grinned as though he held a secret between his teeth. The same ropey build that was just a tad too tall to be stocky. The same eyes, lit with an irrepressible amusement, that looked at her as though she was something more than just a girl who liked potions.

She waited in the middle of the alley as he pushed off the wall and met her with an easy smile. "Headed off tomorrow, aren't you?" he asked. His hand extended to take the crate from her, but Harry moved it out of his reach with a smile of her own.

"I've got it," she assured him. "And yes, tomorrow I'm headed back to the States."

"Try to write this year," he said, walking next to her as she began the trek back to the Leaky Cauldron.

"I will," she said, vowing mentally to actually keep her promise this year. "Even if I don't though, I always read your letters, you know."

Leo smiled at her sidelong and nodded. "I know, lass." They walked a few yards in silence before Leo asked, somewhat unexpectedly, "Did you have a good summer?"

Harry hadn't considered the summer as a whole, but she thought, after a brief consideration, that it *had* been good. She felt lighter going into her fourth year than she had any of the previous summers. She'd finally come to terms with her magic, and had used it cooperatively with her training from both Leo and Remus. She'd proven to her family at the World Cup that her potions were more than an interesting hobby. Her father's own office used a potion she'd invented, which was something she never could have imagined coming to pass.

She had also given back to the community. She was collaborating with Snape, teaching Lestrage, tutoring the alley kids, and brewing potions for the Maywell clinic. She felt good about what she'd accomplished. Why, she'd even come to an understanding with the Dominion Jewel. After all that, she could honestly say, "It's been the best summer yet."

When they passed through the entryway to Diagon Alley, into the small area between the hidden archway and the Leaky Cauldron's backdoor, Leo made an apologetic noise and stopped to fish a small roll of parchment from his pocket.

"Almost forgot." He tilted his head sheepishly. "Mum asked me to pass this along. A list of potions the clinic has trouble getting hold of, as requested."

Harry's eyes widened with interest. She'd asked Mrs. Hurst if there were other potions like Seifer's Solution that were difficult for her to procure. One of her projects this term was to research the licenses required for specialized distribution. She wiggled the fingers of her left hand without releasing her hold on the crate completely. "Could you...?" She expected him to slip it into that hand, but instead he leaned over and tucked the scroll gently behind her left ear.

"Thanks," she said, her voice a bit weak with surprise. Clearing her throat, she added, "If you ever need anything for the clinic or the alleys, I'm just an owl away, ok?"

Leo's eyes searched hers with unmistakable intensity. "You know, it goes both ways. The alleys look after their own, but more importantly, I'll look after you, if you ever need it. I know you don't want me to," he added, correctly interpreting her huff, "but that doesn't stop me caring."

"You don't have to worry about me," she said, a faint blush creeping over her nose and cheeks as their proximity and his bright-eyed affection registered in her awareness.

"I couldn't turn it off even if I tried," he confessed quietly. "I know I sometimes treat it lightly, and I don't want to make you uncomfortable, but my regard for you is completely serious, Harry."

She was barely aware of the red flush extending to burn over the rest of her face as her breath caught unwillingly. Why did he have to go and say that? She waited for the surprise to register, then bit her lip as she realized that, if she truly examined their interactions honestly, she'd known how Leo felt for a while. She'd been ignoring the hints and even outright remarks in the hope that she would not have to confront her own feelings directly.

The vulnerability in Leo's gaze shamed her somewhat. Leo was brave, and she wasn't sure she could match that bravery, but it was disrespectful to him for her not to try. And if nothing else, she was certain of her respect for Leo. Thinking about it like that, there was a lot she admired about the older boy: his drive to better himself and the world, his conscientious awareness of and care for the people around him, his confident leadership, and his willingness to take responsibility for those less capable than himself.

Second to and quite apart from his objectively admirable qualities, there were personal things she liked about their relationship, too. Leo had never judged her for anything but her own merit. Her magic never unnerved him. Her blood status never interested him. Her youth, sex, family, none of it had dissuaded him from befriending and supporting her from the beginning. Even her secrets, a point of friction between her and the world in so many of her other

relationships, only concerned Leo insofar as they pertained to his concern for her.

All this went through her mind as she stood there dumbly, not knowing what to do because, for all that, she still didn't know if her feelings for Leo were of the level and nature that he hoped. She didn't *not* like him, but she had always felt that her life held no room for romance. It was, at best, a distraction. At worst it would prove dangerous to the deceptions and assumptions that her plans were predicated upon. But how to express such an unsatisfying sentiment? It would be easier, she thought ruefully, if she had no interest in Leo at all. She could simply tell him so and hope their friendship would settle back into what it had been. Harry could not bear to lie to her friend about her potential feelings for him, however. She felt that such a lie would somehow be worse than all the ones that had come before.

Leo was, as always, perceptive. He must have read the hesitation and uncertainty in her increasingly distressed expression, for he summoned a brave little smile and shook his head slowly. "It's all right, Harry. You don't have to... I don't expect anything from you in response. I just couldn't let you go off again without making myself clear."

She nodded, grateful and humbled by his understanding. Words seemed impossible to form as her throat closed up against the emotions running through her, but she managed a choked, "Thank you," before her brain decided breathing was more important than talking and cut off any further attempts at articulation.

She turned her lower body and took a hesitant step toward the Leaky's backdoor, but her eyes remained fixed on the friend that had come to mean so much to her over the past three years. What had just happened? Was their friendship somehow different, now?

Leo shooed her away with a crooked grin. "Go on, then. Don't be afraid to come back after this."

Harry bristled, and the sudden indignation found her voice. "I'm not afraid of anything, Lionel Hurst, least of all you." She moved to lean on the door before she could work herself up into any more emotional states and gave her exasperating friend a prim nod. "See you."

"Be careful this year."

She was always careful, she thought despairingly as she left. It just never seemed to do her any good.

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[end of chapter five].



# Chapter 6

## The Futile Façade:

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There was something about the first of September that made anticipation crackle like lightning in her stomach. It wasn't just the Modified Polyjuice that she'd taken that morning, though the unpleasant sludge wasn't helping. It was the air itself, the barest chill in the morning that anticipated the turn of the season. She smoothed the school robes she'd already changed into and took a final glance in the mirror to make sure all was in order before she joined the others in their compartment.

Rigel's face hadn't changed at all from the beginning of the summer. Unfortunately, it had been impossible to update her Modified Polyjuice due to simple logistics. She had just been at Draco's house as Rigel, and didn't think she could pass off the dramatic shift in a space of a few weeks as unconscious metamorphing when 'Harry' hadn't undergone a sudden growth spurt in the same period. They would have to make do with waiting until next summer to update it properly; perhaps she and Archie would both have long absences abroad.

She'd still opted to take another dose of Modified Polyjuice, using the same hairs as the dose she'd taken at the beginning of the summer. She'd learned her lesson with the time-turner last year. Even though there was no reason to think she'd have to go longer than the end of term to take another dose, Rigel wasn't going to make such assumptions again.

Finding nothing amiss, Rigel left the bathroom and made her way down the train until she reached the compartment her friends favored. For once, she was the last to arrive. Pansy rose to greet her

at once, the fierce smile on her face enough to warm Rigel's spirit even before the other girl wrapped Rigel in a firm embrace.

"Let me look at you," Pansy said, holding Rigel still with her hands while she examined her. "You've changed a lot, as usual." Rigel supposed from Pansy's perspective, she had. Pansy had last seen her at the end of term, before over a year and a half of compressed time had caught up to her. Luckily, she still looked a bit younger than she should, since she was older than her cousin now and the blending ritual averaged their ages to create the hair she used to assume her current face. Then again, her friends had all grown up a bit over the summer, too.

"You're one to talk," Rigel said, her eyes roaming over Pansy's features. The blonde girl's bone structure was more defined this year, as it looked like she'd lost most of the roundness in her face. As Pansy tilted her head and smiled, Rigel could see that her friend's poised expressions now had a face to match. Sometimes she forgot that Pansy was nearly a year older than her and Draco-or had been, in Rigel's case.

Pansy released her, but her eyes didn't leave Rigel's face as she asked, more seriously, "Are you doing all right, Rigel?"

She couldn't pretend not to know what Pansy meant, but she didn't really want to talk about that. Sirius had already made a minor fuss on the platform. He was deeply concerned with his son returning to Hogwarts after what had happened last year, though he tried not to show it. Rigel gave Pansy the same answer she'd given Sirius.

"Never better." Honestly, she thought she'd be a lot better if people stopped bringing it up. Yes, she'd had a bad experience at Hogwarts last year, but the same could be said of every year so far. Despite that, there were far more good memories for her at Hogwarts than bad.

"How was everyone's summer?" she asked as she took the last remaining seat next to Millicent and across from Blaise.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Theo's suggestive tone was accompanied by wagging eyebrows, which prompted Millicent to punch him in the arm and scowl.

"Not anymore we don't." The dark-haired girl was a couple inches taller and her voice had a lower, smoother quality to it than Rigel remembered. "I spent the summer abroad," Millicent added. "My father took me to Geneva with him to further my political education."

"Were you there after the World Cup?" Blaise asked, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. As always, the intensity of his calculating, somewhat cat-like eyes distracted from any attempt to catalogue the rest of him, but Rigel still got the impression that he, too, was a bit taller.

Millicent nodded, grimacing. "What a fiasco. The British Ministry's reputation has never been worse. We insisted on controlling the event, and now it's come back to bite us."

"I hear Bulgaria has incinerated a number of our trade agreements," Theo said.

"They weren't the only ones." Blaise made a token attempt to sound concerned, but the primary expression on his face was fascination. "Several European nations have expressed reservations about doing business with Britain in the wake of an event many perceive to be destabilizing."

"Idiots," Draco said, shaking his head. "They'll regret that. My father says there's something big in the works that's going to make all this go away."

Millicent sat up straighter in her seat. "My father hinted along similar lines! Do you know what's going on? All I've gathered is that it involves Hogwarts in some way. It must be something monumental, if they want to sweep the World Cup disaster under the rug quickly."

"Father wouldn't give me specifics," Draco admitted. "He kept saying I'd find out soon enough. Then he started showing up to my dueling practice and giving me pointers. I can't fathom that he wants me involved in anything going on at that high a level, though."

"Very suspicious," Blaise agreed. "Mother hasn't said anything, but then, she rarely interests herself in politics beyond the social gatherings."

"Father told me to keep my head down this year," Pansy said, frowning slightly. "I did think it odd, but it makes sense if something big is happening at Hogwarts. Is the Party organizing it, then?"

Draco nodded. "Lord Riddle made it sound as though it was the Ministry's doing, but the way he and Father talked about it, I could tell it was meant to further our agenda somehow. Don't you think, Rigel?"

Rigel kept her face carefully neutral as she said, "Most likely. No doubt the Ministry is supporting it in order to recoup their losses from the World Cup." She was going to say something more, but a sharp pain in her head distracted her. She winced minutely and pushed her thoughts toward the likely perpetrator. *Dom, not a good time to practice.*

The jewel had been working on communicating with her sans meditation, as promised. So far, he didn't seem to have a good way to get her attention without pain, though the discomfort had been reduced with each successive time the construct attempted it. Dom's reply floated up in the back of her mind softly, like a bubble of air rising to the surface of a lake before popping. *Not practicing.*

Rigel fought not to frown. A real warning? She was on the middle of the Hogwarts Express, for Merlin's sake. None of her friends even had sustained eye contact-how could she be under mental attack? She caught Draco glancing at her furtively from across the isle and suspicion bloomed. Was Dom picking up on Draco's empathy? Had Draco scanned her emotions to try and get an idea of how she felt

about Riddle's plans? Rigel summoned her Occlumency skills and smoothed her emotions into utter calmness. After a few moments, the slight headache receded and she assumed whatever it was Dom was reacting to had stopped.

She'd only been distracted for a minute, so the conversation was easy to rejoin. Millicent was saying that the Ministry was desperate to look as though it was in control, so the big event their parents had hinted at must be a way to save face.

"It's about money for the Ministry," Rigel said, remembering what she was going to say earlier. "The Department of Games and Sports is bankrupt. All that personal property loss at the Cup means lawsuits and thousands of demands for refunds. Whatever Riddle has planned, if it brings in revenue, the Ministry will support it completely. Harry says her dad has a hand in some of the preparations, too, so this thing is at least big enough to warrant professional security." Her father had intimated as much when she'd prodded Archie into asking James if he should expect to see him at Hogwarts that year. James had awkwardly said he wasn't at liberty to confirm anything, which essentially confirmed it. If the Auror Department was involved, the Ministry was giving Riddle their full cooperation.

Her friends all exchanged wary looks. "That makes it sound like it could be a spectator event of some kind," Theo said slowly. "Making money usually means asking for donations or charging for something."

"And either one requires the same thing: *press*," Millicent said.

Draco scowled. "How troublesome. We'll have no peace."

"We'll be expected to put a very good face on," Pansy added, nodding slowly. "It explains Father's advice, too. With the anti-pureblood backlash from the Cup, we can't afford to draw too much attention to ourselves in front of the media."

Theo huffed a sigh. "All plans for a quiet year foiled before it even begins. Face it; we're cursed."

"What do you mean 'we'?" Blaise sent Rigel a half-lidded look.

Draco and Pansy both bristled on her behalf.

"You can't blame Rigel for-"

"How dare you suggest such a-"

The compartment door slid open, cutting off the their outrage. A head of yellow pigtails poked in shyly and a pair of wide eyes swept the compartment slowly before resting on Blaise. "Um. Hi," she squeaked out, voice barely above a whisper.

"Hannah." Their dark friend stood gracefully and smiled. "Excellent timing. Shall we?"

He shot a small smirk over his shoulder as he exited the compartment with the Hufflepuff girl in tow. Pansy shot him a resigned glare and Draco looked positively murderous.

"He did that on purpose," Draco snarled.

"Enhanced shifter hearing," Theo said, nodding sagely. "Probably knew she was coming all the way down the train car."

"I thought her relatives didn't approve of Blaise," Millicent said, a contemplative frown on her face. "Last I heard their families haven't reconciled."

"He doesn't care," Theo said, shrugging. "Blaise chose her, and he'll keep at it until he gets his way."

Millicent quirked an eyebrow at Theo. "Perhaps Blaise is more like his mother than I realized. I've heard Lady Zabini always gets what she wants, too."

Pansy shook her head. "Careful what you suggest, Millie. Lady Zabini also has a tendency to outlast her critics."

As a group, they agreed it would be best to change the subject. The afternoon wore into early evening, and Rigel was just contemplating a nap when their compartment door opened again, this time for the Weasley twins. Rigel assumed they were there to see her, but to her chagrin both Fred and George zeroed in on Draco with Kneazle smiles.

Draco scowled at them, but rose unprompted and retrieved a substantial sack from his trunk. With the dignity only possessed by the truly annoyed, Draco handed it over to Fred's eager possession with barely a sniff.

"What a pleasure doing business with you, Draco," Fred said cheerfully, bouncing the sack to produce a clinking noise that made him grin even wider.

Rigel watched Draco's eyebrow twitch at being addressed so casually by the redhead, but to his credit he did not rise to the bait. "Try not to lose it on your way out," he said stiffly, reclaiming his seat in open dismissal of the twins.

"How's it been, Rigel?" George asked, quite obviously not in a hurry to leave.

"Just fine, you?"

"Oh, you know, a little experimentation here, a minor re-purposing of the kitchen there." George shrugged. "We're pretty sure Mum would have kicked us out of the house if we'd been of age."

"There's always next year," she said encouragingly.

Fred and George laughed. "Good to see you, Pup," Fred said, saluting her as he pocketed the sack of galleons at last.

"See you around," George added, waving facetiously to the rest of the compartment before he and Fred took their leave.

When the compartment door shut behind them, Theo could no longer contain himself. "What did you do to owe the *Weasleys* that many galleons?"

"Shut. Up." Draco turned his face to the window and would say no more.

Mischievously, Rigel leaned around Millicent to mouth *tell you later* . She was impressed with her friend for keeping his end of the wager, but that didn't mean she wasn't going to let him be teased mercilessly for falling for it in the first place.

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Rigel kept an eye on Draco as they settled at the Slytherin table in the Great Hall and awaited the Sorting. He was much more put together than the previous year. He looked comfortable in his own skin, and she was pleased that he seemed fully capable of controlling the emotive input his gift provided even in the moderately rowdy crowd of excitable returning students.

She was a bit fatigued from her menstrual cycle once again making an appearance. It had taken a couple of months to re-regulate her body after stopping her time-turner use, but she was back to her usual schedule now. She just wished they'd hurry up with the Sorting and start the feast. Her cramps were always worse when she was hungry.

"Is anyone we know being Sorted this year?" Draco asked Pansy.

Pansy tucked a lock of hair behind her ear thoughtfully, and Rigel noticed it was now long enough to reach past her shoulders. "I think



the Rowle Heiress is eleven this year. The Carrow Heir, too."

"Don't forget Billy Travers," Millicent put in.

"I thought he was slated for Durmstrang." Pansy's mouth was a thoughtful moue. "Isn't his father friends with the Headmaster there?"

Millicent shrugged. "I saw him on the platform. I guess Durmstrang wouldn't take him."

"Durmstrang's definition of pureblood is more strict than Hogwarts'. I'm fairly sure one of his great grandmothers was a Muggleborn," Draco said.

"Durmstrang requires four generations of magical blood on both sides?" Rigel hadn't known that. It seemed a very strict requirement, and she wondered how many people at Hogwarts met that standard.

"Preferably more, but if your surname is old, you can get away with four as a minimum," Millicent explained. "And they don't make exceptions for creature blood, the way schools like Beauxbatons do."

"Technically Beauxbatons accepts all students, regardless of blood," Rigel pointed out.

"Technically, that's a load of centaur dung," Theo said, snorting in amusement. "If you look at their actual acceptance statistics, Halfbloods make up a steady five percent; they keep that quota for publicity purposes, and I hear the Halfbloods pay twice the tuition anyway. As for Muggleborns, I think the last one on record was six years ago, and she didn't graduate."

Rigel held her tongue, but she couldn't help the disgust she felt at how readily those of lesser blood were dismissed and discarded without ever being given a proper chance. She felt a small mental spike and flicked her eyes to Draco. He was watching her intently, and Rigel narrowed her eyes before quelling her emotions firmly. The pain subsided and she sent a quick, *thanks Dom*, to her

mindscape. As the Deputy Headmistress at last paraded the first years into the hall, Rigel was left wondering just how often her friend scanned her emotions. Was he just using it on everyone all the time or did he check up on her emotional state specifically? Either way, she may have to be more careful.

The hall quieted, and the Sorting Hat came alive once more to sing.

"There is a tale you may have heard;

The whole world knows it well

And every year inside this hall

That story I retell

There once were four inspired lords

And ladies who it seemed

Did take upon themselves a task

That no one else had dreamed

On this site they built a castle

Matched to their ambition

Its walls would house the children if

Their plans came to fruition

Its doors would open wide to all

Who sought to fill their minds

Yes, every child was welcome here

Regardless of their kind!

Sir Godric loved the daring ones  
And Salazar, the sly  
Rowena sought the ones with smarts  
And Helga, those who try  
And while each had their favorites  
The truth was widely known  
The founders cared for all their charges  
-Not one group alone!  
Although Godric designed me to  
Decide where you will stay  
What many now forget is that  
Each student got a say  
The truth is that your choices are  
What make you so unique  
A cursory inspection just  
Can't find the things I seek  
No one is born courageous, wise,  
Ambitious, or hard working  
It's folly to imagine I  
Could find such traits just lurking

It's willpower alone that makes you

Something to behold

So disregard your prejudice!

Forget what you've been told!

Instead look to your heart to judge

Who *you* would like to be

And when you try me on I promise

-that is what I'll see!"

Perfunctory applause rang out, but, like last year, it was filled with murmuring and curious commentary.

"I swear it gets less specific every year," Theo said, laughing a bit. "I mean, if it keeps deteriorating the first-years will have to sort themselves."

"It is quite old," Blaise pointed out. "Perhaps its magic is finally fading."

Rigel thought it more likely that the hat had simply forgotten its audience. Still, the Sorting proceeded without incident. The Carrow boy was the first to join Slytherin, and Rigel couldn't help but wonder how an eleven-year-old could have such a haughty look about them. Rowanda Rowle was a timid little thing, with long brown hair hanging into her face, and Travers, who seemed much too big to be a first-year, had a sullen-faced look about him that Rigel hoped wasn't permanent.

"Not much hope for the new lot," Theo commented as the Sorting Hat was taken away.

"Too soon to tell," Pansy said kindly.

They quieted as Dumbledore stood to give his opening announcements. The anticipation on her classmates' faces told Rigel they expected the Headmaster to say something about the anticipated event their parents had hinted at. Dumbledore, however, gave the usual start of term reminders and warnings and sat back down, with absolutely no reference or allusion to any kind of unusual happenings at Hogwarts that year.

Her eyes slid along the Head Table, noting the new faces. There were only two. One was a dark-haired man with a solid build who she supposed was probably the new Care of Magical Creatures professor, because the other one was Auror Dawlish. She recognized his close-cropped hair and perpetually serious expression. He could only be their new Defense professor, but she wondered whether Dumbledore or the Ministry had arranged for him to take a leave of absence from work for so long.

When the food appeared, her year-mates seemed too distracted to even notice, but Rigel dug in with alacrity while they furiously discussed the conspicuous lack of information.

"Maybe he's not permitted to say anything," Millicent supposed.

"More like he doesn't approve of whatever is happening," Draco said. "If it's something that's going to make the S.O.W. Party look good, there's no reason for Dumbledore to support it."

"If none of our parents have revealed it yet, chances are we won't find out until an official announcement," Blaise reasoned.

"You'd think they'd want to at least warn the students that something was going on," Theo said, sounding a bit put out. "After all, we can't be the only ones who have heard something from our parents."

"Ask Snape," Rigel said. Her friends all turned to look at her. She took a swig from her water goblet and cleared her throat. "He usually knows what the Party is up to when it happens at Hogwarts." At least, she suspected he did.

"You say 'up to' like it's going to be a bad thing," Pansy said, frowning slightly.

"Isn't it always?" Rigel shrugged as her friend's troubled expression deepened. "Maybe this year is the exception," she allowed. "I mean, bringing politics into a school full of kids never ends badly, does it?"

Draco was looking increasingly alarmed and Theo straight out gaped at her. Blaise shot a look up and down the table around them before leaning forward and lowering his voice. "Be careful, Rigel. The Party has ears everywhere, and it can make life difficult for you."

Rigel leveled a look at Blaise and slowly slid it to encompass each of her friends in turn before saying, "I don't give a brass Knut if the Party hears my opinion. I'll say it to Riddle's face. Whatever is happening at Hogwarts this year is a bad idea."

Pansy's face paled two shades and she immediately changed the subject. "Will you be starting up the Dueling Club again, Draco? We all so enjoyed it last year."

Draco picked up the thread of conversation easily, but his eyes kept flicking worriedly toward Rigel. He was not the only one. She knew she had unnerved the others with her blunt speech. She didn't care, though. She was so sick and tired of tiptoeing around the Party's ill-conceived plots while they played havoc with her life. As she picked at her food, waiting for the feast to end, she began to feel a bit guilty at startling them, though. It wasn't their fault that their families were embedded in the Party. They didn't know where the Basilisk came from, nor anything about the Dominion Jewel and Riddle's hand in its presence at Hogwarts. It wasn't really fair to put them in the position of listening to her criticize it, when any perception of disloyalty on their part might spell trouble for their families.

She needed to pull herself together. She'd grown too bold in the last few months, forgotten how to keep her own council. She couldn't be herself here, and she couldn't afford to forget that while Pansy,

Draco, Millicent, Blaise, and Theo were her friends, their ultimate loyalty was not to her and never would be.

Rigel kept to herself for the remainder of the meal, and when Slytherin House traipsed to the dungeons she hung back a little, letting the others pull ahead of her in the crowd. She had a moment of wistfulness as she thought of her time in the lower alleys that summer. That freedom was beyond her reach right now. It was time to focus on the task at hand.

When they'd assembled in the common room to await their Head of House, Rigel sidled back over to her friends and gave them an apologetic smile. Pansy sighed, but took Rigel's hand and pressed it briefly. "Do try not to give us all heart attacks at every meal this year, Rye."

She reached up with her free hand to ruffle her bangs sheepishly. "Sorry, Pan. I don't mean to burden you with my worldview. Sometimes my tongue runs away from me."

Pansy's gaze was both worried and a bit sad. "You *can* talk to us about stuff like that, you know. Just maybe," she dropped her voice, "not in the middle of the Great Hall."

"Right." Rigel grimaced. She had really lost her head there. She probably ought to start exercising her Occlumency all the time, if for no other reason than that Riddle's name was likely to come up an infuriating amount over the next few months. She could only hope that whatever he was scheming came to a swift conclusion and left them in peace.

Snape's appearance commanded instantaneous silence. He surveyed the room slowly, probably mentally accounting for all who ought to be present. His eyes met Rigel's briefly before moving on and finally resting on the new first-years.

"Welcome to Slytherin House," he said. Somehow Snape's voice could fill a room no matter how quietly he spoke. "I am your Head of

House, Potions Master Severus Snape. No doubt you believe you understand what Slytherin House entails; forget the misconceptions you harbor. Slytherin House is a unit. We are the bulwark of tradition against a backdrop of indolence and idiocy. Here, you will find refuge for neither. Your triumphs will be your House's pride, your disgraces likewise. That said, Slytherin House will not itself make you into the witches and wizards you aim to be. Every individual in this room must work for their ambitions. It is for Slytherin House to support and safeguard those ambitions until they see achievement."

He paused for a moment to sweep the room with his gaze before continuing in a slightly different vein. "If you have not heard rumors already, know that this year there are certain anticipated events that will elevate this school to public scrutiny like nothing you have experienced thus far. With the eyes of the world upon us, you *will* make Slytherin proud. Each of you will do your part to present a dignified, unified, façade until this charade is over." He cut off a sixth year's question with a sharp cut of his hand. "You will know more when it is necessary. For now, simply be cognizant of your appearance and behavior. If any one of you brings shame to the house of snakes, it will not be only me that you must answer to." With that ominous declaration, Snape swept from the room, leaving the prefects to corral the firsties and the rest of them to exchange murmured conversation.

"Well, that answers that," Theo said, releasing a small laugh. "We've just become the Abraxans in the Party's dog and pony show."

"And me without my manicure done," Millicent said drolly.

Rigel laughed along with the others, but there was a burning sensation in her stomach that she doubted would go away until she knew exactly what the year was to entail. It was like being told you had a grave illness but the exact diagnosis was inconclusive. She just wanted to *know* what was going to happen so she could start dealing with it.



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When Snape dropped Rigel's fourth year class schedule next to her plate at breakfast, Draco snatched it up so fast she was surprised he didn't pop a joint. He ignored her long-suffering sigh and perused it at his leisure.

"No potions," he said. "I suppose you're self-studying again this year." His eyes boggled. " *Alchemy*? Since when do you take Alchemy?"

"Ah, well, remember last year when I was taking more classes than you thought?" Rigel's smile wilted slightly under Draco's affronted glare. "Yes, I am taking Alchemy."

"Healing I guessed, but how did you even get into Alchemy? You need recommendations from about three different professors." Draco was a little more worked up than Rigel would have anticipated, if she had thought to realize that her friends would be very curious about her schedule this year.

Pansy gently plucked the schedule from Draco's hand and looked over it herself. "You've dropped Ancient Runes," she said, humming thoughtfully.

"I figured I could self-study that subject the easiest," Rigel explained. "Arithmancy pairs really well with Alchemy, anyway, and I knew I wanted to keep that one."

"What's it like, learning from Dumbledore himself?" Blaise asked from across the table, shameless in his eavesdropping.

"Very different from my other classes," Rigel admitted. "He literally wrote the textbook himself. His handwriting is a little hard to read sometimes, and there are no chapters or quizzes or tests. We just kind of meander from topic to topic as it comes up."

Blaise raised his eyebrows. "That sounds a bit lackadaisical. Isn't there an OWL curriculum you should be following?"

"Actually, no, there's no OWL for Alchemy," Rigel said. It had been one of her first questions, too.

Draco frowned. "What's the point of taking the class, then?"

"Some people learn things for their own sake," Rigel said, smiling.

"But you could be taking a class that did provide you an OWL," Theo put in. Rigel looked over to see him and Millicent both following the conversation with unabashed fascination.

"OWLs don't really matter for me," Rigel said honestly. "I only need a handful to keep my wand. The Potions Guild only requires the Potions and Herbology NEWTs anyway as a prerequisite to trying for the Mastery."

"You are such a Ravenclaw sometimes," Draco complained. He turned to his own schedule finally and scanned it quickly. His mouth dropped open in shock. "No Dueling? What are they playing at?" Draco stood at once, breakfast forgotten, and strode off in the direction of the professors' table.

"Perhaps the Defense professor isn't up to teaching two classes this year," Millicent said, chewing her bacon thoughtfully. "Shame. I liked your uncle okay, Rigel."

Rigel inclined her head in thanks. When Pansy finally returned her schedule she looked it over to make sure the things she'd discussed with Professor Snape were reflected accurately. Monday and Wednesday she had Charms, Transfiguration, and Herbology. Tuesday and Thursday were DADA, History, and Arithmancy. Friday she would have Healing in the morning and Alchemy in the afternoon. Astronomy was every Thursday evening after sundown. Potions wasn't listed anywhere, but she'd already agreed to have

lessons Friday, Saturday, or Sunday with her Head of House, depending on his schedule each week.

"Rigel," Pansy said, causing her to look up at the blond girl curiously. "Is your schedule correct in putting you in the fifth year Healing class?"

Rigel nodded. "I'm the only student for fourth year, and the fifth year class fits better in my schedule anyway. Madam Pomfrey says it won't be any trouble to get me up to speed. It didn't sound like her fifth year student was much more advanced."

Pansy nodded thoughtfully. "Healing has an OWL, I believe. Will you take it at the end of the year?"

Rigel blinked. She had not thought of that. "I suppose I may as well," she said. "The NEWT isn't offered at Hogwarts unless you get special permission, so this will be my last year taking it officially regardless."

"Why is that?" Pansy asked.

"I think it's because an NEWT in the subject requires a wider range of experience than can be got from a classroom alone," Rigel said. "At AIM, Harry's program has her working at local hospitals in a supervised role, because for a lot of the practical aspects, you need an actual sick or injured person or animal to practice on. Madam Pomfrey can only provide so much in a few hours a week. I know she has had NEWT students in the past, but they end up dropping most of their other NEWT classes and focusing on that alone."

"I hadn't considered that," Pansy said, looking somewhat ill. "You practice on animals, Rigel?"

She winced. "I do. Sorry, Pan. Madam Pomfrey puts them unconscious and numbs them up, so they don't suffer if I make a mistake. Also, we only use animals that can be usefully harvested. It's not wanton, but I can't tell you an animal never gets hurt."

The girl shuddered slightly. "I'm glad I didn't apply to take that subject."

"What do you have this year?" Rigel asked, turning her attention delicately away from the gruesome realities of Healing class. "Did you stick with Arithmancy?"

"I did," Pansy said, pushing her schedule toward Rigel for a quick comparison. "I dropped Divination-it wasn't as rigorous a subject as I thought it would be. I'm sticking with Care of Magical Creatures, though. Did you know Rookwood's uncle is teaching it this year?"

Rigel shook her head. "That's bound to be a great class, then. He owns a creature reserve, right? I bet he's a lot more knowledgeable than last year's professor."

If Pansy noticed that Rigel chose not to say Pettigrew's name out loud, she let it go gracefully.

Breakfast was wrapping up and Draco had not returned. Rigel and Pansy decided it was better to meet him in class than to wait around and potentially lose points for all three of them being tardy, and began making their way toward the Great Hall doors.

A voice from the Ravenclaw table called out to Rigel as she passed. Rigel turned to see Cho Chang waving at her from the other side. She approached curiously, Pansy close behind her. "Good morning," she said, tilting her head as the Asian girl thrust a stack of parchment at her. "What's this?"

"Madam Pomfrey told me you were joining my Healing class," Chang said, smiling in a way that brought out the soft prettiness of her features. "Those are my notes from last year. It's just me taking it this year, so it'll be nice to have company and someone to study with."

Rigel took the notes with a returning smile. "This is very kind of you. I'll be sure to study hard so I don't hold you back too much."

Cho shook her head, and her long, black hair briefly obstructed her eyes before she pushed it back again. "Madam Pomfrey says you are already ahead of the fourth year curriculum. I'm sure we will learn a lot together."

"See you Friday, then," Rigel said, tucking the hefty stack of notes away in her bag neatly. It would be nice to have a classmate to bounce ideas off of, she thought. Archie was decidedly ahead of her now in every aspect of Healing, and his explanations were sometimes too advanced to follow easily.

As she walked toward the Charms classroom with Pansy, her friend looked sidelong at her and said, a playful tone to her voice, "That was interesting."

"Why's that?" Rigel asked, quirking an eyebrow at the mischievous expression on Pansy's face.

"The Changs are relatively new to English Wizarding society, but they have good connections all the same," Pansy said, choosing not to answer the question directly. "She walked about with Adrian for a few months last year, but they parted amiably."

"That is very interesting," Rigel said flatly, fighting an eye roll as she understood Pansy's pointed speculation. "If only I weren't already betrothed."

Pansy bumped her admonishingly. "You can't hide behind that contract forever, Rigel. It's perfectly obvious you have no intention of marrying your cousin."

"Only to someone as brilliant and socially accomplished as you, dear Pansy." At least, Rigel hoped it wasn't that obvious to anyone else.

Draco caught up to them as they reached the classroom, and one look at his face told them he had not been successful in correcting the perceived deficiency in his schedule.

"No Dueling, then?" Rigel guessed, frowning sympathetically. "Did Snape say why?"

"No," Draco said, scowling. "I know it has something to do with whatever the event is that's happening here, though. He said I can't start my Dueling Club again, either! How is that fair?"

"They cancelled the class and the club?" Pansy raised her eyebrows. "That's a rather obvious hint. Are they holding a dueling tournament?"

"I asked that, and Snape said that wasn't why. I couldn't tell whether he was lying-his Occlumency is too good for my Empathy to read," Draco complained. Rigel gathered he must be very annoyed if he went so far as to mention his gift aloud. He normally pretended he was merely clairvoyant rather than acknowledge it openly.

"It could also be because of the press," Rigel pointed out. "Maybe for some reason people don't want it known that Dueling is taught at Hogwarts."

"It's a magic school, it's *supposed* to teach us those things." Draco shook his head with disgust and flopped into his seat with all the grace of a narcoleptic troll falling unconscious.

"It's not exactly an uncommon subject," Pansy agreed. "I suppose we'll have to wait and see what the reasoning is. If there is a dueling competition to be held, then you can enter. If there isn't, we'll find another way to practice."

"Exactly," Rigel said encouragingly. "Who says we have to form a club to practice dueling?"

"I tried that," Draco said, sighing dejectedly. "Snape said if he got a single report of any Slytherins dueling on Hogwarts grounds he would hold me personally responsible and I'd be in detention for a month."

Rigel couldn't mask her surprise. Snape practically doted on his godson. For him to issue so severe a threat could only mean that the dueling ban was serious. Pansy made encouraging noises about finding somewhere Snape wouldn't be monitoring to keep up their practice, but all Rigel could think was that if there was some kind of dueling competition at Hogwarts, she would stay well out of it.

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No one was sure what to expect from the new Defense professor. Whether at meals or in the corridors, Auror Dawlish always bore the same staid look of disinterested professionalism. By Tuesday, rumors already abounded that Professor Dawlish was strict and humorless, but they had also heard that he didn't assign essays. It was with cautious curiosity that the fourth year Slytherins and Gryffindors took their seats for the double lesson.

Dawlish read off the roll briskly, only pausing to mark down modifications to pronunciation before continuing without comment down the list. As he tucked the roll away in a pocket of the olive trench coat he seemed to favor, the Auror surveyed them with a blank expression. A couple of steps in his sturdy boots brought the tall man to the center of the room, where he paused and snapped, "Eyes on me."

Those students at the front of the room who hadn't turned their heads to follow the man whipped around in their seats, startled.

"The first thing you will learn in this class is to always keep your eyes on the biggest threat in the room. That would be me, in case it wasn't clear." His icy blue eyes narrowed as they swept the classroom once more. He walked to the back of the classroom and turned to face them. None of the students looked away.

Rigel felt her eyebrows rise of their own accord. Unexpectedly, Auror Dawlish could carry a room. She knew the man was one of her father's go-to Aurors for important assignments, but she'd never heard him speak more than a handful of words at a time. Then again, she supposed she'd always seen him on duty, most often guarding the Minister in Fudge's personal detail. She wondered again how he'd gotten the Defense Against the Dark Arts job this year. Was the Ministry looking to have a presence at the school? Or had the man simply fancied a chance to teach?

"I am John Dawlish, Auror, Halfblood, and for the remainder of this term-your worst nightmare." Dawlish began to walk back toward the front of the room and it was almost amusing to watch the class swivel to follow his progress like moon-blinked owls. "For the last two years I've served as the Deputy Head of Security for the Minister of Magic. Before that, I was head of Special Response Force Three. I've been fighting the Dark Arts longer than any of you have been alive, so you will respect me in this classroom, understood?"

There was silence, and more than a few confused looks were exchanged among the students. Rigel couldn't think of any other professor who had just flat out demanded respect from his students. It would be interesting to see how it worked out for him.

Dawlish resumed his slow pacing, this time to the right side of the classroom. Was he really going to be moving about the entire lesson? It was going to get tiresome to follow his every move for over an hour. "I have reviewed the syllabi for your previous three years. Near as I can tell from the notes they left behind, your previous professors were well-meaning at best and utterly incompetent at worst."

Rigel tamped down on the offense she felt on Remus' behalf. There was no sense being upset when Dawlish likely hadn't ever met Remus and didn't mean the criticism personally.

"You covered minor schoolyard jinxes and a lot of useless theory in your first year," Dawlish said, ticking off his fingers deliberately. "Your



second year you seem to have wasted entirely. I thought the exams in *Professor Lockhart's* files were a joke at first, but it seems he was just a narcissistic loon." Muffled chortles swiftly turned into awkward coughs as Dawlish whipped his head around to search for the noisemakers. "Last year, Professor Lupin appears to have attempted to catch you up, but while he covered Dark Creatures comprehensively enough, spell-casting fell to the wayside."

"He taught Dueling, too," Ron said, frowning.

"An optional class only helps those who opt into it," Dawlish said. Leveling a menacing look at the redheaded boy, he added. "Don't speak out of turn again, Mr. Weasley."

Ron swallowed and nodded shortly. Rigel caught his eyes and smiled. It was nice of him to defend Remus. He smiled back, shrugging a bit.

"Eyes on me!"

Rigel grimaced, moving her gaze back to Auror apologetically. "Sorry, Professor."

Dawlish met her eyes for a stern moment. "I won't say it a third time." When she inclined her head deferentially, he continued. "Thus far you have not been exposed to anything truly dangerous. While I understand the logistical drawbacks to bringing a quintuple-X dark creature into the classroom, you can and will be familiar with the majority of dark curses by the end of this year."

Many of the students perked up in interest. It was true that while they'd studied the theory behind many practices of the Dark Arts, they'd yet to actually see most of it in action.

"Some people think it's irresponsible to teach dangerous spells to kids," Dawlish said, making his way slowly across the front of the classroom. "They're right, and I won't." She could almost feel the collective sigh of disappointment from the class. "What I will teach

you is how to recognize them and how to counter them. I'm guessing you've never had a Bone Crushing Hex thrown at you, Mr. Malfoy."

Draco startled slightly at being singled out. "Can't say I have, Professor."

"Your name is on the roster for last year's Dueling class, is it not?" Dawlish asked.

Draco nodded slowly. "Yes, Professor. We typically didn't try to kill one another, however."

" *Exactly*," Dawlish said, stressing the word with a growl. "In a friendly duel no one is going to try to kill you, so how will you react when it happens? Many witches and wizards believe that to hunt Dark Arts users you need to know a lot of Dark Arts yourself. Fight fire with fire, as it were. Well you don't. If any of you are ever in a fight for your life, you only need to remember one principle: *react appropriately*."

Dawlish snapped his wrist out and had palmed his wand before Rigel had time to draw a surprised breath. His wand arm twisted unerringly toward Draco and a jet of light shot toward the blond without the murmur of a spell to foreshadow it. Rigel had pulled Draco sideways toward her the moment she saw the wand brandished his way. Her friend ended up half-collapsed in her lap, but the Stinging Hex missed his head.

Draco straightened with slow dignity, a slight flush riding high on his cheekbones. "Thanks," he murmured to Rigel under his breath.

"Anytime," she said, a bit breathless at the unexpected attack.

"Not bad, Mr. Black," Dawlish said, a slight smirk pulling on one side of his mouth. "Didn't spare a thought for anyone behind your friend, though. I only missed Miss Davis by an inch. Why didn't you shield, if your reflexes are so good?"

"I didn't have my wand out," she admitted.

"That sounds like a bad idea, doesn't it?" At his quiet words, there was a rippling shuffle as students produced their wands from pockets and sleeves. "In this class, you will not be assigned homework or quizzes. Your motivation to study will be the number of injuries you walk away with each day."

Rigel guessed she wasn't the only one who felt a fission of trepidation at that ominous pronouncement. It was going to be like a whole year of Remus' dodging exercise. Except there was nowhere to dodge while sitting behind a desk.

Dawlish didn't seem concerned with the fear of Mordred he'd just put into every student. "The key to staying alive when an evil wizard tries to kill you is in matching appropriate actions to particular threats. You might be tempted to dodge everything-that will get you killed. You might try shielding against everything instead-that will also get you killed. If you learn to react intelligently to each spell as it comes, you might still be killed, but there's a higher chance you'll live to at least run away. If you die, the Dark Arts win. This is *Defense Against the Dark Arts*, right?" Most of the class nodded uncertainly. "Then we don't want the Dark Arts to win!" he barked.

"Each lesson I will demonstrate a handful of dangerous spells and teach you how to recognize them on the fly. Next week, you will be tested on your reaction to these spells. I will be casting them on each of you without mercy. Only by properly distinguishing each spell will you be able to react appropriately to it. Some spells cannot be shielded against. Some spells cannot be dodged. If you don't know which is which, how can you survive?" Dawlish frowned around the room at them all as though they had personally offended him by being unable to adequately defend themselves from hypothetical evil witches or wizards. "Mr. Black, what spell did I send at Mr. Malfoy?"

"A Stinging Hex," she said.

"How do you know?" he pressed.

Rigel didn't think he would care that she'd seen about a thousand of them in her sessions with Remus, so she simply said, "The white light is distinctive in the way it flares slightly around the wand before being propelled forward. Also, the Stinging Hex moves slightly faster than the average speed of magic." That was one of the reasons Remus said it made for good dodging practice.

Dawlish grinned at her. "Well, well, there may be hope for your survival. Very good, Mr. Black. Five points to Slytherin."

The Auror spent the rest of the class demonstrating several advanced dueling spells that reacted badly when they came up against a shield. Rigel had no idea that there were Hexes that could explode if they encountered a shield; add to that the very small number of shields that were strong enough to protect from blast at point blank.

Dawlish promised them that next time they would go over spells that affected a wide area and so couldn't be dodged. She found herself looking forward to it. Even Draco seemed a bit mollified by the end of the class.

"At least we'll be learning *something* useful in Dueling," he said to Rigel and Pansy on their way out.

"Are you still going to try restarting the club?" Pansy asked.

"Of course," Draco said. There was no hesitation in his voice. "I worked all summer on the lesson plans. I just have to find a way to do it without Uncle Snape finding out."

Rigel silently wished him luck with that. There wasn't much that Snape didn't find out about, one way or another. Then again, perhaps she was giving him too much credit. He wasn't omniscient, after all. If he were, she would have been discovered and arrested by now. For a number of things.

Defense was not the only class that impressed her that week; Rigel found herself enjoying fourth year classes more than any other year thus far. She was finally catching up to the advanced theories and concepts that she'd started studying way back in first year, when completing Flint's assignments had meant hours of extra research in the Library each week. For the first time, she felt like she'd come full-circle. Her regular course work would now be bridging the last of the gaps in her knowledge, and she was somewhat surprised to realize how much of the fourth-year syllabus she already had a good understanding of, if only because of the background research she'd done is the core subjects just to keep up with Flint's increasingly challenging assignments.

Also for the first time, she could openly study anything she wanted to in front of her friends. Nothing she was interested in could be considered suspicious because everything was above board. If her friends were confused by the almost gleeful about of books Rigel brought into the common room each evening, they wisely chalked it up to 'things about Rigel that no one needs to try explaining' and let her have her fun.

When Friday dawned at last, Rigel was positively bouncing through her morning workout with Draco and Pansy.

"Will you stop grinning?" Draco stopped his squats to glare at her, and there was something so amusing about watching him try to glare and pant and the same time that her smile grew even wider. "Stop it!" Draco cried, a laugh escaping him accidentally. "Damn it, Rigel, your happiness is making me sick."

Rigel laughed. "Enjoy it, Dray. I know you rarely get to experience such pure, unadulterated academic joy."

"You're quite excited for your Alchemy class," Pansy said, continuing to lower and raise herself calmly as she spoke. "If it's really so

interesting, you must explain how it relates to Arithmancy some time."

"Sure," Rigel said easily. "Though that's not what I'm excited about. I have my first Potions lesson tonight with Professor Snape."

"So what?" Draco was having trouble looking annoyed while stubbornly fighting a smile. "You've had Potions with him for three years already."

"I'm learning *free brewing* this year," Rigel said. She had to say it almost reverently. It was what she'd been looking forward to all summer.

"Isn't that dangerous?" Pansy asked. "I think I've heard that many potions-related injuries and even deaths occur because of free brewing."

Rigel nodded happily. "Nearly all fatalities among certified potioners are in some way related to free brewing. It's very difficult to learn, partly because so few Masters adept in it live long enough to pass on their knowledge. Professor Snape is the best there is, though, so he probably won't let any harm come to me."

"What do you mean 'probably'?" Draco spluttered.

"No guarantees in free brewing," Rigel said. She felt like humming, but restrained herself when Pansy sent her a reproachful look. "I'm sure I'll be fine," she assured them. "Professor Snape wouldn't offer to teach me if he didn't know what he was doing."

Pansy and Draco dropped the subject, but she had a feeling they'd be counting her limbs before she went to bed that night.

With an effort, she managed to calm her good spirits to a level Draco found tolerable before they went in to shower and change. She did still have Healing and Alchemy to attend before she got to sink into

the mental nirvana that was a proper Potions lesson after a long summer of independent experimentation.

Healing was a short lesson, with Madam Pomfrey merely going over the syllabus she and Cho were to follow, and reviewing major concepts that Cho had covered the previous years so that Rigel understood where to focus her studies to make sure she was caught up before the next week. Cho had been correct when she said Rigel had already been a bit ahead of the fourth year Hogwarts syllabus, so there wasn't anything that she'd never been exposed to through either Archie's curriculum or her own research. The major difference in the coursework for fifth year Healing was the inclusion of magical maladies instead of primarily dealing with physical injuries.

After lunch, armed with the password 'Cauldron Cakes,' Rigel made her way to the Headmaster's office for her Alchemy lesson. Dumbledore was waiting for her by the bookcases when she reached his office, and no matter how many lessons she had with the old wizard she couldn't quite reconcile his venerated person with the cheesiness of his secret passageway. She couldn't help but smile as he pulled the book and led them through to what served as his classroom. There was something about Albus Dumbledore that put her at ease.

It didn't make any sense, considering he was at least as dangerous as Riddle, in his own way, so the fact that she felt inclined to relax in the Headmaster's presence should itself have been a large red flag. It was hard to remember that, though, when he offered her a lemon drop and hummed cheerfully to himself as he laid out the supplies they would need for the lesson.

"This is your year two Alchemy text," he said, presenting her with another small journal that looked a lot like her 'first year Alchemy text.' Sure enough, as she flipped through it she was confronted with Dumbledore's familiar looping cursive.

Rigel pulled out the previous year's book from her bag and held it toward the Headmaster, saying, "I finished what we hadn't covered

over the summer, Sir."

"You may keep it," Dumbledore said, smiling genially. "One never knows when a good reference may come in handy." Rigel smiled back in thanks and stowed both books before taking the sole seat at the table and pulling out her note-taking materials. The Headmaster began to slowly pace the length of the small room on the other side of the work table, idling stroking his beard as he was wont. "Last year, Mr. Black, we started our arrays with a collection of components and, using precise transfiguration equations, built those elements into something whole. This year, we will begin the study of transforming one whole object into another whole object in a single, complete alchemic event. Unhappily, the arrays we study this term will not always be as perfectly balanced as those you have become accustomed to. In the course of alchemy, it is often the case that the individual portions that make up one object are not perfectly matched to the same portions in the object you would like it to become."

Rigel nodded her head slowly. "So we'll sometimes have leftover elements at the end of a transmutation," she surmised. It made sense, since the odds of having the exact same elements necessary to constitute two completely different objects were probably quite low.

"Just so," the venerable wizard confirmed. "The inverse is also true. At times the object that is broken down will not have all of the necessary elements to form the object defined by the array, and the Alchemist will need to include additional components in the first half of the equation in order to make up for that."

Dumbledore took out a piece of chalk and began drawing a simple array on the wooden table in front of Rigel. The runes defined a single-element transformation, and the Headmaster produced a small piece of wood for the input position. "This array you may not recognize, but it is a useful one to know if you ever need to write a letter while in the middle of a forest. It transmutes wood into paper."



Interesting. They'd only scratched the surface of transforming the nature of starter components the previous year. Mostly they'd been turning raw components into a complex form of themselves-a piece of metal into a metal box, for instance-or else a couple of elements into a compound.

"If I were to tell you that the amount of paper I've defined in the output equation is more than the amount of wood I've provided is capable of producing, what do you theorize will happen when I activate the array?" Dumbledore asked when he had finished the alchemic array.

Rigel frowned. "It either won't work, or the array will use all the wood it has available and only produce the corresponding amount of paper."

"What about the extra magic in the array that is not used by the time the wood is gone?"

Dumbledore always asked tricky questions, but Rigel couldn't think of any other answer than, "It will have to discharge into the air, since the array isn't designed to hold any excess magic once activated."

Her professor hummed thoughtfully to himself, but didn't tell her whether she was right or not. Instead, he briefly imbued the array with the requisite magic and activated it. The circle flared and the block of wood dissolved from the input side, while a pile of rough parchment materialized on the output side. Instead of stopping, however, the array seemed to grow, if anything, *brighter* before finally fading away. With the array used up, the only thing remaining on the table was the stack of parchment and a warped, twisting spiral that seemed to have been gouged out of the wood beneath it.

Rigel had never seen an array do damage to the surface it was drawn on before. "What happened?" she asked.

"What do you think?" Dumbledore prompted.

Rigel looked at the pile of paper, which she thought was a bit higher than it had been before the second, brighter flash, and said, "The array thought the table was part of the wood it was meant to transmute? But that's never happened before."

"When you put magic into an array," Dumbledore said, "it *wants* to be used. The magic pulled the cellulose from the wood of the table because it was the closest. If I had drawn that array on the back of your hand, the array would have attempted to transmute your fingers into parchment, too."

She paled a bit. "That's not good."

"Alchemy can be a very dangerous art," Dumbledore agreed gravely. "You must never forget that the array drives the magic you imbue toward completing the task outlined in the runic inscriptions. If your equations do not balance, special precaution must be taken to account for the *leftovers*, as you put it. Now let us try another example, but this time you will imbue the array, Mr. Black."

Rigel hesitated. She knew this was going to come up-there was no way to continue her Alchemy lessons without addressing it-but somehow she still felt nervous about what she was going to do.

"Professor," she said tentatively. "Would it be all right if I... recalibrated my magical constant?" She was prepared to explain that her magic had gone through certain changes since the last time she'd used it for their classes, but without a word of question Dumbledore reached into his robes and pulled out the calibration device as though he'd merely been waiting for her to ask.

She gaped at him as he set it on the table. How did he guess? The Headmaster twinkled at her. Rigel had to smile as she took hold of the cold metal tube. "Thank you, Sir."

Rigel told herself not to be afraid. She had to have an accurate magical constant to progress in Alchemy, and she had already decided it was a subject she wanted to one day marry more closely with Potions. There was no reason why anyone besides Dumbledore

should ever know what her magical constant was, and even if it got out, there was no reason for Archie's exact magical strength to ever be known once they'd both graduated and switched back. She closed her eyes and channeled her magic, trying not to worry about it. She just let go.

The magic poured out of her at a phenomenal pace. She opened her eyes on a gasp to see the crystal at the end of the calibrator tumbling through yellow and green without pause. It pushed through blue at a fair clip, then began to slow, bleeding lavender and brightening to a proper violet before darkening to an almost eggplant shade and finally holding steady. Rigel set the device down somewhat shakily. It hadn't been that dark when she'd measured it at Frein's for the suppressor. Had the year of living with the suppressor really made it noticeably stronger?

Dumbledore spread a color chart on the table beside the device, not seeming to notice her unease as he mused happily, "Marvelous, simply splendid. We can proceed to more complicated arrays much sooner than I had planned. What do you think? Does it look 'plum' to you?"

"Sure," she said, trying not to let the slightly hysterical laugh inside her chest bubble out. How could it have gotten *worse*?

"A 1.3 it is, then," Dumbledore said, smiling serenely at her. "How incredible."

"Is it?" Rigel shook her head on a sigh. "What's your magical constant, sir, if you don't mind my asking?"

The Headmaster affected a somewhat modest expression. "Mine happens to be .97," he said.

She blinked at him, then looked down at the color chart on the table. The very darkest value on the scale was pure black, and it held the base value 1.0 as the corresponding constant. *Trust Dumbledore to be literally off the chart.* She actually felt a bit better about hers,

knowing that. "How did you ever calculate that?" she asked, now immensely curious. Being lower than the lowest standard meant that he would have been constantly overshooting the calculated input.

He twinkled at her again. "It took careful trial and error to reach the exact number. My first six months, all my arrays exploded. Nicolas was quite displeased with the destruction I wreaked on his workshop."

Rigel tried to imagine the venerated wizard before her blowing up someone's workshop, but she really couldn't picture it. Dumbledore put away the color chart once more and Rigel dutifully made note of the 1.3 value for future equations. She'd expended energy beyond the point of being able to imbue any arrays for a few hours, so Dumbledore wrapped up the lesson there. "If you have nothing else that piques your curiosity today, I will see you next week," he said. He folded his hands in front of his robes and waited patiently while she thought.

There was one other thing she could ask him about, but she wasn't sure it was a good idea. When she paused an awkward time in answering, Dumbledore said, seemingly to no one in particular, "On the rare occasion that a question utterly baffles me, I find I generally have a good idea where to look."

There was no harm in asking, she told herself, as long as she phrased it as an academic inquiry. "I was thinking about this the other day, sir, and it's not really related to Alchemy, but is there ever an instance in which a person's magical core might resonate with another's?"

Dumbledore gave her a long look and began slowly curling the end of his beard around his finger as he thought. "Rarely, a set of twins may have magic similar enough to cause a sort of recognition between the two. It is not a true resonance, however."

"What if the two people aren't related at all?" she asked, striving to sound neutral. "Does it mean those two people would be similar in

some way?"

"Not necessarily," Dumbledore said. He lifted his eyes to the ceiling in a gesture she recognized as him trying to recall a distant memory. "I have never heard of two unrelated persons having resonant magic," he said after a lengthy silence. Rigel fought her disappointment until he added, "Except in one peculiar incident many years ago. This may take some explaining, I'm afraid. Do you have time for a story?"

Rigel nodded quickly.

"Wonderful. Well, I once knew a young woman who was researching the North American Hodag. Are you familiar with the Hodag, Mr. Black?"

Rigel tilted her head. "Just the horn-it's used in alertness potions, though it can be dangerously potent."

"Just so," the Headmaster said. He began pacing the room once more as he continued his story. "The Hodag is also endowed with impressive fangs that, when used on potential prey, inject a very interesting venom into the victim's system. Unlike most venoms, which tend to paralyze or slow prey into a docile state, the Hodag's venom contains a small piece of its own hyperactive magic, which rouses its prey into a state of over-alertness that can last for many days. Eventually, the sleep-deprivation and adrenaline overdose compromise the prey's defenses utterly, and that is when the Hodag make a meal of its victim."

Rigel thought that was a rather gruesome way to go, but animals had to eat as much as she did, she supposed.

"You may be wondering how the Hodag keeps track of its intended prey until the venom takes effect," Dumbledore said, smiling slightly at the look on her face that said she hadn't been wondering that, but probably should have. "This is where the Hodag's other unique ability comes into play. This creature is capable of tracking to its own

magical signature. The venom it releases is quite literally a small piece of its own magic, and the Hodag can sense the location of the pieces of magic it gives away, provided it remains within a certain distance to its source. Isn't that remarkable?"

"Quite," she said faintly. Her mind was whirring with a dawning dread. Was such a thing really possible? Had she been... *tagged*, like some kind of animal? Dumbledore was continuing his anecdote, and she struggled to pay attention. She couldn't do anything now, she reminded herself; she needed to know the full extent of the situation first.

"My student of many years ago believed that any magical creature, including wizards, should be able to do the same as the Hodag, if only they had a way to share a piece of their own magic with another." Dumbledore's face grew somewhat somber as he said, "She devised a ritual to transfer a piece of her own magic to another wizard. Her fiancé at the time volunteered. You could say it worked-too well, alas. His core fully assimilated the magic she bestowed on him, and the resulting resonance between them became so unbearably uncomfortable that they could not stand the slightest contact from that day on. Even worse for my dear student, her theory was incorrect; while she experienced resonant feedback upon direct contact with her fiancé's skin, she could not, try as she might, sense or track him in any way."

"Did they figure out how to reverse it?" Rigel asked, only feeling slightly better that the resonance had not provided any concrete information to the woman about her fiancé.

"I'm afraid not," Dumbledore said, sighing. "The two separated and never came within a few feet of one another again. The experiment was deemed a failure, and I myself have not considered the story further until now."

"Is there a record of the experiment somewhere?" she asked. Despite Dumbledore's assurances that nothing had come of it, she couldn't help the slow panic developing in her brain. Riddle wouldn't

do a thing like that for no reason-if, indeed, that was what he'd done with no ritual or even a spell that she'd noticed. What if he'd found a way to make it work? What if he could track her? Monitor her? What if her already knew she hadn't left the country over the summer?  
*What else could he already know?*

Dumbledore tugged his beard with a frown. "I don't believe our esteemed library possesses a copy of the complete report, but I will make inquiries if you are truly interested."

"Yes, please," she said, trying not to look too desperate. She wanted to run straight to the library and look up everything it had about resonance and cross-contamination of one's magic. She felt dirtied by the idea that she might have had a piece of Riddle floating somewhere in her core. There had to be a way to purify it. She just needed time to research.

She thanked Dumbledore for the lesson and tried to clear her mind of its agitation as she headed down from the tower. There was nothing she could do about it yet. She was in the same boat that she'd been in yesterday, and there was no reason to let Draco sense her upset when immediate alarm wouldn't do any actual good. She vowed to just focus on her upcoming Potions class instead. She was not going to let Riddle ruin it. Not this.

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At dinner, Snape handed her a folded piece of parchment and said, "We will meet in lab three tonight, Mr. Black."

Rigel nodded and ignored her friends' amusement as she increased the speed at which she consumed her meal. She gathered her book bag and took her leave with a hurried, "See you guys," to the others.

She followed the instructions on the parchment to a part of the dungeons she hadn't traversed since first year when she'd made a point to explore every area of Hogwarts she could. She didn't even know Snape had a lab that was so out of the way, but when she knocked and entered it became clear why they were using it.

Lab three was utilitarian to an uncomfortable degree. There were no stools, and what counter space was available had been secured to the left side of the room while the right side held only a single brewing station, well away from anything else. Her first thought was that it would be awkward carrying ingredients back and forth so far. As Snape handed her a heavy-duty protective covering, she understood.

"Is this lab specifically for free brewing?" she asked, taking the covering and frowning as she noted it was as heavy as one of Remus' training belts.

As she tried the full-body apron on, Snape confirmed her guess. "This lab is for particularly volatile brewing. The walls and floor have been reinforced with containment spells, and a number of voice-activated wards are in place around the cauldron stand."

The protective garment, which covered her from chin to knees, seemed to fit well enough. Snape hung it on a sturdy nail by the door, next to another, larger version.

"We store nothing in this lab besides the basics," he told her, gesturing to the bare surfaces and scant tools. "Bring eye protection and gloves to every lesson. You will melt more cauldrons this year than all of your year mates in their seven years combined-no small feat, I assure you."

She smiled, but nodded in response to his expectant look. She could barely contain her excitement. She wondered if they would start with a known recipe and alter it, or just begin from scratch and choose ingredients according a schema to add to the cauldron.



"Before we begin free brewing, there is one other skill you must master," Snape said. As though he could feel the disappointment leaking out of her ears, he narrowed his eyes. "Potioneers who do not learn this before attempting to free brew die. Horribly."

"Yes, sir," she said, smoothing her face into something less kicked-puppy.

Snape reached into his pocket and pulled out a stack of playing cards. He held them out and she took them, noting the distinctive brand across the top.

"Exploding Snap?" What did a kid's game have to do with potions?

"A training tool," he said, face impassive.

"Like the medi-minis?" she asked, tilting her head curiously at the innocuous cards. She had a basic understanding of the game, though she'd never been a huge fan. It was essentially a matching game, except if you didn't match cards in a randomly allotted amount of time, they exploded.

"These are to hone your sensing ability and your reflexes," Snape explained. "The cards heat up slightly before exploding, which means you'll need to cast a numbing spell on your hands to get the full benefit of this training."

"I know a couple," she assured him. "So I'm to try and predict when cards are going to explode? Without feeling the heat first?"

"Indeed. Before you begin free brewing, you must be able to sense remotely when a potion is reacting violently. It is not enough to maintain a connection with the potion via conscious imbuing; you need to be able to sense the danger instinctively." Snape paused to ensure she was following, and with a nod from her, he continued. "Magic sensitivity is a relatively common skill. All it requires is the projection of your magic into the environment around you. You will recall in your first year when I tested your core. The simplest way to

examine a magical thing is to flare your magic toward it briefly and read the return. Do you understand this concept?"

Rigel thought back to first year. When her core had been tethered to Snape's, she'd been able to send a bead of magic along the connection. The echo had automatically translated into rudimentary information about his magical core. She supposed if the theory held true in other cases, she should be able to gather such information about anything around her, depending on how far she was able to project her magical pulse.

"I think I understand," she said, "but would I have to constantly be sending out magic to monitor the potion, since it could change state at any moment?"

"That is the second stage of this ability," Snape said, apparently satisfied that she was following so far. "When you have mastered flaring your magic, you must learn to maintain it in a continuous magical field around you. That application of the skill is *not* common, but it will save your life if your potion erupts unexpectedly."

"Will it be difficult to maintain this sensitivity field while also trying to consciously imbue?" Rigel asked. Conscious imbuing already involved splitting one's attention between the magic going into the potion and the other aspects of brewing. No wonder free brewing was so rarely taught.

"Extremely," Snape confirmed. "I will not begin free brewing with you until you can do it without concentrating."

She nodded slowly. She could understand that, if it was as dangerous as he said. "What will we be doing until I have this mastered, then?"

To her surprise, Snape tilted his head considering and asked, voice neutral, "What would you like to do, Rigel?"

She blinked. "Anything?" Was he serious? Her brain flooded her with options and she just stood there, gaping like an idiot.

"Within reason," he confirmed. "Is there any sub-specialty of the field you would like to delve deeper into before we devote your lessons entirely to the art of free brewing?"

Her first thought was Battle Potions, but she squashed it quickly. Even though she'd been extremely curious about them since Master Thompson had let his specialty slip, she knew better than to ask. The subject was carefully controlled by the Guild for a reason.

Snape noticed her deliberation. "What are you thinking?" he prompted.

Grimacing, she admitted, "I was thinking of Battle Potions, but I know you aren't allowed to-"

"Do you?" Snape's black eyes searched hers with interest. "If you were familiar with the rules that govern a Guild-sanctioned Apprenticeship, you would know that there is very little a Master is not permitted to teach his student. The only things truly forbidden are the secrets of another Master's work."

She thought her jaw might have dropped, but she was too distracted to be sure. "They don't regulate it at all? How can that be?"

"It is an old agreement, predating modern government and going back to the very establishment of the first Guilds. An Apprenticeship was a sacred pact in those days. There were no schools, no opportunity for instruction outside of one wizard's willingness to teach another. A condition for the first Masters' agreeing to join such an organization was that the Guild would have no ability to dictate what was or was not passed from Master to student. Nor can any Master be made to take an Apprentice unwillingly. The most the Guild can do is restrict what its members are allowed to distribute to the public." Snape's voice betrayed no interest in the history, but Rigel was fascinated.

"The Guild also sets the standard for achieving a Mastery," she pointed out. "So they do have some input it what ought to be taught in a traditional Apprenticeship."

Snape inclined his head. "In an indirect way, they do. The limits of the instruction, however, are not theirs to dictate."

"So... can we study Battle Potions, then?" she asked, hardly daring to believe it.

"It is not one of my specialties," Snape admitted. "I will look into it. We can begin with area-effect Potions in general and work our way around the topic from there. Very well. That is all for this evening, Rigel. Practice with the cards until you don't burn your fingers."

She nodded, tucking them away in her pocket carefully so they didn't activate and set her robes on fire. That would be embarrassing.

"Be careful pulsing your magic out around other people," her Head of House added as she headed for the door. "It's the same method used to read other wizards' auras, and those with very sensitive auras will feel it as your magic pushes up against them."

"So I can read other auras with this technique as well?" That could be useful.

"It takes significant study to understand the complexities of an aura," Snape said. "It is not like a core; you will not comprehend intuitively what your magic is telling you at first. The only reason this will be useful for free brewing is because you have developed an unconscious understanding of potions via your prolonged exposure to them through conscious imbuing."

"I see. Thank you, Professor." Rigel left the lab deep in thought. Ideas spiraled to the surface and floated for a moment before sinking back down to stew in the dark a while longer.

Despite what Snape said, Rigel did have a rudimentary understanding of auras through her study of suppressing and projecting her own. She wondered if they would be as incomprehensible to her as he assumed.

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Her second week back, the morning post brought with it a package for "Archie" that Rigel grinned to accept. It was very obviously book-shaped, so she tucked it into her bag to examine later, ignoring Draco's outraged curiosity and Pansy's more politely inquiring expression. If this was what she thought it was, she wasn't going to share it with her friends just yet.

Ever since Sirius and Remus had declined to give her and Archie instruction on becoming animagi, Archie had been wheedling away his father's defenses. Harry had conspicuously let the topic drop. Her help wasn't needed, after all; Sirius couldn't really deny Archie anything. Not if he kept at it, at least. Finally, the day before they were due back at school, Archie reported that Sirius had agreed to recommend a book to educate them on the fundamentals.

Rigel fought a triumphant smirk all through breakfast, and when she had a moment to herself to unwrap the package she had to smile full out. *Self Transfiguration* was an innocuous title and its cover was plain brown leather. Nevertheless, it felt like the Sorcerer's Stone in her hands. Sirius might think that he was only giving them a basic foundation with his recommendation, but Rigel knew better. Between her and Archie, a good book was all they really needed. They could figure almost anything out together.

She had to wait until later that night to contact Archie. He'd told her before they parted that his friend Hermione liked to study by herself for a couple of hours every evening after dinner. That meant that midnight was the best time for her to reach him. It wasn't difficult to

loiter in the common room until most people had gone to bed. Draco gave her an odd look as he finally packed up his Charms essay and headed for the dorms. Rigel just smiled and said she'd be in shortly.

As she continued to wait out the last stragglers, Rigel went ahead and took out *Self Transfiguration* to peruse the introduction. There were a lot of warnings about the dangers of partial transfiguration to living things. It sounded like pretty obvious stuff to her-you didn't try to transfigure half an animal into something, after all, unless you wanted to kill it horribly. It was the same reason Polyjuice was designed to transfigure the whole body. It was also why Metamorphmism was such an impressive ability. You just couldn't *do* live transfiguration in pieces on the fly like that. It took a Transfiguration Mastery level of ability to pull off.

Anyway, it wasn't really as issue, since they would be aiming to achieve a holistic transfiguration. She had heard stories of wizards who could partially transform into their animagus form, but she wasn't sure how true they were. That was likely a very advanced variation on the ability.

At the end of the introduction there was a table of contents. It covered a variety of subjects, including permanent beautification and other self-altering transfigurations. She skimmed past those to the last section, which took up easily half the book, and dove into the theory of animagi as the torches burned lower and the night drew in.

At around one in the morning, she was finally alone. She took out Archie's mirror from her bag and settled into her low backed chair. His mirror didn't have flowers on it and was instead inscribed with briars around the edge. She spoke into it softly. "Harry. It's Rigel, are you there?" They'd agreed to use their assumed names when using the mirrors at school since there was always the chance of someone overhearing.

After a long pause, her reflection blurred and Archie peered back at her. "Rigel? It's only been a week-miss me already?"

"Always," she said. The sarcasm in her voice didn't diminish her smile at seeing him. This really was so much better than writing letters. "I got a delivery today from Sirius. Do you have a minute?"

"I have a lifetime of minutes for you, dear," Archie said on a winning smile. No matter how she practiced, her flattery never sounded that effortless. "Hermione is in the library studying, which means I am amusing myself in my room until she returns."

"How's that going?" she asked, suddenly reminded of his declaration that summer. "Are you really going to start a relationship with the girl?"

"I'm going to try," Archie said seriously. "I know it might make things awkward for you, but you can't deny you've put me in awkward positions a time or two. I won't let it compromise our ruse, of course, but I have to do this, H-Rigel. If I don't, and she falls for someone else in the meantime, I'll spend my whole life regretting it."

Rigel nodded. She could see how much this meant to her cousin and she wasn't going to stand in his way. He had already given up much for their dreams. They both had. She would gladly field questions about her own sexuality and weather remarks to the effect that she was unfaithful to her engagement contract if it meant Archie's happiness. She would do anything for him, and he for her. It was that simple.

"Good luck," she said, smiling sincerely at him. He grinned back, eyes full of gratitude.

"So what did Sirius send you? What we expected?" Archie's face, an exact copy of her own, gained an anticipatory gleam she recognized.

She positioned the mirror so that the title of her new book could be seen. "Think you can get a copy?"

"Undoubtedly," he said when she'd moved the mirror back to her own face. "How is it?"

"I just got it this morning," she reminded him.

He raised an eyebrow. "Exactly. So how is it?"

She laughed softly. "Caught me. It's pretty good so far. It seems like there are a few methods people use to figure out their forms. One of them is learning the Patronus Charm."

"That's a tricky one, isn't it?" Archie frowned.

"It is, and it's not a guarantee anyway. The patronus form sometimes matches the animagus form, but not necessarily," she explained. "Sometimes a strong personal connection will be manifested in the patronus instead."

"Sounds iffy," Archie decided. "What else?"

"Well, there's a potion," she began.

"Yes!" Archie laughed somewhat maniacally through the mirror. "We cannot be stopped!"

"Okay, calm down," she said, laughing a bit at his exuberance. "I was thinking it sounded like the best option, though."

"How long will it take?" Archie asked excitedly. He didn't ask 'how hard is it?' or 'can you brew it?' which she admitted warmed her heart a bit. Archie had such keen faith in her.

"At least two months to brew, and that's if I can get all of the ingredients to start," she admitted. "I'm going to need a vial of your spit, by the way."

Archie's face twisted in disgust. "Ugh, why do I feel like you're always asking for my bodily fluids?"

She sympathized, but there was no way around it. The first chapter of *Self Transfiguration* had outlined the pros and cons of the various methods. Under a footnote titled "Myths Debunked" the author had



noted some of the common misconceptions, one of which required the would-be animagus to hold a mandrake leaf in their mouth for an entire month.

"Not that I don't relish the opportunity, but I promise it's better than the alternative," she said. Much better to soak the leaf in a vial of saliva than to try to eat around it for a month and hope they didn't choke on it in their sleep. "Once the potion is complete, I'll send you your dose and you can take it somewhere you won't be interrupted."

"That sounds suspiciously simple," Archie said.

She rolled her eyes at him. "The potion doesn't *make* you an animagi. It just allows you to take on the form temporarily. That's how we find out what form we have. Once you know, then you have to actually learn how to do the transfiguration. That's the really hard part."

"Two months just to learn our forms." Archie sighed. "Well, we knew it wasn't going to be easy. I'll send you the... spit."

"Make it two vials," she said with an innocent smile. "Just in case."

"This is why everyone thinks potions brewers are weird," Archie told her.

"It's not for the faint of heart," she agreed easily. That a task was unpleasant didn't mean it wasn't worth doing, in her opinion.

"Won't Dad be surprised when we already know our forms come winter break?" Archie grinned at her mischievously.

She returned it full strength. "Surely he didn't give us a book and expect us not to read it?"

"One day they'll stop underestimating us," Archie said.

"Not anytime soon, though." She said goodbye to her cousin and packed away the mirror carefully in soft cloth. She would peruse the

ingredient list for the animagus revealing potion more tomorrow, though she knew just from a quick glance that she'd be ordering at least a couple of things from the apothecary in Hogsmeade. She didn't keep morning dew in stock, and certainly not samples 'untouched by human feet' whatever difference that was supposed to make. It would probably be at least November before she finished the potion, considering how much research was going to go into the ingredient list alone. She ought to have the time, though. She hadn't appreciated just how much time Flint's assignments had taken up until she no longer had them to occupy her evenings.

The room was quiet when she crept in from the corridor and shut the door behind her. She didn't need light to navigate to her bed and slip off her shoes, but as she climbed onto her mattress, the hangings on the bed next to her slid open and Draco's face peered over at her by the light of his wand. He had a book propped open on his knees and she wondered if he'd stayed up to read because he wasn't tired or because he was waiting for her.

"Hey," Draco whispered, setting his book aside. "Is everything all right? You're out later than usual."

Rigel nodded, whispering back, "Had to practice something for Potions. Snape said it would bother other people, so I was waiting until everyone went to bed."

"Oh." Draco's expression relaxed. She felt a bit bad for worrying him. Whether she acknowledged it or not, the events of last year hadn't only affected her. Draco had been there when Snape found her. No doubt the memory colored his concern for the hours she kept. "Did it work?"

"I haven't got the hang of it yet," she said, shaking her head. "That's okay, though. I'll keep trying." And that would be a good excuse for staying up late in the common room the next time she needed to talk to Archie, too.

"Rigel?"

She paused in fluffing her pillow to look over at her friend. Draco's expression was still relaxed, but there was an underlying concern that shone even through the dim light. Rigel put down her pillow and slipped off her bed. She climbed onto his and pulled the curtains shut so they could converse more naturally without worrying about waking their roommates. "What is it, Dray?"

"You've changed," he said simply. "You have this anger in you-I've never felt anger from you like this before. I want to help," he added, gazing at her imploringly. "It feels like you're pulling further away from me, though. I don't know what to do."

"You do more than enough," she assured him. She couldn't help feeling touched at his genuine concern for her wellbeing.

"I feel like I don't know how to reach you, sometimes," he admitted. There was a small crease in his brow that made him look older.

She took his hands carefully. "I'm right here. Sometimes I do get angry, but my anger is not aimed at you, Dray."

"I know," he sighed, clenching his hands around hers a little anxiously.

"I'm very grateful for your understanding, and Pansy's, though I may not always show it," she said softly. "I have changed. I'm sorry if it's hard on you sometimes."

" *I'm* sorry that I couldn't prevent the things that changed you," Draco said fiercely.

"Sometimes I wish I hadn't experienced them." She took a deep breath and mustered a smile. "If it means no one else did, though, I find I can accept it."

"You *shouldn't* ." Draco exclaimed. He dropped her hands and put his own on her shoulders to shake her a little. "You always put others before yourself. It's going to get you in trouble-more trouble, I mean-

someday. What if..." he looked away embarrassedly, but steeled himself before pinning her with a distraught look. "What if next time you don't come back, Rye?"

She swallowed, but the emotion was still thick in her voice when she said, "I'll always try to come back, Dray." It was the most she could promise.

"All right," he said. A split second hesitation, then he wrapped her in a quick hug that was so light she barely felt it. She hugged him back just as gingerly, then drew back with a small smile. "Night, Rigel," Draco said, smiling back. He waited for her to clamber back over into her own bed before he doused his wand light.

"Night, Dray."

She lay awake a while longer, wondering what she had done to deserve such a good friend. Well, she thought after a silent moment, she didn't deserve him of course. She was just very lucky. That was okay. She would simply enjoy his friendship while she had it.

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It was the third week in September before Rigel found an evening to steal down to the kitchens and visit her favorite Hogwarts House Elf. She'd waited until dinner was over, so the kitchens were mostly occupied with cleanup when she climbed through the still life painting and waited at one of the tables until Binny was free.

"Young sir!" Binny bounced up and down on her heels and because Rigel was sitting down, they were almost at eye-level. "How is your summer being?"

"Very well, and yours?" Rigel asked.

"Madam Touraine is promoting me to Head Stable Elf," Binny told her. The pride in her voice and carriage was unmistakable.

"Well done! She must really trust you to give you so much responsibility."

"I is being the most experienced," Binny confided. "Still, it is being a great honor. Is young sir practicing his French this summer?"

"Not that much," she confessed. "Can we practice a little?"

"Oui." Binny led her through a series of basic conversational topics, and while Rigel was certainly rusty, she got back into the swing of the language before long.

After almost an hour of somewhat mindless chatter, Rigel asked Binny for some mice, if the kitchens had any, and in no time she had a trio of fat snacks for Treeslider. She bade Binny good evening and made her way up out of the castle and into the growing twilight.

Rigel made it almost to the forest's edge before her feet stopped moving of their own accord and she looked into the trees with increasingly short breath. Backing up a few paces, she breathed deep through her nose and shook her head. What was the matter with her? It was only the forest. She'd been in and out of the outskirts dozens of times in the past three years. She couldn't deny the slight tremble in her legs as she sat on the grass and simply stared at the tree line, unseeing. She hadn't been back there since...

A shudder rippled through her, and she bit down on a slightly hysterical whimper. She could feel the anxiety in her like a physical thing, pulling her shoulders in toward her ribcage and squeezing her lungs into empty sacks. Rigel ruthlessly smoothed her emotional state into eerie, unnatural calm. She would not get worked up over this. It was in the past. Nothing that happened months ago had the power to touch her now. That man was dead. That place was gone.

Wrapped in her artificial serenity, Rigel slowly stood and took first one step, then another toward the looming trees and shadows. She only made it to the first trunk before she had to sit down again and catch her shallow breath. She clenched her fingers in the dirt, wondering how the hell she was supposed to work through this phantom panic when it didn't make any sense .

She heard Treeslider before she saw him. *"Juiccccy moussse, niccce and sssoft, tasssty sssnack, all for me!"* She didn't think anyone would believe her if she told them that singing sounded entirely ridiculous in Parseltongue. Nor would they believe that a snake could come up with a surprisingly catchy rhyme scheme-at least, it was catchy in his tongue. She could barely hear the original beneath the translation her brain superimposed.

" *Ssspeaker! You have been gone for lifetimesss,*" Treeslider complained as his slim, green form broke from the underbrush. She thought he looked a little bigger than the last time she'd seen the snake.

" *Sssomehow I do not think you sssuffered much,*" she teased the boomslang snake.

" *You wound me, Ssspeaker.*" Treeslider made a show of coiling and uncoiling in agitation. *"Much hasss changed thisss ssseassson. The thessstralsss have ssstolen my nessessting grounds. The new nessesst iss not sso niccce. And the Runessspoorsss, Ssspeaker, they are everywhere."*

" *What iss wrong with Runessspoorsss?*" she asked, amused. They were not a particularly aggressive species.

" *They bicker like nessesstlingsss,*" Treeslider bemoaned. *"Jussst one iss bad enough, with thossse headssss sssniping at each other. But thisss ssseassson there are many new densss. I can ssscaceccely essscape them."*

*" I am sssorry to hear of your troublesss," Rigel said solemnly. She produced the generous parcel the elves had prepared and said, " Would it help if you had sssomething to eat?"*

*" Perhaps," Treeslider hissed. His attempt at nonchalance was ruined by the way his big eyes followed the parcel eagerly as she set it on the ground. She unwrapped it to reveal three fat kitchen mice and the boomslang snake nearly chortled with glee. "Sssuch a kind ssspeaker. Ssso good to your ssservant."*

*" You aren't my ssservant," she said, frowning. Was that what the snake thought?*

*" I watch over the foresst for you, Ssspeaker." Treeslider tilted his head in an odd parody of confusion. "Are you dissspleasssed with my reportsss? Or perhapsss... I ssshould have attacked that man."*

*" Man?" she asked, her heart rate accelerating.*

*" The one who makesss you sssmell of fear," Treeslider said. He sounded as miserable as a snake could. "The lassst time you came to the foresst, you were not alone. I ssstayed away, but I sssee I ssshould have defended my ssspeaker."*

*" Not at all," she said, swallowing her memories and leaning forward from her seated position so the snake could look her in the eye. "I jussst want you to know that you do not have to ssserve me in thisss way. I would ssstill bring you sssnacksss."*

*The snake swayed slightly back and forth for a long moment as though thinking. "Asss your ssservant, I reccieve your favor, Ssspeaker. The Runessspoorsss dare not challenge the ssspeaker's chossen. I will continue ssserving you and you will reward me with juicccy delightsss."*

*She laughed. "Very well, Treessslider." There was no point arguing with the snake. Clearly, he did not feel overly put upon. Rigel*

stretched her neck as the snake gloated over its prize and asked him, *"Will you ssstay awhile?"*

*"It will take time to devour thessse offeringsss, Ssspeaker."*

She took that for agreement. *"Warn me if anything comesss,"* she said, closing her eyes. She wanted to try practicing her sensitivity field outside of the castle. She'd been working on pushing out her magic the way Snape described, but it was difficult when everything it came into contact with sent waves of incomprehensible information back at her. There was just too much magic in Hogwarts-it was distracting.

Not to mention the other students. She'd only tried it in the common room once, and it was enough to give her a massive migraine. She felt every person who walked through her shaky field, and each sent a shiver of discomfort down her spine. It felt like static electricity whenever her projected magic touched another person. She had to wonder if that was how Draco felt all the time, bombarded by information that was exhausting to try to sort through.

Rigel hadn't even started practicing with the Exploding Snap cards. She could not yet focus on other things while maintaining her magical field. She slowed her breathing and let the evening air wash over her as she reached for her core. The first step, she'd found, was to gather her magic and pool it within her skin. How much she could pool before releasing it determined how far the resulting magical field would reach. Only when the magic she wanted was pulled from her core could she push it out of her in all directions.

At first, she'd found herself pushing it out in a thin disk around her middle, meaning she only received feedback from things that were three and a half feet off the ground. It took several days of sweat-inducing mental effort to create a full sphere of magic and pulse it away from her like an invisible explosion. Just like explosive energy, she felt the magic fade faster the farther it got from her. Things at the edge of her sphere barely registered while things right next to her lit up like Christmas trees to her magical sense.



Rigel had found she could send a single pulse of her magic pretty far, perhaps as much as fifty feet before she stopped sensing anything from the returns. If she tried to maintain a field around herself, though, she could only hold five feet or so. The field tended to fluctuate erratically, contracting and expanding again as her concentration wavered. In the quiet outdoors, however, she had a much easier time pushing the magic out around her and holding it there. She could feel Treeslider as a little crackle of energy just in front of her. As she focused on him, the energy slowly condensed in her awareness until it represented vaguely his relative shape and size.

" *That itchesss.*" She heard the words as though underwater. Slowly blinking her eyes open, she attempted to maintain the field while answering, but as soon as she spoke it dissipated.

" *Sssorry,*" she said. The snake had swallowed one of the mice and was curled around the other two contentedly. Rigel arched her back in a stretch. She kept her eyes open and gathered her magic again, this time flinging it out around her as far as she could.

" *Sssssss.*" Treeslider jerked in a wordless hiss of annoyance.

She smiled apologetically, but her attention was far away, focused on the echoes of information coming back to her on waves of magical return. Several things with magic showed up in her mind's eye as she sifted through the knowledge. "*What isss over that way?*" she asked the snake, pointing off to the right along the tree line. "*Up in the treesss.*" There was a crackling feeling like a dozen tiny spots of energy.

Treeslider flicked his tongue out and said, "*Bowtrucklessss.*"

Rigel grinned. "*And there? Sssomething in the ground.*" She indicated a point behind Treeslider and to the left.

" *It's only a nessesst of Runesssspoors,*" Treeslider said, coiling a bit tighter around his remaining mice. "*You don't want to talk to them.*"

*Ssso annoying. I cccertainly don't have enough miccce to ssshare."*

" *I wouldn't dream of asssking you to ssshare,*" she assured the possessive snake. She practiced for another fifteen minutes or so before the feedback started giving her a headache. Upon standing, she said, "Want me to walk your miccce into the foresst a bit? It'sss not sssafe to be expossed while you digessst."

" *Very well,*" the snake decided, uncurling from the two remaining mice and allowing her to pick them up gingerly as he awkwardly slithered into the trees with his bulging middle.

Rigel took a deep breath and held it as she followed, focusing only on Treeslider's rustling, ungainly form. She blocked out everything but the serpent's trail and made good headway into the forest before her fear reached into her chest and wrung out her heart like a wet rag. She gasped in air and stopped, leaning on a thick trunk to stave off dizziness.

" *Ssspeaker?*" Treeslider came back and surveyed her with a crooked head. "*You sssmell of fear again.*"

" *I'm fine,*" she said firmly, not sure if she was trying to convince the snake or herself.

" *Thisss isss far enough,*" Treeslider declared, settling down in the roots of the tree that was propping her up.

Rigel deposited the mice in the circle of his protective coil and said, "*Sssee you later, then.*"

She turned back toward the castle, and was relieved to note that it was much easier going the other way. Each step felt a little lighter and by the time she broke the tree line once more her breathing was mostly regular. As she walked back up to the castle, Rigel resolved to visit Treeslider at least once a week from now on. She refused to be ruled by fear.

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The morning of the last Sunday in September, Dumbledore interrupted breakfast with an unexpected proclamation. He stood before the hall until it quieted and said, without a trace of his usual humor, "Tonight there will be a special feast here in the Great Hall. A number of Ministry officials and guests will be present and an important announcement will be made. I know you will all represent our school with pride. Please be in your seats promptly at six o'clock."

The old wizard sat, and chatter broke out across the House tables like quail startled from the brush.

"Finally," Theo said, grinning across the table. "I've been dying of curiosity."

"Dumbledore doesn't sound too thrilled about it," Millicent noted. "Wonder how long this has been in the works."

"Since last spring," Rigel said, thinking back with a mental scowl to the day Riddle and Snape had ambushed her about her magical suppressor. "Riddle was here to meet with Dumbledore about it at least once last term."

"Lord Riddle was here at Hogwarts?" Pansy's expression was bewildered. "Why didn't you mention seeing him, Rigel?"

"I was a bit distracted at the time," she said, shrugging uncomfortably.

Looking back, she was almost certain that was the day he'd done... whatever he'd done to her magic. Rigel had read through the report Dumbledore procured for her several times, but she still wasn't entirely sure what effect Riddle had meant to have on her. The report

made it clear that the magical contamination, as she'd come to think of it, hadn't allowed the witch to glean any information at all about her fiancé. The magic she'd transferred to him had simply become his, and once it was gone she wasn't able to sense that bit of magic or exert control over it anymore.

Still, she was not satisfied. He had some reason for it, she just didn't know what yet. She would keep researching.

The day passed slowly as everyone tried to distract one another until dinner. Rigel sat in the common room through the early afternoon, reading through Dumbledore's Alchemy textbook while Pansy and Draco discussed increasingly wild theories as to what was going to be announced that evening.

It was almost a relief when their conversation fell silent. Rigel looked up from the notebook to see Rosier and Rookwood approaching their couch. Rookwood held a stack of white cards in his hand, which he distributed to the three of them with a rare smile. "A more formal invitation will be sent to your families, of course, but I wanted to invite you three personally."

Rigel flipped open the card and read the elegant scroll. *You are cordially invited to the joining of Edmund Rookwood and Alesana Selwyn in sacred matrimony.* The time, date, location and so on were listed on the back. It was to be the following summer, just after Draco's birthday.

Pansy leapt up from the couch and embraced Rookwood with an excited squeal. "I am so happy for you, Edmund. An outdoor ceremony is inspired."

"Thank you," Rookwood said. His deep voice was laced with satisfaction. "It was Alice's idea to ask my uncle for use of the gardens at his reserve."

"Congratulations," Draco said, standing to shake Rookwood's hand once Pansy had stepped back. "Smart move, having the wedding as

soon as you graduate. Yours will be a splendid match."

Rigel rose as well and took Rookwood's large hand when Draco was through. "I'm sure the ceremony will be stunning," she said, smiling up at the upperclassman. "I'll remind my father to check the mail so we can RSVP."

"We will be glad to have you," Rookwood said, inclining his head in thanks.

"Indeed," Rosier added, his patience apparently expired. "Having the silver trio will make it a guaranteed success."

"No one calls us that," Draco said firmly as he reclaimed his seat. Rigel and Pansy followed suit and the older boys chose chairs across the small coffee table for themselves.

"They really do, though," Rosier said sadly. "Alas, for your dignity."

"How was your summer?" Pansy asked, cutting off Draco's simmering retort. Rigel thought the girl probably knew exactly how his summer had been, but she gave Pansy points for attempting to keep Draco and Rosier civil. Somehow it was always like oil meeting water with those two.

"Dreadfully uneventful," Rosier said. "I almost wish I'd been at the World Cup, if only for a break from the monotony."

"Excitement isn't everything," Draco said sharply.

"So I've heard," Rosier said, waving a hand dismissively. "I want to hear about Rigel's summer. I hear you spent it abroad. You do seem unusually tan."

She was no such thing after spending a month mostly indoors, but she humored the seventh year. "I was visiting the Darian Gap community in the Americas."

"What were they like?" Rookwood leaned forward with his elbows on his knees and his hands loosely laced. "I've heard the wizards there are entirely closed off from the world."

"Nearly," Rigel agreed. "They are closer to our definition of druids than wizards, really. The villages are too small to support specialized craftsmen. Each wizard makes his own wand or talisman. A lot of their magic doesn't rely on that, though. It's mostly plant-based or ritualistic."

"And you went as part of a Healing outreach," Rosier said. It wasn't really a question, but Rigel nodded all the same. "How did that go?"

"There was an outbreak of tropic fever while I was there," she said.

"He was put under quarantine for ages," Draco added, sending her a look that said he thought it entirely her own fault.

"Goodness, that sounds trying," Rosier said, cocking his head at her.

"It was quite virulent," Rigel agreed. In fact, the fatality rate had been near fifty percent until someone figured out that it was being transmitted through mosquito bites. Once they figured out how to ward villages against the bloodsuckers, infection rates dropped off completely. Fairly sure that her friends did not want the unhappy details, she merely said. "We couldn't save everyone."

Rosier's face went blank with shock at her blunt words and even Rookwood looked taken aback. It was Pansy who broke the awkward silence that followed. "It was so good of you to try, Rigel. I really admire your selflessness. Not many would have left their home and traveled to a strange new place to help those in need, particularly with the risks involved in handling an epidemic."

"It wasn't entirely selfless," Rigel said, smiling softly at her. "I did learn a lot."

"Honestly Pans, Rigel doesn't need more encouragement to put others before himself," Draco said, scowling playfully at her. The others laughed, and conversation moved on to more pleasant topics.

"How is NEWT prep going?" Pansy asked them.

"Fine."

"Awful."

They spoke at the same time and shared a brief smile. "Aldon exaggerates," Rookwood told them.

"Edmund is trying not to scare you," Rosier said, shaking his head. "The coursework is beastly. McGonagall's got us calculating the rate of magical expenditure in time-delayed transfigurations."

"The rate of what?" Draco's brow furrowed. "That sounds more like Arithmancy."

"It is," Rookwood confirmed. "Advanced Transfigurations requires a basic understanding of Arithmancy, however."

"The rate of expenditure changes for every different material, so it's not like you can even memorize the equation once and be done," Rosier said on a sigh.

"That's because the magical coefficient of every material is unique," Rigel said. The four of them turned to stare at her. She blinked at them. "It's not so much that the equation changes as the variable does. Materials that have a higher coefficient don't last as long when Transfigured because the coefficient describes how resistant the material is to magical change."

"How do you know that?" Pansy asked, openly curious.

"It's a basic principle of Alchemy," she said. Rigel remembered having to explain the same thing to Percy and wondered why they didn't teach that to seventh years right off the bat.

"I have heard that Alchemy is Transfiguration by way of Arithmancy," Rookwood said. "Is that accurate?"

"Basically," Rigel said, nodding. "Alchemy uses Arithmetic equations to calculate exact proportions of material and magic while relying on runic arrays to actually enact the Transfiguration."

"Sounds unnecessarily complicated," Rosier commented.

"It is for anything that can be achieved with basic Transfiguration," Rigel agreed. "Supposedly once you get to the upper levels, Alchemy can achieve Transfigurations that no other branch can replicate, but of course you have to be someone like Dumbledore to really take advantage of that."

"It does seem to have interesting applications, though," Pansy said. "At least, you have a better understanding of Transfiguration than we do, and that's Draco's best class."

Draco snorted. "Rigel studies too much." The look he shot Rigel made her think he knew where she'd found the time to pursue such advanced topics and was probably still annoyed that she'd had a time-turner for the entirety of last year. She smiled sweetly at him, aware that he couldn't say anything about the time-turner without getting her interrogated by the Unspeakables for breaking contract. All he could do was glower back at her silently. She had to admit he was good at that.

Eventually, and almost inevitably, the conversation circled around to what everyone was trying to pretend they weren't waiting for. The announcement.

"My uncle knows something," Rookwood said. He sounded certain. "He came to Hogwarts this year for more than just teaching."

"You think there will be creatures involved?" Draco wrinkled his nose. "Like some sort of circus?"



"If there are creatures involved, they won't be the kind you find in your average menagerie," Rookwood reasoned. "Uncle Aurelius is renowned as an expert in dangerous and hard to handle beasts. The only one better in his field is Master Scamander himself."

"Oh good, more danger at Hogwarts," Rosier drawled.

"I'm sure the Ministry has everything under control," Pansy said. After a moment she cracked a reluctant smile. "I sound entirely foolish saying that."

"Utterly barmy," Draco agrees. "The Ministry? In control of something? Bite your tongue."

"The Party will have it in hand," Rookwood said, shrugging unconcernedly.

*Because they've handled things so well in the past,* Rigel thought. She didn't say it out loud but Draco's sharp glance and the spike in her head from Dom told her that her feelings on the subject did not go unnoticed.

Rookwood and Rosier left about an hour before dinner, and Pansy rose as well. "You boys ought to smarten yourselves up for dinner. If there's really going to be dignitaries or press, your families will want you to look sharp."

"Mine won't," Rigel said, smirking.

"I'm sure you'll make an effort for my sake then," Pansy said primly.

She would, and the other girl knew it. Sighing, Draco stretched and gestured for Rigel to come along. "Might as well get dressed. If we hurry, Pansy will have plenty of time to tell us what we've done wrong."

"Don't tempt me, boys." Pansy laughed as they scurried off to their room. "And don't forget to change your shoes, Rigel!"

She looked down at her very serviceable black boots. "No one else appreciates you," she told them mournfully. They didn't answer, but if they could she knew they would agree with her.

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The Great Hall did not look as it normally did on an average Sunday in September. It had been decorated. The theme was unclear, but there did seem to be a lot of silver and black. Tapestries depicting witches and wizards of great renown had been hung to cover nearly every available space along the walls. She recognized the four founders near the Hall entrance, dramatically portrayed in dynamic poses that suggested decisive and inspiring action. Then there was Nicholas Flamel, Adalbert Waffling, Mopsus, Artemisia Lufkin, Falco Parkinson, and even Merlin himself, among others.

The House tables had been largely stripped of their own colors, and shining silver dishes had replaced the plates they normally ate on. The Head table had been modified as well. Where usually Dumbledore sat in the center of the table, his chair only slightly more ornate than the other staff members', now the center of the table was physically elevated on a kind of dais, with three chairs that looked more like thrones to draw all eyes to those seated upon them.

Riddle sat in the center, the very picture of a lord reigning over his court. He glittered faintly in ebony robes stitched with luminescent silver thread. The Headmaster had been shunted to Riddle's left, with the Minister of Magic, by rights the one who should have had the highest consequence, seated at Riddle's right hand. *Not subtle at all*, she couldn't help but think critically.

Rigel took her seat between Pansy and Draco without commenting on the new décor or seating arrangements. She did watch the others exchange wary glances up and down the table, but most of the students in Slytherin House clung to dignity and refrained from

gaping at the dais with open confusion. She saw a couple of Gryffindors actually point and wanted to smile, but when she remembered who they were pointed at, the amusement dried up like spilt coffee, leaving only a ring of crusty emotional residue in its wake.

At precisely six o'clock, the doors to the Great Hall swung closed of their own accord, barely missing the heels of a couple of young Hufflepuffs who'd cut it too close. Everyone looked expectantly at the Head table, where the teachers sat with inscrutable expressions. The moment stretched into awkwardness before Dumbledore began to rise. As soon as the older wizard made to take his feet, Riddle stood smoothly and spread his hands wide. The Headmaster sank into his seat again with a faintly amused expression, and Riddle began speaking as though he hadn't noticed Dumbledore moving at all.

"Good evening, students, staff, Minister. Thank you all for joining me on this special occasion." Riddle didn't exactly smile, but his features nevertheless gave the impression of pleasure. "Tonight we have a great announcement. Some of you are about to be faced with an opportunity that comes along but once in a generation. For a determined few, this opportunity may define the trajectory of your lives." The Hall was filled with rapt faces and students leaning forward in their seats to see and hear better. "Before we get to that, however-let us feast!"

Riddle clapped his hands and food materialized on the tables to the tune of hundreds of disappointed sighs. The man certainly was sadistic.

The clatter and chatter of silverware and students echoed up and down the tables. Rigel studiously ignored it, serving herself vegetables and potatoes with her head down and her eyes focused on the table in front of her. Once she'd filled her plate, however, she found she had no appetite. Her stomach was churning. She had a premonition of impending plots twisting itself through her guts and no

amount of lovely House Elf cooking could break through the welling nausea.

"You're not eating," Pansy said from her left. Rigel glanced over at her through her fringe.

"Not hungry," she admitted.

"Don't work yourself up over this," Draco advised lowly from her other side. "It won't be as bad as you seem to think."

Rigel knew, somehow, that he was wrong. It was going to be exactly as bad as she thought. Something about Riddle's smugly confident expression had told her as much. Still, she smoothed her emotions under a blanket of Occlumency and smiled politely to her friends. "Sure." They both looked disappointed at her rather obvious dissembling, but at least they left her to pick at her meal in silence.

As dessert was at last cleared away, the doors opened once more to allow a swarm of people to filter in from the Entrance Hall. Witches and wizards with cameras and quills hurried to crowd the Head table with shouted questions and flashing bulbs. Riddle stood tall before them, his particular not-smile managing to convey pride and benevolence all at once. Minister Fudge got to his feet hastily to beam at the press like a trained monkey. Dumbledore was the last to rise, slow dignity and a vague sense of disapproval emanating from his wizened figure.

With a wave of his hands, Riddle quieted the ravenous reporters. The students fell silent as well and a fresh wave of anticipation thrummed through the room. "The time has come to reveal the purpose of tonight's gathering. This year, Hogwarts will be host to a grand event-the first and only competition of its kind. The True Triwizard Tournament!"

At his declaration, the candles in the room flared with light and everywhere in the audience gasps and sighs of amazement rippled.

"What *does* he mean?"

"There hasn't been a Triwizard Tournament in *ages* ."

The whispered conjectures spread through the Hall like scuttling creatures in the shadows. At another pass of Riddle's hand, the murmuring settled into a hush. Rigel's stomach clenched against her bad feeling as the dark-haired politician explained.

"For many years in our society a great debate has dominated the collective sphere. What makes a great witch or wizard? Is it nature or nurture? Luck or destiny? Does power reside in the mind... or in the blood?" Riddle allowed the shock to permeate his audience before his face relaxed into a predatory smirk. "This year at Hogwarts, we shall answer that question once and for all. A call will be sent out this very night to all corners of the world. Let any witch or wizard who believes in his or her greatness come to Hogwarts-and *prove it* ."

"Circe's tits, he can't be serious." Theo's face was an open study of incredulity, and he was not the only one. Rigel's eyes slid from one shocked expression to the next. There was the leader of the S.O.W. Party, famed wizard of power and blood purest extraordinaire, declaring the question of blood supremacy *unresolved* .

For a moment, she wondered if he'd gone mad. He wanted to put the question of blood prejudice to a public test on the international stage? Then she realized what the end game would inevitably be. A pureblood would win the tournament, and the so-called debate would be dealt a killing blow in front of all and sundry. Riddle was gambling the foundation of his party-to win eternal vindication for his cause.

The press clambered with questions, but Riddle wasn't through. "In one month's time, on Samhain's Eve, the preliminary participants will be announced. A total of nine young witches and wizards will be chosen to fight for the chance to represent their communities. While contestants will not be excluded by blood or background, there will be certain restrictions. In order to present a fair contest of each category, the tournament organizers have chosen an age group that,

we believe, best represents the potential of young magic wielders without restricting the pool of talent unnecessarily. For that reason, this tournament will be open to all witches and wizards between the ages of fourteen and seventeen."

The uproar was instantaneous. Younger students took to their feet in outrage at being excluded, while those fourth-year and above students whooped with wild delight.

"Why have an age range at all?" Millicent did not look particularly pleased to be included; mostly she seemed puzzled by the criteria. "Wouldn't the older students automatically out-perform the younger ones?"

"Depends on the criteria they use to determine participants," Blaise said, pitching his voice lower to cut through the din rather than trying to talk over it. "Lord Riddle said only nine will get to compete. That's not very many, if every teenager in the whole world gets to apply."

Rigel tried to un-grit her teeth, but it wasn't easy. With the cut-off at fourteen, at least some of her friends were guaranteed to get caught up in this tournament nonsense.

A flash of light from Dumbledore's fingers surprised most of the students into silence, at least long enough for the Headmaster to say, with remarkable evenness, "Please allow Tom to finish his explanation, students. Once the announcement is over, you may all go to your dormitories to discuss the news at length."

Riddle shot Dumbledore a look that was hard to read. Rigel thought he might be annoyed at the Headmaster's use of his first name. The politician raised his hands once more and said, ever so benevolent, "I know that some of you are disappointed. Rest assured that this event will be equally as thrilling to watch as to directly compete. The tournament committee has gathered expert minds from every field to create for you all this spectacular trial of talent, versatility, and will. From Samhain Day until Yule, the first nine chosen will undergo fierce preliminary trials, until at last one wizard from each category

will rise to the fore. After the New Year, the real competition begins: one pureblood, one halfblood, and one muggleborn will go head-to-head in an all-out contest to decide who will be the winner of the True Triwizard Tournament and claim the title of Blood Champion for once and for all!"

Applause broke out spontaneously, and Rigel couldn't help but flatten her lips in despair of her classmates. Was no one considering the consequences of the kind of competition Riddle was describing? Could they not see the way this tournament would rip at the deepest divides in their society, inflaming old prejudice and giving outlet to the worst kind of superiority in every way? Could they see nothing beyond imagined glory and the base desire for gratuitous entertainment?

"Lord Riddle! What will the prizes be?" One of the reporters made himself heard over the noise and everyone settled down to hear the answer.

"Is eternal glory not enough?" Riddle laughed lightly at the man's stammered retraction. "But of course, there will be incentives. How else are we to attract the best and brightest the Wizarding World has to offer? For the nine semi-finalists, a cash prize of 500 Galleons will be awarded." He paused to allow the applause at that to die out before continuing. "The three Blood Representatives who advance to the finals will each receive 1000 additional Galleons, as well as a full scholarship to the secondary institution or Guild program of their choice, upon the completion of their regular schooling. We have partnered with nations worldwide to ensure that any finalist from anywhere on earth will be afforded the very best in advanced educational opportunities."

There was a great deal more applause at this. Rigel supposed uncharitably that it was hard not to support educating promising young people. "As for the Blood Champion, whoever that may be, he or she will win an all-expense-paid world tour, where the Champion will meet influential and outstanding witches and wizards from participating nations in a wide variety of fields. The Champion will

earn one other prize as well. Would you like to see it?" The encouraging cheers did not leave any doubt that everyone would, if Riddle didn't mind, very much like to see whatever it was.

Riddle clapped his hands twice and smoke briefly obscured him. When the black fog evaporated a moment later, Riddle was holding a shining staff of purest silver. He lifted it horizontally above his head and declared, "Behold, the Rod of Zuriel!" From where she sat, Rigel could see that the body of the rod was wound with ropey filigree, but what drew the eye was the massive red stone set into the nest-like cradle at its top. It looked like a ruby, but she'd never seen a ruby so large, nor so perfectly red. A blood gem. How unbearably on the nose. Riddle turned slowly left then right, allowing everyone who wanted a glimpse to bask in the shining beauty of the staff. "This glorious staff will amplify the magic of any who possess it. An unparalleled tool deserving of a matchless master. The Blood Champion will be awarded its allegiance!"

A shiver went down her spine at his phrasing. Not the staff but its *allegiance*. Was it sentient? Rigel hoped not. She'd had enough of sentient stones to last a lifetime.

"Sir, a question from the Daily Prophet!"

"Yes, Miss Skeeter," Riddle said, giving an indulgent nod to the witch in acid green as he lowered the staff and placed it before him on the Head table.

"How will the tournament committee ensure the contest is fair?" Skeeter's voice dripped with sweetness. "Will the judges be above reproach?"

It was a good question. There was simply no world in which Riddle would allow a halfblood or a muggleborn to win his tournament. But how would he maintain the appearance of impartiality?

"There will be three separate stages, all judged in different ways, to avoid any murmurings of partiality," Riddle said smoothly. "When the



various magical institutes around the world nominate their candidates, two dozen randomly selected school board members and representatives of the educational departments of various governments will be invited to participate in narrowing the field down to just nine participants. In the preliminary stages, a panel of judges, equally balanced in terms of blood status of course, will preside over the tasks, scoring candidates on a variety of metrics, some of which are, due to the nature of these preliminary tasks, unavoidably subjective. When the final three are chosen, however, the scoring changes. The final events will be measured according to a transparent rubric that corresponds directly to how a representative performs in the challenge. The winner will be determined according to his or her score in each of the final challenges, and so no one can say that it was subjectivity that ultimately determined whether a pureblood, halfblood, or muggleborn would become tournament champion."

"You certainly seem to have thought of everything, Lord Riddle," Rita Skeeter simpered.

It was a rather convoluted plan, Rigel thought, but it did upon first recitation give off an illusion of fairness. That alone made her suspicious.

"Why not use the Triwizard Cup?" another reporter asked loudly.

"That artifact's properties do not lend itself to our needs," Riddle said, sounding only a little apologetic. "Its choices are mysterious, after all, and we want there to be no question of integrity in this tournament."

"For what criteria will the preliminary candidates be chosen?"

"Ah, that is an excellent question!" Minister Fudge spoke loudly, clearly unable to hold himself back from the press conference any longer. "You see, this tournament is not necessarily about intelligence or book smarts alone. The candidates that become our preliminary contestants will have to be well rounded. Strong ability

across multiple subjects is preferred, and the candidates will additionally be screened for creative problem-solving ability, work ethic, good character, and, of course, magical strength. Anyone can self-nominate, but recommendations *will* carry weight."

"Minister, is the Department of Games and Sports going to finance the tournament?"

"Ah, not fully, and we are accepting donations at this time," Fudge said, clearing his throat before adding, more loudly, "Though the Ministry of Magic is proud to sponsor the True Triwizard Tournament, I would like to thank Lord Riddle and the S.O.W. Party for conceptualizing the event and spearheading the planning committee. I would also like to thank Headmaster Dumbledore for agreeing to the use of the school and grounds in this manner. The good headmaster's support for the tournament logistics has been invaluable."

There was polite applause, but it only lasted a few moments before the reporters flew into a litany of inquiries once more. Rigel started to tune them out when the question of security arose and the entire conference began to devolve into the Minister weakly assuring the press that another incident like that of the World Cup was well outside the realm of possibility.

She turned this new horror over in her mind slowly, almost numb to its enormity. She actually felt a bit better, knowing what all the fuss was about now. It could have been much worse, she reasoned. What if Riddle had wanted to implement some new curriculum at Hogwarts that didn't include Potions? She shuddered at the thought and wondered how her mind had even conceived such evil. A tournament wasn't the end of the world. She would resignedly witness her friends making fools of themselves trying to get nominated and otherwise ignore the whole proceeding. It had nothing to do with her, and she would not allow the spectacle to distract her from her studies.

After another ten minutes of questions, Riddle finally cut the session short. "The Department of Magical Games and Sports will release a statement in the morning detailing all that we have covered tonight and more. Thank you all for your time. I wish you a pleasant good evening."

The reporters left, reluctantly but inevitably. When the Hall had returned to relative quiet, Riddle addressed the seated students again.

"Hogwarts is one of the few all-pure institutions left in the world. You are the bastions of our tradition, our culture; the pride of this community rests in your hands this year, students." Riddle looked down over the House tables with indulgent admonishment, like a mother reminding her children to eat their vegetables. "I trust that each of you will uphold the dignity of your blood over the coming year. Prepare to show the world what Hogwarts has to offer. To those of you who would compete: good luck."

With that, Riddle reverently picked up the Stick of Zuriel or whatever he'd called the silver staff and left the Hall. Dumbledore dismissed them all soon after, and Rigel joined the flood of Slytherins flowing down into the dungeons like a very talkative river.

"Who do you think they'll pick?" Millicent asked. "There are a number of talented students who qualify, though I suppose there's no guarantee that someone we know will get chosen."

"There has to be at least one from Hogwarts, don't you think?" Theo raised his eyebrows meaningfully. "After all, it's being hosted here. How embarrassing would it be for the Ministry if none of us got to compete?"

"What a convoluted tournament." Blaise's voice was neither approving nor disapproving, merely factual. "No doubt the reports will be confused and sensational tomorrow morning."

"That's why the DMGS is releasing a statement," Pansy reminded him. "They aren't giving people much time to apply. I wonder if that was deliberate?"

"Probably to cut down on the number of applicants the committee has to sort through," Draco said.

"Will your father be on the committee?" Millicent asked.

"I'm going to write and ask him tonight," Draco said, scowling slightly. "I can't believe he didn't tell me about this."

"Probably knew you'd tell your friends," Theo guessed.

As they approached the corridor that branched off toward Snape's office, Rigel peeled away from the crowd.

"Rigel?" Draco frowned at her as the others slowed to see where she was going.

"I've got to talk to Snape about something," she said, waving them on. "I'll meet you back in the common room."

In truth, she didn't have any pressing matters for her Head of House. She just didn't want to listen to her friends over-discuss the tournament for the next hour. If she could stall long enough in Snape's office, they might be done talking about it by the time she got back.

"Are you going to ask for a nomination!?" Nott's voice was both incredulous and admiring. "Working fast, aren't you?"

Rigel did not disguise the look of distaste on her face. "Not on your life."

She took her time walking through the dungeon halls. What was she going to give Snape as the reason for her visit? There was one thing she had been meaning to ask him about, only there hadn't seemed a good time to bring it up. As she researched magical transference in

her free time, she'd become more and more concerned about what Riddle had intended that day in the spare classroom. Rigel wanted to ask Snape if he'd noticed Riddle doing anything to her magic, but she was afraid to know the answer.

What if he had known what Riddle was doing and hadn't told her? She had to admit that would hurt. Rigel knew Snape didn't approve of the way she'd handled her magic last year, but she didn't like to imagine that the Potions Master would go so far as to allow her to be violated in that manner. She could feel resentment threatening to climb up the column of her throat so she swallowed it down forcefully. She didn't know anything for certain. Perhaps it was past time she asked.

She knocked on the familiar office door. There was a longer pause than normal before Snape's voice called for her to enter, and he sounded a bit off. Wondering if she'd come at a bad time, Rigel turned the silver knob and pushed. She'd only taken a couple of steps before she stopped, hand still on the door and took a steadying breath. Riddle was in Snape's office, sitting at his desk as though he had any right to the Potions Master's seat.

"Forgive me, Professor. I'll come back tomorrow." She made to back out of the office but Snape's hand on the door's edge stopped her. She narrowed her eyes slightly, briefly contemplating letting go of the handle and walking out anyway, but the look in Snape's eyes dissuade her. He was staring at her in resigned frustration, and a flick of his gaze had her coming back into the office completely so that he could shut the door behind her.

"Just the boy we were talking about, Severus." Riddle appeared quietly satisfied, and the pleased glint in his eye provoked her to an open frown.

"Indeed," Snape's inflection revealed nothing. He conjured two chairs and bade her to sit.

Rigel sank slowly into the chair, content to ignore Riddle for as long as possible. "Was there something you required of me, Professor?"

Her Head of House pressed his lips together and shifted his stare to the indolently lounging Riddle. "Perhaps you should explain, Lord Riddle."

"Of course, Severus. Mr. Black-may I call you Rigel?" His smile was as fake as a Diagon Alley love charm. She jerked her head in a sharp negation but he seemed not to notice. "Severus was just telling me of his plans to nominate you for the tournament."

There was a dull buzzing in her ears and she blinked rapidly. She could not have heard him correctly. Her brain replayed the words in her head, confirming the dark horror that was building in her chest. "I don't understand." The words were faint and scarcely intelligible, but it was the best she could do as a hole of raw panic opened up inside of her.

"The True Triwizard Tournament," Riddle said, still smiling. Except there was no humor in his eyes and the smile held the aggressive edge of barred teeth. "Severus was saying, and I quite agree, that you would be the perfect candidate for Hogwarts to put forth."

Rigel turned to stare at Snape. There was simply no way that he would ever do such a thing to her. Would he? She searched his blank expression and found no reassurance. After an awkwardly long silence in which she begged him with her eyes to refute the awful man sitting *in his chair*, Snape's eyes flickered, every so briefly, toward Riddle and back.

She nearly gasped with relief, but managed to school her expression before it betrayed her. Snape had not wanted this. It was all Riddle. Again. Summoning her very best apologetically regretful expression, Rigel widened her eyes and bit her lip before saying. "That's very kind of you, Professor. I'm afraid I don't have time for such an undertaking this year, however. As you know, I have a full schedule."

Snape let the tiniest of grimaces slip onto his face and said, "I'm afraid I must insist, Ri-Mr. Black. It is very important that Hogwarts make a good showing for this event."

"Then it might be best to ask an older student," Rigel said reasonably.

"We are not asking another student," Riddle told her, voice chiding. "We are nominating *you* ."

The use of 'we' did not escape her. She didn't know what Riddle thought he would gain by forcing Snape to nominate her, but he was out of his mind if he thought she would be participating in his circus. "I am honored," she lied. "Still, I won't be accepting. I hope you find someone suitable."

She made to rise, but Riddle's face fell into a hard glare and she found she couldn't complete the gesture. Merlin, but he was scary when he stopped pretending to be a normal person.

"You *will* be Hogwarts' representative for the tournament, Rigel." Even her name on his lips made her want to snarl with aberrance.

Lifting her chin, she glared back with all her might. "You cannot *force* me to participate, Mr. Riddle."

"Control your temper, Mr. Black," Snape cut in sharply. When she looked at him, the worry for her that lined his face was the only thing that kept her from snapping back.

"With all due respect, Professor, I will not go along with this. Nominate me all you like. Even if they pick me, I will decline to compete. Please find another candidate." Rigel thought she'd kept a civil tone, but there was still a silent warning in her Head of House's eyes. *So be it*, she thought. *If I have to defy even Snape to avoid this tournament, I will.*

To her surprise, Riddle merely smiled again. "You have thirty days to change your mind. If you remain uncooperative, I will devise a means to change it for you."

"What does that mean?" Rigel stiffened her spine against the thought that he would use nefarious means to control her somehow. Even Riddle could not get away with the Imperious Curse, but she did not put anything past the abhorrent politician.

"No one is un-persuadable," Riddle told her. The way he said it, emotionless as a remark on the color of the sky, was the most ominous thing about it.

"You have nothing I want," she asserted. She couldn't think of a bribe that would be worth the dreadfulness of getting wrapped up in his little opera. No amount of money or knowledge was worth that.

"We shall see."

She stared in incredulous fury at the wizard before her. He thought he could just make her do something she didn't want to do? Let him try. Rigel kept her glare up until she felt the familiar flash of pain that was Dom's warning behind her eyes. She broke his gaze at once and stood. "If that is all, I best get back to the common room. Good evening, Professor."

Without waiting for a reply, she fled the office. It was only halfway back to the common room that she realized her hands were shaking. Closing her eyes, she slumped against a cold stone wall and let the rage crash over her. How *dare* he? What the hell did he think he was playing at? And Snape just *stood* there and *let* him-

With a slightly shaky laugh, she realized that was what upset her the most. Was her professor really so spineless? What did Riddle have over him, that he bowed to the man's every whim? She grimaced against the bitterness and straightened slowly. What did it matter, really, why Snape capitulated to Riddle's insistence? All that mattered was what she would do next. Rigel was on her own, that



much was clear. That was fine. She would be her own support, as always.

Dizzy with the swirling implications of the night, Rigel made her way back to the common room and pleaded a headache when her friends waved her toward their chairs. She retreated to her room and dug in her trunk for a certain mirror. Archie needed to know about the tournament. At the very least, it meant many more eyes on Hogwarts than they'd even anticipated. The ruse would be tested that year like never before.

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"Must you aggravate the boy every time you encounter him?" Severus was hard-pressed not to let his expression betray his dismay as he locked and warded the door after Rigel Black's abrupt exit.

"He purposely provokes my displeasure," Lord Riddle said unconcernedly. "Eventually, he will learn respect. That, or he will suffer the consequences."

Severus suspected it would be the latter. Rigel had very little sense of self-preservation, apparently. "How will you convince him?" he asked. He very much doubted the average inducement would appeal to a boy like Rigel Black.

Riddle's expression turned sardonic. "How would you go about it?"

Severus gave it honest consideration. His lord would accept nothing less. "It won't be enough to offer something he wants. Black could easily agree to participate and then make a poor showing to spite you." Riddle let out a noise of agreement. "You will have to offer him something he cannot afford to refuse. What that may be..." Severus lifted a shoulder. "I've no idea what he might value so much."

"He's a fourteen-year-old boy. It will not be difficult to discover," Riddle said confidently. After a contemplative silence, the dark-haired man shook his head and refocused. "Regardless, I had another reason for seeking you out, Severus."

He had wondered when Riddle would get around to what he'd originally come down to the dungeons to speak about. Certainly neither had expected Rigel to walk into the office so blithely. Severus suspected that Riddle would have waited until the end of the month to inform Rigel of his nomination, had the opportunity not presented itself so invitingly.

"The Potter girl," Riddle said, and Severus' attention snapped back to him in surprise.

"What about her?" he drawled, conveying to the best of his vocal ability that the girl ought to be of no concern to Riddle. She was of concern to no one but him, for the moment.

"I need you to separate the boy from his attachment to her. Regulus intimates that the girl has undue influence over our would-be champion." Riddle fixed Severus with a stern look. "Black cannot afford the connection, nor the distraction."

Severus paused for as long as he dared before answering. He had to think of some way to divert the politician's intentions. How had the man even known that Severus was in any way connected with Potter? "That will be prohibitively difficult, my lord. The two are closer than most siblings. Black would no sooner relinquish Harriett Potter than he would give up studying Potions."

"You will persuade him otherwise." Riddle appeared determined to pursue this course, and Severus couldn't help but wonder who had suggested this ill-advised plan to the politician. "Rigel Black is to be the perfect poster-boy for Pureblood preeminence. He cannot be so closely connected to a Halfblood."

So Riddle did intend for Rigel to win his tournament. Snape had suspected as much, but to have it as much as confirmed still lodged a weight in his stomach. Was it fate, that his student sought neither attention nor hassle yet was unable to escape either? "It may not be possible," Severus cautioned his lord carefully. "Could you not leverage their relationship instead?"

Lord Riddle tilted his head, considering. "As long as they are so attached to on another, both are vulnerable," he mused.

That was not quite what he meant. Severus offered, "A symbol of Pureblood who has strong ties to Halfbloods and Muggleborns would be more sympathetic to the moderates. Rigel's affection for his cousin will appeal to those who otherwise wouldn't support him as champion."

He had the satisfaction of seeing Riddle's eyebrows rise. "Interesting assertion, Severus. Are you certain that isn't your own sympathies talking?"

"If it is, my point is sound," Severus said, raising a brow of his own. "In addition, consider the girl herself: a talented young inventor, heiress to the Potter line. Her attachment to Rigel may be the leverage we need to win her to our side."

"You praise her." Riddle looked fascinated now. Not the best of indications, but at least he had successfully diverted the man's attention.

"Her ability speaks for itself," Severus said flatly. "Add to that the fact that she has the favor of the Aldermaster already, and you see why she is not as dependent on my good will as it seems. Her ideas are too compelling for the field to ignore. Better to have her in our corner before she becomes an unstoppable force in the academic community."

Riddle sat up straighter, looking at Severus as though he'd never seen him before. "And if I were to insist, Severus? If I told you that

you must alienate the girl from her cousin in the next six months?"

Severus's gaze was steady as he looked at the powerful man across from him and said, "I would tell you it cannot be done. Beyond all that I have already mentioned, I have a contractual apprenticeship with both Rigel Black and Miss Potter. I can neither dissolve nor undermine either agreement without losing my own standing in the Guild. Regretfully, my lord, I am not the man for this task. If there is a way to separate those two, it is beyond my sphere of influence."

Riddle's gaze glittered with captivated curiosity. "Do you truly believe she can be persuaded to our side?"

"She will go where her cousin goes," Severus said slowly. That much he was sure of. "The boy will have to be convinced first. He doesn't like you," he added, in case Riddle had any delusions on that front.

"I don't require him to like me," Riddle said, looking amused. "Whether he wants to or not, he will become a symbol of our Party. When he wins this tournament and proves decisively that pure blood wins out, he will be ours by default. The people will rally behind him."

"Can a schoolyard tournament really accomplish so much?" Severus wondered aloud.

"Everyone loves a good sporting match," Riddle said, smiling slowly. "This spectacle will be like nothing they've ever seen. People who never thought they had a stake in blood politics will be choosing sides. That is the power of entertainment."

He suppressed the urge to widen his eyes and instead allowed the ripples of thought disturbed by that pronouncement to propagate silently. Severus could not shake the sense that Riddle was entirely correct in his assessment of the masses.

After a final instruction to keep pressure on Rigel Black regarding acceptance of his place in the tournament, Lord Riddle took his leave. Severus stayed seated a while longer before retiring. He had

much to reflect upon. It was fortuitous, perhaps, that Rigel had requested to learn Battle Potions this term. Almost as though he knew what was in store for him. All Severus could do was prepare his student as best he could for what awaited. There was nothing else for it.

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[end of chapter six.]

A/N: Well, that's it! A mere 25,000 words ^^ . I promise it was only meant to be 15k or so. The plot just keeps running away from me... but I will catch it. Eventually. Thank you all so very much for reading! I hope you are as excited as I am for the year to come.

## Chapter 7

A/N : Lovely readers, I don't deserve you. But you all deserve this.

### The Futile Façade:

#### Chapter 7:

Archie loved his cousin Harry, but hearing the mirror ding twice in as many weeks sent an immediate shiver of disquiet down his spine. Harry was many things, but chatty was not one of them; she would not call just to say hi, and they had finalized their cross-syllabi studying schedule the week before. Plus, it was only mid-afternoon. That meant Harry couldn't even wait a few hours until their designated calling time to talk to him. He locked the door to his room and fished the mirror from his bedside table drawer.

"Yes Rigel?" As soon as he spoke, the mirror's surface cleared to reveal his cousin's care-worn visage. His heart dropped at the look in her eyes, but he knew she wouldn't appreciate his panic. "What's happened?" he asked. If someone had discovered her identity, they were prepared to run, but surely it had not come to that already.

"There was an announcement tonight at dinner," Harry said. Her voice sounded a bit more vague than normal, as though she were still working through a sudden shock. "There's to be a tournament here at Hogwarts. Riddle's pushing for me to compete."

"WHAT-" Archie clapped a hand to his mouth and took a deep breath before continuing, at a more manageable level, "*What does that mean?* How can they force you to compete?"

"I don't know," Harry said faintly. At the sight of moisture gathering in the corner of his cousin's eyes, Archie's sucked in a sharp breath and started murmuring rapidly into the mirror.

"Oh, it's okay, Harry. Whatever it is, it'll be okay. I promise we'll work through it. Just start at the beginning and explain everything. I'm here as long as you need me." Archie wasn't sure if it was the words themselves or the soothing tone of his voice that slowly coaxed her out of her daze.

She blinked hard several times and pulled a slow breath in through her nose before sighing. "Okay. Yes. It started with Riddle's announcement..."

Archie struggled to hold onto a semblance of equanimity as Harry recounted the evening she'd had. He didn't have the emotional control that Harry did, though, and his brain was giving birth to a litter of worries while her tale unfolded. A tournament built around blood prejudice sounded like the most gauche thing he'd ever heard of. Harry *couldn't* compete in such a tournament. Who knew what kind of things would be asked of her? What if the competitors had to take some kind of contractual oath? What if she had to go *swimming*?

"... and then Snape acted like he didn't have any choice which means it's up to *me* to find a way out of this madness." Harry broke off her increasingly distressed recitation to suck in a breath and Archie interrupted her.

"It's up to us, remember. You're not in this alone. We can handle anything together." Archie waited until her eyes refocused on his own and gave Harry a confident smile. "Really, it's not so bad. All we know so far is that Riddle is *trying* to come up with some way to convince you to participate. He hasn't succeeded yet so there's not reason to panic."

"I don't know what he could offer that would tempt me," Harry said, frowning slightly. "I'm worried he'll take matters into his own hands somehow if he thinks I can't be persuaded any other way. I just don't see why he's so set on me competing. There are plenty of others who would gladly take up the mantel for the Cow Party. Draco would in a heartbeat. Theo, too, and Rookwood wouldn't turn the

opportunity down either. I'm probably the worst possible choice for this!"

Archie sighed. "Not from his perspective. He doesn't know most of the reasons you're unsuited to this. What he does know is that you're powerful, smart, and strong enough to survive several things that might have killed other wizards your age. He knows you're the Heir to an old, Dark family that has recently pulled away from his influence. If you win this tournament, what happens?"

"Everyone thinks pureblooded children are in general more talented than halfbloods or muggleborns," Harry said glumly. "And I become the face of bigotry."

"The *Black Heir* becomes a symbol of pureblood power," Archie corrected her. "Don't think I'm thrilled about that, either, but we have more important things to consider. If it looks like the Blacks are moving back toward Dark politics, how many of the neutral pureblooded families might also reconsider their stance? Especially if the tournament succeeds in Riddle's true aim."

"What's that?" Harry asked, puzzled. He preferred her confusion to the lost, frustrated expression she'd been wearing just a few minutes ago.

"Riddle doesn't just want an anecdotal example to use in arguments favoring pureblood privilege," Archie said evenly. "He's trying to swing public opinion in general in favor of purebloods. Do you know what happened after Ireland won the World Cup?"

Harry blinked at him. "No. What does that have to do with it?"

"Ireland got a brand new stadium with ten thousand more seats than their old one held," Archie told her. "Because they're winners. People love a winner. It's why we root for teams in the first place. Us verses them. That's Riddle's game. He's tired of pureblooded families supporting halfbloods and muggleborns. The Light families' support is the only thing keeping purebloods from having even more



advantages than they have now. Do you see what this tournament is going to do?"

Harry nodded slowly. "I was thinking something similar myself, though I hadn't thought of it like Quidditch teams. The number of people who root for a champion who doesn't represent their specific blood community is going to be low. Halfbloods will root for the halfbloods. Muggleborns for the muggleborns. And a lot of purebloods might root for the pureblood candidates without even thinking of it as a social issue. It will seem natural. Easy to choose a side. And easy to disparage the other side because that's just how human nature works once people choose sides. People are going to lose their minds. Oh Merlin, how are we going to stop this?"

Archie raised his eyebrows at Harry's words. Where had his apathetic cousin gone? And when had altruism become her first impulse, rather than an instinct she attempted to suppress beneath caution and guilt? While he was proud of her, he didn't think she fully comprehended the situation at hand. "I don't think anyone can stop it except Riddle, at this point," Archie told her. "The most we can do is undermine the effects."

"I could agree to compete and then throw the competition," Harry suggested reluctantly.

Archie grimaced. "There's no way Riddle won't think of that. If he gets you to compete, it will be with the understanding that you do your best. That's why he wants you to compete, not any of your classmates. They would be more eager, but their best isn't like *your* best, Ha-Rigel. Your best is scary. Riddle wants that."

"It's still a gamble," she argued, looking uncomfortable at his determination. "With candidates from all over, there's bound to be others with as much skill, if not more."

"I think all those convoluted precautions Riddle has put in place for 'fairness' will actually give him more control of the proceedings than most will suspect," Archie said thoughtfully. Riddle was a politician.

He simply would not implement measures that did not favor him in some way.

He could see Harry running her free hand agitatedly through her hair, ruffling the front into disarray. "How is this my life?" she muttered. "Well, our life. I'm so sorry about this, Archie. If I hadn't garnered Riddle's attention we wouldn't be in this mess. How are we going to make Sirius understand?"

Archie's stomach clenched. His father would absolutely be against him participating in the tournament. Quite aside from Sirius' aversion to pureblood supremacy and all its rhetoric, he also just wouldn't be okay with 'Archie' doing something so dangerous after all that the last three years had entailed.

Still, that was not Harry's fault, and Archie could see that his cousin had enough on her shoulders. "Let me worry about Sirius," he said gently. "I'll write a letter breaking the news gently, and explaining as best I can what's going on."

Harry looked alarmed. "If you tell him what Riddle is doing, Sirius won't let that go lightly. He'll make an enemy of the SOW Party, and he's only just now coming back out into society again."

"I have to tell him something." Archie blew out a breath. "I'll think on it. You start brainstorming ways around whatever Riddle comes up with to get you to compete."

"All right." Harry looked slightly relieved to have a straightforward task to tackle. "Can you ask around AIM and see if anyone knows anything more about this tournament?"

"Sure," Archie said. That would be easy enough. He doubted he'd learn much, though. If he were Riddle, he wouldn't put too much effort into advertising this supposedly open tournament. The fewer applicants, the better control he had over who the 'impartial committee' determined to be the best competitors. Checking his watch, he realized Hermione would be coming to collect him for

Sunday afternoon test prep shortly. "Are you all right?" he asked Harry.

She nodded with a small smile. It might have been convincing if not for the lines creasing her forehead and the sheen of overwhelmed moisture that coated her usually flat grey eyes. "Yes, go about your day as normal. Thanks for answering, cuz. I feel a lot less like road kill, though I maintain that Fate keeps running over me on purpose."

Archie laughed, relieved that at least Harry maintained her morbid sense of humor. "Call me again if the stress gets to you. I'm always here."

Harry nodded bravely. "I know. I won't forget. Talk to you soon."

"I'll ask the professor here about this tournament," Archie added.

"Do *not* get yourself nominated." There was his domineering cousin.

He grinned innocently. "Who, me?"

"Harry!"

"Just kidding. I promise not to make your life any harder, cuz." He searched her eyes a final time before smiling sadly. "Take care of yourself. Screw Riddle and the tournament and what anyone else expects. Don't do anything you can't handle."

Harry nodded seriously. "I'll do my best."

That's what he was afraid of. Archie knew Harry would do as she pleased, in the end. She always did. He just hoped it worked out for them again. The connection was cut off, and Archie put the mirror away slowly, lost in thought.

He'd been sort of vaguely concerned with the suspicions Harry harbored about what Riddle was up to that year, but since coming back to AIM he hadn't given it much attention. After all, if whatever he was scheming was as out in the open as it seemed it would be,

how bad could it really be? Apparently it could be very bad. So bad that he wasn't sure how Harry's sanity would survive the pressure. Not only was she being coerced into championing a cause she vehemently disagreed with, a cause that had incidentally prompted her to commit to a lifelong deception at the risk of her very soul at the tender age of eleven, but *in becoming* that champion she would inevitably put that deception into the realest peril it had ever faced. That sort of thing couldn't be good for the psyche.

And here he was in North America, completely unable to give her the hug she so obviously needed. On a dissatisfied sigh, Archie checked his reflection in the mirror and summoned a more cheerful expression. When he looked less like he'd just be told his favorite dog had died, Archie left his room to track down Hermione. If anything could cheer him up, it was seeing her lovely brown eyes darken in concentration as she tried to answer his practice test questions. If the gods were truly smiling on him, she might nibble a quill while she thought.

He hadn't quite worked up the courage to tell Hermione how he felt yet, but he didn't have any trouble admiring her from across a study table while he waited for the opportune moment.

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Rigel woke the next morning with a blinding headache. It seemed that all of the stress she'd been trying to ignore had caught up with her sometime in the night. She slowly unclenched her jaw and suppressed a groan as she slid off her bed and blinked against the crust between her eyelids.

She retrieved a pain potion from her kit and gulped it down in a single go. By the time she had changed into her running clothes and exited the bathroom, her head felt almost normal. Draco mumbled a good morning as he swapped her places in the bathroom to brush

his teeth and comb his hair. Why he bothered grooming himself before going out to exercise, Rigel didn't understand. She supposed it was part of his charm, though.

When they were both mostly awake and dressed, they crept out of the dorm room and into the common room where Pansy awaited them. Rigel was always amazed at how alert Pansy seemed so early in the morning. She wondered if their blonde friend simply woke up refreshed and cheerful or if Pansy set an alarm much earlier than they did and used the extra time to reach full operational capability.

Rigel was looking forward to a long run that morning; she had a lot to sort out in her head as far as Riddle's tournament was concerned. She didn't count on Draco and Pansy noticing her preoccupation, however.

"Are you ever going to tell us what's on your mind?" Pansy asked. Her voice was light and even despite the brisk pace the three of them kept around the lake.

"I thought you said not to pester him!" Draco said before Rigel could answer.

She couldn't stop the laugh that bubbled up from her chest. Her friends were really too much sometimes. "Am I so obvious?"

"The aura of darkness hanging around you when you got back to the common room last night was," Draco told her frankly.

Rigel shook her head ruefully. "That bad, huh? Well, I had a bit of a shock, that's all."

"What happened?" Pansy asked. "Did Snape do something disagreeable?"

"It wasn't Snape-not really," she amended, as she had not quite decided whether to confront him on his lack of defense of her yet. Rigel hesitated, but she'd already started to explain. If her friends

knew what was happening, maybe they would excuse her foul moods. "Riddle was in Snape's office last night. He's asking Snape to nominate me for the tournament."

"Oh, congratulations!" Pansy's smile faltered when she turned to see the scowl on Rigel's face. "Ah. That is... how dare he? Without even consulting you first?"

Rigel felt a smile tug at her lips involuntarily. "I know, I sound churlish and ungrateful. I really don't want to be in the tournament, though. I don't agree with its premise. I don't want to be the face of blood supremacy. I just want a quiet year."

"So don't do it." Draco said it with an obvious expression on his face. "I mean, you were polite when you declined, right?"

"The first couple of times..." Rigel grimaced. "At the end I was pretty annoyed though. I don't think I left Riddle with any illusions as to my attitude."

"Well, that isn't ideal, but I'm sure the damage can be rectified," Pansy said uncertainly.

Rigel shook her head sharply. "You don't understand. He's still insisting. I told him flat out that I wouldn't do it, and Riddle just said he would find some way to convince me."

"He said *what*?" Pansy stopped running and stared at Rigel in shock. Draco and Rigel stopped as well and all three took a moment to catch their breath before Pansy pinned him with a fierce look. "Rigel, he's threatening you. What did he say exactly?"

Rigel recounted the conversation as best she could, grimacing when Draco and Pansy both winced at her phrasing.

"You told him he has nothing you want?" Draco whistled lowly. "That's not good."

"But it's true," Rigel said, frowning.

"If he thinks he can't tempt you, he's going to use another kind of pressure instead," Pansy said. Her soft features were tight with concern. "Rigel, this isn't good."

"I know that," she said, clenching and unclenching her fists helplessly. "But what can I do?"

Surprisingly, Pansy was quick with the answer that Rigel had been trying to conceive all night. "Warn your family," the girl said, eyes full of deadly earnest. "Family is always the first thing people will try to use against you. If they know ahead of time and are prepared to withstand pressure on your behalf, that's half the battle won."

"Should you be telling me this?" Rigel was moved by the unhesitating practicality with which Pansy had met her explanation of the situation. She knew that Pansy and Draco ought not to help her undermine anything Riddle was plotting, considering their families both supported the Party, and yet here they were listening and commiserating with her. Perhaps there was some room between loyalty to family and friendship, after all.

"It's nothing you shouldn't already know," Draco said, an odd expression on his face. "Rigel... why don't you tell him you're medically incapable?"

She blinked at him. "Medically incapa-oh. You mean my... condition?" She glanced at Pansy, but the pureblooded girl looked merely concerned. Her friends hadn't really brought up the story Snape had spun to protect her time-turner the previous year, and Pansy still didn't know she'd ever had a time-turner. If Draco suspected the story was false, he still thought she had some sort of embarrassing skin condition that made her avoid close contact with others.

"Of course," Draco said, frowning. "You can't be expected to compete, considering."

"No one else knows about that," she said quietly. She didn't have to fake the fear she felt at Riddle ever discovering that secret. "I *won't* tell Riddle about it. If it turns out I can't get out of this, I'll deal with that as it comes."

"You're smart, Rigel," Pansy said, smiling bracingly at her. "Just don't let them take you off guard. I know you'll come through this okay."

Rigel smiled back gratefully. She truly didn't deserve her amazing friends. "Thank you guys. It doesn't seem so hopeless, saying it all out loud."

"Oh, it's hopeless," Draco said, a smirk creeping onto his face. "With you as our champion, Hogwarts is doomed."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Rigel demanded, playing along if only to lift the heavy, despondent feeling from her shoulders.

"We'll be a laughing stock," Draco bemoaned. "Think of it-the only champion who solves every task with a *potion* ."

"Is that a challenge?" Rigel laughed. It wasn't funny-the very idea of participating in the tournament was horrifying at best-but it was cathartic to let the hysteria leak out a little.

"Don't encourage him," Pansy said, starting to jog once more.

They hurried to catch up to her. After a few minutes' silence, Rigel asked, "Are you guys upset that Riddle wants me to compete? Were you thinking of entering yourselves?"

"I was," Draco said frankly. "I think my father would have asked Uncle Severus to nominate me, if things had gone differently. I'm glad you told me now, though, that the Party already has a plan in mind. Otherwise I might have let hubris get my hopes up."

"You would make a good champion," Rigel offered tentatively. "You should enter. If I can get out of this, maybe you-"



"Don't fool yourself, Rigel," Draco said sternly. "I know you don't want to do this, but you have to ask yourself what the cost of defying Lord Riddle will be. I'll survive not being the pureblood representative. But promise me something," he added suddenly. At Rigel's prompting look, he said, slowly, "Promise me that if you are picked-if you can't refuse-that you won't just throw it away. You have to at least try, Rigel. Otherwise it's an insult to everyone who would be in your shoes, if they could."

Rigel felt the blood drain from her face. Could she promise that to Draco? She didn't want to try. She thought back to what Archie had said. If Riddle somehow coerced her into competing, there was very little chance that he wouldn't also coerce her into taking it seriously. She nodded after a long moment's thought. "Okay. If I have to compete, I'll take it seriously-for you, Dray."

He made a face at her. "Don't make it weird, you prat."

"Will you carry Draco's favor in your pocket for good luck?" Pansy wondered.

"Pansy!" Draco shot her a betrayed expression. "I am not the girl in this relationship!"

"Excuse me?" Pansy's challenging glare had Draco visibly backpedaling just as fast.

"Not that there's anything wrong with that. It's just not how our particular dynamic functions. Right, Rigel? Rigel, *tell her.*"

"I will certainly dedicate my victory to Draco's virtue and grace," Rigel allowed.

"You take that back!" Draco lunged at her but Rigel took off into a sprint before his hand could grasp her neck.

They sprinted the rest of the way back to the castle. The lighthearted feeling of wings that carried her well beyond the end of the workout

might have been adrenaline, but it also might have been the glowing wonderment in her heart at the idea that her friends really cared for her. They were willing to walk a delicate line for her, even though it gained them nothing aside from her gratitude. Their support and advice gave her the determination she needed to seek out her Head of House that very day. She would confront him alone, without Riddle there to ooze threats with his very presence, and see what the Potions Master had to say. Draco and Pansy were willing to take a risk for her. Maybe, a small, naïve part of her whispered, Snape would too.

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She had a potions lesson scheduled Sunday afternoon already, so Rigel collected her protective gear and headed toward lab three a little early. If she could get the difficult conversation out of the way first, it might not even cut very much into her lesson. Snape was within when she arrived, but she noticed he hadn't made any preparations for brewing yet. He was simply waiting, arms folded across his chest and head tucked slightly so that his gaze drilled into the ground. She had seen that posture many times; it meant the Potions Master had succumbed to his thoughts completely. He'd likely been that way for a while, as even her quiet entrance didn't startle him from his reverie at once.

He knew she was there, of course. Snape always knew when someone was near. He had some kind of near-constant passive Legilimency that allowed him to recognize the feel of the minds around him. She wondered if it was related to the projected magical field she was learning for free brewing. There was probably a deeper mental aspect to it, but she wouldn't be surprised if the basic theory was similar.

She set down her gear and waited a few minutes for Snape to refocus on the world around him. When his eyes rose to her face,

Rigel met his look with calm serenity. "We need to talk, sir."

His eyebrow lifted so slowly it had to be unnatural. "I presume your desired topic of discussion is the events of yesterday evening."

"Quite."

"State your piece, then," her Head of House said flatly. His arms were still crossed and the way his eyes narrowed at her stubborn expression didn't bode well for open communication. Still, she had to try.

"I want to know why you didn't defend me last night, sir. You know I don't want to do the tournament, yet you are prepared to nominate me anyway because Riddle asked it." She searched his closed expression and for once allowed the hurt to show clearly in her eyes. "I need to know if you bow to Riddle because you agree with him or if there is some other reason you cannot stand against him."

Snape's black eyes glittered at her as he waited for her to finish. When he spoke, it was measured and slow. "I do defend you, Rigel, though you do not perceive it. I have limited maneuverability in what Lord Riddle requires, but what leeway I possess I have spent almost exclusively on *you* these past three years."

Rigel blinked. "What do you mean?" She had expected Snape to either refuse to engage her on the topic or else to tell her that Riddle was acting for the best somehow. She hadn't let herself imagine that Snape would openly admit to being on her side. Still, she didn't know in what instances he would have needed to maneuver on her behalf.

"Think, Rigel. You have foiled more than one of Lord Riddle's plans. Do you know what usually happens to people who stand in his way?" Snape's frown was tight. "He removes them from his path, one way or another."

She thought quickly. "Has he threatened me?" Was Archie going to be in danger in the future?

"I convinced him there was no need to," Snape said sharply. "You first year, I persuaded him that you meant no harm, that you didn't know what you were doing, and that saving Draco's life was a good thing. It would tie the Black Heir to the Malfoy family, after all."

Rigel drew in a sharp breath. Had Mr. Malfoy's offer of a life debt been at Riddle's behest? Is that why they allowed Draco to maintain his close friendship with her? Because Riddle wanted the Black family realigned with his Party? Snape had continued without pausing, so she left that line of thought for a moment to catch up to what he was saying.

"Second year I expected a greater reaction. Lord Riddle seems to have overlooked your part in the death of Slytherin's monster and the magical construct's madness-

"He didn't overlook it," Rigel cut in. "I made a deal with him."

Snape stared at her. "What could you possibly have bargained?"

"The construct told me everything in the Chamber. More than I admitted to Dumbledore," she said softly. Her magic squeaked like a cat whose tail had been yanked and she winced. That would be the vow warning her not to reveal anything specific. "I can't talk about the exchange we made. Suffice to say that he did not take my knowing anything about the construct stoically."

The Potions Master began to pace the small room agitatedly. "You should not make such bargains lightly."

"I didn't," Rigel said, frowning. "I don't doubt that without an assurance of silence Riddle would have ensured it another way."

Snape did not contradict her, which in itself was a bit terrifying. It was one thing to suspect that Riddle would go so far as to Obliviate or otherwise prevent a person from revealing his secrets, but quite another to have it essentially confirmed by one of his Party members.

"He has put that business behind him, at least," Snape said, almost to himself. "Last year he will not forget as quickly. Lord Riddle was livid at your interference."

"I was *kidnapped*," Rigel snapped, outraged. Riddle had no right to be upset with her that his minion had turned coat and lost his humanity.

Snape's eyes flashed. "Do not take that tone with me, boy. Riddle does not believe you had no hand in the destruction of the stone. He doesn't even believe it truly destroyed. Before I persuaded him otherwise, he was prepared to question you himself over the matter."

"How did you change his mind?" Rigel asked, not sure if she wanted to know.

"I intimated that you were not in any state to be interrogated," Snape said, his lip curling slightly.

"You told him I was broken," Rigel said, voice sharp.

"I bought you time to regain equilibrium before facing him," he corrected her. "Do not think you would have been beyond his reach in the Darian Gap, had he pressed the matter."

She paled. The thought of Riddle confronting Archie over the Dominion Jewel... it was unthinkable. Their ruse would crumble instantly. "Thank you," she said hoarsely. "I... did need the time."

He inclined his head briefly. "Then of course there is your obstinacy regarding this tournament."

"I won't do it," she said firmly.

"You will," Snape said, just as firm. "He will not give you a choice. The only question is what he will do to ensure your cooperation."

"So he *is* going to threaten me," Rigel said, eyes widening slightly. Pansy was right.

"I cannot be certain," Snape said, shaking his head. "You must prepare yourself for anything. He will use your vulnerabilities against you. Already he has asked me to divest you of your attachment to your cousin. He wants you isolated. Unsure of yourself and others."

"Wait," Rigel said, her head spinning. "He asked you to separate me and Harry? Why?"

"Lord Riddle believes that attachments are a weakness, but more than that, he is hoping to turn your loyalties toward the S.O.W. Party this year." At her incredulous look, Snape's lips twisted. "It is not so unthinkable as you assume. If he succeeds in making you his pureblood champion, you will stand apart from your classmates. It is a lonely competition, and you will be competing for something your family is unlikely to support."

She nodded slowly. That was certainly true. If her family pulled back from her, if she didn't have her cousin to rely on so completely... it might be enough to put her off balance. Still, she just couldn't see herself ever turning to Riddle for anything. "What will you do to Harry?" she asked dully.

Snape hissed. "Haven't you been listening? I will do nothing. I am trying to help you. And Miss Potter. My protection only extends so far, however. I warn you so that you can make your own defenses."

Unwilling tears sprang to Rigel's eyes and she ducked her head to hide them as she blinked them away with fierce impatience. She'd been so mistaken. Snape was supporting her. He always had been, only she hadn't seen it because she'd been so arrogant as to believe Lord Riddle tolerated her for his own reasons. "Thank you, sir," she said again. Her voice sounded choked and she flushed slightly with embarrassment. She must look exceedingly foolish, blubbering like a child over his protection-protection that extended to Harry, apparently. That alone had her chest filling with warmth.

"You are more than welcome," her Potions Master said gruffly. She peeked up to see an expression almost like embarrassment on his

face, too. "Regardless, you must not rely on me. Lord Riddle will not be waylaid indefinitely."

Annoyance beat back her embarrassment swiftly. "He's not a lord," she muttered. "He doesn't head any of the old families, and he hasn't been granted an Order of Merlin First Class."

"He is what he says he is." Snape's tone was absolute. "That is power. Gainsaying it will not change the reality that most consider the man to be equal and above the other Lords of society."

She shook her head in slow disbelief. "Why do you follow him?" The question slipped out without her conscious decision, but once it had she didn't take it back. She did want to know. "You're a halfblood," she added bluntly. At his dark look she qualified her words slightly. "I'm not saying everyone has to support political agendas that align with their inborn groups, but I know you aren't a bigot."

"Do you?" His voice had grown silky-always a bad sign. She didn't retreat, though. In that moment, she felt closer to Snape than she ever had, as a mentor, a role model, a professor, and as a person, too. She wanted to understand him better, even if it made him uncomfortable.

"I do. I'm pretty sure you don't like werewolves, but you put an entire year of your life into improving the potion that helps them through transformations. I know Dumbledore asked you to do that Remus could teach here," she went on before he could protest, "but you could have easily found a way out of it. There are other things, too. You don't treat Harry like she's an idiot or unworthy to study potions just because she's a halfblood girl. You aren't rude to Mr. Hagrid or Mr. Filch, even though both would be considered undesirables according to the S.O.W. Party. You-"

"That is sufficient," Snape growled. "What is your point?"

"That you don't let a person's blood status or even magical affliction affect your interactions with them. I don't see what about Riddle's

party ever drew you to it." She shrugged. "I guess they support other things, like loosening the restrictions on Dark magic and promoting the old cultural traditions. Those platforms get so buried under the blood mania. Is it worth it?"

Her Head of House's face was utterly devoid of expression. "My personal choices are none of your concern."

"I don't think you really support his ideals," Rigel said bravely. "I think he has some hold over you, and that it's going to affect what you can and can't do to help me." She blinked up at him in earnest. "I understand if you can't always protect me. I'd just like to know, so I can make my own plans, like you said."

Snape took a step closer and the menacing intimidation he gave off as he leaned into Rigel's personal space made her catch her breath. "Do not ever question my loyalties to the Party again," he breathed. "I have my own arrangement with Lord Riddle, and its details are not yours to know. Understand that I am limited in what I may deny him and make your... plans accordingly."

She gulped silently. "Yes, sir."

"Good. If this matter is settled to your satisfaction, we must discuss your training." Snape stepped back and unrolled a bit of parchment he plucked from his pocket. "Your classes end two hours before dinner Monday through Thursday," he noted. She wondered if he'd brought a copy of her schedule tonight specifically or if he carried it around so he knew where she was at all times. Somehow, she wouldn't put it past him.

"That's right," she said, not sure where he was going with it.

"Very well. You will report to my office on those afternoons for the next month. We don't have long to prepare you-"

"I'm *not* participating in the tournament," Rigel interrupted, exasperated.



"Nevertheless, I will train you as though you are," Snape said, sneering. "Are you going to turn down extra lessons?"

She opened her mouth and then his words caught up to her. Her teeth clicked together with a snap. "What kind of lessons?" she said after a moment of frustrated internal debate. Who was she kidding? Of course she wanted extra training. She just didn't want to look like she was giving into the idea of competing.

"Self defense, silent casting, dangerous creature familiarization... a number of things, really," Snape said smoothly. The amusement in his eyes told her he knew exactly how tempted she was by the idea of extracurricular instruction.

"It won't interfere with my potions time." It was not a question. At Snape's affirmative nod, she sighed. "I suppose extra training never hurts. As long as Riddle understands I'm only doing it for the knowledge. I haven't agreed to compete."

"I think we are clear on that point," the Potions Master drawled.

Rigel silently reflected that no one was going to be clear on that. If her friends found out she was going to Snape's office every afternoon for extra training they would never believe she wasn't trying to get nominated for the tournament. Where was Snape going to find the time for this, in any case? With her filling up his late afternoons and weekends, how was he going to get all his marking done? "Do you have a time-turner?" she asked abruptly.

Her question startled a snort of laughter out of him. "It's called time management."

She peered at him suspiciously. "You're going to make the prefects do your marking, aren't you?"

"There's an idea," Snape said idly. His blandly innocent expression was not convincing.

After a moment of silence in which they both looked at one another appraisingly, Rigel thought she was tentatively satisfied with the way their conversation had gone. Snape hadn't exactly spilled his guts for her, but she hadn't expected him to. She knew more about where Snape stood in relation to Riddle and herself, even if he didn't openly admit to being disloyal to the Party. In addition, she knew now that she had more reason to be grateful to her Head of House than she'd ever imagined.

She suspected he was as exhausted from their guarded heart-to-heart as she was, so she offered, "Are we brewing anything today?"

Snape inclined his head, lips twitching upward just slightly. "I have a recipe for an area effect potion purported to dissolve into a mist that slows the movement of anything inside it."

Intrigued, Rigel tilted her head. "How do we prevent that reaction while we brew it? What's to stop it dissolving before we get it into the bottle?"

"You will recall your lessons in Indirect Stirring. A barrier is necessary to contain the potion inside the cauldron until it is at a stage that it can be transferred. Don your protective gear and I will begin the necessary ingredient preparation."

Rigel grinned. Potions was a balm to the soul. She was convinced that almost anything could be cured with the simmering sound of a full cauldron, including any lingering awkwardness between her and Professor Snape.

It was only much later, as she tested her magical field against the Exploding Snap cards in the common room, that she realized she had forgotten to ask about the resonance again.

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[AbAbAb]

Archie tapped his feet restlessly under the table in class on Tuesday, impatient for Congenital Diseases to end so he could ask Professor Willoweed whether she'd heard anything about the tournament happening at Hogwarts. In addition to being a Healing professor, Willoweed was also charged with mentoring and career counseling for AIM's upper levels, which meant if anyone might know about a foreign competition open to students between fourth and seventh year, it would be her.

The lesson didn't seem as though it would be ending any time soon, however, and the reason was not surprising. Hermione was arguing about the textbook explanation. Again.

His beautifully spirited friend had always been opinionated, but this year the fiery witch was nothing short of a crusader. Hermione had blossomed in the Lower Alley sunshine and Archie found her transformation utterly fascinating. No cause was too hopeless for the fifteen-year-old healer-in-training. As evidenced by the impassioned way she railed against the medical community's widely accepted practice in regards to the increasing instances of infant mortality.

"So we just let them die?" Hermione demanded, voice high in indignation.

To her credit, Professor Willoweed kept a faultless composure. "No one is celebrating this, Miss Granger. The fact is, there is currently no known cure for the phenomenon commonly called the Fade."

"The way you describe it makes it sound like there's not even a known *explanation*," Hermione said hotly. "Infants less than a year old are dying inexplicably, and somehow it's not the number one priority at every research hospital in the world. Does no one else see a problem with that?"

Archie thought he ought to give Willoweed a break. "Hermione, it's not a worldwide issue."

"What?" she said, turning to blink at him distractedly. "What did you say, Harry?"

"The Fade isn't prominent in every Wizarding community," he said gently. "There are recorded cases around the world, but in terms of the overall rate of occurrence, it's only affecting a few places as badly as Britain. So it's not a worldwide priority."

Professor Willowweed inclined her head, and her curls barely twitched in their tight coiffure. "Additionally, Miss Granger, there has been a good deal of research into potential catalysts over the last half century. Despite that, there is no consensus as to the Fade's medical origin, if indeed there is a medical issue underlying the condition at all."

Hermione's eyes widened. "What does that mean? How can there be no issue? The babies die of *something*."

Their professor took a slow breath. "Some... experts maintain that there is nothing physically wrong with the children who Fade. Their symptoms present and progress in spite of every attempted treatment. Healing doesn't work. Quarantine doesn't work. No herbs or potions are known to forestall Fate's hand once an infant is afflicted. In the face of all this, who can say whether the disease is not more akin to a curse?"

"We treat curses, too," Hermione insisted. "Healing doesn't end at illness or injury. If our oath gives us responsibility for spell damage, then we have a responsibility to these infants regardless of whether the cause is ultimately magical or medical."

"It is kinder and more merciful to send a Fade-touched child home with its family." Professor Willowweed grimaced. "I don't like it any more than you do, but without a viable treatment option, we can do little but observe each infant's slow passing."

"Nothing is incurable in itself," Hermione said. Her eyes were bright, and Archie felt a sympathetic sting in his own in response. Hermione

was the only one he'd ever met who agreed with him on that simple truth. There were no lost causes. Only cures that hadn't been discovered yet. "How can we in good faith simply give up?"

"Our community hasn't given up," Willoweed said firmly. "There are a number of renowned specialists still working toward better understanding this condition. Until they offer a solution-or even a course of action for mitigating the illness-the prescribed response to this diagnosis is as I said: make the child comfortable, direct close kin to Mind Healers who specialize in grief, and document every detail of the case carefully so that the data may be passed to those searching for a cure. Now, class, we are out of time. Are there any more questions?"

Hermione was biting her tongue on a number of questions, if Archie didn't miss his guess. Willoweed gave her an apologetic look and dismissed the class to lunch. Archie blew out his breath and slowly began gathering his materials. Once most of his classmates had flocked into the corridor, Archie said, "Professor, could I ask you about something before you go?"

She raised her eyebrows. "Something that couldn't be brought up during the lesson?" she prodded.

Archie smiled with all the charm in his piggybank-which, he admitted, was somewhat limited while he wore the hybrid 'Rigel' face. Still, he would work with what he had. "It isn't about Healing, exactly. I heard something from my cousin, who attends Hogwarts, and wondered if it was true."

Hermione, who of course hadn't left the classroom without him, frowned curiously at him. "Rigel wrote to you?"

Archie smiled, neither answering nor denying her guess. "He said that Hogwarts is hosting an international tournament of some kind. It's supposedly open to all students fourteen to seventeen years of age. I hadn't heard anything about AIM nominating a candidate, though."

Professor Willoweed looked utterly nonplussed. "A tournament? For students? I haven't heard of any such thing, Mr. Potter."

That was interesting. It had been a day and a half since the announcement. If the Cow Party meant to raise awareness for its competition internationally, they were doing a poor job of it. Unless they weren't advertising to certain schools on purpose. AIM had a lot of muggleborns. Only Ilvermorny had more. Could it be that Riddle didn't want to give those students too much time to apply?

"It was announced just this weekend," Archie said, feigning innocence. "Perhaps the news is just slow to reach us. Or perhaps AIM isn't going to participate."

"We regularly nominate candidates for international programs," Willoweed said, talking more to herself than to him. "There's no reason our faculty shouldn't have been notified. Thank you for bringing this to my attention, Mr. Potter. I will look into it."

"Sure, Professor," Archie said, grinning. "Hermione? Lunch?"

His brown-eyed girl tilted her head in a way that he knew meant she wasn't impressed with his acting ability. Still, she nodded and waited for him to sling his book bag over his shoulder before following him out of the room.

"Why are you interested in this tournament, Harry?" Hermione asked slowly as they headed toward the cafeteria. "Are you trying to enter? Would you be gone all semester?"

Archie shook his head. "No way. I don't want any part of it. I just wanted to know if AIM had been contacted about it or not. The whole thing is a pageant, 'Mione, except instead of beauty they're celebrating blood."

Hermione gaped at him. "Harry, stop." She pulled on his arm until he paused and turned to look at her. "Will you explain what you mean by that? A tournament that celebrates blood?"

He grimaced. "It's being put on by the S.O.W. Party." Hermione's nose wrinkled, and he quite agreed. "They want to 'settle the question' of blood purity once and for all, so they're hosting a contest for students around the world. It's going to pit blood categories against one another, so in the final round one pureblood, one halfblood, and one muggleborn will compete for the championship."

"That's utterly barbaric," Hermione spluttered. "Not to mention nonsensical. They may as well put people with Type A blood against those with B and O for all the scientific rigor it demonstrates!"

Archie laughed. "But which category would Type AB get to compete in? No, I'm afraid your Triwizard Tournament won't work at all, 'Mione."

"This is serious, Harry. Who on earth would allow such blatant bigotry a stage to prance around on?"

"Our Ministry of Magic, who else?"

Hermione's eyes flashed. "And roping children into it! What imprudence. I suppose there's some kind of prize or enticement?"

"Sure is, luv. A pretty one, too. Not as pretty as you, of course-

"Not now, Harry." Hermione's cheeks flushed, but she would not be distracted. "We have to do something about this-this outrage."

"There's nothing stopping it now," Archie reasoned. "Besides which, we're well out of it here."

Hermione was appalled. "We can't just do nothing. I'm going to find out what the prerequisites for applying are."

She started off down the corridor with a vengeance. Archie, stomach clenching a bit at the familiar tone of stubborn determination in her voice, hurried to catch up. "Hermione, you can't be thinking of applying."

She tossed her hair and pinned him with a challenging look. "Why? You don't think I could do it?"

He raised both hands instinctively. "I didn't say that. Why would you want to be wrapped up in that madness, though? It's going to be like some kind of coliseum match, only you'll be the lion they set against their chosen warrior. The S.O.W. Party doesn't want to see a muggleborn do well, don't you see?"

Hermione looked every inch the lioness as she leveled a fierce glare at him. "I do see. I see exactly what they're trying to do and I'm going to make them regret it. I'll show them-the whole world, even-that muggleborns are every inch as magical as purebloods. They want to put it to a test? I eat tests for breakfast."

Archie couldn't help the startled laugh that escaped him, though he shouldn't find any part of it funny. Harry was going to kill him if Hermione actually entered this thrice-damned tournament. Still. "You're amazing," he said, smiling in a way that probably made him look dopey. He didn't care. "That tournament doesn't deserve you."

She favored him with unimpressed amusement. "Stop flattering me and help me find out about the entry requirements, Harry."

"As my lady commands," Archie said easily. He bowed, sweeping an arm out toward the corridor. She slipped ahead of him, and he tried not to stare too obviously at the way her hair swayed when she stalked.

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The morning after the tournament was announced, a sign up sheet had been posted on the Great Hall announcement board where hopeful students could indicate their willingness to be considered for nomination into the tournament. There was no indicated limit to the



number of students a school could put forth to the deciding committee, so there were a great number of names on the parchment by Thursday morning when Rigel walked into breakfast with her friends.

The popularity of the tournament didn't really explain why there would be such a large crowd gawking at the announcement board four days after students had begun signing up, though. Rigel could not see anything unusual over the heads of the students crowded around, so she turned her attention to her porridge and ignored it until Draco's curiosity overcame his decorum and he stood with a huff to go investigate.

Rigel exchanged an amused look with Pansy. Their friend couldn't abide not knowing what was going on around him. She assumed he would come back to report his findings, but instead she heard her name called sharply from across the hall. Rigel set her spoon down and turned to see Draco standing with an agitated expression in front of the message board. She slowly rose and made her way over.

"What is it?"

"Someone's-look, Rigel." Draco waved students out of the way and Rigel's stomach rippled with unease at the way they stared at her as they moved back.

She turned her eyes to the announcement board where a long piece of parchment was tacked for prospective tournament nominees. The parchment was almost full of names now, except... every single name was hers. *Rigel Black* had been written over and over in dozens of different handwriting. She felt her mouth press into a mirthless line. "I'm going to kill the Weasley Twins," she said calmly.

"Every time someone writes their name it turns into yours."

She turned her head to find Cedric Diggory standing with a group of other Hufflepuffs next to the board. "I didn't do this," she told him.

"I didn't figure you did," Diggory said, shrugging one shoulder. His handsome face loosed a smile that was like an arrow. "Still, it's a bit inconvenient, Black."

She was briefly taken aback that he knew her name-she hadn't really met him as Rigel, she didn't think. Then again, she supposed everyone in the school knew her name and face after the Valentine's Day fiasco, and then that floating flower prank... come to think of it, her self-designated press secretaries had probably been more effective than she gave them credit for.

"I'll see what I can do," she said, smiling back ruefully. Her eyes cut to the Gryffindor table and she heard the Hufflepuff boy suck in a breath.

"I'm suddenly glad I'm not a Gryff," he murmured.

"Only two of them are in any real danger," Rigel said. She flicked her eyes over to Draco, softening her face enough to convey gratitude. "Thanks for the heads up, Dray. I'll take care of this."

He nodded and broke off for the Slytherin table as she crossed to where Fred and George were holding court among the Gryffindor sixth years. She placed a hand on each of their shoulders and squeezed harder than strictly necessary.

"Ah-ow, Pup," Fred said, leaning into Angela Johnson to escape her grip. "Good morning to you, too."

"And such a surprise," George added, wincing as he bore her hold. "What strong fingers you have."

"The better to coax explanations out of wily redheads," she told him. The bright smile on her face stretched wide, but it didn't reach her eyes.

Fred eyed it with unease. "Caught the notice board, did you?"

"It was hard to miss," she said. "More publicity work on my behalf? You really shouldn't have."

"Well, it's too good an opportunity to pass up," George said. His tried to smile, but when her hand closed harder over his shoulder it turned into a grimace. "Godric, Rigel, you've got a grip like a grindylow."

She released them both and folded her arms across her chest instead. "I appreciate the great lengths you've both gone to on my behalf, but I'm going to ask you to change it back, now."

"No can do," Fred protested. "The world must realize the inevitability of your ascendance."

Rigel felt a headache creeping up her neck and consciously relaxed those muscles with an impatient shake. "I want no part of this tournament. It's a funny prank, but the teachers might get the wrong idea. Besides, it's starting to annoy people who actually want to be considered."

George rolled the shoulder she'd grasped gingerly. "We were going to undo it next week, anyway," he admitted. "You must admit it's a good continuation of the flower prank, though."

She conceded that much. If it had been anyone else, or even anything other than Riddle's tournament, she would probably have thought it harmless. "Some other time, maybe. This tournament has people a little on edge, don't you think?"

The twins exchanged a look. "So far the only one on edge about it is you," Fred said. His freckled face scrunched up in thought. "It's bothering you, isn't it? Granted, it's a mad idea to begin with, but there's no need to take it personally. The Cow Party is just being the Cow Party."

"I think it's a terrible idea," she said, sighing. "I'd just... rather not be associated with it if I can help it."

George frowned up at her. "Is everything okay, Rigel?"

She summoned a smile again. "It will be if you fix that sign up sheet."

Both redheads shrugged, though George still looked concerned. "Consider it done, Rigel."

"Since you asked so nicely," Fred added, wagging his eyebrows.

Rigel bowed her thanks and headed back to her breakfast. A shadow passed through her mind as a thought struck her. Her porridge was probably cold.

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Draco watched Rigel make his way back toward them and slid sideways toward Millie to make room on the bench again where Rigel had been sitting. His dark-haired friend picked up his spoon and eyed his bowl in resigned disappointment. A flicker of Empathy and Draco could feel Rigel's mournful regret. Resisting the urge to roll his eyes, he took out his wand and shot a warming charm at Rigel's porridge.

Rigel looked over in surprise and beamed at him. "You're the best, Dray."

He fought the ridiculous hum of pleasure that thrummed through his veins and affected a wry expression. "Note to self: Rigel is easily pleased."

Pansy laughed from across the table. "He didn't look pleased a second ago. What happened over there, Rye?"

"Just the Weasley twins causing trouble," Rigel said. A peeved flush was creeping up Rigel's neck and Draco nearly flushed too when he

caught himself admiring it.

"They switched all the names on the tournament sign up sheet for Rigel's," Draco said, distracting himself before he could do something as idiotic as scrutinize his friend's blood flow again.

Pansy shot an uneasy look at Rigel, but Millicent sounded intrigued. "Are they trying to get you nominated, Rigel?" she asked.

"Not anymore," Rigel said firmly. "I set them straight."

"You really don't want to enter?" Theo asked from Rigel's other side. "A lot of professors like you, and you've proven yourself resourceful, if nothing else. It's not the worst idea."

Draco fought a scowl. Not a bad idea? It was a brilliant idea. Rigel was perfect for this kind of competition, and Draco was not surprised Lord Riddle agreed. He was smart, talented, powerful, and he thought well on his feet. Plus, he had grit, which Draco could not say about most of their classmates. It was odd, really. Fortitude wasn't a virtue Draco had ever considered before, but his friend was tenacious in a way that most young adults their age were not. In a way that, Draco admitted, *he* was probably not.

"Thanks, Theo, but I don't have time for such a big commitment right now," Rigel was saying. Draco wondered just who the boy thought he was fooling. Rigel had already made it perfectly clear that he despised the very idea of the tournament, not to mention his contempt for Lord Riddle himself. Draco appreciated Rigel not repeating such dangerous opinions over breakfast, but it was a bit late to pretend he held anything but aversion to whatever the S.O.W. Party touched.

Sometimes Draco wondered what had caused Rigel's thoughts to shift so radically against the Party and Lord Riddle. Was he like others who had soured against the pureblood elite in the wake of the World Cup disaster? Was it because of what had happened to him last year? Or, a more realistic voice prodded him, had Rigel always

thought this way? Perhaps he'd held these opinions as long as Draco knew him, and was only just now saying them aloud. Draco wasn't sure whether it was a good or bad thing that Rigel trusted them enough to be openly hostile toward their parents' political and social affiliations now. It certainly didn't make friendship with him more comfortable.

Than again, Draco reflected as he eyed Rigel contentedly shoveling porridge into his mouth, friendship with Rigel had never really been about comfort, had it?

Draco was drawn from his musing when Pansy asked him how the work to reinstate the Dueling Club was coming along. "It might be a lost cause," he said, frowning. "I can't find anywhere in the castle that's secure enough from prying eyes. The dungeons, the towers—they're ultimately too exposed. If Snape has the prefects on the lookout for students dueling somewhere out of the way, there's no way he won't find out eventually."

"What if we held the meetings earlier than most prefects are awake?" Pansy suggested. "We never see anyone on our way out to morning workouts."

"That's true," Draco said slowly. "How many people do you think will want to come if the time is so inconvenient?"

"Probably the same number of people who'd still participate despite knowing Snape was against it," Pansy said, her eyebrow quirking in subtle sardonic humor.

Draco grimaced. They would definitely lose members if people knew the Head of Slytherin was staunchly against the club. "I just don't understand why he's banning it," Draco muttered. "I understand taking away the class if Dawlish doesn't want to teach it separately from general Defense, but why deny us the club?"

Millie snorted. "Maybe they don't want it to seem like Hogwarts has an advantage when contestants start showing up here for the tasks.

There's got to be some sort of dueling involved, right?"

Draco shrugged. Explanations wouldn't really placate him anyway. He wanted to keep his skills sharp. And he had *plans* for the club, Mordred curse it.

"Draco," Rigel said tentatively. Draco raised an eyebrow at his hesitant expression. Rigel seemed to steel himself before saying, "It sounds like what Snape is worried about is visibility. If you had a place no one would ever see the club meeting, he might let it go."

Draco thought back to what his godfather had threatened. He said if he heard whisper of the club operating, Draco would be held accountable. "I suppose if he doesn't hear about it, he won't really go seeking it out. Still, we're back where we started with no place to practice out of public view."

"I might know a place," Rigel said quietly. Draco whipped his head around so fast he nearly cricked his neck.

"You know a place," he repeated, wondering if he was hearing things. "Where?"

"It'd be easier to show you later," Rigel said. He spoke at such a low volume, Pansy had to lean forward across her food to hear. Draco wasn't getting anything from his Empathy at the moment, but he suspected his friend was uneasy. "It's not a place people know about."

Draco smiled in disbelief. "Rigel, that's-" he faltered as a thought hit him. "It's not... the Chamber of Secrets, is it?" Fascination warred with fear at the thought of trespassing through that place.

Rigel snorted. "Of course not. It was sealed off by the Headmaster after second year."

"Oh. Then I can't wait to see this place," Draco said. He turned back to his breakfast after adding, "You can show us before lunch."

He assumed Rigel knew of some out of the way abandoned classroom. Merlin knew Rigel disappeared often enough without explanation. He couldn't always be in his lab. Well, Draco amended, if anyone could spend that amount of time in a lab it would be Rigel, but it also made sense that he had somewhere else to go.

When Rigel dragged them all the way up to the highest floors of the castle, Draco had to wonder if the reason his friend was so freakishly fit wasn't because he traversed all those stairs so often. When the boy stopped in front of a tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy, Draco just wondered if Rigel had finally cracked under all the academic pressure he put on himself.

"This corridor is out of the way," Pansy allowed, "but I don't think it's quite big enough, Rigel."

Their friend only smiled slightly. "I was confused at first, too. Binny showed me this place." Rigel walked along the wall facing the awful tapestry with an expression of pure concentration on his face. Just as Draco and Pansy made to follow him, Rigel turned around and paced back toward them, then paced away again without explanation.

Then a door appeared in the wall, and Draco had to focus on keeping his eyes inside of his skull. "Tell me you didn't just open a portal inside Hogwarts' wards," he said faintly. He honestly would put nothing past the young wizard in front of him.

Rigel let out a short laugh. "Course not. This is called the Come and Go room, Binny says. It appears when you think of something you need and pace by this wall three times. I think it's been here since the castle was built."

He opened the door and gestured for them to go ahead of him. Reminding himself that Rigel would not let Draco walk into an abyss, and feeling oddly like he had the first night he'd followed Rigel through a secret passageway to the Owlrey, he stepped through and into a room that was almost as large as the Great Hall. The walls



and floors were bare, but a line of dummies like those that populated the Defense classroom waited along one side of the room.

"This is... perfect," Draco breathed.

Pansy came to stand beside him and looked equally impressed. "How long have you known about this, Rigel?" she asked.

"A while," Rigel said vaguely. "I used it last year, when I needed somewhere to study that was quiet."

Draco understood what Rigel couldn't say without breaching his contract with the Department of Mysteries. This was one of the places Rigel would come when he was folding time and multiple instances of him existed in other places.

"It's a bit bare to be comfortable," Draco commented.

Rigel closed his eyes for a moment, and not a breath later there were large cushions piled on the floor between them. Draco's breath caught. "It's a *magic* room?"

"This is Hogwarts," Rigel said, deliberately misunderstanding him.

"Can the room provide anything you ask for?" Pansy asked. Her face shone with undisguised excitement. "Can I try?"

"Go ahead," Rigel said, smiling widely. "You just have to think it three times, and as long as the one who created the room didn't require it to be unchangeable, it should work."

Pansy laughed in delight as a series of lifting weights materialized on the ground before her. "This is brilliant, Rigel. It's perfect for the club, don't you think, Drake?"

Draco had to nod. It was perfect. And Rigel had given it to them, even though he could have kept it to himself forever, and no one would ever have known. "Thank you, Rigel."

Rigel ducked his head embarrassedly. "I'm sorry I didn't show it to you sooner. I should have."

"This more than makes up for your suspiciously secretive nature," Draco said, grinning. He expected Rigel to laugh, or maybe to smile sheepishly again, but instead his friend's face blanked. Draco caught the tail end of an emotion before Rigel smoothed out his feelings with Occlumency, too. Rigel was ashamed, and underlying the shame, unmistakably afraid. Draco stared at him, and Rigel stared back, expressionless. "I mean it, Rigel. This is amazing," Draco said. He put all the earnestness he could summon into his face and voice. It barely made a dent in Rigel's impassive façade.

"That's good," Rigel said evenly. "In all the time I've made use of it, I've never seen anyone else here, so there should be little chance of anyone getting wind of your club meetings. Still, it might be a good idea to swear anyone who still wants to attend to secrecy, at least until the school recognizes the club as legitimate again."

"We'll do that," Draco agreed. He didn't know what was upsetting Rigel, since he'd already tried to make it clear he wasn't annoyed with Rigel for keeping the room to himself. "I'll spread the word quietly, among last year's members, that we have a plan to reinstate the Dueling Association unofficially. If they want to participate, they'll have to swear not to reveal the meeting location before we show them."

"And if that puts people off, so be it," Pansy added. "After all, we don't want members who aren't completely committed to learning Dueling."

That decided, they left the room and Draco watched with silent awe as the door was swallowed up into the wall once more. Hogwarts really was incredible sometimes.

On Friday morning, Madam Pomfrey was pulled away from their Healing lesson to the Quidditch pitch after two firsties apparently collided in mid-air and injured themselves too badly to be moved to the Hospital Wing. Rigel and Cho offered to help, but Madam Pomfrey waved them off as she bustled out the room. Apparently emergencies were not a controlled enough environment to supervise two students.

"How's the year so far?" Rigel asked Cho. The girl looked a little tired, but nowhere near as stressed as some of the other fifth years she'd seen haunting the Library.

"Just fine, thanks," Cho said, tucking a long strand of hair behind her ear and peering over at Rigel in a way that made her look like a nervous kitten. "I asked one of the older Ravens for his fifth year syllabus before term ended last year. I've been reading ahead all summer, so the coursework isn't as overwhelming for me."

"That's very sensible," Rigel said, impressed. Reading ahead was undervalued, she thought. Her classes were always easier when she'd self-studied the material first.

"It's bookish," Cho said, huffing under her breath. "My mother despairs of me, holed up in the house all summer. I don't like the outdoors, though."

"I spend a lot of time indoors, too, over breaks," Rigel told her. "Brewing, mostly, but I get a fair amount of reading done, too."

"You should have been a Ravenclaw," Cho suggested. As soon as the words were out of her mouth she dropped her gaze, seeming regretful. "I mean, not that Slytherin isn't..." She trailed off, apparently unable to think of an appropriate compliment.

"Maybe in another life," Rigel said gently, smiling to show she was not offended. "You must be top of your year, being so prepared,

right?"

Cho looked uncomfortable. "No, actually. My practical grades in some subjects aren't as high as I'd like."

Rigel nodded in understanding. "I know what you mean. Defense this year is especially tricky, since almost all of the points are practical."

Cho nodded. "Yes, exactly. My Defense grade has never been so poor."

She had a thought and tilted her head at Cho, considering. "If I told you there was a... study group, of sorts, for Defense, would you be interested?"

"A fourth-year study group?" She looked a little skeptical.

"It's open to all years," Rigel said. "It was more like a club, last year, but this year it hasn't been officially recognized by the school."

Cho blinked at her, a sharp light coming into her eyes. No one looking at the girl now could imagine she wasn't fiercely intelligent. "You mean the Dueling Club your friend Malfoy started last year? Isn't it a bit violent? I've seen it on the lawn. You all just pair off and shoot spells at one another, right? No wonder the administration disbanded it."

Rigel shrugged. "We do duel, since that's sort of the point of the club, but Draco also goes over other aspects of Defense. Basic spell combinations, agility drills, that sort of thing. With Auror Dawlish teaching the way he does, reflexes definitely come in handy. I don't mean to pressure you, or anything. If you're interested though, it might be helpful for your Defense grade."

The older girl looked torn. "You said... it's not an official club this year, right? Will we get into trouble for continuing it?"

"Not if nobody finds out," Rigel said, smiling innocently.

Cho's eyes narrowed. "This is why you are in Slytherin." At Rigel's unrepentant look, Cho sighed. "I do need to do something to improve," she said quietly. "Is it really okay for you to invite me?"

Rigel nodded. "Why not? It'd be good to have another Healer there, in any case. I can't always make every meeting with my potions schedule, and having someone to patch up minor injuries would go a long way to keep the club unnoticed. So what do you say? You want to give it a go?"

Cho smiled tentatively. "Okay. Where do I sign up?"

"Draco will handle that. You'll have to sign an agreement not to disclose the location of the club meetings before you're allowed to participate, but that's the only formality." Rigel noticed Cho didn't seem thrilled at the idea of signing such a thing, but clearly her grades meant more to her than the risk.

"All right," Cho said, sighing. "I can hear my mother now. 'Xiao Zhou! You dare to defy school regulations?' We'd better not get caught."

"She-ow Jo?" Rigel fumbled over the foreign words. "Is that what she calls you?"

Cho let out another small giggle-huff. "Yes. Cho isn't really my name, you know. It's Zhou. Cho is just easier for people here to say. Xiao Zhou means something like 'little Zhou.' It's a pet name, of sorts."

"Jou? Xou? Am I saying it right?" Rigel was trying to mimic what Cho- *Zhou* did with the 'Zh' sound, but she had a feeling it was very wrong.

"Pretty close," the girl said, looking pleased. "You don't have to call me that, though. It will only confuse people."

"I'll just use it in our lessons," Rigel said, shrugging. "No sense using 'Cho' now that I know that isn't your name."

"I'm used to it," Zhou said politely.

"Still, it's not the same, is it?" Rigel knew it wasn't. No matter how long she went by Rigel, it still wasn't really *her*.

Zhou smiled. "I suppose... it's not. Thank you, Rigel."

"Sure." They talked of other things, and before long Madam Pomfrey had returned. Rigel thought about the girl on her way to her lesson with Dumbledore, though, and considered that even the most obvious things about a person could be misleading. She ought to appreciate this fact about others, since she spent so long exploiting it in herself.

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When another lesson with Snape passed without Rigel getting up the courage to ask whether he knew about the resonance she shared with Riddle, Rigel knew she needed to do something else about it. She'd combed through the Library for any information about magic transference and resulting connections. In addition to the anecdote Dumbledore had shared with her, there were a number of processes and rituals that purported to transfer a piece or all of one's magic to another being or object.

Most of them were Dark or at least censored, but Rigel's invisibility cloak meant that she didn't need to explain to a teacher why she wanted to research such topics. There were rituals to transfer family magic to adopted children, rituals to take a wizard's magic away forever, and even rituals to strengthen the magic of one wizard by siphoning it from another. The last were especially gruesome, and Rigel thought the reported results seemed unpredictable at best. It

could not possibly be worth doubling raw magical power if the ritual also caused the two bodies of magic to clash violently, and sometimes fatally, within a wizard's core.

It did give her an idea for how to address the resonance, though. If absorbing new magic at sufficient quantities could cause a kind of civil war inside a wizard, then even a tiny amount should have noticeable effects. She just hadn't been paying close enough attention.

She asked her friends not to disturb her for the afternoon and sunk into meditation while comfortably nestled into her four-poster bed. The icy wind that met her at the edge of the mists momentarily disoriented her, but she remembered the sandstorm Dom had unleashed in the other layer of her mind and supposed he'd probably done something similar now that the mountainscape was the primary layer again.

She willed herself into the center of her mind and the world folded around her until she stood in the space room. A hundred shadows danced as the globes of light spun cheerfully around the large sun in the middle. She closed her mind for only a moment to savor the warmth, then turned and left the secure space, calling, "Dom?"

The construct materialized beside her in the underground corridor with a welcoming smile. "You're here," he said happily. "I wondered when you would visit again."

With a snap of his fingers they were transported to the cozy lab where she stored her decoy memories and aspects. The fire crackled merrily in the hearth, but that was about all that Dom had left untouched. Where there had been bare rock exposed at the edge of the mountain cave there were walls, now, and a lovely oak beam ceiling. The furniture looked more like something carved by a master carpenter than the simple chairs she'd conjured originally. The rug that hid the trapdoor was gone. In its place, seamless wood flooring gleamed in the firelight. She couldn't tell where the trapdoor was at all, if it even still existed. Dom didn't move through the mental sphere

the same way she intuitively tried to do. Perhaps he found a physical portal to be insecure. Probably he just thought it tawdry.

The carving of Sekhmet adorned the mantle in a place of honor. She had to smile at it. It seemed Dom had elected not to leave everything behind when he changed the layers of her mind.

"Tea, Harriet?"

She flinched involuntarily. "Rigel, in this layer," she told him. "Please."

Dom frowned at her, his even features perturbed. "What layer you project doesn't change who you are, you know."

"I know that," she said, a bit defensive. "If someone comes to this layer, though, you have to refer to me at Rigel, because that is what they will be expecting."

"You want me to have civil conversations with intruders?" Dom was openly amused. "You are a strange human."

"You knew that already," she said, sighing. She sat in the ornately carved chair he indicated and let him pour her a cup of tea. She had no idea you could create food in a mindscape. When she sipped at the delicate china cup she frowned. There was a certain emptiness to the beverage. It was like inhaling a very strong scent of tea. She had the vague impression that she was drinking it, but it didn't feel entirely real. Still, the taste was good.

"Where did you learn to make tea?" she asked.

"Peter," he said simply. He politely ignored the shudder that rippled through her at the unexpected sound of his name. "I learned much while we were bonded. What brings you here today, *Rigel*?"

Grateful for the change of topic, she leaned forward and set her teacup aside. "I have a problem."



"You have many problems."

"I have a new problem," she clarified, narrowing her eyes at his cheek. "I think someone has corrupted my magic."

"Impossible," Dom said fiercely. "I would have noticed."

"I think it happened before you... bonded with me," she said. "You wouldn't have known any different."

"Why did you not say something before?" Dom asked, tilting his head curiously. "Such a thing is certainly cause for concern, if it is true."

"I didn't know until recently," she admitted. "I touched a wizard's hand and my magic resonated; it was exactly the feeling that I had when you-when I-"

"Yes, last Spring," Dom said, waving his hand. "Are you referring to an incident about a month ago or so? I did feel that. The entire mindscape shook like an earth tremor. It stopped quickly, though, so I assumed you had foolishly put yourself in danger again and gotten your fool head knocked into something unforgiving."

She scowled. "I didn't do anything. I just shook his hand and there was resonance. There's no explanation for that except my magic having some part of his mixed up in it somehow."

Dom's face closed as he thought. "I do not think it is possible for one to transfer magic through a handshake alone. Magical transfer usually requires that both parties' magics be loosed into the open. Otherwise they cannot mingle."

She blinked in surprise. None of her research had told her that. Loose magic? Did the wild explosion of her magic following the removal of her suppressor count? "There was a time my magic was, I suppose, *loose* around him. His wasn't, though."

"Are you certain?" Dom asked keenly. "Think. Were you so focused on this wizard at the time of the incident that you can be sure he didn't loose his in order to affect yours?"

"No," she breathed. "I was only focused on my own magic. Maybe I didn't notice..."

"If he intended to meld your magics inconspicuously, he wouldn't have needed to release all his magic into the air, only a small part." Dom peered at her intently. "How strong was the resonance?"

"Strong enough to turn my stomach," she said, lip curling in disgust.

"Yet the foreign magic itself is not a strong enough presence to cause you daily issue," Dom mused. "If it were a significant amount your magic would have reacted stronger at the initial injection. Is this wizard your enemy?"

"It's Riddle," she muttered, "So yes."

Dom nodded slowly. "Then something must be done. You have come here for my help, yes?"

She nodded. "I don't have the time it would take to examine every drop of my magic in depth. You could, though. Right?"

"You wish me to sift through your magic and attempt to... filter out any particles that do not belong?" Dom asked. His smile was just a little eager. "I would need access to the whole of it, of course."

"I know," she said, trying not to let her unease show. "I... trust you, now, to work in our combined best interest. This is important. If Riddle can simply touch me and identify me as Rigel Black, then I can never meet him as Harry Potter. And he's not exactly the easiest person to avoid. This resonance could undo everything, understand?"

"Of course," Dom said soothingly. "Just leave it to me."

"Thank you," she breathed, more than relieved. It felt surprisingly reassuring to have this boy-construct in her corner. If Dom could handle the search for Riddle's magic amidst her own, she could handle the effort to discover what exactly Riddle's intentions were in instigating it.

"If you want to thank me, tell your friend to stop skimming our emotions," Dom said, sniffing. "It's very annoying."

She chuckled. "It's his gift, so I can't very well tell him how to use it. Still, I'll try to do better with my emotional Occlumency. You're doing great with warning me when it happens."

"It shouldn't be necessary," Dom complained. "You aren't even of age. It says something sad about your society that so many people are interested in the inner workings of a minor's mind. When I first transferred my consciousness to your mind, I thought you were a paranoid little girl. Now, I think your fears are exactly as acute as they need to be."

"Oh." She wasn't sure how to take that at all. "Thanks?"

Dom snorted-actually *snorted* at her, with smiling lips and quirked eyebrows and the expression was so human it ached in her chest. "Go on, Girl. I know you can't spend all day here."

"I haven't finished my tea," she said, halfheartedly.

"Next time you come, it will be more realistic," Dom said, still smiling at her. "It isn't quite right yet."

"It's close," she offered.

"Close is never close enough. Go."

She went. Her back was stiff and her right foot had fallen asleep when she returned to full consciousness, but despite that she felt much better than she had before. She didn't know if her faith in Dom

would pay off or backfire horribly, but she was more comfortable having someone working on the resonance problem with her. It didn't feel quite so overwhelming anymore. Now all that remained was to straighten her backbone and actually ask Snape if he knew anything about it.

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Two weeks after the tournament's announcement Rigel saw Riddle again. It was early on Saturday morning and she, Draco, and Pansy were returning to the castle after their jog around the lake when they crossed paths with a group of witches and wizards apparently surveying the Hogwarts grounds.

By silent agreement, they made to skirt around the group, but the recognizable sound of Lucius Malfoy's voice called, "Draco?" in a tone so incredulous it would have been funny under other circumstances.

Draco grimaced and Pansy shot him a mortified look. It was clear the girl had never imagined being caught sweaty and red-faced in front of a prominent member of her parents' social circle. The three of them stopped their fast walk and turned to face Mr. Malfoy, who was striding toward them across the grass with a frown on his pale features.

"Good morning, Father," Draco said airily. "You didn't mention you'd be dropping by today."

Lucius gave his son an unimpressed look. "What are you doing out here, dressed in... rags?"

"Exercising," Draco said.

"Without your Quidditch team?" He didn't seem to believe his son at all. "In the company of Miss Parkinson, no less?" Rigel was offended on Pansy's behalf that Mr. Malfoy found her to be the least likely candidate to participate in exercise of her own volition.

Pansy merely flushed. "We have taken up jogging some mornings to keep in shape, Lord Malfoy. Normally no one is about at this hour. Please forgive my dishabille."

"Jogging." His silver eyes surveyed the three of them slowly, taking in the dirty trainers, baggy clothing, and sweaty faces. His nostrils flared and his nose twitched slightly in distaste. Clearly their collective smell was less than appealing.

"It's helps with dueling if we have good endurance," Draco told his father. "We've all seen notable improvement since we started morning exercises."

"I was under the impression that your Dueling Club had been disbanded," Lucius said silkily.

"Suffice to say that Uncle Snape will not hear of its reformation," Draco said, smirking slightly. To Rigel's surprise, that was what finally caused Mr. Malfoy to relax his stern expression and smirk back at his son.

"Careful, Draco," he said. His voice was more amused than admonishing, however.

"Always, Father," Draco assured him.

"Lucius."

Mr. Malfoy turned his head back toward the group of witches and wizards, who had all paused while he spoke with his son. In the center of the group, wearing an expression of expectant impatience, stood Riddle. Mr. Malfoy inclined his head deferentially before turning back to dismiss them. "Don't be late to breakfast," he said.

"Good seeing you, Father," Draco said.

"Have a good day, Lord Malfoy," Pansy murmured.

Rigel said nothing, merely smiling briefly when Malfoy flicked his eyes once in her direction before turning around and treading back toward the others. Draco and Pansy turned toward the castle but Rigel kept watching Riddle's group for a moment longer. "They're heading for the forest," she said quietly.

Pansy tugged on her arm to draw her toward the castle. "Don't let them see you've noticed. Do you think one of the tasks will be in the forest?"

"It's a good place to hide things," Draco said. "Maybe they're going to store materials there away from snooping eyes."

"They shouldn't disrupt the denizens of the forest with their spectacle," Rigel muttered.

"I'm sure they will take that into account," Pansy said. She didn't *sound* sure, though.

Seeing Riddle on school grounds, Rigel somehow expected the summons that came for her later that day in the common room. The small Rowle Heiress handed her a note, ostensibly from Snape, requesting her presence in lab three as soon as she was able. Snape rarely sent notes through other students, and he never scheduled a lesson without a specific time. Resigned to whatever awaited her, Rigel rose from the sofa and shook her head when Draco and Pansy shot her questioning glance.

"I'll be back later," she said dully. "Professor Snape wants to see me."

Draco and Pansy were not fools. "Just Snape?" Pansy asked, eyes bright with concern.

"I guess I'll find out." She shrugged.

"Be careful," Draco said, frowning over his Transfiguration text at her.

"Always, Father," she teased, cracking a small smile.

He made to toss the book at her, but she left before he could commit to the move.

The brief amusement left her as she traversed the dungeons with lead steadily filling her heart. She had taken Pansy's earlier advice and written to her parents, Sirius, and Remus, warning them that someone might attempt to put political or social pressure on them in the coming days. The returning owls had carried replies running from concerned to upset, and full of questions. She and Archie had done their best to keep details vague while impressing on their family the seriousness of the situation. At the moment, the adults were under the impression that Archie was being pressured *in general* to compete in the Triwizard Tournament and was worried the pressure may spill over onto them in some way.

Sirius had vehemently urged his son not to do it. He didn't want Archie in any more harm's way. James pressed for details as to who exactly was trying to influence him. Remus advised caution and offered his expertise and help in the event that Archie was pressed into competing. Lily just wrote Archie to be strong, collected, and stand up for himself.

Rigel was gratified at their support, but she knew they didn't really grasp the magnitude of the problem. Riddle was not one to be dissuaded by a firm, repeated, 'no, thank you.'

She entered lab three with all the joy of someone walking to their own execution. Snape was there, but-as expected-he was not alone. "Mr. Riddle," she said, voice emotionless. "What a surprise."

"So jaded for one so young, *Rigel*," Riddle said. The way he stressed her name made her twitch slightly. Just what was he trying

to prove?

"Professor." She acknowledged the man standing with his arms crossed to one side of the room. "I suppose we aren't brewing today."

"I see you neglected to bring your protective equipment in any case," Snape said flatly. "Lord Riddle is here to speak to you."

"To threaten me, you mean," she said. If either man was surprised by her bluntness, they didn't show it.

"Threats may not be necessary," Riddle told her. He opened his arms wide in a gesture that welcomed her to agree with him. "You've had two weeks to think it over. Tell me you've reconsidered your reticence and will agree to participate in the tournament. Tell me that, and you can get on to your lesson with Severus."

"I'm afraid that's not the case," she said firmly. "If you nominate me, I still intend to decline."

"Then this discussion will be far less pleasant than I'd hoped," Riddle said. His insincerity was unparalleled. She took a moment to study the politician as she waited for him to get to the point. He looked much the same as he had when she first saw him. Suave, confident, dismissive of everything around him, and utterly sure in his ability to manipulate the world to his favor. Even his looks hadn't really changed in the last few years. Not his hairstyle nor his habit of dressing in robes that were cut to make him appear grander than he was.

She wondered if he'd changed at all on the inside, but quickly dismissed the notion. What a naïve child she'd been before, thinking that Riddle might listen to someone like her. Might change his ways at the admonitions of a twelve-year-old. Riddle didn't respect anyone enough to take their words to heart. He understood only power, so she would have to summon every ounce of it inside her to defy him.



The older man seemed to be studying her even as she watched him, but what he saw she couldn't guess, nor did she care to. After a drawn-out silence, Riddle finally said, "You will participate as a pureblood candidate in the Triwizard Tournament. That is not in question. The only question is what it will take for you to capitulate. I know you consider yourself above manipulation, but it simply isn't true. There are things you want. I can help you achieve them. You need only ask."

"I prefer to secure my own victories," she said, slightly confused. Was he trying to soften her up?

"You think things are more satisfying when you earn them?" Riddle chuckled darkly. "That is a Hufflepuffian fallacy. Getting what you want can be simple. You seek a Potions Mastery, do you not? I can secure that for you."

"Mastery is decided by a closed examination at the Guild upon completion of an Apprenticeship. You have no influence over the Guild besides Professor Snape, and he is already Apprenticing me," she said, letting her face display her skepticism openly.

"Examinations can be manipulated," Riddle said idly.

She had to wrinkle her nose in disgust. "I'd rather not have a Mastery than earn it duplicitously."

"And after you achieve this dream of yours?" Riddle pressed. "You'll need capital if you mean to start your own distribution chain. Severus tells me Miss Potter has a talent for inventing. Perhaps you'd like to go into business with her after graduating?"

"If money interested me, I would have wanted to compete in the tournament for the prizes alone." She wondered whether he honestly expected her to be tempted by such common bribes. Then again, she reflected reluctantly, most people probably were. She was fortunate to be born with a modicum of talent and actual work ethic, not to mention her family's considerable fortune. She didn't need to

cheat and she certainly didn't need money. She really ought to be grateful to Fate that those things *didn't* entice her in the slightest.

Riddle inclined his head, not seeming at all surprised. He looked, she thought oddly, like someone running through a standard checklist of interpersonal manipulation. She almost had to laugh at the thought. Perhaps he was simply moving down a mental list: first, attempt to bribe with favors, then with money. What was next?

"Very well," Riddle said, unconcerned. "If self-interest doesn't motivate you, there are other means of inspiring your cooperation." She waited, face blank, though she suspected her eyes were burning. "Your father is an interesting man," Riddle added thoughtfully. "So talented, by all accounts, and yet he languishes."

"He is content," Rigel said warily.

"Would you be content, were he to languish in prison instead?" Riddle's voice was light, as though he'd inquired as to her tea preference.

Rigel felt her breath hitch slightly. "You're threatening to have my father *imprisoned*? On what grounds? Or were you just going to make something up?"

Social and political pressure she expected, economic, too, but this? Azkaban was no idle threat. Imprisonable offenses weren't exactly numerous. They were restricted to the crimes deemed most heinous by their society. Murder. Torture. Rape. Blood Identity Theft. That constituted the broad majority of inmates. Could Riddle really arrange for Sirius to be charged with something like that?

"Not I," Riddle said, his mocking tone grating to Rigel's ears. "I am a respected politician, Rigel. I would never threaten anyone. It would be a pity if the Ministry were to be informed of your father's... more animalistic tendencies, don't you think?"

"His-" Her mind connected the dots after a confused beat. When she realized what he was driving at, she scoffed. "You mean to accuse him of being an unregistered animagi? Where did you get the idea that would work?"

"Peter was so very helpful before his unfortunate defection. So full of interesting information about his old friends," Riddle informed her. Rigel grit her teeth against the urge to flinch at that man's name. She would not. Not in front of Riddle.

" *Pettigrew* was an idiot," she spat. It was the only way she could utter his name without stuttering. "Or did he neglect to inform you that Sirius was also briefly a member of the Auror Corps?" Riddle's face twisted in suspicion. She could tell he still didn't get it. She shook her head. Clearly he didn't have any close supporters in the Auror ranks. "To join the Aurors you have to submit to a full background investigation and questioning under Veritaserum. The DMLE already knows that Sirius and James are animagi. Their forms are not a matter of public record because they are classified as special skills more useful to the Ministry if not made common knowledge."

At least, she thought they were. Neither her father nor Sirius had ever admitted as much, but Rigel had pieced together enough of her father's stories to know that his animagi form had come in handy on more than one mission. When she was very young, before she'd resigned herself to underwhelming her father's expectations, she had looked into the requirements for the Auror Corps. Rigel wasn't lying about the rigorous investigations cadets underwent. It was a somewhat shaky deduction, but it solidified as Riddle's scowl twisted into a sneer. She smirked slowly back at him. "The rat wouldn't know that, since he didn't have the guts to join the program with his friends. Go ahead and tell the DMLE about my father's special ability. I'm sure they'd be very interested to know how you came by classified information. Perhaps the fact that you had knowledge of another animagus who actually was unregistered would be interesting to them as well."

"Watch your cheek, boy," Riddle snarled. His open irritation made her suspect that he likely had known that Sirius wasn't as unregistered as it might seem. He'd tried to bluff his way into leverage and was annoyed, but not terribly surprised, that it hadn't worked.

"I think we're beyond pleasantries at this point, Riddle," she said. "Are you going to curse me? Maybe tamper with my magic again?" The surprise in his eyes gave her some small satisfaction. "Did you think I wouldn't notice?" she brazened. A quick look at Snape saw surprise in his eyes, too-not surprise that Riddle had done it, however. He was looking surprised at her, not Riddle. So he *had* known what Riddle did to her magic. He just hadn't expected her to figure it out. She took a deep breath past the pain and refocused on Riddle. She could ponder Snape's part in that later. "Pretty obvious when your touch makes my skin crawl with resonance."

Riddle looked at her with a kind of pleased fascination. He seemed almost glad she'd noticed. "You were correct, Severus; he continually surprises."

"Why did you infect me with your magic?" she asked. Finally saying it out loud was a relief, but it also made her feel vulnerable, like sharing a secret with someone she didn't trust.

"My reasons are my own," he said, smiling infuriatingly.

"It's my magic," she said, outraged that he wouldn't even deign to explain himself.

"Then you should take better care of it," Riddle said, lip curling.

"I should report you for tampering with another wizard's magic," she said softly.

"You'd have trouble proving that, Rigel," Snape said quietly.

She couldn't look at him. Instead she averted her eyes to the ground. "Whatever you meant it to do, it won't work," she told Riddle.

"We shall see." The bastard chuckled again. "We've deviated from the matter at hand, however. You don't seem concerned for your father's secrets. Fine. What about your cousin Harriet's?"

Rigel looked up into his pitiless gaze. "What about them?"

"So you admit she has secrets." He looked amused again.

"Everyone has secrets. I doubt you've found Harry's." In fact, she was sure of it. If he knew anything about the ruse, he would have opened with that, and they would be having a very different conversation.

"She's an intriguing one," Riddle said slowly. "The Heiress of a prominent House, yet she gallivants about her American school in boy's clothing. I understand not even her closest friends there are aware that she is in fact a girl."

"She's a teenager," Rigel said dismissively. She didn't like the idea that Riddle had informants watching Archie at school. It was bad enough when Leo did it. "Harry can experiment if she wants. Cross-dressing isn't illegal."

"It is eccentric, though, isn't it? Strange enough to be considered unhealthy, even. If a psychologist were to look into her mental stability, she might have trouble attaining a Healing license later on." Riddle's eyes glittered at her as he waited for Rigel to react. She honestly didn't know what to say. The idea that cross-dressing could be considered in some way dangerous, or an indication of an unhealthy psyche, was a bit of a stretch, in her opinion.

"I don't think Harry will have trouble proving her mental capacity." Not to mention she had no intention of becoming a Healer in any case.

"Even if she gains a certificate, what hospital would hire her with that kind of doubt and scandal hanging about her head?" Riddle asked rhetorically. "I know all about the correspondence course she's been maintaining-Miss Potter is planning to come back to Britain and make a life here, isn't she? Unfortunately for her, Britain is *my* purview. Not a hospital or clinic in the entire country would risk endangering their S.O.W. Party donations. A word here, a disapproving insinuation there, and Miss Potter has no future in Magical Britain."

"That would be a shame," Rigel said, unable to suppress the amusement that coursed through her at this tactic. Clearly Riddle didn't know about Maywell, or about Harry's close connection to the Hurst family.

"This can happen in the potions community, as well, Rigel," Riddle warned, nostrils flaring in annoyance at her lack of concern. "I have more influence than you seem to think with the Guilds of London. It is our Party that has tirelessly lobbied for the loosening of sanctions on Dark classified ingredients and materials. If you do not consent to participating in this tournament, her reputation in the academic community will be obliterated. My agents will spread doubt as to her experimental methods, her mental acuity, her penchant for rubbing more than elbows with those in positions of authority to get ahead-"

"That's a lie!" she snapped, furious at his vile insinuation.

"It won't matter," Riddle said softly. He stepped closer, looming over her and lowering his voice in the most menacing murmur she'd ever heard. "People will believe anything, if it comes from a source they trust. A great many people trust me."

Rigel was furious. That he would stoop to such base, filthy lies about her-she exhaled sharply, though she wished she could slap the man. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction. "Go ahead then," she growled, letting her eyes flash. "Tell everyone you know that Harriet Potter is a no-talent slut. I'm still not going to be your show pony."

Riddle narrowed his eyes. "Do not attempt to bluff with me, boy. I know you care for her."

Rigel stared at his superior expression. She wanted to scream. She wanted to cry. Instead, she laughed. Slowly, sadly, she laughed until she could speak through her anger. "No, you don't know. You really don't. You don't understand our relationship at all. It's so much more than whatever self-righteous, martyring, *Gryffindor* connection you're imagining. I'm not falling on a sword for Harry. And she wouldn't for me. If she were in this room right now she'd tell me to do the selfish thing and sacrifice her, because *that's* how much she cares for me. And I would expect the same from her. Do whatever you want to us. We won't be leveraged against one another." Riddle was gazing at her in frustrated incomprehension, and she had to laugh lowly one last time. "I know you don't understand. You can't imagine a bond so strong that two people would be willing to do anything for one another. Suffice to say, all your threats are meaningless. Harry would never *allow* herself to be used against me. She'd die first."

Even Snape looked unnerved at her pronouncement. Was it really so unfathomable? Sure, she had the advantage of actually being Harry Potter, so the idea of Riddle trying to use her against herself was simply ridiculous, but even if she wasn't, even if it really *was* Archie's future in jeopardy, she didn't doubt her words. Archie would kill her if he found out she'd let someone use a threat against him to compel her into doing something she didn't want to do. And she felt the same. Riddle and Snape just looked at her like she'd told them the First Law of Transfigurations didn't always apply.

"You know a lot of things, Riddle, but you don't know anything about real friendship and love. It doesn't make us vulnerable. It makes us strong. If you have nothing else to threaten me with today, I'd like to leave now." She was exhausted, and tired of talking. She knew by the livid heat in Riddle's eyes that he had prepared nothing else for leverage. He'd underestimated her, likely because she was young and relatively isolated at Hogwarts from her support network. He thought she would do anything to protect her family, because that's

what he thought sanctimonious people did. Rigel had set him straight on that account, but it didn't fill her with anything but a dull dread. She'd won a reprieve, a few more days of freedom, perhaps, until Riddle came up with a different plan. There were still two weeks until the tournament participants would be announced. That was plenty of time for Riddle to produce a threat she'd have to take seriously.

"Go, Rigel," Snape said, crossing to the door and opening it. Riddle didn't move from where he was attempting to burn a hole through the stone wall with his glare. Rigel walked out with a grimace. She'd never realized how utterly childish Riddle could be when he didn't get what he wanted. How could a man his age be so unused to things not going his way?

As she strode past Snape in the doorway, she met his unfathomable stare with blank eyes. She wasn't ready to forgive him for not warning her about the resonance, for all that she'd long suspected he knew.

She turned away and began walking toward the common room. The walk became a jog, which bled into a run, and she didn't stop even when she missed the turn to the common room entrance. She was gasping for breath as her feet pounded on the hard floor, but she needed to vent the pent up rage and frustration inside her and she knew if she let herself take out her bad mood on her friends she'd regret it. She ran until she didn't recognize the dungeons around her anymore and she stopped, hands on her knees, to suck in air desperately.

She was much too out of breath for such a short sprint. The shortness of breath didn't go away even as she sank to her knees. Too late, she realized she was in a small, damp corridor that smelled of dust and dank. She'd hit a dead end, and the nearest torch bracket was around the corner. There was barely enough light to see the walls around her, and her breathing would not even out no matter how she tried.



Dizziness overwhelmed her and she heaved, spilling the meager contents of her stomach involuntarily before her. Disgusted with herself, she wiped her mouth and scooted backwards away from the mess, fumbling to take out her wand and vanish the evidence of her panic. She conjured a light while she was at it and the steady white glow calmed her enough to stumble her way back to the main corridor. She took out the Marauder's Map, but found she didn't have the energy just yet to navigate back. She just wanted to sit and breathe for a few minutes. Regain her equilibrium. Her friends would be worried enough without her showing up pale and shaking after what they already suspected had been a meeting with Riddle.

She watched the dots on the Map move around slowly, idly. No one had anywhere pressing to be on a Saturday afternoon. She saw Riddle's dot pacing back and forth in lab three, Snape's motionless dot no doubt bearing the brunt of his displeasure. *Good*, she thought mulishly. *I hope they're both as frustrated as I am.*

Her eyes were drawn to the Slytherin common room, where the dots labeled 'Draco Malfoy' and 'Pandora Parkinson' were close together, still on the couch where she'd left them. They probably wouldn't go anywhere until she returned, she knew. They would wait for her, and worry.

Sighing, she straightened and began the walk back to the common room's hidden entrance. She had no time to feel sorry for herself. She should be happy, or at least satisfied. She'd managed to hold Riddle at bay a bit longer. That was enough, for now.

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Severus didn't see Rigel Black until Tuesday morning, and even then the boy avoided his gaze, keeping his head down and his back turned as he mechanically shoveled porridge into his mouth. He didn't eat like a boy who'd skipped two days of meals, so he deduced

Rigel had taken food from the kitchens. Severus needed to have another serious talk with his erstwhile student about taking one's life into one's hands by baiting a dangerous Dark wizard, among other things, but he knew it was too soon for reasoned words. He hadn't missed the betrayed expression on Rigel's face when Lord Riddle's tampering of his magic had come up. The fact that Severus had been forced to stand there and let his student be bullied in front of him likely hadn't helped soften that perceived betrayal, either.

He didn't have a chance to waylay the boy before he'd scurried off to class, but he would see to it that Rigel attended his extra training lessons that afternoon. Severus had given Rigel a pass Monday afternoon, but he could not afford to again. The boy was going to be finagled into competing, one way or another. Severus would not let Rigel die in this grandstanding farce.

The day passed slowly, as it generally did when the students were distracted and excitable. The tournament was not doing the discipline in his class any favors. His last period was a double, with Rigel's conspicuously less-gifted year mates, no less. Five minutes into the lesson, it was clear from his preliminary questioning that less than a third of the little mongrels had deigned to do the reading. He had a headache before they'd even begun to brew. It was a standard ancestry potion, so simple that the average housewitch could probably produce a passable sample, and yet Goyle's cauldron was smoking before he'd even added the fifth ingredient. If he melted another cauldron, Severus was going to start billing Goyle Sr. for the replacements.

With one eye on Goyle and the other on Longbottom's notoriously nervous fingers, Severus spent the lesson in continuous anticipation of an unprovoked disaster. He had no idea that, when it finally came, it wouldn't be the dunderheads who ruined their potions who caused it.

"You have five minutes remaining," he told the class as the lesson finally ticked to a close. "If your sample is beyond salvaging, save me the trouble and dump it down the sink. If you believe you've

made a credible attempt, bottle your samples and put away the rest of your materials."

When the cauldrons and ingredients were cleared away, Severus surveyed what remained. About eighty percent of the class appeared to have viable samples. He supposed it was the best he ought to expect. He passed out wide-lipped bowls and rolls of parchment to each table. "Pour enough of the Ancestry Potion into your bowls so that it coats your parchment completely when you dip it in, thusly." He demonstrated soaking the parchment into the potion and laying it flat on the table.

"Only a single drop of blood is necessary; pray don't get carried away, or you will be carried away to the Hospital Wing. Those without a sample, use the leftover from your neighbor." He pricked his finger on the edge of a clean knife and let a bead of blood fall into the center of his parchment where the students could see. "If you are not as incompetent as I suspect, your parchment will inscribe itself with your family tree, starting with you and working back for as long as the parchment lasts. You may begin."

The fourth-years began tentatively swirling their parchment into bowls of sample and, some gingerly, some readily, one by one pricked their fingers and applied the final ingredient to their ancestry potion. This was one of his most aggravating classes to teach, but its inclusion was mandated by Ministerial standards, despite the relatively high cost of ingredients in relation to the arguably low academic benefit. Aside from the galling experience of having his syllabus audited by the Department of Education, this class was infuriating because inevitably one of the young idiots took offense to being third cousins twice removed to another young idiot. Wizarding families were interconnected to the point of poor taste, in Severus' opinion. Nevertheless, it was a fact, and one every class of fourth-years took issue with.

When the gasp of indignation came, however, it was almost a sob.

Daphne Greengrass stared down at her parchment with bloodless horror. Her breath came in choked gasps and her frequent companion, Davis, looked up from her own parchment in concern. "Daphne, what is it?"

"It's wrong," the blonde girl stuttered out. Severus restrained an eye-roll at her cheap dramatics. "It has to be."

"What is-?" Davis tried to look at the parchment, but Greengrass snatched it away and put it behind her back. A minor scuffle ensued, and while Severus snapped at the girls to regain their decorum, Nott grabbed for Greengrass' parchment when she wasn't looking.

The boy held off his classmate's clawing hands with one arm and held the parchment to his face with the other hand. "Hmm, says Daphne Greengrass. Seems right to me. Daughter of—hang on..."

"Don't," Greengrass pleaded. The desperation in her voice caused unease to stir in Severus' chest.

"Mr. Nott, hand that to me this instant," Severus barked. Nott blinked up at him stupidly. "Now, Mr. Nott," he hissed. The skinny boy complied with a gulp.

"Sir, she's..." Nott trailed off at Severus' glare.

He put eyes to the parchment and felt himself still. Directly above Daphne Greengrass, where should have been the girls' father, Lord Greengrass was not listed. Instead, it read 'Dirk Cresswell.' Cresswell was well known for having been handpicked by the goblins as human ambassador to the British Ministry. He was a Muggleborn.

Greengrass was looking at him with tears streaming down her face. "Pack up your things, Miss Greengrass, and come with me," he said slowly. "Class dismissed."

He had to practically haul the crying girl out of the classroom; she was too distraught to properly move her legs. "Th-Theo is going to tell-"

"That is the least of your concerns at the moment," he told her, as gently as he dared. "Do you understand what the potion revealed, Miss Greengrass?"

"M-my father isn't-isn't-" She couldn't even articulate the thought.

Severus cursed the thrice-meddling Ministry and the inept populace that had sanctioned the injustice that was about to take place. "Miss-Daphne," he said, slowing down and attempting to force comprehension into her. "You are not a pureblood. Do you understand? Your biological father is a muggleborn."

"No," she whispered, shaking her blonde curls furiously. "No, he can't be. I-I know what I am. I'm the Greengrass Heiress."

Not for long, unless Greengrass Sr. had changed a great deal very recently. All he said was, "You can be that, and a halfblood."

"Noo," the girl moaned. "What... you're taking me to see Dumbledore, aren't you? *You're kicking me out!?*"

"We must get you to the Headmaster so he can discuss your options with you before the Board of Governors gets wind of this," Severus hissed. "Think, girl. There is a highly publicized tournament about to occur on these very grounds, the basis for which is blood superiority. What do you think the Board will do to avoid the embarrassment of a scandal like this?"

"I'm going to disappear," Greengrass breathed shakily. Fear led straight to denial. "No, they can't do that. My father-my... they can't."

"Walk, Miss Greengrass," Severus said, dragging at her arm once more. "There is no time to dither."

Several long staircases later, they'd reached the Headmaster's Office. "Licorice Wands," he snapped at the gargoyle. They ascended quickly and Severus spared the door barely a graze of his knuckles before ushering Greengrass inside.

"Severus, what is the matter?" Albus rose from his desk with furrowed brows at their sudden entry.

He thrust the parchment he was still clutching at the old wizard. "Ancestry potion today. Her classmates know." Or they would by now, he didn't doubt. Nott could not keep his mouth shut for a piece of gossip as juicy as this. Severus knew he detested the Greengrass girl, besides. Short of obliterating the boy on the spot there was nothing he could have done to contain her secret without being accused of flouting school regulations on behalf of a student.

Albus sank back into his chair with a pained look of sorrow. "My dear girl, I am so very sorry. It is unfortunate that you have found out this way. You are not alone, however. We will assist you in whatever you wish to do next."

"So that's it? One stupid piece of parchment and now I have to pack my things? Where am I supposed to go?" Greengrass shrieked, fat tears still leaking from her eyes.

"There are a number of schools who will accept your transfer in situations like this," Albus said gently. "Homeschooling is also an option, should you decline to leave the country. First, however, we will need to contact your parents-"

"Which ones?" she sneered petulantly. "My father will disown me if he sees this." At that thought, her eyes went wide and panicked again. "Oh gods, he'll disown me. And Mother-what will he do to Mother?" She began rocking back and forth in the chair agitatedly. "You can't tell him. Just-just say I flunked out or something. Tell him I was expelled, just don't tell him *that*."

"Miss Greengrass, it is likely that he will find out in any case, and soon," Severus told her. "It is inevitable that this event will circulate the school. If even one student writes home about it, the truth will be released and there will likely be an investigation into why it wasn't reported immediately. The Board of Governors takes incidents like this very seriously."

"But why?" she wailed. "I'm a better pureblood than half of those—those *cretins* I share classes with. I was raised in the old ways. I know all our customs. I deserve to be here more than *blood-traitors*."

"It is not a matter of deserving or worth," Albus said sadly. "Miss Greengrass, if it were up to me you would not leave these halls. The law is unforgiving, however. You will no longer be allowed to attend Hogwarts. I'm sorry. We must contact Lord and Lady Greengrass about this situation. If you fear for your mother's safety in light of this revelation, please tell us now, and we will do what we can for her as well."

Greengrass sniffled wetly. "I-I don't know. Maybe she'll be okay. She still had Astoria, so F-Father can't banish her, I don't think. Oh, I-I have to tell Astoria. She won't understand. What if they send me away? What if I n-never see her again? It isn't fair! They did this to me! It's *their* fault, not mine, but I'm the one who will be punished." Her words garbled as she dissolved into sobs again.

"I will collect the younger Miss Greengrass from her afternoon class," Severus offered. "Headmaster, don't contact the Board until I return."

"Of course," Albus said. He looked every one of his many years in that moment. "Anything you can do to forestall the propagation of this information would be appreciated as well, Severus."

He nodded shortly and left the office and the crying, traumatized girl behind. He couldn't deny a dull pang at Daphne Greengrass' fate. Another life overshadowed by a simple accident of birth.

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Rigel was on her way back from Arithmancy, which she had with the Ravens and Puffs that term due to the weird nature of her schedule, when she passed the Slytherin first-years standing outside the common room, loitering. She slowed her steps, wondering if they had all managed to forget the password, and caught some of their hushed conversation involuntarily.

"-can't *believe* it. My father is going to flip when he hears. A halfblood in Hogwarts! All this *time* ."

"I heard they're kicking her out-"

Rigel stopped listening, stopped breathing, and very nearly stopped walking as well. Her mind went blank with panic. *How-? Who-?* Only with an effort of will did she get her mind to jump start and reset, unlocking the torrent of thoughts that had screeched to a halt in terror. *How could they know? Who figured it out?* And most importantly, what should she do?

These thoughts burned through her brain as she mumbled the password and entered the common room. Her eyes darted about the large space as she struggled to keep her breathing steady. She felt like a cornered animal. It was only a matter of time before someone looked her way. She needed to run, to hide. But first-

Her shoes made a beeline for her dorm, where the mirror was locked in her trunk. She had to call Archie, had to warn him, tell him-

Tell him what? She had no idea what had happened. And why was no one stopping her? Plenty of people glanced her way as she crossed the common room, but no one fixated on her, as though they weren't interested in her at all. Rigel frowned and slowed her steps. She was confused, she noticed. Something wasn't adding up. If people knew she was a halfblood, there should be confrontation,



shock, a prefect should be escorting her to Dumbledore's office; something more than unconcerned glances should be happening.

"Rigel! Over here." She turned her head to see Draco gesturing impatiently at her from where most of her year group was huddled around one of the fireplaces. They all had serious expressions, but there was nothing accusatory in them. Was it possible they didn't know? Had the first years been joking? She approached cautiously, taking in their tense faces. They knew *something* she didn't. The questions was *what* .

"Draco," she said neutrally. "What's going on?" She had such a tight hold on her emotions it was hard for her to feel anything, but she couldn't risk tipping Draco off before she knew what was going on.

"Have you heard?" Theo demanded. There was a light in his eyes that Rigel didn't like. It wasn't happy, exactly, more... exhilarated. She shook her head mutely, and the sandy-haired boy blurted, "Greengrass is a *halfblood*, Rigel. We found out today in Potions."

Rigel blinked, not sure, not daring to hope that she'd heard him correctly. "Greengrass," she repeated dumbly. They thought Greengrass was the halfblood? "Are you sure?"

"As can be," Theo said, chuckling darkly. "Today was ancestry potions. Saw her whole family tree myself, and her father is actually a muggleborn! Can you believe it?"

Rigel looked at her other classmates, noting Greengrass' obvious absence. The others didn't look quite as thrilled as Theo to have such a secret uncovered. Mostly they looked shocked, some upset. She wondered if they were upset because Greengrass was getting kicked out of school or because they'd been sharing classes with a halfblood. The cynical side of her suspected the latter.

"How can Lord Greengrass be a muggleborn?" Rigel asked, frowning. None of this made any sense. "Perhaps it was a mistake."

"No mistake," Millicent said, shooting Theo a sharp look before he could open his mouth again. "Daphne Greengrass was a by-blow, it turns out. Her biological father is Dirk Cresswell."

Rigel nodded slowly. The implications of what she was hearing were slowly creeping over her like Devil's Snare. "She didn't know. Tell me she didn't know."

The others shook their heads, somewhat bewildered at her insistent tone. "She looked pretty surprised," Draco murmured. His face was closed-she had no clue as to what he was thinking, but his eyes were dark with heavy thought.

"That's good, at least," Rigel said, sighing.

"How is *any* of this good?" Davis said sharply. "Daphne is being removed from school as we speak. The elves already took her things from our dorm."

"If she didn't know, they can't send her to Azkaban for blood identity theft," Rigel told her. The others exchanged grim looks. Clearly, not everyone had considered that possibility. "Her parents might be prosecuted, though, if they can't prove they didn't know either."

"The Greengrass Family is in the Book of Gold. They wouldn't dare," Pansy murmured. Her face was troubled, though.

Davis let loose a single tear before swiping at her eye angrily. "I still can't believe it. Daphne was more pureblood than most."

"Except she wasn't," Blaise pointed out bluntly.

"More than you," Davis shot back. "At least her parents are *human*."

"Don't impugn Blaise's blood just because your friend turned out to have a dirty secret," Theo said, scowling.

"She didn't know!" Davis screeched.

Blaise cut in before the two could escalate their argument. "Anyway, she's right, in a way. I'm only pureblood by Hogwarts' definition, which, frankly, is fairly generous. The non-human beings in my ancestry would preclude me from schools like Durmstrang just the same as Greengrass' father precludes her from staying here."

"It's not the same," Millicent said firmly.

"Isn't it, though?" Blaise leveled her with a sardonic look. "After all, if I were to enter the New Triwizard Tournament, it would be as a halfblood."

"*What?*" Pansy looked appalled but Millicent paled.

"That's right," Millie said weakly. "I'd forgotten."

"That can't be right," Pansy protested.

"It is," Blaise said evenly. "The tournament guidelines as to what constitutes pureblood don't count so-called 'creature' blood and require all-magical heritage up to the great-grandparent level. I'm not the only Hogwarts student who would technically have to compete as a halfblood."

"But why would they design it that way?" Pansy frowned, then made a noise of understanding as she apparently worked out the answer for herself. "It's to make sure no one can claim the pureblood category is less than absolute. No 'pure by definition' candidates, I suppose."

"That may be part of it," Millicent said, "But father told me the stricter definition was actually a condition of Durmstrang deigning to participate."

Draco wrinkled his nose. "Who cares if they nominate anyone? There are plenty of other schools worldwide."

"Durmstrang has a lot of influence in Europe," Millicent told him. "Where they go, other schools will follow. If Durmstrang deems the tournament in its current form as worth acknowledging, the rest of Europe is more likely to consider it favorably."

"None of this matters right now," Theo said, clearly exasperated. "How are you all not more concerned about the halfblood that's been living among us for over three years?"

"Don't see how it matters to us," Goyle said slowly. "They aren't gonna cancel school or anything."

"It matters," Theo said, rolling his eyes, "because *anyone* could be a halfblood! If not for the ancestry potion we would have *never known*. What are we gonna do about it?"

"Do?" Pansy shook her head sharply. "We aren't going to do anything, Theo. The Board of Governors will take care of this."

"There should be tests," Theo argued. "They should test everyone in school. Otherwise what's the point of the rule?"

Rigel kept her breath even and her eyes lowered, but she could feel her magic stirring hotly in her stomach at the thought of submitting to a blood test. She wouldn't.

"Everyone fourth year and up *has* been tested, Nitwit," Millicent said, scoffing. "The Potions curriculum doesn't change year to year. You think this is the first time this has happened?"

"Why don't they test us as soon as we get here?" Theo demanded. "It's an outrage."

"You're the only one outraged," Blaise said drolly. "And it would be an insult of the highest order to test the scions of ancient houses for blood purity. The integrity of the Book of Gold and Silver is unquestioned. If the Greengrasses knowingly forged their daughter's

birth records, they will serve time in Azkaban, Theo. That sort of safeguard is supposed to be deterrent enough."

"Why not have the ancestry potion done in the first year curriculum, if they're being so polite about it?" Theo grumbled.

"First years can't brew an ancestry potion," Rigel told him flatly. "It takes a mature magical core to unconsciously imbue at the rate required for the potion's completion. Third year would be the earliest they could have put it on the curriculum, but even then it's slightly more complicated in terms of brewing technique than most third year potions."

Theo huffed. "So the best plan is to kick people out in fourth year if it turns out their mother slept with a muggle?"

"Don't say that about her!" Davis cried. "You've never even spoken to Lady Greengrass, but I've had tea at her house and she came to my birthday party and-and-she *can't* have done what you're saying."

Davis fled their group in tears and stormed to the dorm room that she would now occupy alone for the remainder of term. Rigel watched her go, and a twisted part of her wondered if anyone would be offended on her behalf, were her own falsehoods to become known.

"This is so messed up," Millicent muttered.

"How could we not have noticed?" Theo added, shaking his head.

Rigel stared at him. "Noticed? What was there to notice? The halfblood shape of her nose? Or maybe the halfblood way she crossed her t's?" She couldn't hold back a sneer. "There was nothing to notice, Theo. Because halfbloods aren't outwardly any different from other people. They don't have 'less worthy' stamped on their foreheads."

"I know," Theo said, indignant, "but her magic-"

"Greengrass is *good at magic*, " Rigel snapped. "Say what you want about her personality, but Greengrass doesn't lack magical ability. She has higher grades than *you* in some classes."

"Had," Blaise put in drolly.

Rigel shot him a glance that told the boy he was not helpful. She knew she shouldn't let herself get riled, should keep her head down lest someone remember that she hadn't been in the fourth-year potions class and therefore hadn't been 'tested' like the rest of them. She couldn't help it, though. Her emotions would not stay suppressed. Not when she knew how close she had come to walking out the door with Daphne Greengrass. If she hadn't been pulled out of the regular courses, if she'd been there today...

Their group had been drawing attention since Davis made such a scene flouncing out, and Rigel knew she should walk away before even more of the common room started paying attention. She couldn't though. She physically could not move her feet when one of her own friends stood there and spouted such ill-conceived nonsense.

When Aldon Rosier's voice came from over her shoulder, Rigel closed her eyes briefly in resignation. Where Rosier's attention went, other seventh years' would follow, and sure enough, as she turned around to face him, she found nearly the entire common room staring their way.

"Rigel, I'm sure you didn't mean to imply that there was no basis for Daphne's expulsion. Rules are rules, after all," the golden-eyed young man said carefully. She could see concern for her clearly in his eyes. He was giving her an out, a chance to retract some of her more inflammatory words and toe the accepted line. Rigel considered taking it, she really did. In the end, though, she didn't think her integrity was worth so small a price as social convenience.

"In light of today's revelations, I can't help questioning the basis for the rule itself," Rigel said frankly. "Daphne Greengrass was no less

magical than the rest of us. She knew pureblood customs and tradition better than most of us. So what's the point of kicking her out? Did any of you feel held back or like you weren't getting the most of your education by having a halfblood in the class?" She turned slowly, daring her classmates to contradict her. "Daphne Greengrass has been in school with us for over three years. Is she a different person today than she was yesterday? Of course not. It's you all that have suddenly changed your opinion of her. Because of her blood."

"She betrayed our trust," someone called out from the crowd.

Rigel openly scoffed. "She didn't even know she was halfblooded. What if it had been you? How would you feel if you found out tomorrow that you were a halfblood and your family lied to you? Would you feel like you didn't deserve to be here? Like it was okay to rip four years of hard work out from under you for something that wasn't your fault? Would you feel like a monster? Or would you feel exactly the same as you do today, and the world would seem monstrous instead?"

Dead silence met her pointed questions. She let it fester for a long moment before saying, directly to Rosier, "The rules are clear, Aldon. But they're also wrong."

She pushed through the crowd toward the common room entrance. She could hear the outbreak of murmurs and angry mutters behind her but she didn't care. Her entire being was choked with rage and resentment at the lot of them. She didn't even like Greengrass, but it was clear to her that the girl was nothing more than a victim of circumstance. If this was how her friends would treat a girl who'd done nothing wrong, how much more unforgiving would they be to Harriet Potter, willful blood identity thief and unapologetic liar first class?

She didn't want to think about it. She just wanted to bury herself in some other pursuit, anything to take her mind off the current situation before she gave into her magic's acute desire to destroy something

irreparably. She paced through the dungeons, climbing staircases until she'd reached the entrance hall and could slip the reigns of the castle entirely.

The crisp afternoon air felt like the first clean breath she'd had in hours. She made straight for the forest's edge and was so out of sorts that she'd thundered her way well past the tree line before she knew it. She sucked in air in a slow, deliberate way and kept walking. She was determined to get further into the forest than the last time she'd been there. Every time she came to visit Treeslider she made it a little further. Only when the daylight had been swallowed completely by the canopy and the trunks around her spanned twice her length in diameter did she stop and sink to the soft dirt bonelessly.

Treeslider found her staring listlessly up at the branches above her a few minutes later. The bright green snake barely mentioned her lack of offering before curling up in her lap and singing a hissing song about warm burrows and slow prey. She stroked the snake absently, lost in thoughts she'd rather not be thinking. She shouldn't have gone off on Theo and Rosier. Why was it so much harder this year just to hold her damn tongue? She would have to apologize to them both, probably. She would make some excuse about resenting the school policy on her cousin's behalf. If anyone asked whether she'd done the ancestry potion herself, she would simply intimate that she'd covered it much earlier in her private lessons with Professor Snape. No one would think to question their Head of House about it. This situation would pass, and likely her classmates would eventually forget all about the unwitting halfblood Daphne Greengrass. She wouldn't forget, though. For the next four years at Hogwarts Greengrass would be haunting her steps in every corridor, looming over her shoulder in every exam. Rigel fervently hoped that wherever Greengrass ended up was a kinder place than the one she'd left behind. She wished the best for the girl, but she knew in her heart it was a selfish wish, too. Irrefutably, there stood the fact: *there, but for the grace of Merlin, go I.*



As if tragedy begot tragedy, the papers the next day painted a grisly fresco of the current state of blood relations in Magical Britain. Rigel hadn't noticed at first the rampant murmurs rippling through the Great Hall. She thought the increase in chatter merely a side effect of the Greengrass scandal, still raw and sharp in her mind. She tried to ignore it, but Millicent thrust a Daily Prophet under her nose. The dark-haired girl grimaced apologetically but shook the paper nonetheless.

"You'll want to see this," Millie said softly.

Rigel took the paper with a frown. The front page was mostly images. A building caved in on one side, where an explosion had bloomed and settled into rubble. A snake-eating skull against a twinkling night sky, as ominous and incomprehensible as the last time she had seen it. The headline read: ATTACK ON NOVUS INDUSTRIES.

She felt a sick dread pool in her stomach as she scanned the article. She didn't care about the details, she only wanted to know the outcome. Three dead. Ten injured. The list of names was incomplete, but Lily was not on it.

Rigel tried to breathe evenly, but she could hear the rattle in the air that her lungs expelled. Her mother's company had been attacked. Presumably by the same group who had disrupted the World Cup. She wondered at the utter insanity of it. It was difficult to even comprehend: three dead. They had *killed* people in the name of anti-muggle hate. Why Novus Industries? She answered her own question after a moment of thought. Novus Industries hired muggleborns proactively, despite discouragement from the government and incentives to do otherwise. To a group of people who wanted even scant connection to muggles dissolved, a

company that defied the push to hire only those schooled at Hogwarts had always risked censure. Now, apparently, such companies risked mortal peril as well.

Before she had time to reread the article, an owl from home landed in front of her porridge. The slip of paper enclosed in its talons didn't say much. *Aunt Lily is safe, Sirius wrote. She's taken a leave of absence. They haven't caught the perpetrators yet. Be vigilant.*

Despite its brevity, the word from home was enough to slow her heartbeat and allow her to consider the event almost objectively. The message at the World Cup wasn't a bluff, then. Someone was serious about disrupting the ties between the magical and muggle worlds. And they were willing to kill to see it done. A heavy weight filled her chest at the thought of those whose lives had been taken or twisted, and the many more who would be frightened by this attack. Some would start to distance themselves from their muggleborn acquaintances. Those without muggle ties would reason that anyone who maintained their loyalty had already been warned. Rigel didn't hold out hope that the outcry against this gross injustice would make a difference in tracking the radical group down and neutralizing them. Only real information and dedicated pursuit could accomplish that. James would be busier than ever, now.

Rigel read through the article one more time, slower and more focused. A device of some kind had been recovered from the wreckage, but the DMLE hadn't released any details as to how it might have caused the explosion. At the bottom of the article, in a comment so dry it might as well have been a footnote, it read: *To allow the company time to recover its offices and personnel, the Ministry's Patent Office has suspended their contract with Novus Industries indefinitely.*

That, more than any of the macabre details or gross speculation in the rest of the article, made her want to rip the paper to pieces. *Even the Ministry is scared that their association with Novus will make them a target. Cowards.*

She wondered vaguely when she'd become so cynical. Probably about the time she'd learned that humans would do anything for power and, more pressingly, security, she supposed. She set the paper aside, giving Millicent a brief nod of thanks. Standing, she said, "I'm going to write Harry. I'll meet you all in class."

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That Hermione had managed to find a copy of the DMGS's press release about the tournament within a day did not surprise Archie. That the driven young woman had proceeded to secure permission not only from all of her professors, the Head of Healing Track, and her own parents within the next week *shouldn't* have surprised him, but he had honestly expected someone to realize what a bad idea it was. No one stopped her, though. The professors even encouraged Hermione, praising her for keeping abreast of international affairs and volunteering to represent AIM abroad.

By the time Archie realized he would have to be the one to say something, Hermione's course was set. A couple of other students appealed to Professor Willoweed to be nominated, but Hermione's early enthusiasm for the opportunity settled the professors' minds in her favor. She would be AIM's top choice for consideration by the selection committee, whether Archie liked it or not.

"Aren't you worried about keeping up with the syllabi?" he asked her, watching her bundle together all of the materials required for the application. They were in the library, which meant his friend automatically shot him a disapproving look before answering, in a much quieter tone of voice.

"You've told me a dozen times that your cousin, Rigel, keeps apace with our studies. If he can do it, I can too. Why are you so against

this?" she added, letting go of the papers for a moment and pinning him with a direct stare.

"I'm not," Archie said weakly.

"You have been from the start," Hermione disagreed. "You think I shouldn't go, but you haven't said why. Do you think I can't do it? I'm good at more than just Healing magic."

"I know that," Archie said, eyebrows raising. He hadn't thought he'd been quite so obvious in his misgivings. Now that he had the opening, though... "If the tournament was anywhere besides Hogwarts, about anything other than blood purity, I'd tell you to go in a heartbeat, 'Mione. I know you'll wipe the floor with those snobs. But it's going to be dangerous-"

"There will be adults there to keep it from getting out of hand," Hermione said reasonably.

"Not the tournament, the whole country," Archie told her. "There's rampant blood prejudice everywhere right now. It's getting ugly on both sides and I don't want you caught up in the middle."

"I already am," Hermione said, tilting her head in the way she did when she thought he was being thick. "Harry, I'm muggleborn. That means that I'm implicated in this ideological battle regardless. I can stay here and do nothing, or I can go there and stand proudly and show the world that muggleborns are as talented as anyone else. Don't you see? If people like me are too afraid to stand up for ourselves, it's seen as an invitation to the rest of society to do whatever they want to us. I have to do this, Harry. I won't forgive myself if I don't go and some bigoted pureblood wins the tournament. The Sow Party will use it as an excuse to pass that legislation you told me about, won't they? Or something worse. It can't be borne."

"I know you're right," Archie said, mouth twisting unhappily. "I just wish it didn't have to be you."

"If everyone waited for someone else to do something unpleasant, nothing would ever get done," Hermione said softly.

"I'll miss you," he said, knowing in his heart that he'd never really had a chance at changing her mind.

Hermione leant over and hugged him fiercely. "I'll miss you too, Harry. I'll write every week. And you'd better send me copies of all the homework assignments."

Archie laughed. "You're exempt from the homework and you still want to do it?"

"How will I be ready for the exams at the end of term if I don't do any homework all year?" Hermione asked, shaking her head exasperatedly.

"You're really incredible, you know that?" Archie had to smile at the way Hermione ducked her head slightly to allow her curls to hide the flush in her cheeks at that. "I mean it, 'Mione. I think you're the most amazing person I've ever met. I-I've thought that for a while. I just wanted you to know."

Hermione's wide eyes filled with undisguised wonder and she blinked hard before smiling at him softly. "Harry, I've never met anyone like you, either. You know you mean more to me than anyone else. I promise I'll come back in one piece, ok? Please don't worry too much."

Archie searched her face for a sign that this was the right moment to tell the beautiful, intelligent witch beside him how he felt. As she turned back shyly toward the stack of papers before her, he knew it wasn't. How could he tell her how he felt right before she left for who knew how long? A part of him dreaded that if he didn't, she would find someone else, someone whose charms she was more susceptible to, someone who would inevitably recognize what a special, wonderful person she was and try to make her theirs. Archie knew such thoughts were selfish, though. His own insecurity was not

a good reason to confess his feelings. He could wait a little longer, until she was back with him at AIM and could return his feelings without the complication of long distance or the distraction of a dangerous tournament looming.

Still, it ached to shut the feelings away once more and carefully lock the drawer. It felt like locking a poltergeist in his chest. Every time he looked at her, the drawer rattled.

That night, he lay awake long past midnight, staring up at his ceiling in frustrated longing. Damn, but he adored that witch. As Archie was contemplating giving in to his pent-up desire and releasing the poltergeist in a different sense, so to speak, the mirror dinged and he jumped, startled, from his bed. He ran a hand through his hair and straightened his pajamas uncomfortably before answering the mirror with an awkward cough. "Yes? Rigel?"

"Harry," his cousin said, her grey eyes wide, "Sorry to wake you so early. I have bad news. It's about Lily's job."

Archie shook the fog of embarrassment away and frowned. "What? What's going on?"

Harry's face had a grim cast. "Novus Industries was attacked last night. It made the papers here this morning, but it might make the front page where you are. I wanted to tell you before you found out, though. Lily is fine, but there was an explosion at the office and that ugly snake and skull thing was hanging over the attack site."

"Dear Merlin," he said, feeling shock lance through his stomach. "Was anyone hurt?"

"Yes." Harry looked somber, and the fact that she didn't elaborate only made his gut clench tighter. "I want you to be careful, A-Harry. There's no telling whether these incidents will stay confined to the UK or whether they might spill over to the Americas, but be on your guard. American schools are known for their high muggleborn acceptance rates."

"I'll be careful," Archie promised. He hesitated, but figured this was a good a time as any to tell his cousin about Hermione. "While I have you here," he said slowly, "remember when you told me about the tournament and I promised to ask around about it here?"

"Yes." Harry said again, this time with her eyes narrowed slightly.

"Well, Hermione was with me when I asked, and I may have piqued her interest about the tournament," Archie admitted.

Harry closed her eyes briefly. "Are you telling me Hermione-your friend Hermione who knows Harry Potter likes to cross-dress at school-is going to enter the Triwizard Tournament?"

"I'm not... not saying that," Archie said, trying a sheepish smile. Harry did not return it. "It's not my fault!" he protested. "Hermione is a very determined young woman. When she heard that they were trying to prove purebloods were better wizards than others, she couldn't let it stand. I really admire her willingness to stand up for-"

"Admire it later," Harry snapped. "First explain how you let this happen."

"I don't own her, H-Rigel." Archie snorted. "Quite the other way around, I'm afraid."

Harry's expression softened. "You told her how you feel? Did you tell her about the marriage contract and explain that it isn't permanent?"

He winced. "I... haven't told her, yet. With her determined to participate in this tournament, it didn't seem right to burden her with my feelings on top of everything else."

Harry was silent for a moment. He could tell by her torn expression that she felt bad for him, but didn't know what to say. Harry had no more experience than he did in matters of the heart. Finally, his cousin offered, "Maybe she won't get picked by the selection committee."

Archie shook his head ruefully. "She has three more letters of recommendation than required. Her grades are better even than mine, and her raw magical output is rated fairly high. She'll get picked. Just... please look after her."

Harry nodded slowly. "I will. I'll make sure the others know she's your friend and I won't forgive any disrespect. Tell her to come talk to me if anyone gives her trouble outside of the tournament."

He smiled gratefully. He could always count on Harry. With her at Hogwarts, he didn't have to worry quite so much about Hermione. "Is there anything else I should know?" Archie asked after a moment's pause.

His cousin grimaced. "Actually... I need a vial of your blood."

Archie groaned. "First spit, then blood. Are you making a golem of me, cuz?"

"I wish," Harry grunted. "There was an incident. A halfblood was discovered at Hogwarts and they expelled her."

"WHAT?" Archie's pulse raced and his hands shook. "How could you just now tell me?"

"It happened yesterday," Harry said, frowning. "And they're trying to keep it quiet to avoid a scandal but the whole school knows. If they decide to test everyone, I need some of your blood."

Archie could not believe his ears. "You're *staying* at Hogwarts? You should leave. Now. I can catch a cab to the airport and use my emergency credit card to book a flight home today. I'll meet you at the Dancing Phoenix and we can switch places-"

"Stop," Harry said, exasperated. "We are not invoking Plan B. There's not any kind of manhunt going on. I don't think it will actually be necessary, but I want your blood just in case. Don't worry. Our goose isn't cooked yet."



"What are you going to do with it?" Archie asked, trying not to panic but seriously wondering if his cousin had just become numb to the risks she ran.

Harry smirked, and it was a devious, beautiful thing. "I'm going to make a skin graft. Only I'm going to do it badly."

"A skin-" he stopped. Thought about the possibility. As it clicked, he had to smile slowly. "You are a terrifying person, Harry Potter."

"Watch it," she said, glancing over her shoulder. "My roommates could walk in any time."

"Then you should go back to class and let me go back to sleep," Archie said, yawning. "Thanks for the heads up about Lily. We can figure out anything else in the morning, though."

"It is morning for me," Harry pointed out.

"Bully for you." Archie made a face at her. "Night, cuz."

"Night."

Despite his words, he didn't fall asleep that night. His mind ran doggedly in circles around everything Harry had told him. There had been another halfblood at Hogwarts. A muggleborn-affiliated company was struck by a deadly attack. And what Harry hadn't mentioned at all was telling in itself. She hadn't brought up her own participation in the tournament. Archie wasn't fool enough to think Riddle had changed his mind, which meant Harry was probably trying to deal with his pressure all on her own. She'd better not be taking any hits for him or their parents. Archie would never forgive her if she got herself wrapped up in that blasted tournament because she was trying to be *noble* .

The last days of October passed too quickly. Nothing she did, not her studies nor her friends, could erase the hunted feeling she carried with her as first one, then another week passed without a word from Riddle. She knew he hadn't given up; it was only a matter of time before he tried something else. As the announcement of the tournament contestants crept closer, her nerves began to get the best of her.

Every afternoon as she walked to lab three for whatever training Snape had planned for her, she felt dread pool in her stomach that this would be the session that Riddle appeared, armed with real secrets this time, for all that she doubted even Riddle could uncover the convoluted depths of her true vulnerability.

On October 30th, it was almost a relief to answer the summons of her Head of House. There was no more time. The announcement was tomorrow. Riddle would have to make his threats tonight, or forfeit his desire to have her participate. Either way, it would be decided and done with. Rigel was almost looking forward to it. She couldn't take any more suspense.

She opened the door to lab three without knocking. Riddle leaned against a gleaming counter, arms crossed and face closed in thought. Snape wasn't there. Rigel allowed herself a single hard swallow before closing the door quietly behind her and turning to face the man who seem so determined to complicate her already complicated existence.

"Will Professor Snape be joining us?" she asked.

Riddle roused himself from his contemplations but did not move from his somewhat slouched posture. "No. I wanted to speak to you alone. It occurred to me that you might feel somewhat... attacked in these meetings. A less stilted dialogue may benefit us both."

Rigel's eyebrow rose of its own volition. Riddle thought Snape's presence was what made her defensive? No, she decided. That was just an excuse to remove Snape from the discussion. *To remove the only witness*, she thought sourly. "Professor Snape's presence or lack thereof won't change my mind," she told him. There was no energy in her voice; she was simply stating the truth.

"You've proved remarkably bull-headed," Riddle allowed. To her surprise, the faintest of smiles flickered across his mouth as he considered her. "It's admirable. A man swayed by neither greed nor fear is rare enough; one so young and un-established, nearly unheard of."

He fell silent and seemed to be waiting for a response. Rigel sincerely hoped he wasn't looking for a 'thank you.' "That says more about the world than it does about me," she said carefully. Then, almost hopefully: "have you accepted you can't force my hand?"

Riddle's amusement died. "I could, boy. Never doubt that if I wished it, I could hollow you out to an empty husk and enchant it in such a way that even your closest friends would not notice the difference." Rigel paled, and her wand was in her hand before she recalled drawing it. Riddle flicked his eyes at it, but merely sneered. "Put that away. I have neither the patience nor the desire to see you whittled into a lifeless puppet. You may not believe this, but participating in this tournament is in your best interest, Rigel. Until you realize that, it seems another approach is in order."

This was it, she thought. Now he would reveal just what information he had on her that made him look so supremely unconcerned. She braced herself against the worst. If it was anything short of her identity as Harry Potter, she could-

"What do *you* want?"

She blinked dumbly. Had they just restarted the conversation without her realizing it? "I... don't want to be in your tournament."

Riddle rolled his eyes at her, and the gesture was so incredibly human she almost choked. "And Severus says you're his smartest pupil. I pity the next generation." She flushed. What was he asking, then? "You care not for the security of either yourself or your family. Gold doesn't interest you. So, then. I'm asking. What do you want, Rigel Black? What would it take for you to participate in the Triwizard Tournament of your own free will?"

Rigel shook her head. "I don't want anything you can offer." She felt like a broken record.

"You must not comprehend what it is I can offer, then," Riddle said firmly. "Do not answer thoughtlessly. Consider for a moment the wide world, child. There is little I would not agree to and nothing at all that I cannot do. Don't think of yourself, for a moment. Look beyond even your own family. Is there nothing in the world you would change, if you could? No dream so big you've scarcely allowed yourself to hope for its manifestation?"

She frowned. This was not the same offer he'd made before, she realized. He wasn't offering something as concrete as gold or even something as straightforward as influence. Riddle was offering to enact a wish on her behalf. If he really meant anything... it was almost unthinkable. Wasn't Riddle the one who first warned her against giving an open-ended boon to another person? What was he playing at?

"Why are you doing this?" she asked, honestly confused. "An offer of this magnitude... there's no way on earth one kid's cooperation is worth this."

"The value of a favor is on its bestower to determine," Riddle said dismissively. "What is costly to another is negligible for one such as I." Rigel had to grimace at his arrogance. He wasn't done, though. "As to why this tactic now, well, I've considered you extensively these past two weeks. I admit at first I did not think you so very different from other intelligent young wizards I have known. You chafe at restrictions, at any suggestion of another's control. You are

reckless: overly dependent on your raw talent to make up for what you lack in judicious trepidation in the face of a challenge. Much like Severus, you burrow in academics to avoid dealing with a world you neither respect nor envy. There is, however, one unique facet to your character that I had disregarded as unimportant... until now."

"Do tell," she said faintly. She wondered if other people saw her the way Riddle did. Was she as he'd said? She could be rash, sometimes. Reluctant to surrender control of her life to another, too. Those qualities alone didn't define her, though.

"Your altruism," Riddle said, smiling slowly. "That is the fulcrum that escaped me at first. It isn't obvious, of course. You pretend to apathy with remarkable alacrity, on the surface. Yet when the stakes are sufficiently high, your demeanor shifts entirely."

Rigel frowned. Altruistic? Her? Even Archie knew better than to credit her with an inclination like that. "I think you've misunderstood me," she muttered.

Riddle straightened from his lounging posture and stepped toward her until she could see the secondary colors in his eyes. "Your actions belie you. When I tally the extent of your grandest deeds, the theme is clear; you do for others before you do for yourself. Even the one instance that you asked something of me was on behalf of others. That is your weakness. You do not let opportunities to help others pass you by. Now you have the biggest opportunity you may ever encounter. This time, if I'm right, you won't be able to say no."

She wasn't sure what to think as silence stretched between them. He was bribing her with... charity? This had to be the strangest negotiation ever enacted. Her first instinct was to scoff. The second instinct, on the heels of the first, gave her pause, though. She thought, really thought about the suggestion for a moment. Anything. She could ask *anything* .

A whirlwind of possibilities crowded her mind. She hated that she was tempted. Hated the way Riddle's smile grew the longer she

stood without answering. She had to think faster. This chance-if, indeed, she could view it as an opportunity as he suggested instead of an imposition-could not be wasted. If only she had more time.

What would help the most people? A selfish idea rose to the surface of her mind. *I could ask him to open Hogwarts to non-purebloods.* The idea caught at her throat. There was no way he would agree to that. Yet, was that not how good negotiations began? With a demand so outrageous that compromise ensued?

"If I agree to the tournament, Hogwarts admits muggleborns and halfbloods again," she said in a rush, determined to get it out before her courage deserted her.

"Out of the question," Riddle hissed. His eyes flashed in cold fury.

"You said I could ask for anything," she said, working to keep her voice even.

"Anything *e*lse," he growled down at her.

She favored him with a skeptical look. "You said that before. I no longer believe you."

Riddle's scowl could have curdled milk. "My patience is not endless. Ask. Another. Boon."

Rigel arched her eyebrows and affected her best uncompromising stare. It was worth a try, surely. "Then this is my final offer: if I compete in the tournament, the S.O.W. Party kills the anti-muggle blood legislation."

Riddle stilled, his face suddenly blank. "I don't know what legislation you mean."

"Do not insult me at this stage, Mr. Riddle," Rigel said, frowning. "I refer to the legislation your party has been attempting to pass for the last three years. The increased restrictions on muggleborns and

denial of basic rights to any non-pureblood witch or wizard, including healthcare, employment opportunities, and self-determined marriage prospects. I will participate in your tournament only if the legislation gets scrapped completely and never re-introduced at a later date."

The politician seemed more intrigued than surprised at her elaboration. "You think such a price is worth your mere... participation?" A smirk bloomed like a black rose across his cheek.

She felt her heart jump unexpectedly. He hadn't said no. He was *actually* considering it. Could she really trade her dignity and risk her life in exchange for a guarantee that the awful legislation that had been hanging over the Wizarding World like a cloud would simply... dissipate? She peered into her soul and saw Archie there. Forced into a contract with her for her own protection. She saw Addy, too young to know it, but held under the same threat as any halfblood. Hermione was there too, keen and bright, but destined to struggle for every step she took into their insular society. Even Daphne was there. Poor, prejudiced Daphne struck down by the very uncompromising ideals she'd once held up like a shield between her and the world.

Rigel had to consciously relax her jaw so that Riddle wouldn't see exactly how badly she wanted to make this trade. Unfathomable, that the man had gotten his way in the end. After all her protestations, he had seen the lever she couldn't ignore. Now she had to see that he didn't pull it too far. She tilted her head as though she were still considering. "If not my participation... then my victory. If I win the tournament, the legislation is scrapped."

"Interesting." His face gave nothing away, but Rigel could tell he was taking the offer seriously. She kept her face as cold and unyielding as she could, determined that he believe she would not settle for anything less than the complete eradication of that disgusting legislation.

"That's not all," she said, realizing she needed something else to distract him from attempting to knock the stakes lower. "I'll require

something else for agreeing to participate in the first place. No guarantee I'll win, is there?"

"None at all." Riddle seemed more entertained by that idea than by anything else they'd discussed thus far. "What would you have for this additional condition-keeping in mind that I've yet to agree to the first?"

Her mind was racing ahead of her, trying to think of something that would do some good in the world. Riddle was influential. Why not take advantage of that? "For my initial participation, I want you to publicly decry the recent attacks and the anti-muggle radicals behind them. You've been silent up until now, which, from a man as influential as you, is practically tacit agreement. If I allow you to nominate me for this tournament, you will announce to the press that the S.O.W. Party does not support the violent work of these renegades and that their actions are those of a disenfranchised group of madmen, not reflective of mainstream pureblood policies and ideology in any way."

"Well done, Rigel." Riddle's all too pleased expression doused any feeling of satisfaction she might have derived at listing demands of him for once. "I'll make a politician of you yet." Rigel scowled slightly. Trust Riddle to take credit for any minute amount of cleverness that occurred in his vicinity.

"Do we have a bargain?" she pressed. If she wasn't getting any time to think about this, then neither should he.

Riddle gazed down at her in indulgent amusement. "So like Severus," he mused quietly. "Though his interests were always a bit more... personal, of course."

Rigel's curiosity was piqued. Snape had mentioned the dangers of making a deal with Riddle, once. She wondered what he had bargained, and whether he'd been as sure of himself then as she was now. She also had to wonder how much he'd come to regret



later, and whether he'd do it again, given another chance. While she wondered about Snape, Riddle appeared to make up his mind.

"Very well, Rigel. In exchange for your participation in the True Triwizard Tournament, I will issue a righteously worded press release disavowing the fringe group responsible for the attack on the World Cup and your dear aunt's company. If you manage to win the tournament-not tie, not merely become the pureblooded champion, but win it outright-I will withdraw the aforementioned legislation and never support its reintroduction." Riddle said all of this with a calm, pleasant expression, as though he were listing the food he planned to eat for breakfast the next day.

Suspicious, Rigel said, "We will take a vow to that effect. Tonight." After all, he'd squirmed his way around a promise to her before. She would not make the same mistake twice. "Professor Snape can be our Bonder."

"You mean to make the Unbreakable Vow?" Riddle's eyes flared.

"I do. Unless you aren't as serious about these terms as you say," she said, lifting her chin in challenge.

He didn't flinch. "I'll summon Severus directly." His wand was in his hand before Rigel had even registered his wrist moving. Wordlessly, he flicked the polished wood and black smoke materialized into the shape of an inky crow. It flew through the closed door and was gone. Rigel couldn't help but stare after it. It was like a sort of anti-patronus. She wondered if it could be used to send messages or only to fetch people.

As they waited, Rigel took a scrap piece of parchment and a self-inking quill from her pocket and set to work. She was not about to allow Riddle to write the vows. As the one setting the terms to which he was complying, she had the right to dictate the exact wording. She would not have suggested it otherwise.

It didn't take Snape long to arrive; he'd likely been waiting impatiently for their meeting to conclude, one way or the other. His eyes swept the room when he entered, assessing their stiff postures and still-spotless surroundings. "Lord Riddle," he said respectfully.

"Severus, young Rigel and I have come to an accord this night. We require you to be our Bonder." Riddle said, smirking once more.

Snape paled before two spots of color bled back into his cheeks. "What have you agreed to, Rigel?"

"He's agreed to my terms, actually," Rigel said vaguely. She could scarcely believe this was actually happening, but she wasn't about to back out now. "As such, I will be setting forth the vows." She handed the piece of weathered parchment to Riddle for his inspection. "I trust this wording is satisfactory?"

Riddle drew a single line with his finger across the parchment near the end of the vow, but otherwise left the wording alone. "Suitable," he said smoothly, handing it back to her. Snape's sharp eyes followed the parchment worriedly, so Rigel handed it over for his perusal. She saw the way his breath stilled and his eyes narrowed. It wasn't what he'd expected, then. Good. That made it less likely that Riddle had walked her into this situation rather than the other way around.

Rigel knelt. Riddle slowly followed suit. She felt her teeth ache in protest when their hands met in the traditional clasp. The resonance was unnerving and distracting, but she had no time to dwell on it. Snape touched his wand to their joined hands and Rigel began speaking, clearly and firmly.

"Will you, in the event that I willingly participate in the New Triwizard Tournament, give a public statement on behalf of your political party disavowing the actions of the group responsible for the World Cup attack?"

"I will."

A ribbon of red light snapped out from Snape's wand and twined around their clasped hands.

"And will you, in the event that I am the outright winner of the New Triwizard Tournament, cease all attempts to introduce, promote, or pass legislation regarding the rights of non-pureblooded witches and wizards in the areas of employment, healthcare, and marriage, including any legislation encouraging or requiring people to marry or not marry on the basis of blood status alone?"

"I will."

A second ribbon was loosed and settled atop the first, and Rigel exhaled a slow breath. That was it. Riddle had made the Unbreakable Vow. Before she could say the words to conclude the vow, Riddle spoke again, his voice hard and his grip on Rigel's hand even harder.

"And will you, in the event that you are chosen to participate in the New Triwizard Tournament, agree to compete to the best of your ability in any and all tasks required of a designated champion?"

She wanted to refuse on principle. One simply did not impose an unagreed-upon vow in the middle and expect the rite to go on to completion. She narrowed her eyes, feeling the magic build around her as it sought her verbal agreement or refusal. She replayed his words in her mind, but could not see a downside to them, really. She already was going to do her best in the tournament, because she wanted that legislation gone. What did it cost her to stake her life on that intent when she was already risking her life simply by being in the tournament? Snape's stare was burning into the side of her head, but she didn't look at him. She was looking at Riddle, trying to fathom what he thought he was gaining by adding that additional condition last-minute. His face gave her nothing useful, and magic was beginning to stir restlessly between them. Finally, she capitulated.

"I will," she growled, adding quickly, "So mote it be."

"So mote it be."

A third ribbon barely had time to settle over their hands before the rite was complete and the crisscrossing ties of magic sank into their skin without a trace. "Bad form," she commented, rising from her knees slowly. "Still. What's done is done. I trust there will be no more threats or attempts at intimidation regarding my participation in this tournament."

Riddle inclined his head, though it had an ironic tilt. "As you say, Rigel. What's done is done."

"I'll take my leave, then. I wish you luck in convincing the selection committee to choose me as one of the preliminary contestants within the next twenty-four hours," she added, a bit spitefully.

Riddle merely laughed, slow and sinister. "Dear boy, did you imagine we had not already submitted you to the board? You were selected weeks ago. It was simply a matter of gaining your compliance."

She scowled at the man's sheer nerve. Of course he'd gone ahead with the nomination. Riddle always got his way, she supposed. At least this time she'd made him pay for it. "Good evening, gentlemen," she intoned.

"Get a good night's sleep," Riddle said mockingly.

Not dignifying that with a response, Rigel left the lab and stalked back toward the common room.

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It was a long hour of explaining to her friends what had happened and listening to them gasp and fret and debate possible outcomes in this or that event considering all that had unfolded that evening

between Riddle and her. When Draco and Pansy started arguing over what sort of robes Rigel ought to wear for the ceremony the following night, Rigel stopped listening and took up a book on ailments caused by magic gone awry. She couldn't really concentrate on the words, but she could at least pretend to be absorbed in her reading and thereby discourage any further questioning along the lines of her now-inevitable participation in the tournament.

Rigel didn't tell them about the Unbreakable Vow. It wasn't the sort of thing you revealed to all and sundry. She simply told them Riddle had given a vow to the effect that the anti-muggle blood legislation would not come to pass in the event that she managed to win the tournament. Draco and Pansy agreed that was a generous condition on Riddle's part, and each congratulated Rigel for striking a deal that favored her in the end.

She didn't want to be congratulated, though. She didn't want her friends to be impressed with her at all. What exactly she did want, she wasn't sure. All she knew was that she was in no mood to speculate on likely reactions to her being chosen as a participant. Rigel just wanted to go to sleep, but she had to talk to Archie about what had happened. She could have made her excuses and called him right away, but she'd been interrupting his schedule a lot lately. Better to wait until the hours he'd specified would be best for uninterrupted conversation. The news would keep until then; there wasn't anything he could do about it in any case.

She feigned interest in the magical ailments text until her friends had exhausted themselves and turned in for the night. Rigel kept reminding herself that she only had to wait for the common room to empty, and then she could pass the news to Archie and sleep. Her head felt like a lead balloon, weighty with things she didn't want to really think about until tomorrow.

As the fire dimmed and the dungeons quieted, she stopped even pretending to turn the pages of her book. She simply sat there, eyes somewhat glazed, and let her mind wander. It shouldn't surprise her, then, that Aldon Rosier invited himself to sit beside her on the couch

and said, "What's wrong, Rigel? You've been reading the same page for an hour."

She lowered the book to her lap and took in his searching expression. Rosier was always searching for something, she thought. "Evening, Aldon," she said. "Nothing's wrong. I'm just enjoying the quiet."

"You don't look like someone enjoying anything," he told her frankly, golden eyes alight with concern and-she thought, maybe-kindness. She looked away, toward the glowing fireplace, unsure whether she really wanted to answer and go through it all again. Draco and Pansy's dissection of the evening had been almost as bad as living it in the first place. Aldon sighed, drawing her eyes back to his thin frame as he settled back against the cushions. "You don't have to talk about whatever it is, but if you wanted to, I would listen."

Listen. Not question or debate or analyze. Just listen. Rigel wasn't sure if it was just her exhaustion, but having someone just listen sounded sort of nice. Somehow, she didn't think Rosier would mind if she complained a little, either.

"I'm to participate in the tournament," she said after a long moment of thought.

His eyebrows rose, but otherwise his face remained open. "You decided to nominate yourself?"

"No. Yes. It's-it's been decided. The S.O.W. Party ensured I would be chosen as one of the candidates, and I've agreed to cooperate, in exchange for certain... other things." She blinked slowly at him, wondering if she sounded as mercenary to him as she did to herself.

"So you made a deal with them?" There was neither censure nor admiration in his voice, merely a gentle curiosity that she doubted Rosier could turn off if he tried. He was perpetually interested in the world.

"With Riddle," she clarified. "Just now. I refused, at first, but then... he offered something that was worth it, in the end." Her lips twisted in a parody of a smile. "It's funny. You were the first one to tell me about the marriage law, right? You and Edmund. If not for you, I wouldn't have even known to ask. And he said yes. He agreed, which I still can scarcely believe, to abolish the legislation entirely if I won his tournament. Why would he do that?"

She didn't expect him to have an answer, but Rosier surprised her. "He won't need that legislation if you win the tournament, Rigel. It's not really about *you* winning, per say. It's about a pureblood winning." The older boy appeared to be attempting to explain the situation gently, but Rigel could barely hear him anyway over the roaring in her ears. "If a pureblood wins the tournament, it proves to the world that his party was right, that everything they've been saying for years-that purebloods are better wizards who deserve a better place in society-is correct. With that kind of vindication, and the public support that comes in the wake of the victory, the S.O.W. Party itself won't have to lift a finger. Chances are, the changes he wants to make-the exclusive hiring of purebloods, the disenfranchisement of lesser-blooded people-will happen naturally. That's the power of popular opinion. Weighed against a bunch of legislation he's had great difficulty passing anyway, and you can understand why it's not exactly a bad deal from the party's perspective."

"So I've made things worse," she whispered numbly. There was a tightening in her chest as she ran through the last few hours once again. It had seemed like an inspired stroke. How could she not have considered that the political capital pureblood supremacy stood to gain in general might equal the loss of any legislation in particular?

Rosier let out a frustrated noise. "No, Rigel, that's not what I meant." He took her hands in his and squeezed them. "It was always going to be this way. If not you, it would only mean another pureblood winning the tournament instead."

Rigel squeezed his hands in return as the thought struck her hard. "You think the tournament is rigged."

"I *know* it is," he said softly. "Lord Riddle does not gamble unless all the odds are already stacked in his favor. If you think for a second that he would give a halfblood or muggleborn even a chance at winning his tournament, then you don't understand the man at all. If it wasn't you, it would be someone else, Rigel. And you secured a sacrifice on the S.O.W. Party's part that I doubt would have occurred to anyone else to even ask. You did good, Rigel. Don't doubt that."

"Should you be saying all this?" she wondered, glancing around uneasily. "Your parents-"

"Are not me," Rosier said firmly, a frown marring his handsome face. "I walk my own path, and I've known for a while that it wasn't going to be the one they laid out for me. This tournament is a manipulation of our society on every level, and I'm not so foolish I can't see that."

She smiled somewhat tremulously at him. "No one else seems to understand. My friends feel sorry that I was pressured into competing when I don't want to, but they don't really understand how very *wrong* this all is. Risking my life is one thing, but I don't want to be the figurehead of the pureblood elite, playing knight-errant in someone else's twisted fairytale."

Rosier's thumbs stroked over her fingers soothingly. "I know you don't, but you must come to terms with the role you've cast. The world will never know what you bargained on its behalf. You'll be perceived as one more pureblooded lordling looking for glory."

She closed her eyes in resignation. "I know. What people think doesn't matter, though. Reality matters. If I had refused him again tonight, who's to say he wouldn't have just resorted to threats again. I'd likely have found myself in the tournament anyway, but with no compensation to speak of." She felt a bit better, rationalizing her choice aloud. Even if she didn't fully believe it, it was easier to think that she had done the best she could.



"What do you mean... threats again?" Rosier asked, an odd tone to his voice. "Did he threaten you, Rigel?"

"He tried," she shrugged. "More accurately, he tried to threaten Harry. He doesn't know her, or he'd have known she'd never let me sacrifice myself for her sake. It was ridiculous." She snorted.

"Ridiculous?" Rosier shook his head at her, an odd smile on his face. "No. I think you're just a rare individual. No wonder even a master manipulator like Lord Riddle had trouble leading you by the nose. Good for you, Rigel."

"Thanks, Aldon."

They sat there for a little while without saying anything else. Finally, Rosier got up to leave. "Are you sure you'll be all right?" he asked, his gaze somewhat shadowed by his dark lashes as he looked down at her.

"Eventually," she said, smiling a little. "I'm just going to sit a while longer before going to bed. Thank you for comforting me. You didn't have to."

"The things we do because we want to will always outweigh those we do because we have to. Goodnight, Rigel." He left, taking his enigmatic smile and ever-surprising nature with him.

Rigel went back to staring at the grated flames, wondering whether the firestorm had caught up to her at last.

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Halloween dawned grey and foggy. Rigel woke feeling stretched thin both mentally and emotionally after too little sleep and too much stress-inducing contemplation. That day, more than any before it,

she felt as though she was a ghost possessing a body, living a life not her own. She'd been pushed and hammered and squeezed relentlessly over the past thirty days, and tonight she would be hung up like a prize piñata, at the end of her rope in front of all the world. *What's a girl to do?* she thought mirthlessly as she trudged her way toward breakfast. The answer came to her unbidden, an automatic retrieval of the second half of an obvious phrase. *Tie a knot, of course.*

She sat between Draco and Pansy and spooned porridge into her bowl as though it was any other day. Draco must have found her serene emotional state unnerving, as he asked, somewhat tentatively, "Are you really all right, Rigel?"

She tilted a smile his way and nudged his shoulder gently. "Don't worry about me. I've made my decision and I'm going to stick to it." Had to, really. The Unbreakable Vow would see to that. In light of a decision so final, there wasn't any sense in fretting over it further. She was participating in the Triwizard Tournament, and it was best to come to terms with that fact before she was presented to the world.

"What's going on?" Theo asked from across the table.

"I expect you'll find out tonight," Pansy said evenly.

"It's all right," Rigel said, lifting her head from her breakfast. "Riddle didn't forbid me from telling anyone. I've been chosen as one of the preliminary competitors for the tournament, Theo. I found out last night."

The tawny-haired boy gaped at her. "You... you said you weren't even entering!" At Pansy's stern look, he lowered his voice apologetically. "I mean, when did you change your mind?"

"I didn't enter, exactly," Rigel said, grimacing sheepishly. She had decided she wouldn't tell anyone but Draco and Pansy-and Rosier, apparently-about the deal she made with Riddle. If it became common knowledge, she might be viewed as blackmailing a well-

respected figure of the community. Worse, it might make his statement regarding the radicals and the backing down on his party's legislation ring hollow. "I suppose when the Weasley twins played their little joke it meant I was technically entered, and when they informed me last night that I'd been chosen, it seemed churlish to say no."

"It bloody well would have been," Theo agreed, looking impressed. "Congratulations, Rigel."

Millicent followed with her own congratulations and was echoed by every other Slytherin in hearing distance. She didn't doubt that the knowledge that she'd been chosen as one of the competitors would circulate the school well before that evening. Good. Anyone who'd been desperately hoping to be chosen instead could be disappointed in private. It was kinder, she thought, than letting anyone hold out hope until the ceremony later that evening.

Snape walked over to their table near the end of the meal. "Meet me in my office directly after last period, Mr. Black. There are a few formalities we must attend to prior to this evening's announcement."

She nodded her agreement, and after a moment her Head of House left. It was a relief that they had another meeting scheduled before the big reveal. She needed to face him, to explain to his satisfaction her actions the night before. It would only fester otherwise.

After breakfast she tried to go about the day as normal, tried to immerse herself in classes to take her mind off the impending side show. Everywhere she went, however, there were reminders that it was not a normal day at all. By lunch, everyone stared at her as she passed. Draco and Pansy closed rank around her wherever she walked, but they could not keep the questioning murmurs and dismissive scoffs from her ears. Rigel couldn't blame them. She didn't look like a champion. She wasn't particularly tall or handsome or poised. She was just Rigel.

The Weasley twins found her after her last class, prying her out of her friends' protective circle and whisking her into an alcove with unusually serious expressions.

"We heard a rumor-"

"-most inglorious, it were-"

"-that we may be responsible-"

"-for your pending elevation-"

"-to illustrious champion-"

"-and we wanted to say-"

"We're sorry!" they finished together. Earnest eyes blinked at her above a sea of freckles. She had to laugh.

"You couldn't have known," she said, smiling up at the tall redheads. "Besides, you mustn't apologize for a prank that exceeds your expectations. Only think what an interesting year it will be with me in the tournament."

Fred and George both grinned, exchanging deviant glances.

"Promises, promises, Pup," George drawled, a pleased glint to his eye. "Should we take that to mean you'll be representing Hogwarts with pride?"

"With relish," she said, letting a smirk grace her features. "I daresay the tournament is going to be more exciting than anyone realized. You will help me make an impact, won't you?"

"Our humble services-"

"-are at your service."

She watched them walk away, deep in quiet conversation, and hoped they came up with a few good distractions. Anything that

threw a wrench in Riddle's carefully laid plans could only be a good thing, to her mind.

Draco and Pansy had waited for her just down the hall. "Why do you still put up with them after all this time?" Draco grumbled as she rejoined them. "It's not as though they're good for anything besides cheap laughs."

"They remind me of home," she said. "No matter what you think, a good laugh isn't cheap at all. It takes a lot of hard work and talent to make something look effortless. I admire them."

Draco looked taken aback. "It just seems a waste of time. If they're so talented, they could be doing something to better society, instead of just making a joke of it."

"The nice thing about life is that you can do what you want with it," Pansy said diplomatically. "Certainly it can't be said that all my relatives are contributing members of society."

Draco let the subject drop and instead began listing the members he had confirmed for the unofficial dueling club. He wanted to get a few more lowerclassmen, but seemed to understand that the younger students would be less comfortable skirting the rules than the uppers were.

Rigel excused herself when they'd reached the turn-off to the common room, reminding them that she had to see Snape before dinner. She knocked on the door and entered at Snape's command. He set aside a stack of ungraded essays and conjured a chair for her to sit in. She took in the disgruntled set to his face and said, "I suppose you want to know why I did it."

His eyes flared with suppressed anger. "Indeed. Regale me with your reasoning."

"It's simple. He offered me a deal I couldn't refuse, and he knew it. So I took it. In my mind, the alternative was refusing on principle

alone and ending up with either a worse offer or a more effective threat hanging over my head." She let him see her resignation as she added, "I knew, as soon as he offered such an open-ended boon, that he was willing to go further to ensure my cooperation than I might be willing to go to resist."

"That you made such a bargain does not surprise me," Snape said, somehow managing to make it sound both complimentary *and* insulting. "The fact that you felt the need to stake your very life on the agreement is what makes me question your sanity, Rigel."

"It was the only way to ensure he kept his end of the agreement," Rigel said.

"You think he will not find some way around it? There are always ways, Rigel," Snape growled. "It isn't worth your life."

"My life isn't in danger unless I refuse to compete in the tournament," she corrected him. "Anyway, didn't you make a similar deal with Riddle? When I proposed it, he compared me to you."

Snape's face went blank. "What did he tell you?"

"Nothing. Neither of you ever actually tell me anything," she complained. "I have to guess and piece together disparate comments until something resembling sense forms. I can assume that whatever deal you made has to do with why you're a member of the S.O.W. Party to begin with." Snape was silent, his face closed off, but Rigel was frustrated with how reticent he was with his motivations. "Sir, please," she said softly. "If you were in a similar situation to me, then tell me. Give me something besides cryptic warnings."

The Potions Master studied her wordlessly from across the desk for a long moment. Finally, just as Rigel thought perhaps he was not going to tell her anything after all, he said, "I wanted no part of politics, growing up. I was an academic, much like you. Lord Riddle courted me for party membership, the same way he did anyone of

talent. He overlooked my blood status because my mother's family is old and I am the last Heir. Despite his attempts, I remained disinterested."

Rigel had to smile. They were more alike than she'd realized. "What changed your mind?" she prompted gently as her Head of House lapsed into silence. He appeared to be deep in thought, not seeming to even see her as his eyes focused on memories she wasn't privy to.

"I learned of an initiative the party was backing. It was to increase incentives for companies that hired halfblood or better and introduce penalties for companies who retained predominantly muggleborns. They called it the Purebloods First Initiative, and it would have meant large numbers of muggleborns laid off or pressured to find more menial employment. I had a... friend once who was muggleborn. Our lives took different paths, but I knew that she'd recently secured the job of her dreams at a private development company. I owed her a debt from long ago, and I saw, suddenly, that I could do something to repay it, and in doing so close that chapter of my life for good."

Rigel struggled to keep her face neutral. Was he just going to pretend the muggleborn friend he spoke of wasn't her mother? And was he seriously suggesting that he'd tied himself to Riddle simply to settle an old debt with Lily? "So you bargained with Riddle," she said. The parallels were eerie.

"Indeed. The legislation was tempered-it targeted government jobs only instead of private companies and the penalties were done away with altogether. I have been a member of the S.O.W. Party ever since." Snape rolled his shoulders as though warding off unpleasant thoughts.

"Does he really still own your loyalty after so many years?" she asked, frowning.

Snape's glare snapped into place in an instant. "As long as Lord Riddle is in a position to revive the Purebloods First Initiative in its

original form, I will remain with the party."

"Then... this is your last year," she said, a smile dawning. "If... if I win this tournament, you won't have anything holding you to the S.O.W. Party anymore, will you? Riddle won't be able to pass any legislation about employment that discriminates on the basis of blood. You could sever ties with him."

Snape's eyebrows shot upward. "I doubt Lord Riddle has considered that," he mused, looking oddly lost.

"Something to think about, then," Rigel said, pleased to know that her participating in the tournament might be good for more than she'd anticipated. Struck by a sudden curiosity, she couldn't help but ask, "Does your friend know what you did for her?"

"We are no longer on speaking terms," he told her sharply, "and you will keep whatever conclusions you may have drawn to yourself."

She nodded. She could do that. "Thank you for telling me, sir. I understand your position better now, and why you do the things you do."

Snape scowled at her forbiddingly. "Do not paint me as some sort of martyr. I gained much from the party's influence and connections."

"Of course," she said soothingly.

"I am a selfish man," he insisted through clenched teeth.

She nodded sagely, hiding a smile. "Yes, sir. I understand."

The dark look he gave her said he very much doubted that. "Enough about my past. We were talking about you and your reckless insistence on an Unbreakable Vow."

"In this instance, an Unbreakable Vow favors me, not Riddle," she said slowly. "Unlike the bargain you made with him, my end of the deal is finite; I compete in the tournament, either win or lose, and the



deal is over for me at the end of the year. For Riddle, if I actually win the tournament, he is bound for the rest of his life. He can't re-introduce anti-muggle blood legislation regarding marriage, employment, or healthcare ever again. That's a huge capitulation, considering the legislation he's been pushing for the last three years."

Snape appeared taken aback. Evidently he had not considered the vow from that angle.

"It still surprises me that he would go to that extent simply to have me participate in his tournament," she said tentatively. "Others would have done it for less, for nothing, even. Why is he so fixated on my involvement?" It sounded conceited to say aloud, but the evidence was irrefutable.

"There are many reasons why you make an ideal champion," Snape told her, drumming his fingers on his desk agitatedly. "You are the Heir to an old house, traditionally a Dark house whose loyalty, Lord Riddle believes, rightfully belongs to the S.O.W. Party. It is likely he believes that if you win the tournament, your newfound notoriety and the mantel of what you will come to represent may distance you from your family, whether you like it or not. Lord Riddle has long been interested in the idea of... mentoring you, Rigel. His offer last year was entirely serious. He has not said as much, but I believe... he may be searching for an Heir."

Her face lost all color at once. "Surely not," she breathed in horror. "He is young, yet."

"Nothing so immediate," Snape said, shaking his head. "It is merely a long-term consideration. As aware as I am of your own opinion regarding your abilities, to Lord Riddle you are a once-in-a-generation talent. He would be a fool if he were not to attempt to sway you to his camp."

"He's willing to lose all chance of furthering several of his legislative goals just on the chance that I might change my mind at the end of

this and come over to his side?" Rigel couldn't help but be skeptical.

Snape snorted in amusement. "There are other contributing factors, of course. You come from a family that is publically aligned against the S.O.W. Party, thus repressing any accusations of favoritism or unfairness before they form. Draco would be a decent candidate in his own right, but as the son of the party's right hand man, the choice looks less than objective. Lord Riddle also knows you function well under pressure. You will not embarrass the party on the international stage, particularly with his assurance that you will do your best to win, Rigel."

"That was a dirty move," she grumbled, still annoyed at his blatant break with common courtesy.

"You agreed to it, nonetheless," Snape reminded her.

She acknowledged that truth with a grunt. "So. What do I do now? You said there was some sort of... formality tonight?"

Her Head of House sat back and folded his hands before him. "Tonight all nine preliminary candidates will be announced in the Great Hall after dinner. You will attend a private gathering with the other candidates while the rest of the school feasts. I will collect you from the Entrance Hall at precisely half past five. Wear formal dress robes."

"I don't have-"

"Borrow from Draco and ask Miss Parkinson to adjust them," Snape said wearily. "And for Salazar's sake don't wear those boots."

She sent her boots a pitying look. No one understood. Looking back up at Snape, she asked, "Will Riddle be at the gathering?"

"If he is, you'd best behave yourself," Snape warned her. "You will be expected to meet the other candidates, mingle, and eat something

so you don't collapse when they present you to the press following dinner."

"More press," she muttered, grimacing. "I'd better get used to that, I suppose."

"After the feast you and the other eight candidates will be escorted to the Great Hall where you will each be asked to say a few words to those assembled," Snape went on. "Thank the committee for selecting you, characterize yourself in a way that is neither overbearing nor weak-kneed, and whatever you do, don't mention the political aspects of the tournament in any way. Clear?"

"Crystal," she said, sighing. "I'd better get back to the common room, if that's all. Pansy will want at least an hour to fix me." She stood and took a deep breath before smiling gratefully at the man who had done so much for her and, despite his contrary assurances, the world. "Thank you for explaining everything to me, sir. I'll see you at five-thirty."

She left the office secure in the knowledge that, whatever his professed loyalties or obligations, Severus Snape was in her corner. Not many people could say that, she knew.

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The 'private gathering,' it turned out, was a small plate mixer organized in the chamber directly behind the Great Hall. As Snape ushered her into the room and closed the door behind her, Rigel could hear the dull roar of student chatter through the wall that divided them.

A long table of hors d'oeuvres had been lovingly arranged along one wall. She recognized a few of the small dishes, but many of them were foreign to her. Likely a nod at the international nature of the

tournament. With a mental sigh, she turned her attention from the food to the young adults milling about the room. She'd have to interact with them at some point, she reasoned, so there was no sense procrastinating further, no matter how reluctant she was to, as Snape had so derisively put it, *mingle* .

She caught the sea-foam green eyes of a petite girl with brilliant red hair cut to a blunt lob. "So you're the last one," she said, walking over to where Rigel was still loitering by the door to the Entrance Hall. "Hogwarts, I'm guessin'." Her accent was vaguely Scottish, with a hint of something Southern European.

"I'm Rigel." She offered her hand and the redhead took it after an assessing look.

"Antiope," she said. At Rigel's polite blink, she added, "Not my real name, of course. Everyone at Chalcioecus gets a warrior title if they pass their fifth year trials."

"That's in Greece, right?" she asked, despite herself. She thought she'd heard Sirius and James make a joke or two about the Amazonian witches of Chalcioecus. She wasn't sure how much of their speculation held any merit, however. "Is it true it's an all-female school?"

"Of course," Antiope said, shaking her short hair back from her face impatiently. "It's why our graduates are so capable. No romantic distractions, so we are better able to focus on our studies."

"Makes sense," she said politely, though she wondered whether there was an equivalent school for boys in Greece.

"I wonder," a beautiful girl with a veritable curtain of silvery hair trailing behind her sidled up to them and cut in, "if you will find all zes boys... distracting." The girl's French accent was heavy, but the amusement slid through unencumbered.

Antiope scoffed. "Nothing could distract me from winning this tournament. The honor of my school and the Athenai depends on it." The short girl excused herself with a stiff smile and a less-than-friendly glance at the French girl.

"Fleur Delacour," the girl said, extending her hand palm-down. She spoke so quickly that Rigel's brain automatically attempted to translate until she realized the girl had merely given her name.

" *Enchante*," Rigel murmured automatically, bending over the girl's slender fingers belatedly. "I'm Rigel. Beaubatons?"

" *Naturellement* ." Fleur smiled prettily, gesturing to the signature blue skirt and jacket she wore. "And you would be 'ogwarts. We wondered 'oo ze last pureblood was."

"Are you-"

"'alfblood, apparently," Fleur huffed, letting a sneer briefly disrupt her beautiful face. "'onestly, zes regulations are made by old fashioned bigots."

"They are quite restrictive, I've heard," she offered, wondering whether Delacour was referring to the multi-generational requirement or the disqualification of creature blood as pure. There was something not-quite-human about the way the older girl's hair floated about her. "I was going to ask whether you were looking forward to the tournament, though."

She blinked lovely eyes at her. "Ah. Madam Maxime insisted I participate, but when I saw zes ridiculous regulations I was more inclined to win zan before, I admit."

Rigel smiled. "Best of luck, then."

Delacour favored her with a disbelieving look, but nonetheless said, "You as well, Rigel Somezing." She wandered off, starlight-like hair floating after her.

Rigel rewarded herself for having spoken to two people already by drifting toward the food and helping herself to a plate. She gravitated toward the more interesting ones, choosing an empanada, some sort of triangular cheese pita, and what looked like a mottled boiled egg that smelled oddly sweet. She was about to dip a curious spoon into some kind of soup when a deep drawl stayed her hand.

"I wouldn't try the Shkembe if I ver you. It is not to English taste."

She pulled back from the soup and tilted her head at the rest of the table. "What then?" she asked over her shoulder, eyes still on the array of strange things before her.

"The Lozovi Sarmi." A thick forearm reached past her waist to indicate some sort of little green wrap, so she plucked a couple of them and examined the minced insides with interest.

"Thanks," she said, turning around to smile at the boy who'd helped her. She had to hold her breath momentarily to avoid choking at the sight of Victor Krum, of all people, slouching at her shoulder in fur-lined burgundy dress robes. She smiled wanly.

Krum peered at her beneath a heavy brow. "You look familiar. Ver you at the Vorld Cup?"

Her smile widened with an effort. "You must have met my cousin, Harry. We look very similar."

"Are you talking about Harry Potter?" A voice Rigel recognized piped up from behind Krum, confirming what Archie had already told her. Hermione Granger shifted her weight nervously as Krum stepped sideways to include her. "Harry's my best friend," she added, somewhat awkwardly. "I'm Hermione Granger." She seemed to hesitate between Rigel and Krum before offering her hand to Rigel first.

She took care to inject friendly warmth into her voice as she grasped it and said, "Great to meet you, Miss Granger. As you probably

know, I'm Rigel, Harry's cousin. She speaks very highly of you. If you need anything at all while you are here, don't hesitate to ask me. And this is Victor Krum," she went on, automatically introducing the two of them. At Krum's frown, she nearly swallowed her tongue, adding, "to whom I have not been properly introduced. Please excuse my presumption, Mr. Krum."

Krum grunted dismissively. "It happens often. Pleased to meet you, Miss Granger." He bowed over her hand, and Rigel belatedly realized she'd forgotten to do the same. Merlin, she was mucking this up. Now it looked like she didn't afford Hermione the same respect she did Delacour, at least if anyone noticed.

"Just Hermione is fine," the curly-haired witch said, flushing slightly. "We'll all be getting to know one another fairly well, I expect."

"Her-mo-ninny," Krum said carefully. "This is American name?" He was eyeing the AIM crest sewn neatly into her cloak.

Hermione's flush deepened. "No, I'm British, actually. I go to school in the United States because, well, I'm muggleborn." Her chin lifted ever-so-slightly and pride kept her voice firm.

Krum seemed more intrigued than put off by her declaration. "A long way to travel for school, I am thinking," he said. "In Eastern Europe we have separate schools for new bloods. Not so far from Durmstrang. We do not send them over the sea." He seemed to find the idea funny, though it was hard to tell, as his expression didn't change much.

"Are those schools equal to Durmstrang?" Hermione asked. "Because if they aren't, muggleborns might as well cross the ocean. AIM is nice because it's a top-notch education *and* they don't discriminate."

"Everyone discriminates." This comment came from a dark-skinned boy with colorfully patterned robes who was making his way steadily

down the buffet table toward them. His plate was too full to add any more food, so he paused to eat the top layer down before continuing.

"What do you mean by that?" Hermione asked.

The boy had just stuffed a miniature meat pie in his mouth, and he smiled at them apologetically as he chewed. When he'd finally swallowed, he said, "Traveling so very far for school cannot be an easy thing. If a poor child also wanted to go to this school, could he afford it?" As he spoke, a small stone hanging around his neck flickered with a soft orange glow that faded when he stopped. There was a runic sequence engraved in the stone, and after a moment Rigel realized it was a translation charm. His English still held traces of stiltedness, but was altogether easier to understand than either Krum or Delacour had been at first.

Hermione had bitten her lip to think it over. She admitted, "Tuition is quite steep for foreign students. But there are scholarships."

"Not so many as there are poor children, I think," the boy said, still smiling cheerfully. Hermione was openly troubled, and the boy hesitated before biting into a fried puff. "I hope my words do not offend. I am Tahiil Diric Zahi, of Majeerteen."

Rigel and the other two offered their names in return, and Tahiil's face lit with enthusiasm at Krum's surname. "You I know of," he said, beaming. "Will they let you fly in the competition, you think?"

"Not likely," Krum said gruffly. He didn't seem pleased with his notoriety, a feeling Rigel completely sympathized with. She felt worse, suddenly, for not allowing him to introduce himself before.

"Sorry. Fly?" Hermione asked tentatively.

"You do not know?" Tahiil launched into an excited explanation, but Krum cleared his throat pointedly.



"It matters not for this tournament," he said sternly. "Ve will be tested on our magic, not Quidditch."

"Well said." A tall, pale boy with neatly coiffed blond hair joined their group with a self-deprecating smile. "Jacob Owens. Muggleborn. From Ilvermorny. What a diverse little group we are. Makes you wonder if the selection is as impartial as claimed." He chuckled at his own joke, not seeming to notice that no one else found it very funny. His blue eyes scanned the four of them and, against the odds, settled on Rigel. "Black, isn't it?" Owens smirked. "I heard you're the one to watch."

"I can't imagine where," Rigel said, face blank and voice cool.

"Your reputation precedes you," he said, eyebrows raised innocently.

She doubted her reputation preceded her all the way to Ilvermorny. All she said was, "No doubt by the end of the tournament we will all have reputations."

"For better or vorse," Krum agreed darkly.

As Hermione opened her mouth to comment, the door to the Great Hall opened, ushering in sound and light. Riddle stood in the doorway, smiling out at the rest of them. "The public awaits, candidates. Muggleborns first, then halfbloods, and purebloods last. Swiftly, now."

The nine of them gravitated slowly toward the imposing politician. He was bedecked in resplendent blue robes as deep as the night sky that somehow made him look both youthful and wise. His eyes caught Rigel's as she waited for the others to organize themselves into a queue. She turned away casually.

Hermione stood at the front of the line, followed by Owens and Tahil. Delacour was next, with Antiope and a very skinny boy with shaggy black hair. Krum took the lead position for the pureblood group, and

a stoic-faced girl in a beautifully embroidered silk qipao stepped into line behind him, leaving Rigel to fall in at the end.

As Riddle led them into the hall in a stilted form of follow-the-leader, Rigel concentrated on the intricately looping hairstyle on the Asian girl in front of her to keep from having to look out at the sea of gaping faces. Then again, with so many new faces to concentrate on, she doubted anyone would be paying that much attention to her. Thank Circe for small favors.

The Great Hall was much brighter than it should have been on Halloween. Normally it was lit only by the glow of jack-o-lanterns, but tonight countless globes providing additional illumination floated about the ceiling instead. When she saw the press jostling for camera space between the middle two House tables, she understood why.

Riddle led them to stand in a horizontal line before the Head table, separated from the students and the reporters by only a dozen feet. She wanted to glance over at the Slytherin table, to see how Draco was managing the riotous emotions around them. She didn't want to appear nervous or distracted, however, so she settled her face into an expression of serene calm and kept her eyes straight ahead, focused on nothing in particular.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the press, students, professors, and distinguished guests, I present to you... your competitors!" Riddle's voice rose in a dramatic crescendo and the entire hall lapped it up excitedly. Applause rang up to the rafters, so loud Rigel was surprised it didn't blow the hair back from her temple. "Each of these talented, deserving individuals has won a place in the True Triwizard Tournament on their own merit. Tonight, the candidates will introduce themselves to the world, and then... the first test will be announced!"

The students of Hogwarts lost their minds. Roars, stomps, and cheers greeted Riddle's words, and Rigel couldn't help but wonder whether they were truly thrilled by the idea of nine adolescents like themselves risking their lives for months on end, or if perhaps they

would have cheered anything that broke the monotony of the school year, regardless of the level of its insanity.

The mention of the first test did cause her gut to clench uneasily. It was an unwelcome reminder that all of this was real. She was in the tournament now, come monsters or mayhem.

Riddle retreated to the side and gestured for Hermione to proceed first. Out of the corner of her eye, Rigel saw the girl step forward two paces and lift her chin before saying, "I am Hermione Granger. British native, but schooled at the American Institute of Magic, where I am in the Healing Track. I am pleased to be chosen to participate in this tournament and proud to represent muggleborns everywhere. Thank you."

Uncertain applause broke out as Hermione waited patiently for the photographers to finish snapping photos. Rigel joined in the applause firmly and heard the other candidates join in after a moment's pause. Hermione stepped back into line, and Owens stepped up next, flashing a broad smile at the assemblage and even lifting a hand to wave as though the applause had already begun. "Jacob Owens, born and raised in the United States. I attend Ilvermorny, in the Horned Serpent House, and hope to pursue a career in International Relations following my graduation this spring. Winning this tournament would be a great honor, and I am humbled by the chance to compete. Thank you." He bowed upon concluding his remarks, but the degree was overdone and Rigel didn't think he truly understood how it would be perceived. Nonetheless, polite applause won out and Owens, too, stepped back.

It went on in that vein, with Tahiiil cheerfully introducing himself, Delacour proudly proclaiming a quarter-Veela heritage, and Antiope stiffly intoning the honor and glory she intended to win for her school. The final halfblood candidate spoke with a lilt that rose and fell like water over stone, introducing himself as Matheus Sousa. "I am from Brazil, going to Castelobruxo, so this weather I do not love so much, but I look forward to see what else England has to show." His short speech and laid-back grin won him more than a few giggles, and

Rigel doubted the smooth way he tossed his hair back as the cameras flashed was unrehearsed.

Krum stepped forward as Sousa's applause was dying out, and the noise ratcheted up again immediately. He waited for the hall to quiet slightly before saying, "I am Victor Krum, of Bulgaria, representing Durmstrang Institute. It is my honor to demonstrate the strength of my school in the tournament, and I will strive to prove myself equal to the challenges that await."

Rigel found it interesting that he, too, seemed to be more interested in promoting his school than his blood purity. Perhaps he assumed that went without saying, or perhaps he was truly interested in the tournament for other reasons.

The girl beside Rigel waited patiently for Krum's supporters to cease their wild cheering before advancing with demure steps, taking four to everyone else's two. "Good evening. I am called Shang Feiyan." Her voice was soft and melodic, and the way she said her own name was like a brief song itself. "I come from the great Middle Kingdom, where the line of the Yellow Emperor is unbroken for ten thousand years. His Majesty send me as emissary to plant the seed of harmony in foreign soil and reveal the Han splendor to the world." With her right palm clasped over her left fist, she bowed her head, slowly and smoothly, the loops in her hair swinging forward gently as she did. It wasn't until she began sliding backwards that people realized she'd finished speaking and began to applaud again. Rigel waited a few moments to allow her the accolade before stepping forward herself.

For a moment, she blanked. What was there to say, really? She wasn't honored to be participating and she didn't look forward to the challenge. She didn't truly represent anyone, though she supposed she owed the students of Hogwarts something for having, however unwillingly, denied any of them a chance to compete on their own.

"I'm Rigel Black," she said finally, blinking out at the sea of expectant faces. "I'll do my best. Thank you."

She stepped back quickly, despite the raucous cheers and whistles that followed her. Against her better judgment, she let her eyes scan the hall just once, and found a great many students actually on their feet as they shouted and clapped. The Weasley twins had signs. One read, 'We Love Black Magic!' and the other, 'Give 'Em A Black Eye!' She suppressed a snort and turned her eyes to the Slytherin table. Every one of her housemates was on their feet. While they didn't scream as loudly or wave their arms as wildly as the other tables, the Slytherins, to a one, looked proud. She swallowed and felt a little guilty for her underwhelming introduction. When she caught sight of Pansy's indulgent smile and Draco's fond but exasperated expression, she changed her mind. Her house knew who she was. No amount of posturing could change that now.

"Yes, thank you, candidates." Riddle was back at the forefront, smiling with all the charm at his disposal. "And a sincere thank you to our selection committee. It could not have been easy narrowing thousands of candidates world-wide down to just a few worthy individuals. Now that we have our contestants, I shall announce the first trial!" After the requisite applause, Riddle continued, his voice pitched low to elevate the intrigue of the crowd. "In precisely one fortnight, under the full moon, these nine candidates will venture into the Dark Forest and retrieve... a certain item. They will face a plethora of creatures native to the forest, as well as a few *special* additions. Only the candidates who succeed in evading every trap and snare, defeat the creatures they encounter, and return with their prize before the time runs out will prevail."

Murmurs and fearful exclamations met this pronouncement. Riddle looked all too pleased at the reaction. "Come now, you didn't think we'd make it easy, did you?" His amusement found a faint echo in soft chuckles around the hall. Somehow, Riddle made them forget their momentary horror and the tension in the room relaxed noticeably. "One last round of applause for our candidates! Thank you all for your attention this Samhain's Eve. Good evening."

Riddle swept from the hall, the members of the press tripping after him hastily. Dumbledore stood from his seat at the Head table and said, "Students, you are to treat these eight young guests with courtesy and respect while they reside among us. The house elves have been kind enough to prepare four rooms in the staff wing for their stay, and I trust that no student will be found loitering or otherwise trespassing upon their privacy." Rigel thought it was rather astute of him to nip any thoughts of stalking or otherwise spying on the other candidates in the bud at once. "Candidates, welcome to Hogwarts," he went on, his tone much warmer. "While you are excused from your own classes due to the nature of this event, you are welcome to attend any class here that piques your interest. Our esteemed Professor McGonagall will now show you to your chambers and handle any requests or requirements for the duration of your stay."

McGonagall stood from the staff table and made her way toward the Entrance Hall, the majority of the other candidates following hesitantly. Hermione caught Rigel's eye and smiled. She smiled back, even lifted her hand to wave so it was clear to anyone who cared to look that she knew and liked the girl.

The students began to leave themselves once it was clear the excitement had well and truly ended, and Rigel fell in with the Slytherins, trying to pretend she wasn't monumentally out of place in Draco's costly dress robes. Everyone who passed her wanted to shake her hand or clasp her shoulder in congratulations. Though she caught some envious looks, there didn't seem to be any deeply resentful or aggrieved expressions. Maybe, she thought with the smallest amount of hope, this wouldn't be so bad.

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[end of chapter seven].

**A/N** : Thank you again to everyone who reads the story, and a really special thanks to those who have been reading from the very

beginning. I remember each and every one of your usernames and it makes me glow when I see those die-hard readers from back in the PP infancy still checking out the new chapters. For you newer readers: a great warm welcome to you as well! I hope this chapter entertained.

To anyone whose culture feels misappropriated in this last scene, I apologize. I did my best to research the different characters I wanted to include, but if I've got something wrong please feel free to PM me, review, or post in the Discord server about it. Also: I realized after deciding on the age limit that Krum is technically above it, so... I'm waving my magic wand. And he is 17. Sorry canonites.

## Chapter 8

### The Futile Façade:

#### Chapter 8:

The day following Halloween, Rigel was ambushed in her own common room. The perpetrator, a petite blonde girl with soft blue eyes and a no-nonsense expression, barred her way to the common room entrance with the force of her gaze alone. She gave no care to Rigel's protests that she had brewing to do, ushering her instead toward a low-backed couch by one of the fireplaces. Rigel sank slowly into the cushions, despair creeping into her soul. Her ingredients would shrivel in disuse, she insisted, and her knives would get up to mischief if left alone too long. Her cautionary words were met with an unimpressed stare as her tormenter arranged a stack of folders on the table before them. When Rigel suggested that her cauldron might be missing her, Pansy fixed her with an exasperated frown.

"Rigel, this is important. I promise you can go brew when we're finished."

"We?"

"Millie is helping, too," Pansy said. "There she is." She waved the dark haired girl over and motioned for Rigel to make room for her on her other side.

She shifted toward the middle of the couch, feeling very much as though she'd walked into a trap she couldn't see yet. Millicent came armed with yet another stack of folders, which she arranged beside Pansy's. "Are we studying for something I'm not aware of?" Rigel asked, looking blankly at all the parchment before her.



"Yes and no," Pansy said, smiling serenely at her. "These are dossiers."

"Dossiers," Rigel repeated. "On... me?" Morgana, she hoped there didn't exist so much information on her in the world.

Millicent snorted. "On your *competition*, Rigel. Obviously."

"Obviously," she muttered, sighing. She was not going to have time to brew today after all. Not if she wanted to make it to Draco's dueling club later that afternoon as well.

"First up, the other purebloods. They are your biggest competition until the preliminaries are over. Victor Krum you've probably heard of, but don't think his Quidditch ability is the only thing going for him." Millicent pulled the file on top of her pile toward her and opened it. "This is a collection of his stats from last season. Ignoring the ones exclusive to Quidditch, his agility and reflexes are well above average, even for a professional Quidditch player. His training reports all note that Krum is absolutely ruthless when going after the snitch, so we can expect him to be pretty cutthroat in the tournament as well."

"How are you getting this information?" she asked, a bit alarmed. "And *when*? The participants were only announced last night."

"Here and there." Millicent shrugged. "A lot of it is public record. And we've been compiling information on the most likely candidates in each category since the committee began taking submissions."

"I thought the committee's process was confidential," Rigel said.

Millicent cleared her throat, but pointedly did not answer the unspoken question. "In any case, let's look at his academic performance now. Krum is quite gifted at Transfiguration and the Dark Arts, by all accounts. Don't look so alarmed," she added, seeing Rigel's uneasy face. "Dark Arts is what they call Defense Against the Dark Arts at Durmstrang. They do teach the theory and

some practical uses of the Dark Arts to the upper years, but most of the curriculum is just like ours-familiarization and protection against it. Now, Krum is highly favored by his Headmaster, which is likely how he was selected as the Durmstrang representative. That said, his own family has a good deal of influence in Bulgarian politics as well. Got all that?"

Rigel must have nodded without realizing it, as Pansy was quick to move on.

"Next we have Feiyan Shang," Pansy said, picking up a file of her own. "You can read about each of them in more detail tonight, and we'll quiz you at breakfast tomorrow." That sounded like an awful use of her time, but Rigel knew better than to argue with Pansy while she was in the midst of an explanation. "Shang is arguably the most pureblooded candidate in the competition. She might have the purest blood in the country right now, in fact. It's difficult to say, because Chinese records any older than the Qin dynasty are notoriously difficult to verify. Her family claims to date back to the Shang dynasty, of the great Nuxiu's line, and rumor has it she may also be descendent from Qin Shi Huang himself on her mother's side."

Millicent broke in. "No one can prove that, of course, as the ancient wizard went into hiding after faking his death and his descendants lived in obscurity to protect the secrets of their magical heritage."

"Just so," Pansy agreed. "Still, she is not someone you want to offend. Her father is a public figure in the court of the Chinese high mystics. As to her personal skills, we don't know much. Chinese wizards tend to specialize in Herbology, Potions, Runes, and Alchemy, but we're still working to gather information on Shang's particular strengths. There is no established magical school for China, as families tend to train their own sons and daughters exclusively, so we're relying on Millie's international connections and certain other students with foreign affiliations for information on her."

"What about muggleborns?" Rigel asked, frowning. "Do they not get schooled?"

"There is some debate," Millicent said, grimacing back at her. "The Chinese claim there *are* no muggleborns in their country. Some scholars suspect that anyone discovered with magical ability in China who is not of the established lines is either adopted into one or made to... disappear. China is one of the few countries where the muggle government is not appraised of the existence of magic at all, so it's a lot harder to hold their wizards accountable for their interactions with the muggle community."

Rigel felt sickened. If that were true, it meant blood inequality was not only prevalent outside of Magical Britain, but *worse* in at least one place.

"As you know, the next candidate, Fleur Delacour, is one quarter Veela, which is why she was placed in the halfblood category instead of the pureblood. She is one of Beauxbatons' top students, and her motivations for entering likely rest on the promised world tour. She has repeatedly expressed the ambition to travel and learn other languages among her close friends."

"How do you *know* this?" Rigel asked again. "Pansy, tell me true: are you a Legilimens?"

"Legilimency is such a touch-and-go art," Pansy said airily. "People lie to themselves, too, you know. There is little information that careful questioning of multiple reliable sources can't confirm, however. Where was I? Delacour is particularly adept at Charms and Care of Magical Creatures, with a strong interest in Curses and Countercurses that is bolstered by a relatively high level of natural intelligence. Then there is her Veela Charm. It's weak, compared to a fully fledged Veela, but it *will* distract you if you let it."

"Noted." Rigel would keep her Occlumency strong in Delacour's vicinity.

"Now Matheus Sousa," Millicent said. She waggled her eyebrows. "It is currently unclear how he was selected for this competition. He had glowing recommendations in his application package, but according

to a couple of witches I know at Castelobruxo, Sousa is persona non grata there. He's apparently quite gifted, but hardly attends classes. He's some kind of potions prodigy, to hear these two tell it, but they also say he's been repeatedly caught with contraband ingredients and is always causing trouble for the school. Still, you can expect him to be knowledgeable about Herbology and Potions, and he may be at an advantage in the first task, as his school is situated in the Amazon jungle, somewhere in the northern part of Brazil."

"The last halfblood is Antiope, born Aileen Ross, originally from Scotland," Pansy said, reading off the respective file. "Apparently, she's related to Professor McGonagall through the professor's maternal line. McGonagall's grandmother attended Chalcioecus and became one of the Athenai with the name Minerva. That name was passed down to our professor, though she declined to attend Chalcioecus herself. Antiope's school is on an unplottable acropolis in Laconia, and what we know for sure is it's all-female and emphasizes the manifestations of Athena in its teachings."

"Scholar, warrior, maiden," Rigel recited. "I can certainly see the warrior aspect. Antiope is very straightforward and quick to rise at any perceived slight."

"Yes, she's likely extremely competitive," Pansy agreed. "She'll be well-trained in Charms and Transfiguration, and her Dueling will be flawless. We've gathered that Chalcioecus doesn't focus on Arithmancy, Runes, or Alchemy, as those are viewed as male arts and largely emphasized in the equivalent all-boys school in Laconia."

"The competition may not test those subjects in any case," Rigel said thoughtfully. "Charms, Defense, Transfigurations-those are the showy fields, and people will expect the tasks to focus around them."

"True," Pansy allowed. "Now the muggleborns. Millie?"

Millicent frowned at the file in her hand. "Jacob Owens. The other candidates all submitted family trees back several generations at least, so that the tournament coordinators could verify blood status

against public records, but he didn't submit anything for his family. I suppose they figured as a muggleborn it wasn't necessary. His grades are consistently good, extracurriculars an impressive mix of academic and athletic, and those who know him at school say he's well-liked and rather boring."

"So what's the problem?" Rigel asked, eyeing her unsatisfied expression.

"Boring people don't end up in international tournaments, generally," she said, scowling. "I just have a feeling he's too good to be true. I'll keep digging."

"Next is Hermione Granger-" Pansy began.

"Don't," Rigel said firmly. "She's a friend."

"Why should that matter?" Pansy asked, raising her eyebrows.

"It's a competition, Rigel," Millicent reminded her.

"Hermione isn't used to this sort of thing-politics and rumors and people digging into your background for no other reason than to better understand you. If she knew I was doing this, it would make her uncomfortable, and I care if she is uncomfortable."

Pansy's eyebrows managed to climb higher, but she put the file aside without another word and moved on. "The last one is Tahiil Diric Zahi from Majeerteen. At first we thought he was representing Uagadou, but he's not registered as a student there. Millie believes he's likely from one of the smaller villages within the Majeerteen Sultanate, but obviously not actually part of the Majeerteen Clan itself, or he would have received an invitation to Uagadou."

"It doesn't help that Somalis don't keep traditional records with family surnames," Millicent complained. "Just knowing that Tahiil's father's name was Diric and his grandfather's Zahi isn't enough to really pinpoint his origin. As far as abilities, though, he will have been

trained by his village elders if any were magical. Otherwise, he'll be self-taught. It's strange that he'd even have heard about the tournament, not being affiliated with any major magical school and without apparent political connections to pass the word. We'll keep an eye on him as well, just in case."

The two girls looked at her expectantly, so Rigel said, "Thank you for putting all that together. I'm sure it was a lot of work, and I appreciate your help."

Pansy fixed her with stern look. "We *will* be quizzing you. Read the rest of it, Rigel."

She conjured a fabulously insincere smile. "At the very first opportunity."

Millicent laughed. "See, this is why you get sat down like a child and lectured to-because we *know* you won't read any of it on your own."

Rigel gave up a sheepish grin. "I am grateful to have friends who know me so well. I know you guys are working hard to help me succeed. Sorry if I don't seem appreciative."

"We don't need you to be appreciative," Pansy said, eyes fond. "We just want you to survive this tournament. We can't help you once you're out there in the forest, but we can help you prepare. Draco has already written his father this morning, demanding information on the upcoming tasks for you. Edmund is putting together a compendium of magical creatures used in past tournaments similar to this one. Blaise was looking secretive, but I know he's got an idea or two as well. The point is: you're not alone in this."

She felt a warmth in her chest like the sun coming out from behind a cloud. "Thank you," she said, wishing she knew how to convey the depth of her appreciation in a way that wasn't foolish.

Millicent rose, fanning herself sardonically. "Stop, Rigel. You're making me blush."

Rigel laughed. "It's a curse," she told the girl. She helped Pansy collect the stack of folders, but plucked Hermione's out and requested, "Burn this, please. I'm sorry you went to the trouble."

Pansy pursed her lips, but nodded, accepting the folder back while Rigel carried the rest of them toward her dorm room. Draco was sprawled on his four-poster, scrawling furiously on a piece of parchment, ink flying precariously close to his face.

"What did that essay ever do to you?" she asked, amused.

He looked up distractedly, and she saw there was indeed a drop of ink on his cheek. "It's a letter."

"Someone must have offended you grievously," Rigel remarked, eyeing the disheveled handwriting. "It looks like you poked through the parchment in several places."

Draco blinked and scanned the page, scowling. "Damn. I'll have to rewrite it." He pushed it aside with a sigh and stood with a stretch. "Pansy give you the rundown, then? She's been waiting all week for the announcement so she could impress you with her investigatory skills."

"Really?" Rigel frowned down at the folders she'd dumped on her bed. "I'm afraid I could have been less churlish about listening."

"She won't be offended," Draco said, waving off her guilt. "Pansy gets you."

Rigel sort of doubted that, but she did think it was sweet of her friend to try. Now that the folders were dealt with, she gathered her bag once more and was about to walk out of the dorm when Draco stopped her.

"You're not going to your lab now, are you?" He looked quite put out at the idea. "It's the first Dueling Club meeting today."

"I remember," Rigel said, adjusting the strap on her bag. "It isn't for another hour, right?"

"So you were going to brew a potion in the next forty-five minutes?" Draco's voice was dripping with sarcasm. "What are you working on? A Boil Cure?"

She made a face at him. "I was thinking I could at least get the cauldron treated and the ingredients set up--"

"Or you could come with me to set up for the meeting," Draco suggested. His eyes widened entreatingly and the hopeful smile on his face was pure, unregulated warfare.

Rigel felt her shoulders droop. Brewing would have to wait until that evening, it seemed. "Sure, Dray. What are you planning for this one?"

Draco's face was a picture of contentedness as he told her of his plans. He didn't seem entirely sure how many people were going to attend, which was one of the reasons he wanted to get there early. Chances were at least a few people would have trouble finding the place. That, at least, Rigel could help with.

She walked with her friend to the seventh floor, but told him to go ahead inside and get it set up while she watched the door. "I'll make sure no one gets in who shouldn't," she promised. "You gave them all a password, right?"

"Duck Agency," he said, a bit embarrassed. "It was Pansy's idea. Every week it'll be something innocuous or silly that D.A. could stand for."

"Duck Agency it is," Rigel said, smiling. "Do you think I can convince Ron he has to quack to get inside?"

Draco's eyes lit up with humor. "I'll give you a Sickle if you can." He disappeared into the Come and Go Room, and Rigel took up a



station outside. She'd told Draco she was going to practice using her sensing ability to monitor anyone approaching, but in reality she wasn't skilled enough to tell the difference between individual people, yet, so she took out the Marauder's Map and let her eyes roam over the hallways around her.

The first to arrive was Pansy, of course, and she smiled at Rigel as she approached. "Has he worked himself into a nervous frenzy?" she asked.

"If he hasn't rearranged the room three times by now, that boy isn't Draco Malfoy," Rigel said. "Calm him down, won't you?"

"Don't ask me for miracles." Nevertheless Rigel knew Pansy would try.

The Weasleys arrived next, Ron apparently engaged in a furious argument with his older brothers over whether or not Draco was having him on.

"You can walk about all day, but we're telling you, Ron," Fred was saying quietly.

"There is no room in this corridor," George agreed. "We've been over every inch of this castle."

"Well, it doesn't hurt to look again," Ron said. He spotted Rigel loitering and broke into a jog. "Rigel! Tell these two that there really is a... *Duck Agency* up here."

Rigel gave her best mysterious smile. "Only if you say it in Duck."

"What?" Ron's face began to turn red. "Look, is this a joke or not?"

"Quack?" Rigel said, tilting her head in affected confusion. "Quack quack?"

"Uh... quack." Ron muttered weakly, looking entirely certain that he was being pranked.

"Right this way," Rigel said, stepping to the side and gesturing to the nondescript door behind her. The twins had caught up to their brother at this point, but had nothing to say as Ron pushed the door open and revealed the cavernous space beyond.

"Blimey. This is brilliant," he said, flashing Rigel a grin. He disappeared inside and Rigel turned expectant eyes on the other two.

"Are you here for the Duck Agency?" she asked, smiling at their dumbfounded confusion.

"This was not here before," Fred declared.

"Did you somehow conjure a new room inside Hogwarts?" George asked, staring at her.

"What? No. Why do people keep assuming...?" Rigel shook her head with a laugh. "This has been here all along. It's normally hidden, though."

Their faces cleared in understanding. "There's a password?" Fred said excitedly. "Or a secret action? Like the kitchens!"

"Almost," Rigel agreed. She leaned closer and lowered her voice. "I'll tell you the secret, if and only if you promise to use it well."

"We promise," George vowed, taking Fred's hand and placing it over his own heart. "Tell us, oh wise one."

"The room only comes to those who need it," Rigel revealed, quite enjoying herself. "If you have something you require, simply walk past this stretch of wall three times while thinking of what you need, and the Room of Requirement will appear with whatever it is."

Their eyes were like saucers. "It... *changes*?" George sucked in a breath. He and Fred exchanged a glance and they both exhaled. "Wicked."

She bowed them through the doors and resumed her monitoring of the map. Closer to the appointed time, regulars of last year's club began trickling toward her station. Some, particularly the older students like Rosier and Rookwood, were surprised by the presence of a room along a corridor they had walked before, but most simply shrugged it off as one of Hogwarts' eccentricities.

Neville brought Seamus Finnegan, Parvati Patil, and her sister, Padma. Angelina Johnson came with Alicia Spinnet, and Katie Bell brought Cormac McLaggen. Ginny came blazing down the hallway with a harried-looking Michael Corner at her heels, and Rigel couldn't tell exactly what the look the redhead shot her was supposed to convey, but she got the feeling she hadn't planned to bring the Ravenclaw boy. Also from Ravenclaw came Terry Boot and Anthony Goldstein, neither of which seemed entirely certain of their decision to be there as they hesitantly asked about the 'Duck Agency' meeting place.

Cedric Diggory came, accompanied by a skeptical looking Zacharias Smith and Ernie Macmillan. Susan Bones trailed behind them with a nervous Hannah Abbott. All five Hufflepuffs bid her good day, though she noted Smith and Macmillan were not wholly sincere. Diggory hung back and gave her a rueful smile when his housemates had gone through the door.

"Congratulations on being chosen for the tournament, Black," he said. He looked like he meant it, so she smiled and thanked him. "Sorry about the others," he added, ducking his head with a boyish charm. "They were rooting for me, but I've told them you're a good choice, too."

"It's quite all right," she assured him. "I didn't expect to have everyone's support. I'm only a fourth year, after all."

"Age isn't everything," Diggory disagreed. "Good luck."

She thanked him again, and he joined the others inside. She glanced down at the map, thinking that just about everyone she'd expected,

and a few she hadn't, had already arrived. It was nearing the appointed hour, and she was considering leaving her post and asking the room to hide the door when she caught sight of Zhou several corridors over on the map, wandering somewhat aimlessly.

There was no one else nearby on the seventh floor, so Rigel took off at a brisk walk toward the older girl's location. She found her examining a tapestry with a frown. "Zhou," she called, waving the girl over. "Are you looking for the club?"

"Rigel!" She was openly relieved. "Yes. I know you gave me directions, but I can't remember which tapestry I was looking for."

"I'll take you." Rigel led her back toward the Come and Go Room. "It's great you decided to come."

"I really do need the practice," Zhou murmured embarrassedly. "Thanks again for inviting me."

"You're welcome," Rigel said easily. When they reached the room, Rigel sent the Ravenclaw inside and checked the map one last time for any stragglers before slipping into the room and asking it to seal the door behind her.

Draco had created an open hall with a high ceiling. Stacks of cushions stood next to a teaching dummy in the middle of the floor, and the students who'd come to the meeting stood in a loose circle around her friend. Rigel raised her hand and gave him the thumbs up to signal that everyone was present, then joined the circle unobtrusively and watched Draco take charge of the room.

"Now that we're all here, welcome to the Dueling Association. If you've been invited to this meeting, you're either a member of last year's club that was unfortunately disbanded or you've expressed an interest in extracurricular Dueling practice." Draco looked around the room with appraising eyes. "To be perfectly clear, this club is not official, and, if the faculty gets wind of it, will be banned in a heartbeat, so I'm asking everyone here to sign this parchment before

we begin." He held up a roll of parchment so everyone could see. "This is a binding agreement to keep the location and existence of this club a secret unless given permission by myself, Pansy Parkinson, or Rigel Black to divulge it. Everyone will sign it before leaving this room, regardless of whether or not you intend to continue attending club meetings in the future."

There were a few grumbling complaints, but Draco cut them off.

"You were all made aware of this stipulation when you were invited to the club, so there's no use complaining now," he said loudly. "Line up and sign, then we will begin."

The Weasley Twins were the first in line. At Draco's raised eyebrow, George shrugged. "Seeing this place, we totally understand why you want it kept secret. Signing this is well worth learning such a useful secret about the castle."

Their argument proved persuasive, as the others all proceeded to sign the parchment with more or less good grace.

Draco handed the parchment off to Pansy, who tucked it away. "Great," he said, clapping his hands. "For those of you who were with us last year, you know we usually start with stretching and agility drills, then footwork patterns, and finally practice duels. Since there are so many new faces, however, we're going to split the group in half. Experienced duelers who know the basic footwork and are familiar with at least a few structured spell combinations, to this side of the hall; beginners and those less confident in their skills, to the other."

The students began to sort themselves, though there were more among the two dozen or so who self-identified as advanced than there were beginners. Seeing this, Draco grimaced. "All right, those of you in the advanced group who weren't part of the club last year, speak to Ron Weasley about your level of experience. He'll determine which group you start in. Pansy, you're with the beginners. Go easy on them."

Pansy smiled angelically, and Rigel could see the exact moment several newcomers decided to underestimate her. She almost felt sorry for the fools. Almost. Rigel stayed with the advanced group while Draco outlined his plan for the first term. "The idea is to holistically improve everyone's dueling. To do this, I'm going to be evaluating you for the first few meetings based on random pairings. Once I have a good grasp of strengths and weaknesses, I'll determine the matches going forward in order to force people into confronting styles they aren't as comfortable with. Each meeting, we'll learn a new technique, footwork pattern, or spell and I'll ask you to apply it in your duels. If there is anything in particular you want to learn, bring it to me before or after the session and I'll do my best to work it in. Any questions so far?"

"What qualifies you to teach the club?" Diggory asked. His face was friendly, but his eyes flickered to the back of Macmillan's head as he said it, which told Rigel he was probably asking the question on everyone's mind before the younger Hufflepuff could make a snide remark about it.

"In addition to scoring top in my year in last year's Dueling class, I spent all of last year running the club and most of the summer devising lesson plans and studying advanced dueling techniques from around the world." Draco's voice was even as he said this, not irritated or haughty in the least, and Rigel had to be proud of her friend. He'd come a long way from the boy who had provoked Ron into shooting a jelly-brains jinx at him in first year.

"I can vouch for his ability," Rookwood offered. "We improved a lot last year under Draco's tutelage."

Draco kept his expression blank, but the flush of color along his collar betrayed his embarrassed pleasure at the praise. He really could be rather self-conscious, for someone who acted so self-assured, she reflected.

"Excellent," Diggory said cheerfully. "I retract my question and look forward to learning from you."

"Anyone else? No? We'll get started then. Ron, have you got them sorted?" Draco looked to the tall redhead who had his arms folded stubbornly as he stared down his housemate, Cormac McLaggen.

"McLaggen was just about to join the other group." Ron's face was set, but McLaggen seemed to have no intention of doing any such thing.

"I'm not a beginner," he insisted. "Just because I didn't take the class or join your club last year, doesn't mean I don't know anything about dueling. I went to Dueling Camp when I was twelve."

"You need a proper refresher before jumping into the advanced group," Ron told him. "You can move back as soon as Parkinson says so. This is necessary so you don't end up injured, all right?"

"What if I beat Parkinson in a duel?" the older boy demanded. "Then can I stay in this group?"

"Mate, I can barely beat Parkinson in a duel," Ron said, shaking his head. "Trust me, you do not want to do that."

"It doesn't sound like any of you fourth years are qualified to teach this club. Why don't we take a vote and let one of the seventh years take over?" McLaggen looked around for support, but even the newcomers appeared unsure.

"You don't have to stay, McLaggen," Aldon drawled. "And you certainly weren't invited here to insult our club president."

"That's all right, Aldon," Draco said, looking resigned. "Why don't we have a little demonstration, to ease McLaggen's mind?"

"I'm up for it," McLaggen declared.

"No, I wouldn't duel a beginner," Draco said archly. "It wouldn't be fair. I'll duel Ron. Or Pansy if you like. Since you questioned both of their abilities."

McLaggen scowled, but didn't say anything. Perhaps he realized he'd dug himself into an uncomfortable position.

"Duel Black," Zacharias Smith said loudly.

"I'm not an instructor," Rigel protested.

"Black is the Hogwarts champion, right? I'm sure a lot of us are curious as to what he's capable of," Smith reasoned. "And he's in the advanced group, so it should be no trouble for your conscience, Malfoy."

Rigel waited for Draco to refuse, but instead found him looking consideringly at her. She widened her eyes in a mild glare, lest he have any doubts as to her willingness to participate. While he was thinking, other people chimed in.

"I'd watch that!"

"Let's see the champion duel!"

They'd caught the attention of the beginner's group, too, and now Pansy had come over to see what was going on. "Rigel, Draco, are you dueling?"

"Mr. McLaggen has requested a demonstration of my ability to run this club," Draco informed her.

"Well, there's no better test than a duel with Rigel," Pansy said slowly. "He's by far the trickiest of the group."

"Thanks, Pan." Rigel sighed. There didn't seem to be any getting out of it, with Pansy and Draco in agreement. She stretched her arms out as the students backed away from the center of the hall to give them space. She hadn't dueled Draco since the previous spring. He'd spent the entire summer practicing-but then, so had she. If she could remember not to use any of her freedueling tricks, she would surprise him.



Ron stood as mediator, and when Rigel and Draco had exchanged formal bows, he called for them to begin.

Draco sprang backwards, but Rigel darted forward just as fast. Her friend was more comfortable with a ranged exchange, so she would take the duel to close quarters as often as possible. He spun on perfect footwork around her first spell, but she'd anticipated and already sent a silent Incarcerous to the side after him.

The blond boy muttered a severing curse without pausing, and his unhesitant steps took him directly behind her. Rigel pivoted and raised a shield between them just in time for it to intercept Draco's stunner. She dropped it as soon as the spell dissipated and ran forward after Draco's retreating form. He shot two Relashios in an effort to slow her advance, and Rigel darted in a quick zigzag to avoid them. Draco's next spell came at her feet—a tripping jinx—but Rigel launched herself over it in an athletic leap that would bring her within three paces of her opponent. At the apex of her jump, she overpowered a Lumos directly into Draco's face.

He swore and rolled to the side to avoid her follow-up stunner while blindly erecting a shield between them. He held it while wiping at his eyes with his non-dominant hand. Rigel repositioned herself patiently, slowly stalking in a circle around him, and she heard someone mutter, "Merlin's teats, that was fast" from their audience.

Draco shook his head, blinking quickly. "That was cruel, Rigel."

"Buck up, Dray. We're just getting started," she said with a small smile. She knew her friend could do better. Quick as a snake, Draco shot a Reducto so powerful it blasted *through* his own shield before continuing toward her in a dark cloud of sheer destruction. Narrowing her eyes, Rigel charged toward it while projecting a Fortis before her like a battering ram. The Reducto parted like water against her shield, and she saw Draco's eyes widen as he leapt sideways to avoid being knocked backward. Rigel thrust her wand hand forward as she dove after him. She rolled on her back and shoulders, and the Fortis rolled with her.

Draco wasn't fast enough to escape the Bubble of Doom, and the force of her sideways momentum knocked him to the ground. A smattering of shocked laughter broke out around them, but Rigel was too intent on pressing her advantage to enjoy it. She broke the Fortis and fired off three stunners in quick succession. She'd been working with Snape to shave off wand movements, so her spells came faster than ever, but Draco's reflexes had improved, too. He blocked the first two and rolled backwards to avoid the third, springing off the ground with one hand and regaining his feet to a round of spontaneous applause from the spectators.

"You've been practicing your floor work," she commented.

Draco's answer was a Flipendo that Rigel had to bat out of her way with a quick Relashio. He went on the offensive with a series of fast spells, and Rigel was pleased to see Draco's repertoire had expanded in the last few months. Among the ordinary dueling spells to disable he sprinkled charms to distract and hinder. A blast of wind from a concentrated weather charm pushed Rigel backwards several feet before she dispersed it with a Ventus cast in counter-rotation. He used her momentary delay to conjure two paper crows and set them on her with Oppungo.

"Incendio!" She met the birds midway with fire and followed it up with a second, "Incendio," before their ashes hit the floor. At least, she *said* Incendio. Her wand was actually casting an overpowered Flagrate, however, and while a line of fire arched through the air toward Draco, the marking spell wouldn't really hurt him.

Draco didn't recognize the difference in time. His ears heard 'Incendio' and he was casting Aguamenti automatically before he could help himself. Her Freezing Charm met the water on the ground, and an "Accio Draco," was all it took to force her friend forward into it. His feet couldn't find purchase on the ice to resist the Summoning Charm, and he came slipping toward her, right through the line of harmless fire still hanging in the air. Off balance, he shielded instead of attacking, and that was his undoing.

Rigel hit him with a Weightless Charm that attached itself to his shield instead of dispersing against it-only a Depasco could stop a Weightless Charm from taking effect. Her follow-up Flipendo sent Draco shooting upwards like a balloon-up, up he flew until his shield nudged the ceiling and his momentum reversed. He glared down at her from his gently descending bubble, clearly tempted to drop his shield to get rid of the Weightless Charm and risk a nasty fall to the ground.

"Don't do it, Draco," she called, stalking slowly toward him. "I'll stun you as soon as the shield is gone, and I won't cushion your fall."

"Pansy will," he called back, arms folded.

"Interference will cost you the match anyway," Rigel said. She was nearly beneath the agonizingly slow-falling boy-balloon now, and it was the work of few moments to apply a Sticking Charm to the floor where he would land. Draco's shield charm carried him almost lovingly into her trap, which held him fast even as he finally let go of his shield. He tried to get a few more spells off, but with nowhere to maneuver, he was easy to overpower. She caught him with a Petrificus Totalus and disarmed him neatly.

"Winner, Rigel Black," Ron declared, somewhat unnecessarily. The applause was raucous, and most of the students seemed impressed and excited. Good, she thought. They ought to leave Draco be, now. "Good match, you two," Ron added as she returned Draco's wand and they shook hands. "You could have let Draco win, though."

"He'd never forgive me," Rigel said, smiling apologetically at her friend.

Draco shrugged. "I knew when I agreed to the duel that you would beat me."

"Why not duel one of us, then?" Ron asked. "I thought you were trying to prove your leadership."

"A good leader isn't afraid to lose in front of his subordinates," Draco said, tilting his nose up in affected arrogance. After a moment, he broke into a smile. "Also, it was more important for people to believe in Rigel than for them to respect me. Rigel is Hogwarts' champion, after all. This was an opportunity too good to pass up."

Rigel rolled her eyes. "Not you, too. Soon I'll have an entire team of self-appointed public relations experts."

"Draco is correct," Pansy said, joining their huddle. "A lot more of them will support you in the tournament, now. Good job, you two."

"I had no idea you could use the Fortis like a bludgeon," Ron said. "You'll have to teach us that one."

Rigel was about to agree, when a frisson of awareness behind her caught her attention entirely. She snapped her left wrist and palmed the knife in her sleeve, smoothly raising it in the same motion to block the spell that had been shot at her back without looking. All conversation stopped as Rigel slowly turned her head to see Fred staring at her with wide eyes.

"Uh... It was only a Glow Charm," the redhead stammered. "To make you look saint-like. George bet me you wouldn't block it, and I thought it would be funny..." He trailed off uncomfortably.

Rigel looked down at her now-glowing knife and smiled, shaking off her tension. "No worries. I hope you didn't bet anything big, George."

George shook his head with an amazed whistle. "I wasn't that sure you'd miss it. Some reflexes, Rigel."

She grinned. Her sensing ability *had* been coming along of late. She was almost ready to begin free brewing, but had to keep it up unconsciously for an entire week before Snape would be satisfied. She could feel all the magic in the room, even though she couldn't quite distinguish between individual people or spells unless she concentrated hard.

"Rigel, why are you carrying that?" Pansy said, frowning. "If you use it in the tournament during a duel, you'll be disqualified."

"Better disqualified than dead," she said reasonably. "Anyway, the duel was over at that point."

"Still," Draco said, eyeing the knife thoughtfully, "I'll ask my father about procuring some gauntlets for you. They're considered defensive, so they should be allowed."

"My knife *is* defensive," she offered. Not one of her friends seemed impressed with that logic. She tucked it away, and looked around. Some of her classmates had alarmed expressions on their faces, but mostly they just seemed intrigued. She suppressed a sigh.

Diggory was the first to break the awkward silence that had fallen over the room. "Well, I for one am ready to learn some Dueling. Satisfied McLaggen?"

"They seem to have some idea what they're doing," the Gryffindor boy said, shrugging. "Let's get on with it, then."

"If that isn't a glowing 'thank you for the demonstration, Malfoy,' I doubt I've ever heard one," Diggory said happily.

Draco snorted. "All right. Beginners back to Pansy. You're going to start with the Colouris exercises, and no more arguments. Nobody gets good at dueling overnight. Advanced group-get stretching."

Rigel rolled her shoulders and winced as a bruise made itself known on her back. She must have landed harder than she realized when she was rolling. She poked at it gingerly. A tap on her shoulder made her look over to see Zhou standing hesitantly beside her.

"Did you injure yourself? I can heal it, if you like," the dark haired girl offered.

Rigel grimaced. "It's just a bruise, I think. I'll get to it later."

"It's harder to heal your own back," Zhou pointed out. At Rigel's reluctant expression, she added, "It won't take but a minute. I can do it right through your robes."

"Thanks, Zhou," she said quietly. "I don't think it's serious, though. I appreciate the offer."

"Oh, all right." The Ravenclaw smiled weakly and headed back over to the beginner's group, where Pansy was explaining the Colouris-Eradere game they would be focusing on for a few meetings.

"Why did you invite her?" Draco asked. He eyed the back of Zhou's head with dislike as he rotated his ankles one after the other.

Rigel frowned at him. "She needs extra practice in Defense, and you have to admit having another Healer around is a good precaution. With the tournament, I won't be able to make every meeting. Zhou is a good Healer."

"*Zhou?*" Draco scowled. "Is that some kind of pet name?"

"What? No. It's how she says her name, that's all," Rigel told him. She wondered why he was so annoyed at the girl's presence. She wasn't the only new face by any stretch. "Give her a chance. You were skeptical about Ron, too, at first. Now he's your best sounding board, isn't he?"

"This isn't about Ron," Draco grumbled. He left the topic alone, though, and went on with his stretches in silence.

Rigel mentally shrugged off his peculiar irritation. He was probably still a bit sore that she'd beat him in the duel. As Draco walked the group through their first combination, she combed over the duel in her mind, mentally noting where she would have done something different if she'd had more time to consider her reactions. All in all, she was impressed with Draco and not too disappointed in her return to formal dueling in light of her summer focused on free dueling. Granted, a couple of those moves hadn't been *strictly* in the realm of

traditional formal dueling, but she hadn't bent the rules too far. At least no one could say her style wasn't unique.

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Toward the end of the first week in November, Rigel ran into Hermione Granger in the dungeons, of all places. The curly-haired girl seemed to be cutting haphazardly across the less used corridors, and if Rigel wasn't on her way back from her lab she doubted anyone would have come across the girl.

"Lost or exploring?" Rigel asked, smiling as Hermione whirled and let out an exasperated sigh.

"You shouldn't sneak up on people," she admonished, tossing her curly hair back from her face in an irritated motion. "As it happens, I am lost. I'm looking for the Library. I asked someone near the Entrance Hall for directions, but I'm beginning to suspect he lied to me."

Seeing as she was in the dungeons, Rigel was inclined to agree. "I'll take you," she said. "Sorry if some of my schoolmates aren't being hospitable."

"It's to be expected," she said evenly. After the barest of hesitations, she fell into step beside Rigel. "Thank you for showing me the right way. What were you doing down here?"

"The Slytherin common room isn't far from here," Rigel told her. "I have a private lab that I use for extracurricular research, as well, and it's just back that way."

"The school lets you brew unsupervised?" Hermione's eyebrows shot up. "That would never happen at AIM."

"Professor Snape makes an exception for me, as I've been excused from regular Potions lessons," she explained.

"Harry did say you were quite gifted at Potions as well," Hermione murmured. "I hear Professor Snape is a world renowned Potions Master, so I suppose he would recognize talent when he sees it. I was thinking of attending a few of his classes, but I'm not sure how our syllabi compare in that subject. I may be behind the other fourth years."

"To be honest, I wouldn't attend Potions class here if I were you," Rigel said, a smile tugging at her lips. "Professor Snape *is* world class, but he isn't exactly friendly. You'd learn more reading his work for publication rather than sitting through his classes. Mostly he spends them trying to prevent the students from blowing themselves up."

"That's a rather harsh denouncement of your classmates' ability," Hermione commented, sounding disappointed.

"Not at all." Rigel smiled reassuringly. "My classmates are perfectly average in Potions. The curriculum here includes a great many more temperamental brews than are taught at other schools, however. Snape thinks the most important thing to teach people who probably won't be brewing potions for a living is how dangerous potions are, so they don't accidentally hurt themselves later in life trying something unfamiliar. Did you know that since he's been the Potions Master here, the average rate of potions-related deaths in magical Britain as a whole has gone down? Specifically in adults who attended Hogwarts after 1981."

Hermione looked amused. "You admire him greatly."

"I do," she admitted. "He's my mentor, but more than that, he's an exceptional academic in a number of fields. I'd be happy to recommend some of his best articles if you have the time to read them."



"I'd appreciate it," Hermione agreed, looking cheered at the prospect. "If Potions wouldn't be helpful, what classes should I attend? I was thinking History would be interesting, as I don't doubt a different perspective is offered at an all-pureblood school like this one."

Rigel winced. "History might not be a great subject, either. It's taught by a ghost, currently, and he rarely strays from the textbooks that were assigned to the course when he died."

Hermione looked vaguely horrified. "You don't learn any modern history?"

"Most of the old families emphasize history pre-Hogwarts," Rigel said, shrugging. "And the OWLs are dated enough that it doesn't really impact test scores. If you're looking to get the most out of classes here, I recommend Transfiguration and Charms. McGonagall, the Transfiguration professor, was trained by Dumbledore himself. She's an Animagus, you know."

"Really? I've never met one," Hermione said, eyes wide. "I'd very much like to meet her. And Charms, you said?"

Rigel nodded. "Flitwick was a dueling champion in his day, and most of his ability in that arena has to do with his complete mastery of Charms. Another good one might be Defense, since you're in the tournament and all. Professor Dawlish is an Auror, and he has a habit of shooting sudden spells at his students to hone our reflexes- and to make sure we're paying attention."

Hermione grimaced. "That sounds... instructive."

"It's more harrowing than anything, but I have noticed an improvement in my reaction time over the past month. What else?" Rigel thought aloud as they climbed the main staircase. "The Healing class will be open to you, of course. Madam Pomfrey would love to have you. The fifth year class meets Friday mornings, so you should come then. Do you take Runes or Arithmancy? Magical Creatures or Divination?"

"I've looked into Runes and Arithmancy on my own," Hermione said, "But the Healing track doesn't allow a lot of time for unrelated extracurriculars."

"You might try those, then," Rigel suggested. "I can give you the notes from last year if you want to attend the fourth year lessons with us. I don't take Creatures myself, but I've heard the professor this year is very knowledgeable. There are a lot of unique resources at Hogwarts, so don't hesitate to take advantage of them."

"I was looking forward to seeing the Library," Hermione admitted, smiling sheepishly. "It's supposed to be the best collection in Europe."

"That is what anyone who attended Hogwarts will tell you," Rigel said with a laugh. "I'll let you decide for yourself. Here we are."

She gestured to the large doorway and Hermione beamed at the sight of the brass sign hanging above it. "Thank you! Do I need a card to check out a book?"

Rigel shook her head. "I'll show you how to sign one out. Madam Pince is the Librarian, and she inspects every book that goes in or out, so don't ever damage one if you value your life."

Hermione looked vaguely offended. "As if I would."

Rigel led her into the Library and gave her a short tour of the different sections. Then she took out a spare piece of parchment and sketched a quick map for the girl. "This is the best route from your rooms," she said, drawing an arrowed path. She added the Great Hall, the Transfiguration, Defense, and Charms classrooms, and the Hospital Wing for good measure. She handed it over, saying, "If you ever need anything, stop someone in a green tie and tell them Rigel Black asked to see you. They'll find me for you without much fuss. If you're really interested in the pureblood perspective on modern history, I recommend simply asking people. The ones in blue ties are

Ravenclaws-house of the intelligent and curious. Your average Ravenclaw is always up for a solid academic discussion."

Hermione's smile was small, but clearly heartfelt. "Thank you, Rigel. You've been a great host."

"It's no trouble at all," she assured the girl. "I'll see you around."

Rigel left the Library with a feeling of satisfaction. Archie would be pleased with her for looking after his friend. She would subtly inquire as to who had tried to trick Hermione into traversing the dungeons alone, as well. That sort of prank was likely just petty mischief, but given certain Slytherin inclinations in regards to muggleborns, it could have gone much worse for the girl if someone else had found her first.

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She only had two weeks to prepare for the first task, and by Thursday evening she thought she ought to at least go down to the Forbidden Forest and practice acclimating her senses to it again. Now, more than ever, it was vital that she get past what had happened to her there.

Rigel approached the forest as the sun was just beginning to sink below the treetops. The dark wood seemed to reach out toward her even as she moved toward it, touching some part of her soul that sent a shiver down her spine. She gritted her teeth against the feeling. *I am not afraid of a dead man*, she told herself firmly. *Peter Pettigrew can't hurt anyone now.*

When she reached the outermost trees themselves, however, she found her feet unable to carry her further. At first, she thought unbiddable panic had clawed its way into her, but soon realized the problem was not in her mind, after all. An invisible barrier preventing

her from moving any further had somehow been erected at the edge of the woods. She stretched out a hand along it, searching for an edge that would indicate a localized shield, but the barrier met her in every direction. A ward, then.

"They won't let anyone in," an accented voice drifted toward her through the fading light. She cast out her sphere of magical awareness warily and sensed a presence moving toward her along the tree line. A few moments later, she saw Matheus Sousa strolling in the shadows, one hand trailing along the invisible ward and the other tucked into his pocket. He stopped beside her with a wry grin. "They don't want us looking."

Rigel had to admit it made sense. The tournament organizers wouldn't like anyone seeing what they'd prepared before the night of the task. "We're to go in blind, then," she remarked, sighing. "I don't like surprises."

"Surprises, I don't mind," Sousa said, eyeing the forest through his shaggy hair with something like wistfulness. "I came to get some *Salvia* . It grows here, no?"

She blinked. *Salvia* was a species of mint that could mean many things, from common sage to chia, but most of it wasn't native to Scotland. "I suppose it could, but you would have had to go fairly far into the forest to find it. I've never seen any."

"Ah." His handsome face closed in disappointment and he ran a hand through his thick, dark hair. "I will look another place."

He started to walk away, but Rigel said, "Wait. I probably have a little, if you want it."

Sousa's eyebrows rose. "Really?"

She rummaged into her bag for her potions kit. "What type of *Salvia* are you looking for? Clary? Danshen?"

"Not sure the English name," Sousa said, cocking his head at her with interest as she found the correct sub-compartment in her kit. "Very tall plant, with big, green leaves. Not many flowers. Used for seeing... seeing things."

"Salvia Divinorum?" she guessed. That was the only type of sage she knew to be used in Scrying Potions. "I have that." She pulled it out of the undetectably expanded compartment and examined the bundle closely. "I bought this a while ago, but it looks all right."

She passed it to him and a crooked smile overtook Sousa's face. "You always have plants in your pocket?"

Rigel secured her kit once more with a slightly embarrassed grimace. "I'm a potioneer, and I've learned it pays to be prepared. Are you going to brew some kind of Seer's Solution for the task?" She had heard that such brews were useful for opening the inner eye, but she'd never tried it herself.

"Something like that," Sousa said, looking amused at her still. "Thank you, Mr. Black."

She let out a laugh at that. "Just Rigel is fine. Good luck in the first task, Mr. Sousa."

"Matheus, please, and good luck to you," he said, bowing smoothly to her before heading back toward the castle.

When he'd gone a fair distance, Rigel called, "*Treessslider? Isss that you?*" She'd felt what she thought was her friend waiting within the sphere of her sensing ability for most of her conversation with Sousa.

" *The ssstranger is gone, Ssspeaker?*"

" *Yesss, thank you for waiting,*" she said, smiling when the snake wiggled right up to the barrier and bumped against it agitatedly. "*You can't get out either?*"

*" I am trapped here with all the otherssss," Treeslider complained.  
"How will you give me a mousse?"*

His priorities never ceased to amuse her. Still, he was right. She couldn't give him the one she'd brought. *" How would you like a live mousse thiss time?"*

Treeslider expressed great interest in that idea, so Rigel took out her wand and whispered, "Accio mouse." She didn't put much power behind the spell, but several mice still zoomed out of the forest and bounced against the barrier between her and the trees. Treeslider was quick to neutralize them before the mice regained their wits, and the green snake chortled in a satisfied hiss over his spoils.

*" Ssspeaker isss too kind,"* he said gleefully.

She favored him with an indulgent smile. *"You mentioned 'otherssss' before. Ssso there are new inhabitantsss in the foresst?"*

*" Many new creaturesss,"* Treeslider agreed. *"And trapsss. Metal and magic, ensssnaring thossse that ssstray too closse."*

That was interesting. *"Can you tell me what kind of creatures?"* she asked, a slow smirk blooming across her face. She really did hate surprises.

The snake hissed in wordless agreement as his coils tightened around his dinner. *"I have ssseen a manticore, two sssnallygastersss, a quintaped, and sssmelled a troll,"* Treeslider told her. *"The ssstupid runessspoors ssspeak of Sssphinx and Chimera. Ssseveral ssspidersss are alssso trapped, and the thesstralsss, too. Then there isss the dragon."*

*" A dragon?"* Rigel found herself releasing a wordless hiss of frustration. She did not want to face another dragon in this lifetime. *"Did you sssee what kind?"*

*" Sssmall and fassst,"* the snake revealed. *"And rude."*

*" Naturally," she said on a sigh. "Thank you, Treessslider. You've been a great help to me."*

*" Always pleasssed to help, Ssspeaker."*

She considered the snake, an idea forming. *"Would you mind helping me again sssoon?"*

*" Of coursse."* The snake looked up at her with something like interest in its bulbous eyes.

*" On the next full moon, meet me near the treeline. There will be otherssss around, but do not be afraid to approach me. I will need your help navigating the foressst that night."* Rigel spoke slowly so that the snake would understand and remember. *" Until then, watch and lisssten to all happeningsss inssside thisss barrier. Sssniff out the trapsss you ssspoke of and remember their location. Take note of any new creaturesss and remember. Can you do that for me?"*

*" Yesss, Ssspeaker. I will be your eyesss and earsss,"* Treesslider said gravely. *"When you come on the full moon I will ssseek you and assssisst."*

*" You will not hunger for miccce ass long ass I resside here, "* she vowed. Rigel couldn't help but feel a sense of satisfied accomplishment as she bade farewell to the snake and made her way back to the castle. It was a little unfair of her to have an early advantage in the task, but she had promised to do her best, and that meant using all resources available to her, didn't it? Treesslider would be useful in more than one way, she mused. His presence might just be the steadying reassurance that kept her from having a breakdown in the middle of the forest. Surrounded by dangerous creatures. At night. Rigel grimaced. Perhaps she would brew a potion to help her see in the dark. Snape would likely have a good recipe, and if not... well, she hadn't taken her invisibility cloak to the restricted section for some time.

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The week before the first task found her in lab three once more, but Snape was not interested in brewing with her. All of his attention was on the upcoming task, and none of Rigel's assurances that she had it in hand made an impact on his single-minded focus.

"If you die in this task it won't *matter* if I teach you to freebrew," he snapped at her when she complained that she didn't want to go over physical shields again.

"If I die without learning to freebrew I shall haunt you without mercy," she muttered with a sullen scowl. She was supposed to be learning *potions* from her mentor, not the various viable shields recommended when faced with an Acromantula.

"Do *not* take this lightly," Snape insisted. "What shield will hold against the fist of a forest troll?"

"None of them for long," she said. Trolls were incredibly strong, and it was always better to simply out-run one or trick it somehow.

"And a quintaped?" her Head of House pressed.

Rigel blinked, then frowned. "What makes you think there would be a quintaped in the forest?" Struck by suspicion, she cast her mind over the creatures Snape had mentioned in the last hour. A Manticore, a chimera, and a thestral had all come up in his 'comprehensive overview.' He *knew*, she realized with incredulous annoyance. Somehow, Snape knew what the creatures in the forest were. "Did Riddle tell you to cover these creatures with me?" she demanded, outrage dawning slowly.

Snape's eyebrow rose with slow contempt. "Why would you imagine such a thing?"



"Maybe because everything you've gone over with me is a recent addition to the closed off portion of the Forbidden Forest," she said, drawing herself to her full height. It wasn't enough to come close to Snape's height, but it gave wind to her indignation. "You're *cheating* for him!"

To her surprise, her professor merely smiled at her accusation. "So you've discovered the information for yourself? Good, then there's no need for pretense. We must prepare you for an encounter with each potential creature."

Rigel knew her face was mutinous. "I don't need Riddle to spoon feed me," she growled. "Did it not occur to you two that I could do this on my own?"

Snape sneered at her. "It matters not how you survive, only that you do, Rigel. I will see you prepared."

"It isn't fair to the others," she protested. It was a weak argument. The tournament would never be fair, and all of it would be for nothing if she didn't win, regardless of how it pricked her pride and her conscience to accept the sort of help Snape offered.

"All staff members have been instructed to assist any candidate who asks them. Minerva for one has already taken the Athenei and the muggleborn girl under her wing," Snape informed her. "As you've managed to come by information on the forests' newly resident population honestly, I fail to see a difference in my preparing you for the very real eventualities you are to face."

Rigel's frown remained, but she felt a sigh escape her. If Snape was right, the others were getting help, too, and no matter Riddle's intentions, she had discovered which creatures she'd have to deal with on her own. It would be the height of foolish obstinacy to refuse her Head of House's help at this point. "Fine." She ran a hand through her bangs agitatedly. "I'm mostly worried about the dragon, to be honest, so tell me how I should go about defeating a Peruvian Vipertooth."

"A *what?* " Snape's already chalky complexion whitened further.

It was Rigel's turn to raise her eyebrows at him. "So Riddle didn't tell you everything." She didn't believe for a moment that Treeslider could be mistaken about the presence of a dragon in the forest. "In addition to the ones you've already mentioned, there's the dragon, two snallygasters, and at least one Sphinx. Plus several traps, the nature of which I am not certain."

The potions master swore darkly. "Snallygasters have impenetrable hides and their talons will slice through almost anything. If you see one, I suggest you distract it-they're unhesitatingly inquisitive."

"And the dragon?" Rigel reminded him. "A venomous dragon, at that?"

"Avoid it at all costs," Snape said lowly. His eyes burned with anger and something like worry, she thought. It softened her annoyance. "Even you cannot hold a shield against dragon fire indefinitely."

That was heartening. Not that she wasn't aware of that fact after her encounter the previous year. "Do you think the Ministry would approve a special apparition license for me?" It would be nice to have a last resort, considering how many of the creatures in the forest could maim her given half a chance.

"You cannot apparate on Hogwarts grounds," Snape reminded her, eyes narrowing. "Even if you could learn in the next six days."

"No telling how far into the forest we'll have to go, though," she pointed out wearily. "They could put whatever we're seeking well past the wards, if they wanted."

"Let's focus on tracking and hiding, Rigel. If escape is your only option, I'd advise bringing a broom." She couldn't tell if he was joking.

"Are we allowed brooms?" she asked.

He snorted. "If you are not strictly prohibited them, you would do well to consider it."

"Noted," she said, smiling slightly. It wouldn't be much good for out-flying a dragon in a dark forest, but if things did get hairy, she could always go up and out. Then she remembered the barrier. Her face fell. "The ward keeping all the creatures in has to go over the top of the trees as well," she said. "Otherwise the ones with wings would have flown out by now."

"Or else they are chained down," Snape mused.

"Like Pettigrew's dragon," she agreed, grimacing. "That was only an adolescent. I'd hate to be the committee member in charge of securing a fully grown breed to the earth."

"Do not pity your enemies," Snape advised her.

Rigel's nose wrinkled. She didn't like the idea of having enemies. Most of the last few years had been geared toward avoiding that, though she had to admit her track record had room for improvement. "A broom, then," she said. "Anything else?"

Snape's dark eyes appraised her for a long moment. "Have you considered an alliance?"

"Team up with one of the other contestants? It would have to be a halfblood or muggleborn," she said slowly. "Just for the first few tasks you mean?"

"The only ones you are directly competing against until the final round are Mr. Krum and Miss Shang," Snape affirmed. "Anyone else may be receptive to a helping hand, especially considering you are the only one familiar with the forest."

"And I know what creatures are inside," she added. "Still, would I be in violation of the vow if I helped another candidate?"

"An alliance with a halfblood or muggleborn in this task does not impact your odds of being chosen the pureblood champion and advancing in the tournament. Such a move may in fact increase your odds of succeeding. That said, it may be prudent to have an alternate plan, should your blood begin to boil." Snape's voice was light, almost unconcerned, but she could see the sardonic anger still burning behind his impassive features. Her Head of House had not come to terms with her agreement with Riddle just yet.

Rigel inclined her head. "All right. I'll think about that, too. Now can we start freebrewing?"

Snape favored her with a doubtful sneer. "Have you maintained the sphere of awareness for an entire week?"

"Five and a half days," she said, widening her eyes and allowing a hopeful smile to cross her features. "It would have been seven, but I brewed some Dreamless Sleep that ended up much stronger than intended and accidentally knocked myself unconscious the night before last. Now I'm back to two days straight."

"Why are you taking Dreamless Sleep?" Snape asked. His head was cocked in a way that indicated dangerous levels of interest in her answer.

"I... just have been," she said, dropping her eyes to the side in a show of indifference.

He growled. "*Still?*"

"Not a full dose-well, except for when I over-brew it accidentally. Just a little, to take the edge off my subconscious." She glanced up at his forbidding expression and pressed her lips together in annoyance.

"Nowhere near addictive frequencies. I'm *fine*."

"You should not be going back into that forest," he spat, furious enough to begin pacing the small lab in open agitation.

"That wasn't my doing. Riddle is testing me. He wants to see if I'm still broken, right? Well, I'm not." She fought against the urge to grind her teeth and settled for lifting her chin stubbornly. She needed the Dreamless Sleep to stay rested for the competition. She had too many things to do during the day to waste her hours in sleep-deprived lethargy. It was times like this she missed her time-turner, despite the shiver that the mere thought of the glittering device sent down her spine.

"Try not to undo all the work that went into repairing you in one night," Snape suggested. His voice positively frothed with a roiling venom.

Rigel smiled sweetly in response, though there was acid dripping behind her lips that burned down her throat into her stomach. It pooled there, a fire of resentment that she refused to give voice to. He made it seem as though she'd asked to be kidnapped or strong-armed into a tournament of dubious intent. Left to herself, she doubted she'd ever go more than a few feet into the forest again. "I'll do my best," she promised dryly.

"Go practice your remote sensing." Snape's scowl did not indicate that he found her dissemblance amusing.

She bowed with an unnecessary flourish. "As milord bids."

Rigel could feel the daggers of his glare following her into the corridor, but she didn't have the wherewithal to soothe her professor's ruffled feathers at the moment. Instead, she had a date with a megalomaniacal piece of aluminum oxide.

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Her consciousness barely had time to fully manifest into the icy wind of her mindscape before Dom folded the mental space around her

and brought her into the cabin-like interior of her mountain. The ceilings looked higher, and various magical creatures of disparate origins hung frozen in intricate taxidermied states of motion amidst the rafters. A black bear stared sightlessly down at her from the nearest beam, its mouth agape in silent, teeth-filled fury. A fire roared cheerfully in the fireplace, which was now framed by a glorious array of stones, some suitable for such construction and others, like an enormous hunk of uncut diamond, too ridiculous to contemplate overlong.

The wood floor shone with fresh wax as she made her way to the pair of chairs-more thrones, now, with great, arching backs of interwoven branches. She looked around for any sign of golems, but either Dom had been smart enough to hide them or he'd envisaged ever-shining floors.

"How have you been?" she asked politely as the construct pushed in her chair. He looked the same, a porcelain doll that resembled her current physical form only vaguely. Perhaps she ought to update his shell, to better reflect her current appearance. The only reason he looked that way was to fool intruders, after all.

"Busy," Dom said, smiling slightly as he claimed his own seat and began carefully pouring tea. "I've run through all the magic you gave me the last time you visited."

She'd decided to go about having him comb through her magic by only giving him access to a portion of it at a time. As long as he didn't have more than a fifth of it at once, she didn't think he'd be able to cause her any trouble she couldn't handle. She leaned forward, ignoring the steaming teacup in front of her for the moment. "What have you found? Anything?"

"You were right." He fixed her with a level stare. "At first it was hard to see, but after some experimentation I noticed that the foreign magic you suspected was just a little slower to react when provoked than your own, vigorously responsive core."

She frowned. "What does that mean?"

He stood. "I've collected it here." He plucked a crystal flask from the mantel and held it before her eyes with two fingers. There was a cold blue fire flickering at the bottom, almost writhing in the firelight. "At first it was invisible, stretched thin within your core and for all intents bonded with your own magic. If I do this-" The construct thrust his hand toward the vial and a flare of power reached out from him toward it. For a moment, the blue fire did nothing, but then it lashed against the side of the bottle without warning. The crystal shook, but held. Dom grinned at her over the flask. "Your magic doesn't hesitate. It reacts immediately to any stimulus, while this blue fire always goes still before striking back."

"Like a snake," she muttered, frowning at the creepy little ball of fire.

"Once I could discern the difference, I began separating the two. When this magic is detached from yours, it tends to stick to itself. I also lose all control over it once it's no longer merged with your core," he explained, shaking the bottle a little. The flames crawled from one side of the container to the other in a strange parody of pacing. "This is essentially useless to you, now. You can't use it for anything, but it can't exert any influence over you, either."

She let out a slow breath. "Thank you. Do you think you can separate the rest of it?"

"With time," Dom said, nodding. He went to place the flask back on the mantel but Rigel shook her head.

"Lock it away, please." She didn't want that stuff just lying around. Dom shrugged, but did place the bottle inside a polished wood cabinet. "Thank you," she said, meaning it. "I'll get you a new section of core to work with before I leave." She still didn't know what the magic had been intended to *do*, but she felt better having part of it isolated.

She picked up her teacup and sniffed at it, amused to find it still just as warm as when he'd poured it. The tea felt entirely solid sliding down her throat, but in a way that was almost more strange in the mental plane than the illusory impression of tea had been the last time she visited. "This is good."

"It is acceptable," he agreed, sipping at his own cup. "Now, what fresh problems have you for me today?"

She scowled at him. "I don't need you to handle all of my problems."

"Only some of them, I know," he said soothingly. The amusement in his dull grey eyes wasn't surprising, but the concern that underlined it was. "Well?"

Rigel sighed. "There's this tournament," she admitted. "I have to participate." She began an explanation that sounded even more convoluted out loud than it did in her head. Dom listened patiently, but when she came to the vow he scoffed.

"You should not make such deals with your enemies. Nothing you could gain will be worth helping him to achieve anything." Dom's foot tapped restlessly as his gaze floated toward the ceiling in thought. "This tournament will attract prestige, however, and give you a chance to prove your worth on an international level. You could recruit many followers, if you make a good enough showing."

"I am not interested in followers," she said firmly. "I'm only doing this so that Riddle will stop legislating against non-purebloods."

"No harm in collecting multiple birds from a single stone's throw," Dom said archly. "I'm only thinking of your future."

She groaned. "I'd rather you focus on my present. I don't suppose you have any advice for facing a real Sphinx?"

Dom grimaced. "Almost nothing on this earth is worth coming between a Sphinx and her treasure. What are they offering the



rabble in exchange for competing in this death trap?"

Rigel laughed. "The usual. Money. Fame. A magical staff of Zumez that supposedly amplifies power but is probably mostly decorative."

Dom choked on his tea. "The Rod of *Zuriel*? " He stared at her, entirely aghast. "They're giving *that* hunk of self-important rock to the winner? Why not simply kill them and enslave their will in the spectral plane right off? It would certainly involve less oration."

She stared at him. "Are you saying... you know the Rod of Zuriel?"

Dom rolled his eyes. "Not hardly. I've crossed paths with it once or twice, and I *don't* relish the memories."

She had a disturbing thought. "Are all large gemstones sentient?"

He ignored her. "You are going to win this tournament, correct?"

"I think Riddle means me to," she said, suspicious of the smile blooming across his face. It worried her when Dom was too pleased. "But seriously, are gemstones above average receptive to magical sentence for some reason?"

Dom ignored her, too busy smirking over his tea. "Excellent. Just marvelous." He started laughing, but caught himself with a cough and simply smiled at her innocently. She was not fooled. "I mean, how wonderful. Will you destroy its physical form as well?"

"I don't have any solid plans for it," she said with a frown. "Why?"

"No reason, just curious," Dom said, still smiling. "Now, you asked about Sphinxes. Do not attempt to cross them physically. They will do anything to guard what they've been assigned to protect, which is what makes them such excellent servants. Unfortunately, they have this penchant for riddles that you can use to your advantage..."

They spent the rest of her time in the mindscape discussing all the riddles Dom had ever heard, but Rigel didn't forget his keen interest

in the Rod of Zuriel. It looked as though she'd have to add that artifact to the list of things she needed to research after all. The very last thing she needed was to win the tournament and wind up with another Dominion Jewel on her hands.

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Five days before the first task, Rigel came across Hermione in the Library. The bushy brunette stood cross-armed at the bookshelf of Healing tomes, scowling at something only she could see.

"Need help finding something?" Rigel asked. Hermione started a bit and flushed at Rigel's pleasant expression.

"There's no copy of Henderson's Intermediate Approaches to Magical Maladies," Hermione said, gesturing to the stacks with a frustrated hand motion. "I have an essay on diagnosing modern magical mishaps, but no reference material to work with."

Rigel nodded in understanding. "The Hogwarts Library is wonderful, but it isn't as robust in Healing as it is in other subjects." She opened her book bag and rummaged for a moment before pulling out the book Hermione needed. "Here, use this. I already did that lesson."

"What do you mean you already did it?" Hermione demanded, taking the book and leafing through it as though to check it really was the one she wanted.

"I try to keep up with Harry's syllabus," she said, shrugging. "It helps me a lot in my own Healing studies here."

"Harry told me that," Hermione said, shaking her head impatiently. "I mean how can you have studied it already? I just got notice today that we needed to reference this text for our essay. It wasn't in the

general syllabus, and there's no way you've written the essay in the last-"

"Five hours? No," Rigel admitted, smiling. "I have a faster way of communicating with Harry than owl post. The book is yours, if you want it." She'd read most of it in any case.

The girl clutched the book close to her chest. "Thank you. Do you often have to buy your own books to keep up with our curriculum?"

"Sometimes," Rigel said, shrugging. "Madam Pomfrey also has a good private collection she's happy to lend to the few students she has. If you have any more books you need but can't find here, feel free to ask me."

"You do like helping me," Hermione commented, a strange look in her eyes. "Are you just being nice to me because Harry asked you to?"

Rigel cocked her head. "What makes you think that?"

She hugged the book tighter to her chest with a pensive frown. "I've seen the way your friends look at me in the halls. Like I'm an animal in a zoo they don't want to get too close to. I understand how prejudice works, you know. It's normally something you grow up with, and it can be very hard to change. If you're just humoring me for Harry's sake, I'd rather you not, thanks all the same."

She had to admire the girl's pride. "At first, I was going to be nice to you for Harry's sake," she admitted, deciding honesty was something Hermione would appreciate. "However, what I've seen of you so far, I like. You speak your mind and you're participating in the tournament for reasons I can respect. Coupled with what Harry tells me of your virtues, I'd consider myself lucky to be your friend."

"What does he-she-" Hermione sighed. "What does Harry say about me?" The girl looked interested despite herself.

"Just that you hung the moon and the sun in the same day," Rigel said.

Hermione scoffed. "Harry is so hyperbolic. I never know what he really means." Hermione shot Rigel a self-conscious glance, adding, "Do you refer to Harry as a boy or a girl usually?"

Rigel felt herself go still. What to say? She took a slow breath. "I... refer to Harry as a girl to those who know Harry as a girl, and a boy to those who know Harry as a boy, as you do. People who don't know Harry at all will say 'the Potter Heiress,' but those people's perceptions don't matter much."

"It's so complicated," Hermione said. She didn't sound like she was complaining, exactly, but she did seem frustrated. "In the alleys it's the same. Some people refer to Harry as a boy, some as a girl who presents as a boy. It's confusing."

"Harry wouldn't want you to be confused," Rigel offered, feeling acutely awkward. "Think of it like... a secret. Think of Harry as a boy, but to protect his secret, you can refer to him as a girl in front of people who don't know him. Does that make sense?"

"It's just-" Hermione broke off, uncertainty painted across her face. Rigel kept her face open and kind. With agonized hesitancy, Hermione said quietly, "I think Harry likes me."

"He does," she confirmed, with barely a moment's thought. If Hermione had already guessed but hadn't said anything to Archie, she obviously needed someone to talk to. Rigel summoned her most earnest expression. "Underneath Harry's excitable personality and lighthearted demeanor, he really cares for you."

"I know," Hermione whispered. Her face sagged with discomfort. "But I don't- oh, I don't know how to say this. I'm... not attracted to females. Physically. I know," she rushed on, "that pureblooded culture is supposed to be non-preferential and emphasizes flexibility for the sake of bolstering population or something, and Harry says

most people don't admit to having a firm sexuality these days, but I can't help what I feel. I don't know if I can ever give Harry what sh-he-wants."

There was a white-hot knife twisting in Rigel's heart. In that moment she understood in startling clarity just what the ruse would ask of Archie. Of course Hermione could not be expected to forgo her natural inclinations to entertain a relationship that held no amorous appeal for her. Still, there must be something she could do to help her cousin's cause.

"I understand," Rigel assured her gently. "So does Harry. He won't ever press you, Hermione. Harry values your friendship too much to push you away or make you uncomfortable."

Hermione bit her lip. "I just hate to disappoint him. He's my best friend. It didn't used to be this complicated."

"Apparently, that's a normal teenage sentiment," Rigel said wryly.

Hermione smiled weakly. "Nothing has been normal since my eleventh birthday. I can't bring myself to regret that, though. It's precious, this life." The girl made a vague gesture to the stacks around them, but Rigel knew it was meant to encompass the castle itself, and so much more. Hermione's voice caught as she added, "We're so lucky to be a part of this."

As the other girl took her leave, Rigel reflected that she hadn't felt particularly lucky in a long time.

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Just days before the first task, Rigel was in the midst of Healing a perforated pig's bladder when the Head Girl poked her head into the Hospital Wing and told Madam Pomfrey that Rigel was to be

excused for the day. The nurse clucked in annoyance, but took over the operation seamlessly and said, "Read up on the rest of the urinary system and next week we'll take a closer look at ruptured kidneys."

Rigel nodded and waved goodbye to Zhou, who smiled briefly at her before returning her attention to the pig. Rigel slipped out of her Healing smock, but was aware of the potent stench that followed her out of the Wing. Pansy always refused her company on Fridays until after she showered, though Rigel didn't think it was *that* stomach turning. Judging by the wrinkled nose on the Head Girl's face, she might have to reconsider that assumption.

The older girl left Rigel at the doorway to a seldom-used classroom, where she found most of the other champions gathered within, along with the Headmaster, Riddle, several reporters, and, in a twist of reality she'd never imagined, the wand maker Ollivander, of all people. Rigel stared at the white-haired old man with a detached sense of horror. It was like witnessing a broom collision-or being in one, rather. There he was right in front of her all of a sudden, and there was nothing she could do about it.

Ollivander was the one person in all the world who held the unifying piece in the puzzle that had spiraled into her current situation. It was Ollivander who had, for reasons she had been too grateful to question at the time, not revealed to Snape in her first year that she was Harriet Potter, not Arcturus Black. Now, after years of putting the knowledge to the side, she was caught in the realization that she had no idea what the man's motivations might be as far as she was concerned, and she had no guarantee that the wand maker wouldn't reveal her ruse once and for all that afternoon-in front of members of the international press, no less.

She forced her feet forward and her chin up. If these were to be her last moments as Rigel Black, she would not spend them blubbering or begging. Nothing was certain, yet, and all she could do was carry on in the part she played with bare bravado. Besides, what proof did he have? Even if he kept a record of every wand sold, she could

easily claim she and her cousin had switched wands before going off to school. It would even explain better why the original ash wand hadn't suited her. This and other arguments began to marshal themselves in her head as she stepped more fully into the room.

"Ah, Mr. Black." Dumbledore smiled at her approach. "Now we have only one left to await, I believe. Miss Granger has become adrift in our rather cavernous Library, I suspect."

"She doesn't waste any time," Rigel said, smiling back politely. "If I may ask, what is the nature of this meeting, Professor?"

"I will let Tom explain, if he so desires," Dumbledore said genially. He raised white eyebrows expectantly at the politician, but Riddle demurred with a cold smile. Dumbledore hummed with amusement. "Well then, Mr. Black, to answer your question, this is a wand weighing."

She blinked in polite confusion. "Is there a weight limit on the wands we may use?"

The Headmaster laughed. "Fortunately not. It is merely a formality that ensures no candidate in the competition is utilizing a damaged or otherwise compromised wand."

"So that no one can say their wand was the cause of their failure," Jacob Owens chimed in, smiling widely. For some reason the American always seemed to be on the edge of a joke only he fully understood.

"If I promise not to make any such claims, can I skip it?" Rigel asked. "Only I've got a pig back in the Hospital Wing that I'd like to see back to full health."

A couple of the others laughed, but most only gave her odd looks. "Is zat what I smell?" Delacour asked, raking her eyes over Rigel's robes as though she could spot the viscera on them if she looked hard enough. Rigel shrugged apologetically.

"The formality is mandatory for all champions," Riddle said firmly. The quelling look he sent her recalled the exact wording of the Unbreakable Vow she'd sworn. As if she needed reminding.

"It won't take long," Ollivander promised. When her eyes met his with wary reluctance, the old wizard winked at her. At least, she thought he did. It was the barest flutter of lash, there and gone before she could be sure.

Hermione was ushered into the room shortly thereafter, and Riddle beckoned the reporters—two men in smart business robes and one neon-attired Rita Skeeter—forward.

"Welcome champions and guests, to the Weighing of the Wands. In addition to the formal registering of your wands today, you will also be giving an interview to one of our three esteemed reporters." He introduced each of them with a politician's smile. "Rita Skeeter, special correspondent to the *Daily Prophet*, Mark Russel, author of the popular *Continental Column*, and David Prescott from the *Salem Star*."

Rigel could not help thinking that it was rather clear who Riddle's intended audience was for his little experiment. All the articles would be published in English, and all three of the chosen papers were geared toward middle class readers with more thirst for entertainment than substance. He was not interested in making a scientific or academic point, but in sensationalizing the subject of blood politics in the popular imagination.

"Before that, I'll open the floor for any questions you have concerning the first task," Riddle offered. His expression was entirely magnanimous, and he waited patiently for the competitors to marshal their thoughts.

"Vill ve be allowed in the forest before the task?" Krum asked.

"No."



"Is a wand all we're allowed?" Antiope's eyes were sharp on Riddle as he pretended to think about the question before answering.

"No."

"We can bring anything?" Sousa asked, looking cheered at the prospect.

"Anything you can carry," Riddle allowed. Really, he could have just said 'anything.' A wizard was never limited by space.

The questions went on, mainly about what they should expect to face in the forest, but Riddle deflected them all deftly. Rigel began a mental list of the potions she wanted to brew fresh for the task. It couldn't hurt to have a few extra Blood-replenishers, and while she didn't anticipate relying on it, a Calming Draught would be wise, just in case.

"Should we perhaps commence the weighing?" Dumbledore put in after every champion had the opportunity to ask questions. "I do have a class to teach this afternoon, I'm afraid." He twinkled blue eyes at Rigel, who was his only student in said class. She had to smile.

"I'd like to get back to class, as well," she put in solemnly.

Riddle's expression dripped with such solicitousness she doubted anyone else saw the annoyance laying in its shadow. "Certainly; we must not stand in the way of edification. Perhaps you'd like to go first then, Mr. Black?"

Her eyes flickered toward Ollivander again, but the old man's face revealed only pleasant interest. The wand maker held out his hand expectantly, and Rigel fetched her wand with hands that shook.

"Ah, yes, my old friend." Ollivander grasped the Holly wood almost fondly, running his hands over the length of it and holding it close to

his misty eyes to better inspect its condition. "You've not had an easy time with this one, eh?"

Rigel wasn't sure whether he was talking to her or to the wand, but she nodded in any case. "We've come to terms with one another," she offered. Maybe if he thought she was treating her wand right he'd be less inclined to reveal her secret. Or maybe not-it was only a tool, after all, not a pet. Still, the elderly wizard didn't look at the wand as though it were a mere instrument.

"You have," the wand maker agreed. "Holly is a loyal wood, once its allegiance is won. It will serve you well."

He began to hand the wand back, and she had reached to grab it when Skeeter asked, "And the core? The length? My readers will want every detail." Her acid green quill was poised over a pad of paper, ink slowly pooling at its tip like venom welling in its sack.

"Phoenix feather," Ollivander said, face blank. "Eleven inches."

"Is it...?" Dumbledore trailed off, as though he'd begun the question despite himself. He looked equal parts hopeful and uneasy.

Ollivander's eyes flickered toward Rigel and away before he nodded once. Dumbledore's eyes locked onto Rigel's and held them for a long moment, but the Headmaster didn't say another word. Rigel began to frown. What was wrong with phoenix feathers? Surely there wasn't some kind of stigma around that, too. She glanced around the room to try to get a read on the others' reactions, but none of the competitors seems concerned with the information. It only seemed to mean something significant to Ollivander and Dumbledore-and Riddle. Her eyes caught a ripple of pure astonishment before the politician could disguise it, and she wondered.

When it was clear no elaboration was forthcoming, she tucked her wand away and stepped aside for the next champion. She tuned out the proceedings, not really interested in what kind of wands the others were carrying. What difference did it make? Her mind

wandered back to that Saturday in first year when Fate had seemed to breathe across the tiny hairs on her neck. What had Ollivander said then? She hadn't been paying close enough attention. Something about loyalty, and something about... another wand? He had mentioned the combination was rare, but also that he had sold another wand that was similar, or something. Was it Dumbledore's wand? Did he also have a phoenix feather core? It couldn't be something so simple, she thought. Draco and Pansy both had unicorn hair cores, but they weren't wide eyed and concerned about it.

Still, there had to be something odd going on. When Delacour revealed that her wand contained the hair from her own grandmother, Dumbledore didn't seem half as intrigued. In addition, she felt the weight of Riddle's gaze fall heavy on her several times throughout the rest of the wand inspections, and while she didn't put it past the man to attempt to unnerve her for no reason, she was certain something else predicated his fixation this time.

Tahiil was the last to step forward, but he did so sheepishly. He held his empty palms out in open apology. "I have no wand, I am afraid. I did not know they were required."

This set the room into a tizzy. Rita materialized in the boy's face with simpering interest. "However do you perform magic, then? A staff? Crystals?"

Tahiil shook his head with a smile. "I was taught without this kind of focus. In my village, the elders cast with their hands. This is my way also."

"Wandless magic, how intriguing," Rita said, batting her vibrantly-lidded eyes at the Somali boy. "Do you find it... effective?"

He shrugged. "It works for me. I cannot say for others."

Riddle bestowed a cool smile on the muggleborn boy, saying, "We look forward to seeing your style of casting in the tournament, then."

That concludes the Weighing of the Wands. Each of our guest reporters will now take three champions aside for exclusive interviews. Ms. Skeeter, if you would?"

Skeeter's smile could have burned through concrete with its intensity. "I'll take the Britain-born, if you don't mind, Lord Riddle. My readers will simply *adore* the juxtaposition-imagine it! One pureblood, one halfblood, and one muggleborn, all from our own magical community. Who will they root for? Who will they fall for? It's just *delicious* ."

It sounded rather nauseating, put in those terms. How hadn't she noticed before that it was just as Skeeter said? Was it just coincidence that one candidate from each category happened to be originally from Great Britain, or was it more of Riddle's careful maneuvering?

The man himself inclined his head as though granting a boon. "Mr. Black, Miss Antiope, and Miss Granger-with Ms. Skeeter, if you please."

Rigel reluctantly peeled away from the group and followed Hermione and Antiope out into the corridor. Skeeter ushered them all into a classroom nearby and shut the door firmly behind them. She shooed Rigel and the others into chairs and took a seat on the edge of the teacher's desk like a finicky cat perching on a dirty limb.

"There now, that's cozy," the reporter said, still smiling brightly at the three of them. "You all don't mind if I use a Quick Quotes Quill, do you? I'd like to really concentrate on you, now."

Antiope cast the floating quill a suspicious look, but nodded. Hermione frowned, saying, "As long as we are quoted accurately." Rigel just tried not to grimace. She could still recall the article this woman had written about the Sleeping Sickness. It had rubbed her the wrong way, painting a more dramatic picture than necessary. She didn't foresee whatever article came out of this strange interview being any less sensational.

"Marvelous. Now, let's start with our pureblood. Arcturus Rigel Black. Scion to the Noble and Ancient House of Black. How does it feel, representing the oldest and most respected institution in this groundbreaking tournament?" Skeeter leaned forward toward Rigel, who was greeted with a rather indelicate view of the reporter's open blouse. She fought against the urge to wrinkle her nose at the excess of cleavage on display before her and instead looked down at her hands.

"I hope to bring honor to my school and my family," she said evenly. "I look forward to a challenging and interesting year."

Skeeter tutted at her answer. "Come now, Rigel-they do call you Rigel, don't they? You can be honest with me. It's a lot of pressure, isn't it? You must be dazzled, knowing most of the country is counting on you to uphold the grand tradition of pureblood ability. Will your family disown you if you disappoint them? The Blacks can be very unforgiving, if rumors are true."

Rigel looked up with a frown. "My father would never do that. He understands that ability, as you call it, is tied to the individual, not to any one group. How well I do in this tournament will be a reflection on me, and me alone."

"Well said, Rigel." Hermione was looking at her with something like pride in her eyes. "That's exactly what ought to be articulated about this tournament. It's not really about blood. It's about individuals of different backgrounds coming together and challenging themselves."

Skeeter favored Hermione with a skeptical expression. "It's the backgrounds we're talking about, dearie. That's why the best of the best were chosen to compete. In the end, the one to win will be the one whose background has best prepared him or her for victory. You're all smart and ambitious, Miss Granger, no doubt about that. You wouldn't be here if you weren't. The difference between you and Mr. Black is just blood. No use disputing that."

Hermione visibly bristled and Rigel had to bite her lip on a groan. *Don't do it*, she thought urgently toward the girl. It was no use, though. Hermione, eyes blazing, was about to walk into a political quagmire. "The *difference*, as you put it, is opportunity. Blood has nothing to do with ability. If Mr. Black wins it will indeed be a reflection on Hogwarts-it means he has access to quality education and has made good use of it."

"Then you believe the American Institute of Magic to be of inferior quality, education wise?" Skeeter asked, eyes wide with affected surprise. The implication that Hermione's failure in the tournament was a foregone conclusion rang clear.

Hermione faltered. "That's not necessarily the case. AIM is a wonderful school, with a rigorous curricula. No two institutions will be exactly equal, however. The differences in our educational preparation will be what determine the outcome of the tournament, not our particular blood status, that's all I'm saying."

Skeeter didn't care what Hermione was saying, and it was obvious. As her brilliant green quill scribbled its way across the parchment, the reporter's attention turned to Antiope, who had until this point kept her own council. "Miss Ross, isn't it?"

"Originally, aye," Antiope said. Her red hair shifted against her cheek as a muscle there clenched. "Until I leave the Athenai, however, I bear Antiope's title."

"Yes, all the girls at your school have names of myth, don't they?" Skeeter said, nodding as though she knew a great deal about Antiope's particular situation. "The Amazons of the Modern Day, they call you. It must be very strange for you, suddenly surrounded by young men as well as women here at Hogwarts."

Antiope pressed her lips together. "I'm not sure what you mean. We have young men in Laconia, too. Arguably the finest in the world."

"Yes, but those Spartan wizards are so principled, aren't they?" Skeeter tilted her head in a confiding manner. "And of course the proximity is new for you. Do find yourself *distracted* here in Britain? Or are the women of the Chalcioecus immune to the more... masculine charms?"

Rigel almost had to admire the woman's sheer nerve. It took a singular kind of gumption to be that unapologetically rude to someone's face. Antiope was ready to impale Skeeter's head on a pike, if the jumping tick in her cheek was any indication. Rigel cut in before the girl could answer-any response would only be twisted beyond comprehension by the reporter's sharp tongue and even sharper quill.

"I do find *myself* distracted," Rigel said smoothly, an expression of wistful admiration on her face. It drew Skeeter in like a pile of manure drew flies. "When I first entered this tournament, I never imagined so many lovely, intelligent, and talented young women would be participating. It's enough to make the heart faint, isn't it?"

"Are you admitting to a growing interest in any competitor in particular, Rigel?" Skeeter asked, her voice a tad higher in unconscious excitement.

"I really couldn't say," Rigel demurred. "It is a positively dazzling array. Then again, I am genetically more susceptible to the allure of beauty and talent than other young men, aren't I?"

Skeeter laughed, a tittering sound that suggested she was exactly as deep as she appeared. "I know first hand how *susceptible* the Black men can be, believe it or not." Rigel sincerely did not. "But that's neither here nor there. Tell me, Rigel. Do you think you exploits over the past three years have fully prepared you for this tournament?"

"I'm sure nothing could prepare one for whatever Mr. Riddle has in store," Rigel said, maintaining her polite expression.

"Lord Riddle's plans will be ingenious, to be sure, but you're no stranger to danger, are you? Wasn't it you who cured an impenetrable disease at the age of eleven? And didn't you slay a century-old basilisk the very next year? Then there's that mysterious business last spring, with a professor found dead and you, unaccountably abused and rescued the same day from being buried alive in the very forest in which you are to compete just days from now... well, it's an incredible collection of adventures, isn't it?"

Rigel honestly had no idea how to respond to that. It wasn't even really a question. Skeeter didn't want her to confirm or deny her suppositions. She only wanted Rigel to squirm. Well, she would not give the journalist the satisfaction. "I do seem to have had a string of bad luck, don't I? I hope my participation in the tournament will not be seen as a bad omen."

Skeeter's mouth twisted in sardonic amusement. "If anything, it's *ordained*," she breathed. Rigel was surprised not to see foam in her teeth. "I'm certain my readers will be positively breathless to see how you perform, Rigel Black. Do us proud, won't you?"

Her smile was more of a wince, but the reporter didn't seem to notice. The 'interview' ended shortly thereafter, but it was a long time before Rigel was able to purge the crawling sensation from her skin. She shuddered to think what monstrosity of popular journalism Rita Skeeter would produce from the afternoon's interrogation. Merlin willing, it would fail to sway anyone with a modicum of good sense.

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Her head was still chewing through the likely consequences of the impending article when she arrived at her weekly Alchemy lesson. Dumbledore was waiting for her in his workroom, but a single glance at her expression prompted him to set aside the chalk and call for tea instead. A pair of comfy, oversized chairs replaced the array



table with a gentle bell tone and Rigel had to smile. She wondered if she'd ever be so good at magic that she added sound effects just for fun.

"I find a small pot of good tea can reduce many troubling problems to a manageable size," the Headmaster commented when a house elf had delivered the tea tray and poured them both cups.

Rigel swirled the tea pensively, watching the little twister in the center of her cup with detached curiosity. "Would that tea could reduce an entire nation's pride and folly to a more manageable size," she said after a moment.

Dumbledore hummed thoughtfully. "You'd have to poison a great deal of tea."

Startled, she let a snort escape her. The older wizard twinkled at her when she met his gaze. "There's probably not enough belladonna in the world," she said with a small grin. "Ah, well. We'll have to try persuasion after all."

"Using the tournament, you mean?" Dumbledore's smile faded and a serious note entered his voice. "I admit I was surprised you agreed to participate, Mr. Black."

"You're not the only one," she allowed, her grin twisted into a grimace.

"Your father wrote me to ask whether I could prevent it. Alas, it is not in my power to bar specific students from competing. I told Sirius it was your choice to make, and no one else's." Dumbledore held her gaze for a long moment, and Rigel felt inexorably guilty. How could she explain to the man who had dedicated his life to defending the rights of the disenfranchised that she had made a deal with his political rival in a clumsy attempt to prevent further pressure coming to her or her family?

A flash of discomfort in her head snapped her eyes shut and away. Dom was warning her. She lost her relaxed posture and sat up straight in her chair. "If you want to know why, you can just ask, sir."

Dumbledore had the grace to look apologetic, at least. "Are you free to tell me, if I ask?"

Rigel blinked. He thought Riddle might have silenced her? She supposed Legilimency might be one way around an oath that prevented someone knowingly revealing information. It didn't make her feel better about his attempt to scan her surface thoughts, but she understood that if she *had* been under oath not to reveal anything about her participation in the tournament and he'd asked permission to read her thoughts, she'd have been obligated to refuse. She also would have had to immediately stop thinking those thoughts while around him. "I can talk about it. I'm just not certain you'll approve. My father definitely wouldn't."

He took a sip of tea with an air of innocence that must have been decades in the crafting. "I will probably forget all about this conversation the next time I meet Lord Black. The mind is a sieve in old age, you know."

*Sure, she thought wryly. A sieve locked in an iron trunk .*

As she'd already told Pansy and Draco, not to mention Aldon Rosier, she supposed it didn't really buy her anything to keep the situation from the Headmaster. Maybe, a small voice whispered, he could even help her somehow. "I made a deal with Riddle," she said at last. "He wanted me in the tournament badly enough to trade for my cooperation. In exchange for my participating in every event to the best of my ability, he released a public statement decrying the actions of the radicals who've been terrorizing muggleborns and their supporters."

Dumbledore's eyebrows rose. "I thought it was unusually farsighted of Tom to distance his political party from those renegades. You show remarkable insight into the world around you for one so young.

That announcement has done much to stymie public support for the radicals, though I fear public ennui will be harder to counteract."

She nodded. "That's good. I wanted to tie Riddle's hands, since he was so intent on tying mine. That's why I also stipulated that if I win the tournament, he must cease his legislative agenda against muggleborns."

Dumbledore's hands tightened briefly on his teacup. "In its entirety? Tom would never agree to that in good faith, Mr. Black."

"Not the entirety," she admitted. "I bargained for the specific areas of employment opportunity, healthcare, and the marriage law. I tried to include education, but he modified the vow to discount it. That was a long shot, but I had to at least try."

The Headmaster's eyes began to grow misty, and he set his teacup aside to clasp his hands together before her. "Mr. Black, rare are those willing to put themselves in physical discomfort-much less mortal peril-for the benefit of strangers. You might have asked for anything else from Tom; his platform, while regrettable, nevertheless affords him a great deal of personal power. That you asked for this gives an old man hope for the future of our society. I must commend your selflessness and integrity."

The guilty feeling was back in force. Rigel shook her head helplessly. "Please, don't. It's not like I sought this out or have ever been a strong enough advocate for muggleborn and halfblood rights, even among my own classmates. Riddle was going to make me participate one way or another. I just wanted it to mean something. But I'm not a hero, sir."

Dumbledore's smile widened. "And what do you think a hero is, Mr. Black?"

She cleared her throat. "Well. A hero is someone who sees a wrong and sets out to fix it regardless of the cost to themself. Someone like Hermione Granger, who didn't have to have anything to do with this

tournament, but came knowingly to be judged and degraded before the world simply because she knows blood prejudice is wrong and she thinks someone should stand up against it."

"That is one definition," the Headmaster agreed. "In my years, I have seen many types of heroes, however. Sometimes heroism is as simple as ordinary principles that inspire one person to disagree out loud with another. Then there are the silent heroes. You may be forgiven for not recognizing them, for they often do not recognize themselves. The silent hero is one who corrects a wrong quietly, anonymously, and allows the world to turn on uninterrupted, never knowing how the problem came to be fixed."

"Like Professor Snape," she murmured, understanding his point.

His eyebrows rose. "Severus told you of that?"

"I may have dragged it out of him," she admitted.

"You are very like Severus," Dumbledore told her, smiling once more.

She flushed. It was too soon for anyone to compare her to Severus Snape. Maybe in another decade or two. "If my life is half as impactful as Master Snape's, I'll consider it well-lived."

The Headmaster inclined his head. "Well then, Mr. Black, let us see about winning you a tournament." He beckoned to the air with an empty hand and a slim volume materialized in it. "This will be of use to you. Think of it as supplemental reading."

She took the proffered book and flipped the cover back to see the title on the first page. *Arrays for the Harried*. A quick perusal of the contents showed a series of extremely simplified arrays-no more than two or three runes needed in execution. "Is this Alchemy on the go?" she asked, intrigued.

"Just so," Dumbledore said. "A collection of quick arrays that rely more on magical input than complex definition through runes. They

aren't sophisticated, but sometimes you need a fast solution, not an elegant one."

It certainly played to her strength, she thought, looking at the magical coefficients described in the accompanied equations. They were higher than any other array he'd taught her, and the equations weren't very well balanced, either. A significant portion of the magic she put into the arrays would be lost just in igniting them. For someone with average levels of magic, she doubted the arrays would be useful at all. For her, though, and certainly for a wizard as powerful as Dumbledore, they would be invaluable in a pinch.

"Thank you, sir," she said, putting the book into her bag with a thrum of anticipation. "I really appreciate the help." After a moment of thought, she added, "Do you think you could help with one other thing this year?"

"I can certainly try," the wizened professor promised.

"You've probably already thought of this, but could you work on discrediting the tournament? The ideal outcome I think would be if I managed to win, so that Riddle has to uphold his agreement about the legislation, but the tournament itself becomes so controversial that a pureblood winning doesn't necessarily buy Riddle's party anything in terms of social or political justification for continuing intolerance of muggleborns and halfbloods." At least, that was the best outcome she could currently see. Then again, she wouldn't feel too put out if Hermione managed to win, either. Having a muggleborn declared blood champion might just be enough to make people see them as equal. *Or, her heart sank at the thought, it might be enough to make purebloods hate them even more.*

"Since the World Cup, I have dedicated the bulk of my resources to counteracting the radicals and their propaganda." Dumbledore confided. He appeared calm, which she supposed spoke to his volumes of experience in public affairs. Nothing about the radicals and their erratic string of attacks on muggleborn-affiliated institutions was calming. "It is time, perhaps, to turn some of my attention back

to this tournament. Doubtless there will be numerous opportunities to inconvenience Tom in the coming months." He seemed almost cheered by the prospect.

"Are you in some way related to the Weasleys?" she asked, smiling a little. "Only, you sound a bit like the twins when they see a chance for mayhem."

"Thank you for that favorable comparison, Mr. Black. I did have red hair in my youth." He curled his white beard absently. "Anything is possible. I haven't examined all the branches in my family tree."

Rigel did not believe that for a moment, but she offered, "My father could tell you how to make one like ours-be warned, though, as it tends to take over whatever room you put it in."

Dumbledore hummed. "I rather prefer the mystery." He flicked his fingers toward the now empty teapot and cups, sending them to whatever dimension Dumbledore's dirty dishes were banished. "Now, then. We did have a lesson scheduled, but perhaps your time would be better served elsewhere this week, Mr. Black. The first task approaches, after all. Unless there is anything else?"

There was, of course, but Rigel felt a little foolish even asking the great wizard. Then she imagined asking anyone else and realized she would feel foolish in any case. It might as well be Dumbledore. "I was wondering-well, I wasn't until today, but after the wand ceremony today I wondered... is there something strange about my wand? Only you and Riddle and Ollivander were all acting a bit odd about it. Maybe I'm being paranoid." She let out a self-deprecating laugh. What did she expect him to say, really?

Dumbledore did not laugh with her. "What did Ollivander tell you about that wand?" he asked. The neutrality in his voice immediately put her on edge.

"He said a phoenix's loyalty was hard to win, I think," she said, frowning. "There was something about another wand, too, but I don't

remember it clearly."

The Headmaster inclined his head. "You've met my phoenix, Fawkes, have you not?"

Rigel nodded, eyes widening. "Is it... one of his feathers? I didn't know Ollivander used materials from familiars; I assumed the feather had come from a wild phoenix."

"Most wand materials are collected from wild trees and creatures. At times, however, a creature or being is inspired to give freely of themselves to a wizard. In Fawkes' case, he has given two such feathers in his long life." Dumbledore fixed her with a level gaze. "The second feather resides in your wand, Rigel. I will not lie to you, however; this fact alone is not so extraordinary as to cause alarm. If I may ask, what do you know about brother wands?"

"I've never heard the term," she said, frowning. She was a little amazed to know the exact phoenix that had given a feather for her wand, but there was a fogginess in her mind that told her she didn't fully understand the implications yet.

"It refers to two wands whose core material was taken from the same creature. Not the same species, mind you. The same exact being. It is rare enough for a creature to give more than one hair or feather in a lifetime. Rarer still for two wands who share a core in that way to ever meet." Dumbledore's eyes clouded with thoughts Rigel couldn't hope to follow."

"Please, sir. Are you saying that you and I have brother wands?" She understood that it was extraordinary, but the fact didn't seem to merit the level of gravity Dumbledore was exhibiting.

The old wizard shook his head sharply. "You misunderstand, Rigel. The first feather my phoenix gave does not reside in my wand, but in Tom Riddle's."

The world seemed to go very still. There was a rushing in her ears and the world abruptly occupied an axis that didn't mesh. She gripped the arms of her chair reflexively, fighting the nauseated feeling in her stomach. "That's mad," she whispered. "What kind of sick joke is that? Riddle and I are *nothing* alike." At least, she fervently hoped they weren't.

"It is not a question of similarity," Dumbledore assured her. "It is merely a stroke of Fate. It means nothing in terms of your own character, Mr. Black. Its import lies in the implication for any interactions between them. It is said that brother wands must never cross one another."

She grimaced. "Are you saying I can't oppose him?"

"Not at all. Your life is your own to lead. If, however, you should ever find yourself at the end of Tom's wand, or he at yours, even I would not hazard a guess as to the outcome." Dumbledore looked truly apologetic. "I don't wish this to unduly influence your actions. I only mean to make you aware of this accident of chance, that you will not be taken by surprise at some future moment through ignorance."

Rigel wasn't sure what she thought about the idea that she and Tom Riddle shared some sort of wand bond. It must be equally upsetting for Dumbledore to think that his political nemesis was carrying one of his familiar's feathers in his wand, though, so she strove to maintain politeness. She rose and collected her book bag from its place near her feet. "Thank you, sir. I appreciate your telling me the truth. There are a number of potions I need to brew today, so I should go and prepare. I promise when the first task is over, I'll catch back up to our normal lesson pace."

"I never doubt your dedication, Mr. Black. Good luck in the forest. If you get into trouble, don't hesitate to send up sparks." His eyes were earnest, not a twinkle in sight. "You've been very brave, but no legislative victory is truly worth your life."



"I'll be careful, sir," she promised. And she really would. Whatever the reward, there were too many people who would never forgive her if she went into the forest and didn't come out.

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The day of the first task dawned grey and dreary. She knew she shouldn't be up at dawn, since there was a good chance she'd be up all night traipsing through the dark forest, but she couldn't sleep past first light. Draco and Pansy rose with her, and all three took it easy on their morning jog. Her friends tried to engage her in conversation a couple of times, but she wasn't in the mood to talk about the tournament and talking about anything else felt forced. With no classes to distract her, she retired to her lab to do one last inventory of her potions kit.

She had made all the preparations she could reasonably expect. She had a plethora of first aid potions, including Blood-Replenishers, distilled Dittany, and Pain Relief. There were also fresh doses of her own Protection Potion, with an imbued Fortis that was as strong as she dared. Looking at her kit with critical eyes, there was one other thing she wanted to put into it. She felt stupid for even considering it, but the anxiety in her chest would not let up, so she made her way to the kitchens.

There was to be a grand feast tonight to celebrate the commencement of the tournament tasks, so the expansive room was alive with activity, but Binny somehow took the time to come sit with her while the others made up the package of food and water she wanted to include in her kit. She knew she wouldn't be in the forest more than a few hours, but she couldn't help the impulse. Rigel thought just having the food and water in her pack would help her keep calm in the woods.

"You is being very careful in the woods," Binny cautioned her. "Binny is hearing all sorts of things about the new beings in there." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "Elves is being called to feed them. Otherwise they is eating one another."

"I imagine the dragon eats a lot," she commented. "Is there only the one?"

Binny's ears drooped a little. "You is not supposed to be knowing about her."

Rigel smiled reassuringly. "I didn't hear it from an elf." She didn't push Binny further for details. She didn't have time to prepare for anything new in any case, so there was no sense risking the elf getting in trouble. "So they've kept you all pretty busy down here, huh?"

"We is not minding," Binny said happily. Then her ears drooped again slightly. "But some of the contestants is being more trouble than others."

She frowned. "Who's making trouble for you?"

"I isn't complaining," Binny stressed, though she twisted her hands in her champagne-cork necklace agitatedly. "Missy Granger isn't knowing any better."

"Hermione's been difficult?" Rigel was honestly surprised. Of all the candidates, Hermione seemed one of the *least* high-maintenance. She supposed she didn't know the girl all that well, though. "I will talk to her," she promised. "She's really a nice person, so I'm sure she didn't mean to cause any trouble."

Binny's eyes widened. "You is speaking to her? Asking her not to be leaving scarfs and hats around?"

Rigel's eyebrows rose in confusion. Normally a house elf wasn't bothered by a bit of mess-in fact, she'd seen Binny positively

rapturous over a sink of food-encrusted dishes. "If I ask her to pick up after herself, I'm sure she would," she offered.

The house elf shook her head so hard her ears flapped. "I isn't meaning tidying. Missy Granger is leaving clothes in piles of other things to trick elves into taking. She is freeing elves."

"Oh." Rigel coughed against the urge to laugh. It was certainly not a laughing matter for the elves, but she could see exactly what had happened when Hermione realized that bonded servants-slaves, really-were cooking and cleaning the castle. No doubt the muggleborn girl was shocked and horrified. If she'd done a little research in the Library, any book on house elves could have told her how to free one. Rigel doubted she'd read any good books on their species, however, or she'd know that they not only didn't want to be freed, but that Hermione had no authority to free them, as they were bound to Hogwarts itself, not to the students. Only Dumbledore could free an elf from Hogwarts. Even still, it was probably horribly upsetting for the elves that she was even attempting it. "She definitely doesn't mean any harm. I'll explain the situation to her, all right?"

"Thank you," Binny said, sighing gustily. "The others is fighting over who is cleaning *her* room."

Poor Hermione. She really did mean well, Rigel knew. She had to, to be expending energy in freeing house elves when by anyone's estimation she ought to have been spending all her time preparing for the tournament. Perhaps she'd benefit from a different project to focus her free time on while she was at Hogwarts. Rigel would have to think about it after the first task.

There was a flurry of activity at the door as one of the Weasley twins ducked into the kitchens and the house elves flocked to press food into his empty palms.

"Rigel?" He spotted her and wound his way through the activity to where she sat. It was George, she realized, in weekend attire of

jeans and jumper. "What are you doing down here? Shouldn't you be preparing for the task tonight?"

She gestured to the bundle of food and flasks of water on the table in front of her. "Just collecting supplies."

George eyed the food with a slight frown. "You'll only be in there for a few hours, right?"

Rigel shrugged. "You never know."

Binny excused herself to continue preparations for the feast and George took her abandoned seat next to Rigel. "Is this about last spring? You never talked about it, and it all happened so fast no one could figure out what exactly happened."

"I can't talk about it," she muttered, annoyed that the mere mention of it was already getting her pulse up.

George looked thoughtful. "Whenever my dad can't talk about something at work, it's because there are Unspeakables involved," he said slowly.

"You're very smart, George," she said without expression.

He cursed. "Look, if you're in there for more than six hours, Fred and I will storm in after you. Ron and Ginny will only be a few steps behind. So don't ever think that you're fully alone in there."

She smiled weakly. "Thanks, George. I really appreciate your support."

"Are you really okay with participating, Rigel?" he asked. "You don't have to do this. We can say you're ill. I'll paint Spattergroit pox all over you and you can go home this afternoon. Wait out the year at home, probably do so much self-study that you take your OWLs a year early. You know, normal stuff. Not this madness."

She laughed softly. "Don't tempt me. I know just the potion to mimic Spattergroit's feverish swelling. Pretty sure I could reverse-engineer a healing technique to give myself pustules, too."

"What a talent to brag about," George said, laughing with her. "You may have a grand career in skiving ahead of you."

"My father will be so proud." Actually, he might be, she thought.

"Just don't forget us little people when you're covered in glory."

"And pustules."

They both laughed again. It felt good to just joke about something nonsensical and stop worrying for a few moments. "You're going to do great, you know," George told her.

"I'll do my best for Hogwarts," she allowed. "For Draco and Diggory and all the others who would rather be in my place." *For all the halfbloods and muggleborns I might help if I actually won*, she added silently.

"I've something to help with that," George said, fishing in his pockets. He had to pull out several sweets before he found what he was looking for. It was a small packet tied with a green ribbon that expanded with a tap of his wand. "This is for you. From Fred and me."

She took the gift carefully. A tug of the string undid the wrapping and revealed a soft long-sleeved jersey in forest green. She lifted it to see a silver snake, black badger, golden lion, and bronze eagle embroidered proudly down the sleeves. On the back it read 'HOGWARTS' in bold white lettering. "You shouldn't have," she breathed, running her fingers across the embroidered lion with awe. It was simply stunning.

"We can't have any ambiguity about who we're routing for, can we?" George smiled encouragingly at her. "Anyway, Mum and Ginny

helped us make it. Go on, try it on."

She frowned. "I... here?"

He raised an eyebrow. "I don't think the house elves will be too scandalized."

She forced a laugh. "Right. Ok." Rigel stood from the table and gingerly slipped her robes over her head, keeping her shoulders hunched forward so that the material of her undershirt pooled around her chest, disguising any distortion that her not-quite-flat chest might create. She slipped the jersey on quickly, relieved that it proved loose enough and straight enough that any hint of curve about her hips was cleanly hidden.

"It's a bit big," George said, sounding disappointing. "I forget how small you are without the robes."

"It's perfect," she assured him, grinning brightly. "See? I can move freely." She twisted and swung her arms to demonstrate. "I love it. Thank you, George. Thank Fred, too, if you see him before I do."

"He'll be sore I gave it to you without him," George admitted. He shrugged his shoulders. "Didn't know if I'd see you again before the task, though." She went to take it off once more but he stopped her. "Wear it to dinner. Show them all that you're proud to represent this school."

She nodded. "All right. I only hope by the end of tonight the school is proud to have me representing them, too."

"And now we come to the second part of your gift," George said happily. She tried to protest, but he waved her words away impatiently. "This one's just from Fred and me." He produced a smaller box from his pocket. "Open it."

Rigel took it with a rueful smile. "I don't deserve a friend like you, George."

"Don't say that until you've opened it," he laughed.

She lifted the lid and saw... she wasn't sure what. It was a grey disk about the size of the palm of her hand, no more than an inch thick at its center. It seemed blank at first, but when she tilted it toward the light, etched runes glinted dully at her. "What is it?" she asked, looking down into George's expectant face. "Sorry, but I've never seen anything like this before."

"I invented it," George said. He took the hand that was holding the disk and pulled it toward him. "Here, feel this dent?" He guided her finger over the indentation in the center carefully. "Press down on it for a few seconds to activate it. Then throw it as far away from yourself as you can and wait for the show."

"Show?" Rigel looked curiously at the innocuous device. "Does it explode?" she asked jokingly.

"Exactly," George said. At her alarmed frown he added, "Relax, pup. It's a *firework*."

"This little thing?"

"Don't underestimate it. This baby packs a punch. I thought it would be useful in the forest. If you need a big distraction, or if you just want to celebrate when you win, this little pod will make sure everyone watching remembers your performance." George released her hand and she pocketed the disk reverently.

"I don't know what to say, George. I can't thank you enough." Overwhelmed, she leaned down to give the Gryffindor a brief hug.

He chuckled into her ear. "If you use it, that'll be thanks enough. Just remember to tell people where you got it, if they ask."

She nodded, pulling back. "I will. I suppose I should be going," she added, picking up her robes and the package of food and water. "Pansy and Draco will want to fuss over me before tonight. Thanks

again for the jersey and the firework. I'm almost looking forward to tonight." She wasn't, really, but the lie felt like the best way to express her gratitude to George for not only wanting to support and assist her, but also for lightening her heart before what was sure to be a draining ordeal.

"If Draco says anything about the jersey, tell him Fred and I will be glad to make a matching one for him if he's so jealous," George offered.

She grinned. "I'll savor the look on his face so that I may describe it to you in detail."

"This is why you're my favorite," George said solemnly.

Feeling lighter than she had in days, she bid the older boy a good day and headed back to her common room. She really *did* think her friends would want the opportunity to fuss, and she was in a much better mood to accept it than she had been that morning.

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Her friends were waiting for her when she reached her dorm. Crowded into the small room, Pansy, Millicent, Rookwood, and Rosier joined her three roommates in greeting her warmly as she closed the door and set her robes and bag down on her trunk. Theo was the first to comment on her attire.

"Have you spent all afternoon coming up with that?" he asked, pacing around her in a circle to get the full effect. "It's a little sappy; why include the other houses at all?"

"The Weasleys made it for me," Rigel said staunchly. "I like it."



"It's lovely," Pansy assured her. "Savvy, too. You'll need the support of the whole school, not just Slytherin, to make it through this tournament with your dignity intact."

Rigel grimaced. "Thanks, Pan. All this time I've been worried about my life and limbs; I completely forgot to consider my dignity." She smiled to let the girl know she was joking, and Pansy swatted her gently on the arm.

"Really, Rigel. You should know that dignity is much more important than *limbs* ." Pansy sniffed.

"You can regrow limbs, after all, provided they aren't cursed," Theo agreed. "Dignity, once lost, is gone forever."

"Or at least until you kill all the witnesses," Rosier drawled.

"How many people will be watching the task tonight?" Rigel asked, her lips twitching.

"More than even you could kill before the paper got wind of it," Blaise calculated.

"Rigel isn't going to kill anyone," Draco said firmly. "He's going to crush the rest of those pretenders and rise victorious at the spearhead of a new age."

There was a moment of silence as everyone processed this. Rigel broke into incredulous laughter, and the others followed. "Really?" she said, wiping at her eyes with her palm. "No pressure then, eh?"

Draco cracked a grin at her. "Don't act as though pressure even phases you, Rye. Sometimes I think you work better with it."

"You're faith in me is terrifying," she told him. The others laughed again. "What are you all doing here, anyway? Come to take one last look at me before a dragon chomps me in half?"

"Don't joke about that," Pansy said, at the same time that Rookwood blurted, "How do you know about the dragon?"

Her friends turned incredulous eyes on Rookwood. Even Rosier looked visibly surprised. " *What* dragon?" the golden-eyed upperclassman demanded, his voice clipped.

Rookwood's normally stoic face took on an apologetic cast. "My uncle was responsible for procuring a lot of the creatures for the task. I wasn't allowed to say anything, Rigel. I wanted to tell you. I did include the breed in that stack of creature references I gave you."

"I know, and there's no need to tell me," she said, smiling. "I've got my own sources of intelligence."

Rookwood peered at her for a moment, then smiled in realization. "You asked a snake, didn't you?"

"A gentleman never speaks to snakes and tells," she assured him with an innocent blink.

"I see. Well, since you already know, do you need any advice about the creatures you're to face tonight?" Rookwood asked, eyes intent on her face. She kept it relaxed and unconcerned.

"I'm as prepared as I can be," she said. "Thank you, though. I appreciate your offer."

"Then you'll definitely appreciate what the rest of us got you," Theo said cheerfully. "And you won't be churlish or refuse our help on principle at all, will you?"

Rigel sighed. There was no way to contradict him, seeing as she was already wearing the Weasley twins' jersey. "Who, me?" she joked weakly.

"Excellent. Millie and I thought what you needed more than anything was an alternative to your usual death-defying solo stunts." He

gestured to Millicent, who presented her with a clear semi-circle of soft, gel-like material. It was smaller than the nail on her finger.

"It goes on your ear," Millicent explained. "You hook it on the outer edge and it's spelled to stay put. It's an emergency beacon. If you're ever put in a position where you've lost your wand, all you have to do is crush it and a signal that no magic can dampen will be sent up into the sky."

"Even if your limbs are secured, as long as your head can move, you can smash it against your own shoulder," Theo added. He looked a bit uncertain. "It may seem like a coward's gift, but it never hurts to have a back-up plan."

"I love it." She clipped it onto her right ear at once and felt the magic gently attach itself to her cartilage. Rigel's throat was a bit tight, so she merely smiled with bright eyes at her friends. "Thank you very much." It was hard not to imagine how differently her ordeal last spring might have gone if she'd had something like this on her person.

"My turn." Blaise drew her attention to a pair of black gloves in his hands. He held them toward her and let her take the thin material. Runes glinted at her as her fingers explored the gloves. "I've been working on these for a few weeks. As long as the runic sequences remain intact, your grip will never slip. They'll also resist summoning, to a certain degree."

Her eyebrows rose. That was not an easy feat to accomplish. "You're remarkable, Blaise. Thank you. I'm sure these will come in handy." She drew the gloves on over her hands and watched the dark-skinned boy smile in subtle pleasure.

Rosier approached her next, a pile of material in his hands. "This is from Edmund and me," he said. The older boy almost looked embarrassed, though she told herself that couldn't possibly be the case. Rosier was always oozing confidence.

She unfolded the material to reveal a midnight cloak of sturdy matte material. "It's very handsome," she said, holding it up to test the length against her height. It was exactly the right size to cover the majority of her form without risking tripping her up.

"The forest is dark at night," Rookwood commented. "We thought you might like a bit of camouflage."

"We didn't realize the Weasleys were making you a garment meant to be seen, however," Rosier added, gesturing to her jersey.

"That's all right," she assured them. "Probably for the best, actually. I can wear the jersey until I get into the trees and then slip the cloak on. The other competitors will be looking out for my bright embroidery, and I'll slip right by them." It would help with the cold, too, she didn't doubt. Rigel had to admire her friends' utterly practical impulses when it came to gifts. She hadn't expected anything so material in terms of their support, but she couldn't deny every item the Slytherins had decided on would be of great use that year.

The two upperclassmen looked gratified, and stepped back to let Draco move toward her next. Her blond friend had a smug look on his face that said he knew she was going to like whatever he was about to present her. Draco held out a box about one foot across with green and silver striping. With curling lips, she accepted the gift and pried back the lid.

"You weren't kidding," she laughed, reaching inside to extract a beautiful black gauntlet that seemed to suck the light into it rather than reflect it. "Will they really reflect magic?"

"They ought to, as they're goblin forged," Draco said proudly. "Flip them over."

She turned the gauntlet she held to its underside, where the Malfoy family crest was etched in dull silver near the wrist. Rigel snorted. "Wonderful, Dray. My father will have kittens if he sees this."

Draco smirked. "It was father's idea. We did put the Black crest on the other one."

Sure enough, when she shifted the box so that she could withdraw the other gauntlet, she saw the Black family emblem carefully pressed into its underside as well. "Thank you, Draco. And thank your father, too, please."

"You can thank him yourself," Draco said. "He'll be at the task tonight. Mother, too. Try them on, then. The right one is supposed to fit over the holster Pansy and I got you for your birthday."

She rolled up the jersey's sleeves to reveal the soft leather holster on her right forearm. Once she loosened the straps, the gauntlet slid easily over the skin-tight holster and left room at the wrist for her wand to pass through to her hand unimpeded. "They're perfect. Help me tighten them?"

Draco and Pansy each set to one forearm, adjusting and tightening the gauntlets with care. "They should be strong enough to absorb all but the most powerful spells," Draco said when he'd finished her right arm to his satisfaction. He rolled the sleeve of her jersey halfway down the gauntlet gently. "Physical objects, too, of course."

She rotated her forearms and clenched her fists. "These are amazing, Dray. I can't wait to try them out." She looked at each of her incredible friends and smiled softly. "Thank you all so much. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"Walk into the forest naked, no doubt," Theo suggested.

"Would that be considered brave or idiotic?" she wondered.

"Both, of course," Millicent said with a scoff. "Thank Salazar you aren't a Gryffindor, Rigel. You'd be maimed within minutes."

"No talk of maiming before the task," Pansy said sternly. "Besides, I haven't given *my* present to Rigel yet."

"No one could ever forget you, Pansy," Rigel said fondly. "Still, you didn't have to get me anything."

"My gift is immaterial," Pansy declared haughtily. At Rigel's curious look, she settled into a grin. "I'm going to braid your hair."

Rigel blinked. "And that's... not a punishment?"

Her friends chortled. Glancing between Rigel's fearful smile and Pansy's unyielding expression, Theo said, "That's our cue, mates. I'll see you at dinner, Rigel."

He left, followed shortly by Blaise and Millicent. Rosier cast a single, unreadable glance at Pansy before following suit, Rookwood on his heels. They each bid her good luck even as they abandoned her to Pansy's tender mercy.

When it was only Rigel, Pansy, and Draco left in the room, Pansy let out a chuckle. "Honestly, I don't have to braid it if you don't want. I just thought you'd like some time to yourself before dinner."

Rigel sank onto her bed with a sigh of relief. "I would, actually. Some peace right now would be priceless, Pan-but only if you and Draco stay, of course." She didn't want to be left entirely alone with her thoughts, after all. Nothing good would come of that.

Draco sat on his own bed, Pansy primly perching on the edge beside him. His eyes took on an intent focus as they roamed over Rigel's relaxed form. "Have you packed everything you need?" he asked.

She nodded. "It's all in my book bag. Potions kit, first-aid supplies, food and water, emergency portkey, and a few other odds and ends. I'll add the cloak and be all set."

"What about your starlight," Draco pressed. "That'll come in handy in the forest."

Rigel lied. "It's in there, too." It wasn't, of course. Archie's starlight would never shine for her, so he'd taken it to AIM with him. She did have the invisibility cloak, though. Merlin willing, she wouldn't need it.

Draco's intent expression didn't let up. As the phantom pain came from her subconscious, warning her, Draco sighed. "You're worried," he said flatly. "It's upsetting you."

She shrugged her shoulders. "Hard not to be. Anything could happen tonight."

"Let me help," Draco said. He leaned forward and reached across the gap between their beds toward her. "Take my hand."

Frowning, she examined his outstretched palm. "I'm okay, Dray."

He leant forward all the way and plucked her hand from her lap. "Relax, Rigel. You've helped me plenty of time. I've finally learned how to turn it around, I think." She felt it the moment Draco's magic reached out and attempted to wrap itself around hers. At first, she balked at the invasive feeling. Her head grew tight with pain as Dom made his complaints known simultaneously. Draco grunted. "Don't fight it. Trust me, Rigel."

She tried. She consciously clamped down on the urge to throw up her Occlumency walls and instead attempted to allow Draco the control he needed to connect to her emotions with his gift. Almost at once, a flood of calm washed over her senses, momentarily blurring her perception completely. "Can you dial it back?" she gasped, shaking her head against the heady sensation. The feeling of floating receded, and in its place was a peaceful numbness that left her oddly still, as though a wind that she hadn't noticed buffeting her had suddenly blown out. Through the almost eerie stillness, she managed to ask, "When did you learn this?"

Draco sounded pleased with himself as he admitted, "I've been practicing on fish in the Black Lake for a while. It works through the glass in our common room, you know."

"That's great," she said with numb lips. It was impressive that he'd learned to project emotions onto others after only a couple of years with his gift. Impressive, and also a bit terrifying. She couldn't deny that she was a lot less stressed than she had been before, though. It didn't feel entirely natural, but she supposed it wouldn't hurt to let Draco project serenity on her for a few minutes. "Feels good. Is this how normal people feel all the time?"

Draco laughed. "I doubt it. Pretty sure I don't have the ratio of pleasure-to-numbness down yet. I'll try to lighten it up again."

Rigel nodded as the strangely airy feeling slowly dissipated, leaving only staid acceptance in its place. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Better. I only feel a little bit drunk, now."

Draco released her hand as Pansy wrinkled her nose. "You don't drink, Rigel."

"I've been dosed with enough experimental prank potions to understand the feeling," Rigel said. She tilted her head at the girl, examining the fringe that fell across her brow with a critical frown. "Do you still want to braid my hair, Pan?" she offered. "It is getting a bit long."

"I noticed you tossing it out of your eyes in your duel with Draco," Pansy agreed. She crossed to Rigel's bed and climbed up beside her. Sure fingers carded through her curl-prone locks and captured the strands at her temple one by one. "It's really only bad here in the front," she commented. The girl was so close Rigel could feel her breath against her face and awkwardly averted her gaze toward Draco, who met her gaze with a smirk. Rigel narrowed her eyes at him, but otherwise couldn't move under Pansy's ministrations.

"Leave the sides," Rigel requested. "That way I can hide the beacon Millicent and Theo gave me."

Pansy nodded with a hum of agreement. When she had reached a length that satisfied her, Pansy transferred the strands to her left



hand. She collected her wand with the other hand, tapping the half-braid firmly and letting go with her hand simultaneously. "There. That spell will stay for at least twelve hours, and it won't slip like a fastener would."

Rigel reached up a hand to feel her fringe gathered into a single braid that hugged her head loosely back to the top of her crown, where it was affixed. After that, the hair hung freely among the rest of her locks. She shook her head firmly and felt nothing slip. "Thanks, Pan," she said, smiling gratefully. "I reckon I'm about as ready as I'll ever be."

"Good thing, since it's almost dinner time," Draco said, standing with a stretch. He looked Rigel from head to toe as she and Pansy rose as well. "Don't forget your cloak."

She collected her book bag and gently pushed the cloak into the space at the top. It would be a good cushion for the rest of the contents, she thought. With everything she needed now secured, Rigel shrunk the bag down to the size of a matchbook and put it gently in her right-side trouser pocket. It fit easily next to George's firework device, and she pulled the string that secured the pocket tight.

"We should get him something more tactical for the next task," Pansy told Draco.

"I agree. It'll take time for him to fetch anything he might need. Maybe some kind of belt pouch?" Draco suggested.

"Still here," Rigel reminded them blandly. "And you two don't need to be acquiring things for me for every task."

"Are you going to get something to better carry your supplies for quick access?" Draco asked her pointedly.

Rigel pressed her lips together in exasperation before saying, "My book bag works just fine."

"We'll see how it goes for this task," Pansy allowed. "During your debrief with me and Millie we can discuss it again."

She let out a small sigh, but knew she would not win an argument on the subject at that time. Instead, she focused on re-tying her boots and tucking the laces away securely so they couldn't catch on anything. Boots. Pants and pockets. Breathable undershirt and Hogwarts jersey. Wand holster. Gauntlets. Gloves. She was ready. "Let's go," she said. She felt strong. Prepared. There was a lightness to her bearing that she had been missing. Draco ought to bottle his ability and sell it in the streets. He'd be richer than Midas in no time.

Draco sighed. "Aren't you forgetting something, Rye?"

She blinked. "No?"

He crossed to her trunk and picked up the robes she'd been wearing before putting the jersey on. When he thrust his hand in the pocket, Rigel realized with a flick of her wrist that she'd neglected to put her wand *in* the holster.

"Merlin help us," Pansy murmured and Draco produced the holly wand from her robes and held it toward Rigel with a shake of his head.

"I was using it earlier in my lab and just forgot to put it back in the holster afterwards," Rigel defended.

"That's what you have us for," Draco huffed. "So try not to forget your head in the forest if you can help it." When she opened her mouth he held up a hand, forestalling her. "Ah-ah! Don't make any promises you can't keep, Rigel. Just *try* ."

Pansy giggled. Even Rigel had to grin. What *would* she do without them? She plucked the wand from Draco's hand and tucked it through the bottom of the gauntlet to rest securely in its holster where it might actually be of use to her. "Now, let's go," Pansy said.

She looped her arm through Rigel's. "My parents didn't spring for the VIP tent, but I can at least walk you down from the castle."

It was a mark of the diminishing influence of Draco's calming magic on her that Rigel mustered a frown of confusion. "VIP tent? Aren't we going to the Great Hall?"

Pansy cast her a worried glance. "Didn't Professor Snape tell you that the champions are to feast with the distinguished visitors who've come to watch the first task? You go to his office every other day, it seems. I thought you were *strategizing* ."

"We've focused rather heavily on what happens after I go into the forest, for some reason," Rigel said wryly. "What's this special feast, then? Am I required to go?"

"If they're charging 100 galleons a head for the buffet, I imagine the champions are expected to attend," Draco drawled. They stepped into the common room to find a crowd gathered at the entrance. "We're to have an escort, it seems."

When the students began to notice Rigel walking toward them, many broke out into spontaneous applause and patted her on her back as she passed.

"Good luck, Black!"

"Show 'em what for."

"I've got good money on you." This was from Adrian Pucey, who winked at her as she shot him a disapproving look.

Rigel thanked her housemates over and over, nodding her head here and smiling in gratitude there until she, Pansy, and Draco had cut a path to the door. They led the way through the dungeons and up into the Entrance Hall and another rowdy cheer broke out as the students peeled off for their feast in the Great Hall and left Pansy and Draco to walk Rigel out the doors.

The night wind was already snaking questing fingers into their clothes, and Rigel said, "You guys don't have to come all the way out with me. I can see it from here."

Pansy grimaced, but nodded. She hadn't brought her cloak to dinner, though Draco had. Actually, Draco was quite well dressed now that she looked at him properly. The blonde girl moved forward to very gingerly embrace Rigel. "Be safe," she whispered. "I'll see you after. No matter what happens, just come back safe."

Rigel nodded, though she didn't promise anything with words. She knew better than to tempt Fate's hand on a night when chance might have enormous impact on her immediate quality of life. Pansy gave her a last reassuring smile and dashed back indoors. When she turned expectant eyes on Draco, the boy smirked.

"As if my parents would miss this," he scoffed. "I'm obviously coming to the VIP tent with you."

She grinned back at him. "We mustn't be late, then. All those people of dignity will think the Malfoys have had an unduly poor influence on the Black scion."

Draco tutted at her as they strode toward a large, white pavilion that glittered in the setting sun. "If anything, everyone will be grateful I managed to wrangle a Black into even a semblance of punctuality. Wasn't your family one of the last to arrive to the New Year's gala last year?"

"Year before that, I think," she said thoughtfully. "And we were also late to your birthday party last summer, weren't we? It's almost as though my father was an anti-social hermit for a decade."

They reached the fabric-covered entrance and peeled back the flap. However big the tent had seemed on the outside, it was nothing to the space that existed within its magical dimensions. Her eyes followed the milling of a hundred glittering attendees and Rigel looked down at her forest-ready outfit with a grimace.

"Do you think I'm underdressed?"

"Unavoidably," Draco confirmed. He removed his cloak with a flourish, revealing the full immaculate splendor of his outfit. She shot his polished shoes a dirty look. Really, he might have warned her. "Look, there's Mother. Your father, too. I guess you *are* the least punctual of the Blacks."

"I'll never live down the shame," she intoned.

After handing his cloak off to a house elf standing by, Draco steered her briskly through the throng of people, many of whom did a double take at Rigel's face and attire. Upon closer inspection, they found that Mrs. Malfoy and Sirius also stood near the Minister of Magic and his entourage. James was there, in smart robes that were nevertheless still clearly marked with the DMLE's crest. His watchful eyes caught hers briefly and he nodded.

"Archie, there you are!" Sirius bounded forward and embraced Rigel fiercely. "I wondered if we'd have to send someone to find you. How are you, pup? Nervous? Excited?"

"I'm fine, Dad. Feeling good, in fact. Sorry I'm late; I didn't find out about the VIP thing until just now," she said, affecting Archie's sheepish grin. "Guess I should pay a little more attention to things going on around me, huh?"

"Only if you want to survive the night," Draco muttered.

"Young Mr. Malfoy, it's been too long." Sirius stepped back from Rigel and extended his hand to grip Draco's firmly in a gesture of respect. "I suppose it was you who ensured my son's semi-timely arrival?"

Draco's smirk was positively engorged with amusement at Rigel's expense. "You know how Rigel is; he'd never leave the lab if we didn't lure him out with food."

Sirius's eyebrows rose in amusement. "Our Harry is just the same at home. Seems even when he spends the entire summer away her influence rubs off on him."

"Right here," she tried halfheartedly. Mrs. Malfoy came to her rescue.

"Now is no time to tease the young man of the hour," Narcissa said firmly. Her gaze alone brushed Sirius two steps back so that she could move squarely before Rigel. They were nearly of a height now, she realized with surprise. She could still remember the first time she'd met the lovely lady, when her head had scarcely reached Mrs. Malfoy's chin.

Rigel took Narcissa's outstretched hand with a practiced bow. "I hope you have come to support me tonight, Lady Malfoy. My every step will be sure if I walk with the knowledge of your favor."

"Then I expect you won't stumble." Narcissa smiled.

"If he does, it'll be because the fool is competing in his potions boots instead of his trainers," Draco told his mother with a long-suffering sigh.

"Won't they slow you down?" Mrs. Malfoy asked with a frown.

"Not in the least. Besides, if I step on a runespoor in trainers my stint in this tournament will be very short," Rigel reasoned. "These things will at least slow it down."

Sirius looked curiously down at the boots as well. "Doesn't Harry have a pair like that?"

Rigel nodded cheerfully. "She recommended them a while back. And they're wonderful." And Archie would be getting a used pair for Christmas to collaborate her lie.

Draco looked ready to make some other, doubtless disparaging, comment about her lovely boots, but he was interrupted by the

Minister. Fudge came forward and clasped a hand jovially on Rigel's shoulder. "All ready are you, Mr. Black?"

She slid her eyes curiously across his face, wondering whether he was truly asking. The wide smile plastered across his it made her think otherwise. "As ready as can be expected, with so much mystery surrounding the task," she said evenly.

"Yes, devilishly tricky fellow, our Lord Riddle," Fudge said proudly. "I don't doubt you're in for a few surprises. Still, you'll do us proud, won't you?"

"If I don't, I'm sure one of the other two competitors from Great Britain will," she assured the man with false cheer.

"Ah. Yes, of course," Fudge said. His smile was not quite as brilliant as it had been, but he seemed prepared to bluster through his uncertainty. "Marvelous, to have so many competitors together in one event, isn't it? The tournaments of the past had three champions, but we've got *nine*, and representing the whole world, too."

She wondered if it escaped him that, as three of the nine were citizens of Magical Britain and four spoke English as their native language, the tournament wasn't all that representative of the global magical community at all. She settled for saying, "What good luck that Mr. Riddle felt like arranging such an opportunity this year."

The Minister's face fell a little more at the implied dismissal of the Ministry's part in organizing the tournament, but he recovered quickly. "Yes, we're lucky to have such a civil servant in our times."

"I was curious about something, though," she told the Minister, blinking at him slowly. She saw James grimace at her from the corner of her eye, but she couldn't help herself. It was the same at the World Cup. There was something extremely irresistible about making this small, blustery man uncomfortable.

Considering his part in how uncomfortable her year had become, she didn't feel too bad as he melted under her wide gaze and said, "Ah. Yes? I can't reveal *too* many surprises, mind you, but you are the first to ask..."

She smiled tightly. "I just meant about the logistics of the tournament, Minister. While we're all wandering around in the Dark Forest, how exactly will anyone watch our progress? Or are we to enter unmonitored?"

"Definitely not," Fudge exclaimed, laughing loudly. "Why, imagine! A spectator sport where no one could see what was happening. No, Mr. Black, we've a very special system in place for this tournament." He winked at her exaggeratedly.

"So the competitors will be monitored," Narcissa prompted.

"Yes, yes, Dumbledore himself insisted on it, you know. It was the major condition to his full cooperation with tournament preparations," Fudge confided. "Very careful, that Dumbledore. His old Alchemy Master is the one who came up with the concept, in fact."

"Nicholas Flamel?" Rigel said, surprised. The famous Alchemist had purportedly been retired for years, living a quiet life on the continent. He didn't take commissions any longer, though she supposed if anyone was worth an exception it was Albus Dumbledore.

"The very same," Fudge said, nodding smugly. "You see he invented some kind of rune pattern that connects two points. Every champion will get a headband with a sort of magical sensor on it, and just across the lawn as we speak there are nine great mirrors on the Quidditch pitch. Every champion's surroundings will be visible on the mirrors, you see?"

"That sounds like Muggle technology," Sirius said, looking curious. "The telly-visy that Arthur is always talking about."



"A television, I believe," Narcissa said. At Sirius' incredulous look, she lifted her chin regally. "You think your friends are the only ones who keep tabs on Muggle affairs?"

"Evidently not," Sirius said, inclining his head with an easy smile. "Tell us more about this televisin, Cissy."

"I'd rather let the Minister explain it," Narcissa said primly. She cut cool eyes toward Fudge and added, "How does it work exactly, Minister Fudge? Will the runic array on the champions' headbands transmit sound as well as images to the mirrors?"

Fudge cleared his throat. "Well, I'm no expert, you understand. Lord Riddle seems to think the sound will... take turns, in a way. So it won't be confusing, see? Just one at a time... I believe."

Rigel had to conclude that Fudge was attempting to repeat an explanation that had only been given to him once-one that he had merely pretended to understand at the time, no less. "That sounds very entertaining," she offered. "A shame I will not get to see it myself."

"Not unless you don't make the cut for the final rounds," Sirius said, smiling unrepentantly in the face of the sour look she shot him for it. "Then you can watch with the other students."

"Something to look forward to, then," Rigel drawled. "If you'll excuse me Minister, Father, Lady Malfoy. I must get something to eat before the task."

"Yes, of course," Fudge said jovially, patting Rigel on the shoulder once again. "You must keep your strength up. It might be a long night, eh?"

"Just so." She kept a polite smile in place until she lost sight of the Minister in the crowd. She'd only just reached the long table of food in the center of the pavilion when Malfoy caught up to her.

"Must you bait the Minister of Magic so blatantly?" her friend asked as they took plates and began a slow perusal of the options.

"He didn't seem to notice, so what's the harm?" Her nose wrinkled as she took in the rich spread before her. It all looked dreadfully heavy. She didn't fancy sprinting through the woods on a bursting stomach.

"Everyone else noticed," Draco told her sternly. "It's fine in front of Mother and your family, but anyone who overhears will get the wrong idea about your political leanings."

Or exactly the right idea, she mused, unconcerned. She settled on a couple of rolls and several slices of cured salami. Draco eyed her plate critically but didn't comment, and the two of them found a table in the corner to eat their fill. Looking around at the crowd of posh partygoers, Rigel had to smile. It was impossible to maintain an air of serious contemplation or deadly anticipation amidst this flock of utterly unaffected fools. She wondered whether it had been Riddle's idea to make the night of the first task such an aggressive money-maker or whether the Minister and the budgetless Department of Magical Games and Sports had grasped the chance for extra funds with both hands.

"Everything felt perfectly solemn until this," she remarked to Draco when they'd successfully inhaled their food without interruption. "How do they expect any of us to concentrate on the night ahead?"

"Maybe this *is* the first task," Draco suggested. "First you have to traverse the deadly peril of social disgrace and then escape the grasping talons of desperate socialites. Next, carefully avoid food poisoning at a dubious buffet. Then, and only then, do you earn the privilege of actually fighting for your life in a forest infested with some of the most dangerous magical creatures on earth."

"Makes sense," Rigel agreed. "You have to build up to the heart-stopping terror. If we confront it all at once it won't be appropriately didactic."

"And what moral are we meant to take away from these festivities," her friend wondered aloud.

Rigel was stumped for a moment. Finally, she offered, "Never worry about dismemberment now when it might not happen for another hour?"

Draco frowned. "I don't know, Rigel. It doesn't even rhyme."

She tried again. "A feast of poisoned slime saves a whole lot of time?"

He choked on his glass of punch. "That's criminal. Don't ever become a poet, Rye."

"Only for your delicate sensibilities," she promised.

Draco's eyes caught something over her shoulder and he smiled. "Father is here. Let's go say hi."

Rigel rose and piled her plate on top of his. "You go ahead. I'll find the litterbin and meet you in a moment." Her friend eyed her somewhat suspiciously, but she gave him her most reassuring smile. It only made him more suspicious, she noticed, but he did go on without her. Rigel took her time scanning the room for a receptacle of some kind, and instead spotted the person she most needed to speak with before the first task.

Hermione stood alone at the edge of the pavilion, picking nervously at a plate of hours d'oeuvres. Rigel abandoned her plates shamelessly on an empty table and pressed her way hurriedly toward the girl. Draco would forgive her absence for a little while.

"Hermione," she said, catching the muggleborn girl's eyes as she approached.

"Rigel." Hermione smiled in a relieved fashion. "I thought I was the only one in practical clothing for this event. Have you seen

Delacour? She's in an ankle-length gown."

"She'll probably change after the feast," Rigel said, chuckling. She eyed Hermione's sensible jeans and sweater. "Will you be warm enough in that?"

Hermione raised her eyebrows. "Did Harry ask you to mother me?"

"No, actually." Rigel took a breath and just went for it. "I think we should team up."

"Tonight? Little late notice, isn't it?" Hermione's eyebrows drew together in a frown. "Aren't there rules against collusion?"

"Nothing explicate, which basically means it's encouraged," Rigel told her. A Slytherin had written the rules, after all.

"Is it really smart to pretend to work together, though? I know you feel like you need to look out for me, but we are competitors, remember," Hermione said sternly.

"Technically we aren't competitors until the final round. Until then, our only competition are the others in our respective groups. This is a good move for the both of us. I'm an athlete. My reactions are quick and I have the raw power to keep up a strong shield around us for some time. You're a veritable genius according to my cousin. You'll be an advantage if there are puzzles we have to solve in there. You be my smarts and I'll be your reflexes."

"Why do I feel like you have plenty of smarts?" Hermione asked wryly.

"Two heads are better than one," Rigel insisted.

"Two wands, too." Hermione looked tempted, but wary. "How would it work, then? We don't know where we'll be entering the forest, or even if it's in the same place."

"I'll find you," Rigel promised.

Hermione narrowed her eyes. "And I'm to just wait for your arrival?" She obviously suspected it might be a ploy to get her to waste time at the beginning of the task.

"No, you should head inward. I'll jog a diagonal path and catch up to you."

"How will you find me?" the brunette wanted to know.

"I can sense magic that's around me. I think I can recognize you from a fair distance," she revealed.

"What if you're wrong?"

"Then you're no worse off," Rigel said. "I really think we could help one another out, though. This task is going to be tough. The creatures in that forest are not ones anyone should have to face alone."

Hermione looked sharply at her. "You know what sorts of things to expect? I found a copy of *Hogwarts, A History* in the library that mentioned Acromantula and Centaurs. It was a little dated, though. Do those sort of creatures really still reside in the forest?"

"Those are the locals," Rigel confirmed. "There's a bunch of new creatures too, though. I'll tell you all about them if you team up with me."

Hermione made a face. "Tempting me with knowledge-you *are* a snake."

Rigel laughed. She didn't know if Hermione expected her to understand the Biblical reference or not. "I wouldn't tempt just anyone, though."

"I'm sure you have your pick of alliances," Hermione said shrewdly. "You're the one with the home pitch advantage, after all. I'd be a fool to refuse."

"We both know you're no fool."

Hermione huffed a laugh. "Consider me teamed, then. Do I get a jersey, too?"

Rigel shook her head with a triumphant grin. "Sorry. It's one of a kind. I look forward to working with you, Hermione." She held out a palm between them.

"And I look forward to hearing just what else we're expected to go up against tonight," Hermione returned, shaking her hand firmly.

"Let's talk after the feast," Rigel agreed. "Since we're already so well-dressed, I'll meet you by the forest when this lot heads down to the pitch."

"What's on the pitch?"

"The television screens everyone will be watching us on," she said, smiling innocently at Hermione's scowl of disbelief.

"You can't use electricity near so much latent magical energy," Hermione said briskly. "What's really down there?"

"If we do well enough in the tasks, you may never find out," Rigel mused.

"I want to know now," Hermione protested, an incredulous laugh escaping her lips. "You're just as bad as Harry, teasing me."

"If you see the Minister, you should ask him to explain it," Rigel suggested, eyes lit with amusement. "He's really much better at articulating the complexities than I am."

"Maybe I will," Hermione said, jutting her chin up in response to her challenge.

"He's just over there." Rigel indicated the direction of her father's mop of black hair. "While you do that, I must find Draco again. He

gets a little high strung if I ignore him too long."

Hermione let her go, but Rigel felt the girl's intelligent brown eyes trailing after her. An alliance had been an inspired idea. Archie's friend was more than just book smart-she was quick-witted. In a crisis, the latter was where talent turned to ability.

Rigel sank into the crowd, weaving along with its flow until she spotted trademark platinum blond. It wasn't Draco, but his father, crossing the pavilion to greet Lord Riddle as he stepped through the entrance. She had been wondering when Riddle was going to turn up. It was his party, in a manner of speaking, and she never saw him eschew the limelight unless he had business to attend too. Shady business, at that. His path into the tent took him right by Rigel, who waved a bit disingenuously. She expected him to ignore her, but then Lucius stopped and Riddle paused alongside him.

"Rigel. I see Draco delivered House Malfoy's gift," he said, casting an admiring glance over her gauntlets. "I hope you found them satisfactory?"

"More than, Lord Malfoy," she said, bowing her head in thanks. "I am honored by the regard your house has shown me."

"I have not forgotten the debt that binds your house to mine," Lucius said graciously. "Use them well and do us proud."

"I'll do my best," she said. It was all she could offer, really.

"We know you will," Riddle said with a curl of amusement in his voice. "Do excuse us-we have not yet made the rounds." The two men swept away, leaving Rigel to turn in a slow circle.

Draco had grown over the summer, but he might not be tall enough to see in such a crush, she had to admit. Resigned to searching for her friend the hard way, she began to wander. Here and there she spotted the other eight champions making small talk or filling up on the buffet. The expression on most of their faces was universally

impatient. If they felt like she did, they'd much rather be mentally preparing for the task, not expending reserves of patience and concentration they could little afford to lose.

"Archie," she heard over the crowd. There were only a couple of people present who would call her that, so she stopped moving and looked about her. It was James. He broke through the milieu with a sigh and put a hand on her shoulder bracingly. "How do you feel, sport? Well-rested? Get enough to eat?"

She grinned. "Did Aunt Lily ask you to check, or did Remus?"

James laughed. "It was one question from each of them. I'm also to ensure that you've not been cursed, confounded, or otherwise compromised mentally or physically."

Her grin softened into a fond smile. "I'm just fine, Uncle. I promise."

His face grew serious, and she recognized the Head Auror now in his searching gaze. "We thought you were trying to stay out of the tournament, Arch. What happened? Did someone from the SOW Party threaten you?"

Her father was often described by others as brave and determined. Many forgot that he was also smart-you didn't get to be Head Auror if you weren't-and those who did forget often regretted it. James had enough information from what she and Archie had sent home in carefully crafted letters to come to his own conclusions. There weren't many who benefitted from Rigel's participation in the tournament; Riddle's party benefitted twice.

"It wasn't threats," she told him, regret lacing her words. "I'm sorry, Uncle James, but this was an opportunity I couldn't refuse. If I win the tournament, it will be good for everyone."

His face was pained. "It's dangerous, Archie. We only want you to be safe. After last year-"



"Last year taught me valuable lessons," she interrupted. "The year before that, too. I'm stronger now, and wiser, too. I'll be as safe as may be. I hope I make you all proud."

"Of course we're proud," James said, deflating. "We'll be cheering harder than anyone tonight. Lily stayed home with Addy-she's in a very clingy stage, but Remus is going to try and come as soon as the moon sets."

Her eyes widened. "He shouldn't strain himself so soon after the transformation. I'll be just fine, D-don't worry." Bugger. She'd almost called him 'Dad.' "Tell Uncle Remus there's no need."

"Rampaging hippogriffs couldn't keep him away," James said firmly. He glanced around the room, eyes cataloguing everything they beheld in a sweeping judgment. He looked back at her with apology in his face. "The Minister has noticed I'm missing. Before I go, is there anything you need for tonight? I've got my Auror kit on me."

She shook her head. "Thanks, but I'm well-prepared. I've got enough supplies for a week of camping out in that forest."

James grinned. "Atta boy. Blow them all away, Arch. I'll see you after."

Rigel watched him go, and a pinched pocket of emotion in her chest that she hadn't really noticed carrying eased. At least one of Riddle's possible intentions had come to naught. Her family may not understand why she was participating in the tournament, but they hadn't pulled away from her for it. She should never have let even the tiniest drop of doubt creep in; she could count on her family's support no matter what.

When she found Draco, he was with Regulus Black, chatting animatedly about something the required hand-motions.

"-and it bounced into me and knocked me right off my feet! I had no idea a Fortis shield could be used that way."

Alarmed, Rigel cut into their conversation with an uneasy lurch in her throat. "Draco, there you are. I saw your father, but you'd wandered off."

Draco spun around and favored her with a scowl. " / wandered off? Father and I waited, but when Lord Riddle came in, he had to go greet him. Luckily, there are *some* members of your family who can be counted on to maintain social graces."

"Just the one," she corrected him. "Hello, Uncle Regulus. I hope you're enjoying the evening."

"Nephew," Regulus acknowledged. "Heir Malfoy was just recounting a duel he had with you recently. I understand you have been practicing in your free time; that is wise of you. I don't doubt those skills will be called upon before the year is over."

"Draco is a gifted teacher," Rigel said, smiling. "It would be foolish not to take advantage of his talents in preparing myself for the tournament."

"The way he tells it, you could teach in your own right," Regulus said, eyes bright with undisguised interest. "Your use of the Fortis shield sounds perfectly inspired. Where did you learn such a technique?"

The red flag that had risen slowly when she overheard Draco's conversation was now blowing full tilt in the breeze. Regulus had overseen construction of the arena for the free-dueling tournament that summer. If he had stayed to watch the matches, he would have seen the Fortis shield used in the way Draco described. Rigel tilted her head to the side innocently. "Oh, that? My cousin taught me. She said she saw someone down Diagon Alley practicing the move this summer. It seemed like a fun trick, so we figured out how to recreate it."

"Where in Diagon Alley?" Regulus asked. His voice was inflectionless, as though the answer didn't mean a thing to him. As

though he were only making small talk. Except Regulus Black didn't make small talk.

Rigel shrugged with a slight frown. "I'm not too sure. I think she said there was a pub just off the beaten path. The Prancing Pony or something. I guess they have a big court right in front and some people were mucking about for fun there."

"I know the place," Regulus said slowly. "Your... cousin should be careful where she wanders. Some of those 'mucking about' down there are dangerous."

Her eyes widened in dismay. "I'll tell her. I'm sure she wouldn't want to get mixed up in anything unsafe. She just goes poking around for apothecaries from time to time. Says there are better bargains away from the tourist strip."

She saw the moment Regulus accepted her story as plausible. His lip curled slightly in contemptuous understanding. Rigel wondered if anyone had ever warned him that his habit of compartmentalizing his conceptions of people would stunt his perception. She supposed he might prefer it stunted. Some people just wanted the world to make sense, never mind whether that 'sense' had anything to do with reality.

"I'd advise you to keep such tricks to a minimum in the tournament," Regulus said, twisting his lips restively. "A proper pureblood doesn't stoop to cheap entertainment when he duels. If you come up against the other competitors, finish them fast, without finesse."

She couldn't help the way her eyebrows rose in response to his remonstrations. "That style may work for some, but my dueling style is as natural to me as the way I run. To change it at this stage only risks hobbling myself. Thank you for the advice, Uncle, but if it comes to dueling, I'll simply do whatever it takes to win. Sorry in advance if that embarrasses you."

Regulus narrowed his eyes at her. "Let's hope you're as quick with your wand as you are with your mouth, Nephew. Good evening, Heir Malfoy."

Draco murmured a good evening in return, then turned to stare at Rigel with disbelief. "Are you determined to alienate everyone tonight? Your uncle is an all right bloke, you know. He was only trying to help."

"Regulus is always only trying to help the Family name; he gives little regard for the people who bear it," Rigel said dismissively. "He seeks to control me because he can't control my father. Sooner or later he'll have to accept that I'm my own person."

"You can be independent without being rude," Draco pointed out. "All you had to do is thank him for his advice and then go and do whatever you want. If he brings it up after the fact, you could just say you tried and failed to follow his advice."

"That only encourages more unwanted advice," she said, chuckling. "When did Pansy knock these subtle manners into you, anyway? Last year you would have been insulted on my behalf."

"I just worry you're pushing away allies faster then you can make them," Draco muttered.

"I have all the allies I need," she said, smiling reassuringly at him. "Why, I made a new one not half an hour ago while you were wandering off without me."

"I *wasn't* wandering -" Draco cut himself off with a frustrated growl. "You are determined to shred my composure at every turn, Rigel."

"It's overrated," she told him. "I like your candidness better."

"You're terrible at this game."

She sighed. "Oh dear. If I won't make a good poet or politician, what's left for me in this world?"

Draco snorted. "You make a passable clown."

"Good point. Maybe I can win over the other competitors with laughter." Rigel tapped her chin in mock contemplation. "Do you think humor translates across cultures?"

"Your humor would make a dog whine in any language," Draco said bluntly. Then he pursed his lips, considering. "Maybe as a last resort. They might groan themselves into defeat."

She laughed, but it didn't last long. Her friend's smile slid off his face in time with hers. Draco looked a little lost as his eyes searched her face worriedly. "Will you really be all right in there tonight?"

She slowly nodded. "Stay with Pansy while it happens," she requested.

He agreed easily. They stared at one another in solemn sobriety for a moment, and Rigel reflected that when it came down to it, there weren't any words that could rationalize or make palatable what she was about to do. Their reverie was broken by the amplified clearing of a full throat. Ludo Bagman was calling the gathering to attention in the most abrupt way imaginable.

"Ladies and gentlemen, champions, Minister, Lord Riddle, thank you all for coming! In a few moments, the champions will leave to prepare themselves for the night's events, and we invite you all to adjourn to the Quidditch Pitch where your VIP stadium boxes await." Bagman waited while the polite murmurs of excitement pittered in and out. "Contestants, you have one hour to make yourselves ready and meet back at the Gamekeeper's cabin. Good luck!"

"An hour," Draco repeated, frowning. "That's a while yet."

"Most of the others have to change," Rigel said. "I have some business to take care of, in any case."

He stared at her. "Now?"

"Yes," she said, blinking innocently. "Now."

Draco sighed and stuck his hand out to grasp hers firmly. "Be careful, Rye. Good luck."

"Thanks." She watched him melt into the churning crowd to find his parents. A steady string of glittering people she'd never met before touched her shoulder or elbow on their way by and offered their well wishes and words of confidence. She tried to smile politely at them, but by the dozenth anonymous congratulation she could feel the expression straining.

Rigel started making her way toward one of the exits, more than ready to get out of the tent and back into the night air. Minister Fudge and his entourage passed nearby her and she heard the portly politician saying irritably, "... better be more stable than the last one," to a blank faced Regulus Black. She supposed the ordinary Quidditch stands wouldn't be sufficient to hold all the extra spectators. It spoke of Regulus' extensive political connections that he was allowed the contract for the tournament after what happened at the World Cup.

Sirius caught her as she slipped outside, steering her away from prying eyes and around the back of the tent where it was quieter. He hugged her hard, almost as though he couldn't help himself. "I have something for you," he said after a deep breath. He let her go to reach into his pocket and un-shrink something a small bag about the size of her head. "James has been asking around the office, and Remus and I have been reaching out to all our old contacts as well. Information on this tournament is being kept close, but we managed to ferret out a few things you should know. I didn't want to risk a letter, since interference in a tournament this political would be bad

news for all of us, but-Archie, I don't know how to tell you. There's a *dragon* -"

"Dad, I know," she said lowly, glancing around to make sure there were no prying ears nearby. "I can talk to snakes, remember? I just asked one of the forest serpents to scout around for me. Thank you, and thank the others for looking for information for me, but you don't have to worry. I have a plan for the dragon." Sort of. If running away counted as a plan.

Sirius's worry melted into surprise before he beamed at her. "Good man! Right, then. This is from Remus and me." He held out the sack to her curious fingers. "Officially, James has no part in it." He winked at her, and she smiled back. Her family was really the best, sometimes. Not everyone's relatives would risk political fallout for one another.

She opened the bag and pulled out items one by one. First was a bundle of barrier buttons. "These will be useful," she murmured, nodding gratefully. Next she withdrew a roll of... stickers? "Do I need to accessorize or something?" she joked.

"They'll muffle the sound of anything you stick 'em to," Sirius said conspiratorially. "For your shoes."

Rigel grinned. "Brilliant, Dad. When did you come up with that?"

"Marauder Inc. has been busy this month," Sirius said loftily. "Keep going."

She took a small cylinder from the bag and held it up to her nose to read in the gathering darkness. "Fire Free Burn Baste? Is it some kind of cooking spray?"

Sirius chuckled. "We originally designed it as a sort of 'impress your friend by walking through fire' gag, but I've beefed up the recipe for you. Mist it over your clothes and skin, and it'll absorb heat that registers above your body temperature. It only lasts about four

hours, but I'm hoping it'll hold off dragon fire just long enough for you to run. Granted, we haven't tested it against anything more potent than the fireplace, so don't go thinking you're invincible."

"This is amazing, Dad. Thank you. And thank Remus, and-"

"Pup, you don't have to thank us. Just come back safe," Sirius said, putting a hand on her head and smiling wanly at her. "I don't know what I'd do if I ever lost you, Arch."

"You won't ever have to find out," she promised. At least, even if everything else somehow went wrong in the forest, she knew that she could keep that one promise. Archie would be safe.

Sirius cleared his throat and shook his head embarrassedly. "Anyway, there's one more thing, from Lily." He dropped a perfectly circular disk of obsidian into her hand. It had a small hole drilled through the center where a string threaded through. "To be honest, I don't know exactly what it does, but she was adamant you wear it. I told her it wasn't your style, but you know how women are."

Rigel favored him with an unimpressed look and brought the stone up to squint at it more carefully. "There's some sort of runic shorthand here, but it's miniscule. I'd need a magnifying spell to read it. She didn't tell you what it does?"

"She tried, but it's a bit above me," Sirius admitted. "I gather it's something she's been experimenting with on and off for a while, and since she's been given a leave of absence from work, she's devoted most of her time to perfecting it. Supposedly it can detect different types of magic headed toward you based on its frequency and vector, and some other stuff that sounded pretty technical... and I think it's some kind of defense mechanism. Lily can explain better when you see her next. She says you don't have to activate it or anything; just wear it, and it will work when it needs to."

"That's ominous," Rigel muttered. Still, she dutifully tied the string to her belt as she added, "If Aunt Lily invented it, it's probably both



brilliant and terrifying." She stored the rest of the items methodically, placing them in pockets she would remember. Two of the stickers went onto her boots immediately.

"I suppose that's all I can do you for, son," Sirius said, looking reluctant to go.

She gave him her best Archie-smile. The one that said nothing in the world could bring him down. "I've got this, Dad. I'll see you after and we'll celebrate how amazingly cool I look on mirror-vision."

Sirius allowed himself to grin back at her. "I bet it adds ten pounds."

"Of muscle? Try to catch all the girls who swoon."

"It would be a twist of fate if the papers tomorrow weren't about the first task but instead the witches, young and old, who fell to their deaths at the sight of the chubby Hogwarts champion," Sirius mused.

"Dad," she protested. "I'm not fat."

"I'm only saying you'll probably *look* fat," he corrected her.

She sighed dramatically. "Go, now. I refuse to be tormented so before my big moment." When Sirius hesitated, clearly torn, she said, more seriously, "Really, Dad. I've got to get ready. See you after?"

"Right after," he promised. "Knock 'em out, kid. I love you."

"Love you, too."

He left, and Rigel took a moment to breathe deeply before squaring her shoulders. She still had work to do, and the first task drew near.

She cut through the night toward Hagrid's hut. A twinkling, floating beacon of light hung suspended in the air above it, she supposed in case any of the competitors weren't sure where exactly it was

located. Hermione was pacing before the garden gate when Rigel arrived.

"You're here, good," Hermione said with a tense smile. "Give me all the facts, please."

Rigel leaned against the fence and began the rundown of what the girl should expect in the Dark Forest. "You know about the Acromantula and the Centaurs. The spiders are bigger than anything you're probably imagining. The books will tell you they grow about horse-sized, but the ones in this forest can be twice that tall. Their hides are resistant to spells, and their bite will poison."

"Are they fast?" Hermione asked, chewing on her lips.

"Very. And they eat people," she added, grimacing. "So best to steer clear. The centaurs of course are Beings, which means they can come after you with *intelligence*. The local herd hates intruders and about eighty percent of them will attack a human on sight. Some will leave children alone, but not if they bear weapons-which we do, as they consider a wand to be combative."

"Okay," Hermione said weakly. "Avoid the spiders and the centaurs. What else?"

Rigel leveled a serious look at the other girl. "I'll be honest, Hermione. Most of my plans tonight involve avoiding and running away. Also in the forest are manticores, quintapedes, trolls, chimera, snallygasters, runespoors, and at least one Peruvian Vipertooth. Plus the Sphinx."

"A dragon?" She began to pace again. "What are they playing at? It can't possibly be humane to keep all those creatures locked up in the same place. Then again, maybe they'll be busy fighting one another and won't notice us."

"They'll probably be confined to their own areas," Rigel offered.

"It's still an enormous risk they're putting us to," Hermione muttered. "And this only the first task."

"Riddle wants to start it with a bang," Rigel reasoned. "Also, we'll be monitored while we're in the forest, remember."

"But even if we shoot up red sparks as soon as we see the dragon, it still might roast us before help arrives," Hermione said flatly.

Rigel had to admit, that was probably true. Unless they had Medi-wizards standing by in secret throughout the forest. Somehow, she doubted that would be the case.

"So, we avoid as many creatures as we can, and when we can't, we run away," Hermione reiterated. Her face twisted in concern. "We could never outrun a chimera. Nor most of the other things."

"We use just enough magic to slow it down or stop it long enough to get away," Rigel amended. "If we have to engage something, here's the plan: for spiders and centaurs, target the legs; for quintapedes and chimera, the underbelly; for manticores and dragons, the eyes; for snallygasters, the wings; for trolls, the top of the skull. The sphinx will only try and gut us if we can't answer its riddle, so at least there's a chance for civility there. Got all that?"

"And runespoors?" Hermione asked impatiently. "Which head is poisonous again?"

"I'll take care of the runespoors," she said. "But it's the right head."

"Fine, then. Legs, underbelly, eyes, wings, skull. Got it, thanks." Hermione's face was a lot scarier when she was processing information, Rigel realized as she watched the girl think furiously. She looked a bit like Lily in the midst of a challenging project, actually.

"Step one is meeting up, though," Rigel said. "It's unlikely we'll all be sent into the forest together. If we are, great, but if not I'll find you

right off."

"I'll try to travel on a straight vector to help you find me," Hermione agreed.

"Let's talk about strengths and weaknesses, now," Rigel suggested. "Can you ride a broom?"

"I-no," the girl said sourly. "They don't agree with me."

"Ok, I'll teach you that sometime before the next task," Rigel said, making a mental note. "It'll be useful one day, I promise. We won't need the extra broom, then."

"You brought brooms?" Hermione asked, sounding incredulous.

"Of course. Just in case. I already know you can Heal. How fast can you run?"

Hermione winced. "I'm more of a yoga and Pilates girl, but I won't fall behind."

Rigel considered this. Assuming those were workout regimens that didn't involve running, she supposed Hermione could probably sustain a ten or eleven minute per mile pace if necessary. Not forever, though. "Okay. Harry says you're good with Charms and Transfigurations, yes?" Hermione nodded, looking sure of herself. "Dueling?"

"Just in Defense class," she said. "It's normally very structured. I have been working on silent casting, though."

"That's great," Rigel said. "All right. If you're comfortable with it, I'll take lead in the forest. With my sensing ability I can steer us around nearby dangers quickly. Are you fine with taking direction unless you disagree with a course of action?"

Hermione took a moment to think it over, but nodded decisively once she'd made up her mind.

"And one more thing," Rigel added. "If I tell you to duck or get behind me, just do it, okay? It's not a chivalry thing. There just might come a time you don't want to be standing in front of me. Now, items. What have you brought?"

"Basic first aid kit, water, a bezoar... and an extra hair tie." Hermione grinned sheepishly and fingered her wildly curly ponytail. "I thought a wand would be all I needed, though, really."

"It probably will be," Rigel said, "But you never know."

"Were you a boy scout or something?" Hermione asked, amused.

Rigel didn't know exactly what that was, but she smiled back. "Why, are male scouts known to be particularly paranoid?"

"*Prepared* is the word they use." Hermione laughed softly. "It's not a bad thing. What have you brought, then?"

"My potions kit, which includes first aid potions as well. A cloak to better blend into the forest after the task starts. A couple of knives in case I lose my wand, food and water for a few days-"

"Days?" Hermione spluttered.

"Just in case," she reiterated. "You-"

"Never know, I know." The other girl waved her on. "Anything else?"

"Several things," Rigel said, smiling self-deprecatingly. With a sudden thought, she fished the roll of stickers Sirius had just given her out of her pocket. "In fact, here. Put one on each shoe."

"Trackers?" Hermione guessed.

"Sound mufflers," Rigel corrected. She followed the stickers with the canister of Fire Free. "Hold still and close your eyes and mouth real quick."

"What? No way, what is that?" Hermione balked.

"It'll hopefully keep us from being roasted alive by the dragon. No promises, but it should at least lessen the impact." Rigel handed the can over for her inspection. "You can spray me first, if you like."

Hermione squinted at the label dubiously. "I've never heard of this."

"It's not for sale anywhere yet," Rigel admitted. "My family invented it. They wouldn't give it to me if it wasn't safe."

The other girl grimaced, but held the nozzle toward herself gamely and began to mist the thick cloud that emerged over her legs. Rigel helped her cover the areas she couldn't reach, and Hermione did the same for her. When they were sufficiently coated in the substance, which left a somewhat oily feeling on her skin but at least didn't have a noticeable odor, Rigel packed the items in her bag.

Krum was the first of the other champions to arrive. He was dressed in shorts and a fitted, sleeveless top that showed off his fitness. He gave them a suspicious look, but began stretching near the fire without comment. Feiyan Shang arrived soon after, devoid of her usual makeup, with her hair secure in a simple bun at the back of her head. She wore leggings with a long tunic adorned with an animalistic mask in embroidered silk on the back. Krum paused in his warm up to remark, "The Tao-tie, yes?"

Feiyan blinked at him in surprise. "It is. Symbols are important." She gestured to Rigel's Hogwarts jersey and the Bulgarian flag on the pocket of Krum's shorts.

Tahiil came jogging across the lawn in a set of warm-looking sweats, his usual cheerful expression undauntedly in place. "Good night for a walk in the woods," he said, gesturing to the full moon above their heads. Hermione murmured a few words of polite agreement, but in truth none of the others seemed much in the mood for conversation.

Antiope arrived next, wielding a sword as long as her arm. At the incredulous stares she received from Hermione and Tahii, she grunted. "What? He said we could bring anything." She, too, wore gauntlets, though hers jutted out beyond her elbows in sharp points. Besides Rigel, she was the only other one who'd chosen boots over trainers.

"Can I hold it?" Tahii asked, looking awed at the redhead's weapon. "Please, Antiope?"

Antiope frowned. "No. But you may touch it while I hold it."

The Somali boy happily did so, running a careful finger along the gleaming blade. "So many etchings. What do they mean?"

"Most of them are runes for protection, strength, and durability," Antiope said shortly.

While they were talking, Sousa, Owens, and Delacour all joined them around the fire. Fleur and Jacob greeted the assembled, but Matheus was quiet. The Brazilian contestant wore denim trousers with a sweatshirt and seemed less than his normal suave self. He stared somewhat listlessly into the fire while swaying ever so slightly in the breeze.

Owens, at least, appeared ready for the first task. His expression was absolutely set, and none of the worry or nervousness that shone on other faces reflected in his. With a set of Ilvermorny shorts and a long sleeve shirt, he looked confident and collected. When he caught Rigel studying him, he winked.

Fleur, resplendent in a deep blue tracksuit, made her way closer to the fence where Rigel and Hermione were standing. "I saw you two whispering at the feast," she remarked, hauntingly beautiful eyes glancing between them. "You must have a plan, no?"

"Could be," Rigel said, giving nothing away with her expression. "Hard to make plans when we don't know what the task really is yet,

though, don't you think?"

"Oui. I do. Now you understand ze curiosity I feel." Her eyes were definitely suspicious. She thought Rigel and Hermione might know something she didn't. Well, she was right, but Rigel was under no obligation to tell her so.

"I understand," Rigel assured the girl. "Unfortunately we don't know the specifics of the task any more than you do. Hermione was only asking me about the creatures in the forest-since I have the home pitch advantage, it's only fair I share what I know."

"Share, zen," Fleur invited her, smiling mockingly. Her ponytail fell across her shoulders as she tilted her head to show she was listening.

Rigel shrugged. "I'm sure by now everyone knows. There are centaurs, thestrals, spiders, snakes, and unicorns in the forest here. I think the real challenge will be whatever the organizers have added to the forest since they put those wards up."

"I tried to fly over them," Krum put in unexpectedly. "There was no opening. The wards extend over the trees. I suspect something with wings."

"Very likely," Hermione agreed, nodding her head slowly as though this fact was new to her. "Excellent deduction, Mr. Krum."

Krum raised his eyebrows at the praise. "Thank you, Her-mee-on. Just Victor, please."

"Should we really be on a first name basis?" Antiope broke in. "We might have to fight to the death in there."

Rigel couldn't tell if she was joking. Just in case, she said, "I think the other competitors are the least of our concern tonight. If I know Riddle, he'll have several very nasty surprises in there. Focusing on



anything but the creatures we face could have grave consequences."

"Very true, Mr. Black."

Riddle had arrived. He gestured for the nine competitors to gather around him and produced a delicate cloth bag from his robe sleeve. "I trust you have all made the appropriate preparations for tonight. It is time to reveal exactly what your task entails." He reached into the sack and withdrew a stack of parchment. With deft motions he began to hand them out to each of the champions. Rigel was careful not to let his skin touch hers as she accepted her piece of parchment. Looking down at it, she blinked. It looked like one half of a Teacher Tracker pairing. Just a blank piece of parchment with concentric rings demarking relative distance to the center point. Off toward the forest, a single dot sat motionless on the outer-most ring.

"Those dots represent the prize you will be seeking. While all nine items are collocated, you will know which one is yours when you reach it. You must see to it that your item exits the forest before the sun rises. Taking the item of another champion who has already retrieved his or hers will not afford you points." Riddle glanced around to ensure they heeded his words. "Flip your papers over and you will notice a randomly assigned number. That is your starting position. When you see green sparks fly high above this cottage, the wards around the competition zone will lower for three seconds."

"How will we get back out, then?" Hermione asked.

Riddle's eyes flickered toward the girl. With an empty smile, he said, "If you reach the forest edge and send up green sparks, the wards will be lowered for you to cross."

Hermione nodded, fingering her piece of parchment with worrying hands. "Thank you, Sir."

Rigel caught a glimpse of Hermione's number as the parchment twisted in the light. She was number two. Rigel had five, which she

deduced meant she was to start in the middle. Somehow, starting with the easiest position didn't give her confidence in the supposed randomness of the number allocation.

The politician was still explaining, so she put her thoughts on the back burner. "These headbands are to be worn at all times while you are in the forest." He began drawing colored bands from his bag and distributed those as well. "As we speak, the spectators are gathered in the expanded Quidditch pitch. There, nine great mirrors have been erected to display the happenings of this task to the audience. Each of your bands is color-coordinated to match the corresponding mirror that displays your field of view. I warn you: once the inside bands are touching your skin, they activate, and anything you look at from that point on, the spectators see as well. I'm sure I don't have to iterate plainly what activities you shouldn't broadcast."

With varying grimaces and trepidatious expressions of discomfort, they all nodded.

"Does sound transmit as well?" Owens asked, eyeing his yellow band with interest.

"It does, but in order to lessen the burden on the viewers, only one headband's sound is amplified in the stadium at any given time." Riddle handed Rigel her band last. She inspected it carefully, noting the small inset stones and intricate rune derivations running like ants along the outside of it. The material stretched comfortably in her hand. "You have your instructions, champions," Riddle said. A house elf will escort you to your starting position in five minutes. In case of emergency, send up red sparks. Otherwise... I'll see you at the finish line."

He left them to their thoughts. Many of the contestants began inspecting their parchments for more clues, but Rigel didn't bother. She was pretty sure they had just put a Teacher Tracker on the items they were to retrieve. They would have a beacon to guide them through the forest, but no terrain map of any kind to make it easier.

She stepped close to Hermione, and when no one was looking their way, she swapped their parchments quickly. Hermione frowned at her. "I don't think we're allowed to switch," the brown-eyed girl murmured. "Each parchment probably leads to one item."

"They're collocated," Rigel said. "It's better if you start in the middle and I cut my way diagonally across the forest toward you. This way, you can just move straight ahead toward the items until I find you."

Hermione frowned. "I don't mean to take the easy end of our bargain."

"I don't mind the run," Rigel promised. She felt a slight warming under her skin-the Vow wasn't outright forbidding her course of action, but she walked a thin line in trading a good starting spot for an easier time meeting up with Hermione, whose skills she felt would definitely increase her chances of success. The heat settled, and she let out a breath she didn't realize she'd been holding. There was some subjectivity to the Vow, then. Good.

Suddenly, the house elves were there and there was no more time to plan. Rigel showed her elf the number two piece of parchment and she was led quite a ways along the tree line before coming to a stop on a little patch of grass that glowed in the moonlight. Fleur, who had the number one parchment, gave her an unreadable look as she passed. There was enough room between each contestant that Rigel could see neither Fleur nor Krum, who had number three, by the time she fished her cloak from her bag and put it on over her jersey. She took the time to coat her cloak with Fire Free as well, but eventually the moment came to don her headband, which was emerald green. She fit it carefully against her forehead, making sure not to catch her emergency ear piece as she slid it into a comfortable place.

Once it was on, she was careful not to move her head too much. She looked straight ahead into the trees. She kept her breathing light and even, just in case they happened to be transmitting her sound over on the pitch. Rigel briefly entertained the idea of inspecting her

fingernails cheekily. She squelched it, though. It was not the time for frivolity.

When the sparks finally came, it was almost anti-climactic. Just a flash of green light in the distance and the barrier before her dropped away. She stepped over the boundary and stopped. She was sure by now the other champions were running, but Rigel needed to listen, first. The sound she needed to hear didn't keep her waiting long.

*" Ssspeaker, you have come assss promissed."*

*" Treessslider,"* she hissed, crouching down to the snake's level. *"Are you prepared for a long night ahead?"*

*" Yesss. I have ssscouted tirelessssly for the Ssspeaker."* Treeslider wriggled closer and lifted his head up in anticipation. *"I will sssteer you true."*

*" I put my faith in you,"* Rigel said. She extended her arm to help the green snake coil up it until he was comfortably wrapped around her left bicep, his head near her neck so she could hear him better. *"Hold on tight."*

She held the parchment map in one hand and her wand in the other. The moonlight just managed to penetrate through the forest canopy and illuminate the dot that was her eventual destination. Sighting a path between it and what she judged to be Hermione's starting point, she began to run.

Treeslider immediately began a litany of tiny instructions, correcting her left, right, right again, and once even bidding her to climb through a particularly dense patch of brush. The routes he insisted she take were not those that would seem appealing to a human; most of the time she was off any semblance of a path. Still, she listened and she stepped wherever he told her: this was his home, not hers, and she didn't doubt the paths would be the easiest places for both large creatures to roam and traps to be set.

At once point, when she stopped to let Treeslider sniff the air with his tongue, she heard a noise somewhere behind them. She focused her attention on her rudimentary magic sensitivity and realized someone was following them, moving steadily through the forest on the trail she'd just blazed with Treeslider. It had to be Delacour, she supposed, since she was the only champion further out than Rigel on their side. She decided to ignore the girl for now. If she knew where she was, Fleur couldn't sneak up on her. Really, it was smart for Delacour to try following Rigel, if she assumed Rigel knew where she was going. It's not as though her trail through the forest was hard to miss, strewn with bent branches and trampled brush as it was.

Treeslider had scented a pack of Thestrals, but wasn't concerned by them. Rigel began to run again, zigzagging this way and that along a path that would look ludicrous if anyone mapped it. Still, she'd made good progress without coming across anything more dangerous than a bowtruckle, so she mentally promised Treeslider a hundred fat mice and kept to his instructions.

*" There isss a trap up ahead," Treeslider hissed in her ear. She slowed. " Ssoft sssand that drawsss you in. We mussst crosss, but keep to the fallen treeesss."*

Rigel nodded her understanding and moved forward at a more cautious rate. It was hard to see in the moonlight, particularly as she'd decided to forego the Night Vision Brew in deference to the possibility of being blinded by an unexpected light, but there was a noticeable difference when the soil gave way to unnatural silt. The quicksand was likely something the tournament organizers had fashioned. She followed Treeslider's instructions and jumped up onto a large log. Carefully balancing, Rigel moved swiftly from one such log to another, ever aware that with a misstep, quagmire awaited her on either side. At an unexpected noise she paused, listening hard. It was coming from the quicksand.

She peered through the darkness and risked calling up a light and brandishing her wand toward the source. It sounded like... cursing.

Slavic cursing, she realized. It was Krum, both legs sunk into the quicksand at the thigh. He squinted back at her through the light and cursed again. Well, she couldn't stay too long with the Vow already egging her feet on, but it cost her nothing to conjure a rope and banish it in his direction. He was a strong guy. He could fix it to something with a sticking charm and pull himself out.

Rigel was approaching the vector that Hermione ought to be traveling along, so she projected her sensitivity until it was stretched thin to find the girl. "To the right," she told the snake.

Treeslider hissed unhappily. *"Ssspiderssss that way. Fsssster, Ssspeaker."*

Hermione wasn't moving very fast, and Rigel didn't doubt she was worried about their paths missing one another. It was a matter of minutes until Rigel closed in on her location. Hermione's magic was the brightest and warmest against her senses in the area, but as she grew closer and allowed her sensitivity perception to shrink again, she noticed another, much fainter trace of magic right above her. Hermione was not alone.

Rigel barreled into the clearing just as the spider began to descend. "Accio Hermione!" The girl flew off her feet toward Rigel with an indignant yelp. The spider hit the ground and scuttled angrily around to fix its many eyes on them.

Hermione rolled upright and stared at it. "Mother of God," she whispered. Then she shot a stunner toward its hairy belly. The red light fizzled harmlessly against the Acromantula, and both girls darted backwards away from it as it reared in annoyance.

"The legs, Hermione," Rigel reminded her. "Tie them on the left side. Now!" Rigel snapped out an Impedimenta just as Hermione mustered an Incarcerous. The Acromantula didn't stop, but it slowed just enough for Hermione's spell to wrap two of its legs together on one side. It stumbled. Rigel followed with a second Incarcerous and

down went the other two legs on that same side. Now, when it tried to scuttle toward them, it only managed to turn in a circle.

Already the spider was snapping its fangs in the direction of the rope. It was time to run. She grabbed Hermione's hand and towed her along until the girl's feet caught up with her mind and she was running alongside her. Treeslider's instructions took them off the path immediately and they fought their way through a thick tangle of bramble until the snake said it was safe to stop.

Hermione bent double, gasping for air. "You weren't kidding about the size of those things. That's got to be the biggest spider on earth."

"I think the head of the family is a lot bigger," she said, pulling out water and gulping for a second before adding, "And Hagrid says that one can *talk*."

Hermione shuddered. "No thank you," she muttered. She sucked down some of her own water before straightening. "All right. You found me, good. How far are we from the items?"

Rigel checked the parchment. "Another half mile, it looks like. We're making good time."

"I didn't run into much before the Acromantula," Hermione commented. "Did you?"

"Just some quicksand over toward where Krum started out. Treeslider here is keeping me out of trouble." Rigel gestured to the snake, which Hermione seemed to notice for the first time judging by her widening eyes.

"Right. Harry did say you speak to snakes. That's... useful." She tightened her ponytail. "Ready, then? I'm recovered."

"Me too. Let's go."

They traveled helter-skelter through the forest, and Hermione, to her credit, didn't complain or hesitate when Rigel relayed Treeslider's navigational instructions in a low, constant stream. At one point they slowed from the jog they'd been maintaining and Rigel listened carefully to what Treeslider was telling her.

"We have to go through centaur territory to get to the items," she told Hermione quietly. "If they catch us, it could be bad."

"Could be?" Hermione said hopefully.

"Depends on their mood," Rigel admitted. "Sometimes they let kids go, sometimes not. Since they're already incensed at being trapped in this part of the forest and cut off from the rest of their territory, I say we don't risk it."

Hermione looked indignant, and it took a second for Rigel to realize it was on the centaur's behalf. "What an awful thing to do to sentient creatures," she said.

They moved forward at a slower pace, listening for disturbances and making as little noise as possible. Rigel pushed her sensitivity out as far as she could, and once or twice she picked up individual sparks of magic across her senses, likely scouts, Treeslider told her. The main herd, or however many of them had been trapped in the wards, at least, wasn't within her sensing range.

The two girls were crouched low behind a ridge of underbrush as one of the centaur scouts passed dangerously close when a runespoor shot out from a burrow beside them and made to take Rigel by surprise.

"*Don't you dare!*" Treeslider snapped his head toward the attacking runespoor, making it abort the movement mid-lunge. "*No one touchesss the Ssspeaker.*"

The runespoor coiled in on itself, all three heads swiveling to look at Treeslider and Rigel. "*A Ssspeaker? Isss it true?*" the left head



asked.

" *It can't be,*" another head argued.

" *Ssshow ussss, Ssspeaker,*" the last head insisted.

Rigel grimaced. The centaur scout was coming closer in her awareness. They couldn't afford to make so much noise. Very, very softly she said, "*I am a Ssspeaker.*" The three heads all moaned their apologies and begged forgiveness. "*I will forgive and forget thisss matter... if you dissstract that cccentaur over the ridge. In recompenssse for attacking me, you ssshall not bite any human thisss night.*"

She wasn't honestly sure the snakes would go for that, since they didn't know her or have any reason to be loyal to her, but figured it was worth a shot. To her relief, the runespoor hissed in pleased acceptance and darted away toward the looming presence of the centaur scout. When the two sparks collided in her awareness, Rigel led Hermione quietly away from the scene.

"Did you just make that snake do your bidding?" Hermione asked tentatively. She didn't sound approving.

"I just asked nicely," Rigel said, smiling innocently. "Snakes are very kind and helpful creatures, you know. Possibly the most altruistic of all animals." She thought the Slytherins watching their progress on the mirrors might appreciate the joke, if either her or Hermione's sound was being broadcast.

Once out of centaur territory, they made it another quarter mile in a handful of minutes. They were so close to the dot on the map, now. Just a little further.

A worldless hiss of warning had Rigel stopping immediately in place, hauling Hermione to a halt beside her. As soon as they stopped moving, she heard it: a crashing wave of disruption headed straight

toward them. They dove behind a large tree trunk and froze as the sound approached.

Something immense tore through the canopy and into the clearing they'd just been jogging through. A bellowing roar filled their ears and a stench-so awful it could only belong to one creature-invaded their nostrils.

*Troll*, Hermione mouthed at her in the darkness. Rigel nodded. Hermione raised her wand and tapped herself on the head. She disappeared before Rigel's eyes, and Rigel grinned. Gesturing to her own head, she silently asked Hermione to do her as well. She felt a shiver like egg yoke going down her spine, and when she looked down she was a mere shimmer in the night. On silenced feet, they crept around the trunk to peer at the troll.

The big, ugly creature sat mournfully in the middle of the clearing, clutching its club in one hand and its head in the other. Blood ran steadily from a gash across its temple. Someone had already had a run-in with this big guy. It bellowed in pain and frustration as it prodded the gash again, and Rigel almost felt sorry for it.

Hermione tugged her wrist and Rigel tried to follow her around the clearing without being able to see her. It helped that she could sense the girl's general location with her magic. They made it halfway around the clearing before the troll jerked its head around and sniffed the air in their general direction. They stilled. Great globs of drool dripped from the troll's clunky, uneven teeth, and it rose unsteadily and began lumbering toward them. The girls ran, darting around trees and foliage, even as the troll roared its displeasure and bounded after its invisible prey.

Rigel spotted a hollowed out root system and tugged Hermione toward it. "Down here," she panted. There were numerous accidental elbows and knees caught in soft places as the two of them tried to simultaneously squeeze under the arching roots and into the hollow left by the soil below. Somehow, they managed it before the troll came lumbering into sight.

It stood there, gaping around itself, sniffing at the air in annoyance. The troll seemed to have no idea what to do next. She gathered it wasn't much of a hunter, really. In the meantime, they were effectively trapped. The soil beneath them was damp, and the entire enclosure smelled of rot. The sensation forced its way into her head, spreading like a damp fog despite her best attempt to clear her thoughts and calm her heart.

The darkness seemed to close in around her. She knew Hermione was next to her, but she couldn't see her. It just felt like a body crammed into the space beside her, and rot rose up in a wave to envelop her in memories and panicked anxiety.

"Rigel," Hermione whispered, nudging her in the arm. Treeslider hissed where she brushed against his scales. The sounds, the movement, called her back somewhat, and she realized she was breathing too fast, and shaking. "What is it?"

Rigel shuddered. "I need. My bag." The words were scarcely more than a sigh. The troll was still there, still shuffling in a dumb circle just outside their hollow. Rigel struggled to focus her mind, but it was like trying to hold burning sand in her hands. She flinched away, the sand slipped out, and she was only vaguely aware of Hermione's hands probing slowly through her pockets.

"It's here, but I can't selectively disillusion it," Hermione whispered. Rigel put all her attention on the words. Those words. Their meaning. Right, her bag was as invisible as she was. That's how a Disillusionment Charm worked. Hermione wouldn't be able to see what was in it.

"Put it in my hand," Rigel mumbled on numb lips. Her heart rate was still climbing, and she could feel her breath getting shorter and faster still. When her bag was pressed into her palm, though, something in her relaxed marginally. Some deep fear was relieved just by the knowledge that her bag and everything in it was already in her hand. She shifted sideways slowly and gave Hermione room to enlarge it.

She couldn't focus her magic properly to do it herself, but somehow Hermione knew that.

It was a matter of moments to feel her way around the internal pockets and close her fist around the vial she needed. She withdrew the invisible potion within and uncorked it with a slight snick. Rigel tossed the whole thing back, then reached into her bag and drew out another. She drank that one too, and with the second dose came a rush of pure, numb tranquility that almost brought tears to her eyes. Thank Merlin for Calming Draughts.

Her mind cleared quickly, shoving her back into the situation at hand. She and Hermione were still stuck in a root hollow, there was still a troll prowling the clearing that was their only exit, and now she had some fast explaining to do.

"Sorry," she breathed. She quickly packed the empty vials away and closed her bag. She didn't re-shrink it, though. "I don't like small spaces. I'm fine now. How's your inanimate to animate Transfiguration?"

"My-Oh!" Hermione whisper-shouted. "You want to try to fool it?"

"It does look remarkably thick."

"I've got it."

She couldn't see what Hermione was doing, but she saw when a fallen branch picked itself off the ground and twisted itself into a small deer. The magic-made creature was unsteady on its feet, but remarkably life-like in the poor light. It stumbled into the clearing proper, alerting the troll to its presence. Under Hermione's direction, the deer jerked itself into a mad dash through the brush on the troll's other side.

With an excited bellow, the troll sprinted after it.

Hermione and Rigel immediately clambered out of the hollow and Hermione cancelled their Disillusionment. Rigel dusted a few cobwebs from her hair and pretended not to notice Hermione's critical gaze. She was fine. A little bit *too* fine, as she'd overdone the Calming Draught while brewing again, but nevertheless. Fine.

She checked the map, looked Treeslider over for injuries, and said, "Good Transfiguration, Hermione."

Hermione sighed, but smiled grimly. "It won't last five minutes. Better get a move on."

They had been so close when the troll waylaid them, and they found themselves nearly on top of their map dots in just a few short minutes of running. The clearing the girls emerged into was vast-artificially so. There were still discolored patches of soil where the trees had recently been ripped out, and in the center of the clearing, between them and a raised dais with a golden chest, crouched a Sphinx.

They approached with caution, wands out. The Sphinx looked nothing like the ones in her mindscape, she realized. Dom had created beings more beautiful than terrifying, but this Sphinx was a creature of death. Her nails gleamed in the moonlight, which shone unobstructed down into the enormous clearing. The Sphinx sprang up from her crouch and prowled menacingly toward them.

Rigel cleared her throat. "We've come for what's in the chest," she said clearly. "Do you guard it?"

"I do." It was a woman's voice that came from the Sphinx's throat, but it carried a lioness's growling undertone.

"Will you let us pass?"

"I won't." The Sphinx smiled a mouthful of pointy teeth at them. "Unless you answer my riddle."

"Just one riddle for two of us?" Hermione clarified sharply. Her voice was high with nerves, but she stood tall beside Rigel, her chin out.

The Sphinx raked the ground with its claws lazily. "Your choice. If you choose one riddle and get it wrong, you both die. If you choose two riddles... better odds of at least one surviving."

"We'll take the one riddle," Rigel said immediately. Hermione's eyes shot to her with a gasp.

"Don't you want to think about it?" the girl demanded.

"I'm pants at word games," she admitted. "Whatever answer you give, I'll take my chances with it. I trust you."

Hermione growled under her breath something that sounded like, "foolhardy boys." She squared her shoulders and faced the Sphinx, though. "Very well. We will answer one riddle together."

"What is always old and sometimes new; never sad, sometimes blue; never empty, sometimes full; never pushes, always pulls?" The Sphinx, having finished her recitation, sat back on her haunches and watched them with bright yellow eyes.

Hermione's brow furrowed in fierce thought. "May we discuss?"

"I won't stop you."

Hermione turned to Rigel, who could only shrug. "It doesn't sound like anything real to me," she admitted. "I've never been good at cryptic stuff. I tried to work out a prophecy last year, and to say it went horribly wrong is a big understatement."

"That's fine, I just think better out loud," Hermione said dismissively. "Not sad but blue means it's sometimes blue in color. Never empty and always old make me think it's the ocean, but the ocean isn't normally defined as 'full' and it's always blue. Push and pull... an ocean pulls in the sense of the tide... the tide! The moon!"

Rigel blinked. "The moon does cause the tides," she agreed.

"The answer *is* the moon," Hermione said. She turned back to the Sphinx and positively smirked at her. "Right?"

The Sphinx smirked back. "Correct, little girl." The creatures yawned wide, reminded them of her generosity in not eating them alive, and said, "My supper shall wait a little longer. You may pass."

Rigel beamed at her. "Brilliant, Hermione! I would have spent ages working that out." She and Hermione rushed up the steps to large, gilded chest on the dais. It was obvious at first glance the chest was locked. "More riddles," she muttered.

"It's covered in runes," Hermione said, bending down to inspect the chest on all sides without touching it. "There's Greek, Egyptian, Chinese, Mayan, Celtic, Viking, and more scripts I don't even recognize. Sanskrit maybe? I think... all the runes say the same thing, though."

Rigel peered at the lines of runes. Hermione was right. There were three runes in each script. Kaunaz, Laguz, Hagalaz. Huo, Shui, Feng. "What does it mean, though? Fire, water, air... do we filling in the missing element?"

"There's no place to do so," Hermione said. She scanned her eyes over the chest again and pointed to the lock. "There are three distinct mechanisms. One spell for each lock. Fire. Water. Air."

Rigel grinned. "That's easy enough. Any order?"

"Start with fire," Hermione suggested.

Rigel cast *Confringo* at the lock. A line of fire marked the lock, but otherwise it didn't change. She frowned. "Maybe something more aggressive?" She tried *Incendio* without luck.

Hermione conjured a blue flame on the tip of her wand and held it to the lock. Nothing. They both deflated, looking back over the script again. The Egyptian runes caught her eye and she said, somewhat uncertainly, "That rune doesn't just mean fire. It means lamp, right?"

Hermione's eyes widened. "That's why there's so many scripts. Different interpretations might result in wrong answers. You have to aggregate the different translations to really know what to try. Here, see? The Celtic rune is also the one for sun. The answer isn't fire-it's light."

"Lumos." Rigel's illuminated wand hovered over the lock for a breathless moment, and then the mechanism clicked open. "Thank Salazar. What next? All the scripts I can read look like water to me."

"Maybe this one is simple. Aguamenti." Hermione let the water spill over the chest and the second lock clicked. "Yes! Now air. That's tricky. We could levitate it? Or a drying spell?"

"The Chinese rune for air is supposed to be this," Rigel said, sketching a different symbol to the one of the chest in the grime on the dais. "This one on the chest is... something else."

"Wind!" Hermione grinned. She shot a Ventus and the third lock popped free. They opened the chest wide to reveal a pile of brightly colored sashes.

Rigel grimaced. "I guess the ones matching our headbands are ours. All this way for a fancy ribbon." She hoped Riddle heard that one loud and clear.

They each grabbed the sashes corresponding to their colors-green for Rigel and light blue for Hermione-and tied them securely around their waists. Just as they closed the lid once more, they heard the Sphinx growl from behind them. Fleur had stepped into the clearing, looking just a little ruffled as she stopped and warily stared at the Sphinx.



"You have to answer its riddle," Rigel called helpfully. She and Hermione climbed down and waved on their way back across the clearing.

"Good luck!" Hermione added, looking cheerful now that they had accomplished at least half of their goal. She turned to Rigel and Treeslider. "What's the fastest path out of this place?"

Rigel grinned. "After you, milady."

They started with a Point Me charm on the gamekeeper's cabin, since their maps were essentially useless now that they carried the thing they had been tracking on their person. Rigel conveyed their general desired direction to Treeslider, who was to take up the navigation once more. She really was going to bring the snake a whole basket of mice the next time she came to visit.

The snake was uneasy, however. He quivered slightly against her skin and his tongue continually scented the air. She stopped walking, and Hermione paused as well. "*What iss it?*" she asked, broadening her sensitivity once more.

" *Sssomething comes. Sssomething new,*" the snake hissed.

Rigel focused her awareness. There was something big up ahead of them, but it didn't seem to be moving anywhere. Then she felt it-a dense, fast dot of magic heading straight for them. It would be on them in moments. "Hermione, get behind me!"

The other girl moved without hesitation, brandishing her wand in the same direction as Rigel's. "What is-"

There was no time to answer and she threw up a Fortis shield an instant before something sprang from the forest and barreled into it. A growling yelp, and the creature-a wolf-rolled off the shield and regained its feet with a spry twist. The wolf paused to bare its teeth at her and she realized with a start that it was a *werewolf* .

"What are they playing at?" Hermione moaned. "A werewolf! Of all the irresponsible insanity. "

"He'll be on Wolfsbane, I don't doubt," Rigel said soothingly. They wouldn't let a feral werewolf into the competition zone. That was a recipe for disaster. Then again, he certainly wasn't on the New Wolfsbane, or he would be a lot less alert and aggressive.

"So it's okay if it bites us on purpose?" Hermione's voice was rising again.

"He's a person, remember," Rigel said firmly. "I don't think he'll bite us. Just run us around and scare us, probably."

The wolf leapt again, but Rigel redoubled the magic she had in the Fortis shield and it held firm-though she was pushed backwards several feet, taking Hermione and the shield itself with her. The werewolf prowled the forest on the other side of the shield, watching. Waiting. "It knows I can't hold this shield all night," Rigel muttered. She glanced back at Hermione. "Think you can pull off another free-transfiguration?"

"What would scare off a werewolf?" Hermione asked, huffing out a laugh that was only slightly hysterical.

"Nothing on earth," Rigel admitted. "But we can tempt it with better prey."

"A deer?" Hermione clarified.

She shook her head. "Won't trump a human. Can you do a unicorn?"

"A-but that's barbaric," Hermione protested. "Killing unicorns... even pretend ones..."

"The werewolf is drawn to innocence," Rigel said flatly. "Can't get better prey than a unicorn. Even on Wolfsbane it'll be hard for him to resist chasing after it." It was one of Remus' deepest fears: that he

might come across something like a unicorn, something pure, and slay it while under the wolf's sway.

Hermione stood behind Rigel so the wolf couldn't see her wand moving and began to transfigure a tangle of brush beyond the wolf's line of sight. As Rigel held the shield, Hermione breathed life into the fledgling transfiguration, giving it a coat that shone in the moonlight, hooves of glinting silver, and a horn that glowed with its own iridescence. The unicorn was too graceful-even for an actual unicorn. It had an unearthly feel as it moved, and Rigel guessed that Hermione had never seen a real live unicorn, but seen an image or perhaps a moving photograph. When it was ready, Hermione nudged Rigel's back and she prepared to take advantage of the distraction.

The unicorn galloped into the clearing, rearing at the wolf and turning on its hooves to dance away again with a remarkably realistic whinny. The wolf snarled after it, snapping its jaws almost involuntarily. It took several steps toward the transfigured unicorn, but then stopped, shaking its head sharply. It began to circle back toward Rigel, but Hermione made the unicorn dance just out of reach along the edge of the small clearing. It flashed its horn at the wolf, as though giving a dare.

The wolf threw back its head and howled in fury, and Rigel's left hand slipped into her bag and pulled out a Protection Potion in one smooth move. She hid the potion bottle in her sleeve and splashed a quick line across the ground inside her shield. Then she began slowly stepping sideways, Hermione with her, moving the shield bit by bit in a semi-circle around the clearing, pouring potion whenever the wolf's attention was distracted by the transfiguration.

The animal seemed completely torn between chasing the unicorn and remaining to stalk the girls, which led Rigel to think he probably was on Wolfsbane, or else his mind would be completely given over to the wolf's urges. The wolf batted at the unicorn in frustration whenever it came near, but didn't follow it out of the clearing. It snapped at the transfiguration, then turned back to regard Rigel and Hermione with menacing eyes, then swiped again at the unicorn,

and back to them. This continued even as Rigel slowly reversed their positions in the clearing. Her circle was almost complete. Thanks to her encounter with Remus the previous year, she knew exactly how to trap a werewolf for the night.

The trickiest part would be closing it. For the ward to spring up into place, she'd have to lower her shield for a split second. She timed it carefully, waiting for the wolf to over-extend in its battle with the imaginary unicorn. As it lunged forward toward the transfiguration at last, Rigel took the opening. She dropped the shield and closed the circle, but-the ward didn't materialize. And in that instant, the wolf sprang back toward her with her death in its eyes. Rigel was too slow. Her legs were jellied with surprise and even as she stumbled backwards she knew she wouldn't get the next shield up in time.

A flash of green obscured her vision for an instant, coming between her chest and the oncoming teeth. Treeslider had flung himself forward from Rigel's shoulder with a battle-hiss. She brought her arms up to shield them both from the onslaught, but she was too slow. The wolf twisted mid-air, claws flailing, to dislodge the snake from his snout and Treeslider flew across the clearing, impacted a tree, and lay still.

"No." Rigel didn't know if she said it in English or Parseltongue. She only knew she was furious. Her magic sprung into her hands with a thought, slamming into the wolf like a physical thing. The canine rolled away from the barrage and came up growling on the other side of the clearing. She knew what she wanted. She wanted the wolf *contained*. Her wand, almost an after thought, came up to level at the wolf. "*Fortiss.*"

A shield sprang into life-but not around her or Hermione. It formed around the wolf and contracted, pressing the creature in from all sides. The wolf howled his displeasure and tried to beat himself against the inside of the shield, but it was too small to build up any momentum and the shield only slid sideways in the dirt.

Hermione, breathing hard, finally let the complicated unicorn transfiguration drop. "How long can you hold that?" she gasped.

"Long enough to finish the protection ward," Rigel said grimly. "Would you mind checking on my snake?"

"I-sure." Hermione crossed to where Treeslider was crumpled and crouched down to inspect him with a few diagnostics.

Rigel kept her wand trained on the enclosed wolf even as she circled the clearing along the line of potion she'd poured, looking for any gaps. There was an area that had been scuffed through with a paw. She narrowed her eyes. Smart wolf. He had only pretended to be preoccupied with the unicorn. The swipes he made in its direction were used to foil her circle. How he knew what it was, she didn't know. But she would finish it, now. She found three more places in the dirt that had disturbed the circle and poured a little more potion on each. As she closed the circle for good, she let the Fortis shield fade away. The wolf rushed her, but the Protection Potion would not be budged. It threw the wolf backwards, and the animal let out a growling snarl.

"That will hold until morning," she said tiredly. She turned back to Hermione, who was deep in concentration over the snake. "Is he...?"

"Alive," Hermione said quickly. "But, badly injured. Unconscious. I'm not that skilled with animals; I can diagnose, but I don't know if I can heal him."

"I can," Rigel said, moving forward. "You go on without me-" the Vow sang in her blood, hot and immediate. "No. No, that won't work. I have to keep moving forward. Okay, you take over navigating us back to the forest edge, Hermione. I'll heal Treeslider as we go."

Hermione frowned. "Just a straight path?"

Rigel nodded reluctantly. "We'll just have to hope we don't run into anything."

Something ran into the clearing immediately after she spoke and she wanted to groan aloud. It wasn't a creature, however, but Antiope, brandishing a bloody blade, gore streaked down one side of her. She looked a little crazed, but recognition came quickly. "Black. Granger. Is that a-"

"He's contained," Rigel assured her distractedly. "Item chest is that way." She gestured. "If you'll excuse us."

Antiope nodded once and disappeared back into the trees. "I hope she hasn't killed anything sentient," Hermione said lowly. She used the Point Me spell again and motioned Rigel along. "Just follow me."

They were slower going back than they had been in coming through, without Treeslider to guide their steps unerringly. Hermione went ahead and Disillusioned them again when they crept through centaur territory on silent feet. Rigel scarcely noticed. All her attention was on Treeslider. Brave, loyal Treeslider who *was not going to die*. She cradled the snake's limp body in the end of her cloak as she walked, steadily pumping Healing energy into his form. There was a lot of internal bleeding, but she was determined to stop every bit of it. After a grueling ten minutes, Treeslider was stable, but still unconscious. Rigel tied the ends of the cloak to her belt in a makeshift carrying basket and tried not to jostle him too much even as she and Hermione broke into jogs to make the journey quicker.

To avoid the area where the spiders had nearly caught Hermione in the beginning, they veered to the left on their way out of the forest. Just as they made to course correct again, however, something big and fast as lightning dropped down from the forest above them. Rigel and Hermione both leapt to the side, and Hermione screamed high and fast. Rigel looked over and saw a vicious gash on the girl's arm, but her focus couldn't remain on her friend. What dropped at their feet was not another spider: it was the Peruvian Vipertooth.

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Rigel Black was an idiot, and nothing could convince him otherwise after tonight. Draco sat in a stadium box his father had managed to procure and fumed silently at the large oval mirror in the middle of the pitch, the one etched in emerald green. Pansy sat next to him, clutching his hand hard as she had been since Rigel's run-in with the werewolf. A werewolf! Just what was the Ministry playing at, he'd like to know. He tried to blank out the girl's furiously dynamic emotions, lest they overwhelm his already fraying nerves. Rigel was finally on his way back. He would be out in no time, and everything would be fine.

At least with his snake unconscious, he wasn't speaking Parseltongue every five seconds anymore. Half the stadium had gasped or screamed when it first came blaring out of the mirror, and most of them still flinched whenever Rigel's mirror was transmitting the sound. Draco appreciated that his friend wasn't shy about his ability, but did Parseltongue have to be the *very first thing he said*?

Aldon and Edmund had sidled into the box with him and Pansy as though he'd invited them, and he was reminded of their presence when Aldon muttered, "He needs to drop the bloody snake."

"He won't," Edmund murmured back. "He's loyal."

*He's an idiot*, Draco thought again. There were a million snakes in the forest. Draco was a bit surprised the Vow hadn't made him leave the snake behind by now, but he supposed as long as healing the animal didn't slow Rigel down, it wasn't technically impacting what would otherwise be his best effort.

Granger's viewer, ringed in light blue and second from the end on the left in the line of mirrors, swiveled around to look at Rigel, and Draco greedily inspected the image. Rigel's face was dirty and sweat-stained, but his eyes were eerily calm as he flicked them between the snake and the path ahead. While Granger seemed vaguely scattered every time Rigel's viewer showed a glimpse of her

face, Rigel was collected. He always had worked well under pressure.

It annoyed Draco how often Granger's viewer swiveled toward Rigel. She was constantly checking in with him, looking to Rigel for any and every course of action. If he were cynical, and if he didn't know Rigel at all, he'd think that teaming up with the muggleborn girl had been a masterstroke of public relations. Every time Rigel did something reckless or impressive, the audience got a third person view from Hermione's mirror. It made his journey through the forest all the more entertaining to watch. Unfortunately, Draco knew that Rigel had teamed up with Granger because he trusted her on the word of his cousin and probably didn't want Potter to be upset with him if the girl died in the tournament under his watch.

The sound was making its rounds through the other mirror. Antiope was currently attempting to fight the Sphinx instead of just answering its riddle. The Shang girl had taken out some sort of lute-like instrument and was charming a Snallygaster slowly to sleep. Sousa's mirror was motionless. It had been almost all night, and Draco was trying not to imagine why that was. Perhaps his transmitter had fallen off.

Suddenly the sound was back with Rigel, however, and Granger was screaming. Pansy's hand clamped down tighter on his as Rigel's viewer tilted sideways. It was difficult to see what exactly had happened until Rigel stood straight again and the mirror's image swung to reveal Hermione sprawled on the dirt, blood pouring from her wand arm. Crouched beside her in an attack stance was the dragon.

"No," Draco breathed. He was so close to safety. The Peruvian Vipertooth was smaller than most full grown dragons, but it was fast. It darted toward Granger's prone form, but Rigel's shield was already there, aborting its movements and redirecting its attention toward Rigel himself.



The heavy chain that had presumably once bound the dragon in place trailed slowly across the ground as the Vipertooth stalked toward Rigel, who, for some reason known only to him, wasn't yet running in the opposite direction. Granger's mirror finally shifted to show something other than blood-soaked earth as the girl roused herself and shook her head sharply. From the girl's mirror, he saw Rigel standing, absolutely fearless, in the face of the dragon's wary approach.

"Rigel..." Granger's voice echoed through the stadium. She sounded like a person in a great deal of pain. "Run!"

Rigel ignored the suggestion. "Can you heal yourself?" he asked without looking at her. Granger's viewer dipped down to her arm-or what was left of it. Great, gaping gashes of flesh hung limply where the dragon had raked her. Draco felt sick just looking at it, and from Pansy's choked whimper he wasn't the only one.

"I... think I'm in shock," Granger admitted. "I... yes. I can..." She picked up her wand with her left hand and cast a numbing charm followed by a blood-clotting charm. The dragon had stopped advancing on Rigel, but an ominous tendril of smoke was leaking from its snout.

"It's going to flame," Edmund said lowly. "Come on, Rigel. *Shield*."

He did, thank Salazar. A Fortis that was so bright it practically blinded sprung up between Rigel and the dragon just moments before a beam of pure fire shot out of the Vipertooth's throat. Rigel's screen went completely white, and only Granger's viewer told them that he hadn't just been roasted alive. Granger could still see the boy behind his shield, unmoved by the onslaught of fire. It was no short burst; the flames went on and on, as though the dragon needn't breathe to sustain them.

Rigel was doing something behind the shield. With his free hand he seemed to be fiddling with something in his pocket. Draco didn't know what could be more important than fending off a dragon, but

his confusion was answered when Rigel called, "Hermione, muffle your ears and close your eyes!"

Regardless of whether she did or didn't, they could all still see what was happening through her mirror. *Rigel dropped the shield*. Pansy screamed into his ear as flame enveloped Rigel completely, but Draco scarcely heard her over his own hoarse cry. But-what-Rigel was still there in Granger's viewer. Standing somehow impervious to the fire, his face screwed into a grimace as he flung something toward the Vipertooth and then clamped both hands over his ears.

The clearing exploded. Both Rigel and Granger's mirrors went white for an instant and a crack had everyone flinching before the mirror operators cut the sound. But the sound kept coming, only far away and muffled. He realized it was coming from the other contestants' viewers, too. Everyone in the forest was hearing whatever it was, and one by one the mirrors all panned up to the sky above the treetops.

"Fireworks?" Draco spluttered. What on Merlin's green earth was happening? There were dazzling red and yellow firework animals erupting over the forest in every mirror. Lions and dragons and unicorns danced across the sky. He stood from his seat and-yes, he could see them in the distance from the box. Rigel and Grangers' mirrors slowly regained intelligibility as the fireworks took on a life of their own and began to separate, swooping around the clearing and shooting up into the air before them. The real dragon was nowhere to be seen.

Rigel's viewer moved to focus on Granger, who was stumbling to her feet with tears in her eyes. Draco couldn't hear her over the still-exploding fireworks, but he saw her mouth, *What the hell was that?*

In Granger's mirror, Rigel grinned, his eyes gleaming with satisfaction. *Dragon repellent*, he mouthed back.

Rigel began to assist Granger in patching up her arm, and by the time it looked less like a chew toy the fireworks had almost put

themselves out. The sound moved back to Rigel's mirror as he was saying, "-should get moving again, if you can. We've just attracted a lot of attention."

"You think?" the girl said through gritted teeth. She had sliced through her sweater at the shoulder and was now using the torn sleeve at a makeshift sling. Rigel handed her a Blood-Replenisher, which she took wordlessly, followed by a Pain Potion and what Draco thought was an Anti-Infection Draught. "I can't believe we survived that. The burn repellant worked! I thought for a moment you were crazy, Rigel."

Rigel smiled tiredly. "Dad told me not to test it, but the fire didn't look like it was pausing anytime soon, and I think it was starting to cook me alive even through the shield." Rigel went momentarily cross-eyes as he looked down at his own nose. "Does this look sunburnt to you?"

Pansy let out a tremulous laugh. She was still shaking. "Rigel, you idiot," she whispered. Draco was very much inclined to agree.

Granger performed a Point Me and said, "Let's go. I'm done with this forest."

"Right behind you," Rigel agreed.

The sound moved away to Delacour, who'd managed to get herself cornered by a Manticore just shy of the forest's edge. Draco didn't care, he kept his eyes on Rigel's mirror, and as soon as the end of the trees came into view he was out of his seat. Pansy followed him out of the box in silent agreement, and the two of them ran on anxious feet down the stadium stairs and across the lawn.

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As soon as she was free of that blasted forest, she plucked the headband from her head and dropped it to the ground so it would stop transmitting. As though her aching psyche had summoned them, Draco and Pansy were there at the edge of the forest when she stumbled across the ward line after Hermione.

She was in their arms before she has time to greet them. Pansy's form trembled against her like a wild thing. Draco just gripped her hard and a moment later she felt his blissful numbing trick envelope her as well. She relaxed. Just let go of all the tension and fear and control she'd wound tight within herself over that last few hours. Rigel wanted nothing more than to shower and sleep, but she knew the night was only half over. She would not be allowed to leave until all of the champions had made it out of the woods. Still, for a single peaceful minute, she allowed herself the comfort of her friends' embrace.

When her friends finally let her go, Rigel noticed Hermione standing awkwardly to one side, looking wistful. She reached out toward the girl and shook her uninjured hand. "Well done in there, tonight. Thanks for your help."

"Me?" Hermione laughed a little helplessly. "Rigel, you're the only reason I'm not spider food right now. Or dragon fodder. I-it was so much more than I was expecting." The girl looked completely overwhelmed. Rigel had to agree, though. The first task was way over the top, even for Riddle.

Rigel nodded toward Hagrid's cabin, where a tent had been set up. "I think Madam Pomfrey is in there. She'll check over your arm."

Hermione nodded. The adrenaline was wearing off and the reality of the last few hours settling in over her. Rigel knew from experience the best thing for her to do now was sit somewhere quiet and let a professional take care of her injuries. Hermione walked numbly toward the medic tent and Rigel turned back to her friends. "So, did I win?"

"You prat!" Draco swore. "Do you have any idea how worried we've been all night? Watching you go from reckless to impossible to somehow even more reckless for hours?"

"Imagine how I felt," Rigel said dryly.

"Rigel, it was awful," Pansy said, earnest. "I wish you'd never agreed to do this. It's a miracle no one's died yet. Miss Granger is not the only one to have been nearly mauled, from what we saw."

"How are the others doing?" Rigel asked, serious. She didn't want to see anyone seriously hurt or killed that night.

"Owens and Krum finished ahead of you," Draco said. "Fleur is close, but ran into some trouble at the last minute. Other than that, we've seen Antiope, Shang, and Tahil all make it at least as far as the Sphinx. Sousa... hard to say. His transmitter fell off."

"The mirror went dark?" Rigel clarified.

"No, just stopped moving," Draco said.

Rigel frowned. "As long as it's in skin contact it will transmit, but if it fell off it would have gone dark. It sounds like he's been badly injured." She glanced back toward the trees, grimacing. "Maybe I should-"

"No!" Draco and Pansy both snapped the word at her.

"You aren't going back in there."

"You have to rest, Rigel."

Still, what if he was alone and vulnerable in there? Someone had to do something. Draco heaved a long-suffering sigh. "The tournament organizers know how the mirrors work as well as you," he pointed out. "If Sousa is in that sort of trouble, I'm sure they're already handling the situation."

Rigel nodded slowly. That made sense. Her friends attempted to herd her toward the medical tent, but she spotted Sirius jogging across the lawn toward her. He scooped her up and spun her in a circle, the way he'd done with Archie when he was a kid.

"Thank Godric, kid." He stopped spinning and squeezed her so tight she thought she might break a rib. "Who taught you to be so reckless, anyway?"

"I'm okay, Dad. Watch my snake, please." His grip loosened and she murmured into his chest, "Really. I'm all right, I promise. Everything is fine."

Sirius sighed and pulled back to look into her face worriedly. "You were fantastic, Arch. I'm so proud of you. But that situation was out of order. If Riddle thinks he can try and kill my own kid right in front of me, he's got another thing coming."

"I'm sure it was more controlled than it seemed," Rigel said, not really believing it. She added, "The werewolf was a bit much, though. I mean, it dehumanizes the entire community to put one in the mix with creatures like acromantula and quintapeds. Just another monster in the dark."

Sirius grimaced. "You're right, Pup. I hope it's no one Remus knows. No self-respecting werewolf should have stooped to participating in this madness."

Green sparks popped in the sky just then, and Fleur came limping out of the forest when the wards dropped down. They popped back up just as quickly, and Rigel couldn't help but be impressed. It took a lot of power to lower and raise wards so fast. She thought it was unlikely Regulus could have done it alone.

The French girl gasped for air, spitting out curses left and right. *"That forest is possessed by an evil curse. I hope someone burns it down."*

Rigel winced. *"It's not usually that bad,"* she told the girl. At least she thought she did.

Fleur blinked at her and said, "You sound like my house elf."

Sirius snorted. "Have you been taking love-language lessons from a house elf, Archie? My goodness, I didn't know you were so hard pressed."

Rigel's ears went pink. "Dad! I just hang around the kitchens sometimes, that's all. There's this really nice elf who helps me out a lot and she speaks French, ok?"

"Oh Godric, where have I strayed?" Sirius asked the sky.

Fleur began to laugh lowly. She seemed surprised at herself. "After tonight, I wasn't sure I would laugh again."

Rigel understood the feeling. "The memory will fade soon enough," she told the girl. "There's a medic in the tent over there, if you have any injuries."

Fleur nodded, a hand coming up to prod gingerly at her thigh. Her tracksuit was dark with blood. She began to limp toward the tent, but paused and gave Rigel a grateful look. "Zank you for letting me follow you. I know you zaw me once or twice."

She smiled and shrugged. "No idea what you're talking about."

Draco was scowling when she looked back at him. "You *let* her follow you all the way to the chest? Why?"

"It didn't slow me down any," Rigel reasoned. "Plus it's easier to keep an eye on people when they're close by. The fewer people end up in mortal peril this year the better, I say."

Pansy rubbed her temple. "We are discussing this in your debrief, Rigel."

"Debrief?" Sirius looked between them, bemused.

"Pansy is my strategist," Rigel said, smiling a little. "And Draco is my tactician."

"Does that make me your armorer?" Sirius wondered, grinning.

"You and the Weasley twins," she agreed. "That Fire Free stuff was amazing, Dad! I could feel it absorbing the heat before it reached my skin. I might be flash-burned in a couple of places, but I'd say the first real test was a big success."

Sirius's grin dropped a little. "I'm glad it worked, but it was supposed to be a last resort."

"That was a last resort," Rigel told him. "With Hermione in no state to run, I had no plan other than the firework disk."

"What was that, anyway?" Pansy asked. "It was so small compared to the amount of explosive power inside."

She shrugged. "You'd have to ask the Weasleys. George gave it to me earlier today. I think it was supposed to be a joke-send up fireworks instead of sparks when I finished, you know? But it was dead useful."

"That dragon certainly scarpered," Sirius agreed, barking out a laugh. "I may have to consult these evil geniuses on a project or two."

"They'd love that," Rigel said.

Antiope was the next to leave the forest, her shoulders slumped with exhaustion. She dropped her sword into the grass and raked both hands through her hair, slowly shaking her head back and forth. She seemed to be muttering to herself with her eyes closed. Then, with a deep breath, she collected the blade, straightened, and strode toward the medic tent with a stoic expression.



Feiyan Shang came out shortly after, and while she was rumpled and dirty, she was the first to emerge without a significant amount of blood on her person. She walked over to Rigel's group and asked, "The others. All are out?"

Rigel shook her head. "Tahiil and Matheus are still in the forest."

Shang frowned. "We wait now," she determined. The Chinese girl removed her purple headband and put it carefully in her pocket before looking around at the others. "I am Shang Feiyan. Pleased to meet you."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, too," Pansy said. "I am Pansy Parkinson. This is Draco Malfoy and Rigel's father, Lord Black."

Shang bowed deeply to Sirius. "Is honorable to meet you, Lord Black."

Sirius shifted uncomfortably. "You as well, Miss Shang. Princess Shang? Or..."

Shang giggled, but stopped almost at once, flushing pink. "I am not princess. My father very far from throne. He is court astrologer. Much honor, but not... not..." She frowned in a frustrated way. "How to say a strength to do whatever is wanted?"

"Power?" Pansy guessed.

"Yes. My family has much honor, little power," Shang concluded. "I thank you your kindness, Lord Black."

Sirius grimaced, "Not at all."

The wait for Tahiil and Matheus was excruciating. Minute after silent minute dragged on, with Rigel growing more worried by the second. She busied herself checking on Treeslider, but the snake was out of the woods both literally and figuratively. He was in a deep, healing sleep now in Rigel's cloak. Finally, she excused herself for a

moment, saying she needed to use the bathroom and making her way toward Hagrid's cabin. When she was out of sight, she rummaged in her bag until she found the Marauder's Map and pulled it out. Only part of the forest was actually included on the map, but it was the part closest to the edge, and she was relieved to see two dots, one nearly on top of the other, making slow but steady progress toward the tree line. Relieved, she opted to use Hagrid's facilities while she had the chance and made her way back to her friends a few minutes later, just as green sparks shot into the sky behind them.

They saw Tahil first, because he was dragging an unresponsive Matheus behind him. Rigel, Draco, and Sirius rushed forward to relieve the dark-skinned boy of his burden and set Matheus down gently on the grass. Rigel removed his headband and flung it aside, then began her diagnostic charms, but nothing life-threatening or even all that alarming appeared in her scans. He was breathing oddly, but not in a way that sounded as though he had fluid or anything else obstructing his lungs. His heartrate was fast, with no obvious cause. Had he been poisoned?

She peeled back his eyelid and startled when it jerked out of her grasp and blinked. Matheus opened both eyes and stared at her, not speaking or otherwise reacting to her presence.

"He's awake," she said, unnerved, "But... not really responsive. What happened?" she asked Tahil.

Tahil was still breathing hard, and he pushed aside his headband to wipe his brow with his sleeve as he said, "Not sure. I found him just lying on the ground, but he didn't look injured. Still, he was in no condition to remain in the forest, so I pulled him along with me."

Feiyan bent down to inspect the boy and a moue of disapproval pursed her lips. "Betel-chewer. Fool boy."

Rigel lifted Matheus' top lip and shook her head. "His teeth aren't stained. I don't think this is Betel." Betel was a leaf that, when

chewed, had some sort of cognitive effect on the mind. She was vaguely aware that some wizards in Southeast Asia treated it the way Westerners treated tobacco.

"Not certain Betel," Feiyan said. "But like Betel. His eyes, you see?"

The pupils that stared up at them were blown wide. Lots of things caused dilated pupils, however. He could have a brain injury that just wasn't showing up in her scan. Or maybe he had overdosed on Pain Potion. But again, her diagnostics told her he wasn't afflicted with any pain-causing wounds.

"He looks high as a kite," Sirius said flatly. "Give him a Sobering Draught."

Rigel frowned. "Why would he allow himself to face a task like this while incapacitated?" she asked, even as she fished the potion in question from her kit. "Is he trying to kill himself?"

"Can't understand an addict's thinking, if that's what he is," Sirius said, shaking his head. "He's just lucky this young man has a generous spirit. Good work," he told Tahiil.

Tahiil only sighed. "I am the last to return. Even without helping Matheus, I would be last. I do not think I have done good work tonight."

"You saved his life," Sirius disagreed. "That's all that matters."

Tahiil looked only marginally cheered by this. Rigel had administered the Sobering Draught and was watching Matheus for signs of improvement when a party of Ministry officials arrived from the pitch. Riddle, Fudge, Bagman, and Crouch were all there, along with Dumbledore, the Malfoys, James, and two other Aurors.

Riddle approached Matheus and peered down at him just as the boy groaned and winced against the harsh effects of the Sobering Draught. He let off a few choice words in Portuguese, but quieted his

curses when he noticed all the people standing over him. He sat up, rubbing at his head.

"I trust you are recovered from your... fall?" Riddle said quietly.

Matheus' eyes widened. "Ah yes," he said slowly. "Very recovered. Thank you."

"Then you may join the rest of us in the champion's tent, where we will announce your scores." Riddle's eyes swept over Rigel, Feiyan, and Tahil. "If you would all follow me to the tent and re-don your headbands, we can bring this exciting night to a conclusion."

He swept away toward the medic tent, and the others followed after him wearily. Rigel turned to Mr. Malfoy before doing the same, and said, "Thank you again for these excellently crafted gauntlets, Lord Malfoy. As you can see, they held remarkably well." She lifted one to display the claw marks that now raked across its surface.

"House Malfoy is gratified to be of service," Malfoy said, inclining his head to Sirius and Rigel both.

"We're very glad you're safe," Narcissa added. Her face was pale, and Rigel suspected she had not enjoyed the entertainment that evening at all.

"Someone will need to let that werewolf out at dawn," she realized suddenly. Rigel rummaged in her bag until she procured the Ward Disruptor. She handed it to Malfoy Sr. "Please give this to whoever the organizers send."

He took it, but said, "I will pass it to Lord Potter, as I understand he is sending a team to collect the wolf presently."

"The Aurors are?" Sirius stared at Mr. Malfoy with dawning fury. "The werewolf wasn't part of this."

"Decidedly not," Malfoy said. "An investigation will be launched into how exactly the beast managed to penetrate the wards."

Rigel blew out an exasperated breath. "The item chest was well outside the Hogwarts wards," she said flatly. "Since the competition zone overlapped part of the unwarded forest, all he had to do was wait outside Riddle's wards until they dropped to let us enter, then cross them at the same time."

Malfoy stared at her for a long moment before saying, "Very astute, Rigel. That may be."

"Rigel, the scoring," Draco reminded her.

She nodded, and went to collect her headband from where she'd dropped it earlier before continuing toward the tent. It was much bigger inside than it looked. Dumbledore was in one corner conferring with Madam Pomfrey, who wore a ferocious scowl. The nine competitors stood close together around the group of tournament organizers, in the center of which was Riddle.

"Please put on your headbands once more, as this will be broadcast down to the pitch as well," Riddle began. When he had everyone's attention and all their headbands were in place, he smiled. "Well done, all of you. Tonight you have been tested beyond what any of you likely imagined; this was done knowingly. One of the measures of great witches and wizards is their ability to overcome fear and physical hardship and to remain steadfast and true in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds." He moved his head to look at each of the champions in turn as he spoke, except he wasn't looking at them—he was looking into their headbands. Rigel frowned as she realized this was really about Riddle, not them. Right now, every mirror in the pitch would be filled with his face, smiling and self-congratulatory. She deliberately turned her head away from Riddle and toward the others. She let her headband take in Antiope's stony visage, Hermione and Fleur's bandaged limbs, Tahil's exhausted eyes, Krum's muck-strewn form, and Feiyan's troubled frown. Let

them see the truth of what has occurred tonight. In her mirror, at least, let them know the cost of their entertainment.

"Now, to the scoring." Riddle produced a roll of parchment with a flourish. "I'm sure you're all aware that you're to be judged on how quickly you completed the task assigned to you, but what we have not told you is... that is only one of the four categories on which you were assessed."

He paused for effect, allowing the pure sadism of those words to sink in before continuing.

"The four categories are: time taken for task completion, valor in the face of danger, critical thinking in problem solving, and moral fiber." There were a few murmurs at the last category, but most the others seemed too tired and strung out to really care. Riddle elaborated. "The tournament judges chose these criteria because they represent virtues the Wizarding World would see associated with its best and brightest. You must be effective, creative, tough, *and* ethical. However, we have not weighted every category equally. Timeliness in finishing the task is worth twenty points. Valor is fifteen. Appropriate thinking is worth ten points, and morality, five points. Each champion's score, therefore, is out of fifty."

Rigel wondered at the odd way of scoring. It appeared comprehensive at first, and certainly it was a more in-depth evaluation than she'd been expecting, but it was also... off. Riddle agreeing to give points for moral fiber? She began to suspect that the complicated scoring system was merely a screen; everything about this tournament was designed for a very specific purpose: to ensure a pureblood champion.

"In the category of task completion, in order of success, the points are as follows," Riddle said. The tent was utterly silent as everyone listened carefully. "Jacob Owens, 20 points. Victor Krum, 19 points. Arcturus Black and Hermione Granger, 18 points. Fleur Delacour, 16 points. Antiope, 15 points. Feiyan Shang, 14 points. Tahii Diric Zahi, 13 points. Matheus Sousa... zero points."

Sousa blinked, but didn't argue. He didn't seem to care at all, and Rigel had to wonder if Pansy and Millicent had been right; maybe there was something odd about his participation in the tournament.

"For valor, first place goes to Antiope, 15 points," Riddle said, smiling ever-so-slightly. "Full marks in this category were given for willingness to face every foe encountered. Points were deducted for running or hiding without engaging. Second goes to Arcturus Black, 14 points, for being the only champion to take on the most dangerous foe in the forest and win. Next, Victor Krum, 12 points. Hermione Granger, 10 points. Tahil Diric Zahi, 10 points. Feiyan Shang, 9 points. Jacob Owens, 8 points. Fleur Delacour, 5 points. Matheus Sousa, zero points."

Rigel glanced over at Hermione, a frown tugging at her brow, but the curly-haired girl only shrugged unconcernedly back at her, mouthing the word 'shield.' Rigel grimaced. If she'd known they were going to count Hermione off for it, she might not have shielded her so often. Then again, she probably would have, she admitted. Rigel was not one to take unnecessary chances with other people's safety.

"In the category of problem solving, full marks are awarded for applying the *appropriate* response to each situation or problem set. Marks were deducted for inefficient or unwise use of force." Riddle cleared his throat. "Jacob Owens, 10 points. Hermione Granger, 9 points. Fleur Delacour, 8 points. Arcturus Black, 8 points. Feiyan Shang, 8 points. Tahil Diric Zahi, 7 points. Victor Krum, 6 points. Antiope, 5 points. Matheus Sousa, zero points."

She wondered with amusement whether the judges had found her use of fireworks against the dragon unwise.

"Finally, for moral fiber: full marks to Tahil Diric Zahi for saving another champion at no benefit to himself, and to Feiyan Shang for completing the task without harming a single creature or fellow being. 5 points each. Jacob Owens, 4 points. Arcturus Black, 4 points. Hermione Granger, 4 points. Victor Krum, 2 points. Antiope, 1 point. Fleur Delacour, 1 point-while she did not harm anything

excessively, she did use underhanded means to complete the task. And Matheus Sousa, zero points." Riddle rolled the scroll and tucked it away. "So where does that leave us? Minister, if you would?"

Fudge stepped forward, his chest thrust out. "Thank you, Lord Riddle. Ahem. In ninth place, with zero points due to failure across all four categories, Matheus Sousa. In eighth place, Fleur Delacour, with 30 points. In seventh place, Tahil Diric Zahi with 35 points. Tied for fifth, we have Feiyan Shang and Antiope with 36 points. Fourth is Victor Krum with 39 points. Third, Hermione Granger, with 41 points. And our winner, with a total of 44 points, is Arcturus Black! Well done, Mr. Black. Jacob Owens, then, is our runner up with 42 points. A quick thank you to all the sponsors of tonight's events, and a round of applause for our champions, please!"

No one in the tent applauded, but presumably, down on the pitch, there was some measure of cheering. Rigel found it hard to believe that she'd won the first task, but it was difficult to pin down which category, exactly, she had been scored unfairly in. Somehow, she was certain the scores *had* been manipulated, but the subjective metrics themselves made it difficult to contest.

A few of the others congratulated her on their way out of the tent. She tried to smile politely, but was afraid it came out a grimace. Krum noticed and grimaced back at her.

"Strange tournament ven I come back second and place fourth, no?" He shook his head irritably. "Still, even knowing the scoring ahead of time, I would not do anything different. There is no path for strategy in such a dangerous situation."

Rigel nodded in agreement. "Tonight was mostly luck. Some probably had a harder time than others just based on starting position or the creatures they happened to encounter. I think we all did well."

"I thank you for the rope," Krum said. He left the tent, and Rigel followed.



Hermione sidled up beside her on the way out, "You think you didn't deserve to win, but you did," she told her. At Rigel's grimace, Hermione nudged her. "I'm serious. No one else took on a werewolf and a dragon. I asked around. The others encountered one or two creatures each. We ran into *four*, not including the Sphinx. I'm not so blind I can't see that you did most of the heavy lifting tonight, either. Don't think I won't return the favor, Rigel. Thanks again."

She trotted off toward the castle, still cradling her newly-healed arm close. Rigel found James and Sirius waiting for her, along with Pansy and Draco.

"Father took mother home," Draco told her, "But he said to tell you congratulations for winning."

She nodded. "I appreciate your family's support. Would you two mind going ahead to the castle without me? I need to talk to my dad and my uncle for a minute. I'll be back in the common room soon, though."

Pansy and Draco exchanged a resigned look and both nodded. Pansy hugged her again gently. "Congratulations, Rigel."

They both began the walk back to the Entrance Hall. Rigel turned to the older men with a serious face. "Did you get the werewolf?" she asked James. "What was he trying to do here? I'm sure he was on Wolfsbane, so he must have had a purpose."

James frowned. "I shouldn't tell you."

"I'm the one in danger if I don't know," she said firmly. "Uncle James, if someone is targeting the tournament, it affects all the competitors."

Her father sucked in one cheek and chewed on it. He always did that right before giving in. "All right. Don't spread this information too far, Archie, but we didn't apprehend the wolf. By the time my team got there, the barrier was gone and the wolf with it."

She shook her head. "You can't break one from the inside without a wand or the disruptor potion. There's no way it got out on its own. But if one of the other champions let it out, you would have seen on the mirrors."

"Whoever helped the werewolf free is probably the same one who gave him the information that helped him in," Sirius said grimly.

"That means someone on the organizing committee," Rigel said.

"We don't know that for certain yet," James cautioned. "Just... be careful. You did good tonight, Arch, but there's no knowing what all there is in store for you lot this year. Just keep your head on a swivel and we'll do our best to help out from our end."

She smiled. "Thanks, Uncle James. I couldn't have done it without you guys."

"Don't thank us, Pup, you're just our little advertisement project," Sirius said archly. "Why, every kid in school is going to want some Fire Free Burn Baste now."

Rigel tilted her head. "I don't know; I think more people will remember the Weasley twins' firework display. Now that was some impressive magic."

Sirius laughed. "Challenge accepted! Next time we'll give you something to really knock their socks off."

She blanched. The Marauders and the Weasley twins trying to out-do one another... now *that* was a terrifying thought. A yawn clawed its way up her throat and she stifled it on her grime-coated sleeve.

"Go to bed, kid," Sirius said fondly. "Remus will be sorry he missed you, but you're too knackered to stay up till dawn. Rest up, remember to eat well and get your strength back before the next task. We'll see you soon." He hugged her fiercely, and James followed suit soon after.

"Good work tonight, Archie. I mean it. Not many can take on a werewolf like that and come out unscathed. We think... well, we think it might have been Greyback, himself, but it was difficult to get positive ID through the mirrors. Anyway, sleep well. Addy and Lily send their love." James ruffled her hair.

"Send them mine, too," she said, her voice trembling slightly. She only had to keep it together for a little while longer, she sternly told herself.

She trudged back up to the castle, her feet as heavy and silent as her heart. Her housemates would want to celebrate, she knew. Probably a party had already begun in the common room in her honor. She wouldn't be good company that night, however, so she would beg off, plead exhaustion, wash the night away in the shower and crawl into bed. Maybe, if Fate was kind for once, she wouldn't have to get out of it until the following night. Maybe she'd feel better when she woke. Maybe... well. Maybe a lot of things.

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[end of chapter eight]

A/N: That's it! My patient readers, please forgive all the many typos and grammatical issues that are sure to pervade this chapter. I haven't sent it through my editor, yet, but I did promise you all a chapter and by god here it is! Somehow my 25k chapter is now a 47k monstrosity. I suspect my fanfic is eating other fanfics when I'm not looking. Thanks to everyone who encouraged me while writing this one, and to all those authors writing fanfic of this fanfic, a few of which I have in turn derived my own inspiration from. We are the greatest of self-licking ice cream cones, fam.

If anyone is looking for the link to the Discord server, I believe it is posted in the Rigel Black Forum on this site. As always, thank you so much for reading! I hope everyone's holidays were bright.

All the best, Violet Matter

## Chapter 9

### The Futile Façade:

#### Chapter 9:

Any expectations of tournament fervor having died down after the completion of the first task were abruptly doused the following morning, as Rigel entered the Great Hall to a wave of rowdy applause. She lifted a hand uncertainly in response and hurried over to the Slytherin table, where her friends, merciful beings that they were, quickly blocked her in with firmly planted bottoms and icy glares.

"We missed you at the party last night," Theo said, grinning at Rigel's disgruntled expression. "Congrats again on your win."

"If that's what winning feels like, I want no part of it," she said halfheartedly. "I'm sore all over, and I'll be digging dirt from my fingernails all week."

Pansy set down her utensils at once and picked up Rigel's hand to consider its cleanliness. "Your gloves appear to have done their job and preserved the sanctity of your nail beds. Could it be you're simply grumpy because the party kept you up last night?"

She *had* slept fitfully, visions of bright fire and sharp claws having followed her to dreamland. Even now, surrounded by people she largely trusted, it was difficult to fully relax. Still, that wasn't any of her friends' fault. "Could be," she allowed. "Don't let my poor mood sink everyone's spirits. What were you talking about before I sat down?"

"You," Millicent said, smiling unapologetically at the grimace this drew from Rigel. "The next task is a month out, and we were speculating what kind of challenge it would be."

"Already?" Rigel groaned into her porridge. "No more talk of tasks for a while, please."

"The other champions, then?" Millicent suggested. "Pansy and I will be adding our observations to the dossiers this week. There's a lot you weren't able to see from inside the forest. Tahill, for instance, really is proficient at wandless magic, and we didn't recognize any of the spells he used. Feiyan, on the other hand, appears to know a surprising amount of Latin-based magic in addition to-"

"I'm going to go brew," Rigel muttered, abandoning her meal and hefting her bag over her shoulder with a wince. She really was sore all over.

"Rigel-"

Whatever Pansy was going to say was cut off as Draco said firmly, "Let him go."

She shot a grateful smile at her blond friend, pretending not to notice the worried look in his eyes as she retreated from the table. She'd only gone a couple of steps when a slight girl with long, brunette hair scrambled up from the table and into her path. Rigel paused to let the girl pass-a first year, she thought, vaguely remembering the kid from the Soring Ceremony-but instead the little slip of a girl stopped and gazed up at Rigel with wide, half-hair-covered eyes.

"Good job yesterday!" the girl piped up at her, a tremulous smile creeping across her pale features. "I-" She fumbled in her pocket for a moment before producing a flat green stone and presenting it proudly for her inspection. "I got this! To support you. It's a basilisk scale, see?"

It was... not a basilisk scale. Rigel returned the girl's smile awkwardly. "Thanks, ah, it's Rowle, right? Thank you. For your support. I think that might be a shard of jade, though." Rowle looked down at the rough stone with dismay, and Rigel hurried to add, "Still, green is our color, isn't it?"

Rowle nodded timidly. "Yes. I guess it still works. Well, I'll be cheering for you."

"Thank you," she said again, feeling incredibly stupid. All she could think as the girl stepped aside was she hoped Rowle hadn't paid too much for a fake basilisk scale. Probably one of the older students had played a prank on her. She certainly better not find anyone selling counterfeit potions ingredients in her name.

Rigel left all thoughts of the tournament behind as she walked through the door to her lab. It was like stepping through a portal to her own little world. With the door shut firmly behind her, she didn't have to think about tasks, politics, or even her friends' well-meaning support. In her tiny lab, she was just Rigel, potioneer, and nothing more.

Her current project was simmering innocuously in the corner, the only clue to its incredible difficulty the sheen of pure magic that hovered over the surface. It had taken an inordinate amount of pure magic to stabilize the brew, and there were still a couple weeks to go before the double batch of Animagus Revelation would be ready for consumption. Deep in her potions kit, the final ingredients had already been set to soak in twin vials of her and Archie's saliva. By late-November, it should be finished.

There was nothing else she could do for that project at the moment, so Rigel began to set up the cauldron for a batch of Protection Potion-Krait was still selling through them like love charms-and turned her mind to something she'd been working on since the summer holidays.

Her all-inclusive first-aid kit was coming along slowly. Epidermal healing was only the beginning. Muscle repair had been relatively simple, with nearly the same sort of magic going into the imbuing. She'd managed to replicate a Bone-Knitting spell with the variable base Master Snape had come up with and the use of powdered Erumpent femur as the signifying ingredient, but she hadn't found a way to actually apply it to the bone if the skin wasn't pierced. She

could easily spell the potion into the body at the site of the bone in question, but most people didn't know how to do that, and the kit was supposed to be usable by anyone.

So most of the magic that needed to go deeper than muscle was causing her trouble. The organs weren't easily accessible by any of the usual means-potions ingested tended to stay in the digestive system and salves only penetrated the body so far before the magic dissipated. Organs were delicate, too, in a way that skin, muscle, and bone were not. Too much magic, and their homeostasis would be thrown out of balance.

Her hands worked on autopilot, chopping, shredding, and stirring in smooth motions while her mind wandered. How could she get the imbued magic to where it was needed while still carrying it in a potion? Only pure magic could pass through the uninjured parts of the body without repercussion. If there was a wound in the abdominal cavity that wasn't exposed to the air, it seemed as though magical transportation was the only way to reach it without cutting the body open. How did muggles treat those sorts of injuries? Rigel supposed they probably did just cut people open.

As the Protection Potion came to life beneath her fingers, Rigel's mind drifted. There was something niggling in her memory. She knew Archie's Healing texts had mentioned something else that muggles did besides cutting people open, only she couldn't remember what it was.

A movement in her pocket had Rigel pausing in her ingredient preparation and carefully peering into the recently enlarged space. Treelider was curled up inside, a warm ball of comforting heat at her hip. He was shifting restlessly, but under her patient eyes he subsided into sleep again. The snake still hadn't woken. She knew he was only regaining his strength, but it pained her to see the usually energetic boomslang reduced to a near-catatonic state.

Her memory offered up a scene from the night she'd first met the brave little snake. Alice had sent her into the woods to gather a



specimen from a magical animal for her game with Edmund. Treelider had happily provided his venom. She saw in her mind's eye his fang piercing the thin cork in the vial. Then it played again, slower, and Rigel began to smile.

*Of course.* That's what she'd forgotten. Muggles used a piercing apparatus to go through the skin without damaging it overmuch, and they administered potions-or something like potions, at least-through the hollow tip! Her brain raced along the trajectory of that revelation with giddy excitement. Could the average person be accurate enough with such a device to get a potion in the general vicinity of an internal wound? With the right precautions... she thought maybe they could. She could spell the things-needles, she thought they were called, only not the sewing kind-for accuracy, or maybe charm each individually to find a specific point on the human body. Really, it was no different from hexes that targeted eyes, bowels, or feet regardless of the caster's aim. The magic existed. Applying it was only a question of perseverance, then.

Visions of self-propelled pointy things filled her head until she finished the Protection Potion. Only once it was neatly bottled and labeled did she rummage for spare parchment on which she could regurgitate the flood of ideas. The devices would need to be pre-filled with the potions that corresponded to the part of the body they would be spelled to target. Then there was the added necessity of the needle distinguishing between the injured person and anyone else who happened to be nearby. That would be tricky... but not impossible.

Her quill roved across the page, writing and re-writing and looking for inconsistencies. By the time lunch rolled around, she had come up with a handful of rudimentary runic sequences that approached the concept she'd set out. The final product would be a lot more complex, but it was a good beginning.

She stowed her notes and cleaned up the lab before locking it behind her. It wasn't until Rigel's feet carried her back into the more

commonly traversed areas of the dungeons that she remembered why she'd fled to her lab in the first place.

"Rigel!"

Adrian Pucey's voice stalled her progress toward the Great Hall. She slowed and waited for the older boy to catch up to her. "Hi, Pucey," she offered, wondering what the upperclassman needed.

" *Great* job last night." He clapped her on the back hard and she had to bite down on the urge to cough. "Using the muggleborn to get a leg up was inspired, you know. Everyone is still talking about it."

Ah. Yes. She cleared her throat and smiled serenely up at the tall young man. "I'm pleased to have done well in the eyes of our House. I must admit, however, that I teamed up with Hermione because she's my friend."

Pucey blinked at her. "Your... friend." He seemed unsure whether he was meant to laugh. "Sure, Rigel. If that's what you told her."

Rigel's smile melted into a more serious expression. "Really, Adrian. Hermione is my cousin Harry's best friend. It's only natural that we'd work together."

"But you aren't going to help her win, surely," Pucey pointed out, now frowning. "I mean, this little alliance only works in the short term."

She conceded the point with a slow nod. "At some point we'll have to compete in good faith, it's true. She'll still be my friend, though."

The upperclassman gazed at her searchingly for a moment before shrugging. "If you say so. Anyway, good job, Rigel. Keep it up, yeah?"

"Yeah."

Pucey pulled ahead as Rigel hung back. She wondered how many people thought she'd been *using* Hermione instead of working with

her. Did Hermione feel that way? She blew out a frustrated breath. It was an odd feeling, having the choices you made to stay alive judged and evaluated by a thousand outside eyes. The ordinary dangers of her past were nothing compared to the tournament's gargantuan, political, and public nature. Every time she felt she had a handle on it, some aspect of perception she hadn't considered reminded her that she had no idea what she was doing.

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Classes resumed Monday, but the façade of normalcy that came with them was just that. The aftereffects of the first task were not so easily shaken off. Treelizard had woken intermittently, but only to feed on a couple of small mice before sinking back into energy conserving slumber. She kept him close to her side, and, despite snakes not being on the approved list of familiars, the professors allowed it with pity in their eyes.

Draco positively hovered whenever Rigel allowed it. He'd become something of a personal specter, glaring away anyone who tried crowding her in his presence. Sometimes she was grateful for the interference. Other times, she wondered whether she really seemed so fragile to him. She was fine, after all. The first task had been... intensely discomfiting. But it was nothing a good night's sleep couldn't salve.

The Weasley twins had stopped her in the hall the day after the task and crowed their delight at the number of orders they'd already received for the firework display. None of her slightly concerned protests had stopped them promising to top it with whatever they gave her next. She wondered if Riddle would consider accidentally blowing up everything around her to be 'doing her best.' Still, Rigel had to admit she wouldn't have fared so well against the dragon without the twins' device. When she'd said as much, Fred cackled in

a distinctly worrying fashion before muttering something about marketing a line of dragon deterrents.

The only professor who didn't move on tiptoe around her was Auror Dawlish. Defense Against the Dark Arts on Tuesday kicked off with a Severing Charm aimed directly at Rigel's nose. While the students seemed to stiffen around her, anticipating-what, she wasn't sure: a meltdown? A blowup?-Rigel blocked it automatically. She blinked in confusion at the Defense professor; he didn't normally begin to fire hexes until he'd at least called roll.

The tall man leveled his arresting eyes at her for a long moment before turning toward the blackboard with no more explanation than a flare of his olive trench coat. The lesson proceeded normally, or at least as normally as any of Dawlish's lessons ever did, but when the class was over he said, "Black. Stay behind."

Pansy and Draco had twin expressions of protective outrage. She laid an exasperated expression against them until they grudgingly packed up their things and headed for the door. The sharp look Draco shot her over his shoulder on the way told her they would be waiting just outside. Good friends were equal parts blessing and curse, she thought wryly.

Rigel approached the teacher's desk with healthy apprehension. She didn't think it likely that he'd kept her behind to hurl more offensive spells at her, but she wasn't going to discount the possibility outright. "You required me, Professor Dawlish?"

The man was pulling something from his desk drawer. It was a slim book with a well-worn cover. He passed the volume to her wordlessly and when she opened her mouth to question he shook his head sharply. "That's all, Black."

He turned his back to her, pulled out his wand, and began rearranging the desks for his next class. Rigel looked down at the book in her hand. It was a copy of the *Auror's Field Guide*. A well-used copy, at that. She flipped it open and noted that a number of

passages were highlighted. Her fingers tightened as the thought came to her unbidden: who had asked Dawlish to give this to her? James or Riddle?

Troubled, she pocketed the tome and left the classroom. Pansy and Draco had expectant expressions, but Rigel only shrugged in response to their unasked questions. She didn't know what to say about the handbook. It would undoubtedly come in handy in the tournament, but without knowing whether it was her father or her enemy who wanted her to read it, characterizing it as a gift seemed hasty.

"Is Auror Dawlish affiliated with the S.O.W. Party?" she asked instead.

"Not that I know of," Pansy said slowly. "It's difficult to say with certainty, however. Not all those with membership patronize the social events. Professor Snape is a good example of that."

She nodded. "Is there a way to find out?"

"I'll ask Father," Draco offered. "Did he say something to make you think he's working for Lord Riddle?"

Rigel frowned. "Must you call him that? He's not a lord."

Draco lowered his voice. "Just because he hasn't claimed the lordship doesn't mean it's not his, Rigel."

"What lordship?" she asked, frowning. "There's no House of Riddle."

"The Slytherin lordship," Pansy said softly. "Everyone knows he's the heir, Rigel. He's a Parselmouth-my mother told me she heard it once." Her voice was no more than a whisper by the end.

"If everyone knows, why are we whispering?" Rigel asked.

Pansy pursed her lips. "If Lord Riddle hasn't advertised it, he has a reason for that. No one would bring it up without his permission."

"Except he obviously *has* advertised it, or no one would know," Rigel said. She could feel a familiar frustration building. Why did no one else see how odd this all was? Were they just used to it, having grown up in awe of the politician? "And have you forgotten I'm a Parselmouth, too? That doesn't automatically make someone Lord Slytherin."

"But you're already tied to another House," Draco said, sounding impatient. "Lord Riddle's House must be Slytherin, because he isn't tied to any other."

"That you know of," Rigel muttered. She shook her head in exasperation. "Have you even seen his family tree? Has anyone? Maybe he's not tied to any House-"

"Rigel, be quiet." Pansy shot a glance up and down the hallway. Her face was pale and her voice shook as she carefully added, "Speculation of that kind is dangerous."

"But that's just it," Rigel hissed, trying to keep her voice low. "He's got everyone so scared of his retribution that no one asks the obvious questions."

"Parselmouths don't come from nowhere," Draco said firmly. "Only the oldest pureblood Houses carry the gift, and not many of them are left in this age. *Think*, Rigel. Have you ever heard of a Parselmouth who *wasn't* the lord or heir to one of those Houses?"

She scowled. "No, but-"

"Lord Riddle is waiting for the right time to reveal his origins. That's all. Gossiping about it before that time will only get us all politically blacklisted." Draco's words were steady but his eyes were worried-too worried to be thinking clearly, she thought.

"Fine, then. I'll drop it," she allowed. Her tongue stung with the bitter admission. There was something fishy about Riddle's backstory. She hadn't much cared before, but the more his elitist agenda was

bandied about in her face, the more it irked her. "I'm going to the library," she said.

"We have History of Magic," Pansy protested.

"Binns won't miss me." The ghost never even took roll, and Rigel was several weeks ahead of the syllabus in any case. "See you at lunch."

Draco spluttered as she left them in the corridor but didn't chase after her, at least. It probably wouldn't amuse him to know that she was headed for the genealogy section.

The library was incredibly quiet, being that it was the middle of second period on a Tuesday. Only a handful of harried-looking NEWT students were scattered among the tables. Rigel wove her way through the stacks, but slowed to a halt when she recognized a head of curly hair in the Healing section.

"Hi, Hermione. Looking for anything in particular?" She smiled in a friendly way as the girl looked over distractedly, thinking she was probably looking for a text to go along with that week's AIM assignment.

"Rigel, good morning." Hermione barely glanced over from where she was perusing the shelf. "Ah, sort of. There's not a lot on early childhood diseases here."

Rigel frowned in thought. None of Archie's current assignments related to that topic. "I have a couple of books on childhood syndromes in my dorm, if you'd like them. Doing some extracurricular reading?"

Hermione abandoned the bookshelf to shoot Rigel a considering look. "Yes, actually. I assume you're aware of the Fade?"

"Of course." She grimaced. "Everyone knows of the Fade. I'm afraid a lot of the literature on it is speculation still. Most of the articles I've

seen in recent journals report little progress beyond diagnosis."

"I've noticed the same," Hermione said. Exasperation crept into her tone as she added, "I'd think in the nation where Wizarding children are most affected there would be an abundance of information. Instead, I'm having the same trouble finding anything concrete here that I had at AIM."

"You could ask Madam Pomfrey, but our lesson on the Fade was rather straightforward," Rigel said slowly. "Children are sometimes born without enough magic to sustain their life force. All experiments to stymie the magical bleed-off only prolong the inevitable. I've not seen anything indicating that it affects offspring of at least one muggleborn parent, though, so you don't have to be concerned."

Hermione gaped at her in open outrage. "Not concerned? Children are *dying*. Why wouldn't I be concerned?"

Rigel winced apologetically. "Right. I didn't mean to say that you shouldn't care, of course. Only, there's not much anyone can do right now."

"There's always something," Hermione said staunchly. "Even if it's just thinking as hard as you can about a problem in case you have an idea no one else has."

"That's a good point," Rigel allowed. She of all people should know that qualified professionals didn't have a monopoly on new ideas. Quite the opposite, in fact. "What have you been thinking about so far?"

After a slightly narrow-eyed stare that seemed to gauge whether or not Rigel was teasing her, Hermione waved her over to a nearby table and sat, waiting patiently for Rigel to take the seat across from her before speaking. "To be honest, I'm not sure I fully understand what is even causing the death of the afflicted." Hermione blew out a breath that floated a strand of curls away from her face. "All the publications say that the children are born without 'enough magic,'



but squibs are born without access to much magic, and they don't die. It's as if something is actively sucking the life out of the infants."

"In a way, it is," Rigel said. "Squibs fall into two categories, remember. Some never develop a core or a magic circulation system in the womb, and are born essentially muggles. Others are born with a damaged magical core, incapable of processing or channeling magic correctly. Type two squibs still have a normal amount of magic in their veins; it's enough to fill the circulation system, even enough to produce an aura, but the squib normally can't consciously manipulate it to the degree an average witch or wizard can."

"So you're saying the Fade children are something in between? Born with a magic circulation system but without enough magic to fill it?" Hermione tapped her fingers against the desk as thoughts made a rapid march behind her eyes.

"Exactly. The Fade produces a child with the internal magical infrastructure of a type two squib-fully operable magic circulation system and a damaged core-but much less than the usual amount of magic in that system. To put it in numerical terms, children born with the Fade have natural magical coefficients somewhere in the teens. The regular scale only goes to 10," she added, in case Hermione hadn't gotten that far in her Arithmancy studies. "It's as though-" she struggled to think of an appropriate analogy for a moment. "As though you tried to take a child-sized amount of blood and fill a fully grown adult's circulatory system with it. None of the adult's organs or extremities gets enough blood, the heart can't maintain adequate pressure, et cetera."

"But the healthy body produces more blood if it loses some," Hermione muttered. "Up to thirty percent of total volume, if need be. And our cores can be expended to incredibly low levels-magical exhaustion is rarely fatal."

"Above a certain percent of blood or magic loss, the body *can't* sustain itself, though," Rigel said. "And a witch or wizard is usually unable to access more than eighty percent of their magic. The

twenty percent kept subconsciously in reserve is enough to support your magic circulation system in an emergency, but if a wizard's levels don't recover to at least fifty percent in forty-eight hours, they *will* die. These infants are going much longer than two days without healthy levels of magic. They're essentially born with magical exhaustion, and their cores go into overtime attempting to fill the void. Magic isn't made from nothing, though. The core uses physical resources to rebuild, resources that newborns don't have."

"The core is sucking the life from them," Hermione said, eyes going wide. "But then-why don't they remove it?"

"Remove it?" Rigel could not stop the incredulous horror that came instinctually at the thought. "I-" She swallowed. "You know that a Wizarding child's major organ systems become dependent on magic within a week of the core's activation at birth."

"And the Fade can be diagnosed within the first two days," Hermione argued, eyes flashing. "That gives you three days to remove a core before the infant is dependent on the magic."

"You're talking about purposely turning an infant into a squib," Rigel said quietly, glancing around to make sure they weren't overheard.

"I'm talking about saving their life," Hermione hissed fiercely. "Don't tell me no one's even suggested it?"

Rigel shook her head. "Not that I know of. Such a radical idea would likely not be welcome in most magical circles."

"A limb that can't be saved is amputated before it poisons the rest of the body," Hermione growled. "It's an obvious solution."

"One that no magical parents would agree to," Rigel told her firmly.

"If a muggle child had to lose a leg or perish, his parents wouldn't let him die just because they'd rather he became a football player."

Hermione pulled at her hair in frustration. "Life as a squib is still a *life* ."

"Purebloods don't see magic as a limb, Hermione. It's intrinsic to who a witch or wizard is, not just what they can do. You may as well suggest removing a child's *soul* at birth. That's how disturbing an idea it would be to the families the Fade affects-old, conservative families, that is." Rigel held Hermione's gaze until she could see reluctant understanding creeping into the brown-eyed girl's expression.

"I suppose it would be a difficult and risky procedure in any case," Hermione grumbled. "The magic circulation system is entwined with most of the other organs. Separating the core from the body without sending it into shock... well, maybe it couldn't be done. But if it could..."

"It's worth exploring," Rigel said. Mentally, she added, *very quietly* .

"As long as we're talking about it," Hermione began, shifting her weight forward in her chair and lowering her voice a little. "Why do you think the Fade is disproportionately affecting pureblood families in Great Britain?"

Rigel tilted her head. "Some people would call that a dangerous question, but I believe fear of inquiry is more dangerous than any question. To be frank, I suspect it's a byproduct of inbreeding. That's not a popular opinion, as you may imagine, but there's some evidence for it."

Hermione held up a hand to forestall Rigel's words and produced quill and parchment from her pocket before gesturing impatiently for her to continue. "What evidence?"

"Most of the families I know have been affected have been 'hyper-pure,' i.e. intermarried with only other pureblood families, for multiple consecutive generations, while some families who are pure by

definition now but who have muggle blood in their recent ancestry have not been affected yet at all."

"That's anecdotal, though," Hermione said, frowning. "Do you have statistics?"

Rigel shrugged. "Some studies have been done, but mostly the research is into ethnicity, nationality, and light/dark affiliation more than blood purity. Even though blood purity is an obvious variable, no one seems keen to fund or publish such a study openly. I can only tell you what I've observed, which admittedly isn't all-encompassing."

Hermione pursed her lips in thought. "How many students at this school would you say know of at least one child afflicted with the Fade, whether in their family or another?"

"All of them," Rigel said at once. "I can't imagine anyone not knowing someone who has lost a child. My own grandmother lost several, I believe."

"Several?" Hermione inhaled in acute sympathy.

"That's the price of siblings these days," Rigel said grimly. "At least in those families it affects."

"That's another thing," Hermione said, jotting down another note onto her parchment. "Why does it affect subsequent siblings more than firstborns?"

"Some speculate that it depends on the power of the mother," Rigel said softly. "That hasn't been proven, but people still believe that powerful witches are more likely to keep a second child alive."

"That suggests that the mother has an influence on the amount of magic the child is born with. There have been cases reported of mothers' magic compensating for infant defects in the womb." Hermione nibbled on her quill absently. "For instance, sometimes all magical scans show a baby is healthy until birth, when the infant is

detached from the mother's support system. Maybe... maybe a powerful witch could unconsciously compensate for the lack of magic in the child's system, sacrificing a bit of her own magic to see it born with more. Then, perhaps that can only happen once or twice before the mother can't afford to lose any more magic herself."

"That's a lot of speculation," Rigel pointed out. "It's possible, but you'd need some evidence."

"That's easy to test," Hermione said, scribbling furiously. "Just note the rate of maximum expenditure before pregnancy and after birth in all women and if those from families statistically more likely to be affected by the Fade have measurably less magic after childbirth while those unlikely to be affected by the Fade remain the same... well, that's pretty strong evidence. The trouble is determining which families exactly are more likely to be affected by the Fade. Rigel, do you think... if I start asking around the school about the Fade, will it spark undue animosity toward me?"

"Quite possibly," she admitted. "But if you make it clear you're attempting to solve the problem, not just morbidly curious about it... and if you don't ever mention removing the core as a possible option... you may find people willing to talk to you about it. Let me make a few inquiries first, though. I'll talk to my friends and have them spread the word that you're a brilliant medical prodigy who is researching this matter in good faith, not as a means of discrediting pureblood values."

"Is that really their primary concern? Even if such reticence might prevent a cure being found?" Hermione asked, looking pained.

"If it wasn't, there'd be a lot more families following the Weasley model right now."

"What is a Weasley?"

Rigel smiled widely. "I think you should meet them first."

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Later that evening, after Snape had released her from a gruelingly practical lesson in silent counter-curses, she found Blaise in the common room and asked if he had time to assist her with a personal project.

"Your projects are always interesting, Rigel," he said, putting aside a slim volume on curse breaking and steepling his fingers in a show of full attention. "How can I help?"

She took out the necklace that Sirius had given her the night of the first task. Sweeping the chain over her head, she held it out to Blaise's curious fingers and allowed him to examine it carefully. "I'm having trouble unraveling the exact purpose of the runic configuration that's embedded in this pendant. The shorthand is too advanced for me to get an impression, and the expanded sequences are dizzying."

Blaise frowned in concentration as he peered at the shorthand runes etched on the surface of the circular obsidian disk. He took out his wand and waved it over the necklace, murmuring the magnifying charm. "I've never seen this form of shorthand. It looks like a variation on the Norse system. *Latentia Revelare* ." The revealing charm expanded the hidden sequences into a block of runes that hung shimmering in the air before Blaise's widening eyes. "Merlin, Rigel, where did you get this? I haven't seen anything so complicated outside of sentient objects."

"My aunt made it for me. I assume it's some sort of protection for the tournament, but my father didn't have a full explanation for its purpose." Rigel tilted her head and smiled self-deprecatingly. "I don't recognize half of these runes, to be honest. I was hoping you'd be able to decipher more."

He didn't look away from the runes, but his voice was a little awestruck as he said, "Lady Potter made this? From scratch?"

"I assume so," Rigel said, shrugging. "She's had some free time while her company is rebuilding."

Blaise summoned a piece of parchment, ignoring the yelp of an annoyed second year as it zoomed off of the unlucky boy's table. He cast a copying spell to commit the sequence to parchment, carefully ensuring every rune was transferred correctly before letting the revealing spell go and handing the necklace back to her.

Rigel slid the warm disk over her head once more as Blaise murmured under his breath, jotting down notes and underlining lines of runes as he perused the parchment. She took a seat in a chair across from him and waited patiently as he worked. Several minutes later, he set the parchment down and rubbed his eyes.

"It's definitely for protection," he said, leaning forward as he explained. "The reason it's so complex is that it's been designed to react only to very specific stimuli. There's some sort of threshold that the runes are describing, and if whatever that represents is detected, the necklace will respond instantly with... something. It's difficult to tell. It seems as though a spell has been... trapped, for lack of a better word, in the necklace. It's strange, though. Normally when a specific effect is required, something like a curse attached to an object, for instance, the magic is explicitly described and shaped by the runes on the object. Here, though..." He shook his head, bewildered. "There's magic inside the necklace, but there are no runes specifically to guide the magic once it is triggered, and it doesn't feel wild. Does that make sense?"

She raised her eyebrows in surprise. That almost sounded like... shaped imbuing. Rigel wondered if it would work the same for an object as for a potion. No reason it wouldn't, as long as the object already had magic to contain the imbued spell. It was brilliant. "I think I understand," she said, smiling slowly. "It sounds like Aunt Lily has adapted Harry's concept of shaped imbuing for potions into

something altogether more versatile. Thanks, Blaise. I'll write to my aunt about the specifics. I bet she'll be impressed that you worked it out."

"Not entirely," Blaise said, leaning back with an unsatisfied shrug. "I'd very much like to know what the magic is intended to react to. It must be something incredibly complex, for it to take so many rune sequences to describe. A very specific situation, maybe, or a long list of different things."

"I'll let you know what she says if she writes back," Rigel promised. "I appreciate your help, Blaise."

"Any time," the boy said, his dark eyes alight with interest. "Like I said, you're always interesting."

"I'm not sure whether that's a compliment or a curse," she said, smiling wryly.

"Definitely a compliment. You're not cut out for an ordinary life, Rigel. The sooner you face that, the less annoyed you'll be at the inconvenience of being extraordinary." Blaise's voice was light, but his expression was serious.

"I strongly believe that extraordinariness is a quality imposed externally on unsuspecting people largely minding their own business," Rigel grumbled. "There are no extraordinary people. All people are basically the same, but some of them get more attention."

"Because some of them work hard, apply their natural gifts judiciously, and change the world in the process," Blaise said, smiling widely. "Oh Rigel, however did you get yourself into this mess?"

"I ask myself that question all the time." She sighed. "I suppose it's bad grace to complain when plenty of others would take my place in a heartbeat."



"Less than you might think, after the first task," Blaise told her, his amusement fading away. "It was shockingly violent. You handled yourself well, but many of the other champions did not. Krum cursed his way through the entire evening, Delacour broke down into tears for five minutes after slicing open a Manticore, Sousa obviously couldn't handle the pressure, and Antiope almost *killed* Tahiil when he came across her unexpectedly. The amount of blood and suffering in that one night certainly turned a great many stomachs. Not enough to wish the entertainment to come to an end, of course, but enough to be less than disappointed about not being chosen themselves."

"In truth, I wouldn't wish it on anyone," Rigel admitted. "It's a load of utter bollocks."

"Must be, to have you cursing. Any idea what the next task will be?" he added, smiling in response to her sharp look. "Just asking. Theo and I have a wager. You did work out most of the first task ahead of time."

"It's been less than a week," she pointed out. "Riddle hasn't given us any hints yet."

"Well, he's been very busy, I suppose," Blaise drawled.

Something about the way he said 'busy' pricked at Rigel's suspicions. "Busy how?" she asked, attempting nonchalance.

The other boy shot her a surprised look. "You haven't heard." He hesitated visibly before saying, "The S.O.W. Party is dusting off a bit of legislation. That marriage law they've been trying to pass for a few years, you remember? Lord Riddle has spent most of the week between promoting its merit at Ministry working groups and socializing with influential members of the Wizengamot."

"That's not possible." Rigel's face felt frozen as Blaise's words sank slowly to the bottom of her gut. She had an agreement with Riddle. He couldn't put forth such legislation. He-he *could*, though, she

realized with an ugly jolt. She'd bargained for the end to such legislation on the condition of her *winning* the tournament. There was nothing to stop him from attempting to pass it before the tournament had even concluded. That *bastard*. She hissed wordlessly, digging her fingers into the arms of her chair in helpless fury. "He thinks he can have it both ways. We'll see about that."

She dove both hands into her book bag, producing parchment, ink, and quill with fingers positively shaking with anger. Muttering an apology to Blaise, she began a swift letter to Sirius. There had to be something that could stall the legislation at least until the end of the year. She would talk to Dumbledore, too. Somehow, Riddle would not get away with this.

Rigel's letter was almost finished when the others found them in the common room. Draco, Pansy, Theo, and Millicent claimed the chairs and sofa on either side of them. She felt her friends' curious gazes but only murmured distractedly in response to their greetings as she scribbled out the last couple of lines.

"What's Rigel working on, then?" Theo asked Blaise.

"I believe it's a letter. He didn't know about the recent revitalization of the Party's marriage legislation, it seems." Blaise's explanation was succinct, but there was a breadth of implication between his words.

"You told him?" Millicent groaned. "Rigel doesn't need to be distracted right now. He has to focus on the tournament."

"*Rigel* needs to know these things," she said sharply, turning her gaze on Millicent as she signed the letter with a flourish and set it aside for drying. "I'd appreciate it if my friends didn't filter relevant information on my behalf."

"It's not relevant yet," Millie argued. "There's no guarantee it will pass, even with the popular attention from the tournament to bolster support."

"If it does, my participation in this tournament is for nothing," she snapped. She regretted the angry words as soon as they'd slipped out and grimaced at Millicent's open shock.

"Rigel... what do you mean?" The dark-haired girl frowned slowly, her heavy brow making the expression naturally more intense. "I knew there was something odd about you entering the tournament. You didn't do it freely, did you? You've got some kind of... arrangement going on, don't you?"

Rigel pressed her lips together, but it was a little late to try and fool the girl. Millicent was too savvy, and Rigel had been too careless, incensed as she was at Riddle and herself in equal measure. She couldn't believe she hadn't seen this coming.

"Rigel, you can tell them," Pansy said gently. "Millie, Theo, and Blaise won't spread the information around." She accompanied this assessment with stern looks at all three, and each nodded seriously in response.

"I suspected as much," Blaise offered. "Rigel is many things, but glory-seeking is exceedingly out of character. To be honest, I assumed you were being blackmailed by someone."

"They tried that too," Draco said with a smirk. "Rigel is un-leverageable, it seems."

"Nearly," Millicent contradicted. "Obviously someone found something that worked. Was it about this legislation?"

"In part," Rigel admitted, running a hand through her hair. "I didn't tell you all because it puts you in an awkward position. Draco and Pansy have it bad enough."

"It was Lord Riddle himself you bargained with, wasn't it?" Theo's words cut to the heart of the matter. He scowled at the surprised looks the others shot him. "What? I'm not a complete idiot, you know. If it was anyone less powerful, Rigel could have ignored it. If it wasn't

to do with the S.O.W. Party, he wouldn't feel he needed to hide it from us. You didn't want to conflict our loyalties, right?"

Rigel nodded. "To be frank, I'm working in opposition to the Party's goals. Riddle wanted me to participate. The condition was, in part, that he cease attempts to pass such openly anti-muggleborn legislation if I should win."

"Oh, Rigel," Millicent said, sighing sharply. "That gives him nearly six months to pass anything he deems important enough. And that's assuming he lets you win at all. He controls almost every aspect of the tournament, after all."

"We believe he does want Rigel to win," Pansy put in. She glanced around the common room and, after ensuring no one was near enough to overhear, went on. "Originally we thought it was because the propaganda victory would outweigh any legislative loss, but you're right, Millie. If he spends all of his political clout, he could very well win on both fronts by the end of the year."

"Wait, I'm sorry, but it sounds like you've been strategizing with Rigel *against* the Party," Theo said. His voice was hoarse with discomfort. "I mean, no offense Rigel, but that could get us and our families in very hot water."

"I know," she said weakly. "I'm not asking-"

"You don't have to ask," Draco said firmly. "Regardless of the Party's agenda, what Lord Riddle is doing personally to Rigel is wrong."

"He threatened his family," Pansy added quietly.

"Then he won't hesitate to go after ours if he gets wind of this," Theo shot back, just as quietly.

"Hold up," Millicent said calmly. "No one is talking disloyalty to the Party right now. All Draco and Pansy are doing is giving political advice to Rigel, who is in a delicate situation. We've not said a word

about actively moving against Lord Riddle's goals, and we *won't* . We're just discussing a situation."

Theo didn't look reassured at the distinction. "I sympathize with Rigel's situation, but he got himself into it." He shot her an apologetic look, but didn't temper his words. "If we help him outmaneuver Lord Riddle, if we even talk about it, it's as good as saying we don't support the legislation he's trying to pass. Is that what you're saying?" He looked around at all of them, but no one said a word. "What? Rigel isn't an idiot, either. He knows where we stand on this. Where we've always stood. The Party is trying to curb the influence of muggle culture on our society. When did that become something you all oppose?"

"It's not," Pansy said, looking acutely uncomfortable. "Of course Lord Riddle is doing what he thinks best for our world. But Rigel is our friend."

"Rigel opposes the Party in this; he just said so," Theo said. There was regret in his voice. "I'm sorry, but I don't think you can stand in the middle of this. You're all going to get caught between it."

Before either of her friends could defend her again, Rigel said, "He's right. Theo's absolutely right. You all can't be involved in this any more than you are. I'm sorry that I lost my temper. And I'm sorry that I ever told you lot," she added, keeping her voice strong in the face of Draco and Pansy's mutinous expressions. "I'm grateful for your support, but this is a path you can't follow me down any longer. You'll lose everything you care about."

" *You're* one of the things we care about," Draco said. "Don't shut us out again, Rigel. It's our decision to take the risk, not yours."

She shook her head. "I appreciate and welcome your help in preparing for the tournament; Riddle wants me to win anyway, so it's no conflict. As for the legislative issue, please let me handle it. I have plenty of support elsewhere in this matter." She could see her words hit home with wounding bluntness. Draco's face darkened and

Pansy dropped her gaze to her hands, subdued. "I'm sorry for involving you all. Excuse me."

She rolled up her letter and strode toward the common room door, feeling incredibly lonely for all that she was certain she'd done the right thing.

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After their Healing lesson on Friday, Rigel invited Hermione to sit with her at the Slytherin table the next morning. Most of the tournament champions did not take meals in the Great Hall, preferring to eat back in Hogsmeade where their lodging was. It was hard to blame them, when the Hogwarts students went out of their way to be less than welcoming. Rigel wanted to introduce the girl to her friends properly, however, and she'd cleared the idea with them before asking.

Everyone promised to be on their best behavior; even still, there was a beat of absolute silence when Hermione approached their table that morning and said, "Hi, Rigel," in a voice that was determinedly cheerful.

"Good morning, Hermione," Rigel said, standing to bow over the girl's hand at once. Hermione flushed with more discomfort than pleasure and cleared her throat briskly.

"I've invited Tahil as well, if you don't mind." Rigel saw the dark-skinned boy standing just behind Hermione and stuck out her hand with a smile.

"Tahil, welcome. Chaps? Can we make room, please?"

Draco huffed quietly with annoyance but shuffled left a foot nevertheless. Pansy politely made room at the other side of the gap,

students shuffling down in a ripple effect until there was more than enough space for the three of them to sit comfortably. Rigel took an extra moment to make sure Treeslider was not being squished in her robe pocket before returning to her breakfast.

"Thank you for having me," Tahiil said brightly, wasting no time in filling his plate with anything in reach. "I have been wondering what sort of food you ate here at the castle. What bounty! How fortunate we are this day."

"The elves have outdone themselves, as usual," Pansy agreed.

"The house-elves cook all this every day?" Hermione said sharply.

Rigel, remembering her promise to Binny, answered quickly. "Yes, aren't they brilliant? Hogwarts is lucky to have so many talented elves volunteering to work here."

"Volunteering?" Hermione repeated, frowning slightly. "I was under the impression they were bound to serve the castle."

"They are," Rigel said, smiling serenely. "It is a great honor for them, you know, to be bonded to such a prestigious place as this. It probably seems odd to you, as I've heard AIM doesn't house any elves, but house-elves have their own interesting values and cultural practices. I don't know if you've any interest, but I'd be happy to introduce you to a few if you have any questions."

Hermione blinked at her, then nodded slowly. "Yes, I would like that. I've been... wondering about them. Thank you."

"I think that's one of the best parts of this whole tournament," Pansy put in. The perfect smile on her face made Rigel uneasy for some reason. "The chance to learn about other cultures and their magical inhabitants is priceless, don't you think?"

"I quite agree," Hermione said, nodding. She began to choose breakfast items from the offerings before her, speaking all the while.

"AIM's curriculum is top-notch by any standard, but it's been fascinating to get a different perspective on magical education. For instance, Transfiguration is taught entirely differently here than it is at my school."

"How can it be different?" Draco asked. He sounded interested despite himself, but when he caught Rigel's slight smile he scowled at her and fixed his eyes back on his food.

Hermione answered him regardless. "Each lesson here seems to focus on a different, very specific Transfiguration. Toucan to teacup, rose to writing desk, and so on. Professor McGonagall tends to let students work out for themselves the amount of magic necessary, doesn't she? And she doesn't explain how exactly one ought to shape one's intent to achieve a given effect. She encourages you all to come to that conclusion on your own. I think that's just *fascinating*. At AIM the approach is quite different. First we learn to describe the processes of a given subset of transformation-animate-to-inanimate, for instance-using descriptive runes. Then, we calculate the energy required based on magical coefficients of the materials involved and the complexity factors of the chosen process, and only then do we actually put magic to the task."

"Why would you want to complicate it so much?" Theo asked, his jaw slightly agape.

Hermione blinked. "It's always *complicated*. At AIM we are simply taught to enumerate that complexity before learning a spell, while here at Hogwarts the focus seems to be-and forgive me if I'm mistaken-but it seems to be on developing an instinctual feel for magic on a level that the equations and runic descriptions don't really instill. I bet none of you have to mentally calculate coefficients when you cast a spell, do you?"

"Co-what?" Theo blinked at her, utterly comprehensionless.

"Magical coefficients are only taught in Arithmancy and Alchemy here," Rigel explained. "Hermione is right. We learn Transfiguration



the same way we learn Defense, Charms, and Potions. Once we learn a spell, we have a feel for how it should be cast, and refine that impression over time. AIM teaches students to be efficient from the outset, but it sounds as though the trade-off is additional mental acuity required when actively casting. Do you find it slows you down?"

Hermione grimaced. "I wouldn't have said so, before coming here. Seeing how fast you cast during the first task, though... I have to admit, I can't cast so quickly."

"No one is faster than Rigel," Blaise drawled. "You shouldn't use him to determine the average casting rate of Hogwarts students."

"How did you become so fast, then?" Tahil asked around a mouthful of muffin. "Is it something special about your wand?"

"My wand?" She frowned at him. "There's nothing special about it." At least, nothing that he should be apprised of.

Tahil shrugged good-naturedly. "I know not much of wands. My people do not use them. I thought perhaps it was like a talisman; a stronger talisman often means stronger magic, no?"

"Most wands are created equal," Blaise offered.

"Most?" Hermione's eyes narrowed. "Not all?"

"He means the Elder Wand. It's just a legend, though. All regular wands are basically the same, despite what a wandmaker will tell you." Millicent took in Hermione's intrigued expression and added, "Seriously, the Elder Wand is just a children's story. No study has ever shown that the average witch or wizard's wand is more or less powerful of its own merit. It's always the witch or wizard that determined the power."

"I would like to try a wand some day," Tahil said thoughtfully. "It will be interesting to see if my magic is more or less powerful with a

channel."

"How did you learn magic without a wand?" Theo asked curiously.

"'How' is a difficult question," Tahiil said, favoring the sandy-haired boy with a forthright look. "I suspect it is not so different from how you learn. My people say that all wizards have magic within themselves alone, and a tool to manipulate it is just a crutch. I am not learned enough to say either way. I come from a very small village, with only a handful of elders to teach me the mystic ways." He tilted his head and shrugged. "It is true that perhaps they do not know everything of the world of magic."

"How did you hear about the tournament?" Pansy asked. She blinked wide, pretty eyes at Tahiil. "Coming from such a small village, I mean."

Tahiil smiled widely. "It was most fortuitous! I met a man in Mogadishu when I was collecting supplies for my shaman. He somehow recognized the magic within me, though I gave him no cause to suspect. He offered to make my dreams come true."

"Really?" Millicent leaned forward, exchanging a look with Pansy as she took up the thread of questioning. "What a strange offer."

"Indeed. I did not know how he knew of the Dream Messengers, as he certainly did not appear to be a Uagadou sorcerer, but I was curious. And hopeful," he admitted, shaking his head sheepishly. "It is beyond the fate of one such as I to be invited to the great halls of Uagadou, but my foolish heart did yearn."

"Is Uagadou like Hogwarts?" Hermione asked. "Restrictive in whom they accept, I mean."

Pansy and Millicent shifted uncomfortably, but neither Hermione nor Tahiil seemed to notice.

"In a different way," Tahill said, his cheerful manner fading into seriousness. He lifted his hand to envelope the hall around them. "A school such as this it is, but only the very wealthy may attend. For most, for me, the tribal elders will take in ones who exhibit magic. There is no... no secrecy, as there is here, you see? In my village, everyone knows. My mother and father had no magic, but they recognized it easily in me when I was seven, and in my brother when he was just three. I have been training with my shaman ever since."

"The man who found you in Mogadishu," Pansy began, her tone nonchalant. "Do you remember what he looked like?"

Tahiil grinned. He set down his utensil and lifted both hands before his face, swirling them in a series of gestures too complicated to call a pattern. In the air before him, the figure of a man materialized. Drawn out of light and air, the picture grew rapidly more clear, until Millicent sucked in a breath of surprise.

"Crouch," she muttered, eyes wide.

It was, she realized, peering closer at the translucent image. Tahiil had made a perfect likeness of Barty Crouch Jr., the sallow-faced man she remembered vaguely from the World Cup.

"He must have been sent to recruit for the tournament," Pansy murmured.

"I didn't know Crouch's son was a Party member," Millicent said, eyeing the image with undisguised intrigue. "He's certainly not working for the Department of Magical Games and Sports."

"How do you know?" Theo asked.

"His father doesn't trust him to tie his own shoes," Millicent said dismissively.

"Someone trusted him to find Tahiil," Blaise pointed out.

Riddle. It must be, but why? She was under the impression that he hadn't intended to broadcast the tournament too widely before the candidates had been decided. For some reason, he had specifically sent one of his lackeys to find and recruit Tahil, a muggleborn from East Africa. For what? The appearance of diversity? Somehow she didn't think so.

It made her wonder who else in the tournament was not a chance submission. Were there others who had been specifically recruited, according to criteria that only Riddle understood? The idea that Riddle was leaving nothing up to chance passed unbidden through her mind.

The morning post momentarily stalled any discussion that might have flourished on the subject. Rigel automatically moved her goblet as an owl descended with a letter. She unrolled it curiously-Krait had no reason to be corresponding so soon after her last shipment, and Archie used the mirror almost exclusively to communicate these days. It was from Lily. She hadn't expected an explanation for the necklace to arrive so soon; her mother must have sent off a reply nearly as soon as the query arrived.

*Dear Archie,*

*Your observations on the Dark Defense Disk (your Uncle James named it) are entirely correct! It doesn't surprise me that Sirius was less than articulate in relating its purpose. Essentially, I've designed it to respond to any attack that meets a certain threshold for power, malicious intent, and Dark energy. It's more than just a very fast shield, however-the magic embedded in the disk is, in fact, an entire ward, anchored to the necklace alone. Remus helped me cast the ward over a three-day period, and I developed a ritual that transferred and sealed the ward semi-permanently within the obsidian disk.*

*Harry's research on the concept of Shaped Imbuing certainly influenced the breakthrough in my work; as I am not personally proficient in the skillset, I instead constructed a runic configuration*

*that imbued the magic for me into the vessel of my choosing. The rest of the project-the exact language used to describe the sort of magic the disk needed to detect-has been the ambition of several years of study. Letting a magical object determine intent is particularly challenging, but using inspiration from muggle advancements in algorithmic decision-making, I was able to produce this prototype. I must warn you it won't protect you from mild or even moderate Dark Arts. The necklace is a last resort, and will respond only to attacks likely to maim or kill. I don't anticipate you needing it during a public tournament, Archie, but I want to give you every assurance of safety that I can.*

*As to the other matter you wrote us about: we are aware of the recent attempts to revisit that legislation. Alice tipped us off in time to marshal what political resources we can to stall. It is difficult to discredit it entirely in the current atmosphere. On the one hand, the legislation encourages stronger ties between pureblood and halfbloods, and in doing so grants rights that are in themselves attractive to halfbloods. There are many who believe that consolidating magical power in established families may be a good thing in the face of increasingly violent anti-muggleborn sentiments. People are scared. On the other hand, the tournament itself has lent at least a little credence to the argument for blood superiority, though that credibility may weaken or strengthen with time, depending on how the event unfolds.*

*We don't want you to worry about any of this, however. Just concentrate on being safe, and don't neglect your studies. In the worst case, Harry is already protected from any ill effects the legislation might bring, and Addy is blessedly young, yet. The menfolk send their best regards. You have all of our love and support.*

*Aunt Lily*

Rigel tucked the letter away slowly, lost in thought. Lily would never say so outright, but she could read well enough between the lines. The very fact that she, a 'pureblood,' was in the lead for points in the

tournament was lending momentum to efforts to reintroduce the marriage law. If she made a poor showing in the next task, it might lower popular opinion of the blood supremacy argument, but winning the tournament was the only way to see such legislation gone for good. That, and she was already bound to do her very best in every task. She took a moment to reflect darkly on her own hubris. Had she really thought she could outsmart Riddle? The man had lived and breathed politics and manipulation for longer than she'd been alive. Maybe this entire thing had only been the worst kind of folly. It was hard to think otherwise when her every victory now actively worked against her.

"You look like someone just kicked over your cauldron," Draco said from her left.

"Letter from Aunt Lily," she said. At Blaise's curious, half-lidded glance, she added. "You were right about the pendant. The runic arrays were describing powerful Dark magic. It's designed to defend against it."

"With a shield?" Blaise pressed, eyebrows raised.

"A ward," she said, nodding. "Anchored on the disk itself."

"My, my, that is impressive," Blaise said. "If it works, at least. I wouldn't have said that 'Dark' was quantifiable in that way."

"I almost hope I never find out whether it works," Rigel said, grimacing. "It sounds as though it'll only react to the most dangerous of curses."

"Do you think it would protect you from an Unforgivable?" he asked. His mild tone belied the implications of the question.

"I'm not sure," she admitted slowly. "Lily didn't specify which ward she and Remus imbued it with. It took them three days to cast it, so I imagine it's quite powerful. A ward like that might stop a lesser

Unforgivable, but the Killing Curse... well, I don't know of any ward that claims to stop that. Do you?"

Blaise shook his head. "Even still, immunity to the Cruciatus is nothing to sniff at."

"We don't know that for sure," she said. He was right, though. If Lily's imbued ward was sufficiently powerful, it was a priceless protection. Imagine: all the security of painstakingly anchored wards, available in an instant and automatically erected in response to a sufficient threat. It was nothing short of revolutionary. If it worked, every Auror in the country would want one.

It got her thinking about her first aid kit. What if she could apply the same principle, but instead of a ward, a powerful ritual of Healing? There were some rites of Healing so potent that it took several Healers working in concert to realize them. If such a thing could be performed in advance, then bottled for emergencies... her head felt heavy with the implications. She shook it briefly. There was no use getting ahead of herself. Most Healing rituals were extremely specific, and couldn't be applied to general emergency situations.

"That's not what had you upset, though," Draco said. She felt Dom's warning too late-her friend had already determined that something else was preying on her mind.

"Is everything all right at home?" Hermione asked, concern for Archie no doubt prompting the question.

"Just fine," she assured the girl. "Harry and everyone else are well. My aunt just had some news about the marriage law. It's rather put me off my breakfast, I'm afraid."

"The what?" Hermione asked.

Rigel winced inwardly. Of course, Hermione wouldn't know. Archie had probably never thought to bring it up. After the scene in the

common room earlier that week, she wasn't keen to hash it out in front of her schoolmates, either.

"It's just a law that's being proposed right now," she said. "My family is attempting to stymie it."

"Why?" Hermione gazed solemnly at her, the breakfast on her plate momentarily forgotten.

"We believe it is disadvantageous to halfbloods and muggleborns," she admitted. At Hermione's fierce frown, she realized there was no way to avoid the girl's questions. She gave in gracefully, explaining as succinctly as possible. "The law incentivizes purebloods to marry halfbloods and vice-versa. It is an attempt to fold halfbloods back into pureblood families, reabsorbing their wealth and any magical gifts in the process. It leaves muggleborns to essentially marry within their own community or else marry muggles, thereby diluting their blood and, consequentially, their influence in society further."

Hermione's jaw was gaping by the time she was finished. "Is it not bad enough that we aren't allowed equal education or employment? We're to be excluded in love, too? Why would anyone support a law that limits their own choices just to spite another group?"

She looked around the table expectantly, as though waiting for a reasonable answer to materialize. Rigel's year mates displayed various stages of discomfort, but none volunteered an argument. Likely they knew it would be met with ferocious disagreement. Tahiiil looked interested as well, but he was nowhere near as visibly invested in answers as Hermione. Rigel was about to offer to talk about it later with Hermione, away from the uneasy ears around them, when Adrian Pucey spoke up from a little way down the table.

"You know, I actually agree with the muggleborn." Silence fell in a pool around him as a number of Slytherins stopped pretending not to listen to the discussion and turned to stare. Pucey made a face at the alarmed expressions of his own year mates. "What? I know I'm not the only one thinking it. The law restricts *us* the most. Our



generation is being sacrificed in this giant chess match, expected to marry and procreate with *halfbloods* just so that subsequent generations retain the power our parents have been steadily allowing to slip through their fingers. It's utterly unfair."

"Careful, Adrian," Bole hissed. "The Party is always listening."

"If we don't voice our concerns, how can the Party take them into account?"

Rigel really doubted the Party cared one way or another what the youngest generation thought about Riddle's grand plan to project pureblood power into the future. Her classmates were expected to carry it out, no questions asked.

"It's not *all* halfbloods," someone else pointed out reasonably. "Just the ones with two magical parents. Our children will still be purebloods."

" *Technical* purebloods," Pucey sneered. "I'm not talking about our kids, even. I'm talking about us. Do *you* want to mate with a halfblood?"

"What's wrong with halfbloods?" Hermione said sharply. At the disbelieving looks her question prompted, she huffed out an annoyed breath. "I'm serious. I really want to know what your exact objections are. Do you see them as lesser wizards? Less human? Both? No one has articulated the precise issue to me. Do you consider me a different race? A different species? Is it a caste issue? I'm just trying to understand."

Rigel could see what it cost the girl to refrain from outright accusing the students around her of ingrained bigotry and irrational prejudice. When Pucey adopted a patronizing expression and began his explanation in the most insulting tone imaginable, it took everything Rigel had not to drop her head into her hands and groan.

"Purebloods and lesser bloods simply don't belong together," Pucey said. He spoke just slowly enough to imply that Hermione must be simple or hard of hearing. "I mean, do you breed roses with wildflowers?"

"What does that have to do with anything?" Hermione's voice was flat and unimpressed.

"A garden must be weeded for the plants that belong to grow healthy and tall. Let the weeds grow in the wild if they must, but they ought not be brought in to infect the garden." Pucey seemed to think he had mustered an impenetrable argument, but Rigel had to suppress an incredulous laugh.

All he'd managed to prove to her was that he had never gardened a day in his life. She leaned forward around Hermione so that Pucey could see the steel in her eyes when she broke into the conversation. "A lot of extremely useful plants grow in the wild, you know. At first sight they don't appear as valuable as common herbs and floras, but in fact the wild ones are much hardier, more likely to cure diseases, and by crossbreeding garden plants with wild ones more variety is achieved, and therefore greater usefulness is gleaned from plants as a whole."

Pucey spluttered, and Hermione added, witheringly, "Every so-called 'garden' plant is just a cultivated version of a plant that once grew wild."

"Well, the useful ones can be grown somewhere else until they're cultivated enough to put in the garden, then." His voice grew in confidence as murmurs of agreement sounded around him. "Just don't introduce them in the garden before they're ready, is all I'm saying."

Rigel openly scoffed. "You think a lot of gardens. In truth, most garden flowers are fairly useless, though, aren't they? Pretty, but poisonous to eat and utterly without redeeming qualities that excuse their delicate constitutions and the extra care required to tend them.

Then there are those 'garden plants' that, if grown unchecked, can strangle the garden entirely despite 'belonging' there. No, Pucey, I don't think this is what you're trying to say at all. Quite simply, I think you mean to say that you feel personally disgusted by the idea of consorting with someone of lesser blood. You believe, deep in your gut, that to marry a halfblood would somehow infect you with the stain of the lesser. You're instinctively repulsed by the idea. And that's fine. I doubt you can help it. But you ought to just say so."

She pushed away her plate and gathered her book bag. No one at the table said a word as she stood and left their presence. Hermione and Tahil retreated as well, just as silently. She tried to feel bad for turning an already awkward conversation into an open attack on her classmates, but she couldn't muster any regret.

"That was very well said," Hermione told her once they'd reached the Entrance Hall. Rigel glanced at her to see if she was being sarcastic, and noticed the girl's lip was bruised where she'd bitten it to keep quiet. It was embarrassing to realize that the AIM girl had more self-control than she did. Rigel had once prided herself on her self-restraint, hadn't she?

"I should not have got so upset," she said, sighing.

"You were filled with conviction, not just anger," Tahil said. He smiled at her and laid a hand on her shoulder reassuringly. "In such times, it is a disservice to yourself not to speak your mind."

She smiled back weakly. "Thanks, I suppose. I doubt it will make any difference in their opinion, though. And everyone at that table will be just a little less likely to broach that topic with me, which only inhibits my ability to reach them in the long run. No, I should not have said all that. Most days I don't. Lately, though..." Rigel shook her head. "This tournament is getting to me."

"It was designed to get to everyone, I think," Hermione said, frowning. "It's not a coincidence that the legislation you mentioned is

coming to light at the same time as the New Triwizard Tournament pits blood categories against one another, is it?"

"No," Rigel said, a slightly hysterical laugh bubbling up in her throat. "No, it isn't."

She excused herself, stalking down into the dungeons with restless strides. She needed to talk to Archie, no matter that it was currently the middle of the night at AIM. She thought she might lose her mind if she didn't talk to someone who understood exactly why the issue was eating away at her insides.

Rigel was nearly jogging with impatience as she reached the common room, and it was a matter of moments to locate the mirror, close her bed curtains, and silence them.

"Harry," she called. Even she could hear the weary desperation in her voice. "Harry, please, are you there?"

"Rigel?" Archie's face-his own, not the twin of hers-swam into focus in the mirror and he blinked at her sleepily from its depths. "What's wrong?"

"Riddle is pushing the marriage law," she blurted. It all came out in a frustration-choked rush. "He's using the time before the tournament is concluded to pass the legislation he'll lose the chance to support if I win. What's worse is that my performance in the tournament is the very thing he's going to use to garner the support to pass it. I've become the wand turned against the people I wanted to help by getting involved in this mess in the first place. Riddle outsmarted me." That was really the crux of the matter, wasn't it? "He wins either way. And all my schoolmates are either supporting the law or against it for exactly the wrong reasons. I have to listen to them disparage my kind, watch the disgust on their faces as they contemplate being bound to people like me, and it's infuriating."

Archie's face had lost its sleepiness, but his voice was still thick as he asked, "Is that all?"

"It that all?" she repeated numbly. "Isn't that bad enough? Or do I have to add in my own bleak future if this law gets passed, not to mention Addy's?"

"I just want to be sure I'm addressing everything when I tell you that it's going to be okay, cuz. I agree that you're in a horrid position, but, well, we always knew you would be, didn't we? It hasn't bothered you so much before." Archie frowned worriedly at her. "Are you sure there isn't anything else? I'm afraid this tournament may be weighing more heavily on you than you're admitting to me."

Rigel let out a long breath and rubbed at her eyes irritably. "Maybe," she said lowly. "Maybe you're right. It's nothing really new, is it? Except I'm afraid Riddle might actually get his law passed this time."

"Even if he does, you'll be all right," Archie said soothingly. "We're already betrothed. No one can force you into any contract. And besides..." He trailed off, grimacing. "Never mind."

Her eyes narrowed. "What?"

Archie hesitated, bit his lip, then said slowly, "Have you considered that it would actually be a good thing for you if the law passed?"

She felt her eyes widen into an incredulous glare but stilled her tongue just in time. This was Archie. He would not say such a thing flippantly. "What do you mean?" she asked, when she was certain she could give a level tone.

"If the legislation passes, any halfblood betrothed or married to a pureblood is automatically afforded equal rights to a pureblood, aren't they?" Archie still sounded reluctant, as though the words were being pulled out of him.

"Yes," she said shortly. "That's what incentivizes halfbloods to go along with it."

"And isn't the biggest danger in our situation that *you* are a halfblood, and therefore subject to harsher penalties and fewer rights should the ruse be exposed?" Archie grimaced, but forged on to the end. "If the marriage law passes, you'll be in effect a pureblood. That means you can't be sent to Azkaban-can't even be questioned under Veritaserum-in the event that everything we've done for the last three years comes to light. So, in a way, it would be safer for you if the law passed, wouldn't it?"

Rigel's mind raced. She had never thought of it like that before. He was right, though. Somehow, awfully, ironically, if the legislation meant to enhance the inequality in their world did pass, she would be better protected from the consequences of her own actions.

Archie's eyes were pained as he asked, "Would it be so bad then, if we let it pass?"

Her stomach lurched. "Yes, it would. I know what you're saying, Archie, but-I can't. I can't sacrifice the rights and happiness of so many for my own security. If I start to use the advantages given to purebloods for myself, then the Party wins." The words struck a chord deep inside her, and a truth she'd been ignoring for too long reared up and slapped her. "Every minute I spend here, disguised as a pureblood, is a minute the Party wins." She whispered the words, her voice suddenly too weak to give sound to them properly. "Oh, Archie. What have we done?" For a long time, she'd told herself that she was using the pureblood system, playing it. Really, she'd just been playing along.

*I am just as culpable as any pureblood*, she thought.

In the beginning, she'd rationalized the ruse easily. They weren't hurting anyone, after all. Just getting the education each of them wanted and, she thought, deserved. Somehow, they had crossed a line. If she accepted the passing of the marriage law because of the benefit it bestowed on her as a pureblood's fiancé, however, then the line would be so far in the distance she might never find it again. Maybe they'd messed up from the start, but that didn't mean they

couldn't start mitigating. She had to do something. She owed it to every halfblood and muggleborn who wasn't blessed with the means to do as she had.

In a way she felt stupid, actively undermining her own security by deciding to continuously oppose the marriage law. In the end, though, it was simply a question of the kind of person she wanted to be.

"We can't let this law happen," she said firmly.

Archie blew out a breath of relief. "In truth, I didn't want to let it go without a fight, either. I had to say something, though, in case you hadn't thought of that."

"Thanks," she said, meaning it. "It's always better to consider everything, even if it makes the decision harder."

"How's Hermione?" he asked after a moment of silence.

"She's just fine," she assured him. "Stirring things up around the castle, though you probably won't be surprised. Did you know she's researching the Fade?"

"Yeah, she's been on about that for a while," Archie confirmed. "She wants to specialize in perinatal-neonatal Healing."

Rigel grimaced. "I'm not sure I helped her this morning. Probably alienated everyone in Slytherin who might have spoken to her about it." She ran a hand over her face tiredly. "I'll try to make amends later today."

"You don't have to single-handedly do everything," Archie said. A yawn so wide it cracked his jaw interrupted whatever else he was going to say.

"Never mind all this, Arch. Get some sleep. Sorry I woke you," she said.

"You call on me anytime, cuz. Are you doing all right? The first task had you pretty rattled last time we talked." The soft worry in his eyes left an uncomfortable feeling in her chest. She didn't need him worrying about her, too.

"I'm just fine. Promise. Talk to you soon."

"Night."

She slid the mirror underneath her pillow and sighed. For just a brief moment, she tucked her knees into her chest and buried her head in her arms. She was supposed to be reining in her opinions, not getting increasingly worked up at the breakfast table. How many times since the beginning of the year had she lost her temper with her friends? More than the rest of her years at Hogwarts combined, she thought.

*Maybe I need another outlet.* She didn't always make it to Draco's dueling club as it was, though, so she didn't know when she could find the time for another de-stressing activity. It already felt as though every hour she wasn't spending preparing for the tournament was an hour that actively increased the relative level of risk she would take in the next task. At least, that's how Snape made it seem. She didn't want to think what he'd say to her if he saw her flying aimlessly around the Quidditch pitch on her broom.

Rigel rolled her neck with one last self-indulgent sigh and canceled the silencing spell around her curtains. Immediately, she realized there was someone else in the room, quietly shuffling near the foot of her bed. With a jolt of discomfort that smoothed into wariness as she reminded herself that they couldn't have heard what she was talking about through the silencing spell, Rigel peeled back the curtains and dropped down from the bed.

Draco looked up at her from where he was rummaging in his trunk and stood swiftly. "Rigel. I was just, well... should I come back, or...?" He trailed off, his eyes dipping down across her rumpled



clothing before darting over to the curtains and back to her face, awkwardly quick.

"What?" She frowned in confusion at the flush that was creeping up his neck from his collar. She looked back toward the bed, to where her rumpled covers lay innocently behind mostly closed curtains. What was he...? She blinked, whirling her head back around to gape at Draco in surprised embarrassment. "Oh. No. I- *no* ."

She could feel the blush that bloomed across her cheeks like a hot brand, sudden and irrepressible. He thought she'd been... she shook her head at the thought. She could sort of understand how silenced curtains in the middle of the day might be misleading, but at the same time, did he really think she had stormed out of the Great Hall to do *that*?

Draco's discomfort shifted slowly into amusement as she cleared her throat in acute mortification. She didn't know why she was even embarrassed-she hadn't been doing anything, and even if she was, what business what it of his?-but something about the way Draco's eyes drank in her flushed expression made it all worse. He tilted his head with a slight smile. "You don't have to be embarrassed," he said softly.

"I'm not," she said. Her voice came out thin and breathy, as though she'd just run several miles. "I wasn't-I was just-" She broke off, not quite embarrassed enough to tell him about the mirror.

Her friend went still, eyes focused on something she couldn't see. "Hmm." Dom's mental warning came just then, and she winced against the pain. No kidding, she grumbled internally, belatedly called up her Occlumency as Draco openly scrutinized her emotions.

"Stop reading me," she said, scowling. "There's nothing there."

"I wouldn't say 'nothing.'" He chuckled, eyes skating across her still-present flush. He lifted a hand to her cheek, almost absently touching the heat there. When had he moved so close? The feel of

his fingers against her face summoned more warmth from her stomach, and she inhaled sharply. Knocked from whatever trance had momentarily taken hold of her, Rigel whirled away to grab her book bag.

"I-have to go brew," she lied, keeping her head determinedly down, eyes fixed anywhere but into Draco's stormy grey.

"Rigel, *wait* ." Draco called after her as she darted for the door, but she kept going.

She knew if she made it to the common room, he wouldn't make a scene. If he was even going to. She didn't know what to make of him at the moment. He wasn't... was he? First Leo, now Draco. *No*, she thought stubbornly, shaking her head to rid it of such a ridiculous thought. Draco had never indicated any of that sort of interest in Rigel. He was probably just poking fun at her embarrassment.

Even knowing that, her cheeks didn't cool until she was safely cloistered in her lab. She pushed the odd encounter forcefully from her mind; she'd rather think about how phoenix tears might be used as an amplifying ingredient in potent healing potions. In fact, she might have to think about that all morning and most of the afternoon.

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That evening, Rigel finally got around to the genealogy section of the library. She still felt there was something off about Riddle. It was time to arm herself with facts.

It only took a few hours to confirm what she'd already deduced: there were no Wizarding records of a Riddle family in Britain. Since she'd never heard anyone suggest Riddle might be foreign, she turned her attention to the one thing she knew for certain about the man. Riddle was a Parselmouth. If she assumed that he'd come by the gift

honestly, then he must have a connection to the Peverell family somewhere, just as she did through the Potters.

The Peverells were an old family, but theirs was a tree twisted with tragedy, and there weren't actually many branches left by the twentieth century. The Peverells were entirely extinct in the male line. The only two families with noted connections in a tome from the end of the nineteenth century were the Potters and the Gaunts.

She'd never heard of the House of Gaunt. They weren't mentioned at all in the most recent editions of the books of Gold, Silver, and Bronze. Had they died out in the last century? Or was there some other reason the family had faded into obscurity?

Frustrated by the dead end, Rigel tried tracing Slytherin House instead, since so many of Riddle's followers were convinced he held some secret claim to that lordship. Slytherin's line was descendent from the Peverells maternally, which was how the famous wizard had been blessed with the serpent tongue, but Parseltongue alone couldn't prove the relation in Rigel's eyes. Not when she knew the Peverells had left non-Slytherin branches as well. Riddle couldn't claim that Lordship unless he came from Slytherin's male issue. The Hogwarts founder had never been prolific, and it wasn't long before she found the surname Gaunt in *his* family tree as well. The Gaunts had a double claim to Parseltongue, then. She reluctantly traced the family's tree further, closer and closer to the modern day.

The family seemed to split at some point, with Rionach Gaunt's daughter journeying to America in the seventeenth century, where she would go on to found the Ilvermorny School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. That secondary branch never returned to Britain, but the titled branch, which the author of *Founder's Legacy: Heirs and Heirlooms* had painstaking traced, went as far as Corvinus Gaunt, who was confirmed a student in the Hogwarts registry in the eighteenth century.

With both Peverell and Slytherin lines dead-ending in the House of Gaunt, it was more than likely Riddle was connected to the family.

The only alternative was Riddle coming from an unknown branch on the Potters' side of the Peverell tree. She shuddered at the thought.

Rigel stretched out her neck as she began stacking the books she no longer needed for re-shelving. It was nearly curfew, but she still had several more books she wanted to check. She cleared away her workspace, found a secluded isle and, after ensuring that nobody could see her, drew out her Invisibility Cloak.

Hidden from prefects and librarians alike, Rigel found an older version of the *Book of Gold*, this one from the middle of the eighteenth century, and there she found Corvinus Gaunt again, this time listed in possession of the lordship of the House of Gaunt. His son was listed below him, and in the next two editions of the *Book of Gold*, she found his grandson and great-grandson, too. That was where the line seemed to end, however. The Hogwarts library didn't have every edition of the *Book of Gold* -it was published every five years, but the genealogy section only had editions marking every twenty-five years, likely to save space. In 1925, the House of Gaunt was extant in the person of Marvolo Gaunt, but in 1950, the family was dropped from the *Book of Gold* without explanation.

Anything could have happened in those fifty years. The heirs might all have died. The lordship could have been withdrawn for legal reasons or transferred to another family through marriage. Normally, however, the lordship would still be listed in that case, with the transfer made plain. It was odd that the family simply disappeared. She looked back in the 1925 *Book of Gold* and frowned. Marvolo Gaunt had two children. A son, Morfin Gaunt, who should have taken over the lordship, and a daughter, Merope.

Merope was the first daughter in several generations. If Riddle had been descendant from the male line, his last name would be Gaunt. Merope was the only candidate in recent history to have passed on both Peverell and Slytherin genes to an alternate family name. Born in 1907, she should have been a student at Hogwarts by 1919 at the latest. When Rigel made her way over to the school records, however, there was no Merope Gaunt to be found.

A squib, maybe. Or else she'd been schooled abroad. There was no record of Morfin Gaunt at Hogwarts, either. The family was still in Britain in 1925, however, or Marvolo Gaunt wouldn't have retained the lordship at that time. Was it possible *both* children had been squibs? That would certainly disqualify the family from the *Book of Gold*. It might also explain why Riddle never claimed an open connection to them. He didn't exactly hide it, though, did he? His middle name was Marvolo, she recalled with dawning certainty. She'd looked it up herself in second year. It couldn't be sheer coincidence.

She had one last avenue of attack, though she was reluctant to take it. The library kept copies of the *Daily Prophet* for posterity, but there were so many issues of the paper they were actually nestled in undetectable expansion charms in the relevant stacks. It would probably take her weeks, possibly months, to go through the ones from 1925 to 1950 one at a time, and she didn't know any magic that would speed the process.

*May as well start tonight*, she thought, resigned. The mystery would only eat at her otherwise. The *Book of Gold* was published in April, so she began with May, 1925. Most of the headlines were utterly mind-numbing. It was at once amusing and depressing to realize that all the problems of modern society had been persistent for at least three-quarters of a century. Corruption, crime, and scandal blared up at her from the faded pages, in between routine human interest pieces and Quidditch scores.

As the night wore on, she realized it was going to take much longer than a few weeks at the rate she was going. She'd only reached September, 1925, and her eyes had already begun to droop. With a sigh of defeat, she promised herself sleep after finishing the expanded box she was arm-deep in.

Then, almost unfathomably, she found it. FATHER AND SON SENTENCED SIMULTANEOUSLY. HOUSE OF GAUNT NO MORE! Her eyes, now wide with alertness, skimmed the article with mounting perturbation.

*Marvolo Gaunt found guilty of child abuse and obstruction of justice... stripped of lordship... son declared clinically insane... facing six months and three years in Azkaban prison respectively.*

*The once ancient House's remaining issue, Miss Merope Gaunt, is currently unlocatable, this according to Ministry officials assigned to collect her from the Gaunt residence in Little Hangleton for the trial. Marvolo Gaunt declared his daughter a squib, which disallows her the option to inherit the lordship herself. Without a declared heir, the House of Gaunt will join many other pureblood families in noble extinction.*

That answered the question of the *Book of Gold* . The House of Gaunt was declared extinct after the disqualification of both Lord and Heir for criminal behavior and mental unfitness. Merope had been declared a squib by her own father, thus prohibiting her from taking up the mantle in his absence, and the young woman had apparently disappeared after her father and brother were taken into custody.

Rigel returned the newspapers to their stacks, her mind spinning with the implications. She was almost positive Riddle was the son of Merope Gaunt. His family, while ancient and pure, was also disgraced, plagued with the stain of insanity and squibhood, whether the allegations were true or not. To take up the mantle of Slytherin's name, Riddle would also have to claim the sordid Gaunt family history.

Then there was the fact that she'd seen no Merope née Gaunt in any of the modern books of Gold, Silver, or Bronze. Merope Gaunt had never married into any of the established families. That could only mean one of two things: that Riddle was born out of wedlock-a scandal all its own, which would disqualify him from inheriting the Gaunt Family title regardless, much less the Slytherin lordship-or that Riddle's father wasn't a pureblood.

In either case, it was obvious why Riddle had never tried to publicly claim to be Slytherin's Heir. Instead, he hinted at it behind closed doors, gave just enough justification to keep people from looking too

closely. Who would be inclined to disbelieve polite, attractive Tom Riddle? Riddle, whose magic hung around him in a cloak of sheer power, Riddle, who spoke Parseltongue and whose brilliant mind and perfect manners kept him always beyond reproach.

Rigel scowled as she stalked out of the library under her Invisibility Cloak. Maybe everyone else was falling for it, but she refused to be impressed.

The next time she saw Hermione, she decided, she would ask the girl to help her post a muggle letter to the public records office in Little Hangleton. If she pretended to be an estranged relation looking for family connections, she might be able to find some evidence of where Riddle had acquired his distinctly muggle surname.

With an admittedly vindictive smile on her face, Rigel crept into the Slytherin common room and slid off the Invisibility Cloak. The fires were low, and even the most dedicated of NEWT students had long gone to bed. It was only when she drew even with the cluster of chairs and couches that surrounded the fireplace closest to the fourth-year dorms that she saw him.

Draco was fast asleep on the couch closest to the fire, a troubled frown marring his otherwise smooth complexion. Rigel paused, tempted to simply continue to her room and pretend she hadn't seen the boy. She was too exhausted to deal with him. Then she sighed. He'd probably tried to wait up for her. They had left things somewhat... strange, that morning.

She told herself there was no use avoiding her best friend forever. It had probably been a misunderstanding. Rigel tucked her cloak away in her bag and reached out a hand to shake Draco gently by the shoulder.

The blond boy murmured disgruntledly, but didn't wake.

"Dray," she said softly. "Come on, you can't sleep here."

"Rye?" Draco's face scrunched in unconscious complaint before he blinked sleepy eyes open and fixed them blearily her way. "What time's it?"

"Time for bed," she said vaguely. "Here, let's get you up." She began to bustle him into a standing position. He took several slow steps toward the dorm before stumbling to a halt.

"Wait," he murmured, shaking his head sharply. "I was waiting for you. I wanted to talk to you." He pulled his arm from her helpful grasp and reversed the grip, at once pulling her to a stop beside him and stepping too close. His breath stirred her fringe with the gentlest of breezes. When had he grown so tall, exactly? "You ran off earlier." His voice was still thick with sleep, but the words were growing increasingly articulate. "I didn't mean to make you run."

"I just remembered something I had to do," she said quietly. Her eyes trailed down to the side, neither toward him nor away, exactly.

"I went to your lab. The door was locked."

"Was it?" She cleared her throat. "Well, we can talk about it tomorrow. It's late."

Draco shook his head with a grimace. "I want to say it now. Rigel, you're my best friend. I wouldn't-I didn't mean to make it weird."

Rigel cursed the fluttering in her belly. Somehow, the soft feelings swimming around inside her at the vaguely defined question of what, exactly, Draco meant were enough to strangle her courage completely. She didn't ask him how he felt about her. She didn't think she wanted to know. Didn't know what answer she would prefer. Instead, she stole a glance up at him and said faintly, cowardly, "It's not weird. We're good."

Her friend's face, so familiar to her, was alien in that moment. She knew those eyes, those cheekbones, that mouth. Yet in that moment she couldn't read his expression at all. "Do you... forgive me?"



"Of course," she said without hesitation. She would willingly pretend the electric moment between them had never happened.

"I wonder," Draco whispered. He leaned toward her, his eyes so intent with unspoken possibilities she found herself caught between contrary impulses. Part of her wanted to back away, but the other part was caught in a breathless curiosity. She stared back at him, as though she might discern the nuances of his motivations if she could only untangle the emotions in his eyes. "How far will your forgiveness extend, Rigel?"

She knew what he was going to do-it was obvious, really-and the shock was no excuse for what she didn't do. She didn't pull away, didn't twist her head. She held very still and let him kiss her.

It was the barest of pressure, his lips against hers. The softest of sighs, hers or his, she wasn't sure. Her eyes dipped against the feeling without conscious effort, but when his hand came up to graze the smooth skin of her neck she gasped and retreated, reason flooding back into her brain at last.

She stared up at him in slowly dawning horror. "Oh, Dray. We can't. / can't. I'm sorry." What had she been thinking? Where had careful, deliberate Rigel gone and who was this hormone-inflamed psycho who'd taken over her body? Was she really so tired that she'd let her guard down completely? And what did it say that, when she let herself, *this* was how she acted around her closest friend?

Draco's expression was still soft as he gazed down at her. She wondered if he felt as dazed and confused as she did. "Was it so wrong, Rigel? I know you feel this, too."

Irritation rose up over the embarrassment and fear and she clung to it with both hands. "Don't read me. It isn't fair."

"How else am I to know? You never show your true feelings." Draco was frowning now, hurt creeping into his tone.

"My feelings are irrelevant. Listen to my *words*, Draco. This can't happen again." Rigel took two steps backwards, pointedly firming her stance as she reclaimed her space.

He narrowed his eyes at her, visibly gathering himself. "If that's what you want."

"It is."

The words nearly choked her. She had no idea what she wanted. What did it matter? The only thing that mattered, all that ever had, was the ruse. Whatever was hanging in the air between them like a siren's call, it could not be allowed to grow stronger. She couldn't afford any distractions, now of all times, and Draco could not afford to tangle his heart up in hers, regardless of whether he knew it or not.

"Fine, then. Goodnight, Rigel." Draco turned and strode down the hallway with measured steps, the firm line of his back an argument against any concern she might have that his feelings were hurt or his pride irredeemably shattered.

He would be fine, she told herself. They would be fine. In the morning, all of this would seem like a nonsensical dream. She gave her friend ten minutes before following him to their dorm room. Sneaking through the darkness, trying not to listen to the sound of his breathing, she felt like the worst sort of coward. No matter how many times she repeated to herself that she'd done the right thing, for both of them, she couldn't drown the self-reproach that crawled its way into her chest. Weary and regretful, she fell into an uneasy sleep.

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She spent Sunday morning in her lab. She told herself she'd meant to work on a few things for Krait in any case, and that she wasn't hiding from Draco. He'd pretended nothing was wrong that morning at breakfast, but his coolly polite demeanor only made the churning in her own stomach more confusing.

The second task was only a week away. She couldn't afford any distractions. That was the mantra that echoed in her mind as she took out the ingredients to an emotion suppression potion and stared at them. It would be easy, and take her no time at all. All the poorly defined emotions swirling around inside her would go away, calmed beneath the blanket of magical control. Occlumency could help her conceal them, but it didn't prevent her from feeling.

Only the fear that emotions, like magic, might somehow get stronger when repressed stopped her from brewing a double batch then and there. As disturbing as her new, unwanted awareness of Draco was, it might be best to let it eat at her until it ran out of steam.

She set the ingredients aside. Rigel knew she could always change her mind later, if the odd tension between her and Draco became too disrupting.

After a peaceful lunch with Binny in the kitchens, in which she attempted to listen more closely to the elf's explanations of human-French grammar, Rigel made her way to lab three for yet another non-potions-related lesson with Snape.

Her Head of House must have noticed the resigned, cheerless set of her face when she trudged into the lab, as he adopted a long-suffering expression and said, "Don't pout, Rigel. It's unbecoming of a Slytherin."

"I'm not," she said, aware that this only made her sound more put out. What did he expect? She couldn't pretend to be happy about the direction her apprenticeship had taken.

"Have you kept the projection ability up all week?"

"Today is my last day," she confirmed quickly, hope rising irrepressibly in her chest.

Snape considered her for a long moment before inclining his head. "Then, after the second task, we will begin freebrewing."

" *After?* " Rigel frowned, mildly outraged.

"There will be plenty of time after," Snape said firmly. "It's important that you do well in this task."

"Why this one in particular?" she asked. "Aren't they all important?"

"It will cement your supremacy at the top of the pureblood category if you outperform both Krum and Shang in the second task," Snape explained. The frown above his gaze told her she should have already worked this out for herself. "Then, regardless of how far you make it in the third task, there will be a strong argument for your being chosen as the pureblood champion."

She mulled that over for a moment before saying, "What about after Yule? Is Riddle so confident that I can beat whoever wins out in the other two categories?"

Snape's face closed, and Rigel's eyes narrowed. There was something there, she knew. Her professor proved unwilling to speculate further, however, as the dark-haired man swept across the lab with a flourish and changed the subject. "We've been covering counteractive magic the last several lessons."

"I've noticed," she said dryly. It hadn't been hard to deduce that whatever the second task was, it involved counteracting spells, wards, and curses. That was all Snape had emphasized since the first task's conclusion.

Snape was not amused by her levity. "Then you'll be well-prepared for today's test." He produced a small box from his robes and laid it on the counter. Rigel approached slowly to look it over. The wooden

cube looked innocuous enough, but she'd learned in the last few lessons that the most dangerous wards and curses were supposed to look harmless. That was how they caught a witch or wizard unprepared. "You have fifteen minutes to open this *without* destroying its contents."

Rigel nodded and took out her wand. A general revealing charm produced no reaction. She cast *Alohomora* and immediately had to shield herself from a roiling bolt of magic that shot out at her from the box. It now glowed an ominous red, and subsequent attempts to get a spell through its little red aura failed and fizzled upon contact. Sometimes the spells she tried prompted an attack, and sometimes the box simply sat there.

She paused in her casting to consider a different approach. One of the principles Snape had been attempting to teach her was that most protections were focused in certain directions. A ward, Snape said, was often like a bridge. A bridge can withstand an enormous amount of force-from certain directions. Bridges are designed to hold immense weight before collapsing, because carrying weight is what a bridge does, and sometimes a bridge can withstand sudden stress from the side, if the builder was very clever and anticipated storms or earthquakes. Very few bridges, on the other hand, are intended to bear load from below. A proportionately small amount of force can crack a bridge from beneath, when the same amount of power applied from any other direction wouldn't shake it.

Most wards were like bridges, because they'd been designed to keep something in or something out, but rarely had protections focused in both directions.

Maybe the box was like a bridge, too. Rigel tucked her wand away and placed her hand on the counter next to the box. After a glance at Snape, she thought better of that, and wandlessly levitated the box onto the ground, instead. Kneeling, she laid the palm of her hand against the stone floor beside it and channeled her magic into the flagstone.

The stone slid away from the box in ripples, and the box, after a moment's silent resistance, broke apart as portions of wood were pulled into the void left in the stone beneath it. When it fell still, the wooden box was melded to the floor, all four sides warped beyond its intended shape. With its structural integrity went the integrity of the magic sustaining its protections, and Rigel was able to pry the lid off with relative ease. She pulled out a bright blue robin's egg and grinned.

Snape stared down at her, eyebrows raised. "What, precisely, was that, Rigel? We haven't covered transfiguration as a destabilizing technique."

"It's something Professor Dumbledore taught me," she said, rising from her crouch with the egg in her hand. She realized after hefting it that it wasn't a real egg; it was a hollowed shell and light as a feather.

"Alchemy without runes?" Snape's thoughtful gaze slid from the box to Rigel's face.

"It's a bit like wandless magic," she offered. "Instead of the runes there to shape the reaction, you have to guide it with will. The amount of raw magic required in the technique makes it prohibitive to complex reactions, but for simple stuff it's a lot faster than drawing out the runic array. The more runes you omit, though, the more individual shaping intents you have to replace with your own will."

He lowered his lids sharply. "You mean to say that it requires simultaneously projecting multiple, separate intents in your mind as you cast?"

She nodded. "Exactly. It's kind of tricky to conceptualize, but Occlumency helps. I can cast while holding six or seven separate shaping ideas at once, provided they aren't too contradictory. It helps that most runes in a single array will be complementary."

"Incredible," he breathed. "What else can you do with it?"

"Besides fusing adjacent things, I can light a fire, dissolve most substances into particulate matter, and do basic phase shifts-water into ice, that sort of thing." She was pretty proud of how quickly she'd managed to apply the most basic of concepts discussed in Dumbledore's supplementary textbook. It helped that shorthand alchemy was a combination of several other skills she already possessed. In fact, it was sort of like shaped imbuing, only with multiple spells at once.

"Can you undo it?" he asked, eyeing the box again.

She winced. "Not really. I could separate it from the floor, but the portions of wood that have been melded with the stone won't un-meld without painstaking arrays."

He didn't look terribly pleased that his floor was now marred, but she thought he ought to be glad she had the foresight not to ruin the counter, at least.

Snape had her practice several more shorthand alchemical reactions, this time with materials of his choosing, before declaring himself satisfied with her efforts for the day.

"You promise we'll start freebrewing as soon as the second task is over?" Rigel checked. She didn't want to leave without confirmation of that much, at least.

Her Head of House sneered at her, amusement in his black eyes. "Do you even remember how to brew? It's been so long since I've supervised you. Perhaps we ought to start with a Boil Cure, just in case."

She glared at him, but then a thought struck her and she frowned. "Actually, sir. There is something lately... I've over-brewed a number of potions without meaning to. Does that happen to potioners as they become more capable?"

"Quite the opposite," Snape said flatly. "Have you been imbuing too much magic?"

She shook her head. "Same as always. It's automatic for most potions, now. I haven't had to actually check for a while, but lately when I do check, there's too much magic in the potions, even though I haven't imbued any longer than usual."

Snape pressed his lips together in displeasure. "Your rate of imbuing should not be noticeably faster, unless, of course, you've been repressing your magic again and it has grown *stronger* ."

Rigel shook her head quickly. "I haven't."

"Have you changed your ingredient source?"

"No."

Snape evidently did not believe her, as he held out his hand expectantly. "Your kit."

She pulled it out of her book bag with a sigh. The potions master extracted a few ingredients at random and bent his attention toward them with a scowl. He let them fall to the table almost at once. "These are brimming with superfluous magic, Rigel. Where did you get them? The Forbidden Forest?"

"The same apothecaries as always," she told him, utterly bewildered.

Snape began to pace the lab, stalking slowly as he turned the problem over in his mind. After a few minutes he stopped and grimaced. "You've been practicing your magical awareness with your kit on you."

She blinked. "Yes," she said slowly. "I always have it on me. You think my magic interacted with the ingredients when I projected it out around me?" She hoped not. She really didn't want to have to



replace *everything* in her kit. It was countless Galleons worth of ingredients.

"It is likely that you lose small amounts of magic to the air when you practice the sensing technique. Over time, with repeat exposure, the ingredients have been slowly absorbing it. With more potent ingredients than usual, the amount of magic you're used to imbuing will saturate the brew. You're lucky none of these ingredients have become unstable." Snape looked satisfied with the explanation. He raised his eyebrows at her, as though inviting her to challenge him with some other problem.

All she could think about, though, was Matheus Sousa. "I lent him the salvia," she muttered in horror. She could feel the blood drain away from her cheeks.

"Come again?" Snape demanded.

She groaned. "Sousa. Before the first task. He was looking for salvia and I gave him some of mine, but it was probably saturated, too! What if it's *my* fault he failed the first task?"

"There's nothing you can do now," Snape said, sounding unconcerned.

"I can apologize," she murmured, scowling. She hated to think that she was the reason the boy had wound up insensate in a forest full of dangerous creatures, but it made sense. Divination potions were incredibly delicate, as any mind-altering potion would be, and an imbalance in magic that stressed the properties of *salvia divinorum* would certainly be enough to tip the effects of such a brew closer to 'comatose' than 'enlightened.'

"Don't admit to anything in haste," Snape cautioned her.

She wasn't really listening. She had to find Sousa now and apologize, and possibly warn him against using any more of the too-potent salvia.

"Thanks for the lesson, Professor. I've got to go."

He called after her, but she hastened out of the lab to find an out-of-the-way alcove. Once alone, she dug out the Marauder's Map and scanned it methodically for the dot she needed. 'Matheus Sousa' hovered near the edge of the Forbidden Forest, and Rigel sighed with relief. She'd rather sort this out immediately than dwell on it until she saw the boy again.

It was late afternoon, and the trees at the very edge of the forest seemed utterly unremarkable, leaves shifting innocently in the chilly winter breeze, as though they hadn't housed the terrors that still brought a feeling of panicked foreboding even though she wasn't planning on re-entering the forest anytime soon.

Treeslider poked his head out of her pocket with a tentative flick of his tongue. "*You are bringing me home, Ssspeaker?*"

Rigel frowned. She'd grown quite used to the comforting weight of the snake dozing in her pocket or curled in her lap over the last week. Her professors had all been incredibly lenient with his presence, probably more out of pity than any real desire to tolerate an exception to the rules about acceptable pets, and Rigel had no desire to release the boomslang snake into the wild again when he'd only just woken up from his Healing sleep a few days ago.

" *Only if you desssire to return. You may stay will me asss long asss you wisssh.*" She put a warming charm on him wandlessly, and told herself she wasn't bribing him to stay with her. A chill wouldn't be good for the cold-blooded creature while he was still on the mend.

Treeslider peered up at her in silent contemplation before retreating into her pocket with a contented hiss. " *Ssspeaker needsss looking after,*" he added quietly from the depths of her robes.

Pleased that he wasn't eager to go back to the forest, Rigel took out the Map again and followed the edge of the forest around behind Hagrid's hut, where she found Sousa lying on his belly, his head

pillowed in a bed of wild clover. To all appearances he was simply taking a nap, but Rigel found herself hurrying toward him in concern, nonetheless.

The dark-haired boy shifted his head as her footsteps crunched across the dry grass. His shaggy hair flopped back to reveal a considering eye that followed her approach curiously. When she stopped a couple feet from his prone form, Sousa let out a gusty sigh and flopped over on his back.

"It is the boy with plants in his pocket," he remarked. His arms reached up in an indolent stretch before coming to rest behind his head. "You are come to rain green gifts on me?"

Rigel grimaced. "I actually came to ask you about the sage I gave you. I think there may have been something wrong with it."

"The salvia?" He raised his eyebrows at her. "Good stuff. I didn't guess it so good."

"It was over-saturated with magic, I think," she admitted, frowning down at his unconcerned expression. She felt decidedly awkward standing over him while they had a conversation. "It may have made whatever you brewed with it too strong."

He nodded slowly. "Good stuff. You have more?"

"More?" She struggled against the impulse to splutter. "I'm worried I accidentally poisoned you."

"I can handle it," he assured her. An amused smile tugged at the edges of his lips. "I make no mistakes in potions."

Rigel pressed her lips together. "You never know, Sousa. Maybe you're misusing it somehow. I could look at your recipe if you like."

It was odd to realize that someone could look patronizing while they were lying at her feet, but Sousa managed it with effortless

enjoyment. "Just ask," he told her, eyes alight with mischief.

"Fine. Did you intentionally dose yourself with a mind-altering potion during the first task?" She felt bad voicing the question, but the Brazilian boy was deliberately egging her toward this blunt engagement.

"Yes."

"I-you did?" Rigel shook her head, uncomprehending. "But why?"

Sousa sighed, letting his eyes drift away from her troubled expression, up toward the golden afternoon sky. "I am not angry, if you fear it. Your salvia is very strong, but it did not ruin my potion."

"You can't have meant to leave yourself so vulnerable during the task," she argued. Why she was arguing against his own self-proclaimed motivations, she didn't know. It just didn't seem possible that anyone could be so reckless, or so utterly blasé about such an ignoble use of potions ingredients.

"I never had so intense a high," he said. His voice was smooth and low, as though fondly recalling a treasured memory.

Rigel could feel a frustrated scowl creeping its way across her face. "Why did you enter the tournament if you weren't going to take it seriously? You could have got yourself or someone else killed."

A shadow crossed Sousa's face for the first time. "I did not enter," he said, his voice clipped.

She felt her irritation wither on the vine. Sousa, too? That made three of them, then, if she included Tahiil. "Were you recruited?" she asked, sinking to her knees on the ground beside him. "Tahiil was, too."

Sousa looked mildly interested in that fact, but shook his head. "My school gave them my name. The school board wanted rid of me for a

year. They say if I want to stay enrolled next year, I have no choice."

"That's horrid," she murmured. "No one should be forced into a competition like this."

"It is not all bad. I have more time for my research this year with no classes."

"And what are you researching?" she asked, curious despite herself.

A tranquil smile bloomed on his face and he looked up at her with rapture in his eyes. "Euphoria."

Rigel huffed a laugh despite herself. "Right. Well, try not to get yourself killed with my ingredients, Sousa."

"Matheus, please," he said cajolingly. "You mean not to give me more salvia?"

"Not on your life," she said sweetly. Rigel rose and dusted her knees. "Good luck in the next task."

"You as well. Really," he added at her rueful look. "You make an odd face when you win. It is funny."

She left him to his relaxation and trekked steadily back toward the castle, her thoughts awl. How many of them were really in the tournament by choice? Rigel had her own reasons for participating, of course. Tahil was grateful to be here, but hadn't sought it out. Sousa had been entered as a way to foist him away from Castelobrujo for a year. Delacour had hinted that her Headmistress strongly influenced her decision to participate, and Shang had as much as admitted that she was there as a junior diplomat, tasked to raise awareness of the power and skill of the Middle Kingdom's magical community.

That left Krum, Antiope, Owens, and Hermione as the only champions here to compete for themselves. Even Hermione had a

bigger reason for competing, though-she wanted to prove to the world that muggleborns should be taken seriously and treated as equals.

Rigel had to wonder whether Riddle knew that Sousa had been entered in bad faith. She also wondered why Tahiil had been recruited, when there were plenty of muggleborns around the world who'd probably thrown their hats into the ring. Maybe he didn't *want* the best candidates worldwide. Riddle liked to prove his points on his terms, after all.

*And I'm helping him do it*, she thought morosely. The cloud of self-recrimination had been descending regularly since her mother's letter. She knew she wouldn't be able to live with the guilt if she helped to pass the very legislation she was competing to quash. She just didn't know what she would do about it, yet.

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Much too soon, the morning of the second task was upon her. Because Riddle wanted the first three tasks completed before Yule, there was just two weeks between each of them. Once the final three champions were decided, the tasks would be spread more generously over the Spring term. For now, though, it felt as though she'd barely caught her breath from the first task when the last Sunday in November dawned clear and cold.

Rigel spooned porridge mechanically into her mouth as chatter and speculation flew in convoluted arcs over her head. She was attempting to keep an even emotional keel that morning. She didn't know exactly what the second task would entail, but she did know it was to take place on the Quidditch pitch. No forest meant it couldn't possibly be as bad as the first task.

"Cheer up, Rigel," Theo said bracingly. "At least you don't have to wait around all day this time. It'll be over by dinnertime."

He was right. The task was scheduled to begin after lunch, which left her with only five hours to fret. That was nothing, really.

The morning post was normally accompanied by a flurry of noise, as students exclaimed over packages from home, admonished owls for nipping bacon off their plates, and generally reveled in the distraction from daily life. That morning, however, the usual roar cut off almost abruptly, choked by shock and fear that was delivered to their tables on indifferent wings.

She lifted her head from her bowl as the Slytherins around her grew silent and still. Her eyes met Millicent's across the table, and the solidly built girl's face was drawn with coiled tension. She, Pansy, and Blaise all had copies of the *Daily Prophet*.

"What's happened?" she asked quietly.

Eyes dropped to the side and no one offered the paper immediately. Rigel's eyes widened and her breath caught. It wasn't her family. It couldn't be.

Seeing the alarm in Rigel's eyes, Pansy leant over and offered the paper with a murmured, "It's no one you know."

Only slightly relieved, she took the paper with stiff fingers and flipped it over to read the headline. She didn't even get that far. The snake-eating skull glared up at her in moving black-and-white. Beneath it, a building lay in ruins.

### ***MUGGLEBORN OUTREACH CENTER LEVELED***

*In the dark hours of Sunday morning, the London Center for Muggleborn Outreach, a charitable organization run by the Dumbledore Foundation, was attacked. Believed to be the work of violent extremists, the collapse of the offices from which dozens of*

*muggleborns are contacted every year occurred after repeated exposure to Fiendfyre irreparably damaged the foundations.*

*As of this printing, one woman has been found dead and several others injured in the rubble. The deceased, Arabella Doreen Figg, was a registered squib and long-time employee of the Dumbledore Foundation. She and three other magically challenged individuals lived above the outreach center and were caught in the attack as they slept.*

*Aurors have contained the scene and Obliviators were called upon to modify multiple memories of muggles who witnessed the magical fire in action. A Dark Arts expert, who wishes to remain nameless, explains that Fiendfyre would normally be expected to incinerate much more than the foundations of a single building when unleashed. "Either the attackers are very sophisticated users of the Dark Arts and have exceptional control, or these vigilantes aren't powerful enough to summon full-fledged Fiendfyre at all."*

*The Center for Muggleborn Outreach was founded to educate British muggleborns about the magical world, and to provide assistance in applying to alternative magical schools in the wake of the pivotal 1981 decision to limit Hogwarts acceptance to pureblood magical children only. When asked previously how the organization goes about contacting these children, most of whom would have no idea otherwise that they are in fact witches and wizards, Albus Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, has said that he allows his charity access to the school's ancient registry, which automatically tracks the births of all magical children within Great Britain's shores.*

*" No matter what laws come to pass, Hogwarts still calls to them."*

*The perpetrators of this grievous act are still at large, and are believed to be associated with the same group of anti-muggle extremists who conducted a similar attack on Novus Industries in late October.*



*For more on the activities of the Dumbledore Foundation, page 3.*  
*For more on previous attacks by this extremist group, page 8.*

Rigel pushed the paper back toward Pansy with a mute nod. She glanced toward the Head Table and saw that Dumbledore's seat was conspicuously empty. She wondered if he'd known Arabella Figg well.

She wasn't going to eat anything else, so she rose from the table and said, "I'll be in the common room."

On her way out of the Great Hall, she was waylaid by Professor Snape.

"A word, Rigel."

She followed him down the hall, out of the way of curious passersby. "Yes, Professor?"

"The tournament organizers will be inventorying the items carried on a champion's person before the second task," he informed her. "If you've anything you don't want examined, I suggest you leave it in your dorm."

"They didn't do that last time," she said, frowning.

"Last time you nearly burnt down the forest," Snape drawled. "Did you imagine they'd let you do that twice?"

She felt her lips twist in dark amusement. "I suppose not. Thanks for the warning, sir."

He inclined his head. "Naturally." The Potions Master swept off, leaving her to mentally list the things she needed to take out of her bag before heading down to the pitch.

It was moments like this she really appreciated being in Slytherin House. None of the other Heads of House would stop to think she

might have something she didn't want to be discovered if her pockets were unexpectedly turned out.

In the end, she removed her Invisibility Cloak, the Marauder's Map, all the correspondence that was tucked into her potions kit, and a number of questionable brews that were still in the experimental stage. She also left behind the Mandrake leaves swimming damningly in their vials of spit. There really weren't any innocent explanations for trying to become an animagus without telling anyone.

She kept the Fire Free Sirius had given her, as well as Lily's Dark Defense Disk and the emergency beacon from her friends. She doubted they'd even notice the last one. The last thing she had to figure out was what to do with Treeslider; she didn't want him in the task with her.

When she brought the lethargic snake out of her pocket in the common room later that morning, Blaise volunteered to keep him for the day. She smiled in genuine gratitude as she transferred the snake to Blaise's waiting arms, with a whispered promise of mice if he behaved. Blaise was the least excitable of her friends, and she told herself that Treeslider would be fine with him until she could take him back.

Rigel had lunch in the kitchens, with only Draco and Pansy to keep her company as she attempted to center herself for the trial ahead. Draco outlined his plan for the next Dueling Club and Pansy described her latest suitor from the continent in devastating detail.

"Why do you let your parents set you up with such buffoons?" Draco asked, wrinkling his nose. "I told my mother not to even think about matchmaking until I left school."

Pansy allowed a rare, patronizing expression to cross her face. "And when she does, you'll have a dozen offers before you can say 'I'm a catch.' Some of us have to think ahead."

"You're a catch, too," he protested. Realizing how that sounded, he added, "I mean-you know what I mean."

"You're the son of two ancient houses, Drake, your father effectively runs the Ministry of Magic, and most important of all you are under no obligation to marry young."

"You shouldn't be either," Rigel said firmly. "Pansy, you have your whole life to marry."

"It's not the marriage," Pansy said quietly. "It's the children. You both ought to open your eyes. Pureblood women have a responsibility to the next generation, and births are becoming more and more difficult. Many believe starting younger and waiting longer between each child is the key to better odds at survival."

"What?" Rigel hadn't known that. "When did this idea come about?"

"It's relatively recent," Pansy admitted. "I've heard it whispered more than once of late that girls should be getting on with it sooner, rather than later. The point is that I have a pressure to procreate that you boys simply don't. It's not your fault, but it means I have to consider my future now."

"That's barbaric," Draco said flatly. "It isn't the Middle Ages."

"Is there any substantiating evidence for starting younger?" Rigel asked.

Pansy shrugged. "I don't think so. People are getting desperate, though. Isn't it strange that there are six dorm rooms in our hallway and only four are being used?"

"What are you saying? The population's declined that much?" Draco frowned, pushing away his kidney pie. "I reckon... there are a lot of families with only a single branch remaining."

"That's a long-term trend, though," Rigel pointed out. "Pureblood families by definition can't grow the way other populations do-the pool of potential partners just isn't that large. Eventually, families merge and old names die out."

"It was fine when families were having at least two children, but these days... I think we're reaching a critical point," Pansy said, her eyes tight. "No one wants to admit it, but I saw an article in *Arithmancy Today* in my father's study this summer. The calculations don't look good for the future of pureblood society. We need more children."

They needed to stop being pureblood, Rigel thought cynically. The problem might be as simple as expanding the gene pool.

They were interrupted by Binny coming to clear their dishes. The house-elf patted Rigel's arm with a tutting noise as she placed a comically large plate of strawberry tarts in front of Draco. "Young sir is being safe today, yes? This tournament is not being worth a wizard's life."

"Right you are, Binny," Pansy concurred.

"It's on the Quidditch pitch, presumably in full view of the whole school. I don't think it'll be so dangerous," Rigel reasoned.

"Nevertheless, you will be careful." Pansy's tone was absolute.

Rigel nodded with a small smile. She didn't need people worrying about her, but it was sort of nice when they did anyway.

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With no more time to procrastinate, Rigel changed into her green tournament jersey and laced up her trusty boots. She didn't think

she'd need Aldon and Edmund's cloak that afternoon. After checking to make sure her wand was in the holster where it belonged, she slipped on the gloves Blaise had given her and let Draco help her into the long fingerless gauntlets.

"Any idea what it's going to be?" Draco murmured as his fingers tightened the laces.

She shook her head. "Something to do with counter-spells. No point wondering now, though. We'll see in a few minutes."

His eyes met hers and the close proximity took her mind back to that night, when his eyes had burned so brightly in the firelight and her breath had been so loud in her ears.

She stepped back with a closed expression, muttering her thanks for his help. Her bag waited patiently by her bed, and she made a show of double-checking everything inside was as it should be.

"We really have to get you something better than that satchel," Pansy said from her perch on Draco's bed.

"It worked just fine in the first task," she said, shrugging unconcernedly.

Her friends exchanged a look that said they didn't agree, but didn't press the issue just then. On her way out from the common room, she once again picked up a crowd of students. Her fellow Slytherins escorted her out onto the lawn like some sort of very short honor guard, and only at the entrance to the Quidditch stadium itself did the majority of them break away and make for the stands.

She caught a glimpse of something odd set up on the other side of the stands, but Rigel didn't get a chance to look closer before her attention was pulled by Ludo Bagman and Bartemius Crouch, who appeared to be standing guard at the stadium entrance.

"Mr. Black, if you please," Crouch called, gesturing her closer. She peeled away from the stream of students headed into the stands and walked his way, closely flanked by Draco and Pansy. "The champions are not permitted to go inside just yet. If you'll make your way to that tent, you can wait with the others for the event to begin." He checked something off of the clipboard he held and waved her toward a large covered pavilion that was situated out of the way.

"Can my friends come?" she asked.

"Family only, I'm afraid." Bagman said apologetically. "Not enough room in the tent for all your friends, I daresay." He chuckled grandly, as though a much larger group of people was listening, before snapping his fingers. "Before you go, though, we've got to do a check of the items you want to bring in the stadium."

Rigel opened her bag for them, not volunteering information on either the necklace under her jersey or the earring hidden by her hair. Bagman picked out a few potions at random, but he seemed rather overwhelmed by the sheer amount of potions and ingredients inside her magically expanded bag.

"You could start an apothecary with all this," he exclaimed. "What do you imagine this task will entail, Mr. Black?"

"Rigel always carries that stuff," Draco said, openly amused at her expense.

"All of it?" Bagman shook his head in bewilderment. "Why?"

"He likes to be prepared." Pansy smiled serenely into Bagman's uncertain expression.

"Right. Well, there doesn't appear to be anything, ah, untoward," the big man said, handing her bag back. "You haven't got any more of those fireworks hidden away, eh?"

"Not today," she assured him.

"Right then." Crouch broke back in with an impatient wave toward the striped pavilion.

Rigel accepted careful hugs from Pansy and Draco and bid them farewell. She was halfway to the tent when something Bagman had said caught up to her brain. Her family would be in the tent. She dug a hand into her bag, hoping she had some left from the year before. With a relieved grin, she produced a small vial of concentrated Eau de Archie. Holding her breath against the smell, she tipped a bit of the oil onto her fingers and tapped it against her neck and wrists. The moon's pull on Remus would be weak in the middle of the cycle, but it never hurt to be cautious.

That settled, Rigel continued to the covered pavilion and swept through the entrance to find a large, comfortable space that someone had thoughtfully plied with warming charms. Most of the other champions were present, as were a host of other people she didn't recognize; she assumed they were the champions' respective families. Her family was, somewhat predictably, by the refreshment table.

Sirius spotted her as soon as she stepped inside. "Pup! Is there a reason you're always the last to arrive?" He handed a plate of fruit off to Lily and hugged Rigel hard; she thanked the double layer of constricting undershirts she wore for letting her sink into it.

"Draco and Pansy like to fuss," she murmured into his chest.

"How do you feel, Arch? Ready?" Remus took her by the shoulders when Sirius released her and smiled down at her. His nostrils flared and sympathy crept into his gaze. "Nervous?"

"A little," she said, glad he'd mentally supplied a reason for her stench. "I've been practicing hard all you showed me this summer, though, and learning new things with my friends, too. I'm sure whatever happens, I'll get through it."

"You're going to do great," James said confidently. His gaze assessed her briefly, and he appeared satisfied with her overall health. "This one won't be as bad as the forest."

"You aren't supposed to tell him anything," Lily said halfheartedly. She shoved Sirius' plate back at him and stepped forward to give Rigel a hug of her own. The familiar scent of her mother wafted over her, and it was all Rigel could do to keep her face relaxed against the pang that thrummed through her. "Sirius says you were splendid in the first task. We're so proud, Archie."

"Thanks, Aunt Lily," she said, her voice-or rather, Archie's spell-copied voice-was thick in her throat. "Where's Addy?" she added.

"We left her with Alice," James said. "Didn't think she ought to see this."

"She's extraordinarily attached to us lately, but a little time apart will do her good," Lily said. "Remus and I didn't want to miss another task. It's a shame Harry can't see you now. She'd be so impressed."

"And jealous." James grinned.

"Harry wouldn't want this kind of attention," Rigel disagreed. "With the press and everything, she'd go spare."

"True enough." James chuckled. "Did you hear what they've done with the mirrors for this task?"

Rigel frowned. "No. I assumed they wouldn't need them, since the task is taking place on the Quidditch pitch in front of everyone." No one had given her a headband, after all.

"You're half-right," Sirius said, wrinkling his nose in distaste. "They've distributed the mirrors to major magical commerce sites worldwide."

"What?" Rigel's eyes widened in dismay. "You're not serious."



All four of them nodded apologetically. "There's one up in Diagon Alley as we speak," Remus told her. "And guess who's having a fundraiser this afternoon in Diagon as well?"

"The Party," she growled. "Those opportunistic exhibitionists."

Sirius shrugged. "The Ministry needs the funds from ticket sales, so they won't say no to whatever advertisement strategy Riddle suggests."

It was crazy to think that witches and wizards all over the world were going to be watching the task as it happened. Trust Riddle to milk the tournament for all it was worth. She wondered how it would work. Would a single headband be rekeyed to all nine mirrors and kept somewhere with a good vantage point? She felt a moment of pity for Nicholas Flamel, and hoped the famous alchemist hadn't been pressed into personally reconfiguring the mirrors every two weeks.

"Rigel?" It was Hermione. Behind her stood a kind-looking couple with Hermione's eyes and chin.

"Hi Hermione. Dad, this is Hermione Granger; in case you don't remember, she's Harry's friend from AIM. My friend too now, I suppose." Rigel smiled at the girl and she returned it after a startled beat.

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Granger," Sirius said. "These must be your parents?"

"Yes, Mr. Black," she said. A moment later her ears turned pink and she blurted, "Lord, I mean. Sorry."

Sirius laughed. "You can call me Sirius, if you want. Leave the lord stuff to people who give a Hippogriff's hoof."

"Right, ah, my parents, Wendell and Monica Granger. You remember Harry's parents from the airport, of course." James and Lily smiled in friendly recognition and nodded at the couple. "And this is Rigel

Black, Harry's cousin, and his father, Sirius. Um, and I think you must be Harry's Uncle Remus, right?" Hermione smiled tentatively at Remus, who looked surprised to have been recognized. "Harry talks about all of you so often, I feel I almost know you," she added.

"Pleased to meet all three of you. Harry keeps forgetting to bring you over to the house, Miss Granger," Remus said.

"I see Harry in the alleys anyway." Hermione shrugged.

"Diagon Alley?" James said, eyebrows rising.

"Where else does Harry spend all summer?" Rigel cut in quickly, forcing a laugh. Remus joined in, only a half a beat too late to be completely natural.

"Are you ready for the second task, Hermione?" Lily asked kindly.

Hermione grimaced. "Since we still don't know what it is, that's hard to say. I'm as ready as I can be, I suppose. How about you, Rigel?"

Rigel shrugged. "Like you said, it's impossible to know. I'm ready to get it over with, though."

A chime sounded through the tent, and Sirius sighed. "That's for us, champ. We've got to go."

"Already?" The word came out before Rigel could stop it. Seeing her family was like finding a well of certainty in a desert of indecision. It reminded her what she was here for.

"Next time, don't show up at the last minute," Sirius said, ruffling her hair with exasperated fondness.

"Next time, tell me you're coming ahead of time," she said, mildly indignant. It's not as though anyone ever told her these things were happening. Was there a bulletin board somewhere she hadn't been checking?

The adults all gave her words of good luck before slowly making their way toward the tent's entrance. She and Hermione watched them go, and the muggleborn girl said suddenly, "I almost didn't let them come. If they'd seen the last task, I'd be out of this tournament already."

Rigel grimaced sympathetically. "The Wizarding world is a lot on a normal day."

Hermione turned toward her, and her eyes were much harder than they'd been before her parents left. "Did you see the paper this morning?" The reminder sent a shard of ice through Rigel's veins. She nodded mutely. "It's the same agency that reached out to me when I turned eleven, you know. I remember Mrs. Figg. She gave me the pamphlet about AIM's Healing track when I told her my parents were dentists." Moisture gathered in her eyes but she dashed it away impatiently. "This whole tournament is an invitation for people like the ones who orchestrated that attack to do whatever they want to muggleborns, squibs, and muggles alike. We're not people in their eyes."

"That's why you're here, though. To show them they're wrong," Rigel reminded her gently.

Hermione pressed her lips together. Her eyes were flinty with bleak certainty. "People like that can't be persuaded. They've already decided to hate. I'm here for everyone else. If enough people see reason, the legs will give out from under this madness."

"I hope you're right," Rigel offered.

Bagman and Crouch stepped into the tent, calling for the champions to gather round. Rigel and Hermione drifted toward the center of the enclosed pavilion, where Crouch began arranging them according to his preference. Rigel was herded into a group with Shang and Krum, at which point she realized they were being sorted according to blood.

"This task will be undertaken individually," Bagman told them, smiling widely in cheerful anticipation. "Muggleborns will go first, then halfbloods, and finally the purebloods. You will wait here until it is your turn to try the challenge, and after you either finish or fail you will be escorted to a box from which you may watch the remainder of the task. You will not be permitted to leave the stadium until the scoring is complete."

"You may now decide amongst yourselves in what order you would prefer to compete," Crouch added. "Muggleborns?"

Hermione's face could have been set in stone, were it not for the fire that burned in her eyes. "I'll go first."

Tahiil shrugged and Owens inclined his head, saying, "I'll go second, then."

"Halfbloods?" Crouch looked expectantly at Sousa, Delacour, and Antiope. None of them looked well pleased at the manner in which he had referred to them.

Antiope stuck out her chin and said, "I will lead our group."

"Zen me," Delacour said quickly. She looked at Sousa as though daring him to argue, but the Brazilian only smiled disinterestedly.

"And, our purebloods?" Crouch prompted.

Rigel opened her mouth to volunteer, but Krum cut her off. "You von the last task. You should go last."

She wasn't sure how that followed, but Shang's blank face didn't give her any clue as to whether she agreed or not.

"Excellent idea, Mr. Krum," Bagman said, clapping his hands together. "More dramatic that way, eh?"

Rigel was certain that hadn't been Krum's train of thought. The scowling boy grunted. "I vill go first, then."

Shang inclined her head. "I agree."

There didn't seem a point to arguing, even though Rigel would really prefer not to have to wait through eight other people's attempts before she got the task over with. Seeing no further deliberation, Crouch nodded his head and scribbled the order down on his clipboard. "Very well. Miss Granger, if you would?"

Hermione followed him out of the tent, her wand gripped tightly in her hand. A few minutes later they heard the roar of the crowd accompanying her entrance into the stadium. Rigel grimaced as she realized just how nerve-wracking it was going to be, waiting in this tent, listening to every ooh and aah the spectators produced and wondering what was happening.

She grabbed a glass of water from the buffet and claimed a seat nearby, slowly sipping at the water as she tried to block out the sounds of the stadium. Rigel worried about Hermione having to compete while in the midst of grief. She hoped the girl wouldn't do anything reckless.

"WELCOME TO THE SECOND TASK!"

Bagman's magically modified voice rang out in the distance and Rigel stifled a groan. They had to listen to the commentary, too? Riddle was unquestionably sadistic.

"OUR FIRST CHAMPION, HERMIONE GRANGER, NOW TAKES THE PLATFORM."

"Platform?" Antiope was listening hard.

After a few minutes of relative quiet, a collective gasp from the crowd washed over them. Bagman's voice followed it with, "WHAT A CLOSE CALL! GRANGER BARELY AVOIDS A NASTY FALL!" The commentary went on in this vein, with numerous exclamations and sometimes screams, punctuated by Bagman's vague and decidedly unhelpful additions.

"He must know we are listening," Tahiiil mused, pacing the length of the tent with restless energy.

"I'd say the task involves some sort of elevation," Owens commented, his tone more curious than concerned.

Shang's face, however, went white. "I do not like heights," she said softly, dark eyes wide with fear.

"Maybe it's not-

"GRANGER SAVES HERSELF FROM FALLING AGAIN! HOW MANY TIMES CAN SHE KEEP THIS UP?"

The Chinese girl put a hand to her stomach and swayed slightly on her feet. "I cannot do this," she whispered.

Antiope scoffed. "Why would you join a competition like this if you're afraid of something as simple as heights?"

"They tell my father it will not be a factor," Shang said, her breathing faster than normal.

"Who told him zat? Ze tournament organizers?" Delacour narrowed her eyes in suspicion. "Surely zey would not be so unfair, giving information to some alone."

Shang shrugged helplessly. "I said if there is heights, I will not compete."

"If they lied about it, then the information wasn't meant to help her," Krum said. He exchanged a look with Delacour that was hard for Rigel to interpret. They seemed to be in agreement over something.

"What are you saying? That someone doesn't want Shang here to win? I thought everyone wanted you purebloods to win," Antiope said sharply. Her hand clenched on empty air, and Rigel wondered if it was a habit she'd picked up from carrying a sword in that hand.

Clearly Rigel was not the only one whose tools had been subject to censoring this task.

"What gave you that idea?" Rigel asked, genuinely curious to see whether the girl had worked it out.

Antiope shot her a scathing look. "It's obvious to us all. Britain's blood politics are notorious the world over, Black, and it's no secret which side Lord Riddle's Party falls on."

"I am confused," Tahii said, raising his hand. When the rest of them stared at him, he smiled awkwardly and put his hand down again. "Mr. Riddle has said the tournament is an experiment. Even he does not know who will win."

Before anyone could answer, Professor Flitwick poked his head into the tent and called, "Mr. Owens? They are ready for you."

Owens left with him, and Rigel frowned as she realized she'd been blocking out the sounds of the stadium to focus on their conversation. She had no idea whether or not Hermione had succeeded in the task.

Sousa, who until that point had been content to lean quietly on one of the corner tent poles, was the one to answer Tahii's question. "It is a trick, no? The seeming of objectivity is very convincing. For me, there is no surprise if Mr. Riddle chose every person in this room."

The seven of them looked around at one another, and Rigel wondered if the idea that they were not being given equal expectation of winning angered any of the others.

Antiope rolled her shoulders restively. "I don't care what Lord Riddle *thinks* he's doing. I'm going to win this tournament regardless. If he wanted one of *you* three to win-" she shot a fierce look in Rigel, Krum, and Shang "-then he made a mistake including me."

Tahiil's eyebrows rose, and a thoughtful look entered his eyes. He met her gaze and, after a moment, smiled at Rigel with a shrug. "We all must do our best no matter what."

Krum and Delacour both made noises of agreement, but Sousa merely sighed. Rigel noticed Shang was still on the verge of an anxiety attack, and pulled her shrunken bag from her pocket to look through it. She produced a Calming Draught, one of several she'd re-brewed after learning that her ingredients were oversaturated.

"Here," she said, pressing it into the girl's hands. "It's a Calming Draught." Shang's face showed no sign of recognition, and she supposed they had some other name for it in China. Perhaps they even used a different brew altogether for the same effect. "It will reduce your fear," she explained.

Shang frowned at the vial mistrustfully, taking it gingerly into her hands and attempting to examine it carefully. Her hands shook so badly, though, that she clenched her eyes shut in frustration and said, "Sorry. You can open please?"

Rigel uncorked the vial for her, and the black-haired girl tipped it back. After only a few moments, a look of peaceful relief smoothed the lines of tension from her face. "Thank you," Shang said, surprise in her voice. Rigel wondered if she'd honestly expected her to poison her. Then she wondered how bad Shang's fear must be, that the girl had accepted the risk anyway for a chance at relief.

Owens finished surprisingly quickly, with Bagman's shouted, "THAT TIME WILL BE TOUGH TO BEAT!" signaling the end of his run. Professor Sinistra collected Tahiil shortly after, and Rigel once again attempted to block out the sounds of the stadium.

Frustrated by every gasp and groan echoing out of the pitch, Rigel finally turned to Shang and said, "Will you wake me when you go?" Shang nodded, looking puzzled, and Rigel settled herself in a corner of the tent and sank into her mindscape, where the howling of her mind's wind greeted her. All other sound was washed away in its



wake, and Rigel felt something approaching relaxation creep into her.

As she willed herself into the cozy cabin-like interior of her once icy mountain, Rigel caught Dom in the midst of weaving what appeared to be a tapestry out of pure magic. It was only just begun, too early to guess what the overall design would be. The construct looked over as she materialized and said, "If it isn't my gracious hostess. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I just needed to get away from reality for a moment," she said, sinking into an armchair with a sigh.

Dom made a noise of understanding deep in his throat. "Your emotions have been especially volatile of late. Is everything all right?"

At mention of her emotions, her mind went to the night Draco kissed her. She pressed her lips together against the remembered feeling and grimaced. "It's been a strange week. The second task is today, so try not to use too much magic," she added.

He paused in his weaving and gave her a sidelong glance. "You have more than enough."

"No telling what I'll be facing though," she said. "Maybe I'll see the dragon again-I'm sure it wasn't cheap moving one out here."

Dom stood from his task with a long-suffering look. After conjuring a pot of tea and flawlessly pouring Rigel a cup, he leaned back in his chair and said, "I've finished sifting this batch of magic. The foreign magic behaves the same as the last batch. I've stored it together." He indicated one of the closed cabinets with a careless flick of his fingers.

Rigel nodded in understanding. "Remind me after the task, and I'll get you another batch. Thanks for doing this, Dom. It takes a lot off my mind."

"You should still be concerned with its purpose," he said sternly. There was something about the smile he tried to hide behind his teacup that told her he was pleased with her gratitude, however.

"I'll worry about it later," she mumbled, sinking deeper into her seat. He nudged the second teacup toward her and she took it. Her eyes traced the surprisingly detailed pattern on the china. "Was Pettigrew really the first English wizard you possessed?"

"Possession is an inexact word for it," Dom said, fingering his own teacup idly. "Peter invited me into his mind, and in return I provided him power beyond anything he'd ever been capable of. To your question, however, yes. I was created in Egypt-at least, I was given conscious form there. I don't know where the stone I inhabited was originally found. I ruled through various pharaohs, until I was betrayed and entombed for upwards of two thousand years. Then Peter came for me." There was a faraway look on his face as he added, "I don't mourn his failure, but I am not ungrateful for his hand in my destiny."

"Anyone would be glad to be free, after such a long imprisonment." Rigel was surprised the jewel had retained any semblance of sanity. Looked at it like that, Dom's implacable rage and entitlement was almost understandable. She wondered whether it was even fair to judge the magical construct by human standards. After considering how much time he'd spent leeching knowledge from human minds and using that power to influence the world around him, however, she thought he probably ought to be held to *some* standards for a change.

Dom's eyelids fell to half-mast as he regarded her carefully. "I wasn't referring to my relocation from Egypt. I am indebted to Peter for bringing me to *you*, Harriet."

Rigel blinked. She couldn't help but feel somewhat incredulous. "I bound you to my mindscape, Dom. I took away any chance you had at ever ruling again."

"You gave me a form of my own," Dom said quietly, staring down into his teacup. "You gave me a name."

Those seemed like small things to her, in comparison with an eternity of power. If it gave him a sense of peace with his situation, though, she wasn't going to discourage his existential development. "I appreciate your presence here more than I thought I would," Rigel admitted after a moment of contemplation. Once she'd said it out loud, she couldn't quell the cynical thought that perhaps that had been Dom's intention, and the reason he'd been so cooperative of late. To voice that suspicion wouldn't do her any credit, but she wouldn't forget it, either.

A jolt that inexorably came from her physical body shuddered through her, and she put down the teacup and rose. "I have to get back," she told him. "I'll drop by again soon."

"Good luck in the task," Dom said, smiling up at her. "Try not to die."

"I always try not to die," she said with false cheer. If her returning smile was a tad brittle, he didn't comment. Rigel allowed her avatar to dematerialize as she followed the tug of the physical realm back toward its source.

Feiyan Shang was standing over her, a gentle hand on her shoulder. Professor Snape was beside her, his black gaze revealing nothing as he watched Rigel roll her stiff neck.

"Thanks," Rigel murmured. "Good luck, Shang."

The Chinese girl grimaced. "Thank you. For the Calming Draught as well."

Snape's eyes sharpened with disapproval, but Rigel smiled unrepentantly. "Anytime." To Snape she asked, "Has everyone made it through so far?"

"No. Mr. Zahi was knocked from the course, and Antiope failed to counter the final challenge." Snape turned his attention to Shang, saying, "If you're ready?"

They left, and Rigel was alone in the tent. She began to stretch slowly, starting with her shoulders and by the time she'd made it to her ankles, Bagman's voice boomed out. "SHANG TAKES A SPILL! IT'S ALL OVER FOR OUR SECOND PUREBLOOD FOLKS!"

Rigel winced. That didn't sound good. Just what was this task, that thirty percent of the participants had already failed? It wasn't long before Professor McGonagall stepped into the tent and gestured for Rigel to accompany her. "It's time, Mr. Black," she said.

Rigel peered up at her as she left the tent behind. "Is it going to be bad?" she asked.

McGonagall's face softened and her lips relaxed from where she'd had them tightly pressed together. "It will be a challenge, Mr. Black, but it isn't like the forest."

Rigel nodded, letting her gratitude show through her eyes. "All right. Thank you."

They walked to the stadium entrance, and as Rigel passed beneath the bleachers she caught sight of the task for the first time. It looked like a very strange sort of obstacle course, and it hung suspended in the air, hundreds of feet above her head. There was a square platform on the ground near the entrance to the pitch, and Rigel judged it would lift her up to the course when she stepped onto it. The task itself seemed relatively straightforward, as there was another, much bigger, platform on the far end of the pitch that was, presumably, her goal. Between the two platforms, however, was a maze of narrow pathways, sometimes intersecting, sometimes continuing uninterrupted for long stretches. She could see no obvious obstacles along the network of paths, but she didn't fool herself that balance was the only thing being tested that afternoon.

Then she noticed something else. "There's no net," she breathed, horror lodging in her throat.

"There are spells in place to catch anyone who falls," McGonagall assured her. "Still... it is not a pleasant experience."

She swallowed somewhat shakily. She wasn't afraid of heights per se, but she had no desire to test the catching spells herself. The crowd roared around her when she came into view before the platform. Everyone was so high above her, and she supposed it made sense from a presentation standpoint to have the task elevated so spectators in the high Quidditch stands could better view the excitement. Rigel still suspected that Riddle had done it solely for the added element of fear.

"Good luck, Mr. Black," McGonagall said, placing a thin hand on her shoulder in a brief squeeze. "When you are ready, ascend the platform. The task is over when you reach the end, fall, or become too injured to continue."

Rigel nodded once and stepped forward with a confidence she didn't feel. Remembering her family's warning that her every move was being transmitted to mirrors worldwide, she kept her head high and her expression calm.

The starting platform was a slab of stone about the size of a typical doorframe, and no more than a half-foot thick. She stepped to the center of the rectangle and bent her knees in preparation for its movement. Rigel didn't anticipate the speed at which the stone would rise, however, and she found herself forced into a crouch as it ascended with a whoosh. Her stomach felt as though it had been left behind on the grass. When it came to a stop, she stood slowly, taking a deep breath as Bagman's voice rang in her ears. "OUR LAST COMPETITOR REACHES THE PLATFORM! LET'S SEE IF HE CAN BEAT OWENS' TIME!"

Rigel could see the course more clearly now, and she realized the 'paths' she'd seen from the ground were actually a series of floating

tiles, none quite connected to the next. There was a small chance between every tile for Rigel to misstep and fall. There was only one way off the platform, so she took it, lightly jumping onto the first tile, then the next, steadily making her way toward the first fork in the course.

She had just landed on the sixth tile when it disappeared beneath her feet. Rigel plummeted, her heart stopping in that instant of free fall before her fingers caught the edge of the seventh tile and stuck. Her left arm was wrenched painfully as the no-slip spells on her gloves fought against her downward momentum and won. *Magic bless Blaise Zabini*, she thought, grimacing with the strain as she swung her right arm up to catch the tile as well.

Rigel tried to ignore the screams and shouts of the crowd as she slowly-painfully-pulled her body up enough to get her knee over the edge of the tile, too. With a last heave of effort, she collapsed on the seventh tile and panted, shaking her left arm out gingerly with a scowl. That was stupid of her. She had given into the temptation to move through the task quickly, and naturally it had cost her.

She took her feet again quickly, but this time pushed her magical awareness out in front of her, instead of letting it rest relatively near her skin as she'd become unconsciously accustomed. Rigel could project her magical sensitivity a good dozen feet without straining her endurance, and as soon as she focused on it she could feel the magic holding up the course, clinging to every tile. It felt more delicate than was reassuring. It took her a moment to filter the information she was receiving, but when she ignored the magic that was keeping the tiles afloat, she could sense the next trap.

Three tiles down there was a small ball of malignant magic lurking. She took the next two steps confidently and stopped, pulling out her wand to cast a revealing charm. It was just a trip jinx, attached to the underside of the tile, but even that simple thing could be dangerous on a course like this. Rather than spend the magic disarming it, she pushed her awareness out to check that the next tile was clear of spells and then leapt forward over the trap tile.

Gasps accompanied her jump, but Rigel easily cleared the distance. "WHAT A LEAP!" Now she had a choice to make. Two tiles led in different directions before her, and the innocuous, winding tiles gave no indication of which path would be better.

She took the right path, sending her magical awareness out ahead of her, and tried not to feel alarmed when a good number of spectators groaned at her decision. There was something new up ahead. When she got closer to it, she saw a tile that was bright red and she stopped, heeding the warning despite being two tiles away. The basic revealing charm told her nothing except the density of magic present. It certainly wasn't a trip jinx. Rigel took her bag out of her pocket and enlarged it before slinging it across her shoulders. She took an empty vial from one of the deep pockets and tossed it forward toward the blue tile.

The vial was met with a jet of flame that burst upwards out of the tile. The glass was resistant to heat, so it only blackened a little and fell off the edge of the course. Rigel would probably be able to walk through it if she applied a coat of Fire Free. No sense in wasting it, though. Instead, she cast a Fortis shield around herself like a bubble. It would hold against even dragon flame for a few seconds. The fire coming out of the tile was nowhere near that strong, and Rigel didn't feel a thing as she once again leapt over the problematic tile.

Really, the second task wasn't so bad, she thought as she moved forward once more. With her sensing ability, she was ready for the next three traps she encountered, even though only about half of the tiles were color in warning. She supposed they wanted to give the competitors *some* chance of succeeding, especially against the more dangerous obstacles. Rigel countered one more fire-related trap, a spell that would have bucked her off its tile if she'd stepped on it, and a runic array that tried to blow her off the course with a sharp gust of wind. Then she came to a tile that was acid green. Her trick with an empty potion vial produced no reaction, and she lamented the waste of a good vial as it tumbled sadly to the ground.

The revealing charm did provoke a response, however. From the center of the tile sprouted a flower, unnaturally tall and slender, with a single, bright pink bloom. It looked a bit like an Anemone, but the center was wrong. A sickly green cluster of *something* was nestled in the center petals, and she could feel magic trapped there, too. Rigel was torn. She could cut it with a severing charm, but what if that triggered the magic? She tried to vanish the plant; her magic bounced off the petals. Incredulous, she figured she'd have to burn it, and hopefully destabilize whatever the magic was grounded to.

She cast *Incendio* on a spare bit of crumpled parchment from her bag and tossed the small fireball gently toward the black tile. It came to rest at the plant's base, and after a moment caught the flower's stem, spreading quickly toward the head. The fat, pink petals took an eerily long time to burn, though, and Rigel kept her wand at the ready, unnerved. Her suspicions were rewarded when the flower suddenly convulsed and the center *exploded* outward. Acid greed spores rained down on her, and she jumped back a tile while casting a hasty Bubble Head Charm. It wasn't fast enough. She felt a burn at the back of her throat and immediately turned her wand on her airways.

From her fight with Ralph in the Lower Alleys, she knew what to expect from this kind of attack. It wasn't exactly the same as sleeping gas, but the process of identifying the foreign substance in her lungs and metabolizing it before it could be carried any further was similar.

The poisonous spores were potent. Even though she'd only breathed in a small portion of what was spewed from the still-burning flower, her vision was already narrowing at the edges. She fought back against the temptation to close her eyes and kept at her self-healing. After a brief, confused moment, her magic had flushed as much of the invasive substance as was possible. Rigel shook off the lingering drowsiness and moved forward again. The flower was just a pile of ashes, now, and the tile had turned back to an innocuous tan color.



She stepped past it, and the crowd erupted into cheers. "BLACK SHAKES OFF THE SLEEP SPORES! CAN NOTHING STOP THIS CHAMPION?" Rigel was about a third of the way along the right-hand path now, and ahead of her was another fork. Left would take her back toward the center of the course, which meant a relatively straight shot toward the finish line. There seemed to be more colored tiles on that path, though. After a moment's indecision, she went right.

Almost immediately, her magical sensitivity flared with warning and Rigel dropped into a crouch so fast her knees popped. An arrow of fire whizzed over her head, and another followed it as she half-crawled, half-jumped to the next tile to avoid it. They were coming from the red tile on the middle path, and she scowled at the unfairness of being waylaid by something not even on the path she'd chosen. Rigel cast a Fortis shield as she stood, but a moment later she was flat against the tile again as a third arrow shot through her shield. The only thing that saved her was its deceleration as the arrow met resistance. Muttering a curse at whoever designed the obstacle course, Rigel channeled her frustration and consciously summoned a Depasco Shield instead. She waited until a fourth arrow fizzled into nothingness as it met the shield before standing. Somehow, it seemed nothing she did would be effective twice. She wondered whether the course was evolving as she went, but doubted even Riddle was *that* good.

The red shield hung hazily around her as she very carefully moved forward. She had to hold it several inches off the ground or risk dissolving the tiles beneath her feet. When she was clear of the arrow tile's range, she dropped the Depasco immediately; it was too draining to justify keeping up, even though she doubted anything the course threw at her could penetrate it.

Two tiles after she'd dropped the shield, a non-colored tile let out a hiss beneath her feet and white mist sprang up all around her, choking her senses before she could so much as hold her breath. She froze as her vision went completely dark. *Why didn't I sense*

*anything?* she thought, trying and failing to keep her breathing light in response to the utter blackness surrounding her. It must not have been a spell, she reasoned. If it was a potion with a mechanical trigger, the traces of magic in the brew itself were probably too weak to notice amidst the tile's levitation magic.

Rigel couldn't detect any poison in her system-and yet, she'd definitely inhaled the mist. Her vision certainly hadn't deserted her of its own accord. She realized with a sickening stomach turn that her hearing was gone, too. The world around her was silent. At the same time, though, she could feel the stone beneath her feet. She hadn't been transported, then.

She racked her brain for potions that could take away sight and sound but leave her able to feel the breeze on her skin and smell the sweat on her clothes. There were two that she knew of. Monistra's Malediction could cut off any of the five senses depending on how it was brewed. She supposed someone clever enough could combine two of the five into one mist, or perhaps the mist was a combination of two potions released simultaneously. The other one was Prisoner's Poison. It was once a popular potion in law enforcement, before the runic sequence to bind a person's magic to their skin was discovered. Prisoner's Poison deprived sight and hearing both, in addition to cutting off the conscious use of a person's magic. It didn't prevent accidental magic, which was part of why it fell out of favor.

Rigel very carefully cast a warming charm and felt the corresponding rush of heat. Monistra's Malediction, then. She sagged with relief. Rigel had hoped even Riddle wouldn't be sadistic enough to bind someone's magic mid-task, but she was constantly relearning not to underestimate him.

The cure for Monistra's Malediction was tree sap, specifically from a grove of wand wood trees. Rigel had both Black Walnut and Sycamore in her kit. Slowly, aware that she could easily lose her balance on the path without sight to orient her, Rigel felt for her bag's opening and groped her way along the extended inside until she came to the compartment she wanted. There were two vials inside,

as expected, and she brought first one to her nose, then the next. She drank the Black Walnut, even though the Sycamore was sweeter, because Black Walnut was only seven Knuts an ounce.

Her vision cleared just as her hearing came rushing back. She winced as the silence was blasted into a hundred, screaming pieces and Bagman's voice roared in her ears. "LOOKS LIKE SOMEONE CAME PREPARED! BLACK BECOMES THE FIRST CHAMPION TO OVERCOME THE ANTI-SENSORY MIST!"

Rigel summoned her magical awareness around herself like a cloak and moved forward once more. A brown tile was the next in her path, and without needing to be provoked a wall at least twice her height sprang into place before her, blocking the rest of the path entirely. She could double back and try a different path, but she was almost to the end. Running a hand along the surface of the wall confirmed her suspicion that it was too smooth to climb. The wall was coated with some kind of wax, and almost slippery to the touch. She considered it. The wax was thick enough to draw in.

With a smile, Rigel used her wand to draw a simple, linear alchemical array. She bound the array in a wide circle at waist height and wiped her wand tip clean. As she pulsed magic into the runes to activate it, the stone within the circle cracked and crumbled until it was nothing but a pile of fine sand. She pushed her way through easily and continued.

The roar of the crowd was picking up once more as she neared the last colored tile. Before she could get there, her sensitivity shivered as it brushed up against something powerful in a nondescript tile just in front of the obviously colored one. She tossed a vial at it, with no reaction. A revealing spell came up blank as well, but she knew something was there. Maybe it needed a little more provoking. Instead of wasting magic on a blasting curse, Rigel dug out a handful of dried chimera eyes from deep in her bag. It took only a moment to imbue enough magic into the volatile ingredient. The eyes grew hot in her hand and she flung them forward at the suspicious tile. They

exploded on contact, and something huge and metal *reared* up out of the tile.

It was a contraption like a steel shark, and it closed with a sickening snap over the air where Rigel's foot might have been, had she stepped on the tile unwittingly. She couldn't help but be glad that no one else had made it so far down that particular path. Someone could easily have lost a leg in the monstrosity. Now that she could see it, Rigel banished the trap over the edge of the path and watched it fall to the earth with relieved satisfaction.

Only one obstacle left, she thought, crossing the remaining tiles and coming to a stop before the last, which was a brilliant violet color. She didn't need to trigger this one at all. A magical barrier shimmered into being between the purple tile and the final platform. Then, a white stone basin rose from within the tile, climbing slowly upward until it was as high as Rigel's chest. There were runes inscribed all along the edge of the basin, and Rigel narrowed her eyes as she deciphered the sequence.

It wasn't conveying a terribly complex message, so it only took her a minute to work it out. The barrier would dissolve only when she added the key to the basin. The key was... blood. Rigel could feel a cold sweat breaking out over her temple. There was no way she could risk spilling her blood into the basin. What if it somehow tested for blood purity? She shook her head impatiently at the thought. It couldn't, if all the other champions were to have a fair chance at passing the barrier. Still, who knew what would happen to the blood she put into the bowl? What if the organizers saved it for some reason? What if it was analyzed later? The runes specified human blood, not animal, but there was one thing in her potions kit that could help her. She had a vial of Archie's blood. Rigel swallowed hard. She couldn't. Could she? No, she definitely couldn't. Archie had given her that blood willingly, and willingly spilt blood was too dangerous to leave lying around, no matter the circumstances.

But what to do? She could turn back, make her way to the last fork in the road and then fight her way forward again through all the

obstacles in the center. Even as she considered the course of action seriously, she felt a wave of heat without a source stirring inside of her extremities. The Vow would not allow her to turn back.

"Shite." She needed to think. There had to be another way. Maybe she could overpower the runic barrier: bypass the instructions and somehow dismantle it without triggering any negative effects. Her eyes strayed over to the center tiles, and she wished desperately that she'd taken that path instead.

A crazy thought came to her, and Rigel seized it with both hands before the Vow could assess her intentions and tell her otherwise. She tossed an empty vial over toward the center path, a distance of some thirty feet, and it scraped against the edge of a tile before tumbling down. Her eyes didn't follow it, however. She'd learned what she needed to: there was no physical barrier between the paths. Rigel produced a Modified Weightless Draught from her bag and downed it with a wicked grin.

"WHAT IS BLACK DOING NOW? HE SEEMS TO HAVE GIVEN UP ON THE FINAL OBSTACLE COMPLETELY!"

She ignored Bagman's incredulity-ignored also the voice in her head telling her this was probably not a good idea-and jumped.

The stadium erupted with screams, but Rigel was not falling: she was floating. The Modified Weightless Draught left her lighter than air, and she drifted in a smooth arch toward the center path. It neared, she tried to slow, but her control was less than perfect. She overshot the path and started to descend between the center path and the left-most path. With a grimace, Rigel pointed her wand at the place she'd meant to land and said, "Accio!" The stone tile was anchored to the air with magic, but Rigel was not anchored to anything. There was a reason you weren't supposed to try summoning objects that weighed more than you did. In a vacuum, the lighter object was the one to move. Unless a witch or wizard was grounded with magic, whether consciously or unconsciously, a summoning spell could backfire.

Rigel was counting on her spell doing just that. There was a violent tug at her navel and then she was zooming toward the tile. She connected hard and held on with both hands to still her momentum. With the Weightless Draught still active within her, Rigel had to rely on her non-slip gloves to keep her from floating off the path with every movement. She scrambled forward on her fingertips and toes in an awkward crab shuffle, and was very grateful that there were only four tiles between where she landed and the end of the center path.

She was so focused on not drifting off into space that she misread what her magical sensitivity was telling her. The final obstacle came not from the blue tile at the end of the path, but from the plain tile just before it. A ward sprang up around Rigel's crouched form, trapping her in a dome of pure magic. Her muscles clenched in surprise that turned to terror as the ward began to shrink steadily inward. Something inside her *screamed* in vicious protest. Memories of that rotting pit, days of torture and hunger and pain, rose up in her mind like a tidal wave, and the only coherent thought Rigel could produce was *never again!*

She felt a spasm of pain in her head and had the vague impression that Dom was attempting to communicate something, but to no avail. Her magic flooded the bubble around her, pouring from her so fast and in so many directions that Rigel closed her eyes against the intensity of the resulting light. Pressure built, forcing Rigel down onto the hard tile, and when she could press herself no closer to the stone, when the space beneath the ward was so thick with her magic that something-and Rigel was very much afraid it would be her bones-had to give, her magic suddenly found direction. It *sharpened*, for lack of a better word, against the ward, and the blue barrier burst like an overripe fruit. Magic exploded in all directions, Rigel gasped for air, and the stadium of spectators swelled with a deafening roar.

Rigel felt more than saw the spells holding up the path crumple in the wake of her magic. The tile she was on slid sideways and Rigel pushed herself off in a desperate lurch. She shot toward the final

platform with more speed than grace, but her hands found purchase before she could bounce off it, and she rode the rapidly destabilizing stone to the ground. She impacted more heavily than was likely intended as the magic animating the platform gave a final death rattle. The jarring change in momentum tried to bounce her weightless form back into the air, but she rolled sideways instead, grasping at the long grass to keep her anchored to the ground. Hard earth and brittle clumps of weeds had never smelled so good.

Dimly, she was aware of Bagman's voice ringing through the stadium, of hundreds of people high above her, shouting and cheering her name. She was even aware of the sickening booms that came as tile after tile tumbled to the ground around her. How long until one crashed into her head and finished the job the course had started?

A shield sprang into being above her and she twisted her head around to see Snape striding toward her in a walk so fast it was nearly- *almost* -a run. Her Head of House dropped the shield just long enough to grasp Rigel firmly by the wrist, and then he was towing her through the air toward the edge of the stadium, where a set of stairs awaited them.

When they were out of immediate danger of being brained to death by falling stones, Snape let the shield fall completely and put his wand away in favor of holding Rigel down with both hands. "How long does this last?" he demanded, his mouth in an unamused line.

"I have a counter potion," she said.

"Then why haven't you taken it?"

Rigel scowled up at him. "I've been using both hands to not float away. Normally I can control the movement a little better, but-"

"Allow me a guess: you over-brewed this one, too." Snape's expression could have withered the Whomping Willow.

She flushed. "I-well, I got all new ingredients, but I may have neglected to replace all the *potions* I made since starting to practice my magical awareness."

"The counter potion," Snape reminded her sharply. "There's an entire stadium waiting on you."

Rigel huffed, but obediently dug into her bag for the imbued Finite potion, Snape tethering her to the earth until its effects kicked in. She felt gravity catch up with her in an unpleasant rush and caught herself against Snape's shoulders to steady her balance until she was certain she wouldn't fall onto her face. "Thanks," she said, almost sighing with relief. "I can't believe it's over."

"What strains credibility is that you made it through the entire course almost unscathed," Snape said. She couldn't tell for sure, but she thought he almost sounded proud.

"It was my sensing ability that saved me," she said, drawing herself up to full height so she could look him sincerely in the eye. "I'm sorry I ever complained about having to learn it. Thank you, Professor. For everything."

Snape's face softened infinitesimally. "Foolish boy. Keeping you alive would be easier if you *cooperated* now and again."

"I will from now on," she promised. Rigel thought she even meant it. "How are the others?" she added. "Is everyone all right?"

"See for yourself," Snape said. He swept up the stairs and Rigel followed quickly, despite how bone-tired she was.

At the top of the stairs was a special box, obviously set aside for the competitors. Seven of the others were present. She took a quick accounting and asked Snape, "What happened to Antiope?"

"She was unable to escape the shrinking ward. It crushed several of her bones before she fell unconscious and forfeited by default."



Madam Pomfrey is seeing to her. The girl will be fine," he added after a moment, clearly reading in Rigel's pale expression the horrified concern she felt.

Snape told her to wait there while the scoring was deliberated and left. Rigel stepped forward toward the front of the box, where the other seven competitors stood at the balcony's edge. Hermione smiled grimly at her as she approached.

"You did really well," Hermione said bracingly. "Faster than most."

"Was it?" She couldn't hide her surprise. "It felt like I was up there for ages."

"I felt the same," Hermione said. "I think we all did. All that adrenaline. And every second you spend thinking about what to do just feels like a lifetime, doesn't it?" Rigel nodded. She looked Hermione over subtly, but the muggleborn girl caught on and smiled wryly. "I'm fine, Rigel. I had a few rope burns from an unexpected *Incarcerous* and boils down my left side from a jet of bubotuber pus, but nothing I couldn't heal myself. Are you all right?"

Rigel shrugged. "No real injuries, except for the poisonous flower."

Hermione nodded sagely. "Those sleeping spores are fast acting. I'm impressed you counteracted them so quickly. Feiyan and Tahiil took the same route, you know, but the spores got them both. Tahiil fell off the course in his sleep, but Feiyan landed on the tile. The spores wore off after ten minutes or so, but I think they made her dizzy; she lost her balance when that anti-sensory mist hit her."

Rigel nodded slowly. "The mist takes away sight and sound but leaves the other senses. It's enough to give anyone vertigo, and coupled with the after effects of the spores and her fear of heights..." Rigel glanced over to where Shang stood, pale, but not visibly injured, on the other side of the box. Tahiil was with her, and they seemed united in an unspoken misery.

"Exactly." Hermione looked down onto the pitch, where the remains of the obstacle course were scattered in pieces all over the ground. She smiled suddenly, and it was a terrifying, fierce thing. "I'm glad you destroyed it."

"So am I," Krum grunted. He had sidled up to Rigel's other side while they were talking. Krum had burn paste slathered up and down his right arm. Judging by the pattern, she guessed he'd tried to protect himself from an unexpected jet of flame with it. "That task was more luck than skill."

"Some people had less trouble, it's true," Delacour added. Clearly the box was not big enough to prevent her from hearing their conversation. The French girl's eyes lingered briefly on Rigel but turned sharply to land on Jacob Owens, of all people.

The American boy raised his eyebrows and smiled. "Me? I was pretty lucky, I suppose. Maybe they went easy on me for going first."

"Could be," Delacour allowed, but Rigel could tell that she was not convinced. She wondered why the girl was even suspicious of Owens—none of them had seen his run, since he'd gone first. Was it just because he'd got a better time?

Come to think of it, she had no idea what her own time had come out to be. Sheepishly, she asked Hermione, "Did you happen to catch my time, by chance?"

Hermione blinked at her in surprise, but it was Delacour who said, "You weren't even paying attention?"

Rigel frowned. "I had rather other things on my mind, at the end there. What with the entire obstacle course coming down around my ears."

"How did you do that, anyway?" Owens asked, eyes bright with curiosity. "Even Antiope couldn't break out of that ward, and brute strength is sort of her specialty." He smiled in that strange way of his,

and Rigel had to wonder again why she never found his humor amusing.

"I just panicked," she said flatly. "My magic was completely uncontrolled, I'm afraid."

"Hence the chain reaction," Owens said thoughtfully. "Interesting."

"This is why you go last," Krum said. The smallest of smiles ticked up the corner of his mouth.

Rigel scowled. "There was no way to predict that would happen."

"After the dragon, we knew *something* would happen," Krum argued. Hermione snorted with laughter then turned pink as Krum's amused eyes turned on her as well.

"They've finished scoring," Sousa said suddenly, drawing everyone's attention to the pitch once more. Rigel let her eyes linger on the Brazilian for a brief moment, but he, too, seemed to be in reasonably good health, though there was something utterly drained about his expression that she sympathized with. It was how she felt internally, after so much magical expenditure in so short a time.

Across the pitch, directly on the opposite side of the stands, there was a golden box that jutted out from the rest. She could make out the vague features of those inside—not enough to identify them all, but enough to know that Riddle, Crouch, and Bagman all stood within. Dumbledore, too, she thought, though the old wizard was keeping to the back of the box.

As though in confirmation, Bagman's voice boomed out over the pitch once more. "LADIES AND GENTLEMEN! THE JUDGES HAVE DELIBERATED AND THE SCORING IS CONCLUDED!"

Rigel's attention was interrupted by a hand on her back. She whirled around and found Pansy and Draco standing behind her. She grinned at them and fell into Pansy's brief embrace. After an almost

immeasurably short moment of awkwardness, Draco clapped her on the shoulder and said, "Great job, Rigel."

"You were *splendid*," Pansy added.

Hermione turned around with a look that was as good as a pointed hushing noise. The three Slytherins fell silent to listen and Rigel turned back toward the announcer, but neither Pansy nor Draco retreated from their close proximity to her shoulder blades.

"... JUDGED ON THREE CATEGORIES FOR THE SECOND TASK! TIMELINESS IN COMPLETING THE COURSE, PROBLEM-SOLVING, AND DEGREE OF RESILIENCE! AS WITH THE FIRST TASK, PROBLEM SOLVING IS DETERMINED BY THE COMPETITOR'S ABILITY TO MATCH APPROPRIATE RESPONSES TO THE CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED. IMPRECISE APPLICATION OF MAGIC IS NOT THE GOAL! THE FINAL CATEGORY, THAT OF RESILIENCE, IS MEASURED BY THE STATE OF HEALTH IN WHICH A COMPETITOR COMPLETED THIS TASK. CHAMPIONS WITH FEWER INJURIES WILL SCORE HIGHER, AS IT DEMONSTRATES SUPERIOR REACTIONS, EFFICIENCY OF CASTING, AND QUICK THINKING! BEFORE WE SCORE THEM, LET'S GIVE ALL THE CHAMPIONS ANOTHER ROUND OF APPLAUSE!"

Rigel rubbed her ears as the stadium erupted around them. She wouldn't be surprised if every person present went home harder of hearing from listening to the obnoxiously overpowered Sonorous Charm.

"FOR TIME, OUT OF TWENTY POINTS, SCORES ARE AS FOLLOWS: JACOB OWENS, 20 POINTS. ARCTURUS BLACK, 19 POINTS. HERMIONE GRANGER, 18 POINTS. FLEUR DELACOUR, 17 POINTS. VICTOR KRUM, 16 POINTS. MATHEUS SOUSA, 15 POINTS. ANTIOPE, TAHIL DIRIC ZAH, AND FEIYAN SHANG ALL RECEIVE ZERO POINTS!"

The crowd roared its approval or displeasure-it was impossible to tell which-and Rigel felt a hand on her shoulder again as Draco's voice dipped into her ear. "Second place. You would have been first, but Owens didn't even trigger some of the obstacles in his path."

Rigel tried to listen, but the feeling of his breath against her ear distracted her completely. Her attention was yanked back to the stadium as Bagman's voice started up again.

"IN PROBLEM SOLVING, OUT OF FIFTEEN POINTS, WE HAVE: JACOB OWENS, 15. MATHEUS SOUSA, 14. HERMIONE GRANGER, 13. FLEUR DELACOUR, 12. VICTOR KRUM, 11. ANTIOPE, 8. FEIYAN SHANG, 6. TAHIIL DIRIC ZAH, 6." There was a pause in which Rigel wondered if Bagman had forgotten to call her name. Then he went on. "AFTER SOME DELIBERATION, IT WAS DETERMINED THAT ARCTURUS BLACK'S DESTRUCTION OF THE OBSTACLE COURSE WAS NOT A CONSCIOUS ACT OF WILL. NEVERTHELESS, AS AN OVERREACTION, IT WAS TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT IN HIS SCORE. RIGEL BLACK THUS RECIEVES A PROBLEM SOLVING SCORE OF 10 POINTS!"

" *Ten?*" Draco's voice was incredulous. "Five points off for one bit of overzealous magic? And anyway, that ward could have killed you. How is anything an overreaction to threat of death?"

"Are you finished?" Rigel turned to smile ruefully at her friend. Honestly, she wasn't surprised they'd docked points for what her magic did to the course. Probably it had taken someone a very long time to assemble it. She couldn't dredge up any regret.

Draco grumbled something under his breath, but did fall silent when Bagman got around to the final category.

"AND OUT OF FIFTEEN FOR RESILIENCY: MATHEUS SOUSA, 15 POINTS! JACOB OWENS, 15 POINTS! ARCTURUS BLACK, 14! FLEUR DELACOUR, 13! HERMIONE GRANGER, 12! VICTOR KRUM, 10! TAHIIL DIRIC ZAH, 6! FEIYAN SHANG, 6! AND ANTIOPE, 3 POINTS!" Bagman waited patiently for the cheers to die

out before concluding, "IN FIRST PLACE THEN, WITH A TOTAL COMBINED SCORE FOR BOTH TASKS, JACOB OWENS WITH 91 POINTS! SECOND PLACE WITH 87 IS ARCTURUS BLACK! THIRD PLACE, HERMIONE GRANGER WITH 84 POINTS! VICTOR KRUM IN FOURTH WITH 76 POINTS! FLEUR DELACOUR, FIFTH WITH 72 POINTS! SIXTH, FEIYAN SHANG WITH 48! ANTIOPE IN SEVENTH WITH 47! TAHIIL DIRIC ZAH I IS IN EIGHTH PLACE WITH 46 POINTS! AND BRINGING UP NINTH PLACE IS MATHEUS SOUSA WITH 44 POINTS! WELL DONE TO ALL THE CHAMPIONS, AND GOOD LUCK IN THE NEXT TASK!"

Finally, mercifully, Bagman's voice cut out and left their throbbing eardrums in peace. Rigel turned back to her friends and smiled somewhat ironically. "There now, that's not so bad. Congratulations, Owens," she added, raising her voice so the muggleborn could hear.

He shrugged in a way that would have been self-deprecating, had his chin not been held so high. "Like I said, it was mostly luck."

"Still, congratulations," Hermione said, smiling brightly. It was evident how pleased she was for two muggleborns to be represented in the top three champions. "You too, Tahiil," she called to the still disappointed-looking Somali boy.

Tahiil shook his head grimly. "I was not fast enough to counter the flower. Just as I was not fast enough at overcoming the puzzles in the forest. Truly, I see the advantage of a formal education."

Hermione had a dismayed look on her face, but she said, bracingly. "Just think, though-after this tournament you'll be somewhat famous, Tahiil. I'm sure many schools would be happy to sponsor you if you wanted to attend."

The boy's open face melted into a cheerful smile. "You are right. Perhaps I can also bring my brother. I must not forget that to compete at all is a bright opportunity!" Rigel had to smile at his newfound enthusiasm. Shang didn't look nearly so ready to bounce

back from her disappointment. Tahiil noticed too, for he said, "Will your sponsors be very upset, Feiyan?"

A flush of shame crossed her pale cheeks. "I think yes. I make a bad attempt."

Even Fleur, normally rather callous, winced at Shang's downtrodden face. "It eez not your fault you are scared of heights."

Shang nodded, but it was obvious she wasn't convinced. Sousa huffed a laugh on his way out of the box. "Cheer up, Feiyan. You're still three places ahead of me." Sousa caught Rigel's eye as he passed her and winked.

She felt Draco stiffen at her shoulder. A moment later he said, "We should get going, Rigel. My parents will want to congratulate you." Rigel nodded agreeably and bade the rest of the champions farewell, giving an extra smile to Hermione, who grinned back, still visibly pleased with her performance.

Her friends were quiet as they made their way down the stairs from the competitors' box, but as they made it to the pitch Pansy said, "Very well done, Rigel. Second place looks good strategically at this point in the tournament."

"Second place to a muggleborn?" Rigel clarified, her eyebrows raised. She didn't quite understand Pansy's reasoning.

"The points are close, and you're still firmly in the lead of the pureblood category. Having other categories represented in the top three makes the whole tournament appear more legitimate," Pansy said quietly, checking first to make sure no one was near enough to hear.

"It helps that you're only in second because they docked you five points for destroying the course," Draco added sardonically. "Now the tournament seems fair, and you'll still have people who secretly believe you deserve to be in first. It's a win-win."

Rigel sighed. "Of course it is, with Riddle determining the scores."

Pansy frowned at her. "Lord Riddle doesn't get a say in the scoring," she said slowly. Realization dawned and her scowl deepened. "You didn't read *any* of the supplemental reading Millie and I gave you, did you?"

"Ah. Not exactly," she admitted, wincing.

It was Pansy's turn to sigh. "There are five official judges. Mr. Bagman and Mr. Crouch, of course. Then there's Griselda Marchbanks, head of the Wizarding Examination Services." Rigel looked sharply at Pansy, wondering if she'd misheard. Misinterpreting her surprise, Pansy added, "Who better qualified to judge relative adolescent magical ability?"

Rigel nodded. "Makes sense." It seemed like a conflict of interest, though, considering the life debt the elderly witch had once pledged her. "Who else?" she asked, more out of obligation to satisfy Pansy's disgruntlement than out of real interest.

"Horace Slughorn and Lord Raoul Goldentower."

"Slughorn? The Potions master? I've read his work on Felix Felicis. It's brilliant," Rigel said. Despite herself, she appreciated the idea of a potioneer on the tournament judging panel.

"Of course that's how you know him," Draco said, chuckling a little. "Slughorn isn't just an academic. He's an incredibly well-connected politician, too."

Rigel hummed uninterestedly.

"He was a Hogwarts professor from the thirties to the eighties," Pansy told her, amusement lurking in her eyes. "I hear he called in a number of favors from former students to be chosen for the honor."



"How'd Goldentower get chosen, then?" Draco asked. His tone didn't indicate a surplus of good feeling toward the name.

"Lord Goldentower is notoriously Neutral, and his partner founded that correspondence school for the lesser bloods. Including him and Madam Marchbanks together makes the judging panel above reproach."

Rigel wasn't so sure of Pansy's assessment. "Even if Riddle doesn't get a vote, he's still in the box with them while they're deliberating, isn't he? I bet he's still influencing the scores."

"I'm sure Lord Riddle is the picture of impartiality," Pansy hissed, warning in her eyes as they neared the center of the pitch where a group of adults stood in a loose cluster.

Rigel picked out her family easily, as well as the Malfoys, the Grangers, and a number of other men and women who were probably related to the other champions. A tall, thin Asian man with a grim countenance caught her eye in particular, and she supposed by the constellation patterns embroidered down his sleeves that he was Shang's father. She hoped he wouldn't be too hard on the girl.

Sirius met her with open arms but Rigel, realizing she hadn't had a chance to reapply the Eau de Archie, shook her head with a wide grin. "No, Dad! I'm all sweaty!"

Sirius let his arms drop and settled for ruffling her grimy hair instead. He grimaced at the feel of dirt and sweat and said, "You weren't kidding. Still, great job, Arch! You nearly gave me a heart attack when you jumped off the edge of the path, but I have to admit using Harry's potion was clever."

"It was," Lily agreed, leaning around Sirius' form to smile at Rigel warmly. "We'd seen it at the World Cup, and it still caught us by surprise."

Remus elbowed Sirius to the side so he could smile down at Rigel and put a light hand on her shoulder. "You were brilliant, Archie. Had a little trouble with the runic barrier on the right-hand path, did you?"

Rigel grimaced. "Not exactly. It was a straightforward sequence. I just didn't want to do what it said."

"What?" Draco's alarmed voice had her glancing over to where he was waiting beside his parents, who had hung back to give Rigel's family the first chance to congratulate her. Rigel frowned at him and Draco frowned back. "How could you-I mean, weren't you worried about doing your best?"

The odd way he phrased it told her he was concerned about the Vow but didn't want to say so openly. She smiled reassuringly. "A little, but in the end the way forward was intolerable. So I chose another course very quickly, without dwelling too much on the consequences."

Draco did not seem reassured by that explanation, but Lord Malfoy looked terribly intrigued. "What was this intolerable way forward, then? A spell too costly to perform, perhaps?"

"Rigel has plenty of magic," Narcissa disagreed, smiling indulgently in her direction. "I think we all saw that when he overcame the shrinking ward."

"That was an incredible flare of magic, wasn't it?" James added, grinning proudly. "Reminds me of you, dear," he added to Lily, who swatted him without heat in retaliation.

"But what did the runic sequence want to you do?" Remus asked, frowning.

Seeing that he would not be distracted, Rigel grimaced. "It wanted blood. Human blood, specifically, so I couldn't just use my potions kit."

The adults grew sober around her, and James said sharply, "That's Dark magic."

The Malfoys all stiffened. "A blood ward itself isn't necessarily Dark," Narcissa said carefully, quelling her husband's fierce expression with a look. Lucius' nostrils flared but he didn't say anything as his wife added, "Nevertheless, we should not be encouraging children to spill their own blood so cavalierly."

Pansy made a noise of realization. "Rigel, you said once that willingly spilled blood can be quite dangerous if it falls into the wrong hands. Is that why you didn't do it?"

Rigel nodded, remembering the day she'd spilled blood into a goblet in the Malfoy gardens quite clearly.

"Smart lad," Sirius said, nodding firmly. "You made the right choice."

She wondered if all parties would see it that way. Rigel knew she was prone to paranoia when it came to Riddle, but she couldn't help but suspect that barrier had been there for a reason. Internally, she could justify the decision to move laterally in the task with the thought that if the barrier somehow had a recognition component to it, then it was a greater risk to her odds of winning the tournament to go through with it than it was to try another route. After all, if she was outed as a halfblood in the second task, there was no way she could 'do her best' in the rest of the tournament. The explanation could not be shared with Riddle, however. Would he wonder why the Vow had not stopped her from taking a different path? Would he believe that she had simply made the decision too fast for the Vow to react?

The other champions eventually made their way to the center of the pitch as well, picking out routes around the fallen debris of tiles. A few of them were still ominously colored, and Rigel was glad to see the tournament organizers coming toward their group. Surely they would take care of the hazards.

To her bemusement, however, Bagman and Crouch seemed more interested in socializing with the friends and families of the champions, and Riddle was nowhere to be seen. A tall man with greying hair, bright eyes, and a rather generous middle inserted himself into their group with a pleased, "Lucius Malfoy! It has been too long!"

Mr. Malfoy had an odd expression on his face when he greeted the newcomer. It was something between amusement and carefully jaded appreciation. "Horace, well met. I trust your duties have not been too taxing this day?"

"Taxing? It's an *honor*," the man said jovially. "I haven't had this much fun in ages. James, Sirius, so glad you could make it out today. Pitch looks a bit different than it did in your days at Hogwarts, eh?"

"You could say that," James allowed.

"I wouldn't call it an improvement," Sirius added wryly, looking around at the rubble in false consideration.

Delighted laughter poured out of the taller man's throat. "Always quick with a joke, this one. Yes, I remember well. And who might this young man be?" He peered down at Rigel with unconcealed fascination, and she wondered if he meant to be as alarmingly interested as he came across. There was no way he didn't know who she was, either.

"As if you couldn't guess," Sirius said, wagging his eyebrows. "This is my son, Arcturus Black, who prefers to go by Archie-or Rigel, for his friends. Arch, this is Horace Slughorn, best Potions professor who ever lived."

Ignoring the subtle dig at Snape, Rigel extended her hand politely and said, "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, sir. I'm a great admirer of your work."

"Oh?" Slughorn's eyebrows quivered as his smile curled upwards.  
"What work might that be, young man?"

"Well, all of it," she admitted, "but I particularly enjoyed the essay on your demonstrated improvements to Zygmunt Budge's centennial recipe for Felix Felicis."

Slughorn raised a hand to his chest dramatically and cried, "My word! A potioneer indeed! I admit I suspected Severus might be exaggerating just a tad. Your work with the dried chimera eyes-if I'm not mistaken-was a delight to witness today, *Rigel* ."

"Thank you, Master Slughorn," she said, smiling a little. "I hadn't expected anyone to recognize the ingredient in that context."

"I've a sharp eye," Slughorn agreed.

"Those weren't exploding beans?" Sirius looked genuinely surprised.

"It is good to know someone with an appreciation for *talent* is on the judging panel," Narcissa said smoothly. Sirius shot her a scowl, but oddly, he didn't seem to mean it.

Slughorn's smile was irrepressible. "Oh, Narcissa, you do flatter an old man. I must say it is a delight to have a potioneer in the competition. Your handling of the werewolf in the first task was quite admirable, you know. And of course that leap you made! Why, I don't think I've seen a potion with quite the same effect before,"

His curious gaze waited for an explanation. Rigel smiled. "Both potions are my cousin's invention. I'm sure she'd be happy to send you a sample."

"Miss Potter, yes of course," Slughorn said, shooting James and Lily an emphatic look. "Your daughter has been keeping us all on our toes at the Guild."

"That's Harry," James said weakly. "Full of surprises."

"I wouldn't have done so well without her help," Rigel put in for good measure. She wanted no one to think it odd that she'd used so many of 'Harry's' skillsets in the tournament. "Every week she sends me more potions that might be useful."

"No amount of potions can teach level-headedness in the face of danger," James said firmly. "You've got that all on your own, sport."

"Well said! And a very Gryffindor attitude," Slughorn remarked slyly. "I daresay old habits are hard to kick. I myself was in Slytherin as well when I attended this grand school," he told Rigel in a confidential tone. "But of course, I didn't discriminate based on House as a professor. I pride myself on recognizing talent wherever it comes from."

Rigel couldn't help noticing Lily and Remus exchanging a wry look behind Slughorn's back. She didn't miss the fact that Remus had not been included in the conversation at all, despite having been at Hogwarts with James and Sirius when Slughorn was teaching there.

"Then it's no wonder you were one of only five wizards chosen to judge the tournament," she said, letting a light of admiration enter her eyes as she looked up at him.

The ex-professor wagged a finger at her obsequiousness, but there was an undercurrent of satisfaction there nonetheless.

Slughorn didn't seem like an overly bad sort, and his potions work was unquestionably superb, but she wondered how a man so transparently easy to please could do so well in politics, too. Perhaps it really was that simple, she thought. If you had no ulterior motives, people were more likely to trust you and solicit your help or advice. Maybe Slughorn's desire to be praised and acknowledged was effective precisely because it was so seemingly easy to oblige.

The Potions master left their company shortly thereafter, off to wrangle an introduction to the other champions he considered interesting, she didn't doubt. The Malfoys stayed just long enough to

convey their sincere congratulations to Rigel on the completion of the second task before they, too, made their goodbyes.

Draco and Pansy hesitated, clearly not wanting to leave Rigel's side, but she gave them a reassuring smile and said, "I'll catch up with you in the common room. My family will probably stay a while longer, if they're allowed."

"We've got another... twenty minutes before we're escorted out of the wards," Sirius confirmed after a quick Tempus Charm.

Pansy gave Rigel a quick smile and gracefully bade the adults farewell. Draco was less smooth, nodding without saying anything but casting a long, lingering look her way as Pansy took his arm to leave the pitch.

Rigel kept her face even, not willing to reveal even the slightest amount of her internal discomfort in front of her family. Archie would never hear the end of it if Sirius or James picked something up about her increasingly complicated relationship with Draco from her expression or voice. She just knew Sirius had been eagerly awaiting the day he could tease his son about his first crush, but this was not something she was willing to allow. The circumstances were too confusing. Too personal.

She pretended to listen to her family's exuberant recounting of the second task, including all the parts she'd missed while stuck in the tent, but her mind kept wandering back to Draco. Why couldn't she find an equilibrium with regards to him again? Would it be like this between her and Leo when she went back to the alleys over winter break, too? Romance was so annoyingly intrusive, she fumed silently. It ruined otherwise perfect friendships, burdened her relationships with both Leo and Draco with some kind of vague expectation that she felt incapable of meeting. However patient or understanding their regard-and she had to admit that both Leo and Draco had been very understanding, in their own ways-it was still there, hanging in the air between them like the ghost of what could have been.

Rigel forcibly refocused her attention on her family. Family was a different kind of complication these days, she thought. The crisscrossing weight of different personas, lies, and truths all mixed together was getting heavier. Every task they attended was a risk that she might expose herself-might be forced to reveal a skill that Archie had no way of recreating-in the name of winning.

With that in mind, she thanked them profusely for coming as their twenty remaining minutes dwindled to a close. Then, she paused, biting her lip in the way Archie often did when he didn't want to say something but didn't know how to hold it back, either. Sirius, of course, noticed at once.

"What is it, Arch?" He searched Rigel's eyes for some hint of the source of her sudden reticence. "Are you handling everything okay?"

She nodded, though she did it unconvincingly. After a worried look between Sirius, James, Lily, and Remus, she said, "I was just thinking, the next task is going to be harder, isn't it? They keep getting harder, and I'm so grateful that you all keep coming to support me, but..."

"But what, Archie?" James looked concerned now, too.

"I just..." She sighed, just as Archie would have when he was on the verge of giving into his own, irrepressible honesty. "It's hard sometimes, knowing you're all watching me compete. Sometimes I get so nervous. I don't want to disappoint you."

"You could *never* disappoint us." Sirius said it so fiercely that Rigel had a hard time continuing. She knew she had to, though. The more her family saw, the more elaborate the lies would become.

"But what if I did?" She let her eyes grow wet, thinking of how Archie would feel to know she was straining his relationship with his father *again* for her own ends. "Sometimes I want to try things, take risks, but knowing you're watching I just *can't*."



"What are you saying, Archie?" Lily asked, a soft sympathy in her tone. "You'd rather we didn't come to the tasks?"

Bless her for saying it. Archie would not have been able to. Rigel didn't have to fully affect the miserable expression on her face as she shrugged helplessly. "I don't know. I just-I don't know."

Remus, insightful and empathetic to a fault, said softly, "We don't want to add to the pressure you're already under. If it's easier for you to focus on the tasks without us watching, just tell us. All we want is for you to get through this tournament safely. None of us want you to feel as though you have to perform well for our sake."

"He's right," James said firmly. "Whatever will help you concentrate on what's important-that's what we want."

Rigel smiled tremulously. "I don't want you to think I don't want your support. It means more to me than you can know." She let her voice crack just slightly. "It's hard to disregard your presence, though. Everyone else I can block out while I'm in the task, but you all... you're too important to me. Wondering what you're thinking as you watch me compete is sort of..." She trailed off into a whisper for the last word. "Distracting."

As Sirius' face crumpled, she felt like the worst sort of monster. Surely, there was a special circle of hell reserved for people who brought that exact expression of dismay and crushing helplessness to a parent's face.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, turning her face down in shamed remorse.

"No," Sirius said, a hitch in his voice. "Don't be. It's... okay. I understand, Arch. If it will help, we won't come to the tasks. As long as you know that we do support you. We're here for you, whatever you need."

Rigel flung herself into Sirius' arms, pretending to stifle a sob in her throat. "Thanks, Dad. I know you'll love me no matter what. I'll tell you everything that happens, and I promise I'll be safe. I just... I have to do this on my own. You know?"

Sirius tucked her head under his chin and squeezed her tight. "I know, Arch. I wish I could fight this battle for you, but I know I can't. If you need us to support you from afar, then that's what we'll do. Right, everyone?"

Rigel pulled back to see James, Remus, and Lily all nodding solemnly. She didn't have to summon the tears that filled her eyes at their unwavering understanding and support. They came all the same.

It was a tearful goodbye all around. Rigel watched the four adults whose unconditional love she didn't deserve move toward the gates and took a moment to compose herself. There in the center of an empty stadium, surrounded by the physical remnants of her own magic's destructive capabilities, she'd never felt so alone.

By the time she felt ready to rejoin her classmates in the castle, the other champions had long gone, and Rigel was the last one on the pitch. The sun was beginning to set, and in its wake a brittle cold settled over the evening. Rigel trudged toward the exit, turning the day's events over in her mind and marveling at the idea that she was a third of the way through the cursed tournament. That was something, at least.

As she passed under the stands on the way out of the stadium, a voice that might have been conjured from her nightmares floated toward her on a hiss that was almost a sigh.

"You were incandescent today, Rigel. You're well on your way to achieving everything you want."

She almost kept walking. Only the thought that he must be truly desperate to speak to her if he'd been lurking under the bleachers

for an untold amount of time, and the subsequent deduction that if that was the case he would be willing to follow her up to the castle, stayed her feet.

"You're the man of the hour, not me," she said, turning to peer into the shadows. "Isn't this tournament about accomplishing what *you* want, and nothing else?"

"I never do anything for just one reason," Riddle said, emerging from the shimmer of a strong Disillusionment Charm and stepping close enough to discourage speaking at a normal volume. He wore a deep shade of midnight blue, and whether he meant it to or not the fabric seemed to disappear at the edges, so that Riddle almost looked as though he was floating within the shadows, rather than in front of them. "That is something you are too young to understand as yet. Still, you're far from hopeless. I see Severus has been training you well."

She had nothing to say to that, and kept her face blank. Rigel was as yet still furious at the man for attempting to circumvent the Vow they'd made by pushing through his odious marriage legislation early.

He took in her expressionless silence and tilted his head, allowing his cold eyes to narrow thoughtfully. "You do not approve of Severus' lessons?" he guessed.

Rigel fought against a sneer. That's what he thought she was annoyed about? "I don't care about that."

"What *do* you care about, Rigel Black?" Riddle loomed over her, so close she would swear she could feel the unwanted resonance between them, buzzing under her skin. It was probably in her head.

"You lied to me," she bit out after debating the wisdom of keeping quiet.

"Careful what you accuse me of, boy." Gone was the silken, indulgent tone. Riddle's voice could have cut glass.

"I know what you've been doing, what the S.O.W. Party's been doing to push the Marriage Law through." Her face was growing warm with the effort of keeping her anger in check. "You said you would withdraw that legislation-"

" *If you win,*" he hissed. It took her a moment to realize he had slipped into Parseltongue. Whether from fury or a desire for secrecy she didn't know. " *I sssaid I would withdraw the attempt if you win. And I will. Unlesssss it passsessss firssst.*"

" *The implication-*" she tried, but he cut her off again.

" *Don't be a fool. Did you really think I'd let it go-the work of yearssss-without sssso much ass a fight?*" Riddle dropped the Parseltongue to laugh low at her frustrated expression. "Oh, Rigel. I know you're more intelligent than this. In any case, you are mistaken if you think your protest will sway me. We've already struck our deal. While you may hinder my efforts for future legislation after this tournament, the Marriage Law is too important."

"There are other ways to consolidate your power base," she snapped. "Ways that don't step on individual freedoms."

Riddle shook his head, almost pityingly. "You can't begin to understand my reasons. And you don't have to. You don't get a say at all, I'm afraid." At her mutinous expression, his smile, if anything, grew. "Think of this as a learning opportunity, Rigel. A lesson on formulating agreements. One day, you may even thank me."

*I'll never thank you for anything,* she thought, her eyes flashing with the force of her defiance.

"Speaking of lessons, the offer still stands, you know." Riddle's face was open, expectant. Rigel couldn't fathom his meaning.

"What offer?"

Impatience clouded his expression before he tossed it off with an annoyed jerk of his head. "Your magic, Rigel. I can help you train it. Severus has been very helpful, but his preparation is methodical. Thought-driven. You won't be able to think your way through the next task."

"Is that so?" Rigel had to wonder if this was his true reason for forestalling her when she was alone. Was he here to warn her about the next task directly? It still irked her that he thought she needed his intervention to win, but she was not so prideful as to refuse the information. In this, at least, their goal was the same, and the sanctity of the tournament's moral ground meant little to her when she understood the purpose behind its fair façade.

He seemed to know that she couldn't resist listening to whatever information he deigned to give her, for he was smiling once more. "The third task will test your reflexes, your magical ability in the most immediate and dangerous of circumstances. And your opponent won't be a creature or runic array without the intelligence to fight back."

Rigel blinked, almost surprised at its simplicity. "You're talking about a duel."

"Very good." He smirked down at her. "Given enough time, I can make you unequalled in this arena. Even with just a handful of days under my tutelage, you would be nigh unstoppable."

This time, Rigel smirked back at him. "I can handle my own training for this one."

His subtly cajoling smile turned sour. "Have you stopped to think about the opportunity you're spurning out of this childish spite? There are a great many wizards who would be *grateful* to be in your position," he snarled.

"Then go find one of them," she breathed, utterly perplexed as to why he insisted on... what? *Mentoring* her? It was absurd. Did he think her hatred for him was something changeable? Some fleeting fit of adolescent pique? He would learn otherwise.

She stalked away from the stadium, from Riddle, and from the unbridled aggravation he kindled in her heart. In fact, she thought as she made her way swiftly up the long lawn, he'd already given her the perfect platform from which to cement her opposition, hadn't he? If she made it to the final round, she wondered how many people would be interested in hearing the pureblood champion's take on the new legislation the S.O.W. Party was so confidently proposing. *More than none*, she thought darkly. *And that's a start.*

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[end of chapter nine].

A/N: There we have it, 10k or so over-budget-so, par for the course. It's also a month late, and I do apologize to anyone who got used to the new schedule. I'm still *trying* to do one month on ffn and one month on original fic in rotation, but sometimes the chapter only comes when it wants to come. Like a late-term baby, gestating in my head beyond its due date, sucking up nutrients in the form of ideas and basically draining the life from my soul like a giant plot-driven leech. Happy Mother's Day, everyone. Thank you for all of you out there still reading and reviewing this story. A big special thanks to the Discord community and the wonderful ideas and critiques its members provide, too. I love you all, and I hope you liked the chapter.

For anyone **concerned/disappointed/leaping-for-joy** about the drops of romance in this chapter, all I will say is don't make the mistake of certain other characters and pin your emotional hopes on Rigel. She will disappoint you. And everyone else. The girl just can't right now y'all.

Best,

Violet

# Chapter 10

## The Futile Façade:

### Chapter 10:

December landed on wings of ice and roared with the breath of an irritable grizzly. The first Thursday afternoon after the second task found Rigel bundled to her ears, making a slow tunnel through the soft snow toward the Forbidden Forest. Treeslider was curled against her chest, hissing a litany of doubtful words under three layers of clothing.

" *The wind iss much too sssearing, Ssspeaker.*" The boomslang snake's voice came floating up to her ears, and Rigel tucked her chin in response.

" *Thisss wasss your idea,*" she hissed into the neck of her jumper.

" *Your nessst isss sssso warm,*" Treeslider said plaintively. " *How wasss I to know thisss monssstroussss ssstorm awaited usss?*"

" *I sssaid it wasss cold,*" Rigel said, chuckling a little at the snake's dramatics. It had long since stopped snowing, and was now only blowing the fresh powder back and forth.

" *Ssspeaker isss known to have a poor underssstanding of heat.*"

Rigel thought Treeslider had a poor understanding of words, but she didn't want to argue with the snake. Instead, she stopped moving toward the forest and said, "*Doesss thisss mean you don't want to sssee how your nessst isss doing today?*"

Treeslider shuddered against her torso. "*It isss lossst under thisss messss. We mussst return to the ssstone foresst before we freeze.*"



" *All right.*" She sighed. Would that the snake had made this determination before she'd slogged halfway across the grounds.

A familiar voice called out from the swirling winds, an unfamiliar tone of urgent amusement in its pitch.

"Save me! Rigel, stop them!" Hermione was tearing across the lawn, bright blue scarf trailing behind her like the tail of a kite. She rounded Rigel and ducked down behind her, as though Rigel's unimpressive girth was capable of shielding her from sight in this expanse of white.

Only a dozen paces behind her, two bundles of burgundy were committed in a headlong charge. Rigel felt mischief curl within her. "When I say so, jump to the side," she murmured to the girl doubled over in breathless laughter behind her.

She waited until the Weasley twins were near enough to see the whites in her eyes. Her arms outstretched, she said, "Guys, we can talk about this like reasonable-now!"

Rigel and Hermione leapt out of the way, and the twins, who'd each taken a running lunge to cover the last several feet, fell in an explosion of powder and spluttered outrage. Fred came up first, spewing, "Traitor!" alongside a mouthful of snow.

George shook himself like a dog, sending wet misery everywhere in a three-foot radius. "N-no fair!" he said, taking his feet with some difficulty. Rigel schooled her face to blankness, refusing to give sympathy to the boys who would have cheerfully plowed her into the snow.

"What are you doing, chasing Hermione?" Rigel asked them, folding her arms in a posture of mock sternness. "When I introduced you, I'm *sure* I mentioned she was under my protection."

Fred scowled up at her from his seat in the snow. "You can't have all the good ones, Pup!"

"I left you Ron, didn't I?"

Fred pursed his lips. "Ron doesn't squeal like he used to."

Hermione let out a helpless laugh. "Why is everything here so *weird*?"

"It's Hogwarts," the twins chorused. The looks on their faces indicated the statement should be self-evident.

"You get used to it," Rigel offered. After a moment's thought, she frowned. "Actually, you never should. Harry won't forgive me if I send you back weird."

"Harry is even weirder," Hermione muttered.

From her point of view, that may very well be the case, Rigel allowed. She turned back to George, who was now helping Fred brush the powder from his pants. "Why chase Hermione when there are so many more deserving souls in this world?"

George smiled, and it was so innocent she automatically suspected a lie. "We just wanted to invite her to the Burrow this summer."

Rigel allowed that to sink in for a moment before asking, "In what language is pursuit equivalent to an invitation?"

Fred's expression was pitying as he drawled, "If you don't know the answer to that by now, Pup, you may never figure it out."

Before she could retort, George punched his brother lightly in the arm and said, "No! Bad, Forge, corrupting the Puppy."

"Did they not see you face down a dragon?" Hermione's tone was altogether bewildered.

"Fred and George have known me too long to be in awe," Rigel said. She found she was grateful for the thread of truth woven behind the humor as she spoke. "I can say the same, though. They try to

pretend they don't care about anything except fun and chaos, but these two once braced a first year's fractured wrist when he was too scared to go to the Mediwitch."

"Aww, Puppy!" Fred fell into her arms, and subsequently windmilled backwards just as quickly, once Treeslider made himself heard from the confines of her shirt. "Why is your shirt speaking in Parseltongue!?"

She brushed a soothing hand over the front of her jumper, murmuring comforting nothings to her familiar until he stopped threatening to eat the clumsy sack of flesh that had disturbed his slumber.

"Is that the snake from the first task?" George asked, leaning close and peering in the general direction of her torso as though he could see through the layers to the irritable boomslang snake within.

She resisted the urge to shy backwards from his gaze, knowing intellectually that there was nothing but a lumpy jumper to see. "His name is Treeslider," she said. "After the difficulties in the forest, he's been somewhat... resistant to rehabilitation." Not that she minded, really. Rigel felt rather selfish, but part of her wanted to keep the snake. He was a wild creature, not some pet. Still, each time he declined to go back to the forest her heart warmed a little more toward the idea of enjoying his companionship indefinitely.

"He was very brave for you," Hermione said, frowning thoughtfully. "Did you know him before the task, or did you use your gift to find him when you learned the task was in the forest?"

"I met him my first year here," she admitted. "He's been a better friend than I probably deserve."

"Friendship isn't about deserving anything," George said firmly. "It just is."

Rigel smiled, but she knew it was wan. Easy for some to say, she supposed.

"As long as we're on the spirit of friendship," Fred declared, looking between Hermione and Rigel with a deviously innocuous expression. "We really did want to invite you over to the Burrow this summer. Both of you, actually. Bring Harriet too, Rigel. It'll be fun."

She could honestly say she'd never spent a day at the Burrow that wasn't fun. Hectic, farcical, and exhausting, yes, but unmistakably *fun* .

"They keep telling me this mythical 'Burrow' is somehow held together with magic alone," Hermione said, openly dubious. "It isn't possible, though, to build something out of magic like that." Her eyes darted to Rigel's and she added, almost against her better judgment, "Is it?"

Rigel considered her answer carefully. Hermione was, she had noticed, painstakingly correct in all things. "It has to be done slowly, over time, but yes, eventually it is possible for magic to compensate or even take the place of regular materials. It just depends on how much magic is regularly imbued into the foundational wards. Hogwarts is a great example of that, actually."

Hermione looked vaguely disturbed. "Are you saying the castle is only held up by magic at this point?" She didn't seem comforted by the idea.

"No, don't listen to Pup!" Fred exclaimed. "He doesn't live in a centuries-old house stitched together with magic and love."

"But... you do?" Hermione clarified.

"Sure!" George said cheerfully. "And we can tell you *all about it*."

"You can?"

Rigel grimaced as Hermione took the bait like a starving guppy. *It's a trap*, she thought at the poor girl. *Don't do it*.

Alas, Hermione was no Legilimens.

"Boy, can we!" George looped one of his arms through Hermione's, and it was the beginning of the end for the girl. "The Burrow's primary wards date back several centuries. As you probably know, when subsequent wards are added within an existing set, the two works can be fused to become a single ward. This is the principle behind the Burrow's magnificence."

Fred appropriated Hermione's free limb, picking up the narrative seamlessly. "Indeed, Milady, and the more wards you add to the original as the years pass, the stronger the original ward becomes. Anyone trying to take down the Weasley wards now would have to not only break the power of the original Weasley who cast them, but also overcome the magic of every additional ward that's been cast there since!"

"But what if the wards are contradictory in nature...?" Hermione was gone before Rigel could send a prayer to Merlin for her sanity.

She returned to the castle at her own speed; a part of her enjoyed the bracing bite of the winter wind against her face. It felt real, in a way that the surrealism of the tournament and all the drama orbiting in its sphere never did. Sometimes it was hard to remember what she'd entered this absurd competition for. Just as sometimes it was hard to remember how deeply she was entrenched in the ruse. She tried not to think about it, mostly. It would only overwhelm her to consider the true implications of the wide, furrowed web she and Archie had managed to weave.

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Rigel found her plate positively buried beneath packages Friday morning. A heavy parcel from Flourish and Blotts contained several books on rituals that she'd catalogue-ordered after running through most of Hogwarts's unrestricted references on the subject. Lily's use of a ritual to imbue the obsidian necklace had refocused her interest in the subject, and she was certain there was a connection between Dumbledore's story about a witch who transferred her magic to another and the bottle of Riddle's magic slowly accumulating in her mindscape.

She set the books aside and took the letter from the next package curiously. It was from Archie, and he advised her not to open it at the table. She heard the rattle of potions vials as she tucked the small rectangle into her bookbag and smiled. It seemed her cousin had sent the additional samples of blood she'd asked for. Rigel already had enough for one unexpected blood identity test, but after the barrier she'd encountered in the second task, she wanted enough for each of the remaining tasks, too.

The last parcel was soft, and contained both a letter and a number of pages from a Muggle newspaper that were yellowed with age. Rigel couldn't help but smile in anticipation as she perused the politely-worded reply to an inquiry she'd sent to the Little Hangleton public records office. Hermione had helped her find the correct address, and after that it was a simple matter of dropping it into the muggle-mail slot at the Hogsmeade owlery.

*Dear Mr. Riddle,*

*Your research has led you to right place, but I regret to inform you that the search for your estranged family is not yet at an end. The Riddle family did indeed have a prominent branch seated in our town for a number of generations, and in fact owned much of the town itself at one point. In 1943, however, Squire Riddle sold the family holdings to the town council and moved his entire family with very little warning.*

*Unfortunately, Thomas Riddle did not provide any forwarding address. We have heard no news of the family since they left Little Hangleton. In order to facilitate your search, I have included every mention of the Riddle family I could find in our town archives. If you do discover where the subsequent generations of the Riddle family ended up, I hope you'll write again and let me know. It would be a satisfactory conclusion to a mystery that has interested the townsfolk for many years!*

*Best of luck in your endeavor.*

*Sincerely,*

*Agatha Spool*

*Little Hangleton Archives*

Rigel's grin was threatening to spill over her face as she set the letter aside and thumbed through the muggle newspaper clippings. She had no interest in the many articles about Squire Riddle's shady business dealings or Mary Riddle's social proclivities. As she flipped past an article about the acquisition of a large tract of land that had been originally set aside as a primary school, she found it: an edition from 1926 with the brazen headline 'Squire's Son Elopes With Local Tramp!' splashed across the front page. It was exactly the sort of gleefully salacious article one might expect from a small town with no love for its richest constituents.

The text contained more speculation than fact, but one thing appeared to be indisputable: Tom Riddle, handsome son of Squire Thomas Riddle, had absconded suddenly and most perplexingly to London with one Merope Gaunt, daughter of local vagabond Marvolo Gaunt. The picture painted of Merope was not pleasant, and it was clear to Rigel that the townspeople suspected there was much more to the story. Dashing and wealthy young men did not often take up with the backwater, squalor-bred women of the world without the impetus of blackmail, villainy, or both.

*It's indisputable*, she thought. The feeling of triumph that rushed through her was almost giddy. *Tom Riddle is a halfblood*. Given the Riddle family's sudden relocation, she reckoned he'd tried to cover his heritage up by sending the Riddle family somewhere far away, but he couldn't oblivate every townspeople in Little Hangleton.

Her next thought cut through the giddiness with wariness. How in Merlin's name could no one else know? It had taken her less than a month of serious searching to put the pieces together. Was it really possible that no one else had ever wondered? *Maybe he's silencing them*, a grim voice offered. *Or disappearing them, like he did his whole Muggle family.*

With that ominous possibility ringing in her mind, she rolled up the newspapers and tucked them into her bag with the letter. As she straightened, she met Pansy's eyes, and the blonde girl leaned in from her seat beside her to ask, "What have you done, Rigel?"

The girl had probably caught the name Riddle on every newspaper article as Rigel flipped through them. Still, Rigel tilted her head carefully and asked, "Are you certain you want to know?"

Pansy stared hard at her for a long moment, but in the end, she shook her head and turned her worried eyes back to her own breakfast. "Be careful," was all she said.

Rigel smiled reassuringly, but inside she was torn. On the one hand, Riddle was a dangerous man, and he probably wouldn't hesitate to retaliate if he knew what she was up to. On the other hand, she thought too many people had been careful around him for too long. If those around him had been a little less careful and a little more suspicious, he might never have built the powerful mystique that let him waltz through the world without any regard for it.

There was, she supposed, at least one person she could speak to freely about it. All that morning in her Healing class she was semi-attentive at best, and she barely managed to choke down a few bites of food at lunch in her excitement. It was only after impatiently giving



the gargoyle the password and hurrying up the spiraling stairs that she realized Dumbledore was still down in the Great Hall and she would have to wait for him to finish his meal before she could share her grand theory.

The wind in her sails sufficiently snuffed, Rigel sank into one of the soft, oversized chairs that littered the Headmaster's office and took out one of her new books to pass the time. It was titled *Rituals of Transference* and the table of contents told her it was broken into sections pertaining to familial and non-familial magical transfer.

She settled in to read, on the lookout for any use of transference magic that sounded potentially malicious. The subject matter turned out to be too interesting to skim, however, and she found herself nose-deep in a chapter about Bloodline transference when Fawkes trilled out a welcome. Rigel glanced up to see Dumbledore twinkling genially down at her.

"Are my clocks running slow today?" he asked curiously.

She flushed. "No, sir. I'm running early. There was something I wanted to ask you about before we began today's Alchemy lesson."

"Ah. In that case, why don't we address your question in comfort before adjourning to the workroom?" He rearranged a chair so that it was facing hers with a whimsical flick of his fingers and called for tea and biscuits. The soft, gooey sweets wafted chocolate fumes her direction and Rigel, who hadn't eaten as much as she should have at lunch, accepted one with chagrined gratitude. "Now, to this lunch-averting matter," the Headmaster said with a wink. "What can I help you with today, Mr. Black?"

Rigel opened her mouth, and suddenly realized she had no idea where to start or how to explain her recent obsession with Riddle's genealogy. After a moment's hesitation, she pulled the bundle of newspaper clippings from her bag and selected the relevant one for Dumbledore's perusal. "I've been looking into Riddle's background," she said, grimacing. "I know it's a bit gauche, but I'm so tired of my

friends calling him 'Lord Riddle' and acting as though he's the next coming of Salazar Slytherin."

Dumbledore's eyebrows rose as he rapidly scanned the paper's contents, but when he leveled his piercingly blue gaze at her, he showed no real surprise. "So you have discovered Tom's somewhat ignoble roots. I'm certain you're aware that he would prefer this knowledge never see the light of modern day."

"You knew?" Rigel frowned. "Sir, forgive me, but I don't understand why no one else does. This undermines everything he's been trying to do for the last fifty years. If it was leaked, it could change everything." As Dumbledore continued to look impassively grave, she added, "Couldn't it?"

Dumbledore sighed. "I am aware of Tom's heritage, in part because I was the professor sent to introduce him to the Wizarding World. While at Wool's Orphanage, I spoke with the proprietress about the circumstances of young Tom's arrival there. His mother only lived long enough to name him for his father and grandfather, but this information was sufficient to trace his origins the very same way you have now done."

"Why isn't it commonly known?" Rigel asked, still confused. "I mean, wouldn't people have asked while he was in school?"

"Tom himself was unaware of his lineage until very late in his school years, I believe," Dumbledore said slowly. "He was thought to be a muggleborn, at first, but when rumors of his Parseltongue ability began to circulate the school, that belief changed. After all, who ever heard of a Parselmouth who wasn't a pureblood?" The question, eerily reminiscent of something Draco had said, sent a thrum of unease through Rigel. Sometimes, it seemed Dumbledore's gaze was too perceptive. If she didn't have faith in Dom's ability to warn her of even the subtlest attempt at Legilimency, she might worry for her secrets.

Rigel considered the old man's words, but had to ask, "If you knew, why haven't you said anything? This could drastically affect his support base."

Dumbledore regarded her almost pityingly. "Tom will only deny it. All evidence aside, he will claim the Riddle name comes from the mystery of his origins, and that the muggles you traced until their disappearance were a mere coincidence."

"But if the speculation is made, he'd have to give some explanation, wouldn't he?" she asked. Even though part of her balked at essentially treating the halfblood label as an accusation, she knew that his supporters would see it that way. Why not use it, then? "His mother is certainly Merope Gaunt. The Parseltongue gift, as well as the orphanage's records, would be proof of that. He'd have to give some account of his father. Who else could he claim?"

"I believe he would probably name Morfin Gaunt, if pressed." The Headmaster said quietly.

Rigel gaped at him. "His uncle?"

"Incest is more palatable than the truth, to those who would care in the first place," Dumbledore reminded her gently.

She grimaced in distaste. "But even still, Morfin was in prison for three years." She shook her head. "It just isn't possible. Riddle's birth date is listed as a year and a half after his uncle's imprisonment. Unless you're suggesting Merope went to Azkaban for conjugal visits with her brother..." She attempted to say it sarcastically, but as the words came out of her mouth she realized with horror that it was *exactly* what some might suggest.

"There are those for whom even that explanation would be preferable." Dumbledore didn't seem disgusted or disappointed by that fact, merely resigned.

Rigel let out a huff of revulsion. "That's just... ugh. What is *wrong* with the world?" No matter which way she looked at it, Dumbledore was absolutely right. If she came forward with the information, not only would she paint a giant target on her back, but Riddle wouldn't even flinch. He'd probably play the embarrassed pureblood card and cagily admit that his parents had been siblings in unsanctioned lust. Better than that allow the whisper of a possibility that he, Lord Riddle, head of the S.O.W. Party and preeminent bigot in all of Britain, could be a halfblood.

All her research, for nothing. She bit through the biscuit in her hand with an annoyed growl. After chewing it over both literally and figuratively for a moment, she said, "I don't suppose we could force him to do a blood test." She didn't need Dumbledore's regretful look to tell her it was impossible. Riddle was simply too powerful to make him do anything he didn't want to do. Back to square one, then. Unless... she shot the Headmaster a considering look. "Maybe we could trick him, somehow. Is there any magic that only a pureblood can perform?"

Dumbledore frowned thoughtfully. "Apart from very specific inheritance magic, I'm not aware of anything. That is, of course, what makes the distinction largely superfluous in the first place."

Rigel flushed. "Yes, sir." Really, what had she been expecting? If there was an easy way to undermine Riddle, no doubt the Headmaster would have done it long ago. She glanced down at the book in her lap thoughtfully. "When you say inheritance magic, do you mean familial rituals? I'm reading about them now. There are a few that sound incredibly powerful, but it strikes me that I don't know any purebloods who would actually want to use one."

"How you do mean?" the Headmaster asked, a mild frown on his face.

"Well, a lot of the inheritance type rituals in this book seem to require significant sacrifice on one side. For instance, this line circumvention ritual-" She turned to the page and tilted the book so that

Dumbledore could see the description. "-was designed around the transfer of familial gifts to an unrelated, lesser-blooded witch or wizard. The idea was that the last heir to a family could pass his or her gifts to a halfblood or muggleborn. This way, rather than allow the magic of an old line to go extinct or fade into obscurity as it blends into other strong pureblooded lines, the magic lives on even when the family dies out."

"I can't say I've ever heard of such a ritual being performed," Dumbledore said, his slow, elderly voice contrasting sharply with the speed at which his eyes roamed over the page.

Rigel nodded. "Exactly. Because what pureblood in existence would be both utterly selfless and utterly unprejudiced to the extent that they would sacrifice their own gift in order that another, less pure wizard might wield it instead?"

"All who come immediately to mind are also those for whom the passing on of family magic would not be a strong priority." As he said it, she wondered if he was thinking about Sirius. Even if her uncle had a family gift to pass on, he would never consider that it might be his duty to do so.

Really, there was something tragically ironic about it all. Purebloods liked to think of themselves as so very unique, but the type of magic that was truly exclusive to them was also that which would require them to give up that part of themselves in order to make use of it. She shook her head ruefully as she put the book away. "I suppose you've listened to me rail against the system enough for one day, Professor. Shall we, as you put it, adjourn to the workroom?"

"The system might be better-tempered if it had more occasion to resist a good railing," Dumbledore said with a chuckle.

"Nevertheless, your father is paying good tuition for me to educate you, rather than the other way around."

"A wise man once said, 'education is a journey, not a destination, and as such may not be rushed,'" Rigel said, standing along with the

aged professor.

"Which wise man was that?"

"Uncle Remus," she admitted, grinning briefly. "It was a shame he couldn't keep teaching here. Something should really be done about that curse."

Dumbledore inclined his head regretfully. "The only two cursebreakers to try their wands at lifting it were both irreversibly altered by the attempt. Since then, I have ceased commissioning the work, though I admit it is especially difficult to bear when it means bidding farewell to so dedicated an educator as Mr. Lupin." They crossed to the bookcase where Dumbledore pulled the secret lever to reveal his workspace. It never ceased to amuse Rigel that a wizard who was taken so seriously by so many had an irrepressibly whimsical streak. "Tell me, has your uncle found alternative work to satisfy him?"

She nodded slowly, recalling the last couple of letters from Remus. "I think so. He's begun tutoring a group of orphan kids who live in London. Not as structured an environment as Hogwarts, of course, but I think he enjoys the challenge and the chance to pass on what he knows to those who didn't receive the same opportunities he did."

Dumbledore smiled, but there was something incredibly sad about it. "Many are the risks that turned to regret over the years, and few the gambles brought to vindication. When I balance the scales of my life, however, I do believe the decision to admit Remus Lupin to Hogwarts will be one of the heaviest achievements in the basket of absolute good."

His words brought a lump to Rigel's throat, and she was abruptly reminded of her purpose in coming to Hogwarts in the first place. It hadn't been to challenge the system or prove herself to anyone. She had only come to learn, and sometime this year she had begun to lose sight of that ambition, a guiding star lost in a meteor shower. In the midst of everything raining down around her, she had to wonder

if she would ever get back to that girl. And when all of it came to an end, in which basket would her decision to become Rigel Black fall?

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Rigel walked into lab three the next morning ready to demand that Snape honor his bargain to teach her freebrewing in exchange for her making it through the second task and mastering projected magical awareness. She wore the unshakable determination like a cloak; this time, no matter how dangerous he claimed the next task would be, she would not be put off with more ancillary lessons. This time, they would brew. Snape was already within, and as he turned to greet her, she cut him off sternly.

"We are freebrewing today or I will transfer to Durmstrang and take up an apprenticeship with Master Montmorency," she declared.

The dark-haired man drew his spine in, increasing his already imposing height, and raised an unimpressed eyebrow at her. "Master Montmorency will never take an apprentice who can't even use his own eyes before speaking."

Rigel blinked. She leaned around her Head of House to see a cauldron sitting innocently at its brewing station and an array of ingredients laid out on the large countertop. "Oh." She felt the blood move into her cheeks and her chin drop an inch as her indignation lost its direction abruptly. "Good," she managed.

Snape watched with open amusement as she pulled on her protective apron, gloves, and glasses. Rigel couldn't begrudge him his humor at her expense, not when the warm glow of anticipation was climbing its way out from the deepest corners of her heart. She took up the brewer's position beside the workstation and gave the Potions Master her undivided attention.

"How do we begin?"

"There are differing philosophies when it comes to freebrewing," he told her. "The discipline is by its very nature non-standard. Some begin with a known recipe and attempt to alter it." He paused, as though gauging her reaction to the idea. Rigel pursed her lips. That didn't sound like true freebrewing. Snape's mouth curled into the semblance of a smile and approval slipped into his voice. "It is my opinion that such an approach only limits the imagination and stifles the entire process. It may be safer, but reward is always proportional to risk."

Rigel quite agreed. She didn't want to incrementally alter existing recipes until she reached an arbitrary threshold of different-enough. The point of freebrewing was to create something entirely new. "How did you learn?" she asked.

"Trial and error," Snape said. He grimaced in remembrance. "It was a frustrating and dangerous path-one I would not lead another down." Rigel frowned. The more she gleaned about his apprenticeship with Master Liu, the more she thought that not all brilliance lent itself to instruction. She was exceedingly fortunate that Professor Snape had both knowledge and the patience to impart it. Her Head of House gestured to the ingredients before her. "Instead, I have devised an introduction to this art that is both open-ended enough to foster free-thinking and limited enough to focus your efforts. What do most of these ingredients have in common?"

Rigel surveyed the counter slowly. Whether powdered, dried, or fresh, there were very few ingredients she couldn't recognize on sight. "All of them have effects on the mind," she said after a moment.

Snape inclined his head sharply. "You must come to freebrewing without a preconceived idea of how your potion will be constructed. Equally true, you must never put things into the cauldron without a purpose. The key, then, is to begin with a strict idea of *what* you want the potion to accomplish, and work backwards to the *how*."



She nodded slowly. It made a kind of sense, but she suspected she'd understand what he meant better when she actually did it.

"For now, I will set you goals and provide a semi-limited array of ingredients you may use," Snape said. He folded his arms across his chest and fixed her with a challenging look. "Your first potion must lessen a person's grief without also suppressing positive emotions."

Rigel's head tilted to one side as she thought. *Interesting. Not just a blanket emotional suppressant, then.* She waited to see if he would give her any other instructions, but her professor merely stared at her expectantly. With a slow grin, she snapped her magical awareness about her like a permeable shield and reached for the oils. Her hand hesitated for a moment over peppermint, but with a shake of her head she took the lavender oil instead and coated the cauldron.

As she set the fire to a mild temperature, Rigel ran through the various subtasks inherent in Snape's challenge. The brain was a complex series of balances, and she thanked her Healing training for giving her the vocabulary to express what she wanted to accomplish at the most basic level. More than anything, bad feelings flourished in the absence of good feelings. Foremost, then, she needed ingredients to increase norepinephrine for positive drive, serotonin for happiness, and dopamine for pleasure. Then something to cloud the sharp memories.

When the bottom oil was warm, she filled the cauldron halfway with plain water and turned up the heat until it simmered. Moving back to the counter, Rigel collected the petals and stigmas of a *Crocus sativus* plant first. The longer they steeped, the stronger the antidepressant effect would be. Next came root of *Curcuma*, sliced thin into rounds so unsettlingly orange she thought it must have been grown in a magical greenhouse. Chia seeds, ginseng, and powdered cocoa followed. She tipped a vial of raw honey into the pot and watched as it grew thin and dispersed as Rigel coaxed the fire higher.

Her sensitivity whispered along the edges of her concentration as she stirred clockwise, not counting so much as watching, waiting. Rigel resisted the urge to consciously imbue, reminding herself that as long as she was projecting her magical awareness, she probably didn't need to. She eyed the St. John's Wort, but in the end thought better of it; the powerful antidepressant was also unpredictably reactive. Without knowing exactly what it would do to the serotonin levels, it wasn't worth the risk. When the powder of the cocoa had completely dissolved, she removed the stirring rod and reached for two shining strands of hair. The first was Veela, and the second from the tail of a unicorn. She twisted the two hairs together and wound them around the stirring utensil before submersing it in the hot liquid. Rigel held it there, watching silver bleed slowly into the mixture, and when she felt the magic stop seeping into the potion, she removed the hairs, now blanched, and set them aside.

After a scoop of crushed Fae fruit to dull recollections, she sealed the bulk of the mixture with a layer of sunflower oil and sprinkled a handful of dried pixie wings across the top. Rigel thought the oil might allow the calmative magic of the pixie to seep into the potion without risking a reaction with the fairy fruit.

She was wrong. Her potion tried to explode- *tried*, because, just as the reaction began, Rigel flooded the cauldron with magic. The reaction froze before it could go any further, stalling into a kind of half-putrefied state, and Rigel thanked Snape's stubborn insistence on her perfecting her magical awareness that she got to keep her eyebrows.

Rigel let out a slow breath and stepped back from the cauldron with a sigh. She glanced over at her professor and surprised a look of utter astonishment on his normally impassive face. "What is it?" she asked, a frown sliding onto her face. "Was I supposed to wait for it to explode?"

He shook his head slowly and pulled a vial of thick, black sludge from his belt. She recognized the inertifying mixture as he poured it over her ruined cauldron and grimaced in rueful realization that he'd

never expected her to create a viable potion on the first try. "Well done," Snape said, fixing her with a stare that was once again unfathomable. "Now, tell me what you did wrong."

"The sunflower oil wasn't strong enough to keep the fairy and pixie magic from reacting negatively," Rigel said at once. After a moment's thought, she added, "Maybe an entire layer of honey would have served better."

The Potions Master made a noise of agreement. "Why did you add the pixie wings at all? The potion as it stood prior to the addition of sunflower oil would in all likelihood have at least approached the goal."

Rigel shrugged. "I wanted something that would suppress the amygdala. That's where anger and fear reside, and I think those can be a part of grief, too."

"Interesting hypothesis," Snape said. "You'll write half a roll on that theory for next week." She nodded, and tested the heat of the cauldron with her hand beside it. Deeming it safe to touch, she carried it to the sink.

"That was fun," she said, looking over her shoulder. Rigel had expected freebrewing to be exhilarating, and perhaps intellectually satisfying, but she hadn't anticipated the sheer, untainted pleasure that came with creating something completely from scratch, with no recipe or rules to tell her what she should or shouldn't do within the cauldron. "Is it always fun?"

"When it isn't terrifying," Snape said drolly.

She laughed. It was impossible to imagine the serious professor being afraid of anything, so she supposed he only meant to tease her about the near-disaster that was her first attempt at the art. Never mind failure, she thought. She would try again. Now that she knew what it felt like, bringing a brew to life with nothing but the impulses of her own mind, Rigel didn't know how she could go back

to relying solely on recipes. It would be like asking a bird to walk, after it had already learned to fly.

*Well*, she thought wryly, *not fly, exactly. Glide, maybe.*

Rigel helped her professor consolidate the ingredients into crates to take back over to lab one, and she thought nothing could ruin her good mood. Then Snape said, "Has Lord Riddle discussed his intention to prepare you for the third task himself?"

She growled audibly before she could stop herself. "I've no intention of humoring his attempts at mentorship. In case he doesn't get the picture, tell him kindly that I *have* a mentor-one who didn't shove his magic under my skin like some kind of human mosquito."

Snape winced minutely, perhaps in response to her analogy, but more probably at the reminder of what Riddle had done to her with the help of his own machinations the year before. "Have you... made progress in isolating the injection?"

Rigel scowled at him from under her lashes, not sure how much she really ought to tell him. He was as beholden to Riddle as ever, after all. "I've been looking into it. Given enough time, I think I can separate it from my own magic, but I still don't know what it was intended to *do* . Do you know?" she added, daring him with her level gaze to lie to her.

His expression was grave. "I have only suspicions. Lord Riddle never forgot that day you eavesdropped on our conversation in the Malfoy gardens. He does not have the subtlety required of the mental arts to recognize mental shields at a distance, as I do. It is my suspicion, therefore, that at least part of his intention was to mark you in a way that only he would recognize."

"It's not supposed to work like that," she said, frowning. "I've been reading about ritual transfer of magic, and the party who relinquishes a piece of his magic always loses touch with it as a consequence."

"There was no ritual that day," he reminded her. "No runes, no sacrifice. When you imbue magic into a potion, do you lose the ability to sense it?"

Her eyes widened. "No," she whispered. Then she shook her head. "But I can only sense the resonance when he touches me."

"It isn't *your* magic," Snape said. "What you perceive may not be a reflection of its limitations."

Her hands shook on a container of saffron and she stilled them with a desperate will. It was a terrifying thought, that she'd been wrong about how the magic he'd mixed with hers might be utilized. A fool she was to think Riddle would forget that her lack of aura allowed her to successfully eavesdrop on his private conversations more than once. She'd been so sure that he couldn't possibly track her with the bit of his magic swimming in her veins... but maybe it was all just wishful thinking.

Her Head of House caught her eye and said, with the air of someone stating the obvious, "If you refrain from attempting to hide from his immediate perception, it may not cause you additional difficulties."

It probably seemed simple to him. Snape had no idea as to her real concern. She'd thought avoiding any physical contact with Riddle would be tricky. This was much worse. How was she ever to be Harry Potter again, if Riddle could identify her as Rigel Black just by being in the same room? How was Archie to ever pretend to be Rigel in his presence? They *couldn't* until Riddle's magic was isolated and purged. A nuance in Snape's phrasing caught up to her and she looked sharply at his carefully blank expression. "What do you mean 'may not'? You think there is something else it could do?"

"If I am not wildly mistaken, Lord Riddle's primary motive in offering his tutelage in the first place was to convince you to use your magic in ways he deems beneficial," Snape said. His voice was so even as to be almost inflectionless, but she caught the hint of disapproval in

the way he said 'tutelage.' He didn't think much of Riddle's teaching abilities either, then.

Rigel nodded easily. It had been obvious that Riddle wanted her to make the most of her powerful magic. "He wanted me to stop suppressing it."

"And he got what he wanted," Snape reminded her.

"That was due to circumstances beyond anyone's control," Rigel said quickly.

"Don't underestimate his hand in seemingly unrelated events." Snape looked down at her with a frown. "Did your magic not become more aggressive, harder to suppress, and more prone to defying your express will in the immediate aftermath of Lord Riddle's visitation?" Rigel blanched at the implication. Could that really have been his aim? To force her to deal with her magic by making it even more unruly than it had been? She began to shake her head slowly, wanting to deny Riddle any hand in what had occurred in the forbidden forest the previous spring. At her pained disbelief, her Head of House made an impatient noise. "Think, boy. The most obvious piece of evidence is one simple fact: Lord Riddle wanted you to confront your magic, and you did."

A dark scowl crept over her face. "Sure I did. Only after it killed Pettigrew, though." A hollow laugh escaped her. "If Riddle did have a hand in it, I guess the joke's on him."

Snape's hand came down on her shoulder and she snapped her eyes up to meet his storm-filled gaze. "You said the Dominion Jewel killed Pettigrew."

Rigel dropped her gaze first. "Both are true. The Jewel mummified him, but I suspect my magic was well on its way to crushing him by the time that happened." The words came out utterly detached, and all she felt was a distant resignation, a pity for circumstances that were no longer hers to alter.

Her Head of House growled. "Even if that's true, your magic was beyond your control at that moment."

"Maybe it was, or maybe it was acting on some subconscious desire I was afraid to acknowledge." She swallowed the bile that tried to rise at that admission. Steeling her stomach, she went on. "Even if I try to lay that at Riddle's feet-even if I believe his magic inflamed the wild, indomitable aspects of my magic to the extent that it acted more aggressively than it otherwise would have-that still leaves me with a handful of Riddle's magic and no idea what to do with it." She shuddered. "I *hate* that there's a piece of him in me. It makes my skin crawl."

"I understand," Snape said slowly. "However, I do not believe that some miniscule amount of him could make you any more or less than you already were. Any claim you perceive his magic has placed on you is symbolic. He cannot own you unless you let him."

Rigel's smile was brittle. "He owns me this year." She looked up at her professor with a determined expression. "It'll be worth it, though, if it crushes his awful legislation. If I win, things will be better for non-purebloods in Britain." She had to believe that.

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Rigel found fire in her heart as she prepared to face the final preliminary task. Dueling was an arena she felt fairly comfortable in, but she knew that very sense of security might be her downfall.

Too many people knew Harry Potter's style of dueling. Even without Remus attending the third task, the chance that those who knew her in the alleys might catch the mirrored dissemination of the event was high. Rigel could not use any of Harry's tricks to succeed in the upcoming duels. Her only recourse was to prioritize speed above

finesse, and hope to outclass her opponents in sheer efficiency alone.

The Room of Requirement obliged her needs, providing half a dozen panes of spell-reflecting glass that would throw anything she cast at them back in her face. Rigel trained with all of them, sometimes concentrating a flurry of spells on a single, shimmering pane, other times changing her target between every spell to test her footwork.

There were limits to the training. She could only practice countering spells she herself knew how to cast, so it would do nothing for the sort of tailored defense Dawlish was attempting to drill into their heads. Still, it was better than casting at a dummy that couldn't hit back.

By her third such session in the Come and Go Room, Rigel had ceased attempting to block any of the spells she cast. Instead, she moved the reflecting glass closer and closer, forcing her mind and muscles to react faster in order to avoid getting hit. There was something also dance-like about the exercise, and as her mind became clearer and her body lunged and twisted with increasing fluidity, she thought she finally understood what Remus had been trying to push her instincts toward all this time.

Such was the trance-like state her exercise inspired, Rigel didn't hear the door to the Room opening behind her. She didn't notice the footsteps that approached the circle of mirrors in which she spun, and she didn't realize she was no longer alone until Draco's voice called out, "What on earth are you doing, Rigel?"

She whirled to face him, and the spell she'd already cast sucker-punched her in the shoulder. Rigel hissed at the sharp Stinging Hex and rubbed her hand over the flesh with a huff of annoyance.

"Draco," she said after the pain faded. "What are you doing here?"

"There's DA today," he said, stepping between a gap in the suspended panes of glass and examining them curiously. "I came early to set up. Do these reflect anything you shoot at them?"



"As long as it isn't more powerful than the magic that went into creating them," Rigel said absently. She felt an incomprehensible desire to wipe the sweat from her neck and brush back her hair, but she ignored it. The last thing she would ever do was primp for Draco Malfoy. A part of her wanted to collect her bag and just leave the room, but she was braver than that.

Draco turned away from the glass and silence stretched between them. Rigel didn't know what to say, and her friend's expression seemed suspended in some sort of cross between reluctance and regret. When she couldn't stand it anymore, she said, "This is ridiculous."

At the very same moment, Draco blurted, "I didn't mean to."

She stared at him. Blinked. Finally cleared her throat and asked, "Didn't mean to what?" She was pretty sure he had meant to kiss her. Unless someone had Imperiused him. That would be a pretty pathetic use for an Unforgivable Curse, though.

Draco blew out a frustrated breath. "I didn't mean to make it weird between us. This is why I never... before."

Her eyebrows rose against her will. He made it seem as though it hadn't been a spur-of-the-moment impulse. "Has this been malingering?" she asked, almost afraid to know the answer.

He laughed, a short, hoarse sound that cut off as abruptly as it had begun. "It's not an illness," he said, shaking his head. "Rigel, I've been interested for a while, all right? That night... I'd been thinking about you all day, since you reacted so strongly to my teasing." She winced, having already guessed that something about her embarrassment had triggered some underlying curiosity on his part. Draco wasn't finished yet, though, "I was half asleep, and getting all this feedback from my empathy, and I let myself get carried away. I'm sorry, okay? I wish I hadn't done it, with how it's changed everything."

Rigel sighed. Draco was dramatic, but she couldn't deny that things had changed, somehow. The kiss was like a wrong number in an Alchemical equation. A small mistake that had cascading effects. His expression beseeched her for forgiveness, and Rigel couldn't refuse her friend such a small thing. "I'm not upset, you know. I don't like you taking my emotions for permission, but I understand how you might feel... misled by your ability. That said, do you understand why I don't think this will work despite any feelings that may or may not exist? My life is complicated enough. Time is something I don't have to devote to a relationship. And there are other things," she added before he could speak. "You know about my... illness. Even if I returned your feelings, we would- *could* never progress beyond what it was that night."

Draco's face clouded. "I don't need-"

"Don't be an idiot," she said gently. At his scowl, she reached out to take his hand and pressed it between her own. "I know it's hard to redirect emotions when they've already gained momentum. I'm asking you to, though. For both our sakes, Draco." She took a deep breath and smiled wryly at him, even though it felt like a she'd swallowed a jar of snakes. "We would never work together. My goals preclude it. Really, though, that's a *good* thing. You're going to end up with someone a lot less crazy than me. Someone communicative and honest. Someone whose priority is *you*, Draco."

Her friend was visibly pained, but he swallowed the hurt and lifted his chin with a staidness that would probably do his father proud, had the man been present to see it. "You are crazy," he said bluntly. "And incredibly uncommunicative, most days. I don't pretend to understand all of your priorities, Rigel. Here's what I do know, though: I've never met anyone with your intelligence, courage, patience, or tenacity. If you think you don't shine brighter than everything and everyone around you, then you don't see yourself clearly at all. After knowing you, everyone else seems smaller, with petty problems and bland personalities." Rigel opened her mouth to protest, but Draco held up his free hand. "I'm not trying to argue with

you. I can feel your determination from here, and I know better than to try to change your mind when it's made up. I just want you to understand why it might take me a little while to do what you want." He slipped his other hand from her grasp and shook his head ruefully. "No matter what you say, I don't think there's anyone in the world like you."

Rigel blinked the moisture back from her eyes and whispered, mouth twisting, "I promise you wouldn't want to fall in love with someone like me."

He grimaced, but didn't contradict her. "Are we still friends, then? I've missed you, lately."

She summoned a small smile. "I'll be your friend as long as I can, Dray. Even that much you might regret in the end. Just don't ask me for more. This time, I really mean no."

Draco peered at her, a frown tugging at his brow. "Why do you feel so foreboding? Don't scowl at me," he added, "You know it's a strain to turn off if you aren't Occluding."

Rigel rolled her eyes, but silently admitted that he was right. If she really didn't want him to read her emotions, she had the ability to prevent it. "It's nothing," she said after a moment, smoothing her feelings away to a place he couldn't see them. "Just an ominous feeling I have sometimes."

Perhaps he would have pressed her, if Pansy hadn't walked in at that moment. As it was, they exchanged bracing smiles and left the circle of mirrors to greet her. As her friends discussed the plan for that evening's DA meeting, Rigel thought at least some of the awkwardness between them had dissolved. Her heart felt lighter, and where there had been a ball of guilt and confusion in her gut there was now only a vague sense of soreness, like an infected boil that had finally been drained.

That feeling, too, would fade, she thought, and soon it would be as though nothing had ever come between them. Whatever the poets said of the power of romantic affection, true friendship was something far beyond it.

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Thursday Rigel skipped lunch in favor of going to the library. She'd finally cracked open the Auror's Handbook that Dawlish had given her and found a long list of recommended spells, many of which she hadn't heard of. At the end of the section on spell choice was a footnote recommending *Deter, Delay, Deny: Nonlethal Spells for Every Enemy*, by Armando Dippet, and Rigel was curious to see whether Hogwarts stocked the book.

She found several copies in the Defense section, none of which looked terribly well-worn. She supposed when it was shelved next to *Most Riveting Revenge Spells* and *1000 Hexes and Jinxes*, most people overlooked the more pacifist option. Rigel smiled as she tucked one of the copies under her arm, however. The less destructive magic she knew, the better, at least until the Vow no longer held her wand to the fire. She had no illusions about how the next task would be framed. There would be no third option this time, no wooly interpretation of winning that might give her leeway under the Vow. She could only win a duel or lose it, and losing would not be an option.

On her way to Madam Pince's desk, she spotted Hermione's exuberant hair peeking over a table full of books. Rigel changed direction and peered curiously over the tall stacks. The girl was hunched over a scrap of paper and appeared to be doing furious long-hand calculations, muttering under her breath as number after number appeared in the wake of her quill.

"What kind of arithmancy is that?" she asked, wincing as Hermione, startled by the unexpected question, slashed ink across her paper. "Sorry."

Hermione blew out a breath and scattered sand over the streak of ink quickly. "Hi, Rigel. That's all right. I'm just double-checking my calculations at this point. It's not Arithmancy; it's about the Fade."

Rigel raised her eyebrows. "You have enough data to begin drawing conclusions?" She'd tried to convince as many of her schoolmates as she could to speak to Hermione, but she hadn't honestly held out much hope that they would.

The brown-eyed girl nodded, gesturing for Rigel to sit beside her. Hermione pulled a sheet of paper from between two books in the stack before her and said, "This is everything totaled. I interviewed fifty-two students and cross-checked everything they said against at least one other person to verify they'd remembered correctly."

"Fifty-two?" Rigel was stunned. She hadn't known there were even fifty-two students in the whole school whose families had been affected by the Fade.

Hermione smiled, and there was a hardness to it. "I realized quickly that people who'd directly witnessed the Fade weren't keen to speak about it. Your friend Selwyn did answer my letter, as did your father. Miss Bulstrode approached me on her own, and Mr. MacMillan, but everyone else I asked directly declined to talk about it. So I started asking students who didn't have anyone in their immediate family succumb to the illness. I suppose one thing in favor of the rampant bigotry in this society is that every pureblood knows a great many of the others."

Rigel whistled. "So you asked people whether they knew of any families who had been affected, and if so to what extent. That's brilliant." Even about a topic as sensitive as the Fade, people rarely minded talking about other people's problems. It troubled her that

she hadn't known Millicent's family lost a child to the Fade, but she supposed it wouldn't have come up in any casual conversation.

"The Weasleys gave me the idea," Hermione admitted. "They freely listed everyone they knew about, so that I'd know who to approach, and that made me realize that in a society this insular, everyone would know of someone, most often more than one. By having everyone list all the cases they'd heard about, and only using those confirmed by at least one other in my data, I've done a rudimentary statistical analysis of the phenomenon." She ran her finger down each column on the sheet of parchment. "No one reported any cases of the disease in a child who had at least one muggle or muggleborn parent. Seventy percent of reported cases are from pureblood couples whose families have married only other purebloods for four generations or more. Of the remaining thirty percent, about half were cases where one of the parents' family had only been 'pure' for three or fewer generations, and the other half were couples in which one of the parents was a halfblood. In both of the later cases, the other parent always came from a family with four or more generations of pureblood breeding."

She looked expectantly at Rigel, whose eyes were very wide. She swallowed, then said carefully, "You appear to have narrowed it down to a single constant. In every reported case, at least one parent came from a family that was four-or-more generations pure."

"That's what the numbers say," Hermione confirmed. "I've been combing the most recent Book of Gold, and I've come up with a list of every family in Great Britain whose pedigree meets that criterion." She reached into her bag and pulled out a roll of parchment. "This is all of them. Every family with a high risk of contracting the Fade."

"How high is the risk?" Rigel asked, almost afraid to look at the list. She was certain she'd see the names of most, if not all, of her housemates on it.

"That's where the numbers get tricky," Hermione admitted. "The number of first-borns to succumb to the disease is very small. In

those instances, both of the parents in question came from an extremely long line of purebloods. For the vast majority of cases, it strikes the second child born to the same parents. In instances where the couple separated or the second born was the result of an affair, cases of the Fade were much less likely, particularly if the child was born of a different witch."

"That supports the theory that the mother's magic may have more to do with the Fade than the father's," Rigel said.

Hermione glared at her. "What theory is that?"

"Until now, I thought it was something wizards said to make themselves feel better. Like how they used to think the female determined the sex of the child, too." Rigel shrugged apologetically. "The first instinct is always to blame the woman."

Hermione huffed in amused agreement. "This time, they may have a point. It also gets more complicated if a couple continues to attempt to birth more children. There are a few cases, such as your father and uncle, where a couple had one healthy child, several Fade-stricken children or miscarriages, and then another healthy child. Lord Black indicated he suspected his mother of performing some sort of black ritual to ensure his younger brother's survival. There's no way to verify that, of course." She tapped her quill on the table restlessly.

"And it would have to be a very black ritual for other families to not even consider it as an alternative to losing a child," Rigel pointed out. "Perhaps it was something known only to my grandmother. I'll look through the Black Family library over the winter break."

There was a brief, but acute look of envy on Hermione's face at the mention of a family library. It passed after a moment, but Rigel wondered if Hermione ever wished she'd been born into an old magic family, if only for the sort of knowledge it afforded one. "I'll be doing a little more research of my own over the break, as well,"

Hermione said. "Healer Hurst has promised to let me look through the clinic's records and add the data to my study."

"The Lower Alley citizens don't keep long records of their families the way people here do," Rigel cautioned her.

Hermione nodded. "Still, more data doesn't hurt. Especially more information on the exact medical progression of the disease. All this information helps us understand where the Fade is likely to present, but it doesn't get us closer to curing it."

"Doesn't it?" Rigel blinked. "It seems to me that the Weasleys are the wisest of us all. If every family on this list made a concentrated effort to marry a muggleborn or halfblood this generation, the disease would be effectively eradicated for at least another four generations."

"I don't know if I'd go so far as to conclude that," Hermione said carefully. "Weren't you the one who said that most purebloods would only accept a cure that didn't force them to compromise their beliefs?"

Rigel grimaced, but had to admit she was right. "It's just maddening to know that, with a simple choice, no more children would have to die."

"It seems simple to us because it doesn't violate any beliefs we hold dear," Hermione said. "There are some muggles who have a religious objection to vaccines, for instance." At Rigel's frown, she explained. "Vaccines are a way of immunizing people against diseases before they catch them. Some are created with animal cells or even human cells, and there are groups of people who object to having them administered. It presents a social health risk, and it's always a tragedy when a child falls ill or dies from a preventable disease, but when someone believes something so strongly, almost nothing can change their mind." Hermione's eyes were alight, and in that moment she looked like a crusader of old, only her cross was something like the individual freedoms of all.



"So if we can't convince them to change their ways, the only thing to do is to cure it," Rigel concluded. She smiled ruefully. "No big deal, then."

Hermione laughed. She opened her mouth to say something, but they were interrupted by a gruff voice from behind them.

"Hermy-oin."

It was Krum, looming over them with an uncharacteristically uncertain expression on his face. He nodded briefly to Rigel, but his attention was drawn back to Hermione inexorably, and Rigel recognized the look in his eye with a jolt of surprise.

"Hello, Victor," Hermione said, her hands fluttering nervously before she clamped them firmly together before her stomach. "How are you today?"

"Very vell," the older boy said softly. "I wanted to ask you a quuestion."

"Oh, all right. I'm good at questions." Hermione laughed a bit awkwardly, reached up to tuck an errant curl behind her ear, then seemed to remember her plan to keep her hands still and returned it to her lap abruptly. Her face reddened. "Go ahead."

"Is there someone who will be escorting you to the Yule Ball?" The Quidditch player's dark eyes were fixed on Hermione's face with cautious hope.

Hermione coughed, as though the air in her lungs had decided to choke her of a sudden. "Ah, no. Not yet. I-" her eyes darted toward Rigel, an expression of both panic and guilt in her eyes. "-no."

Krum glanced suspiciously at Rigel, who blinked at him blankly before realizing he expected her to challenge him for Hermione's hand. She grimaced and turned pointedly away to stare unseeing at

a nearby bookshelf. Once she had, she heard Krum said, "Then will you do me the honor, Herminon?"

Hermione's voice was somewhat unsteady as she said, "It would be my pleasure. Thank you very much for asking, Victor."

From the corner of her eye, Rigel saw Krum bow gallantly over one of Hermione's hands before smiling widely. "The pleasure will be mine." He left the library, and Rigel turned back to Hermione with a feeling of cold foreboding in her stomach. How was she going to explain this to Archie?

As she watched Hermione's expressed descend from embarrassed, disbelieving pleasure to utter misery, thoughts of Archie receded and all Rigel could think of was how to stop the girl in front of her from dissolving into tears.

"What's wrong, Hermione? Don't you like Krum?" she asked carefully.

Hermione's breath hitched and her lower lip trembled. Rather than cry, the girl closed her eyes tight and counted to three under her breath. When she opened them again, her gaze was wretched, but clear. "I don't know. He's very... well. There's something alluring there. It's what I always thought I would feel, when..." She shook her head and gripped her hair, her shoulders slumping in despair. "*I want to*, you know. I want to want Harry."

Rigel froze, utterly sure that she had no more idea how to navigate this particular conversation than she had the last time. Hermione didn't appear to need her input, however, as she continued.

"Harry was my first friend. S- *he* understands me better than anyone. Harry is so much more than I ever thought one person could be. More outgoing, more earnest, fun, kind, protective, *smart!* " Hermione let out a watery laugh. "God, but Harry is so smart. Perfect. Almost. But without physical attraction, it's just friendship, isn't it? Not romance?"

After a moment Rigel realized she was expected to respond. She shrugged helplessly. "I don't know anything about romance. Really, I'm the worst person to ask." Hermione's heartbreakingly torn expression ate away at her reluctance to get involved, and she added, "If you really want my opinion, I think... be with who makes you happy. Whoever makes you feel whole. And maybe you don't know who that is yet. And that's okay, too." Rigel thought no one should have to decide about forever when they were fifteen.

Hermione considered her words with a solemn expression. "I do like Victor. Maybe it's just hormones, but I won't know unless I try, will I?" Something firmed in her eyes and she nodded slowly to herself. "It'll be an experiment, then. If I can puzzle through how I feel with different people, then maybe I'll figure out what it is I really need. Thanks, Rigel." She began to pack up her notes, and Rigel realized the lunch period was probably almost over. Rigel picked up her book, and was about to leave when Hermione added, "Who will you take to the ball, then?"

Rigel frowned. "What ball?"

Hermione stared at her. "The one Victor just asked me to. The Yule Ball."

"I assumed that was... some kind of Durmstrang thing?" The statement came out as a question as Hermione's expression turned exasperated. "I'm starting to feel as though there's a mailing list I've been left off of."

"The Yule Ball is scheduled the night after the third task," Hermione told her. "It's to celebrate the three blood champions and the halfway point for the tournament. Do you really not know about it? McGonagall told me weeks ago."

She groaned. "Snape probably cares less than I do. Is it mandatory?"

Hermione laughed. "The champions are to open the dancing, so I would say so." Rigel scowled in displeasure, but the scowl fell into a blank expression as Hermione added, "Will... Harry come?"

Rigel had the sudden realization that rampaging hippogriffs wouldn't be able to keep her cousin away. All she said was, "We are engaged, so it would be proper. Did Harry tell you about that?"

Hermione made a noise of affirmation. "Harry said it was arranged but not serious."

"That's right," Rigel confirmed quickly. "There's never been that sort of attachment between us. Harry's more like my sibling than anything. The engagement was drawn up as soon as we found out about the S.O.W.'s marriage law, just in case."

"For protection," Hermione said, eyes wide. "I see. That's quite a sacrifice for you, isn't it?"

"No more than it is for Harry." Rigel shrugged. "Anyway, it's not forever. Only until we're seventeen, as long as the legislation is killed once and for all before then."

"Do you think it will be?" Hermione asked, eyes penetrating.

"I aim to see it so."

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Between freebrewing with Snape, training her reflexes in the Room of Requirement, and wrapping up a number of other projects in preparation for the end of term, the remaining week before the third task passed all too quickly.

Before she felt fully resigned to it, Rigel found herself walking down to the pitch through the early morning fog, frost crunching beneath her trusty boots. In addition to her Hogwarts jersey and loose breeches, she wore an underlayer of warm silk that she hoped would prevent her muscles seizing in the freezing air.

A part of her wished she was back in the alleys, that this was just another day spent in the courtyard of the Dancing Phoenix with her friends, but she willed those thoughts away firmly. She had to distance herself from that person. Harry-the-alley-free-dueler couldn't be anywhere near the tournament stage that day.

Draco and Pansy walked on either side of her, silently supportive, and in the distance, she could see the stands already filling up with spectators. "Are your parents coming to watch today?" she asked them, more for something to break the tense atmosphere than anything.

"Of course!" Draco looked offended that she would even ask. "They wouldn't miss it. Or did you forget again that you're family?"

Rigel smiled, but said, "I asked my family not to come to this one, actually. It's too much pressure with them watching."

Draco frowned. "Since when does pressure get to you?" After a moment's shrewd contemplation, he said, "You just don't like people fussing over you. Well, I'll tell Mother and Father not to overwhelm you, but what else can you expect when you risk your life and limb in front of all and sundry?"

"It wasn't Rigel's choice, exactly," Pansy said, defensive on her behalf.

"I don't mind your parents' version of fussing," Rigel said, a small laugh escaping her. "Sirius would wrap me in a bubble charm if he could."

"Rigel!"

They all three turned to see Zhou hurrying down from the castle behind them. Draco made an annoyed noise under his breath, but didn't stop Rigel from waiting for the girl to catch up to them.

"Hi, Zhou," she said.

"Hi." The girl panted a bit, but caught her breath enough to say, "I just wanted to wish you luck today. Ravenclaw is supporting you, no matter what happens."

"Thank you," Rigel said, genuinely touched. Never had she imagined the school could rally around her like it had. She'd expected so much more resentment for being chosen over older, better-liked students like Cedric Diggory. "I'll do my best to represent Hogwarts proudly."

"I'm sure you will." Zhou's voice was still a little breathless, and her eyes darted between Rigel, Draco, and Pansy nervously before she blurted, "Do you have a date to the ball?" Rigel's lips parted, but nothing came out for a long moment. Zhou turned red, disappointment creeping into her eyes. "I mean, you probably do. I just thought I'd... ask. In case you didn't."

Rigel summoned a smile despite the awkwardness she felt internally. Zhou was only trying to be nice, after all. If she hadn't had anyone to go with, she'd have been grateful to accept the girl's offer. "It's very kind of you to think of me," she said warmly. "Since I'm engaged to Heiress Potter, though, I'll be escorting her." She'd already discussed it with Archie, and he was prepared to play 'Harry' for the evening. Rigel thought some crazy part of her cousin was actually looking forward to it, from the mischievous gleam that had entered his eyes as they discussed the possibility. It worried her a little, but in light of the portion of Riddle's magic that Dom had yet to filter from her core, they had no other choice.

Zhou murmured something understanding and fled quickly toward the Quidditch pitch. Rigel peered after her with a somewhat puzzled expression and heard Draco snort from beside her. She slid a glance toward him. "What?"

"You really are the worst," he muttered. There was more amusement in his voice than censure, though.

"What's that supposed to mean?" she asked, unsure what she was supposed to be apologizing for.

"Ignore him, Rye," Pansy said, looping her arm through Rigel's. "Focus on the task."

Rigel didn't miss the look Pansy shot Draco behind her back, but she didn't know what to make of it, so she did as her friend suggested and bent her attention to the upcoming ordeal.

They'd all been officially informed of the nature of the third task three days before. Rigel wasn't sure what advantage Riddle thought an extra week and a half to prepare was supposed to have bought her, but she suspected he merely wanted her to feel beholden to him. That was his game, after all. Make people trust him by bestowing small favors on them, then take advantage of the impulse toward reciprocity. Rigel refused to be fooled. She also refused to feel guilty about any supposed advantage his words tried to bestow on her.

Draco was muttering last-minute strategy in her ear, and she humored him by listening, but she knew general strategy would be secondary to direct observation. The first match she would be going in blind, but every subsequent match she would have some notion of her opponent's style, simply by watching the others fight.

She left Draco and Pansy at the stairs to the stands and made her way to the center of the pitch alone. A large, perfectly circular platform had been raised there, not as high as the obstacle course had been, but elevated enough to give a better view to the spectators above them. The other champions waited in a loose circle in the shadow of the stage, and when Rigel joined them, Crouch cleared his throat.

"Now that we are all present, the task will proceed as follows: Granger and Sousa will duel first, followed by Krum and Zahi,

Delacour and Antiope, and finally Shang and Black." Crouch raised his voice to cut across the murmurs. "Owens, being in the lead currently, will get a by the first round. The tournament is elimination style until the final round, so second round matches will be directly determined by the results of round one."

Bagman cut in with a broad smile. "That is to say, the winner of the first match will face the winner of the second match, and so on. Someone else will get a by in the second round, of course, but that will be determined at random."

*Sure it would*, Rigel thought cynically. She didn't miss the fact that both muggleborns who hadn't been given a by in the first round were on the same side of the bracket. At best, it meant only one of them would make it to the final round.

Hermione's face was set with determination, but Rigel wondered how much time the girl had really been devoting to preparing for the tournament on top of her investigation into the Fade. She couldn't fault the girl's priorities, but she worried for her safety. The Triwizard Tournament was, she thought, not a place for good people.

Hermione and Matheus climbed the steps up to the platform as the crowd began to thunderously communicate its approval. Crouch and Bagman directed the rest of them toward the edge of the pitch, where a staircase led them to their own private box from which they could view the duels.

After just a few short minutes, Bagman's amplified voice counted down the moments to the beginning of the duel. Hermione's stance was almost textbook, but she leaned slightly away from her opponent rather than toward him. *Lack of aggression*, Rigel thought. While initiative wasn't everything in a duel, it was harder to control the pace when you began on the defensive.

"-TWO, ONE, BEGIN!"



Hermione had a shield up before the echo of Bagman's voice had faded from the stadium, but Matheus merely stared at her, not moving, from across the ring. He spun his wand idly, and faint laughter came down from the stands. The AIM girl scowled, clearly torn between keeping her shield up just in case and dropping it so that the magic didn't drain her unnecessarily. It was smart of Matheus to use her indecision against her. As long as she kept the shield up, she'd wear away at her own endurance.

Finally, with an impatient flick, Hermione dropped the shield and sent a wordless disarming spell at Matheus. The Brazilian boy was all the way on the other side of the ring, and had plenty of time to dodge the spell. She sent another, then two more in quick succession, but Matheus side-stepped them all without bothering to shield.

"Get closer," Rigel muttered. Hermione was only going to wear herself out at that distance.

The girl seemed to realize Matheus could dodge faster than she could cast, for she broke off the point-spell offense and instead lifted her hands into the air dramatically. A dozen small boulders materialized in the space above her head, and a sharp jab with her wand sent them hailing down toward Matheus. The spectators cheered at seeing such an advanced conjuration, and Rigel clapped along with them. It was smart; using an attack that covered such a wide area precluded physical avoidance.

The dark-haired boy finally lifted his wand and it bobbed in the air like a conductor's baton for a moment before a shimmering barrier of a type Rigel had never seen before appeared between him and the falling rocks. It didn't shield him so much as it spun the incoming projectiles off course and deflected them away. It was as though he'd created a localized twister out of the air before him.

A few of the rocks shot sideways and came to rest at the edge of the wards surrounding the stage. The rest fell somewhere between the two duelists. Hermione set about transfiguring the rock closest to her, and Rigel's eyebrows rose. To transfigure something you'd

already conjured was a very advanced application of magic. A cloud of smoke momentarily obscured the girl, and when it cleared, they could see the rock had burst into a dozen shards. Hermione banished them with an audible cry. They rocketed toward Matheus, and for a moment it seemed the fast-moving pieces would cut through the wind barrier. At the last moment, they were turned aside.

Hermione stood at the ready position, but didn't cast another spell. A moment later, Matheus flinched violently and his barrier dissolved as he ducked his head and waved his arms wildly against something Rigel couldn't see. Hermione had a spell off the moment the boy dropped his barrier in distraction, and abruptly, it was over. Matheus caught the disarming spell in the back and crumpled.

"I'M NOT SURE WHAT WE JUST SAW, BUT HERMIONE GRANGER HAS WON THE FIRST DUEL!"

The stadium erupted, and Rigel breathed a sigh of relief that Hermione had made it through the first round unscathed.

"What waz zat?" Fleur demanded, glaring down at the pitch as though the duel had personally offended her. "I could not zee what happened."

Tahiil laughed. "It was clever! Did you see the smoke when Hermione transfigured that rock? It was a screen. I felt two spells, not one. The invisible thing that attacked Matheus must have come from that moment."

"She surprised him ven he let his guard down," Krum said. There was a pleased note in his voice.

Antiope scoffed. "It was still a boring duel. I hope you two provide us some more entertainment," she added, giving Krum and Tahiil a mocking look.

Tahiil was utterly unfazed. "We will certainly do our best, Antiope. Will you cheer for me?"

The redhead sneered at him. "Not a chance. I want to face Krum in the finals."

Fleur tossed her hair with a huff. "Getting ahead of yourself, are you not?"

Antiope's only response was a confident smirk. "This task was made for me. You're all using just your wands, but I petitioned the judges to be allowed use of my sword." Several of the others protested, but Antiope only laughed. "It's only right that I be able to show my skills to their best advantage. If any of you had trained with a weapon, you could have used it just the same."

"Freedueling iz dizgraceful," Fleur said. The fierce disgust in her voice didn't wholly disguise the trepidation in her eyes, though.

"It is the noblest of all arts," Antiope spat. "Only countries who have forgotten how to do it think it's beneath them. Luckily, this is an *international* tournament, so your close-minded rules don't apply. I'll prove to everyone watching today that steel is vital to true combat."

The appearance of Hermione at the top of the stairs forestalled the argument. Rigel went over to congratulate her, with Krum right on her heels. Hermione gave them a weak smile. "It wasn't great," she murmured. "I didn't realize what it would be like, dueling for real."

"You ver vonderful," Krum rumbled. "Very advanced magic."

"Matheus wasn't even trying," Hemione said with a sigh. "Thanks, though. Good luck in your match, Victor."

He took her hand and kissed it despite the sweat and dirt. "If you are vatching, I vill vin."

The frustration melted from the girl's face and she nodded. "I'll cheer you on."

Krum and Tahiiil left the box, and Hermione's face hardened again. "Be honest, Rigel. How did I do?"

"You were a little timid," Rigel said kindly. "You hung back on your side of the ring without moving closer. If you'd been casting from halfway across, for instance, he wouldn't have had time to dodge your spells." Hermione winced, but nodded. Rigel went on. "Your quick-thinking was impressive, though. That sort of creativity can't be taught. I'm sure the judges were impressed with your conjuring and transfiguration. Can I ask what spell you got Matheus with in the end?"

"Avis," she said, smiling sheepishly. "I just conjured them invisibly and sent them around the barrier to dive at him from behind."

"Brilliant," Rigel said, smiling back. "Not many people can alter a spell before casting it. Harry would be so impressed."

Hermione flushed. "I'll wait to feel pleased with myself until we see how the next round goes."

"Just don't be afraid to move around, really use the whole platform," Rigel said. "The barriers won't let you fall off the edge."

Hermione nodded. "The next duel is starting," she said, and they both moved to the edge of the box with the other champions to watch.

Tahiiil still had his irrepressible smile on his face, while Krum, whose dueling stance was slightly lower than Rigel would have expected for a boy with his height, was the picture of solemn concentration. At Bagman's word, the two boys sprang into action. Krum darted forward, aiming two spells in swift succession to either side of Tahiiil. Trying to pin him in place, Rigel guessed. Tahiiil batted at the air with one of his hands, however, and the spell that would have impacted to his left met an invisible force and reflected. As Tahiiil moved left, Krum was forced to roll under his own spell. By the time he stood, Tahiiil was behind him.

Krum cast a shield at his back without looking, and as Tahiil's first spell fizzled harmlessly against it he spun, catching the dark-skinned boy with a Flipendo that hurled Tahiil into the air and deposited him clear across the stage.

Tahiil held up a hand toward his opponent as he climbed slowly to his feet, and every spell Krum shot at him rebounded from the invisible defense. With his free hand, Tahiil began casting. It was eerie to watch spells appear from the end of a person's fingertips, Rigel noted. Stranger still to watch the boy cast wandlessly over and over again, a feat that would exhaust most wand users she knew before long. Tahiil was still smiling, though his eyes held a wary respect for Krum that had been absent before.

Krum grew tired of avoiding both his own spells and Tahiil's. The broad-shouldered Bulgarian stopped casting point spells and instead aimed his wand at the stage. A torrent of water burst from his wand like a flood, catching Tahiil up to the knees and forcing him to stop casting and brace against the hard current to avoid being swept off his feet. Krum was all the time chanting something, and beginning from his side of the platform the water, trapped by the wards at the edge of the stage, began to freeze.

Tahiil clambered onto one of Hermione's boulders to keep from getting stuck in the ice. By the time he'd reached the higher ground, Krum had conjured skates on the bottom of his boots and was gliding across the arena as though he'd been born doing it. He closed the distance between them in moments, and none of Tahiil's spells could hit him and he pivoted and slid back and forth on the frozen platform.

"He changed the terrain to suit him," Hermione said wonderingly.

Rigel agreed. "He's too fast on those skates for Tahiil to hit him now."

The Somali boy seemed to have realized the same thing. He lowered his hands, seemed to shudder violently for an instant, and then he was folding in on himself, transforming, Rigel realized. Her

mouth fell open without her consent as Tahiiil, now a spotted hyena, leapt from the rock and knocked Krum from his feet. The crowd went mad, shock and awe giving way to wild excitement as it became clear just what Tahiiil was truly capable of.

Both boy and hyena rolled across the ice, and the hyena was the first to rise. The animagus gave a "woo-op" call and used its clawed feet to restlessly pace the ice until Krum, one hand gingerly poking the back of his skull, regained his feet. Krum eyed the animal warily, slowly circling on his skates. He cast a stunner at the hyena, but the large canine nimbly avoided it, something like a laugh escaping the powerful jaws.

Tahiiil made a small bound toward Krum, then away again, feinting left, then right as Krum tried to decide which way to go. More laughing followed, and Rigel could see Krum's frustration even from her vantage point. The Bulgarian's wand flurried into motion and a thick net sprung out toward the animagus. Tahiiil came back on his hind legs and batted it out of the air, coming down on top of the net and using the extra purchase on the ice to leap forward. Krum conjured a physical shield, but the force of the hyena's weight bore him backwards onto the ice anyway. As his head hit the ice a second time, the shield failed and Tahiiil's jaw clamped around Krum's wand arm. He twitched his head the barest amount, and Krum's wand fell from limp fingers, spinning across the ice.

Rigel thought Krum would surrender. Tahiiil must have expected it, too, as the animagus released Krum's arm and "woo-op"-ed loudly into the sky. As the hyena's head came back down, Krum punched him in the snout. A sickening yelp rang out and Tahiiil scrambled back, but Krum found the strength to follow him. The Bulgarian tackled the hyena, wrapped thick arms around Tahiiil's neck, and summoned his wand. When the tip of his wand pressed into the animagus' fur, Tahiiil froze, then slowly shifted back to human form.

Krum didn't let up. He gripped Tahiiil by the jaw and exposed his throat for all to see the wand-point digging into the vulnerable skin

there. Stunned applause filled the pitch as Bagman said, "THERE YOU HAVE IT! VICTOR KRUM CLAIMS THE SECOND MATCH!"

The boys separated at once, Krum going so far as to help Tahil to his feet on the slippery ice. Impossibly, the slighter boy still had a grin on his face. Healers took charge of both of them as they left the wards, and a small break was called as tournament organizers were sent to clean up the stage for the next match.

Rigel exchanged a look with Hermione. "Krum did well," she said.

"He never gave up," Hermione agreed, respect in her eyes. "Tahil, though... do you think he went easy on Victor?"

Rigel's eyebrows rose. "He used his animagus form. I don't think he was holding back."

Hermione seemed unconvinced. "I read somewhere that hyenas have stronger jaws than a bear. If Tahil wanted to, he could have ripped Victor's arm clean off."

"He wouldn't do that, though," Rigel said reassuringly. "These are exhibition matches, Hermione, not fights to the death. No one should be aiming to maim or kill. Tahil did his best within reasonable limits. That's all any of us should do."

She didn't know if she was trying to convince Hermione or herself of that.

By the time the third match was ready to start, Krum had been released from the healers' care and rejoined them in the champions' box. Hermione congratulated him for his win, but Krum did not seem wholly satisfied with it. "I am not sure he wanted to win," the older boy muttered when pressed.

Rigel couldn't speak to Tahil's motivations, but she didn't think lack of heart would be an issue in the next match. Fleur and Antiope stared each other down like mortal enemies, for all that they'd only

known one another a couple of months. Antiope did indeed have her sword, an impressively sturdy weapon that she hefted one-handed in her left hand, her wand clutched tightly in her right. Fleur appeared undaunted, though Rigel suspected that was mostly out of pride. The girl's distain for weaponed combat indicated she had no familiarity with it, and Rigel knew from personal experience what a jarring difference it could make in a duel.

"Who do you think will win?" Hermione asked from beside her.

Rigel felt bad saying it, but there was no point in dishonesty. "Antiope. If she's half as good with that sword as she thinks she is, it'll mess up everything Fleur's been trained to."

"Why is freedueling banned in Britain, anyway?" Hermione asked curiously. She lowered her voice and added, "I've heard Healer Hurst mention it once or twice-a lot of the injuries we see at the clinic are from such illicit duels."

Rigel nodded. "Part of it is because it causes so many injures. The added element of complexity that comes when you introduce weapons, potions, and other forms of magic into a duel can exponentially increase the probability of lethal harm, even when both participants know what they're doing."

"And the other part?" Hermione asked shrewdly.

"Old fashioned prejudice," Rigel said with a faint smile. "Wizards like to think they're too good to use anything 'muggle' in their traditions. Relying on something other than one's own magic is, for some, the sign of a weak wizard. Magic is Might, and all that."

Hermione groaned. "That phrase alone makes me want to take up a sword myself."

"Maybe Antiope will teach you," Rigel said with amusement.



"Maybe I'll get the king to teach me," Hermione said, laughing quietly.

Rigel froze, then immediately tried to disguise her alarm with a casual tone. "King?"

Hermione shot her a guilty glance. "Never mind. I think... maybe it's something I'm not supposed to mention." She sighed. "I don't understand everything about the lower alleys yet."

"Have you asked Harry?" she asked.

Whatever Hermione might have said, it was lost in the roar of the stands as the third match began.

Antiope charged. Fleur began casting, probably as fast as she could, but Antiope darted around every spell without ceasing her relentless advance. The fact that she wasn't blocking the spells outright with her sword made Rigel think it probably wasn't imbued with the same ability to absorb magic that Goldflame's had been. By the time Fleur realized Antiope wasn't going to be stopped, the redhead was upon her. She slashed viciously through the air and the beautiful blonde girl barely managed to leap out of the way in time.

Fleur retreated, shielding against the next several attacks as she steadily backed her way to one end of the platform. With a scowl of frustration, Fleur conjured a thick, earthen wall between her and her opponent. Antiope made to go around it, but Fleur cast a Bombarda at her own transfiguration and it exploded outward, burying Antiope in dirt.

As the redhead struggled out of the debris, Fleur took the time to conjure a shield of pure magic and affix it to her left arm. By the time Antiope had regained her feet, Fleur was ready. She met Antiope's next strike with her shield, but Rigel could see the way the impact reverberated through the part-Veela's slim frame. Antiope rained blows down on the girl again and again, and Rigel had to wonder if the freckled warrior was just toying with the Frenchwoman. Antiope

hadn't cast a single spell yet, using only her sword to batter at Fleur's defenses over and over. She certainly was out to prove something.

The physical blows visibly tired Fleur, who had taken to hiding behind the shield as often as she attempted to cast. Antiope had uncanny reflexes, and a way of sliding out of the way of spells even when they were fired almost point-blank. The Beauxbatons champion couldn't get space to breathe, let alone come up with a viable strategy in the face of Antiope's relentless pursuit.

Really, it wasn't too surprising when Antiope gripped her sword in both hands and finally brought it down with enough force to break through the conjured shield and bite into Fleur's biceps. The silvery-blond girl fell to her knees, cradling her bleeding arm, and Antiope moved her sword to the place above Fleur's heart. The French girl glared up at Antiope from her defeated position, but Antiope merely shook her head, waiting until Bagman had officially declared her the victor before lowering her weapon.

"She didn't cast a single spell," Hermione said, clearly marveled.

"Her style gave her an overwhelming advantage against a dueler like Fleur," Rigel said ruefully.

"It seems as though her advantage would be the same against any of us." Hermione appeared troubled. "I hope I don't face her in the second round."

Rigel hummed, but didn't say anything. She sort of hoped Hermione didn't face her, too, but she didn't want to undermine the girl's confidence. She glanced across the box at Feiyan, who gave her a small smile.

"Now is our turn," the Asian girl said. She was dressed warmly, in a long tunic and thick leggings, and her long, black hair had been pulled back from her face in a bun.

Rigel nodded. "Shall we?" She followed the slightly shorter girl down the spiral stairs and onto the grassy pitch. The stage loomed large and intimidating ahead of them, but Rigel felt more anticipation than fear as she climbed the stairs to the top. Dark forests and obstacle courses were not really her forte. This, though? The look of determination in her opponent's eyes, the feel of her wand gripped securely in her fist, the sturdy, even platform beneath her feet-this she knew.

Feiyan's stance was wide, almost dramatically so. Rigel favored a loser, partial-crouch that kept her centered without sacrificing maneuverability. When Bagman called for them to start, it was a long moment before either girl actually moved. Rigel darted right, and watched as Feiyan matched her with sweeping footwork that explained her wide stance. A tripping jinx bloomed effortlessly from her wand and she carefully watched as Feiyan turned around it. There was something lovely about the economy of movement the dark-haired girl displayed, as though she were merely following a pattern long committed to memory.

Rigel wanted to know what that pattern was. She teased Feiyan's defenses, casting first to the girl's left, then to her right, then high and low, sizing up the nature of her response to each spell. Most of the time, Feiyan opted to dance around it rather than block it. Rigel moved closer, her spells coming faster, and Feiyan's footwork sped up in response. The girl was well-trained.

When Feiyan's first spell came, it was not one Rigel had ever heard before. A cloud formed between them and ice particles that had seemingly condensed within it shot out at Rigel. She summoned magic to heat the air around her, and when the attack finally reached her it was but the sting of fast raindrops. She sent an Incarcerous toward Feiyan, but the girl turned away from the spell even as she cast another, unrecognizable spell toward Rigel's feet.

The solid platform beneath her turned to mud, and Rigel promptly sank three inches. She conjured a Fortis shield to protect her as she pulled her boots free with a squelch and froze the mud directly below

her feet with a spell from her free hand. Feiyan shot several fireballs her direction, but the Fortis repelled them easily. When Rigel dropped the shield to prepare her next spell, the Chinese girl turned to the air once more, calling up a torrent of rain over Rigel's head with a swirl of her wand. Rigel's clothes were instantly soaked through, and she realized the other girl was playing the long game. In the frigid December temperature, the rain clung to Rigel's bones and forced her to consciously ignore the impulse to shiver and slow. The rain also made the mud on her half of the platform much more slippery.

The rain didn't stop her from sending two Relashios in quick succession, however. Feiyan's footwork saved her from both spells, but Rigel had the time she needed to leap over the remaining mud and shorten the distance between them. She pressed forward with spell after spell, forcing Feiyan onto the defensive while she closed the gap. When she was close enough to see the consternation in Feiyan's eyes, Rigel tried a trip jinx again. The other girl did stumble, but not before hissing, "Feng!" at her with a sharp jab of her wand. A gust of wind lifted Rigel off her feet and knocked the breath from her lungs as it deposited her back the short distance she'd just gained.

*So 'Feng' means Ventus,* she noted sourly as she rolled with the fall through the waiting mud and came up on the defensive. Feiyan had already cast her next attack-fire again, this time a litany of small, burning hail that forced Rigel to call up another shield. With her free hand, Rigel reached beneath her to etch a basic state-change rune into the muck. The water evaporated from it instantly, leaving a layer of dry dirt behind instead.

Rigel gripped a handful of the dirt and, when the fireballs had stopped, dropped her shield. She flung the dust into the air, banishing it in a rocketing cloud toward Feiyan with careful control. It caught her in the face, and the girl spluttered and coughed, eventually choking out the wind spell again to disperse it. By the time the cloud was gone, Rigel was halfway across the platform again, an Impedimenta on the tip of her wand.

Feiyan swirled around the spell with one of her curious, sweeping half-turns, and Rigel heard her say, "Feng!"

She was ready this time. Rigel flung a Ventus with as much force as she could muster in the space of a second. It met Feiyan's wind spell head on and overpowered it, knocking the pale girl off her feet with an audible "Oooff." Feiyan was so close to the edge of the platform, Rigel's spell slammed her into the wards and she slumped to the floor with a groan.

Rigel summoned the girl's wand, and found herself almost disappointed with how quickly the match had gone. Then she shook her head at her own foolishness. She should be grateful to not have tired herself out in the first match. Cheers rained down on her from the stands, and Rigel summoned a smile as she helped Feiyan to her feet and handed her back the wand she'd taken.

"You all right?" she asked.

Feiyan nodded, shooting Rigel a rueful look. "I am well. Only shamed."

"It was a good match," Rigel said.

The girl shook her head, but did not seem overly disappointed. "After task number two, there was small chance I advance. Now, at least, I can go home."

Rigel made a noncommittal noise and they exited the platform as Bagman announced a short break while the second-round matches were decided. She was shivering with the drenching she'd had, but otherwise uninjured, so the healers let her go back up to the champions' box after a very thorough drying spell, a heated blanket wrapped around her shoulders.

"ROUND TWO WILL BEGIN WITH OWENS VERSUS GRANGER!" Bagman informed them all. "BLACK AND ANTIOPE WILL DUEL SECOND, AND KRUM RECEIVES A BY!"

Rigel wondered whether that decision was based on Krum having incurred the most severe injuries during the first round. She supposed it wouldn't be the worst way to decide, though it didn't escape her that the muggleborn candidates were exclusively matched against one another.

Hermione seemed, if anything, more nervous in the face of her second match than she had been before the first. Rigel thought the girl hadn't known quite what to expect the first time. She wished the AIM girl luck, but Hermione only grimaced at her before descending the stairs once more.

It was clear from the start that Owens had a great deal of training. The American boy took the initiative at once, with a handful of not-particularly-dangerous spells that nevertheless came one after the other fast enough to keep Hermione on the defensive. The girl was being herded slowly toward the end of the platform, and Rigel doubted she even realized how many steps back she'd taken until her back came up against the wards.

Hermione took a Tarantallegra without shielding in favor of getting time to cast a spell of her own. The ground beneath Owens' feet heaved, throwing the boy off his feet. Hermione cast a quick Finite on her jerking legs and dove around the boy's next spell, which boiled through the air where she'd just been. When Owens regained his feet, Hermione had switched their places and clearly hoped to box him against the wards instead. Owens blocked each one of her spells with split-second shields that he called up and released in the space between instants.

Rigel had never seen someone shield so fast before. The flickering technique probably saved him a lot of magic in the long run, she thought, but it had to take exemplary concentration and reflexes to get the shield up just in time to meet each of the spells Hermione hurled at him. Certainly, the strategy was having an impact on the girl's morale. Rigel hoped she found a way around Owens' defenses before frustration drove her to something desperate.

Finally, Hermione cast a spell that Owens couldn't shield against: conjuration, again, this time two small dogs that raced toward her opponent with lolling tongues. They closed on Owens from two different directions, but the boy swept his wand out with a vicious slash and something like a slicing charm swept out around him in a horizontal arc. It cut right through the conjured animals, severing their bloodless heads, and Hermione froze in momentary shock before stumbling backwards to avoid the tail end of the cutting spell as it dissipated.

Owens didn't give her a chance to regain her equilibrium. He began to cast again, almost lazily at first, and then faster and faster, battering Hermione's shield such that she couldn't risk dropping it to retaliate. His spells were not so innocuous any longer; Reductos and Bombardas replaced jinxes meant to slow or impede. Hermione lost ground, and, eventually, her shield slipped.

She jumped backwards as it failed, but couldn't escape the full range of a Confringo that exploded at her feet. Hermione was propelled across the platform, and the limp way she rolled to a stop told Rigel the girl was no longer in full control of her faculties. There was a sickening silence as Owens walked closer to where Hermione lay, gasping weakly. The girl attempted to raise her wand, but it shook in her fingers. The American boy paused, and Rigel thought he would disarm her.

He didn't. The spell that came out of his wand was Flipendo, and it impacted Hermione's chest point-blank with a sickening crunch. Rigel let out an involuntary sound as Hermione's body was flung backwards so hard she hit the wards with a second crunch and crumpled unmoving to the stone stage. The stadium erupted at the sudden violence, and Bagman hastily declared, "THE MATCH IS OVER! OWENS ADVANCES!"

Owens left the platform without looking back. Healers descended on Hermione's supine form, and Rigel waited in the grip of fear for her to move. Please, Merlin, let her *move*. A hand on Rigel's shoulder

jerked her back from where she'd leaned dangerously over the railing and she inhaled sharply.

It was Krum's hand. She didn't know when he'd been released from the medical tent, but when she glanced back, she saw that his face expressed exactly the murderous anger Rigel felt flailing helplessly inside her. Muted clapping drew her eyes back to the stage, where Hermione was sitting up. A healer held a wand to her chest, and the girl was visibly struggling to breathe, but she was alive. Rigel slowly unclenched her hands from their death-grip on wood between her and the pitch, and by the time Jacob Owens had climbed the stairs to the champion's box, Rigel was pretty sure she didn't want to maim him. Much.

She wasn't above giving him her best glare as he casually said, "It's your turn next, isn't it?"

Rigel tucked the anger away, knowing it would not help her in the fight against Antiope. There was no smothering it entirely, however, and it simmered in the back of her mind, ready in case she needed it later.

She felt almost naked stepping up to the platform without a knife in her left hand. Antiope's sword was, if possible, even more intimidating when the redhead brandished it toward her across the stage. Rigel took a moment before Bagman began his countdown to tighten the long gauntlet on her left hand, grateful that the top plate extended nearly halfway up her forearm. There was no doubt this match would test its workmanship even further than her encounter with the werewolf had.

"-ONE! BEGIN!"

Antiope sprinted straight at her. Rigel had been charged by bigger people than her before, and stood her ground. Having seen the redhead dance nimbly around Fleur's spells, Rigel went for a broader approach. She conjured a net of fine steel links and banished it at Antiope in the next breath. The girl sliced through it



without stopping, proving beyond a doubt just how wickedly sharp that sword was. Rigel realized with sudden surprise that the girl had checked her strength when she struck Fleur. Otherwise, the sword would have bitten clean through her chest.

When Antiope was almost on top of her, Rigel called up a swirling cloud of black smoke. Snape had taught her the spell, and the only downside was that without her enchanted glasses, Rigel couldn't see through it either. It did stop her opponent's charge, as even Antiope was not reckless enough to run where she couldn't see. As Rigel was about to take the opportunity to put space between them again, a spell she recognized boiled at her through the black cloud. She ducked beneath it and dove forward to escape the resultant explosion. Her roll took her through the opaque cloud and into Antiope's booted feet. The girl gave a grunt of surprise and swung at Rigel in wild reflex, but she was ready with a shield that flung the girl back, sword and all, as it bloomed from her wand right into Antiope's personal space.

Rigel released the shield before it had even fully formed, choosing to press her advantage as Antiope quick-stepped backwards to regain her balance. She cast three stunners with barely a pause, aiming each one in a slightly different place so that the girl could not avoid all three with one move. Antiope's footwork could have made even Draco blush with envy, though, as she lunged and twisted around the oncoming spells. Her last spell went over Antiope's head as the stocky girl ducked under it and swung her sword up to try and get under Rigel's guard.

Rather than shield again, Rigel slammed her left hand down and to the side, meeting the blade with her gauntlet and redirecting Antiope's sword with sheer force. It was more surprise than anything that let her succeed, she thought, as Antiope's sword bounced off and away. Rigel didn't waste the second of shock that widened her opponent's eyes. She shot a stunner point-blank at the girl's chest and watched, unwillingly impressed, as Antiope's reflexes took over and the girl fell backwards in a truly beautiful backbend. The girl's left

foot came up with a sweep as she did, and Rigel jumped back a step to avoid a boot to the face.

Rigel could do little more than gape as Antiope reversed her momentum on her right foot alone, her left leg arching forward to force her upright again before joining its pair on the ground in what was, she realized with a disbelieving smile, a perfect dueling stance.

"Incredible," Rigel breathed.

"Shut up." Antiope cast a Bombarda and Rigel called up a reflecting shield to send it straight back at her. The girl stepped back and to the side to let it sail over her shoulder and impact with a boom against the wards some twenty feet behind her.

There was a brief pause as both girls stared one another down. Rigel wasn't sure what tactic to use with someone as skilled as Antiope. There would be no getting around her footwork, and she seemed to seamlessly transition between sword and wand when necessary. Rigel would have to surprise her, she thought.

Antiope was clearly resizing Rigel as well. The girl brought her hands together and gripped her sword between both of them, her wand trapped parallel to the sword's hilt beneath her right palm. With a battle cry, the girl charged again, her chin-length hair flying wildly behind her. If Rigel thought Antiope wouldn't be able to cast with her wand pinned to the sword pommel, she was mistaken. Before she could consider how to defend against the sword, a stunning spell came jetting toward her along the trajectory of its point.

Rigel hastily got a shield up to intercept the spell. It held easily, but a moment later the sword came whooshing down. Rigel braced herself against the reverberations of such a strong blow impacting the Fortis, but Antiope's sword barely slowed when it touched the edge of the shimmering shield. Rigel yelped and twisted to the side with enough desperate force to strain several abdominal muscles simultaneously. The sword missed her neck, though, continuing

down with enough force to clang against the stone floor as Rigel dragged herself sideways.

She sprinted away from the girl and her shield-eating sword, her heart thumping in her chest at the inexplicably close call. What in Merlin's name had happened? Rigel had seen Fleur's shield hold up against Antiope's sword several times. For that matter, Rigel's own shield had deflected Antiope's sword just minutes earlier. What had changed?

Rigel eyed the redhead across the healthy distance she'd put between them, and her gaze was drawn to the two-handed grip Antiope had on her sword. *That's it*, she thought. She'd switched to a two-handed grip when she broke through Fleur's shield, too. Something about it gave her sword that extra ability. Rigel had never heard of anything that could just slice through protective magic like that, but then, she was well aware that the world was full of more things than she'd personally catalogued in her short life.

Armed with renewed caution, Rigel cast several Impedimentas in quick succession, hoping that if she could slow the girl down, even for a short period of time, she might gain the upper-hand. Antiope ducked and dipped around each of them without trying. *Perfect footwork*, she reminded herself. Ranged attacks gave her too much time to dodge, and close-in combat gave her the advantage. Really, Rigel thought, this task had been made for a witch like Antiope.

Well, Rigel was not afraid of close-dueling either. She cast a few moderate dueling spells, but ultimately allowed Antiope to eliminate the space between them. She met the girl's next strike with the back of her gauntlet, using her right hand to brace her left and her slight height advantage to bear down on the girl until she disengaged. Antiope audibly growled as she came back for a second strike, this time toward Rigel's right side. She spun into the attack, dropping her wand from her right hand to her left and using the momentum from her pivot to counter the force of the redhead's blow, this time with her right gauntlet. She was casting a disarming charm with her left hand before Antiope's sword had even finished connecting, forcing the girl

to let go of the pommel with *her* wand hand in order to simultaneously attack and shield.

As soon as Antiope switched to a one-handed grip on the sword, Rigel summoned her own shield and slammed it against Antiope's with as much force as she could summon. The redhead, not anticipating the physical assault, cried out as her unanchored shield was slapped backwards into her face. The unmistakable crunch of a broken nose made Rigel wince, but Antiope's sword descended like an avenging angel, precluding any true remorse.

Rigel spun away from the weapon and took a couple quick steps back to catch her breath. Antiope had blood dripping down her chin, but one wouldn't know it from the utterly focused look in her eyes. She spat a glob of red spit onto the platform, and Rigel couldn't help but think that no one should be so careless with their own blood.

Antiope advanced with a vengeance, resuming her two-handed grip and casting with a speed that Rigel spent every ounce of focus keeping up with. Eventually, the girl was close enough to begin slashing at Rigel again, and without the option of a shield, Rigel met every blow with one or both of her gauntlets. Her arms began to shake with the sheer amount of force raining down on them, but she was maneuvering Antiope around the platform all the while. Finally, Rigel reached the position she needed; she flung a Ventus so powerful she could perceive the net change in her core, and it flung Antiope back and down, pressing her into the ground until it dissipated.

With her opponent temporarily occupied, Rigel dropped into a crouch and dragged her fingers through the congealing wad of red spit that Antiope had abandoned. As she drew an abbreviated rune with the fresh blood on her fingers, she said, "Rigescunt indutae."

Antiope, who had scarcely regained her feet, literally froze. The blood in her veins seized just long enough for Rigel to lunge forward, wrap her gauntleted hand around the sword, and wrest the blade from Antiope's fingers. The effect of the single-rune magic only

lasted a brief moment, not nearly long enough to do the girl any real harm, but it was long enough for Rigel to drop the sword to the ground and cast a sticking charm with a truly vindictive sense of satisfaction.

The first thing Antiope did was try to wandlessly summon the sword. It remained fixed to the stone, and the redhead girl shouted her fury to the sky. She charged, but Rigel thought the girl looked a lot less frightening with only a wand to brandish before her.

Antiope's entire style depended on her weapon. Without it, her defense had glaring holes, and Rigel took advantage of each and every one. She kept the duel close, so that Antiope had neither time nor space to dodge. Antiope tried several debilitating spells, but without the sword to swing in their wake, Rigel was free to shield or dodge as she preferred; the redhead was good, but Rigel was faster. She whipped spell after spell into Antiope's defense, and after the sixth over-powered stunner, Antiope's magic faltered. Rigel saw the shield flicker, and when it failed, she had an Incarcerous waiting. Antiope fell, bound and shortly thereafter disarmed, to the stone.

Rigel stared at her opponent's wand, resting innocently in the palm on her free hand, and it took her a moment to realize it was over. Then she realized no one was cheering.

"WELL THERE YOU HAVE IT." Even Bagman seemed vaguely stunned. "BLACK ADVANCES TO THE FINAL ROUND!"

The applause started slowly, and faded quickly. Rigel was amazed that she still had it in her to care, but something about the lackluster response to her victory set off warning bells in her brain. As the adrenaline receded and full reason returned, Rigel wondered belatedly if blood magic hadn't been the best way to endear the public to her cause.

*It's not as though it was a blood curse or anything permanent,* she reasoned. The rune was one she'd found in Dumbledore's book,

*Arrays for the Harried*, and she didn't believe the Headmaster would give her anything dangerous.

She released Antiope and returned her wand, all the while trying not to quail under the fiery fury in the shorter redhead's glare. "What kind of dirty trick was that, Black?"

Rigel did not pretend to misunderstand her. "I drew a rune in your blood," she said, indicating the smudge on the platform that remained. "It wasn't shed willingly, but that doesn't mean it holds no power."

Antiope scowled and pointed her wand at the smudge. "Scourgify." Her expression was still furious, but there was a grudging understanding in her eyes, too, when she looked back at Rigel. "They don't teach us runes at Chalcioecus. Aside from the trick, you fought well. This wasn't your first time facing a weaponed duelist."

Rigel smiled, but didn't respond to the implied question. The two of them made their way toward the stairs, but Bagman's voice forestalled their descent.

"THE THREE REMAINING CHAMPIONS WILL EACH DUEL ONE ANOTHER FOR THE FINAL ROUND. THE MATCHES WILL BE: BLACK AND KRUM, KRUM AND OWENS, THEN OWENS AND BLACK." Rigel suppressed a groan as she realized she'd be dueling again immediately. Antiope gave her a smirk as she continued down the stairs. "THE HIGHEST SCORE WILL BE GIVEN TO EITHER THE COMPETITOR WHO WINS BOTH HIS MATCHES OR THE ONE THE JUDGES DEEM TO HAVE FOUGHT MOST IMPRESSIVELY OVERALL."

It didn't escape Rigel's notice that she was the only champion who would have to duel four times instead of three. Why couldn't they give her a by this round and let her duel the winner between Krum and Owens? Riddle really was a sadist, she decided as she turned around and moved back to the center of one side of the platform.

She tightened the laces on her boots, gave her muscles a quick stretch, and waited for Krum to take the stage as well.

Krum regarded her warily as he took up a ready stance on the opposite side of the stage. Rigel dipped into a slight crouch and bent her mind to the upcoming duel. She'd seen from his match with Tahiiil that Krum was a careful, strategic duelist. He was also well-rested from his break, while her muscles ached from the battering of Antiope's sword. If she wanted a shot at outlasting him, Rigel would have to keep him at a distance and wear him down with magic.

Grimly, she brandished her wand and waited for Bagman to count them in.

Three. Two. One.

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The scene playing out on the platform below could not have gone better if he'd choreographed it himself. He supposed, in a way, he had, but Rigel Black had once again surpassed his every expectation. The boy was a diamond under pressure; each match he performed better, even as his competitors grew wan and worn.

Originally, he'd not expected the Slytherin to actually win the third task. The boy need only advance to the final round, and his existing point lead would ensure that he was crowned the pureblood champion. The two girls he was matched against should not have posed a major challenge-at least, not if the judges had followed his advice against allowing Antiope a weapon. The promise of a more exciting spectacle had been too tempting for the Department of Magical Games and Sports to ignore, however, and he was forced to grit his teeth as Black dueled an opponent he was in no way qualified to face.

Again, however, the boy had surprised him. Rather than fumble before the added challenge, as Delacour had, Rigel became more efficient. More creative. Pain seemed not to slow him and nothing—neither the cheers nor jeers of the crowd above him—could break his concentration. Few wizards had any real experience with dueling these days, much less the skill to handle both wand and weapon simultaneously. It was why he'd expected the boy to leap at the chance for real training in the art. When Rigel rejected his offer in amused pride, he'd thought him wholly foolish.

Now, he wasn't so sure. The boy looked utterly at his leisure, neither overly tense nor particularly nervous as he led the Durmstrang boy around the stage in a subtle dance. Krum thought he was setting the pace, carefully probing his opponent's defenses with an unpredictable combination of grey magic that mixed dangerous spells with relatively innocuous ones. It was clear to him, however, that Rigel was only obliging the pace to recover energy after his last duel. Eventually, the boy would strike back. Rigel Black was more ruthless than he admitted, whether he realized it or not.

He took a moment to observe those around him in the judge's box. Most of the occupants were utterly enthralled in the duel, impressed, as well they should be, in the level of talent the young wizards were displaying. There was one rather predictable exception. Albus Dumbledore's eyes were, as ever, leveled at Tom.

He wondered whether the old Headmaster suspected his final aim in all this. Probably he did—it mattered not. For once, Dumbledore was only tangentially related to his primary target. A dismayed gasp from Marchbanks brought his head back around sharply. Rigel had taken the edge of a slicing spell to the arm. The boy didn't slow, and Riddle's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. After several more spells were exchanged, Rigel failed to fully shield against a buffeting charm, and was knocked back several feet. Krum began to cast in earnest, no doubt sensing victory on the horizon. Rigel took several other spells in some peripheral way or another, and then Riddle realized his game. The boy never flinched or even betrayed surprise when one of



Krum's spells caught him. Telling, too, was that none of the seriously damaging spells came anywhere close to him.

*He's letting them hit. Lulling Krum into a false sense of security.*

Riddle had to smirk in heady approval. The boy was allowing Krum to come to the conclusion that he was tired, slowing down and getting sloppy. It was gloriously satisfying to watch the Durmstrang champion advance, like a particularly bold lamb to the slaughter.

His sharp peripheral vision surprised a troubled frown on Dumbledore's face. Tom slowly turned to acknowledge the ancient wizard, unable to hide his amusement at Dumbledore's distress. So he was worried for his precious student, was he? Rigel Black would not be the first soul Dumbledore failed to save, nor would he be the last.

Another sharp sound from Marchbanks, whose objectivity was but a fragile screen when it came to the young Slytherin dueling below, brought his attention back to the entertainment. Krum had attempted to press his advantage. He was nearing the center of the platform, risking the added vulnerability of the position under the assumption that Rigel was losing steam.

Rigel allowed himself to be thrown backwards and rolled, seeming to miss the next two spells almost by sheer luck alone. Krum darted forward, but by the time the fourth spell left his wand Rigel was on his feet again, sprinting toward the surprised Bulgarian boy with no sign of the fatigue he'd been feigning just moments before. Krum was thrown on the defensive as his opponent closed the gap between them, forced to hold a shield against the barrage of spells the slighter boy threw his way, scrambling backwards all the while.

Faster and faster the boy cast, continuing to advance until there was nowhere left for Krum to retreat within the wards. The stadium around them was almost silent as Rigel threw magic across the stage as if it was effortless. It seemed impossible that the young wizard could produce magic any faster, and yet, within the space of one breath to the next, he did. The entire platform was lit with the

ferocity of the boy's casting, each spell taking off on wings of light before the one before it had been dispersed. He doubted any shield, no matter how expertly cast, could hold against it for long. Krum was utterly overwhelmed.

It was gratifying to see the boy perform so well, even as his talent made attempting to mentor him... inconvenient. The more Rigel Black succeeded, the harder he would be to control. And yet, his very plans depended on the boy rising higher than he ever dreamed. If only the child would not resist his destiny.

He could feel nothing but pure pleasure watching Rigel force his opponent to submit. Cunning. Patient. Ruthless. Was the boy not a perfect conduit for his knowledge and influence? Even his stubbornness would be an asset, when turned in the proper direction. As Bagman proclaimed Rigel's victory, he listened to the crowd's uneasy rumblings. As the boy lifted his head uncertainly to the sky, he saw the trepidation in his eyes.

He smiled slowly. This, he could work with. Often he bestowed on his followers validation where otherwise in their lives it was absent. Rigel Black would be set apart after this demonstration. Envied. Feared. Suspected of anything the shallow minds of the masses could conceive. The boy knew it, by the uneasy way he ducked his head and allowed the medics on standby to escort him to the healing tent.

Tom caught Dumbledore's eyes as he made his way from the box. The icy gaze levied a heavy judgement, but he was no longer a child. He had no interest in the following match, and took his time descending the many steps to the ground level. By the time he stepped into the healing tent, Rigel's wounds, minor as they were, had all been treated. The healers left the tent quietly as he entered, and he turned his attention to his quarry. The boy sat on a cot with his head down, a cup clutched between his hands. The water in the cup trembled, and when he spoke, it sloshed over the edge.

"Congratulations, Rigel."

The boy lifted his head with a gasp that was only audible to his superb hearing. "Riddle." His voice was flat, but resigned rather than combative.

"What a spectacular set of duels you've had," he went on. "It's easy to see that you're the most impressive competitor on that stage."

Sure enough, the boy's eyes flickered up toward the roaring crowd and back down unconsciously. Rigel grimaced. "I'm winning, at least," he said, shrugging uncomfortably.

He shook his head slowly. "And yet you sound guilty for doing so." Rigel scowled, but before an argument could surface, he'd pressed on. "Their applause means nothing, you know." The boy gaped at him in surprise. He smiled down at him ruefully. "There will always be those who are envious of true ability and trepidatious of its implications." He carefully did not mention the word 'power.' The boy had responded poorly to it in the past. "Of course they try to make less of you. They would rather see you as *other* than as something they could all aspire to if they ever bothered to truly apply themselves."

Rigel's eyes were wide, and he stared at Tom as though he'd never seen him before. He took a small step closer and lowered his chin slightly, just enough to convey a sense of empathetic rapport. "They don't see the hours of training, the late nights spent in fervent study, or the early mornings of disciplined practice. They don't see weekends and holidays sacrificed to self-betterment, but I see those things. I see your ambition, your perseverance, and your drive. You are *extraordinary*, and you shall not apologize for it in my presence." He lowered his voice, softening it deftly. "Anyone who doesn't realize that is in the wrong. Well done today. You've shown the world what you're truly capable of."

Rigel looked more lost than accepting of the words, but that was all right for now. He turned to go, and thought the boy didn't mean his muttered, "That's what I'm afraid of" to be heard by him. He did not acknowledge it, except in his head.

*One day, Rigel Black, you will not be afraid of anything. When you stand at my side, fear will be but a memory of a time before uncompromising greatness was fully embraced.*

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As Riddle walked out of the tent, Rigel had to admit that, if she hadn't been a halfblood pretending to be a pureblood, and if she hadn't known he was full of shite, she might actually find him convincing. There were times, she conceded, when the man was incredibly persuasive. She could hardly blame people for being swayed by him. Somehow, in some sick twist of the fabric of time and space, Riddle had known exactly what she longed to hear in that moment, when doubt and unease churned their way to dread in her stomach. It was precisely that which made her distrust the man, though.

Friends did not come to you when you were at your most vulnerable and attempt to sway you. If the man had known the first thing about true friendship or even mentorship, he would know better than to try to use her weakness to leverage her viewpoint toward his own.

She sighed. Riddle's little pep talk aside, she still had one last duel before the day was done. The look in Krum's eyes as she'd pinned him in place and ripped away the last of his defenses was something she'd never forget. The Bulgarian had looked at her as though she'd peeled off her own face before his eyes. Shock, disbelief, fear, and panic all shot across the staid boy's face in the instant he realized how badly he'd underestimated her. Now they would all know that beneath Rigel's calm, collected demeanor there was something undeniably aggressive. Something merciless.

Knowing that staying in the tent wouldn't help her analyze Owens for her upcoming match, Rigel levered herself up from the cot and left the healing tent behind to seek out the stairs up to the champions'

box. She was the only one left, so she let her shoulders slump and leaned heavily on the railing, taking in the match below with tired eyes.

It was clear almost immediately that Krum had exhausted himself in his match against her. He spent more time dodging than casting, and when he did cast the spells flew sluggishly. The boy's magical core was just about tapped from all the powerful spells he'd thrown her way. Owens was fairing much better, likely because this was only his second duel, not his third, and he conserved a lot of energy with his shield flickering technique.

Owens' footwork was fluid, and he seemed to slide effortlessly out of the way of Krum's ranged attacks. Whenever the Bulgarian attempted to close the distance between them, Owens switched his spells to area-effect charms and transfigurations to keep him back. It was clever, Rigel admitted, watching Krum once again fall back before a barrage of sharp stones banished his way. Krum's already weakened magic would be even more ineffectual at a distance: easy to dodge and somewhat attenuated by the long way the spells had to travel.

The match didn't last much longer. Without the strength to conjure any of his own area-effect spells, Krum was at an unrecoverable disadvantage. When Owens caught the boy in a petrification charm at last, Rigel made her way down from the box with a thoughtful frown. Getting through Owens' defense was going to be a challenge.

She passed an exhausted, bruised, and scowling Krum on the way up to the platform. "You fought well," she offered.

He paused to let her by, shaking his head. "I lost the pureblood spot ven you beat me," he said. "I just wanted to pay that boy back for vat he did to Hermy-one." Krum leveled an imploring look at her. "Thrash him, Black."

Rigel pressed her lips together but nodded slowly. She didn't like the dark desire for vengeance that thrummed in her blood, but she also

couldn't forget the sound of Hermione's ribs cracking beneath an entirely unnecessary Flipendo.

Owens was waiting patiently for her as she ascended the final steps. He smiled, and there was an unruffled quality to the tall boy that didn't sit right with her. Rigel wondered why she hadn't paid closer attention to the boy during the first two tasks. With so many competitors on the field, many of them boasting unique and exotic abilities, it was too easy to overlook the blond American. She should have listened to Pansy and Millicent; she couldn't for the life of her remember anything specific about his background. It should have been a red flag that the innocuous looking boy across from her was leading the scoreboard. Before, Rigel had been too focused on her own concerns to really see this boy, but she was looking at him now.

The boy bowed with a mocking grin as Bagman counted down to the last match. Rigel solemnly returned the bow-if he was going to invoke the courtesies, then she wouldn't be the one to disgrace them. As the final word rang out, Rigel's wand arched into motion. Two stunners and a disarming spell cast so fast there was scarcely space between them were enough to wipe the smile off the Ilvermorny boy's face, but his micro-shield flickered up to intercept each attack.

She had to admit his timing was impeccable. Not many could judge the speed of a spell's approach accurately enough to confidently raise and lower a shield at precisely the right moment. It meant he never spent much time passive, easily moving between defense and offense with seamless speed.

Every time Rigel tried to close the distance between them, Owens repeated his strategy for keeping Krum at arm's length: area-effect spells nasty enough to deter most people from bearing the brunt of them. She allowed him to force her retreat with wind charms, fire spells, and blasting curses. Just as she could see him begin to relax into the rhythm, she charged.

Startled, Owens conjured a barrage of icy shards and banished them toward her in a razor-sharp rain. Rigel shielded without stopping and didn't let up her sprint. Owen's jerked his wand down and the ice instead began to solidify beneath her feet. Rigel leapt forward over the ice and tucked into a ball, maintaining her shield tightly around her and letting it roll her forward in a dizzying tumble. The roll carried her forward so fast, even Owens couldn't get another spell up before she was in his guard.

Rigel's left hand clamped down on his wand arm, jerking the weapon away from her with brute force. Owen's let out a grunt of surprise but reacted quickly; his free hand grabbed wildly at her head, gripping a fist full of hair and yanking it down harshly. Rather than let him leverage his strength to pull her off him, Rigel inverted her wand and severed the hair with a wordless charm. Owens' wide eyes were riveted on her wand, waiting for it to turn around and curse him, but he was looking in the wrong direction entirely.

Her left hand hadn't been idle. The runeless fire array she'd imprinted in pure magic on his sleeve ignited, and the taller boy let out a strangled howl of pain. Rigel had let go of his arm before the array activated, and the boy was free to drop to the platform and roll in an instinctive attempt to put the fire out. Maybe she could have disarmed him right then in his distraction, but she didn't. Later, she could tell herself that she'd been playing it safe, hesitating to avoid overextending herself, but in that moment, she simply wasn't done with Jacob Owens.

As he rolled, she crouched to the stone and drew a ground shaking array with her wand. It ripped up the stage in a circle around her, bucking Owens' rolling form with the force of the magic she'd shoved into it. He hit his head on the stone but managed to raise a shield as he rolled to a stop-not one of his flickeringly short varieties, but a real shield, carefully layered and intended to last. No doubt he would try to hold it until he could regain his feet.

Rigel cast a Lightning Jaw at the shield almost idly, and the magic collapsed in on itself with a shudder. Owens cursed, only half-risen,

and stumbled backwards away from the blasting curse that followed. As she pursued the boy around the platform, Rigel reflected that it was for the best that theirs was the last match. The stage wouldn't be in much condition for anyone after she was through with it.

The next several minutes were an exercise in sheer stamina for Rigel, and a prolonged, desperate escape attempt for Owens. The more disheveled the boy became, the more satisfied Rigel felt. By the time the boy found himself leaning, panting and sweating, against the wards, the stage was a lunarscape of potholes and crevices, interspersed with the occasional scorch mark. Rigel was beginning to tire too, however, and knew that only an end to the match would bring her real peace.

She tossed a couple of standard disarming spell at him and let Owens shield as usual, his signature defense flickering up and away again with the same precision it had at the beginning of the duel. Then, Rigel cast a stunning spell with her wand and followed it immediately with a wandless Banishing Charm, cast from her left hand without moving it from her side. The second, nearly invisible spell caught up to the first about two-thirds of the way across the space between her and Owens. The boy, clearly familiar with the speed at which a standard stunner moved, defended automatically. This time, however, his timing was just the tiniest bit off.

Rigel's accelerated spell reached him before his shield was fully formed, and he collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut. It was a long moment before Rigel lowered her wand and let out her breath in a slow whoosh. Her ears were ringing with the noise in the stadium, but for the life of her she couldn't tell whether it was approval or not. She supposed it didn't matter. She'd won.

The energy which had sustained her for most of the day began to drain out of her like the air coming out of a balloon when the hand holding it closed had let go at last. She considered reviving Owens, but there were already healers coming onto the stage to do just that. Instead, Rigel tucked her wand away and began her final descent from the dueling platform. A healer approached her as she crossed



the lawn, but she waved the wizard off. There was nothing wrong with her that he could fix.

Bagman was shouting something to the crowd, but she wasn't listening. All her energy was bent toward putting one foot in front of the other. Pansy and Draco, somehow, got to her before she reached the exit. They must have left their seats the moment Owens collapsed. She attempted a smile for them, but it withered on the vine. She felt like a rag that had been wrung out and left to hang limply on a line. Already, she regretted losing her temper with Owens. Why had she let the stupid tournament get to her?

"Congratulations, Rigel," Draco said earnestly. "You did it. You're the pureblood champion."

The pureblood champion. She, Harriet Potter, was the pureblood champion. A hollow laugh escaped her, and she clamped her hand to her mouth to hold it in. Her shoulders shook with the effort. *I'm the pureblood champion.* Even her mental voice sounded hysterical. *What a joke.*

The laughter turned to hiccupping sobs, and Pansy gathered her close in a gentle embrace. "It's all right, Rigel. It's over, now. Let it out."

It wasn't over, though. At best, she was only halfway through the storm of madness. She turned her face into Pansy's shoulders and listened to the girl tut over her newly shorn hair. Somehow, the inane concern centered her, and she calmed as Pansy prattled on about the charms it would take to fix the uneven length.

"He looks dangerous," Draco argued. "We should shave it all instead."

Rigel choked out a laugh, imagining Archie's face if she told him he needed to go bald for the winter holidays. When she leaned back to send Draco a grateful smile, he smiled back bracingly.

"Seriously, you were great, Rye." He wagged a finger at her and added, "I think you've been holding back in Dueling Club."

The joke fell flat, and Rigel knew by the slightly awed look in his eyes that she'd really surprised him that day. Beneath his concern for her and his unquestioning support, Draco must be wondering how kind, studious Rigel Black could put someone on their back like that. She'd never gone so far in training.

She turned away from his conflicted gaze and took a deep breath. Forcing a nonchalant grin, she said, "I guess you never brought out my full potential. Maybe Pansy should take over the DA."

"But then it would be the PA," Draco complained. "The Pansy Association just sounds sad."

"How about the Perfect Army?" Pansy suggested lightly. She tucked her arm through Rigel's and began to tow her slowly toward the exit, studiously ignoring the churning crowd that stood between them and the castle doors.

"More like the Pathetic Army."

They bickered over the options all the way back to the Slytherin common room, and somehow the normalcy of their banter cut through the awe-struck faces and the whispers when no amount of stoic pride or quiet humility would have protected her.

By the time she reached her dorm, she had almost stilled the quivering anxiety in her chest. Whatever conclusions her friends may have drawn from her performance in the third task, they were sticking by her. It was that thought that Rigel clutched tightly to as she locked herself in the bathroom and turned the water as hot as it would go.

As the water washed away all evidence of the day, she told herself that Riddle was wrong. Power didn't count for everything, and not everyone who witnessed it would inevitably flinch away from it. It just

confirmed her suspicion that the politician had no real friends. From that thought came another, far more disturbing. How different might the world be if he did?

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Rigel woke the next morning with a vague idea of spending the day in her lab. She deserved some relaxation after the third task, she thought, and her walk to the Great Hall for breakfast was occupied imagining which potion she would brew first.

She veered toward the Slytherin table, but was waylaid as she passed the Gryffindors by a pair of highly complimentary redheads.

"Puppy! You were a right terrier yesterday!"

"Didn't stick around to let anyone congratulate you though," George added, shaking his head in mock disappointment. "Don't you know your adoring fans need face time to sustain their obsession?"

"More reason to remain scarce," Rigel said.

"No chance of that today," Fred said, chuckling.

She frowned, looking between the two sixth years suspiciously. "Why's that? I hope you haven't done anything extravagant."

The twins stared at her. George coughed and said, "It's, uh, the Yule Ball tonight, Rigel." His voice climbed higher as he added, "You do have a date, right?"

Rigel rolled her eyes on a groan. "I forgot about that."

"Forgot?" Fred laughed. "You're only the main even, Pup. Listen, if you need a date, I'm sure we can-"

"No need for that."

The three of them turned to see Matheus Sousa with a relaxed half-smile on his face. She searched his expression critically, but his eyes seemed clear for the moment. The Brazilian boy leaned down and said, voice light, "I will take you, if you like."

It took her an embarrassingly long moment to realize he was asking her to the Yule Ball. Her eyes widened and she shook her head apologetically. "That's very kind. I have a-well, my... fiancée is coming. But thank you. Sorry?"

Matheus tilted his head consideringly at her, but then he sighed dramatically. "I will never heal from this hurt. My life is now pale and black."

Rigel frowned. "It can't be both pale and black."

"Ouch, so harsh, Puppy." Fred snickered.

"Give the bloke a chance," George added, smirking down at her superiorly.

She glared up at them. "Why don't one of you give him a chance, then, if you feel so bad?" She turned to Matheus with a sweet smile. "Fred and George are excellent company. You should ask one of them."

The twins exchange an affronted look.

"One of us?"

"Impossible!"

"We're a set, Puppy."

She was certain they were joking, but Matheus smiled widely and spread his arms. "Will you two do me this honor, then?"

Fred and George had matching expressions of mischief.

"I'm imagining Mum's face," Fred admitted, grinning widely.

"And it's difficult to resist," George agreed, nodding in false solemnity. He eyed Matheus with sudden suspicion. "Say, we weren't your second choice, were we?"

Matheus widened his eyes with affected dismay. "Pray, do not imagine this. In truth, Rigel was but an excuse to talk to *you* ."

"In that case, however could we refuse?" Fred wrapped his arms around George's neck and batted his eyes at Matheus playfully. "Be gentle with us."

Rigel looked between the twins and Matheus, confusion warring with horror as she imagined the three of them unleashed on the world. A thought struck her and she narrowed her eyes at the twins. "Don't drink anything he gives you," she said flatly. A moment later, she reconsidered and shot a worried look toward the Brazilian boy. "Don't drink anything *they* give *you*, actually."

All three of the boys laughed, and Rigel firmly told herself that it was not her fault if Hogwarts was a smoking ruin by the end of the night. She turned resolutely away, thinking that if the world was to end in a matter of hours, she at least wanted to eat breakfast first.

As she sat, Blaise said, "Bit early to be breaking hearts, isn't it, Rigel?"

She shot him a look that said she did not appreciate him using his enhanced hearing to eavesdrop. "The castle has gone mad," she muttered, spooning porridge into her bowl.

"One night of madness never hurt anyone," Pansy said, smiling slyly.

Rigel gave her an unimpressed look. "What hapless soul are you taking, then?" she asked.

Pansy sniffed, but there was something more nervous than haughty about it. "Draco is accompanying me, actually." Her eyes met Rigel's briefly before turning to study her orange juice with undue gravity. "As friends, of course."

"That's great," Rigel said at once.

There was an awkward pause before Pansy said, "Yes, well. Blaise is escorting Miss Abbot, of course. Theo has managed to catch Heir Smith's eye, and Millie is taking Mr. Zahi."

Millicent flushed, the color dramatic against her pale skin. "He's interesting."

Pansy nodded sagely. "He is, indeed. I think it's quite decorous of you to be such a faultless ambassador for Hogwarts, Millie. The visitors are in an awkward position, attempting to secure escorts in a foreign place."

"Not all of them did, though," Theo pointed out. "That Chinese girl brought a beau from home, I hear, and the American Rigel trashed in the finals did, too."

Rigel winced. It hadn't been that bad, had it?

"Delacour is going with Roger Davies, of all people," Draco put in. "Can you imagine that twit attempting a waltz?"

Rigel did a quick mental tally and said, "What about Antiope?" She was the only one, besides Krum and Hermione, they hadn't mentioned.

Pansy smiled slowly. "Miss Weasley asked her. I was there when it happened. She said that stunning redheads such as themselves could only logically deign to accompany one another, and Antiope *agreed*."

Rigel could easily imagine Ginny saying such a thing, and she had to smile in amusement. Picturing the two fiery, bold souls, she thought the combination would either be spectacular or disastrous.

"Weasley just wanted to be the only third year to attend the ball," Draco said cynically.

"Then she succeeded, and we can't fault her for that," Pansy said primly.

Rigel thought privately that people faulted others for succeeding all the time, but she didn't say so. She made it halfway through breakfast without thinking about anything other than how many cauldrons she could reasonably expect to brew simultaneously that morning. She was a little rusty at juggling multiple brews, but the challenge would be refreshing.

The mail brought ripples of surprised exclamations and murmured conversations. Rigel, despite her better judgement, turned her attention to the paper that Pansy was poring over with Millicent and said, "What is it, Pan?"

Her friend had a familiar, uneasy look on her face. "It's... the marriage law."

Her heart dropped. "It's passed already?"

Pansy shook her head quickly. "No, but... it passed committee last night."

Rigel was not at all familiar with legislative processes, but Millicent clarified at the frown on her face. "The bill was introduced for consideration and has passed the preliminary requirements for being voted on by the full Wizengamot at a future point."

"When will they vote on it?" she asked weakly.

"Not for a while," Millicent said, shrugging. "The Wizengamot is in recess through the holidays, and typically only sit about 60 days a year. With the number of propositions already on the docket for the spring session, I'd estimate it'll be at least after the spring break before it's considered."

She felt the ice in her veins thaw in slow relief. She still had time. To do what, she wasn't sure. All she knew was that there must be some way she could influence the outcome. If not, then all the time spent preparing for and stressing over the tournament would be an utter waste.

After a moment in which her blood pressure attempted to convince her to just pack up and move to Majorca, Rigel took a deep breath and turned back to her breakfast. There was no need to be macabre over breakfast. Rather, she should turn her mind to something more productive. How exactly Archie was going to get to Hogwarts, for instance.

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Professor Snape had already made the arrangements, it turned out. Archie would be arriving in her Head of House's office by special international Floo access a short while before the ball was set to start, and Rigel had to wonder just how focused on the third task she'd been that she could hardly remember the conversation she'd had with Snape several days before outlining precisely that.

Pansy, bless her patient heart, had graciously found the time to select Rigel's dress robes amidst her own preparations, and so it was with tentative confidence in her attire that she arrived at Master Snape's office door. She pulled at the stiff collar awkwardly as she knocked. When the door opened, she was entirely surprised to find her professor also dressed in formal robes, his hair clubbed back neatly and his expression no less severe for the transformation.



It made obvious sense, she supposed. It was a formal event for all attending, not only the champions, and that included teachers, too. She stepped into the room to wait and tried not to scuff the shiny toes of her entirely unfunctional shoes as she walked. Archie was right on time, and both she and Snape moved out of the way as the temporarily connected fireplace lit up in a way that had nothing to do with the fire.

Her cousin spun out of the grate with a graceful stride, his delicate, sky-blue dress robes swirling around slender legs. There was an odd gait to his approach and Rigel realized with raised eyebrows that Archie was wearing improbably constructed heels of sparkling silver. Her eyes trailed up the form-fitting tailoring about his hips and waist, and she nearly choked when she noticed the cheerfully bouncing twin globes affixed to her cousin's chest, scarcely contained by the thin, draping material that gathered almost in afterthought around Archie's lithe neck.

*What on Merlin's green earth...?* Rigel did not return her cousin's stunning smile. Her face looked absurdly incongruous atop the menacingly curvaceous form she could only assume Archie had constructed solely on the basis of a *Playwizard* magazine.

"Cousin!" Archie wrapped graceful arms around her. "I've missed you so."

Rigel forced her arms to hug the alien being clinging to her, but dropped them immediately in distaste. Archie felt so *wrong* as a female. "Harry, so glad you could make it safely. Thanks for coming all this way."

Archie shrugged, patting his elaborate updo as he pulled back from their embrace. "Term is over anyway for us. Easier to Floo here and go home with you and Sirius tonight than to catch a flight from the States. Master Snape, you look fantastic," Archie added airily. "Thanks so much for setting up the international Floo tonight."

Snape's face was entirely blank as he said, "Perhaps you and your guest should make your way toward the Great Hall, Rigel."

She nodded, taking Archie by the wrist and saying, "Good idea, Professor. See you in a bit."

When they were safely in the corridor she whirled on Archie and demanded in a strident whisper, "What is wrong with you?"

Archie blinked at her in surprise. "What?"

She jabbed a finger in the general direction of Archie's metamorphized chest and hips. "That! Why didn't you stick to something more androgynous?"

"In this dress?" Archie looked down skeptically at the clinging fabric. "It would never have worked."

"Who told you to pick such a revealing dress?" she hissed. Could he honestly not see any problem with his appearance? "How am I supposed to look like that for the rest of the holidays after Sirius sees you tonight? Salazar, how am I supposed to replicate that for the rest of my *life*?"

A sheepish look dawned across her cousin's face. "Ah, I see. Well, the clothes you wear are usually so baggy. Who's to say what size rack you have? I bet Sirius will assumed he just never noticed. If he notices at all-I mean, he's your uncle. Ew."

"He'd have to be *blind* not to notice those. Trim them down. Now."

Archie pouted at her, the red lipstick on his mouth making the expression more dramatic. "Then it won't fit right."

"I'll shrink your dress a little," Rigel said through gritted teeth.

"Snape's already seen me."

"I swear on your life Professor Snape will. Not. Ask."

The boy in female flesh sighed, but obligingly went down a cup size. It was still overwhelmingly wrong in every way, but at least 'Harry' no longer looked like an underwear model.

When Archie's dress was appropriately adjusted to his satisfaction, they started toward the Great Hall again. He peeked over at her under dark mascara. "Are you still angry with me?"

Rigel sighed. "No. Sorry, Ar-Harry. I've been sort of stressed lately."

"I know." Archie smiled ruefully at her. "I heard you won the third task."

She immediately felt guilty for having forgotten to tell him so herself. "Yes. Sorry, cuz. I should have used the mirror to tell you. I just..."

"I get it, Rigel. Really. You've got a lot on your shoulders right now. I think you're doing great, though. Halfway through, right?"

She nodded wearily. "I can't wait to go home tonight. I need to get out of this mess for a bit."

"Just a few more hours," her cousin said, patting her on the back consolingly. His expression was poised and, if she admitted it, his version of her face was quite pretty all done up in makeup, glittering drops in his ears. *It doesn't look like me, though*, she thought uneasily. Then she shook her head and impatiently reminded herself that she didn't even know what she looked like anymore. What did it really matter what Archie did with her face? It wasn't as though she hadn't ever caused him difficulties wearing his face the last few years.

They reached the Entrance Hall and found the other champions waiting to the side of the Great Hall doors with their respective dates. Hermione waved shyly at them from her place next to Krum, but her welcoming expression faltered as she caught sight of Archie in full female getup.

"H-Hi Harry," she said. After a moment of awkward hesitancy, she stepped forward to embrace her friend warmly. "I've missed you," she added, her brown eyes searching Archie's. Whatever she found there, it softened her smile and relaxed the tenseness in her shoulders. "Letters just aren't the same, are they?"

Archie's eyes swept Hermione with bright appreciation. "Not at all the same. Look at you, 'Mione. You look like a fairytale come to life."

Hermione flushed and giggled embarrassedly. "I spent ages getting ready. I felt such a ninny in front of the mirror, but... well, it's not every day you get to attend a party like this."

Rigel realized that the Yule Ball, which had seemed like just another stifflingly elitist event to her, would be the first time Hermione had any real exposure to pureblood high society. She hoped the girl wasn't expecting a true fairytale-there were more thorns than roses to be found on a night like this, in her experience.

Then again, perhaps Rigel was just cynical. There was no reason Hermione couldn't have a wonderful time, dancing and drinking and reveling in the sparkling beauty around her without ever looking too closely at the sins it concealed.

*Merlin, I sound like Rosier now.* Rigel cast her eyes about for something else to focus on and found Krum hovering awkwardly where Hermione had left him. She smiled bracingly at him, knowing the Bulgarian boy had no idea what sort of undercurrents were being exchanged between his date and her friend from America. Taking pity on the situation, Rigel introduced Krum to Archie before Hermione had to present him as her date.

"Have you met Victor Krum, Harry? He's one of the other tournament champions," she said. "Krum, this is my cousin, Harriet Potter. Harry was nice enough to come all the way from America to be here tonight."

Archie's eyes left Hermione reluctantly and settled on the Bulgarian boy with careful blankness. "Nice to meet you. Shame you didn't make it to the finals."

Krum grimaced, but politely responded. "Your cousin was the better wizard. I wish you luck in the next tasks, Black."

She thanked him, and it was a mercifully short wait that followed before McGonagall began to usher the champions into the hall. As Krum and Hermione pulled ahead of them, Rigel whispered, "Can you dance in those shoes?" to her unusually quiet cousin.

Startled from whatever internal reverie he'd been lost in, Archie blinked at her. "Dance?"

"Yes, dance. We have to dance now," she said.

"You hate to dance," he reminded her.

"I was not given the option of refusing," Rigel said, frowning. "So is that a yes or-"

"Mr. Black. Wait here until Mr. Krum and Miss Granger pass through the doors, then proceed." McGonagall barely glanced at them as she focused on the timing of their entrance. "When the first dance concludes, you'll be called to the small platform in the center to be officially announced as a finalist. Go now, Mr. Black."

They were the last through the doors, and she felt the air catch momentarily in her lungs at the sight of the Great Hall done up in all its festive splendor. She wondered whether the castle was always this beautiful during the holidays, but reasoned that whatever the usual standard was, an event such as the Yule Ball would no doubt have raised the bar higher.

The floating candles had been replaced with shining balls of soft light that danced to their own soundless tune above their heads. Great wreaths sat proudly in a river of thick garland, anointed by the same

golden frost that coated the sills of every window. A dozen towering trees broke up the otherwise cavernous hall, each one decorated more spectacularly than the last, and in the center of them all was a large open space clearly intended for dancing. A full orchestra was stationed where the Head Table usually sat, and a long table of refreshments lined the left side of the hall.

The dance floor already held six couples and one triad, and as soon as Rigel and Archie took up their spot, the music began. She and Archie both stepped the same direction, then froze. Archie's eyes widened comically. "I don't know how to follow," he blurted.

Rigel felt a smile tug at her lips. "Neither do I."

They both laughed quietly, and Archie shrugged. "Let's just make it up."

They began again, Rigel moving so painfully slowly that Archie at least had a chance to mirror her steps before she stepped again. She tried to apply the correct pressure to his waist and hand, to cue him as to her intentions before each step, but Archie was comically incapable of processing her signals in time to meet her movements with his own. They fumbled about in a largely stationary circle, while other champions gracefully danced around them in their procession across the floor.

She met Archie's eyes again and couldn't stop the laugh that bubbled up from her stomach. "This is ridiculous," she said. Still, there was a large grin on her face. When was the last time she'd really smiled about anything? There was a lightness in her heart that hadn't been there for some time. She didn't even mind the pitying glances Delacour and Davies shot them as they twirled by.

The twins, who had formed a loose sort of triangle formation with Matheus, joined hands and lifted them over Rigel and Archie's heads in a bridge as they passed to either side. Archie pretended to cling to Rigel in swooning terror and she laughed again.

Finally, the music swam to a lingering halt and Rigel let go of her cousin to bow. Archie tried to bow too, forgetting that a dipping curtsy would make more sense in his robes, and they bumped heads. "You are the worst date ever," Archie said, rubbing his temple.

"Me?" Rigel snorted. "You're all over the place, *Harry* ."

"But you love me that way, *darling* ." Archie lifted his nose. "Shouldn't you be over there, anyway?"

Rigel looked to see Delacour and Owens both moving toward the very center of the dance floor, where a small platform was raised above the rest of the room. Riddle stood atop it in grand, silver-trimmed robes of evergreen. Rigel sighed, but comforted herself that after this, she would be free of champion duties for the whole winter break. She shot Archie a look before she left and said, "Don't wander off."

He gave a simpering finger-wave and smiled through closed lips. Praying he didn't cause any trouble without her there to stop him, Rigel moved to the raised platform and waited for the other two to ascend the short staircase first before she stepped up after them. From her vantage point, she had just enough height to see over the tops of every head in the Hall. Delacour moved sideways to give her room to stand, her short, moon-white dress glinting in the soft light, and a hush fell over the crowd.

"Welcome, ladies and gentlemen, to our little celebration," Riddle said. He did not seem to shout, but something amplified his voice clearly throughout the room in a way that was exponentially more pleasant than the usual Sonorous Charm. "As of yesterday, the New Triwizard Tournament is halfway concluded, and tonight we crown our Blood Representatives!"

Thunderous applause echoed up to the rafters, and Riddle paused a moment before beckoning Owens forward to the edge of the platform. "First, the Muggleborn Champion. Jacob Owens attained

the highest overall score after the first two tasks, and in the duels he progressed further than any other muggleborn competitor. Congratulations, Mr. Owens. Is there anything you'd like to say?"

Owens had a broad smile on his face as he raised a hand in acknowledgement of the polite applause. "Thank you, Lord Riddle. All I can say is that I'm deeply honored to have made it this far, and I look forward to being able to test my mettle against serious competitors going forward."

Rigel's eyebrows came down in a frown at his words. What was that supposed to mean? That he didn't consider the other champions to be true competition?

Delacour was presented next as the Halfblood Champion, and Riddle explained that although she earned no points in the third round, her scores from the first two were high enough that Antiope, who had earned twenty points for winning her first match but subsequently lost the second, was unable to surpass her. The French girl smiled prettily at the assembly and gave a short speech expressing her renewed determination going forward and the glory and honor she wished to win for Beauxbatons.

Then Riddle turned to Rigel, a truly patronizing smile on his face. "Finally, our Pureblood Champion. Rigel Black. What can one say about this young man? Mr. Black demonstrated remarkable talent, rising to the top against incredible odds in the first two tasks and going on to defeat not two, nor even three, but *four* opponents in the final task. I think it's safe to say that he's the undisputed winner of the preliminary round!" Applause broke out all around them, and Rigel had to fight the urge to scowl at Riddle for singling her out of an already singular group. "Mr. Black, if you please."

Riddle's expectant expression told her it was not a request, and she stepped forward into the range of his amplification spell. She looked at all the upturned faces, wondering what she could say that would mean anything at all to them.



"Good evening. I'd like to first thank all the people who have supported me since this tournament began. I don't think I would be standing here without you." She gazed thoughtfully at the cheerful, entertained expressions below her. "It must seem very exciting, watching us all run and jump and bleed and fall, then get back up to do it all over again. I can't imagine what it's looked like, but I can tell you what it's felt like. These tasks are unlike anything the average person would face in a lifetime, much less just a few short months. I feel more as though I survived something than won anything. To the champions whose scores, determined by whatever arbitrary metric, didn't merit a place in the finals, I'd just like to say: congratulations. You survived it too, with grace and heart both, and I think that's all anyone could ask of us. Thank you."

She met Riddle's eyes with a defiant expression, but he didn't appear overly displeased at her subversive speech. Rather he bowed his head to her and said, "Thank you, Mr. Black, for reminding us all what an arduous journey it's been so far. Truly the young witch and wizards here before you have accomplished a Herculean task already. What awaits them in the new year... well, you'll just have to wait and see, won't you?"

Amused titters rippled through the hall, and like that, the solemn spell was broken, and any small amount of shame Rigel's words might have stirred settled back beneath the blanket of cheap delight.

"As a reminder, for making it to the finals each of our three Blood Representatives will receive an additional 1000 Galleons and a full scholarship to the secondary institute of their choice!" Rigel had actually forgotten about the prizes, and she wondered which secondary program Archie would want to go to. Riddle waited for the cheering to fade before continuing. "And of course, whoever is crowned Blood Champion will be going on an all-expense paid world tour next summer, in addition to becoming the new owner of this rare and powerful magical focus-the Rod of Zuriel!"

Riddle seemed to draw the silver staff out of the very air, and he held it high so that the light-catching red stone cradled on top could be

seen by all. The splitting headache that attacked her had Rigel stiffening in pained surprise. Her ears roared and Dom's voice drifted through the white noise. *Just a little closer...*

Without realizing she was doing it, Rigel stepped forward. The pain receded and she cast out her magical awareness toward the staff, wondering what about it had got Dom so riled so quickly. It didn't feel powerful, exactly-there was no intense concentration of magic in the stone and it didn't seem to be exuding any sort of power into the air around it. There was something there, though, other than a pretty red stone. Something soft, dark, and slow-moving. She bent her focus toward the jewel with a frown, certain that there was more beneath the shadow-feeling at the surface.

She felt a creeping sensation in her mind, the likes of which she had not experienced since she was eleven. Rigel flinched backwards, breath stuck in her throat, and she rooted her feet in place while leaping inward to her mindscape. She'd only just manifested on the mountainside when she heard Dom yelling, "Get back, you fool! I can handle Zuriel's crawling mist!"

Rigel caught a glimpse of inky black fingers pressing through the storm at the edges of her mindscape, but a hand on her arm snapped her back to reality, where Delacour was tugging her surreptitiously toward the platform stairs. Riddle's eyes asked a question as she turned to descend, but Rigel ignored him. She was in the midst of a terrifying discovery and had no extraneous mental energy to spend.

Delacour hissed at her to hurry, but Rigel barely had the faculties to stumble down to the dance floor at her own pace. Her head was aching, her hands shaking, and she very much wanted to hurl at the idea of that stuff invading her head. *Never again*, she snarled in her mind, and only Dom's answering, *I've got this*, kept her from sitting down right there on the floor and sinking into a meditative state without care for where she was or how it would look.

She kept her Occlumency shields strong, aware of the parasite's tendency to jump into unguarded minds nearby, and pushed her way unseeing through the crowd. Rigel was vaguely aware of people calling out to congratulate her as she passed, but she didn't answer them. She made her way to a corner of the hall, skirting around one of the large trees to the backside of it, where she found a small space. The tree blocked the view of the rest of the hall.

With space to breathe, and think, Rigel turned her mind to the wonder, the horror, of the realization that the Rod of Zuriel was a great big ball of Sleeping Sickness. Had Riddle infected it? To what purpose? She replayed Dom's reaction in her mind and let go of the first suspicion. If Dom was familiar with what he called 'Zuriel's crawling mist' then it couldn't have been a recent change to the rod's nature.

What if the Rod of Zuriel was the original source of the Sleeping Sickness? She didn't know how long Riddle had been in possession of the staff, but there was a less than zero percent chance that he'd had it long enough to learn to weaponize its characteristics.

She could tell the exact moment when Dom succeeded in eradicating the black infestation from her mindscape. She felt instantly cleaner and more clear-headed. Rigel did her best to send feelings of gratitude toward the construct, knowing that if it weren't for him, she'd be collapsed in a heap on the floor. She got the echo of smugness in return, and the faint sound of his voice saying, *Typical Zuriel.*

That confirmed, Rigel was left to ask why Riddle would give the staff up now, and what he hoped to gain by awarding it to the tournament's winner. It could simply be that he had no more use for the tool, but she doubted it. At close range, its power was incredibly fast-acting and potent. It made her appreciate exactly how diluted a form of the sickness she'd dealt with in her first year. She wondered how susceptible she would be to its influence if she was in its presence for a prolonged period of time.

"Rigel, what are you doing?"

She whirled around to see Theo holding the hand of Zacharias Smith, clearly startled to find her in the place he'd intended to sneak away with his date to. "I just... needed a moment," she said. Summoning a smile, she smoothed her dress robes restlessly and calmly made her way back to the party proper.

It was only after she began to wander through the crush that she realized she had no idea where Archie had gone.

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Rigel's cousin had *changed*. There was the obvious-made more so by her aggressively feminine attire-but something about the girl's very nature seemed to have altered since the last time Draco had seen her. Potter seemed to... bubble. She wandered the hall with a wide, cheerful smile on her face, greeting those who met her eyes good naturedly and without reservation.

He supposed with a critical frown that she may have simply gained some sort of social confidence with her... physical maturity. Certainly no one would mistake her for her cousin now. He personally hadn't found the halfblood lacking in confidence before, but what did he know about teenage girls? Pansy alone was enough mystery for one person to spend a lifetime unraveling.

The Potter Heiress paused in her journey across the hall as the Weasley-twin menaces called her name, and shortly the girl was engaged in animated conversation with the two of them plus a rather bemused looking Sousa. From his vantage point near the windows, he could see the girl's green eyes as she flicked them restlessly about the room. Eventually her gaze settled, and he followed its trajectory to the dance floor. She was watching the Bulgarian

champion and his date, the Granger girl Rigel kept bringing to their table during meals.

No, he realized after a curious moment of analysis. She was only watching one of them. Potter's eyes followed Granger's smile with a wistful longing so heartbroken that it could only mean one thing. Potter *wanted* Granger. Draco was bewildered as the implications settled over him. Why hadn't the girl asked Granger to the ball herself, then? Had she not had the chance before Krum got there first?

Draco snorted. Perhaps the mudblood was smarter than he'd thought, if she'd chosen the pureblooded Bulgarian over a halfblooded bluestocking like Potter. The longer he watched her watch Granger, however, the more his emotions turned from amusement to irritation. Whatever her feelings, Potter had accompanied Rigel to the ball, not Granger. She ought to be at least attempting to pay attention to her date.

Where was Rigel, anyway? Draco craned his neck, aided by the extra height he'd gained since the beginning of the term, and eventually spotted Rigel near the refreshment table on the other side of the hall.

"Thirsty?" he asked Pansy.

His patient date slid him a sideways look that said he was not fooling anyone and said, "Yes, now that you mention it. Shall we move toward the punch?"

He took her arm with perfect gentility and led the delicate blonde confidently through the crush. A glance at her face revealed a very small smile of amusement, tucked into an otherwise blandly polite expression. Draco felt a pang as he admitted the lovely girl could have had her pick of suitors and had probably only accompanied him to save him the trouble of escorting someone he had no interest in giving his full attention. Pansy was too good for him, but then, that wasn't really news.

He didn't make further pretense of perusing the refreshments when they had crossed the hall; rather, he towed Pansy toward Rigel and caught their friend with a light hand on his arm. Rigel turned and eyed them both with a relieved smile. "How's it going? Have you seen Harry?"

"She's busy mooning after Granger," he said before he could check the words.

"Mm, not surprising," Rigel said distractedly. "Where, though?"

Draco made an impatient noise in his throat and said, struggling to keep his voice even, "Don't you even care? She wants someone else, Rigel."

"I know." Rigel looked over at him with eyebrows raised in surprise. "It's not a love match, remember?"

Draco didn't understand it. How could he value himself so lightly? Would he really rather be with someone who doesn't love him than entertain even the possibility of being with Draco? He tried to steel his mind against such thoughts. He was supposed to be moving past that, or at least trying to for Rigel's sake. It was hard to watch him act as though he didn't deserve anything more than his disinterested cousin, but Draco reminded himself that Rigel's priorities were not his own.

He guessed it was probably easier for Rigel to be in a relationship he didn't have to contribute to. Still, he thought Harriett Potter an unforgivable idiot who didn't deserve Rigel in the least.

"She was over by that tree with the silver birds on the branches," Pansy said softly.

"Thanks, Pan." Rigel shot them a parting smile and melted into the crowd again.

Draco forced himself to turn and begin ladling punch from a bowl rather than stare after his friend like some sort of lovelorn idiot. Pansy took the glass with a sympathetic smile and patted his arm gently.

"It's his life," she said. "We can't make him live it differently."

Draco looked at her, really looked, for the first time that night. He noticed the silver dusting of diamond powder in her hair, the painstakingly perfect curls that must have been created one at a time, and the slightly bored glaze to her soft blue eyes. "I've been a poor date," he said, apology in his tone.

She lifted a corner of her mouth. "I anticipated as much," she admitted. Then she added, "I considered a match with him too, you know." Draco's eyes widened in surprise, but Pansy only shrugged self-deprecatingly. "It was early on, before I realized the truth."

"What truth?"

"Rigel's already decided to live without love." Pansy's eyes were sad, but firm in their belief. "I don't know when he made that choice, but I suspect it was before he ever met us. It isn't personal, and it isn't something anyone can make him un-decide. Until he allows affection willingly into his life, it will always be something intrusive to him. Something troubling, rather than something wonderful."

Draco's mind fought against such a proclamation. "But he cares so deeply," he said, voice slightly hoarse.

"It isn't that he's incapable," Pansy agreed. "One day, Rigel may love someone quite fiercely. For now, however, he simply won't accept it from anyone."

Her words didn't make him feel better, exactly, but a pinch in his pride that he hadn't realized was there did ease just a bit. *She's right*, he realized with an internal groan, *And I really am a willful fool*. All the evidence had been before him, from Rigel's constant discomfort

with attention and affection to his oblivious dismissal of those such as Zhou and Matheus. Even his lack of concern with his cousin's obvious desire for someone else was proof of Pansy's point.

Rigel neither sought love nor recognized it when it came for him. Perhaps it was best, then, that the dark-haired boy hadn't attempted to entertain Draco's suit out of some sense of kindness or duty of friendship. Perhaps, as Rigel had said, it would only have ended poorly.

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By the time she got to the tree Pansy had indicated, it seemed Archie had moved on. She pressed herself up onto the toes of her too-shiny shoes and tried to see over the heads of those around her. Most of those present were adults, however, and she resigned herself to searching the sea of bodies one section at a time.

She saw her father standing at the Minister's shoulder and carefully avoided that circle. He didn't look pleased to be on guard duty again, but she supposed he couldn't ask Dawlish to do it as long as he was technically assigned to Hogwarts. Thankfully, Archie didn't seem to be anywhere near there. The last thing she needed was to see James publicly lose his mind over Archie's choice of attire.

"Archie!"

At the sound of her cousin's name, she whipped her head around to look for him, then realized that, obviously, it was meant for her. After a moment of confusion, she saw Sirius dart from behind two witches in voluptuous skirts and come to a panting stop before her. "There you are," he said brightly. "Mad crowd, eh?"

He scooped Rigel up into a hug fierce enough to take her breath away. "Congratulations, Arch. I'm glad you'll be coming home to us



safe."

She hugged him back firmly. "I always will, Dad. And thanks, but I'm pretty sure the judging is rigged."

He barked out a laugh and drew back to look down at her. "I liked your speech. Thought Riddle was going to swallow his forked tongue."

She let out an undignified snort, picturing the statesman with said appendage flicking out from behind his teeth whenever he talked. "It was spur of the moment," she admitted. "I couldn't resist an opportunity to rain on Riddle's blood-fueled parade."

"Undermining from within, I get it," Sirius said, nodding slowly. He leaned closer and added, "Don't tell your aunt I said this, but... sometimes having a seat at the table is more productive than protesting the table's existence." His face screwed up as he attempted to caveat his metaphor. "That is not to say the table is the only outlet for expression. Just, you know, throwing away the opportunity to sit there won't help those who never get a chance to, right?"

She frowned. "Sure," she said, though she wasn't certain she knew what exactly he was trying to say.

Maybe he would have explained further, but Regulus Black swooped down on them in that moment, clearing his throat as he approached. She wondered whether he had embedded a tracking charm into Sirius's skin at some point; the man never had trouble finding his older brother, no matter how large the gathering.

"Sirius," he said, nodding with the barest suggestion of respect. "Nephew." His grey eyes on her were warm with approval. "Excellent showing in the third task. The might of the House of Black will be unquestioned for years to come."

She stared up at him in utter surprise. Regulus had never been so openly complimentary. "Thank you, Uncle," she said slowly. "I'm gratified you didn't find the display overly vulgar."

The slender man narrowed his eyes at her. "If the tournament were subject to the Common British Dueling Etiquette, you'd have been disqualified a number of times over. Then again, you'd never have faced an opponent with a *blade* in those circumstances, either. Anyone could forgive a certain amount of... indecorous creative action, as it were."

"Any Slytherin, you mean," Sirius said, rolling his eyes. "Just admit Archie was awesome, Reggie."

"Do not call me that," Regulus hissed. Watching his eyes flare over the childish nickname, Rigel tried to hide a smile. They never looked more like brothers than when they bickered. Regulus seemed to catch her amusement in any case, and he let the faintest of scowls cross his face. "Don't think you'll be excused for every lapse in tradition you displayed on that stage," he said sharply. "Wherever did you learn such swift application of runes? That's not in any compendium of standard dueling techniques that I've seen."

She smiled innocently at him. "It was more Alchemy, actually, than runes alone. Headmaster Dumbledore taught me."

"*Dumbledore?*" Regulus very nearly spluttered. "He takes less than a dozen students a decade. I'm to believe he's teaching you some sort of-of battle Alchemy?"

"He teaches me all sorts of things," she said, honesty making her words even sweeter. "His class is quite unstructured. Some days we just talk about whatever strikes our interest." Regulus went pale as his mind supplied a number of topics that the venerable Light wizard might broach. No doubt he thought the Headmaster was working to turn the Black Heir against Dark politics, at the least. She cheerfully twisted the knife a little deeper when she added soothingly, "I'm not

surprised you haven't come across runeless arrays, though, seeing as Dumbledore writes all his own textbooks."

Sirius laughed lightly. "Of course he does. Half the time, I'm pretty certain he only humors the rest of us by pretending to be bound by magic's typical limits."

Rigel chuckled as well, much of her amusement derived from the apoplectic annoyance Regulus was trying and failing to suppress. "You're right, Dad. I've caught him using wildly different wand movements for the same Transfiguration. I think he's just having fun when he waves a wand. Great wizard, Dumbledore."

Regulus opened his mouth to say something, then snapped it shut and turned on his heel to leave their presence. Rigel and Sirius met one another's eyes and both burst into guffaws that had people around them turning to stare.

"That was priceless, Arch," Sirius said, wiping his eyes with one hand and clutching his stomach with the other.

"Uncle Regulus makes it so easy," she said with an amused sigh. "Do you think he's got the hint that I'm not worried about his approval yet?"

Sirius shook his head with a rueful smile. "Reg means well. He just cares a little too much about the Black Family legacy." His eyes took on a wistful gleam. "Cares for it more than he does for the individuals it consists of, anyway." He shrugged off the pensive expression a moment later and made a show of looking around. "Where's Harry, anyway? Don't tell me you lost your date already?"

Rigel grimaced. "I've been looking for her, but I'm afraid we got separated when I was called onto the platform."

She and her uncle spent a moment searching the Great Hall for a glimpse of Harry's sky-blue robes. Rigel saw Millie on the dance floor, wryly attempting to teach Tahil an approximate quadrille.

Blaise was locked with a blushing Abbott beneath a mistletoe-strewn branch, and Rigel turned away as the dark-skinned boy plucked a flower from the tree and tucked it into the girl's blonde hair.

When she finally spotted Archie, it was with an internal groan of despair. He was talking to Rosier. *Why*, in the name of Godric Gryffindor, was he *talking to Rosier*?

"Found her," she said in a clipped voice.

"Great," Sirius said, not seeming terribly concerned. His eyes had found Professor McGonagall, who was suspiciously casting revealing charms at the punch bowl, and he wagged his brows as pure mischief took flight in his eyes. "Think Minnie will agree to a dance?"

"If she does, Uncle James will kneel in awe at your feet," she said dryly.

Sirius puffed out his chest and said, "Challenge accepted. Hold my punch."

He thrust a glass of red liquid at her and Rigel sighed. Seeing nowhere to put the cup down, she tossed the rest of the drink down her throat and pocketed it. A moment later, the flavor caught up with her and she blanched. What on earth had Sirius been drinking? The sharp, biting taste was like no potion she recognized, so she could only assume he'd spiked it with a common spirit of some kind. Rigel shook her head against the unpleasant sensation and swallowed the nausea back. That would teach her to drink anything after her uncle.

Rigel set off toward where she'd seen Archie and Rosier near the orchestra, skirting the dance floor so she wouldn't collide with any of the dancers. She'd only made it halfway around when she was stopped by a frail hand on her elbow. Madam Marchbanks, dignified in a sober, high-collared robe of deep blue, had forestalled her.

"Mr. Black, there you are," the elderly witch said with a satisfied nod. "We wanted to congratulate you on your stunning performance in the tournament thus far."

She ducked her head with a murmured thanks, looking past the woman to where Mr. Ogden stood with a pair of unfamiliar, much younger men. Ogden smiled at her conspiratorially. "I suppose you haven't met the Lords Goldentower yet, have you? You can blame Raoul here for the points you lost in the second task."

The dark-eyed, curly-haired man he indicated gave an affronted look. "Unlike *some* of the judges," here he eyed Madam Marchbanks with a sharp glance, "I have been perfectly impartial." The man, who must have been the tallest and broadest person present apart from Hagrid, bowed with a chivalrous flourish. "Raoul Goldentower, at your service." he said. "This is my partner, Gareth Goldentower."

He indicated the paler, slightly less broad wizard with soft chestnut hair beside him. The second Lord Goldentower-and didn't that get confusing?-gave her a warm grin. "Nice to meet you, Mr. Black. Don't mind Raoul. His honor compels him to be harder on those he approves of."

Rigel smiled back, a little off-guard by the familiar way the man spoke to her. Something Pansy had said rose from the depths of her memory, and she tilted her head curiously at Gareth Goldentower. "Do you by chance run a correspondence school called Sphinx, sir?"

The wizard, who she judged to be about her father's age, raised his eyebrows in surprise. "Indeed, I do. Well, it's really Callaway who runs the program. I only finance the overhead."

"My cousin is one of your students," Rigel said. At Gareth's polite frown of confusion, she clarified. "Harriett Potter. She attends school in America, but is hoping to get around some of the restrictions on employing halfbloods in Britain by doubling up with your courses."

Lord Raoul Goldentower cut into the exchange, curiosity sharpening his sloe-dark eyes. "Smart girl. How does your cousin feel the curriculum compares?"

Rigel thought for a moment before saying, "She thinks Sphinx's Defense Against the Dark Forces material is more comprehensive than most programs' and that Household Charms should be taught in formal schools, too."

"But...?" Gareth pressed her with a cajoling grin. "Don't hold back."

"His ego can take it," Raoul added.

She smiled apologetically and said, "Harry says the Potions curriculum is fairly basic. She has pretty high standards for that subject, though. You should hear how she disparages her Potions Master at AIM."

Ogden made a noise of realization and said, "Miss Potter is the one who came up with the new imbuing technique Burke's nephew has been going on about."

Rigel nodded, but Marchbanks said sharply, "She also saved your life last Yule."

Ogden flushed. "I haven't forgotten." He turned to Rigel beseechingly. "I could never forget the debt I owe the two of you. If you or Heiress Potter ever find yourselves in need, I pray you come to me."

"Or me," Marchbanks put in staunchly.

Raoul groaned. "You can't be so openly partial, Griselda. Does the integrity of the tournament mean nothing to you?"

Marchbanks sniffed. "You know as well as I do that this entire affair has been bungled from the start. There are ways to test an

adolescent's magical prowess *without* risking life and limb. We do it every year, after all."

"Somehow, I don't think the equivalent of a public O.W.L. test would garner the interest the Department of Magical Games and Sports is looking to cash in on, darling," Ogden said wryly.

"Crouch could certainly do a better job reining in that son of his," Raoul admitted. He gave Rigel an apologetic look. "The first task in particular was wildly inappropriate, and I hope you don't think we condone the danger you all were placed in."

Rigel looked between the adults in confusion. "I thought Riddle was designing the tasks," she said slowly.

Ogden shook his head dismissively. "A man of his position doesn't have time for such details. He's left the majority of the logistics to certain members of his party."

"Some of whom didn't do so well on *their* O.W.L.s," Marchbanks muttered.

Raoul and Ogden politely bit back smiles, but Gareth laughed outright. He caught Rigel's eye and winked. "I'm sure you have better things to do tonight than listen to a group of old-timers complain. Before you go, however, I wonder if we might ask a small favor."

Rigel blinked at him, but tentatively inclined her head. "I'm at your disposal."

The two Lords of Goldentower exchanged an embarrassed glance, and Gareth reached toward his robe pocket. Rigel fought against the instinct to stiffen, and felt foolish when the brown-haired man simply pulled out a piece of blank parchment and a quill and said, "Our heir, Gilmyn, is a fan of yours. He asked us to procure your autograph, if we got the chance."

Rigel stared at him, eyes wide. Then she let out a disbelieving laugh and said, "Really?"

Raoul met her eyes with long-suffering amusement. "His godmother, Buri, took him to see the second task in Diagon. The whelp hasn't shut up about you since."

"He thinks you're the greatest hero since Godric Gryffindor," Gareth added, a fond smile tugging at his generous mouth.

She took the parchment and quill with an expression of sheer incredulity. After a moment's debate, she simply wrote, *To my first fan, Gilmyn Goldentower. I hope you grow into a hero more worthy of renown than I. Sincerely, Rigel Black.*

It was only after she'd handed the parchment back with a nonplussed smile that she realized how natural it felt to sign Archie's name. Her smile grew stiff, but she held it as she turned to Marchbanks and said, "I should find my cousin before she thinks I've abandoned her for more beautiful company."

The older witch chortled dismissively, and Gareth shot her an appreciative grin. Rigel bowed and took her leave, determined to find Archie before she got sidetracked again.

It wasn't that she didn't trust her cousin, only that she would feel no surprise to find Hogwarts had been set aflame in his wake.

She searched the hall high and low for Archie, and as she neared the doors with increasing trepidation, she came across Ginny and Antiope sharing a sparkling glass of something pink near the entryway.

"Lost something, Rigel?" Ginny asked tauntingly. Her red-orange hair tumbled in gorgeous curls down her back, the sight a subtle contrast to Antiope's blunt, crimson locks. Both girls were stunningly beautiful in matching golden gowns, but Rigel was too on edge to appreciate Ginny's black humor just then.



"Hello, Ginny. Antiope. Where did Harry go?" She stared Ginny down with a no-nonsense expression, and after a moment the third-year caved.

"Your buxom fiancé left a few minutes ago," Ginny admitted. Her bright eyes flashed as she added, "Said she wanted to see a bit of Hogwarts while she had the chance."

Rigel groaned under her breath. *Of course* Archie would want to see the school while he could. Why didn't she think of that? He was supposed to have attended Hogwarts, after all. It only made sense to take advantage of the one night he could walk the halls to cement a few convincing details in his mind.

She muttered a hasty thanks and left the Yule Ball without a backwards glance, wishing she'd tucked the Marauder's Map into her dress robes that evening.

The Entrance Hall was deserted, the great doors leading out onto the lawn shut tight against the winter chill. She tried to imagine where she would go if she was Archie, and figured the dungeons probably wouldn't interest him. She headed up the stairs quickly, pausing at each landing to look down the main corridor, hoping Archie had the sense to not wander far from the central staircase. If he tried to take on the twisting side corridors or-Merlin forbid-the narrower, moving staircases in the upper levels, he could be lost for hours.

On the third-floor landing, she caught sight of light spilling out onto the flagstones from a doorway and made her way down the corridor to find the iron-gate door to the Trophy Room standing ajar. Rigel frowned and slowed her steps. Why would Archie be drawn to the Trophy Room of all places? He'd never been one for museums.

She peered into the cavernous room and startled backwards almost at once. It wasn't Archie; it was Riddle. The man was standing with his back to the door, staring with arms clasped behind his waist at a shining plaque. He hadn't seen her-she knew he hadn't-and yet his

voice drifted out into the corridor. "Haven't you learned better than to listen at keyholes, Rigel?" Snape's theory was right, then, she thought with a sinking stomach: Riddle could identify her by proximity alone. When she hesitated, not really interested in having a one-on-one conversation with the man, he added, more quietly, "Shall I teach you that lesson again, then?"

With a brief grimace, she slowly stepped around the doorway and into the room proper. "Reminiscing doesn't seem your style," she commented.

He raised an eyebrow. "Do you imagine you know me so well?"

She glanced at the plaque he'd been staring at-his own, of course, and for 'Special Services to the School' no less. Knowing what he'd gotten the award for, she felt her mood sour further.

Riddle noticed, and he tutted chidingly. "What reason have the young to be so embittered? You should be downstairs, enjoying your youth with folly."

"I've seen where youth's folly can take one," she said sharply, still eyeing the brightly polished award. "Besides," she added, finally looking back at Riddle, whose face had gone carefully blank. "Thanks to you, I've more pressing concerns than my youth."

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean. You've won your spot in the final stage of the tournament. You have nothing to worry over until the new year." He put a hand to his breast and affected a hurt expression. "Why, I orchestrated this entire, frivolous event-or my people did, at any rate. You should be thanking me."

Thanking him? Surely, the man jested. Rigel stared at him with open incredulity. "I heard your prejudiced pet project passed committee," she said baldly. "How convenient for you, that it will probably be put to vote before the tournament ends."

Riddle smiled slyly. "My plans are proceeding apace, yes. Thank you for your concern."

"I'm concerned for the world, not for you," she said, disgust riding into her tone.

"I'm trying to save the world."

Rigel scoffed. "Yes, I know. 'Save Our World,' right?"

Riddle's eyes grew cold at her dismissive return. "No, Rigel. You don't know. Without this law, our world as you know it will fade to nothing within the next generation. You should be helping me, not undermining the tournament's messaging at every opportunity."

Rigel dearly wished to reject his words as so much political smoke. Something about the vehement cast to his sneer gave her pause, however. He truly believed what he was saying. She cautiously took his bait.

"How is your bigoted legislation going to make *anything* about the world better?" she challenged. "All it's going to do is consolidate power where it already exists and marginalize muggleborns further by denying them the opportunity to even marry into established wizarding families."

"The plight of the mudbloods can wait," Riddle snapped. "Ours cannot."

He looked as though he wanted to say more, but he didn't. That, combined with the word he'd used before-'generation,' he'd said, not 'century' or 'lifetime'-made Rigel stop and really think for a moment.

A horrible suspicion took root, and she immediately wished she had walked out the door when she had the chance. "No," she breathed, repulsion taking the sound from her denial. "Not even you could be so..." Rigel couldn't finish the sentence. Looking into Riddle's eyes, the truth slapped her in the face. It was utterly counterintuitive, but

wouldn't that be just like him? He, who sickened the children of his own supporters in order to increase their political power. He, who found profound purpose in the repudiation of his own past. He, who tore to the fore the one student in all of Hogwarts who wanted most to slide into the shadows.

"I'm sure I don't know what you're mumbling about," Riddle said, turning his gaze away as though her suspicions were nothing worth considering. Riddle was a predator, though, and she'd never known him to look away from his prey. He was trying to dispel her confidence so she'd drop the subject. It was too late. In a moment of awful clarity, the whole of it had come to her awareness unbidden.

Still, she wished it wasn't true. "Tell me you aren't trying to preserve your twisted party ideals *and* stop the rate of population decline." She gazed at him in wide-eyed accusation. There was a sick feeling in her stomach and she could feel the sweat beading on the back on her neck.

His sharp eyes swung back around to meet her own, and lurking behind the warning there was a sort of mild surprise, as though he hadn't really expected her to figure it out.

"You are," she said dully. "Do your supporters even know?"

Riddle's face was blank as he retreated inward to calculate a response, no doubt attempting to come up with a way to spin her discovery. "In the long run, those in doubt will thank me. We've tried it their way for too long. Encouraged same sex relations, pushed witches to have children younger, longer-nothing works. The blood is now its own poison. We must take halfbloods into the fold."

"Not muggleborns, though," Rigel said sharply. "Why not? The data suggests that merging pureblood lines with the newest possible blood will result in the least likelihood of the Fade."

Riddle actually smirked at her. "Don't be ridiculous. Even I could not convince the old families to go that far."

"So you'll just leave muggleborns out of your new world order." She couldn't say she was surprised.

"Unless our society expands the genetic pool and procreates *without* the delay that forcing the traditionalists so far from their worldview would inevitably trigger... well, there won't be a Wizarding World for the mudbloods to stumble into one day, will there?" Riddle's tone was utterly condescending, as though she were being tiresome suggesting that something like equality or common decency should get in the way of his grand design.

Rigel dropped her gaze to the floor, disgust at his methods warring with the truths Hermione had recently confirmed. It was insidious, yet in retrospect so obvious an idea that she was stunned it hadn't been proposed sooner. The concept of imposing dictatorial limitations on who people could and couldn't marry was a hideous violation of free will, and of course it *would* end up consolidating pureblood power into the old families while at once strengthening the lines, if it worked, but... but.

*Wizarding families are dying out. Magical children are falling victim to the Fade. What if he's right and wrong?*

Shaken, she couldn't move when Riddle leaned closer to her and said softly, "I'm doing this to save us all, Rigel. Won't you help me?"

She didn't know what to think. She needed space to sort through everything, time to reevaluate what she wanted to do. Her instinct was to mistrust what Riddle was saying simply because it was Riddle. Just because an evil man said something, however, didn't make it untrue. If he said the sky was blue, she wouldn't call it orange just to spite him.

Still, she would be a fool to believe him outright, after all the careless manipulation she'd witnessed from his hand. Rigel stepped backwards, putting space between them, and said, "There has to be another way. Just because you haven't found it, doesn't mean it isn't there."

"Wishing such a path to exist won't make it so," Riddle reproved.

"Taking the path most convenient to you isn't any better," she said, lifting her head to allow him to see the stubborn set to her expression. "You do what you think is best, and I'll do the same. If the world is saved, great. If not, at least it won't be because nobody tried."

Riddle scowled down at her, clearly unamused with the turn the conversation had taken. "Rigel, don't be a fool-"

"Good evening, Mr. Riddle," she said firmly. Without waiting for him to respond, she left him there in the Trophy Room, amidst the reminders of a boyhood that, to her eyes, still lingered in the man in spite of his attempts to deny it.

She descended the stairs blindly, not truly paying any attention to where she was going, and her feet carried her past the Great Hall, where the party was evidently still in full swing. By the time she found herself in the dungeons, she realized she had no intention of going back up there, no matter how rude it was to abandon a gathering that was, in some ways, meant to celebrate her.

Rigel slowed her steps as the cool, dungeon air seeped into her bones. There was something calming about the still, somewhat damp atmosphere, and peaceful thoughts of the dungeons inevitably turned her mind to thoughts of potions.

With a jolt of surprise, she realized she'd completely forgotten to give Snape his Yule present. All thoughts of Riddle and the party receded to the back of her mind as it latched onto something she could do that very moment. Somehow, her intention to find the time for Snape's present had been lost in the maelstrom that was the third task and its aftermath.

With a smile of anticipation tugging at the corner of her mouth, she turned away from the main corridor and into the maze that made up

the dungeons proper. *He'll be so surprised*, she thought with a small sense of satisfaction.

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Severus paced the length of the Great Hall with a not-unanticipated sense of annoyed resignation fueling his steps. As expected, his colleagues were too busy socializing to pay any mind to exactly what their charges got up to. It fell to him to patrol the shadowy corners of the hall, all the while suspecting Hagrid of intentionally giving the hormone-laden beasts the perfect cover for mischief.

He rounded a garishly-strewn tree of gold and orange to find Nott plastered indecently against a Hufflepuff whose father assuredly did not know his son was stepping out with a Slytherin. Severus cleared his throat sharply and Nott, attuned to the noise after four years in his House, broke for air with a sharp gasp.

"Professor Snape! Uh, we were just-"

"Spare me the pathetic splutters of your false explanations, Mr. Nott," he hissed. "Unless you wish me to send happy solicitations to your parents, I will not catch either of you again this night."

Smith flushed a violent red and began to stammer a panicky plea that Nott cut off with a none-to-subtle stamp of his foot against the stockier boy's ankle.

"Yes, Professor Snape," Nott said firmly. "Won't happen again."

He jerked his chin toward the edge of the tree and the boys fled. He took a deep breath in a futile attempt to calm his irritation before following them back into the crowd. If he was being honest, and he always strove to be with himself, if no one else, Severus could admit

a large portion of his annoyance had nothing to do with the rambunctious improprieties of his students.

He'd been... not looking forward to, precisely, but certainly *amenable* to the opportunity to speak with Potter about what progress she'd made toward the completion of her portable healing kit. Severus had a number of theories he needed to run by the young potioneer, only to find the chit had morphed into some nightmarish product of adolescent insecurity for the evening. If he was the chit's father, she'd not dare leave the house in that getup.

With a sneer, Severus shook his head sharply. No matter. He would speak to the girl when she was in a more academic frame of mind. He knew well the idiocy of youth.

As he veered for the next tree positioned too close to the edge of the hall, a frisson of discomfort along his spine alerted him that one of his wards had just been tripped. He froze, turning his mind to discovering which one, and identified it almost at once as the entry ward for his personal laboratory.

With a growl that sent nearby students scurrying away with apologies dripping from their lips, he rounded toward the exit. Severus might have known, with so many alumni on the grounds that evening, that the sanctity of his workspaces would be at risk. No doubt some former Gryffindor hoped to gain a small revenge for petty grievances past.

Guests and students alike slid out of his way automatically as they caught his eye, but it was still a frustratingly slow slog toward the Entrance Hall. Severus wanted to blast a path through, but knew that Albus would not appreciate his making a spectacle with so many eyes on Hogwarts that night.

By the time he'd escaped the sea of socialites, he estimated ten minutes had passed. He made a swift descent toward his lab, fury spurring his heartrate higher with every second that passed. Despite his hurry, his pace slowed to a creep as he approached the lab. The



door was ajar, and the torchlight within told him the intruder hadn't yet escaped. He stalked closer on silent feet, wishing fervently for the perpetrator to give him an excuse to use lethal force. Albus could not be too angry, if it was in self-defense.

The door was open wide enough to slip in with the barest whisper of his robes against the stone, and he smirked when he saw the intruder crouched on the ground with their back to him. Amateur mistake, but then, the stature of his vandal told him it was likely a student taking advantage of the distraction upstairs. Severus raised his wand to the ready and said, in his most intimidating snarl, "Lost, aren't we? Did you really think-" The boy spun around on his heels, and the words died in his throat.

It was Rigel, kneeling on the stone in his dress robes and looking up at him with a sheepish smile. "Hello, sir. I suppose the wards gave me away, huh?" The boy looked wrinkled, but content.

"What are you doing?" he bit out after taking a moment to holster his wand. Rigel was holding a piece of chalk, and he'd scribbled several rows of runes across the floor of his lab.

Rigel looked back at his work, added a couple of lines to the last rune, then pocketed the chalk and drew his wand instead, saying, "Caelum gave me the idea."

Once his mind had reviewed the words and confirmed his hearing, he pointed out, "Caelum Lestrage hates you."

"Well, he told Harry and Harry told me," Rigel admitted. "They're sort of... friends?" The boy's nose scrunched and he shook his head. "No, that doesn't work. They have an understanding, I guess. Anyway, do you like it?" Severus raised his eyebrows, a pointedly blank look on his face, and Rigel flushed lightly. "Oh, right. Hold on, sir."

He turned back to the runes and began to cast slowly, a chant-like spell that caused the runes to glow white. The floor of his lab began

to ripple, and he felt it buckle slightly beneath his feet. Severus locked his knees in place until the spell had finished and the runes dissolved. The floor did not reassert itself fully, however. With a frown, he tapped down on it with his foot and encountered a springy give that seemed to mold itself around his boot. He took several steps and his frown receded. It was... not uncomfortable.

At his silence, Rigel began to babble again, dusting off his hands carelessly. "I wanted to thank you for everything you've done for me this term. You tried really hard to prepare me for the tasks, and I didn't make it easy on you." Severus snorted. Rigel grimaced and said, "I was a brat, all right? And thank you for teaching me free brewing. I mean, I know this isn't close to equal value for your lessons, but... thanks. Happy Yule, sir."

Severus stared down at the child. Rigel looked back at him earnestly, chalk smudged across his cheek and nervous anticipation in his gaze. "Thank you," he said slowly. "This was very thoughtful." He did not, as a rule, accept gifts from students. Usually it was little more than a transparent attempt to bribe his favor. This, however... Rigel had taken time to adapt the idea, no doubt researched the necessary runes and spells, and attempted to surprise him with the gesture.

He was unavoidably moved and reminded why it was that, even when Rigel was being bullheaded and deliberately obtuse, he would bend over backwards to see him succeed. Rigel was, without question, deserving of everything he could give the boy and more.

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The rest of the night was a blur. She remembered stopping by the Slytherin common room to collect Treeslider and her trunk before Snape escorted her back to the Great Hall, an oddly embarrassed expression on his face all the while. She remembered the relief at finally finding Archie talking cheerfully to Professor McGonagall

about AIM's Transfiguration curriculum. After that it wasn't long before Sirius had found them both and asked if they were ready to go. Many of the guests had begun trickling out of the castle toward the Apparition point, and she was all too happy to join them.

It was late when they dropped Archie at Potter Place, and she hoped her cousin changed out of those robes and wiped off his makeup before James got off duty and confronted him about it. They would switch back tomorrow, and she was better at handling her father's ire than Archie was. If he went straight to bed, he could put off the lecture until the next day.

She dropped into Archie's bed as soon as she had deposited Treelider with Sirius' other snakes for the night, not bothering to take off more than her shoes. The next morning, Harry was up with the sun. With a sleepy yawn, she mentally asked Dom to switch over to their pyramid mindscape. With the echo of his affirmation in her ears, she chose a pair of Archie's more comfortable jeans and a jumper to don before jogging downstairs. After leaving a note for Sirius saying Archie had gone to Potter Place, she snagged an apple off the counter and Flooed over.

Archie wasn't awake yet, but Addy was. The eighteen-month-old girl toddled her way across the kitchen under Lily's feet and squealed in delight when Harry ran into an invisible, waist-high barrier across the doorway and nearly fell on her face.

"Archie! You're up early," Lily said. She waved her wand and the barrier changed to a soft blue color so Harry could see to climb over it. "Sorry about the baby gate. She wanders into everything these days."

Harry shrugged, and hugged Lily quickly before answering Addy's insistently tugging fists. She swung the redhead up into her arms and bussed the cute kid on the forehead. "How's it going, munchkin?"

"Hawee!" Addy exclaimed, clapping her hands together seemingly just for the fun of it.

"No, darling, that's Archie. Ar-chie," Lily said, smiling apologetically at her.

Addy's cherub face scrunched unhappily. "A-choo," she kid gurgled, somewhat less confidently.

"Smart kid, Aunt Lily," Harry said wryly.

Lily smiled proudly. "Isn't she? The other day she recognized Sirius in his animagus form."

Harry wagged impressed brows at her little sister, and Addy giggled before squirming to be put down again. "I'm gonna go wake Harry," she told Lily.

"She's usually up by now," Lily said absently. "Maybe she's reading."

She nodded in agreement as she stepped over the baby barrier once more, but wasn't at all surprised to push open the door to her room and find Archie sprawled like a starfish, face down in her pillow. Harry shut the door quietly behind her and went to shake the boy awake.

Archie murmured a protest at the jostling and rolled over to swat at her arm. In his sleep, the boy had dropped his metamorphmagus ability and Harry stared for a moment at her cousin's true face. He'd grown so much in the last year. She shook his arm again, thinking it was a good thing she'd thought to come over so early. If James or Lily had come in to wake their daughter before she got there, they'd have had a lot of explaining to do. That is, if James let Archie explain anything before hexing the unknown boy in his daughter's bed.

"Archie," she hissed softly. "Come on, get up. You can go back to sleep at your own house."

"Wha-Harry?" Archie blinked open steely grey eyes and smiled sleepily. "Hi."

She rolled her eyes. "Hi. Tell me when your brain starts working again."

Harry got off the end of the bed and crossed to her chest of drawers to pick out her clothes for the day. She was going to get out of the house and take a break from everything, so she chose warm layers and dug her winter coat out of the closet. She shrugged off Archie's sweater so he could wear it back to his house and paused in slipping her own shirt on at the strangled sound from the bed. She cut her eyes over to Archie with an unimpressed look. "If you can handle altering my bust size to fit into an entirely inappropriate cocktail dress, then I think you can handle me in my undershirt, cuz."

Archie's ears were red and he coughed uncomfortably. "Yes, in retrospect my imitation was a bit off," he said, glancing embarrassedly at her androgynous torso and away again. "Still," he said, injecting a cheerful note in his voice, "I think you'll have a few new offers for your hand after last night."

"That's not a good thing," she told him, scowling as she shrugged first a long-sleeve shirt, then a warm jumper on over her tank top.

Archie shrugged and closed his eyes for a moment. His features rippled and slid into a perfect mirror of her own, and when he opened his eyes he abandoned her oversized pajama shirt and dragged the sweater she'd shucked over his own head. She'd changed into her own trousers while he morphed, and Archie slid his pale legs into the discarded jeans with an ungraceful hop that revealed how sleepy he still was.

Harry was lacing up her boots when Archie said, "Don't forget your contacts."

With a sigh of resignation, she fished a key out of her underwear drawer and opened the box on her bedside table. She only had a

few sets left, but it would last her through winter break, at least. She'd order more in the spring.

She and Archie looked one another over once Harry had her eyes right. Archie had done a good job matching Harry's newly shorn hairstyle, and she allowed him to lengthen her hair with a quick charm so that it would at least approximate what he'd achieved with his updo the night before. With nods of mutual approval, they both made their way downstairs.

"When are we going to take the you-know-what?" Archie asked.

She grinned at him. "Whenever you like. Not today, though. I'm going into Diagon."

"Tomorrow night?" Archie suggested quietly. "That'll give us enough time to start pretending to be ill."

"Good call," she agreed. "After dinner, then."

She stopped by the kitchen to tell her mother she was headed to Diagon, and Lily bade them a fun time distractedly as she attempted to dissuade Addy from climbing the rubbish bin. Not correcting Lily's impression that Archie would be going with her, Harry led the way to the Floo. Archie gave her a tired grin and said, "Grimmauld Place."

She waited for the flames to die down before stepping in herself and Flooing to the Leaky Cauldron. Striding through the dim pub, she felt a strange buoyancy fill her chest, as though she'd shrugged off a heavy lifejacket and could swim freely for the first time in ages. By the time she melted into the bustling holiday crowd, Harry could feel a smile blooming across her face. A laugh bubbled up in her chest, but she held it in instead of letting it out. It made her chest tight but her head light.

She'd known as soon as she woke up that morning that she didn't want to spend the day at home. Her parents would want to catch up with her, would nag her to eat or play with her little sister, and for

once she wanted an entire day to herself. Harry beelined for Tate's apothecary and greeted the cheery shop-keep warmly.

"What can I do for you today, Miss Potter?" He gestured toward a sign near the till and added, "Got a new model of portable fire charm on sale."

"I'll take two," she said brightly, collecting a basket with a practiced swing. "I also need a new standard size four pewter cauldron, a size two platinum cauldron, a starter kit of stirring rods and steel knives, two stands, three crates with glass vials, and a large ladle, if you don't mind."

Tate raised his eyebrows as he jotted the list down. "Stocking a new lab, are you?"

"Something like that," she said, smiling. As Tate fetched the equipment from the back, Harry began to peruse the isles of ingredients, loading her basket with all the basics and a few more specialized ingredients she used often.

By the time Tate had all her requested items lined up on the counter, she was finished. "Your usual account, Miss Potter?" Tate confirmed.

She nodded, and added, "Could you please shrink them for me?"

He obliged, and within twenty minutes of entering the apothecary, she walked out with the makings of a rudimentary lab in her pocket. With a satisfied bounce in her step, Harry slipped away from the crowds, into Knockturn Alley, and headed toward Kyprioth Court. She half-expected to run into Leo on her way to Dogwood Lane, but supposed the king must be busy with other matters. Just as well, since she really wasn't in the mood to chat. There was a restless energy in her veins that could only be cured with brewing.

Her flat was dusty, the corners smattered with cobwebs, so she took the time to cast each of the household cleaning charms she'd picked up from her correspondence course. When she no longer felt a

sneeze lurking in the back of her nose, Harry pushed the furniture in the living room up against the walls to make space in the middle for her cauldrons. She tugged the musty quilt from the bed and spread it over the living room floor to protect it from small splashes, then set about unshrinking her purchases and arranging them to her liking.

After cracking the window to provide a bit of ventilation, she grinned in anticipation and started on her first potion. The size four cauldron would be used to make large batches of the potions she owed Krait, while the smaller, platinum cauldron was for her experimentation. Harry wasn't fool enough to freebrew in a lab with no protective wards, of course. While she thought she could probably contain any explosions if she was quick enough, it would be unwise to take the chance when she had neighbors living below her.

Still, that didn't mean she couldn't work on improving her latest series of shape-imbued healing potions. With the assumption that she could get a needle to administer potions to very specific areas of the body, Harry had gone ahead and made headway on potion versions of the spells to heal broken bones, torn muscles, and ligaments, as well as one to stymie internal bleeding.

Next, she wanted to develop a true emergency potion that would counter severe allergic reactions. There were a couple of spells that blocked histamine receptors in the body, and she wanted to try them both in a base with Bicorn milk as the signifying ingredient. Harry thought the protein-rich milk could, with the right emphasis, induce acute adrenaline production.

The faint sounds of passersby drifted in through the window, and Harry let the peaceful atmosphere lull her into complete relaxation as she worked. After months of stealing an hour or two at a time to brew, it was utter bliss to ignore the clock completely and let the world drift by without her.

She worked steadily from potion to potion, bottling, corking, and labeling before moving on to the next. The shadows walked across the room, but they meant nothing to her. When she ran out of bottles,



she cleared away the dregs from her cauldrons with a quick spell, then set them in the sink to wash properly.

With the cauldrons resting upside-down to dry, Harry stretched her arms and back and peeked out of her front window with a contented smile. Looking out at the cloudy, mid-winter day, she felt more centered than she had in a long time.

Harry shut the window and separated her experimental brews from the bottles that would go to Krait. She hefted two full crates and carried them out to the stairwell, setting them down just long enough to lock up before continuing down to the street.

Across the way, the white-haired Mrs. Whitlock was leaning on her cane, watching the two Botting children kick a small Quaffle back and forth. Harry raised a hand in a friendly gesture, and Mrs. Whitlock waved her over.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Whitlock," she said, setting the crates down for a moment to rest her hands. "How are you?"

"Just fine, Mr. Potter, thank you," the old woman said, squinting a smile her direction.

"Harry's not a mister," Jim Botting said smartly. He was about nine now, she thought, and last she knew not one of Leo's scamps. She wondered how he knew about her gender, but supposed the word must have slowly spread through the alleys after the freedueling tournament. Harry had to wonder how many people knew her last name now, as well. Mrs. Whitlock had known from the start, but she didn't think the older woman was the type to gossip. With luck, Leo's friend Harry would not be immediately connected with Harriett Potter.

Mrs. Whitlock wacked Jim with her cane lightly. "I'll address people as they're introduced to me, Jimmy." She turned back to Harry with a polite smile. "Haven't seen you in a good while. Away at school, I suppose."

Harry shrugged vaguely. "I'm sort of homeschooled, actually." At Mrs. Whitlock's somewhat disbelieving expression, she added, "I muffle the floors in the flat so I don't bother the downstairs neighbors. I suppose since I usually Floo everywhere, it must seem abandoned, huh?"

"Well, we never see any lights on anymore," Mrs. Whitlock said slowly.

"Unnecessary use of magic," Harry said with an easy smile. "I had a friend staying with me for a while, but since she moved out, I just go to bed when the sun goes down."

Mrs. Whitlock made a noise that was neither agreement nor reproof. "You've certainly been a very easy tenant. Everything working okay?"

"Just perfect," she said. Glancing at the crates, she added, "I'd best get these where they're going. It was lovely to see you again, Mrs. Whitlock. Jim, Clara, see you around."

"Bye Harry!" the two kids chorused.

She continued on to Krait's. The Serpent's Storeroom seemed to be doing good business when she walked in; Harry had never seen more than eight people in the shop at once, but Krait currently had over a dozen customers. She wove around them to the back room, where she deposited the crates out of the way. She was about to leave when Krait popped back into the storage room and shut the door behind him.

She raised her eyebrows, taking in the tall, blond man's serious expression. "What's wrong?" she asked.

He clenched his jaw before answering, and the scar along his neck jumped erratically. "There's been some trouble, kid. People are looking for you."

Harry frowned. "What kind of people? Why?"

"The bad kind," Krait said impatiently. "I've been threatened twice, once by mail and then last month some punk defaced my front window. Someone wants to know real bad which of my brewers can manage Potter's shaped imbuing method."

She sucked in a concerned breath. "Plenty of people in the alleys know I brew for you, and some of them know my last name."

"Exactly," Krait said. "It's only a matter of time before they ask the right person and put the pieces together. Watch yourself, kid. Leo can't be everywhere at once in these alleys."

"But why would they care who brews them when you sell the potions themselves in your shop?" she asked, bewildered. "If someone wanted one, they could just buy it."

Krait dropped his voice lower before saying, "There's recruiting happening down this way. Mostly cesspool scum, and for what, I don't know. Could be they're looking to round out their talents with a good brewer of their own."

"Recruiting for a play at the Kingship?" she guessed, disturbed. It had been over a year since a real challenge was made to Leo's position.

"No," Krait said slowly. "Something bigger. There's whispers... dangerous rhetoric, you know? Like the kind linked to these attacks what keep happening. Just take care, all right?"

"I promise to," she said quietly. "Thanks for the warning."

Krait straightened and rolled his neck in a too-casual gesture. "Can't go losing my best brewer when she's just started outclassing all the rest, can I? Get on home before it gets dark, then."

She smiled at his gruff dismissal and ducked out of the back room. When she stepped out into the late afternoon air, she spotted Leo lounging against the alley wall opposite the entrance, his posture so casual she knew he was trying hard to appear nonchalant. Merlin, but he was a welcome sight. There was something intrinsically comforting about Leo. It was in the familiar smile that hovered about his mouth and the unconsciously relaxed grace to his gait as he pushed off the wall and came up before her.

"Harry," he said, a fond crease around his eyes. "Right on time."

She raised an eyebrow while smiling up at him. "I didn't know you were the keeper of my schedule."

"Just a keen observer," Leo said with a laugh. He held up a hand and began to tick fingers off jokingly. "Let's see: first day of winter break, a restless Harry who suddenly has too much free time, and late enough in the afternoon to allow the completion of a handful of potions. Yep, that adds up to you being at the Serpent's Storeroom at this exact moment in time."

She shoved him for his presumption, but couldn't deny that he was exactly right. "So I'm predictable," she said, lifting her chin haughtily. "Maybe you should find a less boring friend."

"Boring, no," Leo said as they set off walking toward Diagon. "How was your first term?"

She shrugged. "Busy. A bit stressful. I just have too many projects going at once, I think."

Leo shot her a knowing look. "And how many of the projects did you bring home with you?"

Harry ducked her head in acknowledgment. "One or two... or a few." He laughed at her, but it wasn't censorious. Leo never was. "How've things been here?" she asked, Krait's warnings fresh in her ears.

"Pretty good," he said cheerfully. "The tournament up at Hogwarts has been great for business. They put one of the observation mirrors here for the second and third tasks, and my pickpockets made out like princes. Of course, it was lucrative for the shops and stalls in the main alley as well. Tithes are going to be good this year."

Harry kept her voice light as she asked, "Did you get a chance to watch the third task?"

Leo hummed. "I bit. I notice you taught your cousin a few things-he was wicked fast."

Harry grinned. "I tried, at least, when he came back from the Americas this past summer. He didn't take to the knife, though."

"A shame," Leo said, chuckling. "That would have been a thing to see: a nobleman wielding a knife like a common tramp on a worldwide stage. I almost wish he had."

"You're not angry at me for passing on your teachings?" she said, just to make sure.

Leo shook his head. "It's your skill now to do what you want with. I can't exactly patent hard work, can I? Anyway, I'm glad the boy's doing well, for your sake. I know it would kill you to see him hurt."

"Thanks," she said, her mood dipping a little. "I'll be glad when the final task is over."

"Might get to see that one in person," Leo said. "I gather it's to be a grand sort of spectacle, and one of our troupes got the contract with the Ministry in exchange for the damage that occurred during the World Cup."

"That's great," she forced herself to say, even while thinking it was anything but. "Won't it be dangerous for you to go, though? The Aurors might be looking for the elusive King of Thieves, and it'll be

suspicious if my dad, who knows you as the son of the Aldermaster, notices the strange deference your people show you."

Leo waved an unconcerned hand. "You may not know it, but I'm a fair hand at disguise. My people know better than to identify me so publicly, too. It'll take more than the Ministry's usual security precautions to catch me."

His grin was infectious, and she found herself smiling back. It was so easy with Leo. Why couldn't it be like that with Draco? By all rights, it should be similarly awkward between her and the tan boy walking beside her. It wasn't, though.

Maybe it was the distance, she thought. Space and time could bring equilibrium to anything. Whatever the reason, she was grateful. She didn't know what she'd do without Leo. He was a fixture in her life, a strangely solid constant in a mercurial world that was otherwise defined by temporary truths in a perpetual state of change.

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The following evening found Archie and Harry competing for the best-sickness acting award. Both were well-practiced in deception by now, and it was with some amusement that they attempted to one-up one another over dinner.

Archie was pale, and a sheen of sweat beaded on his brow. He picked at his food and every so often grimaced and averted his eyes, as though the very sight of the green bean casserole was making him nauseated.

In retaliation, Harry was somewhat flushed, her fringe sticking to her forehead damply and her eyes deliberately unfocused as she stared dully ahead with seemingly no care for her empty plate at all.

With a worried look between the two of them, Lily set down her fork and said, "Archie, Harry, are you all right? You both look ready to collapse."

Harry turned her head slowly toward her mother, blinking lethargically. "What, Mum?"

Lily put out a hand to feel Harry's forehead and tsked under her breath. "You're burning up, dear. Do you feel sick?"

She nodded pitifully.

Sirius, who was next to Archie, felt his own son's head with a frown. "This one doesn't have much of a fever, but he's clammy as anything."

"I was clammy earlier," Harry said, keeping her throat constricted so her voice came out rough. "Do you feel kind of achy, Arch?"

Archie groaned. "Very. Don't tell me it gets worse. What did you give me? Some American virus?"

Harry gave a weak glare, as though she hadn't the energy to be truly annoyed. "There was a bug going around school a couple of weeks ago." She looked apologetically around the table. "I hope I didn't give it to everyone."

"That's rather fast-acting," Remus commented with a frown.

James was already leaning away from her sharply. "I can't afford to get sick right before the holidays. Sorry, kids, but you both need to go to bed right now. Lily will bring you some soup later."

Lily raised an eyebrow at James and huffed. "I will, will I? What if I get sick and pass it to Addy, then?"

"I'll bring the broth," Sirius volunteered quickly.

"Maybe Harry should stay with me, then," Archie said slowly. "I've already got it, so we can quarantine ourselves from Addy."

Lily looked grateful at such thoughtfulness, but hesitated. "Will you be able to look after them both, Sirius?"

"Just leave it to me," Sirius said, tapping his fork against the table to emphasize his words. "I'll have them hearty and hale in no time."

Archie smiled at his father, then swayed in his seat suddenly. Sirius reached out a hand to steady him and said, "Let's get you home, sport."

"No soup tonight, Dad," Archie moaned as he took his feet slowly. "I don't think I can stomach anything."

"Drink lots of water, though," Lily said. "And take a Fever-reducer before you fall asleep."

Harry nodded, then winced and clutched her head as though the act had pained her. "I have some in my kit," she said. She pushed back from the table and made her way gingerly toward the stairs. When she was out of sight, she picked up the pace and rummaged in her potions kit quickly to find the bottles of Animagus Revelation along with two vials of spit-soaked Mandrake leaves. She pocketed all four and grabbed a couple of Fever-reducers to carry in her hands.

When she reached the Floo, Sirius was waiting for her. "Archie's already gone through," he said, sympathy in his eyes. "Go carefully, now."

She held the bottles in her hands tight against her sides, keeping the ones in her pockets from moving too much as she Flooed. Archie was waiting for her on the other side. He shot her a mischievous grin that quickly morphed into a pained grimace as Sirius followed Harry through the grate.



"Harry, you still have spare pajamas here, right?" Sirius asked. He shooed the two of them up the stairs like a fretting nursemaid.

She nodded and smiled weakly. "Always. Thanks for letting me stay, Sirius."

"Of course, of course," Sirius said. They reached the landing for Archie's room and Sirius said, "You two get comfortable and I'll get you some water."

He left them to change quickly into their pajamas. Harry fetched the sleeping bag she used when sleeping over at Archie's and laid it out on the ground with one of Archie's extra pillows. When Sirius came back with the water, they were both tucked up to their chins and the lights were out.

Sirius set a large glass of ice water beside each of them and brushed Harry's sweaty hair back from her face before saying, "Did you take the potions?"

Harry gestured to the empty bottles she'd dumped out in the sink just moments before.

Her uncle smiled and crept toward the door, closing it softly after a murmured, "Sleep well."

Harry and Archie were silent as they counted the seconds it would take Sirius to get downstairs and Floo back to Potter Place to finish his dinner. After a few minutes, they both sat up and lit the torches again. Archie had a grin as wide as his face as Harry pulled the bottles and vials they needed out of her pockets.

She handed Archie the vial with his spit in it and one of the Animagus Revelation potions. He eyed it with mixed excitement and trepidation. "It's going to make us sick for a week afterwards, right?"

She nodded. The Animagus Revelation took quite a toll on the body; there was a reason people didn't drink it whenever they wanted to

turn into an animal, after all. "It'll make our cover more believable when we're actually sick tomorrow," she said.

"How do you know it won't cancel out the Modified Polyjuice when you take it?" Archie asked next.

Harry grimaced. "I don't. I made an extra batch just in case, though."

Archie nodded, his concerns evidently satisfied. He lifted the bottle of shimmering potion to the light. "I can't believe we're finally going to find out our forms," he said. "I hope it's something useful. Like a phoenix."

Harry rolled her eyes. "You read the book-you know it won't be a magical animal. There have been no recorded cases of that ever happening."

Her cousin shrugged, a smile tugging at his lips. "It was just an example. Useful comes in all kinds, I guess." A thought struck him and he blanched. "Harry, what if I'm a fish?"

She snorted. "There's nothing fish-like about you."

"I'm a *water sign*, Harry! I could die before we change back. Doesn't it take an hour to revert?" Archie gazed at her with wide, earnest eyes.

She sighed, but said, "I'll let you go first, then. If you're a fish, I'll put you in the bathroom sink." She was pretty sure neither of them would be a fish, whatever astrological indications to the contrary.

Her ludicrous reassurance seemed to calm Archie down, and he took a deep breath. "Okay. So I just add the leaf to the bottle and drink, right?"

"That's the gist of it," she said, nodding. She gestured to the mirror next to Archie's closet. "Try to note as many details as you can when you transform, so you can recall them later. Remember: after we

take this potion, we still have to learn how to do the actual self-transfiguration. This is just to identify our forms."

Archie nodded. "Yeah, I get it. Ready?" He unstopped the vial of spit and dipped a finger into it with a grimace. With the wet leaf clinging to his skin, he transferred it to the bottle of Animagus Revelation and swirled it gently.

"Wait until it turns silver," she said. It only took a moment before the potion looked like liquified unicorn horn. With a ready grin, Archie tipped it back and gulped the whole thing down at once.

He grimaced, opened his mouth to say something-no doubt a comment on the taste, but froze comically. He shuddered, his muscles twitching briefly, and then the bottle fell from his limp fingers and his body twisted around and into itself in the blink of an eye. Under Harry's watchful gaze, Archie shrank, his clothes folding into some dimension that only Transfiguration Masters had mapped, and in just a few short seconds her cousin was gone. In his place was a tawny fox about two feet in length, complete with narrow snout, pointed ears, and fluffy tail.

The fox rolled across the floor and back to its feet with a shake. He took a couple of steps forwards, fell, then took a couple more back. Archie seemed to notice his own tail out of the corner of his eye, because he spun quickly on the spot before tripping over his own feet and flopping clumsily to the floor.

Harry had to laugh. She'd worried it might be difficult to identify their exact animal types, but Archie was the most obvious red fox she'd ever seen. He was significantly larger than other species of fox, and his white underbelly ran all the way up under his chin to curl around the sides of his mouth. In a way, it made sense, she mused. Foxes were playful and adventurous, with very strong family ties. On top of that, they were a species of canine. When Sirius found out, he was going to be pleased as anything.

As Archie struggled to coordinate his newfound limbs, Harry turned to her own bottle. She added the leaf and swirled it expertly. Before taking it, she hesitated, Archie's worry echoing in her ears. With a soundless grumble, she headed into his bathroom, filled his sink with water, and sat herself on the counter next to it before drinking the potion. If she was a fish, at least she'd be able to flop her gills into the water before she suffocated.

The sensation was utterly dizzying, and Rigel had to close her eyes against the vertigo as an experience not unlike Polyjuice Potion wracked her body. Her stomach heaved against the feeling, but in the next moment a hook like a portkey in the vicinity of her navel overtook her awareness and she collapsed in on herself.

She could feel her body shifting, she noticed with a small sense of wonder. Harry felt every bone and muscle and organ as they shrank, shifted, and twisted into something new. When all the movement stopped, she held herself very still. Nothing hurt and she was still conscious of the fact that she was Harry Potter, human girl under the effects of an animagus potion. She could also breathe without effort, which told her without a doubt that she was not a fish.

When she opened her eyes, the first thing that struck her was the wide field of vision now afforded to her. She didn't have to move her head at all, yet she could see almost the entirety of Archie's bathroom. Including his mirror. Surprise took her as she caught sight of her new form, and her neck muscles twitched almost involuntarily. Her vision swam oddly as her head moved, but by keeping it still she could process what she was seeing.

Harry was a bird. A black one, at least a foot and a half long, with glossy feathers and a deep black beak to match. The only spots of color were her eyes, which gleamed like emeralds in her small skull. A startled noise escaped her, emerging as a sort of croak. Curious, she made the noise again, this time on purpose. A deep throated, "Pruuk, pruurk," rang through the bathroom clearly.

She lifted a foot, just to see if she could, then lifted the other one next. It wasn't easy to balance the clawed appendages against the smooth counter, and her arms went out automatically to stabilize her wings, rather. The iridescent plumage was like slick oil, and she admired it for a moment. The wedge-like shape of her tail caught her interest, next, and Harry mentally classified herself as a raven, subspecies of the common crow.

Snape would be so disappointed if he knew, she thought with amusement. A raven instead of a snake. Better than a lion, she supposed, ruffling and smoothing her feathers reflexively. Ravens were exceedingly common. She could blend in just about anywhere, which was more than could be said about her father's stag animagus form.

A noise from Archie's room brought her attention away from her own reflection, and Harry waddled to the edge of the sink before pausing. The most obvious thing to do would be to fly down to the floor. She had no idea how to go about such a trick, however. Harry tried to lift her wings, and after a confusing moment realized the muscles to do so were located in her chest, not the wings themselves. With a few minutes of experimentation, she was able to isolate the muscles and draw her wings out to their full breadth. She had maybe four feet total wingspan, but the wings themselves were so light she didn't feel unbalanced at all.

She tried flapping her wings up and down quickly, but it only took her a couple inches off the ground before she landed awkwardly on clawed feet again. Harry peeked over the edge of the sink and wondered if she ought to jump or not. How did birds do it? She crouched down, pretty sure she'd seen birds do so before taking off. With a powerful beat of her wings, she tipped forward off the edge of the sink-and fell, plummeting to the ground as the air streamed between her feathers.

Harry rolled to her feet with an irritated twitch of her head. So much for animal instincts. She toddled toward the door, awkwardly holding

her wings out as she wasn't sure how to tuck them back into place properly.

Archie was preening in front of his closet mirror, picking up his paws one at a time and every so often emitting a high-pitched yip that was almost a bark. Harry croaked to get his attention and the fox spun around instantly, a growl on his lips. Archie tucked his sharp teeth away a moment later, as his human mind caught up with him, but it didn't stop Harry from letting out a caw of alarm.

They stared at one another. It occurred to Harry that foxes sometimes ate birds, but after a moment Archie's tongue lolled out and he rolled on his back with a very foxy-like grin, showing his white underbelly. Harry relaxed, her feathers soothed back into place, and she cocked her head at the fox in inquisition.

Archie took to his feet again in answer and proceeded to prance about the room on all fours. Her cousin had gained an admirable amount of control over his limbs in such a short amount of time. Harry watched him with amusement before attempting to flap herself into the air once more. She rose a couple of inches, then landed again. Archie released a series of yips she was pretty sure counted as a laugh, and she clicked her beak at him in retaliation.

They didn't have forever in their current shapes, so she and Archie both set about learning as much about the feel of their animagus forms as possible. Harry desperately wanted to figure out how to fly, but the exact mechanics of it weren't intuitive at all. Eventually, she realized she needed to keep her feathers close together to prevent the air from simply escaping between them. Somehow, she still wasn't getting enough force to take her into the air, however. Focused only on her new shape, Harry didn't realize how much time had passed until Archie barked agitatedly to get her attention and pointed his muzzle at the clock on the wall.

It had been an hour and a half. Harry felt her heart sink as she realized they had far exceeded the advertised amount of time the Animagus Revelation should have afforded them.

She tried to remember what it felt like to be human. The awareness of her true form was just out of reach, and with a trickle of fear she realized for the first time that she couldn't feel Dom in this form at all. It was as though a large part of her human consciousness was locked away for the moment. She had no access to her magic, wandless or otherwise, and no matter how her mind raced she couldn't think of any way out of the raven's body.

Archie whined in the back of his throat and sank to the floor to rest his head on his front paws, ears drooping. Harry tilted her head to focus one of her eyes on him better and realized his fur was slowly changing color. It looked more rust now than tawny, and she wondered whether some of his natural metamorphmagus ability had bled over into his animagus form.

Harry waddled toward her worried cousin and tucked her beak up against his neck fur gently. Somehow, they would get out of this. The potion couldn't have gone that wrong, seeing as it had changed them perfectly into animals while allowing them to retain their human thoughts. It just appeared to be a bit... over... powered. Harry croaked in annoyance. Of course. She'd over-brewed it. Hadn't she replaced all her ingredients after Snape told her about the issue? Everything in her kit was new, except, of course, what had already been put into the Animagus Revelation potions before she'd been made aware of the problem. That, and the vials of spit, she thought in grim understanding.

It wouldn't last forever, then. Just... significantly longer than expected. Hopefully, it would wear off before either of them got too hungry. Harry didn't know exactly what ravens ate, but she suspected it included bugs.

Archie's ears twitched and he turned his head toward the door just moments before Harry heard the sound of footsteps coming down the hall. They both scrambled for cover, but neither was coordinated enough to move quickly. Archie dove into Harry's sleeping bag while Harry attempted to flap her way back toward the bathroom. She almost made it.

Sirius opened the door carefully at first, no doubt expecting to find two teenagers sleeping off acute illness, but when he spotted their empty covers, he flung it open wide and stepped into the room with alarm on his face.

"Archie? Harry?" He scanned the room and noticed Harry at once, conspicuous as she was in the bathroom doorway. With a frown, he drew his wand in an instant and leveled it at her warily. "What the devil-?"

Before he could decide to cast at her, Archie sprang from his hiding place and skidded toward Sirius's feet with a barking battle-yip, baring sharp teeth in her defense. Sirius leapt backwards with a cry and he tried to stun the fox, but Archie rolled out of the way and whined loudly, tongue lolling out at the wizard as he placed himself between Harry and Sirius' wand.

Sirius blinked, lowered his wand slightly, and said, "... kids?" Archie yipped happily and Harry let out a single croak of agreement. Sirius's eyes, already wide, blinked hard. "You... you managed the transformation already?" A smile grew across his face until he was grinning proudly. "Well done! Look at you! I mean-it's only been a few months. Now who is who?" He looked between the two of them eagerly. "Wait, I know! Archie, you're the fox, right?"

Archie bounced on his feet and plodded forward to nudge up against his dad's legs. Sirius sank to his knees and Archie happily jumped into his lap. The wizard laughed and ran his hands gently over the fox's sunset-colored fur. "Do you know what this means? We can go running together, Arch. Wait until James finds out-and Harry! I might have guessed you'd be a bird; always one to observe from afar before that endless curiosity drew you in. I suppose you're some sort of magpie or jay, eh? It's only just that the next generation of Marauders would embody the trickiest of nature's creatures."

After another minute of looking over their animal forms and making various exclamations, Sirius said, "Well, turn back then, and tell me how you managed it so quickly."



Archie began to whine again, his ears pulling back, and Harry ducked her beak into her wing embarrassedly. Sirius narrowed his eyes, looking back and forth between them. "Don't tell me you haven't learned to turn back yet."

Archie jumped out of his lap and over to where his empty potions bottle lay on its side. He nudged it with his nose and yipped.

Sirius let out a sudden laugh, throwing his head back in merciless delight. "Oh, I see! You haven't learned it at all yet-you've only taken the Revelation potion." He shook his head at their downtrodden postures and laughed again. "Serves you right, not waiting like I told you to. I suppose you're stuck for now? You know, a crueller man than me would leave you to sit it out."

Harry tried to make a noise of supplication, but the "pruuk" just sounded agitated. She flapped her wings restlessly and rose half a foot before dropping back to the ground.

Sirius snorted. "You might want to read up on bird mechanics, Harry. You look like a duckling with two broken wings."

She ruffled her feathers in annoyance, but had to concede that she would be doing just that, if she ever regained her human shape. Sirius raised his wand again with a sigh and said, "I suppose I can't torture you too long, seeing as I did promise Lily to look after you."

The Animagus Reversal Spell lit the room with a blue light, and with a lurch that felt a bit as though she was an accordion that someone had pulled sharply apart, Harry found herself standing on her own limbs again. She lunged forward to hug Sirius, nearly tripping as her usual muscle control reasserted itself. "Thank you," she said into his shirt. "I over brewed the potion and thought we were going to be stuck all night." Surreptitiously, she put a hand up to feel the shape of her face, double-checking that the Animagus Revelation potion hadn't interfered with her Modified Polyjuice at all. They'd been incredibly lucky, it seemed.

Sirius hugged her back before letting go to study her carefully. "You appear to be in one piece, at least. I wish you hadn't gone behind my back like this, though. It's dangerous to try and do this on your own. What would you have done if Archie got hungry and lost himself to his animal instincts?"

"The thought occurred to me rather late," she admitted, eyeing Archie's now-russet form with the respect paid by prey to a predator.

A second spell reverted Archie to his own, albeit metamorphed, form, and he whooped with delight before joining in on the group hug. "I wouldn't have eaten Harry," he murmured, sounding mildly offended. "She didn't smell like food."

Harry drew back with a skeptical expression. "What did I smell like then?"

"Not-food," he said at once. "Can't explain it better than that."

"You may have recognized her as pack on some level," Sirius said, sounding excited. Then he seemed to recall he was supposed to be scolding them. "Promise you won't do something unsupervised like that again. Why didn't you just wait for me to teach you?" he added, something like hurt in his eyes. "I told you I'd help."

Archie and Harry exchanged a guilty look. "We sort of wanted to prove we could do it," Archie admitted slowly. "Like you did, when you and Uncle James were young. Also, we thought since we don't have much time over the holidays, our lessons would go faster if we already knew our forms. Now we don't have to spend valuable learning time with you meditating or trying to cast a patronus."

"We wanted to surprise you, too," Harry said ruefully.

Sirius gave them fond looks of exasperation. "Come on, you two: you should know you don't have to try to look cool in front of me after all these years." They both poked him in the ribs as he laughed.

"But seriously, are you going to tell the other adults?" Harry asked. She had a feeling Remus hadn't changed his mind since the last time they'd brought it up to him, and Lily would almost certainly be furious that they'd taken such an unnecessary risk, on top of lying about being sick in order to do it.

"Would that be a very *Sirius* thing to do?" her uncle asked, wagging his eyebrows. He considered them for a long moment, then smirked. "Besides, now that I'm in on the secret it's much more fun. I can't wait to see the look on their faces when you really achieve it, but until then... well, it might be better to present the facts as fait accompli."

"Ask forgiveness, not permission," Archie agreed, grinning in relief.

Sirius pulled them into a hug again. "Aww, how can I be mad when you turned out exactly how I always wanted?"

Harry and Archie both had to smile at that. It was quintessentially Sirius to be more proud of the mischief behind an act than upset by the trouble it caused. They were lucky to be raised by a man so understanding and supportive, who encouraged their flight even as he guarded against their fall.

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Once she and Archie recovered from the truly miserable sickness the aftermath of the Animagus Revelation potion inflicted on them, the holidays passed quicker than she wished. Days danced off the calendar in dizzying pirouettes of potions, animagus study, and time with her family. With Lily now working independently from home, she saw a lot more of her mother on those days when she didn't venture into the alleys. Lily also used her home lab more frequently, which meant Harry stuck to the makeshift lab in number eight, Dogwood Lane when she wanted a prolonged period of uninterrupted brewing.

Her experiments with Bicorn milk were only partially successful. The reaction was exactly what she needed it to be, but it wasn't *enough* of what she needed, unfortunately. A few short days before she was to return to Hogwarts found her tapping her fingers against the windowsill in her small kitchen, wondering if there was a way to tweak the base such that the Bicorn milk featured more strongly in relation to the neutral ingredients.

She supposed there wouldn't be any point to having a constant base for the process of shaped imbuing if she went and tweaked it whenever she wanted to achieve a different result. Maybe she could try imbuing the Bicorn milk before adding it into the potion? She didn't want to just increase the volume of milk; she was fairly certain the high fat content was already distracting the amplifying magic from the true signifying ingredient, which should be the proteins in the milk.

She had to remove the fat from the milk somehow. Harry sighed in annoyance. She knew only the bare bones of distillation theory. Mostly, she was good at adding things together, not separating them into their constituent parts.

There was someone she knew that might be able to help, though. She checked the position of the sun and wondered whether he'd be awake so early in the afternoon. Harry could wait until nightfall, but Krait's warning had made her more conscientious about her safety, and she didn't want to wander the alleys after dark if she didn't have to.

Thinking it couldn't hurt to try, she locked up the flat and made her way back toward Knockturn Alley. The Lamia Lodge hadn't changed at all, except that a significant amount of paint had abandoned the grey door since that summer. Eyeing the newer scratches distrustfully, she pushed the door inward with a wince for her poor ears.

Eyes narrowed in annoyance, Harry rummaged in her potions kit and produced a small vial of sunflower oil. A few drops on each of the

hinges and the door swung shut near-silently. Feeling vaguely vindicated, she tucked the oil away and made her way down the dim corridor. Gavril was halfway across the lobby when she emerged from the entryway, no doubt having heard her entrance and prepared to investigate the delay. He stopped so fast at the sight of her his lank hair swung forward to drape around his shoulders.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Gavril," she said with a pleasant nod.

From his looming height, Gavril stared down at her consideringly. His waxen features creased in a slow smile. "The Rogue's little messenger bird. Come with more bad news?"

"Not at all. I was wondering if Mr. Kasten was awake yet. I wanted to ask him about a potions problem."

Gavril made a noise of impatience that was the scrape of metal on stone. "Always with the honorifics. We are not 'misters' here. The Newborn is below, as always."

He glanced toward the staircase that led down to the lower levels and turned to make his way back toward the desk, which she noticed had acquired a new leg since the last time she'd seen it.

She took a couple of steps toward the stairs, then remembered the way Leo had been careful not to use his wand in coven territory unless given explicit permission. "Could I take a light down with me?"

From the desk Gavril produced a taper that was as long and slim as he was, and as she approached he set a single match beside it with a smile that flashed his fangs. "How is the Rogue these days?"

"Fine, I'm sure," she said. "How's Irina?"

At mention of his mate, Gavril's smile softened just a little. "Still beautiful." As she headed toward the dark staircase he added playfully, "Watch your step."

She took what she thought was the correct passage at the bottom of the stairs, and before long came to a door that read 'Distillery' in faint letters. She knocked, and there was a long pause before the door swung slowly open.

The short-haired, yellow-eyed vampire blinked down at her over her small candle. His head tilted and he sniffed delicately. "You were here before," he said, his voice a strange combination of rustling leaves and trickling water.

"Harry," she reminded him. "I'm sorry to bother you while you're working-"

"I'm always working," Kasten said.

Harry smiled. She knew that feeling. "I just wanted to ask whether you had time to teach me a little about essences. It doesn't have to be right now," she assured him.

Kasten left the doorway and retreated back to his workstation. She hesitated, unsure whether he was dismissing her, but then he said, "Come inside."

The workroom was as she remembered it. Counters ran at waist height all along the walls, and the little light her candle gave off illuminated shelves upon shelves of purified ingredients reaching all the way to the ceiling.

"What do you want to know?" he asked, not looking at her as he put what appeared to be a thermometer into the cauldron that was simmering over a blue flame.

"I'd like to learn how to distill Bicorn milk into its constituent parts," she said. "I'm working on a potion that needs a more concentrated form of the milk. Could I turn the raw ingredient into an essence?"

"Perhaps," Kasten said vaguely. "It depends on what you want it to be. Milk is simple to separate, but the quiddity of the substance

you're searching for will determine what kind of a separation is required."

Harry was quite sure she had no idea what he was talking about. "Quiddity?" she repeated, hoping her confused tone would encourage a more elaborate explanation.

Kasten's voice was impatient as he said, "Quiddity, yes. That which a thing is in itself, which is to say, that which, without it, it would not be."

"Okay," she said, only slightly more enlightened. "Well, I basically want the proteins from the Bicorn milk, but not the fat."

The vampire hummed in understanding. "You want the dry matter. Removing the fat will be easy. Once it is gone, heat and salt will decouple the water from the proteins you need. With some encouragement, you'll have an essence in no time."

Harry was heartened to hear that, though some of what he said was over her head. "Can you teach me how?"

His yellow eyes caught the light of the candle as he glanced over at her. "Yes."

She smiled. "Thank you. I can pay for your time, of course."

"Money is meaningless," he said, uninterested.

"Oh. Well, what would be not-meaningless, then?" she asked.

Kasten seemed to think it over while slowly stirring the cauldron before him. Finally, he said, "There is a shop in Diagon. It is only open while the sun is up."

She waited for him to continue, but he fell silent. Patiently, she said, "I could go there before it closes. Do you need something they sell?"

"I need a snake," he said.

"A snake." Of course he did. "I can get you a snake. Which one?"

"I also need a kneazle."

Harry blinked. "Okay. Is it a... pet shop?"

"Yes. The snake must be an elapid." Kasten hesitated before adding, "That's a family of snakes."

She nodded. "Tropical and subtropical, right?" Elapids included cobras and kraits, and as far as she knew all of them were venomous. "Are you still working mainly with toxins?"

Kasten shook his head, paused, then nodded instead. "Partly. I am interested in antisera at present."

"Like antivenins?" Harry guessed.

"Antivenins, antitoxins, and more," Kasten agreed. His voice began to pick up speed as he explained. "Sometimes the essence of one thing is an antiserum to another. Quite fascinating, isn't it? Practically speaking it is, of course, the opposite of essence creating, as usually a serum requires re-diluting to some extent before it is useful. The two fields are related, however. Antisera are an extension of my experimentation with inactive essences."

It did sound fascinating, and Harry said so.

Kasten seemed pleased, if his elaboration was any indication. "Essences are rarely understood. It isn't a simple function of opacity, as some assume. At times it is as simple as removing the non-essential, however, I find that an essence is also sometimes an amalgamation of separate, mutually dependent parts."

She didn't pretend to fully understand him, but she smiled in thanks for the explanation. "One elapid and one kneazle, then. Anything else?"

The young vampire shook his head slowly. "You'll go now?"



"Of course." She left him in his lab and made her way carefully back toward the staircase. When she rejoined Gavril in the lobby she said, "I'll be back."

Gavril didn't lift his head from its resting place on the desk, opting to flick unconcerned fingers at her instead. She set the candle down beside his lax arm and left the vampire hotel.

The sun was still strong in the sky as she strode into the Magical Menagerie. She told the young man behind the counter what she needed and he scratched his chin lazily.

"Got a green mamba," he said. "Bit dangerous, though."

She shrugged. "I'll take it. And the kneazle?"

"We've got black, grey, and orange," he told her.

"Any is fine." In truth she felt a bit awkward choosing the unlucky kneazle, as the odds of its being exsanguinated once it produced the antibodies Kasten wanted were relatively high. At least, that's what she assumed he was doing with the animals. She didn't know enough about his work to say for certain.

In the end, she left with the green mamba and a black kneazle in separate carrying cases. Harry wove her way back to Knockturn Alley and reached the Lamia Lodge well before sundown.

Gavril eyed her interestedly on her way back through the lobby. "Is that a courtship gift?"

Harry stopped walking to stare at him. Was it a *what*?

"Because you really should have sought permission from Count Aurel first," he drawled, disapproval lacing his rasping voice.

Harry spluttered. "Why would-? No . It's-he just needs these for his experiments." She didn't know where Gavril would get the idea she wanted to court the Count's grandson, much less why two random

animals would be considered an appropriate offering to a vampire in such a situation. Gavril gave her a skeptical expression, as though she might be lying about why she was toting a snake and a kneazle through his lobby.

Her cheeks flaring, she transferred both carriers to one hand and swiped the still-burning candle with the other. Deciding to ignore Gavril's insane question, she descended the stairs again and fairly ran the distance to Kasten's workspace.

He bade her set the carriers on an empty counter and motioned her over to where he now had a second cauldron set up next to the first.

"You have raw Bicorn milk?" he asked. She produced a small bottle from her kit after a moment of searching. He took the bottle from her and examined it before nodding. "This will do."

He moved over to the counter on the right side of the workroom and Harry followed him with her candle. The counter held a strange-looking device. It was shaped like a wheel lying on its side, and in each spoke was an angled slot about the size of a small bottle. Kasten slid her bottle of Bicorn milk into one of the slots and put his hand on the edge of the wheel. With a sharp motion, his arm flew sideways, flicking the wheel into motion.

Round and round it spun, at a speed she could scarcely comprehend. Kasten used his incredible strength casually, pushing the wheel twice more to keep it moving at the rate he wanted.

When it stopped, he quickly removed the vial and held it up for her to see. The once-homogenous milk was now separated into distinct sections. "The heavier components will be pressed to the outside," he said. Uncorking the vial, he skimmed the top layer off of the milk with a spoon and said, "Fat is light. Now it is gone."

Harry was stunned that it could be so simple. She didn't know where Kasten had obtained such a spinning device, but she supposed she could find a spell to do the same basic function for her.

Kasten wasn't finished yet, however. He poured the remaining milk into the cauldron and took a pinch of something from a pouch at his waist, tossing it into the small cauldron as well and adjusting the portable fire charm to his satisfaction.

"Salt?" she guessed.

He nodded. "The proteins are not truly dissolved in the water, only bonded to it. The salt will disrupt those bonds. The heat will encourage them to abandon the bonds altogether, and the water will eventually evaporate. What is left is the essence you need."

Harry smiled, knowing she could recreate Kasten's methods herself with a bit of practice. If the concentrated Bicorn protein worked, that would be one more potion for her portable healing kit.

While they waited for the water to evaporate, Harry said curiously, "If you don't mind me asking, how long have you been doing this?"

Kasten's yellow eyes seemed to flicker in the candlelight. "I have been studying essences for sixty years, fifty of which I have spent as a member of the undead."

Seeing as he didn't look much older than twenty, she supposed he'd become interested in the subject as a teenager. "Are you really Count Aurel's grandson?" she asked. She had heard the count was hundreds of years old. It didn't seem possible.

Her fellow potioneer rolled his shoulders uncomfortably. "The Count is a distant ancestor of mine. It is easier to call him 'grandfather' than to count how many 'greats' our true relation reflects. He does not make a practice of turning all of his descendants," he added before she could ask. "Why he chose me, when I had several older siblings more conventionally talented and sociable, I've never been able to discern."

She wondered whether it had happened suddenly, or with his permission. Kasten didn't seem fully at ease with the subject,

though, so she let her questions fade into the back of her mind. "Sometimes it does little good to ask why things happen. Better to focus on what to do once they have," she suggested quietly.

Kasten hummed his agreement. "I've found my purpose. I don't want for more in this life."

Harry was hit with an acute, irrational bolt of envy. What she wouldn't give to be left to brew whatever she wanted, whenever she wanted. Could there be a more perfect existence? In the wake of that longing came the bitter-sweet knowledge that such a life was beyond her, for the time being. Someday... but then, it didn't do to dwell on someday and ignore the now, did it?

Soon there was nothing left in the cauldron but a kind of damp paste. Kasten scraped it into a vial for her and said, "Any more and it might burn. Will this suffice?"

She grinned. "We'll find out when I try it in the potion tomorrow. Thank you, Kasten."

The vampire rolled a shoulder in a motion that she was coming to associate with some slight embarrassment. "Come back if you find another essence you need."

"I will," she promised, more than pleased with the day's work.

Harry took her newly acquired essence and left the lab. She was drifting somewhat absent-mindedly up the stairs when she heard a voice that made her pause and listen. It wasn't that she recognized the voice-in fact, she doubted she'd ever heard it before-rather that the tone of it was so out of place in the Lamia Lodge as to be remarkable in itself.

"-demand to see the Count this time," the man was saying fiercely.

It was Irina who answered. "The Count only entertains humans when he's hungry. Are you volunteering?"

An outraged huff preceded the man warning, "My master will hear of this insolence. When the time comes for the oppressed peoples of the world to take their rightful place, you'll be out in the cold."

Gavril let out an amused chuckle. "Mortals fear the cold, not we."

"And if you stay a while, I don't think you'll find us oppressed at all," Irina added, dark promise thrumming through her words. "In fact, we can be quite *unrestrained* when the mood takes us."

The man hissed something too low for Harry to hear, and footsteps told her he was leaving. Quick as a cat, she crept up a few more stairs until she could see the wizard. She caught his profile from the side and immediately recognized him from the World Cup. It was Crouch's son, disheveled haircut and strange lip-tic intact. When she heard the front door slam behind him, Harry slowly climbed the last few steps and gained Gavril and Irina's full attention.

"Eavesdropping is plebian," Irina told her.

Knowing full well that vampires could and did listen to almost anything that happened in their vicinity, Harry ignored the reprimand to ask, "What was he doing here?"

"Same as those who've come before," Gavril said, shrugging unconcernedly. "Trying to convince our coven to join in his glorious revolution."

"As if we'd ever participate in something the Carpathians deemed a worthy cause," his redheaded mate said with a curl of her upper lip.

"What revolution?" she asked, eyes tight with concern. Was this the same recruiting Krait had spoken of? "Did he say who he represents?" She didn't know much about Crouch jr., but Mr. Ogden had said he was one of the party members Riddle entrusted to help formulate the tournament tasks. If he was there representing the politician, recruiting from the alleys for some kind of coup d'état, then Riddle had played them all.

Gavril scoffed. "His mysterious backer does not give a name. Calls himself the flight of death. Baroque, no?"

The flight of death. Her French training translated the phrase automatically and Harry felt her stomach clench in unchecked dread. *Voldemort*. It had been a year and a half since she heard that name, but the memories came without calling, a rush of pain, anger, and fear.

"You can't trust Voldemort," she said sharply. "Whatever you do, don't listen to a word he says. And be careful; he doesn't like to take no for an answer."

Gavril exchanged a lightning-fast glance with Irina and said, "We've no interest in listening to a wizard who sends such rude messengers. If the conflict grows too irksome, we may simply relocate."

Harry accepted that with a small amount of relief. If Voldemort was truly still alive, and actively recruiting to boot, then the fewer who joined him the better. "Have you told Leo?"

"The Rogue has not asked."

Right. She would warn him, then. Come to that, she should warn others, too. Her father, to start. She had no proof that Crouch jr. had broken any laws, but surely she could think of *something* to tell James that communicated the seriousness of the potential threat Voldemort represented.

The only one who might truly understand, she realized with a sick sense of irony, was Riddle himself. Harry's mind raced in circles as she left the Lamia Lodge, and finally settled on a memory of Pettigrew, of all people, fiercely justifying his coming to Hogwarts with a simple truth. Those in Riddle's party were always more afraid of *him* than they were of anything else. If the DMLE couldn't get to Crouch jr., Riddle certainly could.

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[end of chapter ten]

A/N: Well there it is my lovely readers. A bit shy of the 50k that was promised, but a doozy nonetheless. Thank you all for your exceptional patience and support. I hope everyone is having a wonderful summer (or winter, if you're in the opposite hemisphere), and happy belated birthday to me!

I just wanted to give a shout out to my amazing beta Mary. Thank you for all you do, and I hope you are feeling better soon. As always, thanks to everyone for reading and reviewing.

-Violet

# Chapter 11

## The Futile Façade:

### Chapter 11:

Harry looked up from *Potions Quarterly* with an unimpressed sigh when Archie burst into her room and shut the door loudly behind him. He leaned against it, looking slightly out of breath, and she half-expected him to drag a piece of furniture across the frame. For a moment, a much-younger Archie transposed himself from memory over her fourteen-year-old cousin. A bittersweet smile twisted her lips. In four years, her cousin had both changed entirely and not changed at all.

"She won't take no for an answer," Archie panted. His eyes were wide in his head and bright like a cornered animal's.

"Lily?" she guessed, flipping a page unconcernedly. Her mother had been wheedling Archie about giving her a duel since they returned from school. She'd been polishing her skills with Remus since the World Cup, but after hearing how well the third task went, Lily wanted to test Archie's ability for herself.

He flopped dramatically down onto her bed, and she hastily rescued a cup of tea balanced near her foot from certain doom. "This is the fourth time this week she's asked. I told her I get enough of that in the tournament, but I think she can tell I don't really mean it."

"Just keep putting her off," Harry said after draining the tea. "There are only two more days until the end of break."

Archie's face scrunched in distress. "I hate this."

She closed the magazine slowly, sensing that he was referring to something more than her mother's persistent badgering. Archie's gaze was on the ceiling, but the pain in his eyes was for something



else. Harry reached out to run a hand through Archie's hair, grown out to Rigel's length but not quite as unruly. "Today I realized... we're halfway through."

He turned his head on the covers to blink at her. "Halfway? Huh. That's-" He broke off, unable to articulate what, exactly, it was. After a long moment, he settled for another, "Huh."

"It's strange, I know. When we started this, even though the idea was to make it all seven years, I don't know if I really thought we'd ever get this far," she confessed.

"And now? Do you think we can last another three and a half years?" Archie asked.

"I don't know that we have another option," she said quietly. They'd have to make a dramatic change to get out of the ruse, now. It wouldn't be as simple as switching back. There were too many differences between their personas. A dozen people would realize in the first week that Archie wasn't Rigel and she wasn't Harry. It was a comical thought, almost; their original lives were all but closed to them until school was through. As Archie's face screwed up again, she offered hastily, "If you wanted to give it up, though, I would find a way, Arch."

A hollow-sounding laugh escaped him. "Yeah? What exactly could you do?"

She swallowed. Nothing great came to mind. Rigel was bound by the Unbreakable Vow to finish out the tournament. Until the end of the year, at least, nothing short of actual death would release her from the ruse. Archie could run away somewhere, if Harry faked an illness, a sabbatical of some kind, maybe. She didn't think he'd be happier somewhere other than AIM if he couldn't be himself, though.

"I could pretend to get pregnant," she suggested half-heartedly.

Archie snorted. "That would raise some eyebrows. It would give me an excuse to leave AIM, but I'd just end up back home. Eventually, it would become clear that I wasn't, in fact, pregnant. Or you."

"You could use your morphing to mimic it for a while, though," she said. At his flat look, she grimaced. "I know; it's a bad idea. You'd have to pretend until I got home for the summer."

He ran a hand over his face and nodded tiredly. "It's just as well," he said on a sigh. "Hermione is coming back to AIM now that her part in the tournament is over. I'd rather be where she is."

"How is Hermione?" she asked. She'd grown rather fond of the girl in the few months they'd interacted. Harry loved her Hogwarts friends, but none of them really understood or even bothered to notice the inequality and injustice beyond the world that cocooned them.

"She wanted me to tell you she hasn't given up on the Fade. You'll probably get letters every week. Also, she's hoping you or Delacour win the tournament," Archie told her.

Her head tilted. "Not Jacob Owens?"

Archie smirked. "She thinks he's a disgrace to muggleborns everywhere. I believe she called him a 'blood-narrative-swallowing, party-line-regurgitating collaborator.'" He sighed in admiration. "Hermione is so uncompromisingly principled."

Harry tried not to let the sympathy show too strongly on her face. Archie had it bad. The way he'd lost his good sense at the Yule Ball was proof enough that time away from the brilliant brown-eyed girl hadn't dimmed the torch he carried a whit. What would he do when they inevitably did have to switch back? Would he feel free to woo her as himself, or would it be too late by then? Given the way Hermione had felt comfortable confiding in Rigel about her conflicting feelings for Harry, she had to wonder if she hadn't inadvertently put Archie-as-himself firmly in the friend category before he'd even had a chance.

"I'll be fine at AIM," Archie eventually said into the silence between them. "Like you said, we're already halfway done. It doesn't make sense to quit now. How are you, though?"

She frowned. "I'll be better when this tournament is over. If I never see Riddle's face again, it'll be too soon." She hesitated before saying anything further, but Archie knew her too well to be fooled by the blank expression on her face.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I think there's something shady going on in the lower alleys."

"What else is new?"

She shook her head. "Not the usual stuff. The other day I heard the name... Voldemort."

Archie gaped at her, then sat up and rounded on her fully. "The diary construct? And you're just now telling me this?" His face closed in concerned worry and he chewed on his lip. "What are we going to do?"

She hitched her mouth in a weak grimace. The truth was, she didn't know whether there was anything they *could* do. "I sent an anonymous tip to Dad's office, but the vow I made to Riddle after second year prevents me from saying too much." Aside from Ginny, Archie was the only exception from the vow; she'd told him everything before the Malfoys' garden party, and hadn't considered it misleading since Riddle was under the impression that Arcturus Black knew in any case.

What Archie didn't know, what she wasn't certain how to explain, was that she was also bound by the thief's code. She couldn't betray anyone who pledged to the Court of Rogues to the Ministry; the trouble was, she didn't know all of the people that entailed. It seemed unlikely that Crouch, Jr. would be paying tithe in the Lower Alleys, but until she could catch Leo long enough to ask him, Harry

couldn't be sure. "I wrote there was an aspiring Dark Lord gathering followers in the alleys. Maybe that'll be enough to catch one of the recruiters, and one could lead to more."

It might be wishful thinking. How could the Aurors find one shady bloke in a hub for shady blokes?

"You said before that it might come after you, if it survived," Archie reminded her.

She inclined her head grimly. "I haven't spent much time in the alleys since I heard that name. At Hogwarts, I'll be safe. Next summer, though, you'll have to start being very careful. After all, it's really Rigel Black the thing has a grudge against, not Harry Potter. Sorry," she added.

Archie waved her off. "You can't take responsibility for the actions of every psychopath in your life, Harry." After a moment of contemplation, he added, "It's kind of messed up that there are enough of those to warrant a blanket rule, actually." He sank back into the covers again and stared at the ceiling with furrowed brows. "Closest fire to the house is the tournament," he murmured. "Once you extinguish that one, we can worry about the next."

Harry tentatively agreed, though privately she suspected Riddle's ambitious amalgamation of warped magic and teenage angst would prove to be the larger firestorm in the long run. A tournament she could handle.

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The train rattled comfortably along beneath her feet, its steady sprint across the countryside at once familiar and soothing. Students in her year group called her name in greeting as she walked down the central corridor. Younger ones waved or stared shyly and

upperclassmen gave her friendly nods. Rigel tried to return the acknowledgements casually, but she knew her cheeks carried flags of color to announce her embarrassment to any who looked too closely.

She marveled at the difference between this train ride and the first, three and a half years before, which she'd spent with her chin tucked into her collar, convinced that anyone who glanced at her profile would immediately discover her secret.

Her friends chorused in pleasure when she slid the compartment door open, and Theo jumped up with Millicent to help her hoist her trunk into the overhead rack. Draco took the book out of the seat they'd saved between him and Pansy, and Rigel sank into a feeling of utter belonging so pure it could only have been distilled from years of true companionship.

"How was everyone's break?" she asked, unable to help the contented smile on her lips.

"We've already been through our holidays," Theo said, waving a hand dramatically. "Tell us about yours instead."

Rigel shrugged. "Mine was quiet. Spent time with the family and just relaxed."

"How is your cousin?" Pansy asked. She had a round of embroidery in her lap, and Rigel eyed it curiously before answering.

"Harry is fine. And Addy is as tall as my knee, if you meant her. She even talks a bit. What are you making, Pan?"

Pansy dropped her eyes to the burgeoning design. "I think it's a heart. Or an onion." She sighed. "Mother wants me to pursue a few feminine hobbies, to impress the suitors. I'm to charm it into a throw pillow after I finish, but I'm told the most gentleladies complete the actual embroidery by hand first."

"What a waste of time," Draco said, flicking his eyes sharply to the side in the way that indicated he was trying not to roll them completely.

"It was either this or knitting," Pansy said with a moue of displeasure.

Theo guffawed. "Does Lady Parkinson think suitors want women well-suited to grandmotherhood? Put it away-she won't know. I got a new set of Exploding Snap cards for Yule." He pulled out the shiny pack and tossed it invitingly up and down in his hand.

Clearly tempted, Pansy slipped her needle into the edges of the round and said, "Don't anyone tell her I neglected it."

"You should just bribe a younger student to do it for you," Millicent said. She pulled the fold-up table out of the side of the compartment and opened the flaps. "That Greengrass chit sews in the common room sometimes."

"Astoria?" Pansy gave up pretending to clutch the embroidery and propped it in the windowsill. "I think she needlepoints."

"Same thing," Millicent muttered.

Theo set up the first game. "Blaise, you playing?"

The quiet dark-skinned boy looked up for the first time from his notebook. "No, thank you. I'm working on a puzzle my mother set me over break."

Millicent glanced over at the notes he'd scribbled and said, "Runes? Don't you get enough of that at school?"

"This is more interesting than the problems Professor Sinistra assigns." To soften the subtle brag, Blaise added, "It's not tailored to whatever concept we're covering in the textbook, at least."

Pansy made a noise of interest. "I know what you mean, Blaise. Sometimes I wonder whether I'm learning anything beyond how to

be a good student of magic. The practicality of real life rarely fits so neatly in a framework of concepts, does it?"

"Application is key," Blaise agreed distractedly.

Seeing that he was too invested in his puzzle to carry the conversation further, Pansy let him be. "Rigel, are you playing?"

She hadn't played in months. "Sure, deal me in," Rigel said, pulling out her wand.

The game began, and Rigel let herself relax into it. All five of them were fairly skilled, so it was several rounds of matches before any of the cards reached the danger zone. Theo shuffled faster, trying to get a match before Wendelin the Weird started smoking.

"Come on, come on," Draco muttered, chin propped in his hand and foot bouncing restlessly.

Millicent's wand darted forward, but it was for a different set of matches, and Wendelin begin to tremor. Pansy let out a nervous noise as she made an aborted forward movement-it was only Wronski, though, not a match.

The explosion was inevitable, and should have produced nothing but a harmless flinch from the lot of them. Something about the tense atmosphere had seeped into Rigel unconsciously without her realizing it, however. When the card swelled with power preparing to burst, her magic flooded it instinctually, instantly duding the impending explosion.

Anticipation whooshed out of the room like air from a punctured balloon as her friends stared at her incredulously. Theo poked the now dormant card and frowned. "You broke it. That's cheating, Rigel."

She looked down at her wand sitting innocently in her lap, as though she could blame the sensitive tool for her magic's actions. "My bad,"

she said.

They gathered the cards so Theo could deal again, but nervous energy had taken root in Rigel's blood. Every time a card flared with magic she had to tamp down on her own to keep it from lashing out and ruining the game. After the third time she wasn't fast enough to stop the unconscious reaction consciously, Theo put away the deck with a shake of his head. "Your reflexes are monstrous," he said, half admonishing and half admiring. "Don't tell me you're going to be this high-strung forever."

Rigel grimaced. She'd thought she was very relaxed. Perhaps she had forgotten what true relaxation even felt like, after so much time spent on near-constant alert. "Sorry," she said again.

"Don't apologize," Draco said quietly. "Those reflexes have saved you from a number of injuries this year. Keep them sharp. We can always play again when this is all over."

She smiled weakly, hoping he was right; she wanted to look forward to a normal that was possible to get back to.

"Cheer up, Rigel," Millicent said bracingly. "You look like a glum ghost."

She made a face, and Pansy said, "He looks more like a put-out poltergeist."

Sensing a challenge, the others were quick to join in. "A sad specter," Theo suggested.

"An abject apparition."

"A sorrowful spirit."

"A forlorn phantom," Draco tried.

"That isn't a true alliteration," Rigel pointed out.



"You come up with one for phantom, then." Her friend huffed.

"A... pitiful phantom?" she wrinkled her nose. "Well, that was a bad noun pick. How about 'gloomy ghoul'?"

"A miserable manifestation," Millicent said, a proud grin tucked into her cheek.

"A wretched wraith," Pansy countered.

"Ooh, good one," Theo said. He stuck his tongue between his teeth, then offered, "A sorry shade."

"A sour spook."

"A... something phantasm," Draco muttered, clicking his tongue in annoyance when he couldn't come up with anything.

"Why do you pick the hardest ones?" Pansy asked, laughing

The blond boy threw up his hands. "There's nothing else left!"

"Soul, presence, shadow-"

"Shut up, Blaise."

Blaise, who had evidently not been so wrapped up in his work as they assumed, smiled slyly. "It appears the long winter break has softened your mind, Draco."

"I'll soften your face," Draco threatened halfheartedly. Blaise had already turned back to his notebook.

Rigel just smiled, watching them all interact so freely. She'd missed her friends, despite wanting nothing more at the end of term than to get away from everything.

Millicent ruined the moment by asking, "What have you deduced about the fourth task so far?"

She blinked at the other girl. "I haven't thought about it at all. Bagman and Crouch said we won't find out until a few days beforehand."

Millicent and Pansy exchanged amused glances. "You can't just wait for information to come to you, Rigel," Pansy said patiently. "Millie and I have been proactive over the break."

"My second cousin is engaged to the niece of the-you don't care." Millicent cut herself off as Rigel's eyes glazed over against her will. "The point is, one of the task creators let it slip that the fourth task is some kind of scavenger hunt. You'll have to find things within a set time limit."

"What sorts of things?" she asked.

"No idea," the dark-haired girl confessed. "But each blood champion is to be assigned a different set of items-you won't be in direct competition, except for the time."

That was somewhat comforting. After the third task, Rigel didn't want to go head-to-head with anyone unless she absolutely had to. She'd been hoping to focus on other things until the task was officially announced. Now, however, she had a responsibility to begin preparation for some sort of retrieval task. Rigel knew Millicent just wanted her to succeed, but part of her wished her friend could have waited a few days before telling her.

All she said was, "Thanks. I appreciate you keeping an ear to the ground for me." At Millicent's knowing look, she added, "Really, I do. I'll brush up on my locating spells this week. Anything on the political front I should know about?"

Her friends tried to politely stifle their expressions, but only Blaise was successful, and it was difficult to tell whether he was even listening any longer.

"You're talking about the marriage law?" Pansy clarified. "It won't be voted on until the end of the spring session. Both sides are ramping up the public information campaigns, in the meantime."

"It helps that the halfblood everybody is talking about right now is gorgeous and utterly unthreatening," Draco said, cynicism in every syllable.

Realizing he meant Delacour, she frowned. Was that the reason Riddle had so carefully ensured the weaker girl would beat out Antiope to the finals? The part-Veela undoubtedly made a more attractive advertisement for marrying halfbloods than the fearsome, uncompromisingly capable Athenai. "Is there any angle Riddle isn't working?" she muttered.

"He seems to be having trouble with yours, actually," Pansy said.

"I've been winning the tournament for him," Rigel disagreed. "Can't get much more 'pureblood supremacy' than that."

Millicent and Theo winced, but it was Blaise who responded. "You could, actually. Of all the participants, you're the one who has been the least vocal in support of the New Triwizard Tournament. It's obvious to anyone watching that you'd rather be anywhere else and you don't agree with the premise. Even the muggleborns are better champions of the spectacle than you."

It wasn't exactly a compliment, but something in Rigel's stomach thrummed in satisfaction.

"It's only obvious to those paying attention to the politics," Theo disagreed. "Most people are watching for the blood and glory."

Millicent reached over to whack the boy upside the head. "Don't tell him that."

Rigel sighed. "I suppose Theo is right, though. Only a few people watching will consider what the tournament really means."

"Those are the only people who matter," Draco said soothingly.

"You only think that because 'those people' include you," Theo muttered. "The common people matter, too. They can start riots and make things difficult for the upper crust."

"They also have thoughts and emotions and valid human experiences," Blaise said dryly.

"Sure, maybe." Theo shrugged. "The point is, disregard their lust for fear and blood at your peril."

"Enough with the blood." Millicent groaned. "You're not helping."

Theo blinked at her. "Helping what? I thought we were just talking."

Draco pinched the bridge of his nose with a low curse and even Pansy sighed. Rigel chuckled. "Let's talk about something else, instead. What else have you all been up to?"

"Theo, why don't you tell Rigel about your winter break?" Draco suggested swiftly. There was an unkind edge to his tone.

The sandy-haired boy's face darkened momentarily. He cleared his throat and said, "There isn't much to tell. Well, Zach and I broke up, but what can you expect with his family dripping a constant stream of poison in his ears? We never had a chance." He gave a dramatic sigh and said, "Think Aldon will let me cry on his shoulder about it this term?"

Rigel let out a surprised laugh. "Rosier?" she asked, incredulous.

Theo waggled his eyebrows at her. "He's fit as anything-don't tell me you haven't noticed."

She grimaced. Somehow, Rosier's looks were always eclipsed by his confounding personality and deliberately obtuse intentions.

"You may have some competition, Theo," Pansy said slowly. "I saw Aldon in a very engrossing discussion with Rigel's cousin at the ball."

Her eyes sharpened. She'd forgotten, but Pansy was right. Archie *had* been speaking to Rosier for a brief time. "Did you hear what they were talking about?" she asked Pansy.

The blonde girl paused delicately before saying, "I believe it was about the marriage law, actually."

Rigel stared at her. "You're joking."

Pansy gave a helpless lift of her shoulder. "I don't know the whole of it, but... well, is it so surprising? In the current political climate, there's a good chance the law will pass. It's smart to test the waters now. My parents are even looking at a few halfbloods for my own prospects," she admitted. "More and more, the well-positioned ones are going to be seriously considered."

Rigel scowled. "I don't care how smart it is. No one should be considering *Harry*. She's spoken for."

"After the spectacle she made of her affections for the American muggleborn at the ball, you can't be surprised that people have figured out your engagement isn't in earnest," Millicent said gently. At Rigel's frustrated frown, she shook her head. "Really, you can't protect her forever, Rigel."

"I certainly can," she muttered.

Draco changed the subject abruptly to whether the others had managed to finish their holiday assignments or not, and Rigel let the conversation drift away from her.

Why hadn't Archie mentioned his conversation with Rosier? Had it seemed unimportant to him or had the emotional distraction of being in proximity to Hermione again pushed the interaction to the back

burner? She supposed it didn't matter why he hadn't told her. Rigel still had to decide what to do about it.

If Rosier thought he could sweep in like some kind of hero and save Harry from the marriage law, he would shortly be divorced from that idea. She had no intention of entertaining pureblood suitors keen on snapping up the 'well-connected' halfbloods as soon as the law went through. *And the law is not going through*, she added with a mental growl.

*Do you mind keeping your angst to a dull roar?*

With an internal jolt, Rigel recognized Dom's voice echoing in her ears. *I wasn't talking to you*, she thought at him.

*You, me, what's the difference? I'm just asking you not to shout down the stars in here.*

Sorry, she offered, a bit put out to be apologizing for the thoughts in her own head. It's not as though she enjoyed the fact that he was privy to them.

*I heard that.*

With a silent snort of amusement, she glanced around the compartment and saw that the others were engaged in a lively debate over the diplomatic effect of the tournament on Magical Britain's foreign relations. Figuring they could do without her for a short while, she settled back into her seat and closed her eyes.

She was by now used to barreling her way through the storm at the edges of her mind. Dom met her in the cozy heart of her mountainscape, a mug of hot cocoa in hand. The marshmallows oscillated weirdly from the bottom of the cup to the top, as though they couldn't decide whether to float or not, but otherwise it was a passable imitation.

"How's your work progressing?" she asked after settling into one of the armchairs by the fireplace.

Dom, garbed in a padded housecoat with matching slippers, put a pipe between his teeth and took a long pull before blowing the smoke out in a thoughtful stream. His bit of theatre complete, he said, "Very well, thank you for inquiring. I've finished with the last portion you gave me."

He pulled a sphere of her magic from his pocket and tossed it toward her. She caught it, though a bit of cocoa dribbled down the side of her cup. Her magic clung to her with a prickling that was almost like static electricity. She squeezed it gently in a sort of one-armed hug, steadfastly ignoring Dom's amused smirk, and, with a thought, sent it zooming back to her space room to join the mass of magic that had already been sifted through. A rough mental catalogue of what remained surprised her.

"You're almost finished," she said, not hiding the relief in her voice. "That's good. I found out he can still perceive the magic, even though it's separated from him. Riddle can identify me without touching my skin if I'm nearby."

Dom raised his eyebrows. "This enemy of yours is more powerful than you've led me to believe."

She stared at him. "I told you, he's the most powerful politician in the country."

"Political power does not always equate to actual power," he said.

"You've seen all my memories of him," she reminded him. "How could you not understand how powerful he is?"

"I've seen him destroy some furniture and let out a bit of power to intimidate a thirteen-year-old," Dom corrected her. "This is... something else. How far away can he perceive the bit of magic in you?"

"I haven't extensively tested it," she said stiffly.

"You should."

She shook her head. "No point. As soon as you've gathered it all, I'm going to get rid of it."

He frowned. "Are you sure that's wise? We may be able to find a better use for it. Releasing it into the world would just allow it to flow back to him. What if you could reverse his intention and use this magic to track the rest of him instead?"

"I'd rather be rid of it. Wait, what do you mean 'flow back to him'? Wouldn't it just dissipate into the universe?"

Dom tapped his pipe on the edge of his armchair slowly. "Not necessarily. If he has such a strong connection to his magic that it remains identifiable as his even *after* intermingling with yours, and if he were close enough when you released it, there's a chance it would find its way back to him. The lesser part will always be attracted to the whole."

She thought about the way the pieces of her magic she separated from her own core required a stern inflection of will to keep from fusing back together within her mindscape. "Is that true for all magic? Can it come back after being cast if the original core is close enough?"

"If the magic can cause noticeable resonance at a short distance, then it retains the intrinsic qualities that make it yours. Such magic can be reabsorbed. Do your potions cause resonance when you hold them?" Dom asked rhetorically.

"No." That would have been hard to miss.

"Spells are much the same," he said, nodding. "Once you force your magic into such a shape, it loses the ability to meld back into your core smoothly. You could unravel the shape, I suppose, and



something in the magic that remains might be recognizably yours once more, but it would require a great deal of effort. Have you ever seen a magical work unraveled?"

"I don't think so. It's not a usual application, though." Nothing like it had ever been mentioned in any of her reading or classes, at least.

"Nothing about this is usual," Dom said, waving his pipe for emphasis. "Don't bind yourself to the limits others accept without question. You're finally almost free of this interloper's influence. It's time to explore your magic's true nature."

She frowned. "What do you mean? Has it calmed down without Riddle's magic?" She hadn't noticed any significant difference since Dom began the filtration process, but she could always hope.

He tilted his head consideringly. "I wouldn't say it's calmer, exactly. Your magic will never be entirely tame, dear. It does seem noticeably *nicer*, however: also younger, more impetuous. Like a wild horse-but without the burr in its blanket." He smiled wide and slow. "Perhaps it's time to try a full gallop."

"If only I had somewhere to gallop to," she said drolly.

Dom shrugged, artful indifference that she didn't believe for a moment. "One day you will, and I'll be ready with your tack and saddle."

Rigel set aside her cocoa and stood with a sigh. "The delusions of grandeur are my cue to go."

"Can't buck your destiny forever," he said calmly.

She shoved the mental equivalent of an eye roll at him and retreated from the inner recesses of her mind. Rigel might be grateful to him for maintaining the different levels of her mind and combing Riddle's magic out of her core, but that didn't mean she had to humor his unsolicited ambitions.

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The sun took its long, slow dive into the horizon and the train settled with a groaning sigh at the Hogsmeade platform. Students poured from the contraption like rats from a sinking ship. Rigel made her way with the others toward the carriages, but before she could follow Pansy and Draco into one, her elbows were captured in twin traps that spun her in a circle.

"Puppy!"

"You're riding with us."

Rigel sent her friends an apologetic smile, and it was a testament to dozens of similar situations that they merely waved her off with promises to save her a seat at the feast.

Fred and George towed her to the next carriage along the line and opened the door-only to find it occupied.

"Eet is you." Fleur Delacour sat on the left bench, Beauxbatons uniform perfectly pressed and hands folded demurely in her lap.

"Our apologies, milady," Fred said with a flourishing bow.

George copied him, adding, "We had no inkling this conveyance was spoken for."

Delacour tilted her chin at the empty seats. "We are all going to ze castle, no?"

The twins exchanged several sentences in a glance, then grinned.

"To the lady's insistence-"

"-we defer."

Rigel found herself boosted unnecessarily into the carriage and took the seat next to Delacour with what little dignity she could scrounge after the twins' manhandling.

"How was your holiday, Delacour?" she asked politely.

"Not too different from yours, I daresay," Delacour said with a pretty shrug. "Always questions about ze tournament. At least I got to see my sister."

Rigel nodded. "I know what you mean. It seems we won't really escape it until this year is over."

Delacour sent her a hard-to-read look beneath her silvery lashes. "Someone will not escape it even zen."

A pang hit her stomach. She kept forgetting the purported 'grand prize.' Rigel was prevented from further comment by the slamming of the carriage door and the rocking jolt that came as the thestral shot forward.

"So, to business," George said, clapping his hands briskly.

Fred nodded along solemnly. "As your official PR reps, we've been considering how to help your public image bounce back from the hit it took during the third task."

"Honestly, Rigel, blood magic?" George's face said plainly that he thought better of her.

Rigel grimaced. "Well... yeah." At the time, it had seemed inspired. In retrospect, she perhaps should have put stricter limits on herself prior to stepping into the ring.

Fred reached over to pat her knee gently. "Not to worry, Pup, we have a plan."

"Winning hearts and minds--"

"Projecting an image of youth and innocence-"

"It's all very simple, really."

"Really." Rigel offered a skeptical look.

The twins grinned unabashed. " *Pranks*, " they chorused.

She raised an eyebrow. "Are you sure that isn't your innate prankster bias talking?"

George looked offended. "I'm sure we wouldn't know if it *was* ."

"Clearly there's no way we *could*, and therefore we can only proceed with perfect clarity," Fred assured her.

"Pranks?" Delacour moved her eyes between the three of them incredulously. "'e 'as a tournament to focus on."

Fred smiled reassuringly, and it was not at all reassuring. "This is directly related. Tournament scores are irrelevant if no one wants you to win."

"Public support will influence the judges," George added hastily as Delacour looked ready to argue. "Amazing that the three finalists are all good looking, well-spoken, and entertaining to watch, isn't it?"

"Not at all, Gred."

"Quite right, Forge."

Delacour's scowl melted away and thoughtfulness replaced it. "Antiope should 'ave advanced," she admitted quietly. "Eef she 'ad been more charming, zey may 'ave put her in a different spot for ze duels."

"People enjoy cheering for those they admire on a personal level even more than the players that are simply good at the game." George concluded. The expression on his face was gentle, but it

clearly communicated that he agreed with Delacour's assessment of the third task.

"So you see," Fred said earnestly, "It's really, positively vital that you take our advice."

"For the sake of your reputation-"

"-your popularity-"

"-and your viability in the tournament as a whole."

Rigel wasn't convinced. "How would pulling a conspicuous prank make people admire me?" she asked. "If Delacour's reaction is standard, then most people will take it as a sign of arrogance that I do anything other than prepare seriously for the tasks ahead."

The redheads traded pitying looks. George shook his head. "Rigel, Rigel, Rigel. What is the fastest way to a man's heart?"

"Between the fourth and fifth ribs," she drawled.

Fred wagged a finger at her. "None of that! And no more blood magic. We're going for charming-and-kind-hearted Rigel, not mop-the-stage-with-the-boy-who-hurt-his-friend Rigel."

"We're sort of a package deal," she said, amused.

George waved a hand unconcernedly. "People can only see one side of things at a time; so, let's show them your fun side."

"And the answer to my esteemed colleague's question was *food*, Rigel. Food is the fastest way to a man's heart," Fred clarified.

"My mistake." She smiled sweetly.

"We should have rescued Puppy from Slytherin before things got this bad," George confided in his brother's ear.

"If he refuses the prank, we'll know for sure he's going Dark."

Rigel scowled. "Let's hear it then, wise masters of publicity."

"Doctorates, actually," Fred said, almost absently.

Delacour muffled a chuckle, but Rigel didn't give them the satisfaction. After all this build-up, it had better be a pretty terrific prank.

George cleared his throat. Fred produced a detailed blueprint of the Great Hall and the kitchens beneath. They explained. Rigel's eyes narrowed, then grew wide. Delacour hid an admiring sigh behind one delicate hand. In the end, there was only one thing she could say.

"The Marauders are going to be erased from the annals of history. Doctors Weasley have ascended."

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Settling back into an academic routine felt like trying to fit into a coat she'd nearly outgrown. After the relative freedom of study the break offered, forcing her attention to the topics her professors required was difficult. The only exception was her lessons with Snape. Rigel fell back into freebrewing as easily as fish slipped into a stream.

As their evening lessons progressed, Rigel became more decisive. She got faster at choosing ingredient combinations and orders, but was also quicker to make mistakes as a result. Each mistake taught her more than following a dozen recipes correctly ever could have; knowing what reactions were intellectually likely and watching them unfold in real time were very different levels of knowledge. Sometimes she could counteract the problem as it unfolded, but other times she realized too late what she ought to have done sooner. That, too, was a valuable kind of learning.

Her protective apron was still pristine, something that at turns fascinated and frustrated her Head of House. He seemed to take some amused affront at the unstained garment, but it was hardly Rigel's fault. A dirty apron might be the sign of a daring innovator, but her magic reacted too swiftly to allow any impending explosions to gain steam.

When another night passed and Rigel hung her spotless protective gear on its hook once more, Snape gave a wry twist of his lips as he commented, "If ever your effects hang in the National Potions Archive, no one will ever believe their authenticity."

"Proof of my preeminence will fade into legend, but you and I will always know the truth." She grinned.

Snape met her grin with a sneer. "Pray your mythology remains as unstained as your apron."

"What cynicism," she said, fighting a laugh. "I suppose I should follow your example and preemptively sour my own reputation, is that it?"

Surprised offense looked out at her from his dark eyes. "My reputation is beyond reproach in our community."

Silently savoring the phrase 'our community,' Rigel clarified. "Your professional reputation is immaculate, true, but a man's mythology is more than just his work alone. People are just as fascinated and intimidated by your personal character, sir." For the most part, she was joking; it was fun to see the unflappable Potions Master flustered for a change. "I've always wondered, did you deliberately cultivate the aura of mysterious genius or does it come naturally?"

"What rubbish," the man muttered, a dark scowl deeply etched on his face.

"My theory has been that it is mostly natural, but that you also happen to enjoy thwarting the shallow curiosity of the fickle masses

at every turn," she continued blithely.

Her mentor snorted. "Now who's cynical?"

"I learn from the best," Rigel agreed.

"And yet I've apparently neglected to teach you when to *shut your mouth* ." His words came out on a growl, but she could tell by the dismissive way he shooed her out the door that he wasn't truly upset. "Get out of here before I remember my original impulse to pickle your organs and be done with it."

She turned back with a frown. "Wait, when did you-?" The door shut firmly in her face. She clucked her tongue doubtfully. "Human organs aren't even that useful," she muttered as she began the winding walk back toward the common room. "He'd probably just put them on display to intimidate first-years."

She fell silent as she walked, mentally cataloguing the things she still had to do that week. Out of the silence there came the steady click of expensive shoes on stone floors, and as she merged with the main corridor that led from the stairs, she crossed paths with Rookwood and Rosier.

By the way Rosier's step faltered slightly at her appearance, Rigel guessed she hadn't imagined how he'd been avoiding her since the beginning of term. Her eyes narrowed. "Evening, gentlemen."

"Rigel." Rookwood inclined his head politely. "How fortuitous our paths should meet."

"Yes, what are the odds?" Rosier drawled, giving his best friend a measuring look.

"I believe Pansy mentioned you'd been looking for us?" Rookwood continued evenly. In step with the older boys now, Rigel could see the mischief glinting in the tall upperclassman's eyes.



She smiled, a small, sharp thing. "It was really Aldon I wanted to speak with."

"You don't say?" Rookwood made a noise of contemplation like a mountain shifting its weight. "Well, why don't I leave you to it?" As he lengthened his stride and easily pulled ahead of them, Rigel reflected that he must always be slowing his gait to keep pace with Rosier.

Rosier mouthed the word 'traitor' to his friend's receding back, but turned with an attempt at charm to say, "Rigel! It's been too long. I trust you aren't finding the new year too arduous?"

"Not as yet," she said mildly. "You know how it is, though. One little inconvenience can snowball when you least expect it. I find it best to deal with small problems before they become larger, don't you?"

"Ah, well, it depends," Rosier said. He cleared his throat and offered a wry smile. "If the snowball rolls down the hill and into your neighbor's yard, you don't have to deal with it at all, do you?"

Rigel tilted her head, the sharp smile never faltering. "I've never been the type to let other people handle problems I am capable of squashing myself."

The golden-eyed boy winced, and his lips silently repeated 'squashing' with an uneasy glance at her expression. Rigel wondered with a morbid kind of self-recrimination whether he was remembering her rather violent showing in the third task. It disturbed her to think that people who once condescended to her might now be a little bit afraid of what she could do, but in that moment, she was willing to use whatever tactic worked.

To her mild surprise, Rosier collected himself with a slow roll of his shoulders and paced to the edge of the corridor, where he could lean against the hard stone and cross his arms. Despite the defensive regrouping, he met her gaze squarely as she followed him over.

When she was close enough that neither had to raise their voices above a low murmur, he said, "This is about your cousin, yes?"

Glad to be done dancing around it, Rigel nodded. "I want you to stay away from her."

Rosier's eyebrows rose at her blunt declaration. After a slow blink, he said, "Respectfully, Rigel, shouldn't that be her decision?"

"What did she say at the ball, then?" she asked, a knowing tone in her voice. "Did she seem at all interested in your proposal?"

Astonishment crept into his bright eyes, followed by a flicker of understanding that he seemed to seize upon. A grin tugged at his mouth and he said, "She didn't tell you? Did you have to hear about it from Pansy?"

Rigel's annoyance spiked at his smug amusement. "I honestly doubt Harry considered your conversation worth mentioning."

That wiped the humor from Rosier's face. "How interesting that you considered it worth stalking me for, then."

"My cousin can be a bit naïve," she said easily. "While I don't doubt she dismissed your attentions out of hand, she doesn't know how persistent you can be, Aldon. So here we are. Regardless of how your conversation went, I'm telling you now to leave Harry alone."

Rosier tilted his head back and stared at the torchlight as it played across the ceiling. "Don't you even want to know what we spoke of, first?"

"Not particularly," Rigel said honestly. She could imagine well enough Rosier's enigmatic overtures and Archie's bemused unconcern.

"Why so hostile?" Rosier complained. "I thought you'd be glad."

"You thought I'd be glad, so you avoided me for two weeks?"

His gaze flicked down to meet hers guiltily. "Well, Pansy may have warned me after your outburst on the train."

Outburst? Rigel rolled her eyes. Why did everyone act like she was crazy for wanting to keep 'Harry' out of their calculations?

Rosier grimaced. "I really didn't mean to upset you, Rigel. You know I value our friendship." He lifted a hand as though he would make a gesture, but then let it go limp at his side again. "Listen, Rookwood and I heard about the law going through committee, same as everyone else. My parents are better connected than most, however, and significantly worse at keeping secrets." He took a slow breath, as though preparing to do something he knew he'd regret. "What they told me, what no one else will be saying out loud yet, is that matches between Party purebloods and halfbloods are not going to be left to chance."

She stared at him, startled, for the moment, out of her anger. "What does that mean?"

"There is an Arithmancy algorithm," he said quietly, his voice nearly a whisper. "Lord Riddle has been working on it for some time. My parents say *he* will match the scions of the old families to optimum candidates. They didn't understand it well enough to explain everything, but their impression is that Lord Riddle can calculate which matches will result in the most powerful offspring. The older a line is, the more important it is that they conform to his plans. Do you understand, Rigel?"

Rigel felt herself shake her head slowly. Her mind was reeling. She'd already figured out Riddle's law was at least partly an attempt to slow the declining Dark wizard population. That he had gone so far as to plan exact marriages between actual children should not have surprised her, but somehow the fresh reminder of the man's pathological need for absolute control hit her like a bucket of cold water.

"That... crazy *mind-buggering* bastard," she hissed when words came back to her at last. A wordless growl escaped her before she tamped down on the pure fury boiling in her veins and snapped her attention back to the concern at hand. "But no, I *don't* understand. Harry isn't in the Party and she isn't a pureblood. He can't control who she marries. So why are you dragging her into this?"

Rosier's expression moved through genuine confusion, then realization, and settled on pity. "Rigel, *you* brought her into this. It's not her prospects Riddle will want to control. It's-

"Me." Rigel closed her eyes as the truth swooped down on her. "The Blacks are one of the oldest lines. Of course he's thought up an 'optimum candidate' for me. It's not Harry, I take it?"

Rosier shrugged helplessly. "I don't know who, but you have to admit... the odds of it being her, out of everyone, are low. I know you won't let Riddle dictate something like that without a fight," he added before she could assert just that. "He's outmaneuvered you before, though." The words were said gently, but Rigel felt them like a slap.

She ran a hand through her hair and took a shaky breath. An algorithm. How was she supposed to predict something like that? "After this year, he has no hold on me," she said. She tried to believe it, as though a strong enough conviction could make it so.

"I hope you're right," Rosier said. "If you're wrong, though... your cousin should have back-up options. Just in case. If you're forced to break your betrothal when you come of age, it won't take long before someone else tries to take advantage."

So that was it. Or at least, that was what Rosier had decided to tell her. Rigel huffed out a frustrated grunt. "I get what you're trying to do. It's not your responsibility, though."

"Why is it so hard for you to accept a little help?" Rosier snapped. "Rigel, you can't spin the world by yourself. You can't be everywhere and fix every outcome. If I want to do this for you, and for her, why

can't you just let me?" The irritation faded and a hint of uncertainty crept into his voice as he added, "Do you think me such a bad option? You think I can't protect her?"

Rigel scowled lightly. She wasn't going to let him twist this around on her. "I don't see why you'd *want to*, Aldon. You've met her, what, once?" She shook her head. "I'd understand if a stranger tried this. Lots of people might assume they could influence the House of Black through Harry, or get in my good graces by 'protecting' her. You know me, though, and you know her, albeit a little. You know she isn't really as influential as her friendship with me makes it seem. She's not in such immediate danger that someone needs to sacrifice themselves to save her, and she's not so useful to you to make her worth that gesture absent a pressing need. So why?"

Rosier's stare was back, only this time it was reproachful. "Careful, Rigel, or you'll start believing your own publicity."

She frowned. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"Have you forgotten your cousin has accomplishments in her own right?"

"I haven't," she protested. "Most wouldn't see an academic career as an asset in a woman, though."

Rosier sighed. "I didn't mean for this to be so confusing for you," he said, softly sardonic. "Is it so hard to credit that I've a genuine interest in her?"

Saying 'yes' would be churlish, but what did it say that he only mentioned the hypothetical possibility that he'd be interested in Harry herself after exhausting other routes of convincing her?

"Of all the halfbloods I've met, she's the most interesting," he said after a moment. Something uncomfortable rippled in his golden gaze, and Rigel supposed it might have cost him to admit to a personal curiosity toward Harry. While she doubted he'd met many

halfbloods, she could admit wryly that 'interesting' was about the most complimentary thing he ever said about another person.

*This is so messed up*, she thought. Unbidden, a memory of what he'd said to her before the tournament started floated up from the depths of her mind. *The things we do because we want to will always outweigh those we do because we have to.*

All of a sudden, she was tired. "What did she say, then. When you asked her about it?"

Rosier's eyes widened, and a cautious hope she didn't want to see surfaced in them. "She babbled something vague and noncommittal and ran away, actually. Sometimes, the two of you are really alike, you know?" Rigel grimaced at that, but didn't contradict him. Rosier cleared his throat and said, "So, do I have your permission to court her?"

"You need her permission, not mine," she said begrudgingly.

"Could have fooled me."

She wrinkled her nose. "Well, originally I thought you were doing something weird." He gave her an offended look, but she brushed past it to add, "Ask her as many times as you want. Just don't expect her to go along with it. She only reluctantly agreed to our betrothal in the first place. Once she's of age, even if we break the betrothal, I wouldn't expect her to accept another one. Harry has no intention of marrying anyone, law or no."

"Well, that's not entirely true," he corrected her. "She seemed very interested in marrying Miss Granger. Only the new law wouldn't let her, would it?"

Rigel flushed involuntarily. Archie really had made a spectacle of his emotions. Being in America had dissolved what little subtlety her cousin may once have possessed. "She'll grow out of that, I think," Rigel muttered.

"Either way, she'll have *options*," Rosier said firmly. "That's all I wanted."

Somehow, despite all the explanations and assertions that had just passed between them, Rigel still wasn't sure she believed him.

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As Millicent sat down at the lunch table, the surrounding Slytherins automatically slid down to make room for her persistent companion.

"Good day to everyone," Tahiil said cheerfully to the general assembly. The colorfully clad boy had a new accessory—a black-and-gold striped tie that he wore proudly, much to Millicent's chagrin.

"Hello, Tahiil," Pansy said with a genuine smile. She liked the Majeerteen muggleborn, and Rigel suspected part of it was his undimnable happiness. "How is your family settling in?"

Tahiil had received special dispensation from the Headmaster to remain at Hogwarts for the rest of the year. While Dumbledore could not offer him a true scholarship or actual credits, due to his being muggleborn, he had managed to secure the boy's place there for a few months longer with the argument that the Board of Governors had already approved the attendance of each of the competitors for up to a full year. After all, when the tournament began it was unknown which of the nine would be continuing for a second term.

None of the other runners-up had elected to remain, but Owens' girlfriend, who was evidently heiress to a prominent American pureblood family, had arranged to stay on as an exchange student for a term to support him. Tahiil had embraced the opportunity with gusto. As the boy pointed out, it wasn't as though he had a school to go back to. He hadn't been officially Sorted, but sometime in the first week of the new term the House of Badgers had unanimously

adopted him. Despite his enthusiastic participation in Hufflepuff class sections, however, it was Millicent he chose to spend most meals with.

"Very well, thank you," Tahiil said with a contented grin. "The most generous Headmaster has gifted my mother and brother with stones just like mine," he revealed, moving the hand that was not piling food on his plate to touch the orange necklace with its embedded Translation Charm. "They like this funny-named village very much. Each day I bring them something different to eat from the castle. My brother is most anxious to know what I learn of wand-focused magics. I think I will try to make him one."

"Make a wand? That's difficult work, especially if you want it to work right," Theo said. "Just buy one."

"The gold I was given for entering the tournament has brought much ease to my family, but I do not think the expense of a wand would be justified, as he can also get along without one," Tahiil said. He shrugged. "Still, it would bring him joy to have even a poorly made one."

"Is your brother as good at wandless magic as you are?" Draco asked.

"Of course," Tahiil says proudly. "He showed his ability much sooner than I did. The elders began teaching him at only three."

The Slytherins in earshot, most of whom had been afforded a good amount of pre-Hogwarts magical education, were nevertheless suitably impressed by the idea of beginning training so young.

"Is he an Animagus, too?"

Tahiil shook his head ruefully. "My brother has found his inner animal, but he has not yet connected with it."



"What do you mean?" Rigel asked. She was no closer to achieving the proper transformation than she had been over the break. Perhaps Tahiil had some insight from his training that could help.

Tahiil considered the question carefully as he chewed through a spiced potato. "It is not enough to know which animal is within your soul. Many people can reach that realization. You cannot become the animal until you *are* the animal." Seeing the blank looks around him, he struggled to articulate his point. "For some, it can be hard to admit that the animal is not merely a part of you; it is you. The good and the bad. Unless you can accept the core impulses of that animal as your own, you will never achieve the transformation. It is not lack of magical ability that prevents you; it is lack of self-knowledge or unwillingness to accept the uncomfortable truths that the animal reveals about your soul."

Rigel considered that quietly as she finished her meal. What were the 'core impulses' of a raven? Curiosity? Cleverness? She had no trouble identifying with that. She must be missing something deeper.

After the meal, she made her way to the library. In the now-familiar stacks containing books on rituals, she found *World Symbology Anthology* and hefted it over to a table to flip through. The 'raven' entry wasn't the longest, but neither was it brief. Certain phrases jumped out at her.

*A bird of clear-thought and memory, evoking insight and prophecy... Mischievous and curious, the raven is both messenger and trouble-maker... A raven is selfish-opportunistic, cunning, and hungry, it takes what it can from the world... Commonly associated with lost souls, the black bird can signal transmutation and rebirth... Secret-keepers, thieves, protectors, providers-*

She shut the book with an annoyed sigh. How was any of that supposed to be helpful? She suspected an animal could be assigned any meaning a person wanted to see in it. None of the human-created associations would tell her what impulses the animal *itself*

might identify with, however. Perhaps she'd have better luck with her animal biology texts.

The descriptions afforded to ravens in the biological sense were easier to reconcile, she found.

Predator and scavenger as needed, adaptable to different environments, fast-learning, acrobatic flyers, cooperative, social, and familial-she was particularly keen to discover that unlike other, more competitive species, older raven siblings helped defend the nest to protect the chicks while the parents were away. That was a sentiment she could identify with easily.

None of the information she compiled on ravens seemed to be easing the transformation, however. Try as she might, no amount of magic circulating through her veins was enough to trigger the Transfiguration. The book Sirius had directed them to made it very clear that manually transforming oneself a piece at a time into the animal would not work-likely, it would kill a person instead. She could not force it. Rather, she was supposed to meditate until she reached a 'stage of enlightenment' in which the 'animal emerged naturally' from the soul.

It frustrated Rigel no end. All her understanding of Transfiguration was secondary; what mattered was achieving some sort of wooly mutual understanding between her conscious mind and the animal beneath it. How she was supposed to do that with no way to communicate with the animal in the meantime, Rigel didn't know.

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In the quiet hours stolen in her private laboratory, Rigel divided her time between slowly perfecting the medical potions for her shaped-imbued first-aid kit and testing the theory she'd come up with while talking with Dom on the train.

If a piece of magic retained the ability to resonate with the core, then it could be reabsorbed by it. That was what Dom asserted, and she grudgingly admitted he'd probably been around long enough to know. Never before had she spent so much time contemplating the nature of magic. There was wild magic-the natural magic that existed, unbound, in all things. When it collected in certain stones, animals, plants, and people, wild magic took on properties that were determined in turn by the characteristics of the thing it was shaped by. Magical beings were the only species known to have conscious control over the magic within them. Rigel had to recognize, however, that even wizards did not fully appreciate which aspects of their magic they could and could not affect.

Rigel could shape her raw magic into spells, molding it into manifesting in a myriad of different ways. She could not, however, change the way her raw magic itself was shaped by its very inhabitation within her. She had learned in her first year that every witch or wizard had unique aspects to their magic. Cores formed differently, unconsciously molded to suit the individual. Inherited magic could tend Darker or Lighter depending on generations of subtle efforts to shape it through genetics. Finally, every being with magic had their own individual signature: miniscule variations in output that were largely undetectable at the macro-level. Like radio waves, each supported a unique frequency, only compounded by a modulation algorithm that existed somewhere deep in a person's soul.

Something about that unique signature became warped when a wizard consciously shaped their magic into a spell. To a casual observer, every levitation charm looked and felt the same, no matter who originally cast it. Even the Weasley twins, both adept at reading and mimicking auras, probably couldn't read the fingerprint off a spell once it had already been cast. She'd heard that Aurors could track the traces of a wizard's signature with enough time and sample size, but casting evidently changed the signature enough that it was an extremely difficult art. It was easier to track a wizard's wand instead, which kept echoes of spells cast for quite some time afterwards.

Once it was shaped, it wouldn't resonate with the original core any longer. Rigel had to wonder whether, if a person could emit raw, unshaped magic and trap it into something neutral, that same person would be able to reabsorb the magic at leisure. As long as it was never shaped, the signature should remain constant.

After all, wasn't that how blood magic worked? The magic within a person's blood was utterly raw-unshaped. When you put blood into something, weren't you really just imbuing it with your unshaped magical signature? The blood itself was symbolic but superfluous. In fact, she thought with a touch of irony, if one looked at it that way, there was no such thing as a pure- or half *blood* -only pure or wild-magic-diluted magical signatures. The great blood debate came down to nothing more significant than the swirls on everyone's fingertips.

Perhaps she would write a satirical short story: a terrible account of the war between clockwise-swirlers and anti-clockwise-swirlers. Those poor souls whose fingerprints swirled neutrally from the middle of their fingers would be tragically caught in the middle. Friends would betray friends, families would be torn asunder. She winced as her thoughts took a dark turn. On second thought, it was too soon. Maybe a couple centuries from now, when the purebloods died out of their own inbreeding and blood purity was looked upon with the same awkward discomfort as other forms of bigotry.

*It's sad that polite embarrassment feels like it would be a win*, she thought with a depressed sigh. Dom sent her the echo of a good feeling, and the unexpected flicker of cheer jolted her out of the morose cloud she'd drawn around herself. *Now is no time to be despairing for the state of the world*, she chided herself.

While she had him, Rigel asked Dom something that had been bothering her lately. *Why weren't you integrated with my magic when I absorbed you?*

*It would destroy me.* The answer came swift and sure. *If I allowed myself to be changed by you the way raw magic is changed when*

*you absorb it ambiently, I would no longer be me. I would be you. A pause came before Dom added. Is that what you hoped? That one day I would simply dissolve into the fire of your core?*

She shook her head physically, then added, because he wasn't in her lab to see, *No. I just wondered. Is the reason you are able to resist it because you are powerful?*

*It is because I have excellent control, he corrected her. Just as your enemy must, to keep his own magic from melding fully with yours even so removed from his physical influence over it.*

Rigel mulled that over carefully. That Riddle had superior control of his magic was unquestionably true. Was that enough to explain why he had not lost all awareness of the magic after injecting her with it? *You said that Riddle must be very powerful, too, to sense his magic in me at a distance. Could I do that, if I put magic into something and someone else carried it?*

*With enough power and control, you could do anything .*

She didn't like the way he said 'anything,' but was pleased that her experiment was theoretically possible, at least.

Rigel had a medi-mini in her palm. The imbuing toy glowed faintly when she poured raw magic into it-the same unshaped way she would put magic into the crystal meter that measured rate of magical expenditure. Now that she knew what resonance felt like, she could appreciate the slight buzzing to her magical senses for what it was. So she could, if she concentrated hard enough, recognize her own unshaped magic in other things.

The next step was harder. She set the medi-mini down one foot away on the lab table and let go. The already subtle resonance immediately stopped. Rigel frowned at it, extending her magical awareness out until the training toy was within its sphere. It felt like a little ball of magic, but she wasn't certain she could identify it as *hers*

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Rigel would need someone else's help to complete the experiment, then. Determined, she closed the lab and wandered upstairs in search of some hapless soul. She found two in the Entrance Hall-or rather, they found her.

"All set to go on Phase One, Pup." Fred fell into step on her left, his brother only a beat behind.

"We're calling it: The Mysterious Box," George added as he took up position on her right.

"Figured a weekend lunch is the perfect time to introduce it," Fred went on as they walked through the Great Hall doors. "It's casual."

"Innocuous."

"Downright *subtle* ."

Rigel turned her head toward a crowd of curious students, all clustered around a red-paneled box underneath one of the nearest windows. Through the throng, she could make out cheerful silver tassels hanging from the box's edges; flanking it were a pair of tall golden candles, flames soft and calm. An arched emerald banner was strung between the two candles, and above the heads of those pressed close Rigel read the silver letters with amusement.

**Sacrifice Food Here!**

"Subtle, you said?" Rigel shook her head with a smile.

George inclined his head gravely. "It doesn't even explode."

"Or fizzle."

"Or whir."

"Or ooze."

"Or-"

"Yes, yes, it's the picture of restraint," she conceded. In a lower voice she added, "Did the Headmaster agree?"

"He seemed positively keen," Fred revealed.

George nodded, looking a bit bewildered. "Said if we pulled the whole thing off, he might give us a special service award."

"Course we told him if he did that, the whole thing would be ruined," Fred said sagely.

"Good pranksters don't take credit." George elbowed Rigel in the side and grinned. "Suppose that makes you our patsy, then."

"Not yet," she said sternly. "We agreed to ease into it."

The twins waved her words aside. "We know," said Fred.

"This one's for the long game," George concurred.

They dropped her at the table, and Pansy leaned in as Rigel considered the food choices. "Know anything about that charming new altar, Rye? So far, any food placed inside of it disappears when you close the lid."

She met the blonde girl's eyes and smiled secretively, but only said, "I need help with an experiment. Have you covered conscious imbuing yet in Potions?" Pansy blinked at her. Rigel took that as a 'no.' "Anyone else able to push magic into an object consciously?"

"What kind of spell are you casting?" Theo asked, only sounding vaguely curious.

"It's not a spell," she said. "I need someone to put raw magic into this." She pulled out one of the red rubber balls.

"Medi-minis again, Rigel?" Millicent said from across the table. "I haven't seen you with those since first year."

"Let me try," Blaise offered, holding out a hand. She passed the ball over and Blaise curled his fingers around it gently. After a long pause, it bled from red to brown and finally to green. "There. Just like imbuing a runic array."

Rigel grinned. "Thanks." She took out the one she had imbued earlier and gave it to him as well. "Now mix them up behind your back and don't tell me which is which."

With an intrigued glint to his eyes, Blaise did as she asked. When he offered them to her again, one in each hand, he asked, "Are you going to try to differentiate them?"

"Exactly," she murmured, drawing in her focus to press her magical senses outward. She could feel both balls, warm little orbs of magic side by side. "Draw them apart a bit," she said, frowning. As Blaise drew his hands apart, she tried to compare the two spheres.

The magic in them wasn't static-magic never was. It churned through each of the small toys in restless circles, but there was definitely a difference. One spun with a purpose, while the other sort of drifted. She thought one of them felt warmer, in a way, but did that necessarily mean it was hers?

Rigel hesitated, then reached out to point at the one that felt warmer and more energetic. "Is this one mine?"

Blaise smiled. "Correct." He seemed impressed, but Rigel wasn't satisfied.

"Your magic is pretty different from mine. Maybe I should test it against another fire core." She flipped through her memories of the sleeping sickness and said, "Millie, your core is fire, right?"

Millicent shrugged. "Suppose so, but I don't know how to transfer magic like that."

"It's easy-" Rigel began.



At the same time, Blaise said, "It's tricky-"

They glanced at once another, and at Blaise's raised eyebrows, Rigel relented. "Well, perhaps you should teach her, Blaise."

Her dark-eyed friend smiled wryly. "Give us a few weeks, and you can attempt the next stage in your experiment."

Rigel wanted to sigh at having to wait so long when she was impatient to know the answer now. She refrained, as it would likely come across as ungrateful. "Thanks," she said. "I appreciate the help."

"What will you do once you know whether you can recognize the magic you split off?" Millicent asked. "If it's something to do with that mysterious red box, count me out; I'm not going to the trouble of learning a difficult skill just for one of your pranks."

"My pranks?" Rigel put a hand to her heart. "You really think I have time for pranks with all that's going on this year?"

"You have time to experiment with esoteric magic," Theo pointed out with a teasing grin.

Rigel had no response to that, and her friends shared a laugh at her expense.

"Is it your mysterious box, Rigel?" Draco asked quietly from beside her as the conversation around them moved on. "Or are those Gryffs roping you into something again?"

She grinned a little and said, "That would be telling."

"Salazar help us; it *is* your box," Draco muttered on a sigh.

"It's really everyone's box, in a way," Rigel said lightly.

Draco narrowed his eyes in flat suspicion. "What does that mean?"

She promised he would find out with everyone else, and ignored his argument that being friends ought to gain him insider information about such things. The mysterious box was one prank she didn't want to mess up, even if it meant keeping her friends in the dark, too. The Weasley twins had been very selective about whom exactly they'd enlisted to help them pull it off, and the least Rigel could do after all the trouble they'd gone to was keep the details need-to-know.

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As January waned, the boxes multiplied. The signage varied, as did the method of appearance. Some, like the one with a mouth drawn in the lid saying simply ' **feed me** ' appeared overnight. Others, such as the one proclaiming ' **donate here to make wishes come true,** ' hopped itself into the Great Hall one morning in a manner that very much suggested the animator twins were in on the game. When, the first week of February, a box with the banner reading ' **the god of anonymous valentines demands tribute** ' appeared, the accusations came flooding in. It seemed a good number of people still remembered *that* prank.

Rigel enjoyed playing the reticent trickster, allowing her eyes to twinkle in her best Dumbledorian impression whenever someone worked up the courage to ask whether she was, in fact, behind the strange and elaborate boxes.

After several weeks, most people seemed to have simply accepted the boxes as part of the Hogwarts aesthetic-that the professors, at the Headmaster's behest, did nothing about them added an extra element of the surreal. Curious students regularly tested the boxes, but each time the result was constant: food (and anything else) put inside it disappeared. A particularly irritated Anthony Goldstein climbed *into* a box midway through the fourth week, but he was not

whisked into non-being, to the general disappointment of those watching.

Her most fervent accuser, somewhat surprisingly, was Zhou. The Ravenclaw stopped by the Slytherin table several times a week to say, "I just *know* you're the one behind this, Rigel. Won't you tell me what you've planned?" Rigel gathered the other 'claws had elected Zhou, as Rigel's only close Ravenclaw friend, to inquire into the mystery as often as feasible. The lot of them couldn't stand being left in the dark.

She gave increasingly enigmatic responses. When Zhou dropped by the table again the morning before Valentine's Day, Rigel gave a vague smile and murmured, "Ah, yes, the offerings are most generous of late. Many blessings abound."

As Zhou smiled wryly and sauntered back to her impatiently awaiting housemates, Pansy gave a small sigh beside her and said, "Really, Rigel, you're going to have to let her down more firmly at this rate."

Rigel shook her head patiently. "I told you, she and her housemates are just curious. As soon as the boxes are understood, this interest will die down."

"Give it up, Pansy," Theo said on a laugh. "Blokes like Rigel will always attract the hopeless romantic types."

Before Rigel could decide whether she ought to be offended, the post arrived. Hands made way automatically for claws and beaks and conversation paused as the owls made their presence insistently known.

They'd scarcely recovered their utensils when Millicent hissed under her breath, "Here she comes *again* ."

Zhou appeared at Rigel's elbow slightly out of breath and slapped a periodical on the table beside her plate. "Is this real?"

Rigel blinked at the magazine before gingerly lifting it to eye the front cover. It was *The Quibbler*, and the headline shouted up at them: "Mysterious Food Donations Appear Nationwide! (First Signs of A House-Elf Revolution?)"

A snort escaped her before she could stop it. Despite the absence of any mention of them, it had Fred and George written all over it. "Where did you get this?" she asked, amused.

"Lovegood, of course," Zhou said impatiently.

"You can't believe anything you see in that rag," Draco said with a frown.

Zhou tossed her hair impatiently. "Yes, normally, but look at the article." Draco and Millicent both grabbed for it at once, and wound up holding it awkwardly between themselves as they both scanned the content swiftly.

"The date of the first reported incident matches when the first box appeared," Millicent muttered as she read. "Of course, with Lovegood here to report on it, that doesn't mean anything necessarily."

Draco made a noise of agreement, but added, "It says these unsolicited food donations have appeared everywhere from St. Mungo's to the Diagon Alley Food Kitchen to Dumbledore's new halfway home for squibs. With places this high-profile, the truth would be easy to verify."

"We've got everyone who knows someone at any of the locations cited already writing letters for more information," Zhou said briskly. Her eyes were bright with excitement as she grinned down at Rigel, who was struggling to keep a blank expression on her face.

"Smart thinking," Rigel said blandly.

"Might be unnecessary, though." Nott drew everyone's attention to the other side of the Great Hall, where a towering red and white confection that might have been a cake hidden under a pile of taffeta hearts was progressing steadily across the room.

Fred, George, and the animator twins carried it together between them, and the lack of struggle with the enormous pastry suggested magical assistance at work. The hall held a collective breath as the four boys lowered the cake carefully toward the newest box. The lip of the box stretched gluttonously until the entire six-foot concoction slid unobstructed into its gullet. The lid snapped shut after it, and the Great Hall exploded with the speculation of a thousand students.

"That's going to be hard to miss," Zhou murmured.

"I rather think that's the point," Blaise said dryly.

As usual, the dark-skinned boy was entirely correct. The next morning, students at every table awaited the post with an almost palpable anticipation, built up over weeks of unsatisfied curiosity and confusion. Rigel even saw Professor McGonagall tapping her plate impatiently, eyes trained on the open doors.

All around her, Rigel saw Valentine's Day packages ignored in favor of the nearest *Daily Prophet*; the collective occupants of St. Mungo's Children's Ward smiled out of the front page, a piece of distinctive taffeta-topped cake in every hand. Rigel leaned closer to Pansy's copy to pick out the words beneath.

#### **VALENTINE'S SURPRISE AT ST MUNGO'S!**

*Yesterday St. Mungo's was the recipient of a six-tier, hundred-pound holiday surprise: a cake large enough to serve the entire hospital appeared without warning or explanation in the kitchens just after breakfast. This wasn't the first such surprise donation, however; for weeks, St. Mungo's, along with a number of other charitable institutions throughout the Wizarding World, has had a rash of anonymous food donations. Without fail, these donations appear*

*seemingly of their own accord in kitchens and donation bins, never accompanied by so much as a word of explanation.*

*According to eye-witnesses, no apparent portkey apparatus has been noted, and of course our readers understand that it is impossible to apparate an item sans wizard to transport it. How are these donations finding their way to these institutions, then? It is, as of now, a mystery.*

*The Ministry was contacted as the first of these food offerings began to pour in, and officials reportedly conducted extensive testing to ensure the mysterious donations were safe to distribute and not a malicious prank. Auror James Potter, current Department Head, assures us, "No evidence of mal-intent or foul play was uncovered. We've determined these anonymous donations are just that-contributions to the less fortunate meant in charitable spirit."*

*When asked to comment on the strange phenomenon, the Director for Outreach at St. Mungo's had this to say: "Thank you! Whoever you are, however you're doing this, we're grateful. You have our assurance that as long as the donations last, they won't go to waste."*

Rigel leaned back with a smile on her face. If she'd ever questioned the Weasley twins' talent for public relations, the proof was in black and white. They were *geniuses* .

"How did you do it?"

She turned to see Zhou, this time accompanied by at least a dozen of her housemates, standing with an awed expression on her face. Rigel tilted her head. "Still so sure it was me?" She didn't deny it, and by the looks of sharp suspicion in the 'claws' eyes, that didn't pass unnoticed.

"The Weasley twins are obviously in on it," Anthony Goldstein opined. "Those Slytherin twins, too. But this is bigger than some prank."

"It's a publicity stunt or something, right?"

"What are you trying to get out of it?"

"How did you even *do* this?"

The questions came too fast to pick out all of them, but she got the general gist. With a shrug, Rigel asked a question of her own. "Do you know what happens to the food we don't eat every day?"

The group around their table fell silent. From behind her, she heard Pansy say, "Some of it is fed to the creatures in the forest."

"Some gets composted, too," an older Ravenclaw said slowly, his face scrunched in thought. "I had to turn it into soil in detention for Sprout once."

"And the rest?"

"Vanished," Draco muttered.

Rigel put a hand to her ear. "What's that, Draco?"

Her friend scowled at her, but raised his voice. "The elves vanish it after every meal. I've seen them do it." Rigel knew he had-she'd been there, too.

Raised eyebrows and understanding murmurs circulated for a moment before Zhou said slowly, "So you set up a way for excess food to be... transported to other places that can use it. But how, Rigel? Is it like a vanishing cabinet? Or a one-way Floo?"

Rigel blinked at the girl, a devilish mischief alight in her heart. "Who said I set up anything?"

The Ravenclaws groaned, and the Slytherins snickered into their plates.

"Honestly, do they expect him to admit it?" Theo chuckled.

The group dispersed with grumbled words of disappointment, and Rigel went back to her now-chilly porridge. Her friends were all eyeing her, so she raised an eyebrow at them. "What? You, too?"

"You don't have to tell us." Millicent sniffed. "I'm just wondering how you got the staff to go along with this for so long."

"It's not much of an extra expense," Rigel said quietly. "Most of the food put into the boxes really would have been vanished anyway. The cake was just to make a point."

"The house-elves are the ones moving the food, though, aren't they?" Pansy murmured. "They don't need vanishing cabinets to do something so simple."

Rigel grinned. House-elves really were amazing beings. Fred and George had sent her as the emissary to convince them to alter the way they dealt with leftover food. With the Headmaster's approval, the kitchen workers had been thrilled to take a few extra steps after each meal. The elaborate boxes were just for show-house-elves did the real work, transporting anything put in them to similar boxes below in the kitchens, the same way food was transported back and forth between the house tables and the four parallel tables downstairs.

The elves would sort out unsuitable items left in the boxes-half-eaten or contaminated food-and the rest was sent to where it could do more good than vanishing into nonbeing. Eventually, the idea was to have one permanent donation bin by the Great Hall doors, where anything that a student no longer wanted could be given to someone in need. With this as an alternative, the elves could stop relegating lost items to the Come and Go Room entirely. Dumbledore, according to the twins, thought the 'prank' would instill a charitable awareness in the student population without seeming condescending or overly superior, as it might if introduced by the staff.

Fred and George, of course, were simply hoping to turn Rigel's public image on its head after the somewhat gritty aura she'd gained.



As she considered the way her schoolmates were responding to the prank-as curious and incredulous as the twins had envisioned-Rigel thought they might just succeed in all three goals at once.

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As though Riddle feared any ebb in public fervor, the announcement informing the champions of the fourth task was dovetailed with a press conference. On the castle lawn, another of the DMGS' many temporary stages was erected. All three of the finalists were obliged to answer questions from those of the press corps invited for the event, and while Rigel was far from keen to face off against the grating Ms. Skeeter once more, she had to admit the woman was dangerously good at her job.

With a tenacious smile that was almost eclipsed by the blonde curls that clung to her head, Rita Skeeter neatly cross-foiled Delacour's remark that the tournament was a proving ground of traditional magical abilities with Owens' assertion that creativity and problem solving were at the heart of every task.

Somehow, and Rigel herself wasn't quite sure whether Skeeter had engineered the statement or not, the reporter got Owens to say, "The real competition hasn't started yet." She was sure they'd be seeing that tag line splayed below the photograph of the three blood champions in their smartest robes, Hogwarts beautiful and snow-capped behind them.

She wondered whether Riddle had engineered this backdrop with a particular intention. He stood tall in sweeping, silver-trimmed robes of deepest black. Against the snow, he cut a dramatic figure, all the more so for how at home he appeared with the seat of his opposition rising triumphantly behind him.

Rigel sensed Skeeter's eyes when they landed on her, like carrion beetles alighting on a meal. She had time to turn her attention back to the small crowd of reporters before the woman raised a single, acid-green-clad hand and the clamor around her snuffed itself in anticipation.

"This one is for the young Mr. Black," Skeeter purred. All Rigel could think was that Binny sometimes called her the very same thing.

"Yes, Ms. Skeeter?"

"All of Wizarding Britain has been atwitter over a wave of mysterious food donations this month."

"That sounds more like a statement," Rigel said, a genuine smile finding its way into her voice. If Skeeter was leading where she thought, then Fred and George had truly come into their own.

Amusement and anticipation threaded through the assembled members of the press as Skeeter's leading statement found purchase in their imaginations. The savvy woman smiled with approval, even as she let out a tittering laugh for strategic effect. "I heard a rumor, Mr. Black. Some of the students at this very school believe they have evidence that paints you as the mysterious architect behind this widespread charitable phenomenon. My *question*," she drew out the word like a boa constrictor might indulgently squeeze its catch, "is this: if you are the one behind it, what made you take time away from preparation for this dangerous and prestigious tournament to pull such a stunt?"

Rigel let a coy smile curl about her lips and cast her eyes to the side as though she were thinking about her response. When she looked back at Skeeter's sharp gaze, Rigel caught respect there for a brief moment. "I can neither confirm nor deny the rumors of my involvement. On an unrelated note, I'd like to say that the Cora Foundation is a non-profit initiative backed by the Black and Malfoy families to get life-saving potions to children in need." She paused to

allow the reporters to scribble down the name, then added. "Minister Fudge was instrumental in its creation. Isn't that right, Minister?"

Put on the spot, Fudge preened and launched into a long-winded account of his personal interest in the good of the wizarding community. Rigel stepped back and smiled at the way Riddle's press conference dissolved into curiosity about this new cross-party charity. Eventually, Riddle had no choice but to step in to bring focus back to the tournament.

"I'm sure you're all wondering just what the fourth task will entail," he proclaimed with a clap of his hands. Attention snapped back to him like a stretched bow string abruptly released. "Much like the first task of the preliminaries, the first task of the finals will take place in a unique arena. Instead of the Dark Forest, our next task will take place in... the Black Lake!"

Rigel frowned as the questions burst one-by-one from the impatient reporters.

"Did you say *in* the Black Lake?"

"How long-"

"-but what precise task will there-"

"Lord Riddle, will the observation orbs be used again?"

At Skeeter's question, Riddle inclined his head. "Indeed, and three of the runic mirrors will be recalled to Hogwarts for the viewing pleasure of all who secure tickets to this fantastic task. Can you picture it? Our champions will brave the cold, oxygenless depths of the mysterious Black Lake, swim through its murky waters, evade the countless creatures of the deep, all to find... well, that would be telling."

Millicent and Pansy were right, then; the task was some sort of treasure hunt. There were plenty of valuable things in the lake. A dozen rare ingredients came easily to mind. Rigel had never

harvested anything underwater, and the thought that the fourth task might be like a subsurface scavenger hunt was cheering. Much better than duels, at least.

After a flurry of questions, Riddle stepped back to allow Misters Crouch and Bagman to expound on how the tournament was fostering international relations. Heavily emphasized in their speech was the assertion that the assessed value of increased trade had already outstripped the losses from restitutions paid following the "unfortunate World Cup incident."

Whether by accident or design, Riddle's retreat brought him to stand beside Rigel, his proximity like a concentrated aura of ill omens. She was unlikely to get an easier chance to speak to him without approaching him directly, but Rigel wondered whether he would be able to control his reaction to the question she wanted to ask. She supposed, either way, his reaction or lack thereof would tell her something.

" *I heard a rumor, too,*" she hissed near-silently. Her mouth barely moved to accommodate the sibilant language.

" *About your self-painted altruissm?*" Riddle sounded bored, but he answered her in Parseltongue, nonetheless, careful to keep it below the register of human hearing.

" *About a mutual enemy, ressurfacccing in London.*" Rigel cut her eyes to watch Riddle's expression as she added, "*At leassst, I asssumed the rogue consssstruct wasss your enemy. Perhapsss I wasss missstaken.*"

Riddle's attention swung toward her with an almost audible snap. His brilliant eyes drilled into her, shock warring with anger and disbelief. His first words were a denial. "*You lie.*"

" *To what end?*"

" *To dissstract me from the presssent climate.*"

" *Thisss isss directly related to the pressent climate, or can't you sssee that much?*" Rigel rolled her shoulders and pretended to look about the crowd, pleasant smile fixed in place for the sake of the press.

When she chanced another glance at him, Riddle's face was sharply closed, and his eyes had gone still in thought. "*The extremisssstsss*" he whispered, almost too quiet for Rigel to hear. "*The attacksss... you believe it isss all the work of that failed experiment?*"

" *If you are not behind it yourssself,*" she said, a shrug in her voice despite her still and relaxed posture. "*I did entertain the thought that you may be working together.*"

Riddle's answering hiss was onomatopoeic in its wordless outrage. "*Collaborate with that mad, broken thing? Never.*"

" *It makesss ssenssse, though,*" Rigel argued. She was more than half convinced of his sincere indignation, if nothing else, but she drew the accusation out to be sure. "*What a coinnccidencce that the attack thisss sssumer happened to make thossse in power desssperate for more revenue-and along comesss your competition.*"

" *My tournament wasss approved long before the attacksss began.*" Riddle spat the words through his teeth, even as he smiled dashinglly for the flashing cameras. "*I ssstrongly ssuggests you refrain from further accusssationsss, lessst I forget that we have a mutual enemy at all.*"

His threat was hollow, if his anger and shock were real. Rigel raised a hand to acknowledge the gesturing photographers, even as she hissed, "*Then asssthe enemy of your enemy, I'll tell you to watch your back-it isss poaching your people to flessst out itsss ranksss.*"

" *It daresss!*" Riddle's reaction was so vehement, Delacour, who was closest to where they stood, rubbed her ear as some of the

unintelligible sounds in the human range reached her. The politician reined in his fury, barely, and demanded, "Who?"

" *Barty Crouch,*" she said blandly. *"Apparently you have not kept him busssy enough thisss year."*

Riddle's anger vanished in an instant, like lightning into a rod, as though the promise of an eventual outlet was enough to ground it for the time being. It was mildly terrifying to witness, and Rigel felt a strange gratitude that it was not she who would ultimately face the tempered wrath.

" *How sssoon he forgetsss what favorsss he owesss me,*" Riddle mused, soft as a sigh but much more sinister.

Rigel couldn't resist. *"Technically, he isss ssstill ssserving you-"*

" *That missscreation isss not me! My followerssss ssshould know better. It wasss not that mad thing that raissed them to the exhalted possition they hold today.*" Riddle's words came fast, hissed together in a string that would have been difficult for even an actual snake to follow. He seemed to have forgotten that Rigel was there as his ire flowed hot once more-except, of course, that Riddle never lost touch with his surroundings.

Except when he did, she amended after remembering the rage he'd flown into at the Malfoy summer garden party after second year.

" *Who beat the cobwebsss off a desssperate, entombed platform and forged it into a monument that could withssstand the modern ssstomach? Who drummed a political movement from tatty tradition and disssenfranchissed elitesss? Who fassshioned legessslation and lasssting change from naught but old complaintsss and stubbornnessss? How quickly they forget, thesse ratsss of the presssent age."*

Riddle was really on a roll, and Rigel hated to interrupt him but the tournament organizers were looking their way, clearly waiting for him

to dismiss the press conference. "*Crouch is-*" she began, but Riddle's quiet vehemence latched onto the name before she could finish.

*" Crouch! The turncoat. Doesss he think the consssstruct can better sssserve his ambitionsss? Who dealt with hisss father when-"*

*" Hisss father is waiting for you to disssmisssss everyone,"* she hissed through a mouth of teeth clenched so hard she felt them creak.

Riddle moved his eyes from the distant line of trees he'd been silently scorching with his gaze to the group of people waiting politely, if a bit unsurely, for his go-ahead. The man's shoulders twitched subtly, as though shaking off an uninvited hand, and he favored each of the assembled with a smile that was both personal and promising. "I'm afraid that's all the time we have today. Please direct any further inquiries to the DMGS staff. I'll see you all in three days' time for the fourth task."

The gathered began to scatter, in twos and threes as cameramen packed up their accoutrements and made for the school gates. Delacour left at once, but Owens lingered. When Rigel met his gaze, she found an unexpected heat there. His usually relaxed face was taut, a deep-seated flame flashing in the shadows of his eyes, like a knife glinting in dark. His gaze slid from her to Riddle, who was watching the departing press, and the fire was banked. When Owens looked back at her again, a crooked smile crawled across his cheek and he winked. Rigel blinked, and the expression was gone. All-around American boy Jacob Owens was back, strolling his way off the stage without a care in the world.

She frowned after him, but Riddle regained her attention with a quiet word.

"Rigel."

She turned to find the man imperiously close to her, head slightly tilted in a way that was certainly meant to be intimidating.

"Riddle," she said flatly, unperturbed.

*" I trussst you will not ssshare thisss rumor with anyone until I have dealt with it."*

Rigel scowled at his presumption. *"I will deal with it assss I sssee fit, assss will you."* She already had, besides.

*" Do not toy with me on thisss, boy,"* Riddle hissed. He leaned further into her personal space, and Rigel bristled.

Her magic flared out in a wave, much as it had with Caelum at the first Yule Gala she'd attended. Unlike Lestrangle, Riddle wasn't moved. The magic washed over him like a wave breaking on a rock. Amusement turned his lips.

"It'll take more than that, I'm afraid." His posture relaxed as he slipped back into English, and the man turned to go.

*That sounds like a challenge,* Dom whispered in her ear.

She narrowed her eyes and sent another pulse-this time at the stage beneath his feet. The wood wrinkled, Riddle stumbled, and the few remaining reporters tittered unkindly. He spun back around and a whip of magic raced through the air between them, faster than her senses could track. She only knew it was there by the sting that bloomed in her cheek on its heel. Rigel stood unflinching, rooted to the spot at the realization that Riddle's magic had moved quicker than hers could react. Riddle could fling his magic *faster than an explosion*, which her magic was more than capable of intercepting.

Rigel kept her gaze steady until Riddle, apparently satisfied, recovered his dignity and quit the stage. *I regret nothing*, she thought, consciously unrepentant in spite of the welt she could feel forming on her cheek. Her own little construct chuckled lowly. *'Atta girl.*



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Her good feeling about the fourth task lasted until she mirror-called Archie to explain it.

"It's probably some sort of scavenger hunt," she said, smiling.  
"Should be pretty low-threat, aside from the creatures that live in the lake."

Archie stared at her from the glass, eyes wide. "Uh, Rigel, has it occurred to you that you'll be *in the lake*?"

She nodded, unconcerned. "Of course. Don't worry, Archie. I actually have the perfect potion for this task, but it seems a shame to waste something so rare. Gillyweed will do just as well, I think. Professor Snape said the task isn't planned for longer than an hour."

"No, I mean-you'll have to *go swimming in the lake*. In something you can swim in. Which will probably not be loose-fitting." Archie's voice grew increasingly high as she blinked at him. "Rigel, you're going to make me look like a eunuch!"

She hushed him and peeked out of her silenced curtains just to be sure none of her roommates had wandered in. "Don't be dramatic. No one will be looking at *that*."

"Everyone will be looking at that!"

Rigel frowned. Surely not. Then again, when had her faith in humanity been rewarded? "You... think so? I could wear several layers... and the water is going to be cold."

"Not that cold." Archie groaned. He ran a hand over his face, and then a disquieting grin crept across it. "All right. Don't worry."

"I am abruptly worried."

"I'm going to send you something. Don't ask any questions! This is about my reputation as a man."

Rigel sighed. "I swear if you send me a rolled-up pair of socks-

It was so much worse than socks. Rigel received a nondescript package the next morning-plain brown paper and no return address. It was so innocuous that every student at the Slytherin table eyed it with interest. She tucked the wand-sized box under her arm with a grimace and decided to open it in private.

Her intuition hadn't failed her. In an out-of-the-way-alcove, under the Invisibility Cloak, Rigel opened the box to reveal a lurid-pink calling card that flashed the words "Innocent Illusions, Hogsmeade's Premier Adult Toy Shop" in metallic script. With a choked laugh that bubbled out of unadulterated horror, Rigel lifted the card aside to reveal a length of turgid silicon nestled in purple cloth. 'Self-Adhering Strap-On' was helpfully embroidered on the silk covering. She poked it. The apparatus had a strange amount of give, and it was flesh-colored, which somehow made it worse.

With a mortified groan, she closed the box again and rubbed her eyes in disbelief. *Seriously, Archie, what the hell?* Did he really expect her to wear it?

Of course he did. After several long breaths she opened the box again and tried to look at it clinically. She dug to the bottom and read the directions. Twice. It would adhere to her with a simple spell could be released with another. Truly, it didn't seem complicated. According to the advertisement, the artificial member would even function like a normal one, rising and... falling as her own bodily fluctuations dictated.

*I never needed this much fidelity into the male form*, she thought silently. She had almost made it over the hump from disturbed to darkly amused. The few times she'd Polyjuiced as Archie had been more than enough for one lifetime. She did have to admit that Polyjuice itself couldn't solve this problem. There was no time to

brew the Modified Polyjuice, even if there hadn't been a large probability that changing the ultimate sex of the gene fusion ritual would noticeably change her appearance, too.

If she looked at it objectively, Archie's plan was an elegant solution. The trouble was, she wasn't completely convinced the problem even merited a solution at all. Rigel still doubted people would be paying attention to what she carried between her legs when so much life-and-death action was unfolding.

It would make Archie feel better if she wore it, though, and her cousin had asked precious little of her all year. Rigel wrapped the box in her cloak and tucked the whole thing into her bag before securing it firmly. *Eleven-year-old me would have been hard-pressed to predict this*, she thought, giving into the humor completely. *I hope it doesn't make it harder to swim.*

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## CHAMPION OF CHARITY: BLACK GIVES BACK

*Just days before the resumption of Triwizard Tournament tasks, this reporter got a chance to speak face-to-face to the three finalists. The delectable Fleur Delacour, dressed for winter weather in a sable-trimmed over robe, expressed admiration for the varied trials presented thus far, while Jacob Owens, Ilvermorny heartthrob, admitted genuine trepidation regarding the coming tasks. "The real competition is just getting started-everything before was a warm-up." There is little doubt that the road ahead will bring both danger and delight for our beloved Blood Champions, but for one of the finalists, there is a more pressing challenge to be faced.*

*My readers have no doubt been following the recent accounts of spontaneous donations made to a rash of charitable institutions. While each contribution was made anonymously, this reporter has*

*tracked them back to their source: Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Multiple eye-witnesses confirmed that the extravagant Valentine's Day cake delivered to St. Mungo's last week was in fact present the day before in the Great Hall. Evidently, a series of donation boxes have been appearing in the hall, one after another, for weeks. Given this, coupled with the fact that every mysterious donation appeared without portkey, this reporter suspects the instrument of miraculous delivery to be none other than the Hogwarts house-elves.*

*But who ordered the house-elves of Hogwarts to begin making these impressive charitable donations? When questioned on whether he sanctioned the bequests, Headmaster Albus Dumbledore had this to say: "Hogwarts students have long been disposed to the occasional prank. Tradition dictates that, absent any pressing danger or harm, the faculty overlooks such expressions of creativity."*

*This much, all of us blessed to attend the great school can attest, but are we to believe that students orchestrated what some are calling, "the greatest concentrated effort to raise public awareness of the decade"? This reporter went to the students themselves and asked one question: who do you think is behind this prank?*

*"It's not a one-man effort," said one seventh-year who wishes to remain anonymous. "I think someone has united the pranksters of Hogwarts for a larger purpose."*

*"The Weasley twins were seen carrying the cake," another student agreed. "The animator twins [a pair of young Slytherins suspected to be associated with elaborate pranks], too. That said, this whole thing is sort of Black's calling card."*

*"Rigel Black is behind it-it's always him," a young Ravenclaw assured me. "He did a Valentine's Day delivery service before. Romantic Rigel, we called him." She provided a list of past pranks associated with Heir Black, compelling evidence of a trend toward the altruistic.*

*Arcturus Black, called Rigel by his close friends, has made an impressive showing in the tournament thus far, but he was making a splash at Hogwarts long before he was chosen to represent the school. Readers may recall that Black was directly involved in curing the Sleeping Sickness at just eleven. Potions Master Severus Snape cited the boy's help in developing the latest improvement to the Wolfsbane Potion at twelve, and academic records acquired from the Ministry's official file system reveal that last year this dedicated student somehow acquired an astonishing number of credits across the spectrum of magical specialties. Accounts from those close to him describe Black as a compassionate soul who consistently goes out of his way to help others. With a portfolio like that, accomplishing a demonstration of the scale we have seen these past weeks is not at all beyond his capabilities.*

*What does Black himself have to say? The modest boy takes no credit for the donations. Instead, he used the opportunity presented by this reporter's question to speak of a new charitable project called the Cora Foundation. The foundation is the brain-child of Lords Lucius Malfoy and Sirius Black, an unlikely combination of benefactors, to say the least! This reporter had to double-check the facts before printing them, but it's true: the Malfoys and Blacks have teamed up to turn what started as a single joint donation to the St. Mungo's Children's Ward into a far-reaching social endeavor aimed to ensure equal access to costly life-saving potions.*

*It's safe to say that Black has his eye on the bigger picture. Following his tongue-in-cheek stunt, a tidal wave of donations from all over the country has come pouring into big-name charities such as the Orphan Fund. Local centers, too, have benefited, with contributions up fifteen percent across the board. As one reader put it, "When a Hogwarts student can do this, it puts the rest of us adults to shame!" One thing in this mystery is clear: the New Triwizard Tournament lived up to its claims to procure the finest young wizards and witches in the world. If the tasks tested virtue alone, this reporter would bet it all on Black.*

Rigel could only hide behind the paper for so long. At Millicent's impatient cough, she lowered the crisp pages to the table and offered a grimace to her friends' expectant faces. "Would you believe me if I said this wasn't my doing?"

"Yes," Draco said with a snort.

Millie only smiled. "It doesn't matter who did it. Rigel, you're society's *darling* ."

"Until tomorrow, at least," she muttered. Cynicism seemed the only possible response to anything by-lined by Rita Skeeter, despite the objective victory to Archie's reputation the article represented. She would have to get the twins something truly excellent for their birthday this year.

"Focus on today, then," Theo suggested. "You've got a task to win, don't you?"

As though she could forget. Rigel was already wearing her swim costume under her robes, which consisted of several compression shirts, an uncomfortably snug pair of shorts, and Archie's special gift, which she was *emphatically not thinking about*.

After all the hype, the fourth task still seemed almost anticlimactic. Even underwater, what was a scavenger hunt compared to a race through the Forbidden Forest, a death-defying obstacle course, and a grueling series of one-on-one duels? She made her way down to the lake without any noticeable nerves. Pansy and Draco wanted to walk with her, but were called away by Professor Snape to answer for a discrepancy in one of their joint assignments. Rigel didn't mind. For once, she was completely prepared for whatever happened.

When she reached the lakeside, it was to see only a small group of people waiting in the cold. Some practical soul had decided that, as they were going to be viewing the task through the observation orbs anyway, there was no need to drag spectators away from their usual seats. The audience would remain at the Quidditch pitch, which left

the champions to prepare in relative peace at the Black Lake's rocky shore.

"Mr. Black, you can leave anything you don't want to get wet in the tent." Crouch gestured to a modest pavilion, from which Delacour was just emerging in a shining silver swimsuit. Rigel ducked inside and shucked her outer robe with a shiver. A couple of firm Warming Charms, and she felt comfortable enough to abandon her shoes and socks as well. From her robe pocket, she unwrapped a wad of viscous Gillyweed. Her Liberespirare Potion would live to see another use.

She hesitated over her pocket-watch. It would be good to have an easy way to check the time, but she didn't know whether it was waterproof. There was a latch behind the watch-face that she'd never figured out how to open; for all she knew, there might be something delicate inside, like a piece of paper or a lock of hair. In the end, she left it on top of her robes. She hoped the Tempus Charm worked underwater.

Rigel picked her way carefully to the edge of the water. Delacour gazed thoughtfully into the dark water, but Owens looked over at Rigel as she approached.

"Now we can start," he said with a friendly grin.

"Actually, we must wait for the appointed hour," Crouch disagreed.

"Makes it easier to judge your times," Bagman added with a self-deprecating laugh. He held a trio of headbands out. "You remember these beauties. Blue for the lady. Yellow for our American contender. And green for our resident Slytherin, of course."

Next, Crouch produced three metal bracelets. Rigel recognized them as more permanent versions of the parchments they'd each been given in the first task. The bracelets clamped down over their wrists and covered the skin between hand and elbow. Concentric circles were etched in iridescent color that would no doubt glow underwater.

Three dots blinked on each one. Rigel noted how carefully Crouch determined who would get which bracelet. Whatever the dots tracked were not all the same, then.

"Today's task is collection," Bagman said bracingly. "Each champion has three items to collect, the general location of which is displayed on your wrist gauges. The first to return to the surface of the lake-not necessarily the shore-with all three of his or her respective items will gain the most points. Partial credit will be awarded for the retrieval of only some of the items."

"Is there a time limit?" Owens asked.

"No." Crouch said firmly. "But once you surface, you cannot return below again."

Rigel exchanged a look with the other two champions. She could tell they were thinking the same thing-if there was no time limit, why would anyone come back with less than all three items?

"What are ze items?" Fleur asked, examining her bracelet with a frown. "Eet does not zay."

Bagman laughed loudly. "You'll know them when you see them. Each is unmistakably marked."

Rigel supposed they would be color coordinated, like the headbands. With the clock ticking toward the hour, Bagman and Crouch hustled the three champions into their starting positions, spaced by several dozen paces along the waterline. At the organizers' urging, Rigel put on her headband, feeling the observation magic activate as the inside band touched the skin of her forehead. She kept her gaze forward toward the rippling, mirror-black surface of the lake, even as she steadily fed herself the slimy weed that had been kept warm by her hand.

She had only just swallowed when Bagman's magnified voice rang out. "BEGIN!"



Rigel heard the others begin to wade into the cold water, but she paused a moment to let the change brought on by the raw ingredient shudder through her. Amazing plant, Gillyweed. Cultivated for centuries by a reclusive coven of hags, its modern form was only discovered when an Herbologist on a collection trip fell in love with what he believed to be a human-mermaid hybrid. The transformation was both akin to Polyjuice and not, more a blooming than a twisting, followed by an intense, unqualified urge to *get in the water* .

She surged forward, some animal instinct more in control of her than she was, and it wasn't until the water closed over her head that clear thought returned and she was able to take stock. Her body had indeed taken on the characteristics she'd read about, but knowing and experiencing were different things. Rigel took an experimental swipe at the water and marveled at the way her webbed appendages propelled her forward with ease. This was another reason she'd gone with Gillyweed over other options-Rigel was not a particularly strong swimmer, and her new fins would give her an advantage. As the water passed through her gills, air came into her lungs without effort, and the brief discomfort of holding her breath was gone.

She peered through the murky blue water without trouble. It took her a moment to notice that her headband was emitting a light of its own. It cut a strange path of illumination in the direction her head was pointing, unnaturally clear wherever the beam landed. She supposed the spectators needed something worth seeing down in the depths. Rigel tilted her wrist to check the closest item's bearing and took off in that direction with a whooshing displacement of water. Once she found a rhythm, she crossed the vast distance with astonishing speed.

Focused on the steady pull through the water, she found it difficult to mark time passing. The terrain, too, seemed meaninglessly disordered. How much ground she covered was impossible to say without distances printed on the bracelet. The closest dot on the tracker took her into a field of long lakeweed, which snaked around her in ebbs and flows as she passed, like slimy wheat swaying in an

invisible wind. She dove in and through it with a playful enjoyment that didn't seem entirely hers, allowing her webbed feet and hands to carry her forward in spiraling dives, which she sort of hoped made at least a few of those watching queasy.

A grip on her ankle arrested her mid-spin, and Rigel twisted, expecting to find it tangled in the weed bed. Instead, she caught a pale green Grindyflow latched on, pointed teeth readying to bite. Rigel kicked her other leg around and rapped it sharply about the head, mindful to avoid its little horns. It startled, jaws clicking together on nothing, but its strong grip didn't waver. She palmed her wand and pointed it threateningly, but the creature seemed to have no appreciation for the danger it represented. Admittedly, it probably wouldn't have encountered a wand in its own backyard before, unless a first-year had dropped one over the side of a boat.

She didn't really want to kill it, despite the annoyingly strangling grip it maintained on her ankle. Aside from the unnecessariness of such an action, the blood could attract anything. Ex-Headmaster Dippet had a number of suggestions for gentle extraction from an unreasonable foe, and it was with a smile that Rigel tried a spell she'd been looking forward to with a bit of morbid curiosity for some time.

Rigel flipped her wand around and pointed it at herself before mouthing, "Lubricus Corpus."

Slime bloomed from every pore, and Rigel had to fight the urge to squeak at the sensation. It was somewhere between ticklish and uncomfortable, but it left her coated as effectively as a good basting. Her ankle slipped from the Grindyflow's grasp like a fish, and she shot away from it with a grin. The creature snarled at her and tried to pursue, but when she bent her appendages to the task, she easily outstripped it. If anything, the slick glaze covering her entire body helped her move even faster through the water.

The blinking dot on her forearm was the only indication that she was heading in the correct direction. It drifted closer to the center as she

wove around ridges and knolls, through gulleys and gorges. Her path took her right to the edge of a cliff, where a field of giant spirulina ended abruptly before a drop-off. At the very precipice of the bluff something glinted, reflecting the light of her headlamp. She approached carefully, but there didn't seem to be any protections set up to stymie her. Tied to a stake that had been unceremoniously thrust into the lakebed was a golden circlet no bigger than a grapefruit. She eyed the emerald green sash that secured the ring and supposed this was what they meant when they said the items would be unmistakably marked for each champion.

Rigel circled the golden prize carefully, searching for a ward or trap. It seemed too easy that all she had to do was collect it. She shivered as she drifted over the deep water of the drop-off. The cold seeped up to surround her suspended form like a tangible shadow. Though she knew it was only a natural consequence of the mingling depths, the chill still set her teeth on edge. It felt like a warning, urging her to hurry up.

She dove, wand brandished at the ready, but encountered nothing and easily looped her left arm through the golden circlet. Rigel paused for a moment to tap it with a mild Sticking Charm. Once assured that it would stay in place, she gave the mental equivalent of a shrug, thinking, *Maybe it really is that simple. After all, there's every chance the dangers of the lake itself will be enough of a challenge.*

Rigel spun slowly in a circle to orient herself toward the next item. Both remaining dots on her tracking bracelet were relatively far away, blinking in the outer-most ring of distance markers, but one was slightly closer. She set off toward that one, her course taking her away from the shallow field of underwater grass, out over the drop-off.

Colder water pressed into her despite the Gillyweed's thermo-regulating effects. The light of her headband did nothing to penetrate the fathoms below her, and though she was loath to leave the little sunlight that had filtered down to her present depth, Rigel knew the

odds of her next item being suspended conveniently in the water were slim.

She dove, water sliding over her still-slimed skin like air under the wings of a bird. Occasionally, something flickered at the edge of her vision, but for the most part she passed unmolested into the deeper trenches of the lake. If she still had ears, she'd have worried about the pressure, but they'd been sealed into something dense and muffled by the Gillyweed. She felt vibrations that might have been sound with her whole body, but for the most part they were easy to block out, the white noise of the underwater world like a persistent but mostly-steady thrumming deep in her bones.

Rigel was halfway to her second item when the water around her fluctuated sharply and began to drag her sideways without warning. She struggled against the current and the mild panic that something she couldn't see was sucking her in. Her beam of light caught a mottled purple and red tentacle to her left and the sensation became clear-the giant squid was passing by, and she'd been caught in its undertow. She flailed inelegantly for a minute before giving into the displacement and allowing the water to tug her sideways in the squid's wake.

A curious tentacle reached out to stroke her arm as she grew near, slime meeting slime for a brief moment of surreal connection. The casual strength of its suckers pulled Rigel along for a time, as a child might drag a teddy bear aimlessly. She kept as still as she could so as not to strain anything accidentally. She doubted the squid meant any harm-it was notoriously domesticated and had never, to her knowledge, harmed a student in all the years it lived in the lake-but a creature so large could have little concept of its own strength.

When it lost interest and released her, Rigel found herself somewhat off-trajectory, but a great deal closer to her goal than before. Taking the luck as it came, she adjusted course and found herself approaching a sunken shipwreck. For a moment she could only stare.

*How in Merin's name did a shipwreck get here?* The idea of the tournament organizers arranging it for dramatic effect was not out of the question, but the established algae colonies looking quite at home all over its wooden surface put doubt to it. Come to think of it, the squid was a saltwater creature, wasn't it? How had it come to be in a Scottish Loch? Those deep trenches she'd passed over gained a new context if she considered the idea that the lake might contain some sort of passageway to other waters in its unfathomable reaches.

Awed and a bit intimidated by the notion, Rigel had to force her attention back to the task at hand. Her tracking beacon led her into the ship's cracked hull, and she carefully slipped through the jagged jaws of broken boards. Her headlamp crawled across the waterlogged cargo hold as she scanned it slowly. She startled a school of fish and had to flatten herself against a barrel as they scarpered past. In their trailing bubbles, she found the treasure she sought. An enormous golden locket was fastened to the pole of an emerald flag, which had been fixed to one of the blown-out portholes.

Rigel's webbed fingers were not up to the task of unhooking the clasp, but after tearing the heavy flag from the pole, she managed to lift it free. She settled the long chain of the locket around her neck and stuck the gaudy thing to her outer shirt with magic. Just one more item remained.

The final dot on her tracker was relatively close. It took her deeper as the terrain sloped downward, toward what she suspected was the very center of the lake. An eerie glow gradually replaced the darkness in the distance, and her eyes strained to understand what she was seeing. Eventually, she understood the towering silhouettes of light in the dark to be the spiraling skyline of an underwater city.

Merfolk, she realized with a touch of wonder. She knew selkies and merrows resided in the Black Lake, but somehow it had seemed unlikely that the tournament organizers would involve them in the task. Of course, common sense would have argued against involving

the centaurs of the Dark Forest, too, so really Rigel should have expected no less. The outer limits of their settlement began as any city might, with small mud residences pocketed by neatly tended fields of lake grass. These dwellings shifted gradually to denser structures of stone as the tunnel-like streets between them gained an appreciable order.

Rigel wove her way warily toward her beacon, keeping an eye out for potentially unfriendly locals. The occasional face peered out at her from a window or doorway, but, other than one scowling selkie who brandished a lobabug at her disagreeably, none came out to either greet or impede her.

As the dot on her bracelet drew close to the center, she slowed her progression. Up ahead, in the heart of the mercity, she could see an area clear of buildings that was probably used as a town square. She darted between stone pillars cautiously. The task had been too easy. The tight feeling in her stomach made her all-too reluctant to rush ahead, despite the knowledge that she was being timed.

Rigel cupped a hand over the light on her headband and peered over a low stone wall into the city square. It had been cleared of vegetation completely, so nothing impeded her view of the squad of Aurors floating in a loose circle as though they had any business being at the bottom of the lake. Each of them wore a red wetsuit and a Bubblehead Charm, which distorted their features creepily. Behind the Aurors, in the center of the circle, she could see glimpses of two more people waiting, but the reason for their presence wasn't immediately clear.

*Where was the last item? It must be valuable, to have actual guards,* she thought. Maybe one of the two figures in the center of the protective circle was holding it. Would she have to duel someone after all?

She crept along the wall several meters, until she could get a better look at the two people the Aurors were encircling. When she finally caught a glimpse of one of their faces, the tight feeling in her

stomach redoubled. It was Owens' girlfriend, Johanna something-or-other. Her eyes were closed, black hair adrift, and Rigel was slow to realize the girl wasn't floating the same way the Aurors were. She hung suspended, motionless, only tethered to the lakebed by a rope around her legs. There was no Bubblehead Charm on her, and for a terrible second Rigel thought she might actually be dead.

*Don't be stupid*, Rigel admonished herself as she ducked back down behind the wall, heart pounding. *What would Aurors be doing guarding a dead body?* She checked her wrist again, but her dot still blinked stubbornly at a distance that suggested her item was indeed within that circle of Aurors. *Why would Owens' girlfriend have my third item?* Then it hit her. The *other* figure in the circle.

Her heart in her throat, she darted further along the wall and looked again. There-between a burly Auror with a mustache and a woman she was vaguely sure she'd met before, Rigel saw her.

Pansy.

Her friend floated limply, blond hair a halo around her pale, slack face. Rigel's limbs jerked in an aborted spasm that she only barely quashed. Anger, boiling hot, coursed through her at the sight of sweet, fragile Pansy tied like a balloon to the lakebed. She didn't know whose idea it was to involve the champions' friends in this bloody spectacle, didn't know whether Pansy herself had agreed to it or been taken unknowing to this fate, but she did know that someone would answer for it.

Pansy didn't seem to be breathing. There was no indication as to whether she was unconscious or asleep, but when Rigel forced her eyes to peer harder through the gloom, she made out a series of numbers hanging over her head, glowing faintly: 11:48. It looked like a date or a time, but it wasn't November and-no, not a date, she corrected as the fourth number changed steadily before her focused gaze-a timer. It was counting backwards. She didn't care to find out what would happen to Pansy when it reached zero.

Rigel eyed the Aurors with unmistakably-aggressive intention. They were between her and Pansy, and that was their mistake. Eight of them and one of her. With a little over ten minutes left to *something*, taking them head-on was out of the question. It would have to be distraction.

She knew a few things about Auror protocol. A disturbance in the distance would not entice them to abandon the primary objective. The only thing that came before mission success was the individual safety of the squad's members, assuming the mission wasn't deemed worth the loss of life. Somehow, she doubted the tournament qualified.

How to threaten their safety without actually harming any of them? If she thought about it, she could probably come up with something from Dippet's book. Something elegant. Compassionate, even. Unfortunately for the Aurors, she was pressed for time and feeling a bit indignant on Pansy's behalf. Regardless of what would actually happen when the clock ran out, the mere implication that Pansy's airflow was at risk flat-out infuriated her. The Aurors would survive a small taste of that fear, she decided.

There was a spell that Healers used to transfer potions directly into a person's stomach. It wasn't ever to be used against a person's will, and Medi wizards took stringent oaths to that effect when they became licensed. Harry was not a Healer, and hadn't taken any such oath. She pointed her wand at the familiar-looking woman and hesitated. The Bubblehead Charm made it difficult to recognize her, but Rigel was pretty sure on second look that it was Nymphadora Tonks. Sirius might take it amiss if she targeted his cousin specifically, she reflected, and adjusted her aim slightly.

She didn't have a potion on hand, but, in a way, they were surrounded by a very simple one. Rigel spelled water directly into the burly Auror's Bubblehead Charm. Not enough to drown him, but enough, this far underwater, to terrify. It wasn't nice. It wasn't honorable. But it worked.



He thrashed in panic, no doubt thinking his spell had failed, and the Aurors on either side of him turned immediately to help. In the confusion, no one noticed her rope-severing charm until it was too late. Rigel summoned Pansy with a grunt of effort, and it was only the fact that the blonde girl was slightly less dense than Rigel that allowed the summons to work. If Pansy had the greater mass, Rigel would probably have flown toward her instead.

The Aurors *did* notice their hostage shooting away from them, but Rigel's spell pulled Pansy through the water faster than they could swim. Rigel shot up from behind the wall to catch her and called up a shield that emerged slightly slower than usual in the watery environment. The Aurors shouted something at her, but Rigel couldn't hear them. She didn't have proper ears, and their words didn't travel the same underwater in any case. Before the Aurors could shoot any spells at her, Rigel disillusioned both herself and Pansy, all the while swimming away as quickly as her finned feet would take them. She dropped the shield when she was far enough and twisted sideways to throw off their sense of where she'd gone. Then she stopped moving, letting them drift in the water with only the slightest trail of bubbles from her gills to give away their position. The Aurors looked around and gestured for a time, but it was clear they were not supposed to move far from their remaining captive.

As Rigel drifted upward, Pansy cradled securely in her arms, she saw Tonks carefully draining the water from her comrade's Bubblehead Charm. She wondered with a glance back at Johanna just where Owens was. Delacour had obviously already collected her third item, which meant Rigel really ought to be racing for the surface. The Vow urged her on, but her conscience worried at her. Would the other girl be all right? She wanted to believe the tournament organizers wouldn't really hurt an innocent. They wanted dramatic stakes, to be sure, but the death of a hostage would be too far... wouldn't it?

People had died before in the Triwizard Tournament, though.

Rigel's stomach clenched again. She couldn't just abandon the other girl. The clock above Pansy's head read: 03:34. If Owens were going to show up and claim his girlfriend from the Aurors, he would have had to make an appearance by now. There was no rule against taking someone else's item. Perhaps, if she brought both girls to the surface, she could claim Owens' points, too.

It was the last, brutally mercenary thought that settled the Vow and kept her blood below an uncomfortable simmer as she carefully kicked her way back down toward the ring of Aurors, who were now looking quite alert and annoyed. With no time to spare, she pooled magic into her wand and abandoned subtlety entirely. She sent the strongest Repulsion Jinx she could muster right into the middle of their ranks. Every one of them was taken by surprise as the spell exploded at their backs. They hadn't, evidently, expected her to aim a spell right next to the hostage. Underwater, the Repulsion Jinx looked like an ever-expanding bubble of hot water that propelled all before it-all except Johanna, who was tied securely in place. While the Aurors tumbled arse over kettle in every direction, Rigel made quick work of severing the dark-haired girl's tether and summoning her as well. With Pansy to anchor her, Rigel had more than enough mass to bring the girl securely to her side.

As the clocks moved down from 01:25, Rigel kicked upward with all her might. The surface beckoned, light dawning just ahead, and yet no matter how fast she swam, it didn't seem to be getting any closer. She must have been much farther down than she thought. The girls were light at first, but seemed to grow heavier as the seconds ticked on. Her limbs were tiring, she thought, but as a pain made itself known in her lungs, she realized that wasn't it; rather, her Gillyweed was wearing off.

Thirty seconds. She counted them in her head as she strained to focus on something other than the burning in her lungs, the trembling in her arms and legs. Rigel made it to twenty, and spots crept over her vision. She felt herself twitch against the need to gasp. This wasn't working. She had to get the girls to the surface somehow.

Rigel readied herself to use the last of her strength propelling the two girls upward. If she pushed with everything she had, they might make it, even if the effort sank her own chances. The Vow simmered angrily in her veins, just as something in her rebelled, though it took a fraction of a second to realize it wasn't her.

*Are you a witch or not!? Don't just die, stupid!*

*Dom? Wha-*

A spell, the words and shape and feel of the magic, slammed into her conscious mind so hard she saw stars. *Ascendio. Ascendio! ASCENDIO!*

Her wand reacted, whether to her command or Dom's she didn't think to wonder until later. Rigel clung to the two girls with everything she had as they shot to the surface like a cork coming out of a shaken butterbeer. She gasped, heaved and coughed as she took in water along with the air, then gasped some more. It was several deep breaths before she noticed she was not the only one gasping.

Pansy was flailing, barely treading water as her eyes darted this way and that, a decidedly panicked glaze to them. The American girl was faring slightly better, craning her long neck around worriedly but keeping her head and chest above the lake just fine.

"Pansy, it's all right." Rigel held out a hand to comfort her friend, and Pansy latched on for a moment before letting it go and slapping the water once more in sheer fright.

"Rigel," she gasped. "What on earth-what's going on? Why are you... slimy?"

"We're in the lake, Pan," Rigel said, her voice a bit hoarse from the water she'd swallowed. "The fourth task in the tournament. I had to come get you, but I did, and we're going to be fine now, okay?"

"No," she said brokenly, panting for air. "No, I'm not feeling fine, Rigel. I can't swim very well."

She could see that. Pansy had her chin tilted all the way back to keep her nose and mouth as far from the water as possible, and the school robes she was wearing were only exacerbating the problem. Rigel looked around for help, but of course there was no one. They were in the middle of the lake, and the shore was at least a mile away. Bloody bugging planning on Bagman and Crouch's behalf.

"Hey, Black," Johanna cut in, her American accent thick. "Where's Jacob? What happened to him?"

"I don't know," she said honestly. "I collected you myself because the time clock above your head was almost out."

"The what?" Johanna was still looking around as though Owens might pop up any moment. "Are you saying Jacob is still down there?"

Rigel shook her head impatiently. "I don't know. Let's get to shore and we can find out."

"I'm not leaving him," Johanna protested, her wide grey eyes horrified. "He could be in trouble."

"How can you help if he is?" Rigel asked, trying to be reasonable.

Pansy's movements were getting increasingly uncoordinated.

"Owens has a monitoring headband, same as me." She gestured to the green band on her forehead. "Everyone on land will know exactly where he is and how he's doing. Please, will you help me get my friend to safety?"

Johanna's expression was torn, but she could evidently see that Pansy was not exaggerating her inability. "Yeah, okay. Listen, girl, you've got to calm down. Understand?"

Rigel could see Pansy gritting her teeth as she replied, a bit breathless. "I am trying. No one told me I would be swimming, however." She made a valiant attempt at slowing her movements to something more controlled, but fear crept into her expression when the more measures strokes caused her to sink a few inches. "Rigel," she stuttered. "I would like to get out of the water now."

*So would I, thought Rigel, but barring someone coming along on a broom and lifting us out-hang on; I can do that much.*

"Pan, I'm going to levitate you," she said firmly. "Don't struggle." She pointed her wand at her friend and said, "Wingardium Leviosa."

Pansy stilled her arms as Rigel's spell carefully lifted her part-way out of the water. Once she was only in waist-deep, Pansy took several slow breaths and said, "Thank you, Rigel. Here." She took the wrist of Rigel's wand hand in her own to steady the spell. "You can't keep that up forever, though. What are we supposed to do from here?"

Rigel, who was focused on keeping Pansy semi-aloft while treading water herself with her free hand, didn't notice Johanna swimming closer until the American girl tapped her in the forehead sharply.

"Hello? People watching on those giant TV screens?" The girl scowled into the runic array from a foot in front of Rigel and clapped a hand on Rigel's shoulder to keep her from moving away. "Now would be a great time to send someone to come and-"

Her words cut off as a hook jerked all three of them into nonbeing.

They reappeared in the center of the Quidditch pitch, sopping wet and stunned by the shock of having been force-apparated without warning. No, not apparated-she recognized the magic receding into her headband as a portkey. A crowd roared down at them from the stands, and all Rigel could do was stare uncomprehendingly until her wits came back to her. The noise, after an hour of near-silence in the lake, was overwhelming. Rigel wanted to clap her hands over her

ears and shut her eyes and make everything disappear, but of course she couldn't. This was the Triwizard Tournament, and she had a role to play.

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[DmDmDm]

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"I'm going to kill them."

Draco barely paid the words any attention-it was not the first time he'd heard them since Pansy's face had appeared, ghost-white and devoid of all life, in Rigel's transmission mirror. Aldon had said it faintly the first time, then again when Pansy's head broke the surface and they could see how utterly unprepared she'd been to come to in those surroundings. Now, watching her rebuild her dignity piece by piece with trembling pride down on the pitch, the words were almost a growl.

"I mean, I'm really going to-"

"Pansy doesn't need us to kill someone right now," Edmund rumbled. Despite his reserved words, Draco could hear an anger at least as great as Aldon's, maybe greater, running hot in his tone. "She needs to be checked out by a Mediwitch, and then she needs comfort and familiarity and calm."

"I can calmly kill them-"

"Just go see to her, already," Draco snapped. His eyes were fixed on his best friends, and he'd never felt more helpless. He wanted to go to them himself, but didn't trust himself not to explode in a pathetic mess of unresolved impotent fear and rage.

"Why aren't you?" Edmund asked, though he was already moving past Draco out of their box.

"I will in a minute."

"Don't tell me you want to watch Owens try to figure out his third item is already gone," Aldon said, scorn in his voice.

Draco tore his eyes from Rigel just long enough to raze the seventh-year with a look. "I will. In a minute."

They left him there, and Draco rewarded his restraint with a muttered curse. Everything about the fourth task hacked him off. First, Snape lured them away from Rigel right before it started with a story that turned out to be made up specifically to rope Pansy into this blasted nightmare. Of course she had agreed, when the obvious alternative was Draco. Pansy was as protective of them as they were of her. Snape made it sound innocuous. She would sleep through the entire thing, he'd said. No harm would come to her. Except mental and emotional harm weren't factored into the calculation, were they?

Draco let out a sharp breath. He needed to get his shit together. Pansy and Rigel needed his support, not his anger. Well, Pansy not so much, he amended as Edmund and Aldon collected her from the field. They wrapped the soaking girl in blankets and bundled her away to the medic tent. Rigel watched her go until she'd disappeared behind the canvas, the very picture of a concerned beau. Draco wondered if Rigel knew how they had cast him and Pansy. The contrast between Owens and his girl was unmistakable.

Owens. What an idiot. Even now he was swimming back toward the merfolk settlement, both of his other items secured and not a care in the world. Draco wasn't interested in watching that prat swim, though. His emotions thoroughly under control at last, Draco made his own way down from the stands. Rigel was still standing in the middle of the pitch, dripping and probably tempting the mother of all colds. No one had even fetched him a blanket yet.

Draco grabbed two on his way past the mediwitch tent and jogged the rest of the way to where his friend stood. Rigel looked a little lost, though it was obvious he didn't mean to. He'd taken off his headband

and the tracking bracelet, but otherwise remained as he had since leaping into the lake.

"Rigel."

The boy turned at the sound of his name, a smile finding easy perch on his face as he caught sight of Draco approaching. "Dray," he said, his voice almost a sigh. "Come to keep me company until the scores are announced?"

"Come to keep you from catching pneumonia, more like," he said, gesturing to the towels in his hands. "Here; you're dripping all over the place and the grass doesn't need watering."

Rigel chuckled as he took a towel and rubbed it over his head quickly. The rest of him was treated the same, and Draco manfully did not watch, even though a voice in his head kept pointing out that this was the most he'd ever seen of Rigel's skin. His friend wore sweats to exercise and always changed in the bathroom. The sight of long, muscular alabaster limbs was almost indecent, somehow. Not that he was looking. Rigel had made his feelings clear-well, mostly clear-on the subject of Draco's attraction and he was *trying*, Salazar help him, to respect that.

He did note with some distant confusion that nowhere did Rigel carry signs of an unusual skin condition. Then again, perhaps it wasn't visible at the moment. Maybe his friend had applied a glamour for the task. That sounded like something Rigel would do.

"Thanks, Dray. I do feel much warmer now." Rigel let one of the towels hang about his shoulders and secured the other around his waist. Draco was silently grateful, as the distracting way those wet shorts clung to *everything* was a painful taunt in each accidental glimpse. "So, how'd I do?"

Draco stared at him. "How'd you do? Rigel, how do you think you did?"



"I don't know," Rigel said, shrugging. "I assume Delacour got back before me, since her hostage was already gone when I got to the mercy."

"That's not a word," he began, but then he shook his head. "No, never mind. Rigel, Delacour quit the task as soon as she saw her sister. She'd only collected one of her other items when she got to the settlement, but she took her sister straight to the surface and forfeited the rest of her time."

"Oh." Rigel blinked slowly. "I hadn't thought that the others might get to their hostages first. I supposed in a way I was lucky."

"Lucky." The word came out slightly strangled, despite Draco's best effort to keep it even.

"Mmhm," Rigel said, nodding blithely. "I mean, lucky that I didn't know about Pansy being down there until I'd already found the other two items. If I'd come across her first, I don't know what I would have done."

"You'd have done what Delacour did," Draco said firmly. He was sure of it-Rigel was the guy who put others first, period.

The dark-haired boy frowned uncertainly. "I don't know if I could have," he said softly. "I have to do my *best* in every task. I can flex a little as long as I still have a good chance at winning, but giving up prematurely... I don't know."

Draco's breath caught as what Rigel was saying sunk in. Could his deal with Riddle have made him choose winning over Pansy? If so, then it could make him choose winning over *anything* . Somehow, that hadn't fully registered until now. He didn't know what to say in the face of such a horrifying thought.

Rigel was rambling on without his input, however. "Salazar. All the cryptic instructions at the beginning make sense now. That's why there's no time limit: because it's a choice they want us forced to

make. Save your friend and forfeit the remaining points, or risk your friend to try and get the other two items before their clock runs out."

"That's what Owens did," Draco said. "He came to the city first, then dithered around and wasted time trying to stall Delacour from getting to her person. It was incredibly idiotic-not only did he waste his own time, but when Delacour realized he was attempting to keep her from her sister, she snapped. Why anyone would purposely nark off a Veela, even a part-Veela, is beyond me."

"So that's why he's still down there," Rigel said, glancing up at the screen. Owens had reached the city, only to find his girlfriend gone. The transmission mirror relayed his conversation with the Aurors, who explained that one of the other champions had escorted his girlfriend to the surface, and that the time on that 'item' had run out in any case. Rigel looked over to where the girl in question was huddled near the medic tent, a troubled frown on her face. "What would have happened when the time ran out?" Rigel asked quietly. "Did they explain while we were down there?"

Draco nodded. "When the clock reached zero, the Aurors were to portkey them out. So you'd lose the opportunity to get points for 'collecting' them, but they wouldn't be at risk of drowning."

Rigel grimaced. "I knew I was being overdramatic. My head wasn't entirely clear. All I could think was that I'd put nothing past Riddle and his little band of psychopaths."

"It came across as noble," Draco said, shrugging uncomfortably. "You look like a saint compared to Owens. And you got all three items, where Delacour has only two."

"She finished faster, though," Rigel said thoughtfully. "How did she get past the Aurors?"

Draco wanted to laugh, but also to cry. "Rigel, she didn't have to 'get past' them. The Aurors weren't there to stop you from taking Pansy."

Rigel stared at him, completely nonplussed. "What? No, they were guarding them."

"From the merpeople," Draco said slowly, "And the giant squid and the grindylows and who knows what else down there-the Aurors were *protecting* the girls. Delacour swam right up and demanded her sister. They handed her over and even helped untie her."

The pale boy shook his head, bewildered. "Why didn't they say so?"

"They yelled it at you, Rigel. Right after you tried to *drown* one of them."

Rigel flushed. "The Gillyweed sealed my ears. I couldn't hear anything while I was underwater. Anyway, I wasn't trying to drown him. Just scare him a little."

That explained it. Trust Rigel to think he was meant to fight eight fully grown wizards for his friend's life. "It says something that diplomatic negotiation didn't even occur to you," Draco drawled. Then again, it said about their country's law enforcement that Rigel had succeeded. Twice. "If you had stopped to say hi, incidentally, the Aurors would have explained that your headband would act as a portkey to shore when you surfaced, as long as you and your passengers were all in physical contact." It had been agonizing to watch them flounder in the water trying to figure out how to get Pansy to shore when all they had to do was touch hands for half a second.

Rigel scowled. "Well, if someone you cared about was tied up at the bottom of a lake and eight guys with wands were standing around them, would you ask questions before shooting?"

Draco wisely did not dignify that with an answer. Owens and the squad of Aurors appeared not far from them on the pitch, and Rigel grimaced.

"I suppose I should explain," the boy muttered. "Or cousin Dora will think *I'm* a psychopath."

He jogged over to where the Aurors were, and Draco let him go alone. It gave him time to watch Owens' girlfriend march across the lawn like a Valkyrie going into battle.

SMACK.

The whole stadium went quiet as the incensed girl slapped her boyfriend across the face. The transmission hadn't stopped on his headband yet, and the sound echoed from the mirror like a crack of thunder.

"YOU LEFT ME! HOW DARE YOU, JACOB? DO YOU KNOW HOW WORRIED I WAS WHEN I SURFACED? ONLY TO BE TOLD THAT YOU WERE STILL SWIMMING AFTER SOME BURIED TREASURE INSTEAD OF TAKING ME TO SAFETY!?"

The whole stadium could hear the argument, but Owens, demonstrating for the nth time that morning what a complete idiot he was, didn't take off his headband before firing back. "I KNEW YOU'D BE FINE."

Draco winced. Even he knew that was not the right thing to say.

"FINE? AT THE BOTTOM OF A LAKE? ANYTHING COULD HAVE HAPPENED TO ME, JAKE. THAT GIANT SQUID COULD HAVE EATEN ME FOR ALL YOU KNOW!"

"THAT'S WHAT THE AURORS ARE THERE FOR," Owens said defensively. Draco thought he was rather missing the point.

"I SHOULD HAVE GONE BACK TO ILVERMORNY INSTEAD OF LETTING YOU CONVINCE ME TO STAY IN THIS MISERABLE, COLD PLACE. WE'RE THROUGH, JACOB. YOU HEAR ME? THROUGH."

Everyone heard her, of course, and Draco was sure the angry little spitfire was well pleased about that. Girls like a bit of drama when they were upset. Rigel rejoined him after finishing his conversation with Andromeda's spawn.

"Did you avoid a blood feud?" he asked politely.

Rigel grinned. "Tonks thought it was hilarious once I explained. The guy whose Bubblehead I messed with was less than pleased, but he did admit it was a good lesson. Did you know all eight of them are trainees? Apparently, the Head of Training, Auror Moody, volunteered them for the task."

"He must really dislike them," Draco said.

Before Rigel could give his opinion either way, Bagman finally put them all out of their misery and announced, "THANK YOU LADIES AND GENTLEMEN FOR YOUR PATIENCE. WITH THE FOURTH TASK NOW CONCLUDED, IT IS TIME TO HEAR WHAT THE JUDGES HAVE TO SAY! IN TODAY'S TASK, CHAMPIONS WERE TESTED ON THE FOLLOWING CRITERIA: EFFICIENCY IN CONQUERING THE AQUATIC ELEMENT OUT OF TEN POINTS, NUMBER OF OVERALL ITEMS RETRIEVED OUT OF TWENTY-FIVE, AND MORAL FIBER OUT OF FIFTEEN POINTS."

Draco blinked, taken aback. "Moral fiber was only five points in the first task. Now it's more than the magic you used to survive underwater is worth?"

Rigel's face took on a cynical cast as he said quietly, "It's worth more points because Riddle is surer of his ability to predict my actions, now. There's a reason my items were, in order of distance from the starting point, also the order that would prevent me from even having to tackle the morality issue at all."

That was... exactly what Draco would do, if he were trying to rig the tournament for Rigel to win. If anything, Draco was a little grateful

that someone was playing to Rigel's strengths. Somehow, he didn't think that was what his friend wanted to hear, though.

"FLEUR DELACOUR FINISHED FIRST WITH TWO ITEMS RETRIEVED IN THIRTY-FIVE MINUTES," Bagman went on. "SHE USED THE BUBBLEHEAD CHARM TO SUFFICIENT EFFECT. FOR CONQUERING THE UNDERWATER ENVIRONMENT, EIGHT POINTS. FOR ITEMS RETRIEVED, NINETEEN POINTS. DUE TO HER DETERMINATION TO RETRIEVE HER LIVING ITEM POSTHASTE, MISS DELACOUR RECIEVES FIFTEEN POINTS FOR MORAL FIBER. THE TOTAL SCORE: FORTY-TWO OUT OF FIFTY."

Delacour looked shocked from where she was huddled around her tiny silver-haired clone. No doubt she'd expected to be slapped with the book for abandoning the task in favor of getting her sister to safety.

"ARCTURUS RIGEL BLACK FINISHED SECOND WITH ALL THREE ITEMS RETRIEVED IN SIXTY MINUTES. HE USED GILLYWEED TO SUPERB EFFECT, NOT ONLY OVERCOMING BUT *ADAPTING* TO THE AQUATIC NATURE OF THE TASK. FOR THAT, HE RECIEVES FULL MARKS IN THE FIRST TWO CATEGORIES. UPON DISCOVERING THE OMINOUS TIME-LIMIT ASSOCIATED WITH THE LIVING ITEMS, BLACK PUT HIMSELF TO ADDITIONAL TROUBLE IN ORDER TO RECOVER BOTH REMAINING PERSONS FROM THE DEPTHS. FOR MORAL FIBER, THEREFORE, HE ALSO RECIEVES FULL MARKS! MR. BLACK'S TOTAL SCORE IS A RESOUNDING FIFTY POINTS! WELL DONE, MR. BLACK!"

Rigel's mouth fell open. "Full marks? What are they playing at? Delacour doesn't get anything for reaching the hostages before me? And I get extra points for unnecessarily, it turns out, stealing Owens' third item?"

Draco shook his head with a small smile. "You can't pretend to be surprised, Rigel. You already admitted the whole thing is rigged."

"They could be less obvious about it," he grumbled.

The crowd was unabashedly in favor of the verdict. Most had by now heard about the piece that Skeeter published in the paper that morning. There could be no doubt that Rigel Black, the 'charitable champion,' would receive full marks for moral fiber on any scale. Rigel was looking up at the stands with a helpless frown. Draco gave a fond sigh and said, bracingly, "I know this isn't the way you would prefer to win, but don't forget that you do want to win this, Rigel. Be glad that your goals are still on track. You'll have time when it's all over to assuage your conscience in other ways."

Rigel nodded slowly. "Thank you, Draco. I... you're right. It's stupid to be upset that things are going my way."

That wasn't exactly what Draco meant, but Bagman had given up on the cheers dying down and begun to simply shout over the crowd's roar.

"JACOB OWENS FINISHED LAST WITH TWO ITEMS IN SEVENTY-FIVE MINUTES. HE USED THE VERY RARE LIBERESPIRARE POTION TO IMPRESSIVE EFFECT."

Draco saw Rigel's head whip around in shock. "There's no way," the boy muttered, staring at Owens like he's just sprouted wings.

"What-?"

"Tell you later," Rigel said, waving the question away before it could form.

"-WILL RECEIVE TEN POINTS. FOR ITEMS RETRIEVED, TWELVE POINTS. WHILE MR. OWENS REACHED THE LIVING CAPTIVES THE QUICKEST, HE CHOSE TO ATTEMPT RETRIEVAL OF HIS REMAINING TWO ITEMS BEFORE RETURNING TO ESCORT HIS PERSON TO THE SURFACE. AS A RESULT, AND REGARDLESS OF MR. BLACK'S ACTIONS IN RELATION TO HIS LIVING ITEM, MR. OWENS RETURNED

AFTER THE TIME LIMIT FOR THAT ITEM HAD EXPIRED. IN TERMS OF THE IMPLIED SCENARIO, HIS LIVING ITEM IS CONSIDERED LOST, AND IN CHOOSING TO PERSUE THE REMAINING TREASURE HE DEMONSTRATED SELF-INTEREST AND AMBITION ABOVE CONCERN FOR THE WELLBEING OF ANOTHER. MR. OWENS WILL THEREFORE RECEIVE NO POINTS FOR MORAL FIBER. HIS TOTAL IS TWENTY TWO POINTS OUT OF FIFTY."

Draco winced as Owens' girlfriend, no longer magnified through the mirrors but nevertheless exceedingly strident, shouted that he was a self-serving snake who deserved to lose the entire tournament.

"Snakes always get a bad name," Rigel said, somewhat tiredly. "Pretty cruel of the organizers to use his girlfriend, in any case. That was asking for this kind of fall out. I'm glad they didn't take Harry, come to think of it."

"It would have been too difficult to move her from America," Draco said with a shrug. "Delacour's sister was already going to be here, since she hasn't missed a task yet, and Owens' heiress was right there for the taking, of course."

"Is Pansy all right?" Rigel asked, his attention drifting to the medical tent now that the scores had been announced. A bit of anger crept back into his expression as he added, "She was trying not to show it, but I could tell she was terrified, Dray."

"She had a bad experience swimming near her parents' estate in France as a child," Draco explained. "They told us she would be asleep through the whole thing, which is the only reason she agreed. I suppose it leant a better sense of drama if the witches awoke when you 'crossed the finish line,' so to speak."

Rigel's eyes found Lord Riddle as he was leaving the judges box. His voice was a dangerous growl as he said, "Then I hope the puppet master is pleased with his little show. He only gets two more, after all."



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He was not, precisely, pleased. The last thing he wanted to do after a successful stratagem was sour the day with unpleasantries. The odious chore of reminding his followers exactly where they stood in line was necessary, however. The simpler the wizard, the more often he needed reminding, and he had left this particular correcting too long.

Barty was waiting, as instructed, in the boat house. For a moment, Tom allowed a faint, nostalgic smile to tug at his lips. He'd conducted much business, in his early days on the rise, in this very boathouse. Its walls were witness to things, plans and decisions, and corrections, too, that few still living would be able to relate. He paused inside the door, taking in the twitchy, sullen-faced man staring out the window at the Black Lake.

Despite being a wizard grown, Barty looked much the same as he had that first day, when he'd come to Tom begging like a dog for scraps in Bellatrix's wake. It had been nearly fourteen years since the favor that sealed the boy, now a man, into his service. Fourteen years of loyal subordination, and now this.

At his pointed footstep, Barty spun and dropped into a low bow. "My Lord," he said deferentially. His restless tongue made an appearance as his eyes roved. "Was the task to your liking?"

"It was... surprising, Barty," he said silkily. "Did I not express the desire to have Draco Malfoy stand in for Black's third item?"

Barty twitched and scowled. "The Malfoys have enough pull. Looks better, anyway, to have a pretty girl on the post, doesn't it?"

Tom sneered at the fool's transparent motivations. "I'm aware that the Parkinsons are your closer cousins. No doubt you wanted to share in their prestige, being connected so openly to the popular pureblood champion. Where you miscalculated, Barty, was in forgetting that it was not your decision to make. You work for me. This is *my* tournament."

"You gave me creative license," Barty whined.

"Too much, it seems." He drew himself up to his full height and said the next words very clearly. "You overstep of late." The silence stretched between them, Barty's fear, growing steadily, a trembling, wind-buffed thing. Into that silence, he snapped, "Were you behind Greyback's little joy spree in the first task? The blood wall in the second?" The whites in Barty's eyes confessed his sins like a caterwauling charm. The only question he really wanted answered, however, was, "Did you honestly think I wouldn't notice, Barty? That I couldn't perceive how your devotion strays?"

"M-my Lord," Barty stuttered. "I don't-"

"Oh, Barty, you really don't think much of me, even after all our years of association. I. Always. Know." He softened his voice until Barty had to lean closer to catch each syllable. "You should have come to me, when you began to doubt. Did I not arrange personally for your father's disgrace and demotion, that you and others like you might be freed from his oppressive anti-Dark agenda? Have I not been a good lord to you, all these years?"

"You have always pushed for our liberation from the tyranny of discrimination," Barty said carefully. He never could quite cage the whine in the back of his voice. "It's just-change is slow, My Lord. Should we not push harder?"

So that was the problem. Plain, predictable impatience. He resisted the urge to sneer. "Push harder?" he asked, no inflection in his tone.

Emboldened by a lack of swift correction, Barty licked his lips and nodded, half to himself. "Yes, we must strike out boldly. Harder, and faster, too. It is the only way to shake up society-to shake down the forbidden fruit they keep locked away out of fear and take it for ourselves."

"Take care you don't cut down the tree that feeds you while you're at it, Barty."

"But it's working!" Barty burst out. "The masses are paying attention. After the World Cup-"

Tom's temper ignited. "You admit to being one of the masked revelers, too? *Idiot child*. We have not worked- *I* have not worked so long for credibility only to allow brash young fools to give into a base desire for anarchy the very hour our victory comes into sight. We are *this close*, Barty." He could not help but seethe at the uncomprehending mulishness in Barty's eyes. "When Rigel Black wins the Triwizard Tournament, the pureblood argument will be irrefutable. Our political power will solidify under the banner of accepted truth, the way forward for society paved inexorably by *us* ." Barty muttered something resentfully, and Tom made an irritated jerk of his chin. "What was that?"

"It isn't *enough*," Barty repeated, more firmly. "They should be punished for the way they've treated us. They should *bleed* ."

"Blood will not solve the problem." It took a hard-earned well of fortitude to disguise his exasperation as forbearance. "Don't you think I considered that? It is a pipe-dream. Revolution inevitably leads to uncontrolled depravity with no clear-cut agenda. No nuanced strategy can survive that environment. Chaos rules. The only certain result is that every friend to common decency and morality rallies against us, don't you see?" Tom pinned Barty with all the ice in his gaze. "Tell me you understand this, Barty. I need you, of all people, to see the big picture clearly."

It would be extremely tedious to navigate a sudden change on the tournament planning committee, especially with only two tasks remaining. If the fool would not see reason, however, Tom had every intention of replacing him. He could afford no rogue pieces on his board at this stage in the game.

Barty's face betrayed his struggle, but in the end, he bowed his head. "I understand, My Lord," he said. "You are wise, of course. Your plans never fail. Forgive me."

Tom allowed his uncertainty to fester. "You will renounce these radicals, Barty. No member of the S.O.W. will be party to that pathetic fearmongering campaign. Its leader will be dealt with soon enough," he promised, adding with a thread of steel, "The last thing I want is to lose you to a doomed cause."

Barty gulped. "Yes, My Lord." He bent into a deep bow and said, head hanging, "I don't deserve your mercy."

"That is the nature of mercy," he said. Satisfied that Barty's foolhardy foray into violent protest had been corrected, his mood took a cautious upswing. "The next task will be *exactly* to my specifications, Barty."

"Yes, My Lord. Whatever you say."

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[end of chapter eleven.]

A/N: my sincerest apologies for the lateness of the chapter, friends. I got no writing done at all in November or December, it turns out. Getting ready to move across country again (because settling down is a thing that I have never met), and putting some thoughtful edits into my very first original book. Which I finished writing. And which I am now terrified to talk about, much less try to publish. Still, I promised myself and the readers that the original project wouldn't

prevent me working and finishing this story. Thanks for all the patience and understanding. To everyone in the Discord server 'Harry Get Some Sleep,' everyone who reviews, and everyone who sends me DMs (that it takes forever for me to answer), thanks for your continued support and inspiration! Hope you liked it. We're nearing the beginning of the end of book four.

In the Discord server I promised to answer some questions in the next author's note. If you aren't interested, feel free to skip-no vital story-related information below. If you have a question, feel free to join the server and submit them for the next A/N, or just message me. I try to answer all DMs, though it takes me some time. Also, as a public service announcement, chapter one of TPP audiobook is now complete and on Soundcloud. Awesome job everyone who participated! You awed me.

Q1: Who are your favorite characters in HP, Tortall, and RBC?

For HP, it's Dumbledore. That's not a popular opinion, perhaps, but I think he's a great character. There's something undeniably epic about him, but he's human enough to be tragic, too. He doesn't feature as much in my story because I feel incapable of fully capturing him. For Tortall, in the original books I like crooked, lovelorn George (you can probably tell), but in the full universe my favorite character is Aly, Alanna's daughter. Clever, cheerful, capable, and irresistibly good-she was everything I wanted to be. For RBC, it may be predictable, but my favorite character is Rigel. I genuinely enjoy her point of view and coaxing her through the complex situations she gets herself in. The whole reason I wrote this series was to create my own role model, in a way. I hate reading about characters I don't admire, because I can't cheer for them. I wanted people to root for Rigel, even as she stumbles and flails, not because she's the main character but because she leans into the story. She has ambitions and steadfastly pursues them, even as the tide of events tries to throw her off course. I don't know if I've succeeded in convincing anyone else that she deserves to win, but for me, at least, Rigel is the hero I wanted.

Q2: How did you discover your love of HP/Tortall?

I'm going to date myself, but the first HP book came out when I was eight. I grew up in that world, and in some ways never left it. I started to read Alanna the Lioness when I was eleven and fell in love with the trope of The Ruse. I always knew I wanted to write about characters who kept big secrets. My one gripe with the original series was how quickly (it seemed to me) she was found out. When I started this series, the one overarching goal was a complex but satisfying ruse that wouldn't end just so the main character could fall in love.

Q3: How did Rigel make so many friends while Archie, the more sociable of the two, has only Hermione?

I get why people are confused. Archie is upbeat, not socially awkward, and kind, so he seems like the type of person who could make friends easily. And he could, if he really wanted to. Growing up, however, he only really had Harry (outside of a few friendly acquaintances like Flint). Archie never wanted or needed a large group of friends. He's used to having one best friend, so when he sits down next to Hermione and secures her friendship, it's enough for him to be happy at AIM. Hermione is also content with one good friend, and as they are both serious academics and spend much of their time outside of class studying together, you can see how he might not have gained other close friendships. Especially because Hermione can be abrasive, and he'd choose her over anyone else. Rigel, on the other hand, actively tried not to make friends, but Slytherin lends itself well to friendship regardless, I think, because in the beginning it was in the other students' interests to continue friendly overtures toward Rigel no matter how many times she rebuffed them. Normal kids, such as those at AIM or even in other Houses, probably wouldn't do that. Slytherins are persistent, however, because they are raised to be political. The result: Rigel had friends made for her and Archie didn't really bother.

Q4: Harry reads a bit like Kel from Protector of the Small, who is ace. How much will romance for Harry play a role in the series?

I didn't give Harry a firm sexuality, largely because I didn't want the focus of the series to be romantic. While fifteen is a time when other teenagers begin to figure these things out, Harry doesn't have the luxury or the desire to think about herself through a romantic lens, so she doesn't. She has firmly compartmentalized that part of her life until an unnamed later date, so the most that romantic attentions of others can provoke in her right now is a vague discomfort and a strong desire to avoid and not deal with it. That said, she can't quash all her hormones, and sometimes she will have moments of brief and often unconscious curiosity. Sorry to not fully answer the question, but the truth is I haven't assigned her a label, even in my head. She's a girl-in-suspense, and maybe she always will be. Readers are encouraged to write their own spin-offs in which that topic is explored more thoroughly-I enjoy reading what you come up with.

Q5: Was Harry's animagus form chosen pretty early on?

Not at all, haha. I finally chose it as I was outlining that chapter, and I dithered for some months prior. There are a lot of other animals I considered her similar to, but many were either too impractical or not native to England-I did think about a lioness-or both: I seriously considered an octopus for a brief time, because they are so clever in their ability to camouflage themselves and escape from any box they're put in. In the end, I decided on a raven because I thought it would be antithetical for Rigel to have an ostentatious form, and I wanted her (perhaps selfishly) to be able to fly.

# Chapter 12

## The Futile Façade:

### Chapter 12:

She finished the fourth task angry and sick with a kind of incomplete vertigo, as though she'd swung too far in one direction and was waiting for the world to pull her back to equilibrium. *A perfect score*, she thought with no small amount of disgust. Did Riddle want people to realize it was all a farce? Perhaps he didn't care, or perhaps he wanted to make it so overwhelmingly clear who the 'best' competitor was that he didn't mind being brash and heavy-handed about it. Rigel watched the politician climb down from the judges' box with a sneer she could not quite contain. Draco made no comment on her dark expression as they left the pitch together.

"Mr. Black!"

Arranging her face into something less disgruntled, Rigel swung around to face Lugo Bagman as he waved her down on her way through the stadium's exit. "Mr. Bagman," she said. "I suppose you want all this back?" She gestured to the collection of jewelry she still wore from the lake, as well as her headband and tracking bracelet.

He laughed at her words, but the sound was tinged with condescension, as though she was a particularly precocious child. "Just so! I'll take your monitoring band and, yes, the wrist tracker. The golden ring next, if you please. No, the locket you keep."

Her hand paused over the clunky necklace chain and she frowned. "Keep?"

Bagman's broad grin was entirely too anticipatory. "That, Mr. Black, is your clue for the next task."



"Clue?" Draco peered down at the ugly locket. "There haven't been clues for the other tasks."

"Adds an element of intrigue, doesn't it?" Bagman said. "It'll give you something to do until mid-April, too. Each of the champions had a clue hidden in one of their miscellaneous items today. If you uncover the secrets of the item, you'll have an edge in the fifth task."

Rigel's eyes narrowed. "Delacour didn't collect her other items."

Bagman waggled his eyebrows. "Pity for her, but lucky for you, Mr. Black. Now, don't forget your effects-they've been moved to the healers' tent." He clapped her on the shoulder and added, "Great showing today! Keep it up, and you'll make a good many people happy."

She let a scowl bleed over her face as the man walked off. "What's that supposed to mean?" Rigel muttered. Was Bagman a member of Riddle's party too? She hadn't thought so.

"He probably bet on you," Draco said quietly. His nose wrinkled as though he'd smelled something unpleasant. "Father says Ludo Bagman's gambling problem means he's always in someone's debt."

Rigel blinked. It hadn't occurred to her that people other than the Ministry and Riddle could be making money off her competing in the tournament. The thought made an already tiresome undertaking feel dirty as well. Wanting nothing more than to shower the residual slime from her skin, she made a bee-line for the medic tent and found Pansy being escorted out under the combined glowers of Rookwood and Rosier.

"Pan, are you all right?" she asked at once. "I'm sorry about all this." She'd never dreamed that her friends would be directly endangered by the tournament, but it seemed Riddle knew no boundaries when it came to the show he sought.

The blonde girl nodded with a weak smile. She looked nearly mummified by the number of towels that were wrapped around her. "Of course. Thank you for returning me to shore." Before Rigel could do more than nod, Pansy was walking toward the castle. "Forgive me, but I'm going to lie down for a while. Well done today, Rigel."

Draco and Rigel exchanged a look. "Maybe you should go with her," Rigel suggested. "She doesn't really seem all right." It riled her blood all over again to see her normally composed friend shivering like a kitten. Draco's mouth twisted. He gave her a look that said he didn't want to leave her, but Rigel gave him an insistent nudge. "Give Millie a heads up, too, if Pansy would rather be shut in her room."

Unable to argue with good sense, Draco sighed. "Come find me in the common room after you've changed. We can break another deck of Theo's Exploding Snap cards or something."

She felt her mouth hitch up on one side. "Sounds fun."

They parted, and Rigel continued alone into the healers' tent. It wasn't empty. Owens stood to one side, shirtless, next to a small table stacked with clothes. The taller boy glanced over as she ducked inside, and as she made to turn around with a mumbled apology, he barked out a laugh.

"Modest? I didn't expect that from someone like you."

Rigel hesitated, then gave a casual shrug. "As long as you're not bothered." She affected disinterest and strode past him to pick her clothes out of the pile. The over-robe she shrugged on over her swimming attire and the rest she gathered up to carry with her. Her pocket watch tumbled out of her shirt and fell to the earth with a muffled thump. She bent over to retrieve it, but Owens got there first.

He'd shucked his swimming trunks and pulled on a pair of sweats, but hadn't yet reclaimed his shirt. She averted her eyes as she held out a hand to take the watch, but when he didn't immediately relinquish it, she was forced to look up with a frown. There was fire in

his gaze, again, and she felt her hackles raise automatically to meet the silent threat.

"My watch, please."

The American boy's fingers clenched over the rounded edge so tightly she saw his knuckles go white, but then he fairly shoved it at her. "Just dripping in Slytherin heirlooms, aren't you, Black?" His eyes lingered on the ugly locket still around her neck.

She let her face go slack with genuine surprise as she slipped the watch back into her robe pocket with careful fingers. "I'm not sure what you mean by that, Owens. Not everything with snakes on it is related to Salazar Slytherin."

Owens' face washed from dark anger to something more snide, and his voice was laced in irritation as he said, "Who do you think you're kidding?"

If he was going to demand answers from her, then she could do the same. "Where did you get the Liberespirare potion?" she asked, eyes watching his annoyed expression closely.

"Maybe I made it," Owens said, his sneer shifting closer to a smirk.

"It takes two people to brew," she told him. "I can't think of many here at Hogwarts who have the skill to help you, much less the inclination."

Owens laughed, but there was no humor in it. "I have more friends around here than you'd think. What's it to you?"

"Just professional curiosity," she said, turning away with a lift of her shoulders that was stiffer than she'd intended.

"Well, keep it to yourself. You should know better than to ask such questions at this stage in the game. We can't afford any hiccups now."

Rigel whirled back at the implication behind that statement, but Owens had left the tent. She shoved her feet into her shoes with more force than necessary. What in Merlin's name was Owens trying to convey? 'We', he'd said, as though they were on the same side. Rigel replayed everything she'd noticed about Jacob Owens and had to wonder how much of his performance in the tournament might have been just that—an act. He had some impressive connections to come up with a *Liberespirare* on short notice, and to imply that he was playing the same game she was... if taken out of context of the literal game they were playing, it sounded as though he was playing for higher stakes than advertised, too.

*Lord Riddle does not gamble unless all the odds are stacked in his favor.*

Rosier's words came back to her, as they had numerous times over the course of the tournament. A number of the candidates had been hand-picked, that much she knew already. It was not a stretch to think that others beside herself might have made additional deals on the side. As Bagman had so helpfully pointed out, more interests than just the Ministry's and Riddle's were at play in a spectacle this big.

The feeling of vertigo hadn't gone away. If anything, her sense of unbalance was growing stronger.

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Rather than probe the locket in the common room where someone could get hurt, Rigel took it to her Head of House's office that evening. If Snape was surprised to see her so soon after the fourth task, he didn't show it. He merely conjured her a comfortable armchair before his desk and gestured for her to sit.

She sank into the chair, acutely aware of every ache in her muscles now that they had a chance to relax, and pulled the golden necklace from her robe pocket. Sliding it across the desk toward him, she said, "This is supposedly my clue for the next task. Considering the source, I thought I should get it checked for traps before I try to open it."

"That's unusually prudent of you," Snape commented, taking out his wand and leaning closer to peer at the locket without touching it.

Rigel acknowledged that truth with a tilt of her head, which sent drops of water from her freshly-showered hair down her neck. She shivered. "Owens suggested it was a Slytherin heirloom. It seemed preposterous that the Ministry would send such a valuable museum piece to the bottom of the Black Lake, but the gems on the front could be an 'S,' I suppose. I reckoned you would know either way."

Snape levitated the locket to his eye-level with an economic flick of his wand, an intent but closed expression on his face. "Slytherin did have a locket-he wears it in his portrait in the Great Hall. This could merely be a convincing replica, however."

That made more sense than risking the damage of something so precious. "Symbolic, then. I wonder if the objects the other champions collected had any greater significance."

"As Delacour never collected hers, that would be difficult to confirm," Snape murmured. His eyes narrowed. "Owens did have a golden cup, in addition to a ring similar to the one you collected. Assuming the cup was Hufflepuff's famed Chalice of Truth, Delacour's clue could be either something of Ravenclaw's or Gryffindor's." He sneered, adding, "That great hulking sword would be difficult to swim with, but Ravenclaw's diadem would be the right size. It has long been thought lost or part of a private collection, however." The Potions Master tapped his long fingers on the desk. After a considerable pause, he gathered his thoughts and tucked them away where Rigel couldn't see them. "Regardless, while this necklace is undeniably enchanted, it does not appear to be cursed."

He plucked it from the air and turned it over in his palm a few times. The clasp didn't open at his touch, but Snape wasn't surprised. "Locked with Parseltongue, no doubt," he said with a nod. "If you'd like to open it now, I'll ensure nothing nasty escapes."

Rigel stared at the innocuous-looking piece of jewelry as Snape set it back on the desk between them. "Can you tell how it is enchanted?"

Her professor shook his head slowly. "Slytherin's original locket was purported to have a number of powers. Clear-sightedness, for one, as well as the ability to forewarn its owner of threats or ill-intentions. If this is that locket, it would explain the exceptionally strong magical signature buried deep within it. I doubt it would be possible to access the locket's true power without being a direct blood descendent of Slytherin's line, however. My examination *did* reveal a rather tacky illusion spell that has been clumsily attached to the locket very recently, but that magic is not malicious. Likely, it is the clue you seek."

She cast her own awareness out toward the locket, to see if she could sense what he meant. There was something clinging to it in her mind's eye, a thin, glittering strand of magic that felt like tinsel and moved with a fluttering ripple. Rigel tried to mentally filter through it, to sense what lay beneath, but all she got was the slow, undulating presence of something before it twisted away from her grasp. She eyed the piece of jewelry with new respect; whatever magic lay not-quite-dormant within, it had to be seriously subtle to curl away from a direct probe.

The tinsel-strand of magic seemed to wave frantically as she pulled back her awareness, desperate to be activated. With a nod to Snape, Rigel focused her gaze on the emerald 'S' and hissed, "*Open.*"

With a snick that sounded too contrived to be real, the locket creaked slowly open. She caught a glimpse of a bright eye blinking out from one of the doors before smoke obscured anything about the inside of the locket. Thick and grey, it poured up from the gaudy

neckpiece to hover in the air between them, churning in a way that reminded her of something. Before she could place the memory, the smoke coalesced into a sphere and a ghostly voice emerged, dripping ominous verse in cadence.

*" A fortnight past the equinox,*

*three heroes will ascend.*

*Their path is clear; their way is not,*

*confusion through them wends.*

*If hearts are hale and minds robust,*

*their bodies strive for height,*

*But all ascension to be made*

*relies on clearest sight."*

They listened to it twice in silence before Rigel shut the locket. "I hate riddles," she said with an annoyed sigh.

"Certain you aren't biased?" Snape drawled. He gestured to the necklace dismissively, adding, "In any case, this is a clue, not a true riddle. 'Riddle' implies an answer that may be deduced by an average listener solely from its own content. This drivel relies on specific context."

She clenched her toes in her boots slowly, turning the words of the poem over in her head. "It's definitely not a prophecy... right?"

"It matches no known prophetic structure," Snape said at once. He sounded absolutely certain, though Rigel hadn't thought he had any interest in the study of Divination.

Rigel was grateful for his sureness, whatever the source. She moved on to dissecting the clue itself. "When it says 'clearest sight,' do you

think that means we're going to be blindfolded? It would explain 'their path is clear; their way is not.'"

"Possible, though a simple blindfold lacks the element of macabre drama we've come to expect." Her Head of House turned his gaze back to the gaudy necklace. "Don't forget that the item itself is part of the clue. Slytherin's locket was known to lend its wearer clear-sightedness."

"I can't access the locket's powers if I'm not an heir. If I'm not meant to literally use it, then it must have symbolic significance," she said.

"The other Founders' items are similar in theme, right?" She cast about in her mind, trying to remember her history lessons.

"Hufflepuff's cup lets the possessor read the true intentions of those around them, and Ravenclaw's diadem gives wisdom, which is a sort of clear-mindedness, I suppose. What about Gryffindor's sword?"

Snape's mouth twisted unpleasantly, but he admitted, "It imbibes only that which strengthens it."

"Clarity of body!" she exclaimed. "Together with the others, that's clarity of mind, heart, and eyes, all of which are mentioned in the clue. The task must contain an element that is designed to trick us."

"'Confusion through them wends'..." Snape murmured. After a moment, his eyes widened and a smirk drew itself across his face in a slash. "A potion."

Rigel blinked, a surprised smile curling at her lips. "I'm an idiot," she breathed. A potion could easily devastate a person's clarity of mind, body, heart, or sight. Which would be affected, though? It could be any potion, and they hadn't been told what items would be allowed in the fifth task yet. She could carry a bezoar, but it might not be a *poison*. A thought pulled her up short and she frowned at Snape.

"Has Riddle asked you to brew for this task?"

His smirk dropped away like a stone falling from a cliff face. "He has not. There is more than a month until the task, however. When the



request comes, I will inform you."

She nodded in agreement, wondering when the idea of pursuing underhanded means to win the tasks had stopped bothering her. It was as though the closer she drew to the finish line, the faster her periphery shrank until, some moments, the tournament was all she could see.

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The first Saturday after the fourth task was a Hogsmeade weekend, and Rigel's friends wouldn't let her spend it cooped up in the castle. She had endured their pointed comments in regards to the healthy need for relaxation through dinner the night before, and by the time the post arrived the next morning, she was close to giving in.

"It's been so long since we all went together, hasn't it?" Pansy said idly, stirring her tea in precise circles.

"Usually Theo has a date and Rigel has some project that keeps him from coming," Millicent agreed.

Theo swallowed his mouthful of scone and said, "I'm free this time."

All eyes turned to Rigel and an expectant silence descended. She opened her mouth to give an impenetrable excuse, but an owl's insistent beak at her elbow distracted her. She took a letter from its leg, noting Archie's writing on the front of the envelope. Draco cleared his throat from beside her and she looked up to see her friends still waiting. She sighed. "I should be preparing for the next task."

"Which you haven't explained to us yet," Millie muttered.

"You just want to brew some more," Draco accused, half amused, half exasperated. "You know we can tell when you come to breakfast smelling like a sewer, right?"

Tahiil's eyes widened. "That smell is you? I thought perhaps this table sat over an open drain."

Several people nearby snorted into their pumpkin juice, and Rigel's eyebrows rose in her own defense. "I can't imagine why you'd want a smelly fellow like myself to accompany you in a closed carriage to Hogsmeade," she said with dignity. Her composure was somewhat undermined when the same owl flapped up to her head and raked her short hair in its talons. With a hiss, she extracted herself and relieved it of its second letter before it could do further damage. She eyed the owl mistrustfully. "Did he tell you to do that?"

The owl gave her an affronted glare and appropriated one of her potato skins in revenge for the insinuation. Rigel frowned down at the two envelopes she'd liberated. The first was thick, as though a great deal of parchment was stuffed inside, and the second was considerably lighter, though it had 'Rigel Black' in red ink on the outside. Not for opening at the table, then. Her curiosity eating at her, she didn't hear Blaise's question until he repeated it.

"I said, at the rate you've been brewing, you're bound to need replacement supplies soon."

She nodded slowly. "That's true, but I have a fairly regular owl order from the apothecary in town. I won't run out of anything."

"Isn't it better when you can pick out the ingredients yourself and ensure the quality?" Millicent tried.

"If I received inferior ingredients, I would simply send them back." After a pause, she added, "Or donate them to the student storeroom."

"Oi! Is that why our potions never work in class?" Theo said, outraged.

"That's like asking if the reason Pan can't bake a pie is because she's not using top-shelf flour," Rigel said musingly.

Pansy sniffed at her from across the table. "You won't dissuade us by being rude, Rigel."

"We only have a couple Hogsmeade weekends left this year," Draco reminded her.

"You've been brewing so much in your lab we hardly see you," Millicent added.

"It's only one afternoon-"

"You're more than prepared for whatever they throw at you next task-"

"Think of your poor, lonely friends-"

"All right! Okay. You all win." Rigel blew out an amused breath. "I'll take the day off from brewing and task prep."

A localized cheer went up from their section of the table, and Rigel resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Her friends certainly thought they were amusing. She stood, brandishing the letters. "I'm going to go sort through my post before we leave, then. See you all at the carriages."

She took the letters to her lab, thinking she might as well pick up her list of ingredients that were running low while she was at it. It really *was* more satisfying to pick them out for herself at the apothecary.

Treeslider lifted his head as she unlocked the door. "*Ssspeaker iss back with food?*"

She pulled a wrapped mouse from Binny out of her pocket and smiled at the snake's pleased hiss of approval. Knowing he didn't like moving from the stone she kept hot with a Warming Charm, she set the mouse where he could reach it and turned to the letters.

The thicker packet turned out to be less like a letter and more like a roughly-drafted Mastery thesis. Hermione had evidently asked Archie to pass on her notes on the Fade. Rigel had been anticipating something substantial, having enough experience with the formidable Miss Granger to expect nothing less than strictly organized brilliance. Still, she had underestimated the girl.

Dozens of pages, meticulously numbered and organized into chapters, were bound by string and accompanied by a neat title page with a note requesting that Rigel check the information for discrepancies. Rigel could honestly say she'd never seen a sheaf of notes so large it required its own table of contents. She set the packet carefully aside for later reading and moved onto the next envelope, which contained two separate letters. She saw immediately why Archie had forwarded them in red. Both were addressed to Harry Potter, one in Leo's easily recognizable handwriting and the other in a vaguely familiar script that took her a moment to place.

She started with Leo's, a smile on her lips that faded as she absorbed his news.

*Harry,*

*How are you? Probably buried in schoolwork and brewing too much for Krait besides. I hope you don't exhaust yourself this term. I worry when you're away, probably because whenever you come back you look like you've climbed through hell to get here. I know, I know-you resent it when I fuss. I sound like an old grandma, but it seems as though the world is growing less predictable every day.*

*The Ministry raided the Lower Alley shops near Diagon, again. No mention of what they were looking for this time, beyond a vague*

*'suspicious persons.' Any person could act suspicious when you invade their homes and businesses on a whim. I shouldn't complain about the Aurors to you, but I hate to let the others see how helpless I feel. Some things I can control; so many more I can't.*

*I'm dancing around what I really wrote to tell you. I'm sorry to bear nothing but bad news, Harry. The Carpathian Clan snapped last night. No one knows what set them off-maybe the raids, so close to their coven, maybe something else-but the Carpathian vampires moved in force against the Shrouds sometime just after dusk. The damage was localized to the Lamia Lodge, for what consolation that's worth. Half of it burned, and the Strigoi Shrouds lost several of their coven to the fire. Gavril was caught in the fighting and injured by a queer device. He's still alive-undead, that is-but considerably weakened. I know you are on friendly terms with him and thought you ought to hear it from me. I don't know when he may recover. Count Aurel believes his second to be affected by a strange sort of poison, though he has not ever encountered a substance able to lay a vampire low in such a way. When there is more news, I will send it straight away.*

*Until then, please take care of yourself. Just come home to the alleys, whatever it takes. I'll feel better when I see you safe for myself.*

*Leo*

She read the letter twice, wringing it for every drop of information. A raid in the alley wasn't unusual, but the Carpathians breaking the code to attack their rival coven unprovoked? The vampire covens wouldn't fight unless tensions were ratcheted sky high-they prized their immortal lives too precious to be wasted over anything less than grave insult or violent desperation. It was difficult to believe that one Ministry raid could push them over the edge so quickly.

Conscious of the group of Slytherins waiting for her in the Entrance Hall, Rigel sped through the second letter with only a hint of the

usual amusement that came when she imagined Caelum Lestrangle deigning to write his halfblood pen pal a letter.

*Brat,*

*I don't doubt you're languishing in some underfunded American laboratory at this very moment. Never fear, I am here to provide word of the civilized world to you. I have, you will find, completely mastered your Shaped Imbuing method. I daresay I have improved it slightly, in fact. I may be able to find time this summer, in between preparing for my Mastery exam and writing my thesis, to give you a few pointers.*

*Master Whitaker has more than prepared me for Mastery, of course, but he advises that it does not do to ascend the ranks too quickly. It gives the wrong idea about one's priorities. Thus, I shall wait the traditional length of an apprenticeship before getting the formalities of Mastery out of the way. I suppose there is always some small improvement to be made, though I fear I shall soon surpass what my Master can hope to teach me. It is not surprising; true talent always rings through the noise. Just think of how quickly I was able to master your quaint brewing trick-even my father was impressed. He has a colleague with an idle curiosity regarding the strange process who had mentioned it to him, and you should have seen his face when I told him I could replicate it flawlessly. He should expect no less from the Lestrangle Heir, of course, but you understand that outsiders to the art often underestimate even its most gifted practitioners.*

*One day, potioners will get the recognition we deserve. When the world sees the true power of my brews, my genius will be undeniable. Don't fall into your own cauldron before I have a chance to show you my improvements.*

*C. Lestrangle*

She tucked the letter away with the others, a mixture of feelings in her stomach that wasn't easy to sort through. He hadn't said

anything about the Liberespirare potion, though she couldn't imagine why Caelum of all people would have reason to give a rare and expensive potion to a muggleborn American. Where would they even have met? It was exceedingly unlikely, but Rigel was starting to suspect conspiracy behind every coincidence.

On the other hand, there was an undeniable warmth at what Lestrangle had not said-he hadn't said thank you, but she could tell that's what he meant. The part of her that had bullied the arse into dinner at their student showcase was glad that his parents were finally recognizing his talents, and that the Shaped Imbuing training had helped him claim some of the respect he felt he was missing in their eyes.

She did wonder whom Lestrangle Sr. had heard about the process from. As the inventor, she'd expect that anyone with questions would come to her, but there was every chance that certain members of society would be too proud to approach a halfblood, no matter their academic interest in the subject. Probably it was someone else in Riddle's Party, though if that was the case, Professor Snape could have answered their questions, too.

Rigel double-checked her shopping list against her existing stores, bid a sleepy and full Treeslider farewell, and left for the Entrance Hall. Despite Caelum's odious manner of attempting to impress her, she was curious to know how he had 'improved' the Shaped Imbuing process. A wicked grin crossed her lips as she imagined him writing his Master's thesis about *her* new brewing process. She would never let him live it down.

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They had to split into two carriages, and Rigel automatically turned to follow Draco and Pansy, but Millicent forestalled her with a touch

to her elbow. Blaise held open the other carriage's door with a small smile, and Rigel climbed in, bemused.

When the thestrals lurched into motion, Millie pulled a green orb from her pocket. "I did it," she said, just a little smug.

Rigel brightened, academic enthusiasm pricked like a the ears of a werewolf by the call of its own kind. "That was fast, Millie. Great job. Hang on-" She took her bag from the floor of the carriage and rummaged through it until she found her own imbued medi-mini. "Take this, and mix the two up behind your back."

Millicent took the green orb from Rigel with a small frown. "Is that the same one from before? How long ago did you imbue this? Mine don't stay green for more than a couple of days."

Rigel blinked at her. "I... don't remember. Mine just stay that way."

"Indefinitely?" Blaise leaned forward to catch Rigel's surprised gaze. "That is quite unusual, I think. Mine will fade eventually, too, as the magic slowly breaks up and disperses back into the air."

"I thought the medi-minis were designed to trap the magic in the orb." That was the whole point, after all.

"Yes, for a time, but the runes that trap imbued magic into these training tools aren't particularly potent," Blaise told her. He took out a small notebook and jotted down a sequence. "See? It's just these five, plus a few to make the imbued magic non-reactive."

Rigel wasn't on Blaise's level with runes, but she knew enough to agree with his assessment. Magic had a natural half-life once it was separated from a wizard's core. Just as potions had expiration dates, no spell lasted forever. Structure, commonly provided by runes, patterns, or other ingredients, helped-the more complex, the better, which was why big, long-lasting magical projects were so incredibly difficult to engineer. Even wards designed to last centuries had to be renewed with fresh magic after a time-as Blaise said, it eventually



would escape its structure and merge with the atmosphere, released back into the world, as some put it.

She'd simply thought the medi-minis had a complex enough magical structure to trap her magic for several years. Rigel turned the problem over in her mind. If Blaise and Millicent were using the same type of medi-minis, and theirs only lasted a few days...

"Either you are imbuing significantly more magic into your orbs or your magic has an additional source of structure that ours does not," Blaise said succinctly.

Rigel pressed her lips together. "I stop when it turns green." That left only the latter explanation. "My magic has always been... different."

"You used to talk about it as though it was sentient," Millicent recalled slowly.

"It is," she said. At the look Blaise and Millicent exchanged, she sighed. "I know how that sounds. I've gone deeper than most people in my Occlumency study, though, and I've seen it. I've interacted with it, and it interacts back with me."

Blaise spoke as though he was choosing his words carefully. "A reaction to stimuli is not necessarily sentience."

"And if I said I've witnessed it acting independent of my conscious will?"

"Some people would say that sounds like possession," Millicent said quietly. "I'm not saying that," she added quickly. The dark-haired girl wet her lips and took a slow breath. "But some people might. If they heard about it."

Rigel grimaced. "I don't tell people, generally. This might affect our experiment, though." The unspoken - *and I trust you both* was heavy in the close space between them.

"I thought you merely wanted to know whether you could recognize your magic after it was separated from your core," Blaise said.

"That's step one," Rigel said distractedly. She didn't know if the experiment would be useful at all if her magic was going to be such a skewed variable. "What I really want to know is whether I can reabsorb magic after it's been separated from my core."

Millicent spluttered. "What, call a spell back into your wand?"

Blaise hummed in interest. "That would have astounding applications. I've never heard of such a practice-a kind of reverse-imbuing?"

"Something like that," Rigel said. "I know it's not normally possible-once your magic takes on a foreign structure, it changes the signature too much to be readily identifiable as yours. At that point, once it's been shaped into a spell or a potion, it definitely can't be reabsorbed. The medi-minis don't shape your magic, exactly, though. They just trap it, so its signature stays pretty much the same, until it breaks up over time, I suppose. What I want to know is whether that means that as long as it hasn't broken up yet, it can be reintegrated into a person's core."

"To do that, you'd have to not only be able to identify it as yours, but be able to manipulate it when it's already outside of your body, too," Blaise said quickly.

"That's step two," Rigel shot back, a grin tucked into her cheek. It turned a little sour as she added, "It's going to be more difficult to determine general limits to the theory if my magic is freakishly keeping its signature structure longer than other people's, though."

Millicent shook her head, looking a little overwhelmed. "How did you come up with such a thing?" she asked faintly.

"With Occlumency," Rigel explained. "I can separate parts of my magic from the majority of my core in my mindscape, and whenever I

go to re-merge them, they sort of snap together, like a smaller magnet meeting a larger one. I started wondering how far I could carry that phenomena from the physical core."

"That's quite a leap," Blaise said. "It's brilliant. Can you imagine being able to store magic, even for a short period of time, and reabsorb it on demand-say, right before a duel? Anyone could become more powerful."

"I don't know that it's possible for a person's core to hold more than its normal level of magic," Rigel said apologetically. The natural storage limits of a core could not be significantly stretched, according to most scholars. "It might be useful to replenish your magic quickly if you were very tired, though."

"Is that what you're thinking of using it for?" Millicent asked. "If it works, that is."

Rigel tilted her head. How much should she say? "Sort of. I've also been reading about different rituals for transferring magic. In most cases, once magic is moved from one person to another, the original person loses their affinity for it and can no longer sense it."

Blaise nodded easily. "Because the core of the recipient converts the magic according to their own core's mechanics. It takes on the signature of whoever's core it resides within."

"What if it didn't, though?" Rigel said. "I read about a case where the original magic retained just enough characteristics from its original owner to cause resonance-like symptoms whenever the donor and recipient were in physical contact."

The dark-skinned boy narrowed his eyes sharply. He whipped a quill and ink out of his pockets and began jotting into his notebook. "Do you have a reference for that?"

Rigel nodded. "I got it from Dumbledore. I'll get you a copy of what I have, if you're interested."

"I'm fascinated," Blaise murmured. "There are so many implications... I see now why you'd take the time from the tournament to continue looking into this. It's amazing that no one else is studying this."

"Maybe they are," Millicent said. "It's not as though the international wizarding community is known for its stellar cross-border academic cooperation."

Rigel made a noise of agreement. "Most archives are poorly organized, too. Even the library here is difficult to navigate for any but the most basic of school-level assignments. There's every chance that someone has stumbled across this phenomenon before and simply didn't do a good job of promoting their findings."

Blaise shrugged with equanimity. "Then you're still the first discoverer, as far as the general public is concerned."

"I'd rather not re-invent the wheel just to claim the copyright," Rigel said dryly.

Millicent patted her knee sadly. "Our Rigel is a hopeless academic purest. He probably wants the knowledge for its own sake or something."

She made a face. "I'm not a Ravenclaw. I want the knowledge so I can *do something* with it."

"What will you do, then? You still haven't said," Millicent pointed out.

"This is just a stepping stone. If I can confirm what circumstances exactly allow a person to absorb-or reabsorb-magic, then maybe I can unlock the mystery behind why some people *can't* ." She saw Millicent's eyes go wide, then shutter with a grief that was intensely private. Rigel lowered her voice to something gentler. "If we can analyze the way magic is integrated in and out of a core to the extent of being able to manipulate it, maybe... we could give it back to those who've lost it."

"You think you can cure the Fade?" Millicent's question was bitter, but not entirely dismissive.

"Not alone. And not just the Fade. There are a number of conditions that involve a disorder of the magical core. Seifer's Syndrome. Squibhood. The truth is, we don't fully understand what our healthy cores are doing right, so how can we know how to fix it when it goes wrong? I want to help solve this aspect of the problem, if I can." Rigel didn't want to give her friend unfounded hope, but she did think there was a connection there that hadn't been drawn yet. In all the research on the subject, she didn't think anyone was currently approaching the question from the angle that puzzled her the most.

Infants with the Fade lost magic somehow and weren't able to produce enough to counteract it. What if there was a way for them to reabsorb it? If the magic could be trapped before it lost its signature, or if it was possible to artificially mimic that signature... well, it was several jumps in logic from where she currently stood, but the only way to know for sure was to leap and see where she landed.

Blaise put his notebook away and cleared his throat. "It's a tall order, and it isn't going to fill itself," he said. "Let's see if this experiment works, to start."

Millicent put the medi-minis behind her back and juggled them randomly for a moment before presenting them to Rigel in closed fists.

Rigel flexed her magical awareness across the carriage, feeling and dismissing the bright return off her friends' magical cores in favor of focusing on the much smaller distillations of magic that sparked in Millie's hands.

Both fire-formed spheres were restless and warm. With the basic information the first few returns carried back to her, she couldn't definitely differentiate them. She needed a more detailed look, so Rigel brought her focus fully to bear on the two balls, blocking out the movement of the carriage, the hoofbeats on the ground outside,

even the soft sound of her own breath. She let it all fade away, her magical awareness the sole lens through which she refracted every mental beam of attention at her disposal.

*Hey, what are you-*

*Not now, Dom.*

She needed absolute concentration to understand in minutia what her magical awareness had to tell her. Faster and faster she pulsed her magic toward the balls, getting quicker and stronger returns as she reached the peak of her rhythm. Gradually, with increasingly nuanced returns, the two spheres began to sharpen in her mind's eye.

The one on the left held a simmering sort of heat, like oil bubbling in a cauldron. In the ball on the right, she found the familiar warmth of a full-throated sun and smiled. Buoyed by success in the first stage, she transitioned from passively perceiving the signatures to attempting to fling her will itself toward the medi-mini, as an arrow was flung toward a target.

It was nothing like controlling the magic in her veins. She could feel the magic in the ball, but exerting the force of her will on it felt like trying to move a boulder with only her mind. There was nothing directly connecting her to the imbued magic, no pathway through which she could channel her resolve.

With only a burgeoning headache to show for her mental effort, Rigel flared her magic toward the ball again in frustration. As before when she used her magical awareness, a portion of it bounced off the sphere and beamed back to her, but this time, the ball twitched-the barest of movements that was nevertheless so surprising that Rigel snapped out of her meditative trance with a gasp.

"-bloody nonresponsive-Rigel! Are you all right?"

She blinked spots away from her vision, and felt a hand move away from her shoulder. Blaise retreated from her personal space, a worried look in his eyes, and Millicent snapped at her from across the seat.

"Rigel, *what* in Salazar's name was *that*?" Millie demanded, her usual calm tone an octave higher.

Rigel made to speak, and her jaw creaked as it unclenched. With a wince, she massaged it as she panted, "Did you see it move?"

"It? The medi-mini? Rigel, you were so deep in that trance you *stopped breathing*. Forget the experiment; are you all right?"

"Where did you go?" Blaise asked quietly, his eyes intent.

Belatedly, she realized she was breathing heavily and dizziness had hold of her vision. Rigel caught her breath and shook her head in confusion. "I've meditated for hours at a stretch before and never stopped breathing. I-I'm not sure why this time would be different. I was just focusing my attention on the medi-minis." A smile crossed her face as she recalled, "I did it, though. I can recognize my own magic. When I get enough details, it's easy to tell the difference, even though on the surface, with a hazier picture, they seem fairly similar. I'm sure I felt it move, at the end," she added excitedly. "Are you sure you didn't see anything?"

Millicent's face was set into a deep scowl. "Is this the kind of shite you make Pansy and Draco deal with all the time? No wonder they want to strangle you so often."

Rigel sat back against the seat. "I don't think I've ever stopped breathing in front of them before," she defended. "I suppose... I did suppress the sound of my breathing so I could focus better."

"That's a scary level of mental control," Blaise said, almost curiously. "You must be very good at Occlumency indeed, if your unconscious

mind took the re-prioritization of your conscious attention as a direct suggestion."

As though on cue, Dom's voice came roaring back into her head. - *imbecilic, self-destructing fleshbag! Do you think I want to perish in this magic forsaken-*

Rigel grimaced and nudged a silent apology his way. She'd have to explain later, when he'd calmed down. "Sorry if I alarmed you," she offered her friends. "I will have to think about how to avoid that next time, but-"

" *Next time?*"

"-I definitely think I felt the medi-mini move. If I can expand on that, then it may be possible to manipulate magic with an in-tact magical signature after it has lost its initial connection with a wizard's core." Rigel looked between the two of them with satisfaction. They didn't immediately return her enthusiasm, but she supposed it was hard for them to understand; experimentation was always dangerous. This was less scary than almost blowing up a cauldron of unstable ingredients, and that happened nearly once a session in her free-brewing lessons. She thought the realization that wizards might be able to exert control over their magic long after it had lost a direct connection with one's core was certainly worth being a little out of breath.

The carriage pulled to a stop, and for an awkward moment, no one spoke. Finally, Millicent said, "You can have this back." She handed over the medi-mini that contained Rigel's magic. "If it really does retain your magical signature, you should probably be more careful about who you hand those to. And Rigel-don't ever ask me to be part of your experiments again. I'm glad you're trying to research this aspect of-of the problem." Her voice hitched briefly, but she pressed on. "I don't think I want to watch you go any further, however. Please be more careful in the future."

Millie held Rigel's gaze until she offered, "I will."



Millicent's mouth hitched ruefully and she exited the carriage. Blaise paused a moment to say, "You aren't a very good liar, Rigel," before following after her.

Rigel took a moment to examine her conscience. She felt mildly guilty for worrying her friends, but it was muted by the thought that she couldn't possibly have anticipated that particular experiment being dangerous. Meditation *wasn't* intrinsically dangerous-how could she have known to be careful of drawing her mental faculties away from vital functions when it had never happened before? Now she knew. Now, she could be more careful in the future.

With a nod to cement that intention, Rigel climbed out of the carriage to find Pansy waiting for her. "The others went on to Honeydukes," Pansy told her. "I thought you and I could go to the apothecary while they brave those hideous crowds."

Rigel raised an eyebrow. "I can pick up whatever supplies you need, Pan; I know you detest the preservative smell."

Her blonde friend sniffed and looped her hand through Rigel's arm in subtle rebuke. They began to walk slowly up the street. "I certainly do not shop for my potions supplies in person, Rigel. I would like to accompany you because I miss you." Pansy looked seriously into Rigel's face for a long moment. "You've been so busy this year. I can't help but feel that... we are drifting apart."

Rigel's forehead creased. Had she been distant? She hadn't felt any more removed than usual from her friends' lives. Her every waking moment was occupied with a task or activity, but in four years that had usually been the case-Rigel filled her free hours intentionally, where most of her peers were content to see where the day's schedule took them.

"We still exercise most mornings," she said slowly. "And there's Draco's dueling club."

Pansy inclined her head, but said, "Lately, in the mornings, you're so focused, Rigel. It's hard to even banter, much less have a meaningful conversation. The other times I see you-meals and the like-are in group settings. I suppose I just wanted a little one-on-one time, to see how you've really been doing."

Attempting to lighten the mood, Rigel put a hand to her heart, "Our hour in the Black Lake together meant so little?"

The shorter girl narrowed her eyes. "You'll be devastated to know how many potential suitors that little escapade has apparently cost me."

"Devastated," Rigel repeated, hiding a smile. "It must be intimidating for your trail of hopefuls to try competing with the great Rigel Black."

"Perhaps this tournament has been too easy for you, if you can joke about it," Pansy shot back, equally deadpan.

Rigel's face fell into more serious lines. "I wouldn't say that."

Pansy nudged her apologetically. "I didn't mean it, Rye. I know it's been awful for you. Anyone else would have buckled under the pressure, but you still maintain one of the highest academic averages in our grade, not to mention your numerous side projects and bursts of 'philanthropic energy.' From the outside, it does seem as though you've got it all under control. That's why I wanted to speak privately with you, however." Pansy tugged them off the main path toward a window display of anthropomorphized hats. Her voice low, Pansy continued. "I flatter myself that I can see the strain others don't. You've been skipping evening study hour, and you miss more meals than you show up for. When you do come around, your eyes are far away, your attention fractured."

"I'm sorry-" she began.

"I don't want an apology, Rigel. I want to help you." Pansy's gaze was imploring. "Is there anything I can take off your plate? Millicent

and I have been trying all year to help in our own way, but it occurred to me that what I see as important does not align with your priorities, and therefore is less helpful than I assumed. What do *you* want help with?"

Rigel stared for an embarrassingly long moment before clearing her throat. "I-er, I'll have to think about it." A brief survey of her highest-priority projects had her discarding most of them out of hand. Pansy couldn't exactly help her with freebrewing, poison study, animagus training, or the potion recipe she was working on for Fred and George. Hermione was already spearheading the Fade research, Archie was there to help with the ruse, and Professor Snape was available for anything tournament-related that came up.

"Well, take your time," Pansy said firmly. "I don't mean to add more to the list of things you're thinking about, just the opposite, but-"

"Hang on," Rigel interrupted. The word 'time' had reminded her of a curiosity she'd put aside for later investigation. She dug into her pocket and pulled out the silver watch Archie had given her what felt like a lifetime ago. "What do you think of this watch?"

"The-what?" Pansy blinked at the watch and then looked at Rigel in confusion. "That's your watch, Rigel. You've had it since your cousin gave it to you two years ago, right?"

"Yes, but I can't open it," she said, prying at the edge to demonstrate. "It never bothered me before, since the watch face is on the outside, but recently someone suggested it might be much older than I thought."

Pansy took the bright silver and turned it over in her hand, but ultimately shook her head. "Have you tried all the basic opening charms?"

Rigel nodded. "I even tried Parseltongue," she said, half-hoping for some sort of recognition or reaction. If it had been an heirloom of Slytherin well-known enough for Owens to recognize it, then surely

Pansy, steeped in such history and tradition since the cradle, would notice it, too.

Her friend only laughed, however, and handed the watch back. "Parseltongue? That would be a heady coincidence. There aren't so many Parselmouths in the world that their artifacts crop up at random, I'm afraid."

Rigel smiled back, replacing the watch with relief. If Pansy didn't recognize it, Owens must have been trying to unsettle her somehow. "Suppose you're right. Maybe I should make some. I'll discreetly distribute gaudy things with snakes on them to pawn shops worldwide and make it look as though there is an entire underground society of Parselmouths with terrible taste."

"To what end?" Pansy asked, amused.

"It would be an invisible congregation," Rigel said, taking Pansy's arm again to resume their walk. "Soon talk of 'The Parselmouths' and 'The Order of Snakes' would spread, until everyone was simmering with curiosity about this group. Who are they? What do they want?"

Pansy laughed. "You could be your own political movement of one. Start an anonymous Parselmouth letter campaign to the Prophet."

"And no one would come out to contradict me, because the only other Speaker in England is-" she choked her sentence before she could complete it, a fission of warning strumming through her magic. She had almost violated the oath she'd taken to keep what she'd learned from the basilisk incident a secret.

Fortunately, the oath didn't care if others drew the correct conclusion, and Pansy already had second-hand knowledge of Riddle's talent. She completed the thought without finding Rigel's discretion unusual. "Him, yes." The amusement was gone again, like a wisp of cloud that refused to stay and provide proper shade from the glaring seriousness of reality.

They had reached the apothecary, and Rigel held the door open for Pansy to enter first, not missing the way the girl's nose wrinkled as she crossed the threshold.

Seeing it from Pansy's eyes, Rigel supposed the apothecary was not the most inviting of shops. It was dimly-lit, the aisles cramped and overcrowded, with labels scribbled in hard-to-read slant on small slates that were never fully cleaned of the previous price's chalk residue. If you didn't understand it, the organization system was a nightmare to navigate and, objectively, probably designed to put customers at a disadvantage.

Still, it put a smile on Rigel's face to pick up a deep wicker basket and thread her way toward the dried herbs. As Pansy fingered a stalk of lavender, Rigel swiftly plucked bundles off the shelves. A customer in the next row sighed loudly, and Rigel felt a brief stir of pity for the no-doubt bewildered citizen before the shockingly low price listed for autumn crocus extract caught her eye.

She tried to remember the prices she'd seen over winter break for the dried flowers in bulk, mentally calculating the labor involved in exploiting the stigmas and wondering how on earth they could afford to sell the distilled extract at such a low rate. Someone coughed as they passed behind her, and Rigel automatically moved closer to the shelf to give them room.

"Rigel..." Pansy said quietly.

She hummed in acknowledgement, most of her attention on profit-per-ounce differentials. A shoulder bumped her from behind and she murmured an apology without looking away from the crocus extract. There had to be something wrong with it, didn't there? An expired batch, maybe?

"Rigel," Pansy said, putting a hand on her arm and tugging insistently.

She broke away from peering at the vial's smudged label with a frown. "What is it?" Pansy was starting intently over Rigel's shoulder, so Rigel followed her gaze to the customer sharing their aisle. The tall young man, who was wearing an exceedingly large trench coat over his robes, must have been the one who'd bumped into her. His brimmed hat was pulled low over his eyes. He coughed loudly into his fist again.

Rigel looked back at Pansy and asked, "Do you think he's sick?"

Pansy shook her head with an exasperated expression. "Rigel, that's *Sousa* ."

The bloke turned fully to face them, a look of exaggerated shock on his face, and Rigel finally recognized him. "Ah! I am so surprised to see you, Rigel Black, here in this store."

"Matheus?" Rigel shook her head, confused. "What are you doing in Scotland still?" She hadn't expected to ever see the Brazilian wizard again.

"Nothing." Sousa said, straight-faced. "It is not related with the fifth task."

"I didn't say it was." Rigel frowned at him. "Shouldn't you be back at school?"

That got a grin from him. "My school would rather I not." He made a show of looking both ways up and down the aisle and then leaned closer to say, "You should pretend you do not see me."

Pansy let out a strangled groan from beside her. Rigel tilted her head, considering Sousa. Snape still hadn't been approached about brewing anything for the next task, but they were certain there would be a potion of some sort involved. "Matheus, did one of the tournament organizers ask you to help by brewing a potion for the next task, by chance?"

The dark-haired boy smiled, sly and slow, but didn't answer. Rigel felt her stomach sink a little at that ominous reaction. She remembered all too well what Matheus did to *himself* in the first task. What was he going to do to them? Finally realizing he was there to give her a heads up on the next task, she said quietly, "Thank you."

"No thanks. I am only here for ingredients." He winked at her as he added, "I have no more of your 'super-sage.'" When she didn't laugh, his face shifted into something more earnest. "Be careful. It will be... bad." Sousa nodded to himself, turned, and skulked into a different aisle.

Pansy sighed. "It's a good thing you make friends easily, Rigel, because your situational awareness could use some work."

"What does that mean?" Rigel asked, still staring after the Castelobruxo wizard. She knew what she would classify as 'bad,' but how bad was bad when someone else said it?

"He was standing there for five minutes. He *bumped into* you."

"People spend a lot of time browsing in apothecaries, and the aisles are narrow," Rigel said weakly. Recalling her earlier fascination, she added, "Besides, just look at this price listed for autumn crocus-there's no way, right?"

Pansy stared at her for a beat, then said, "I'm going to wait outside. Please be more sensitive to shady characters seeking clandestine meetings while I'm gone."

Rigel felt that was a bit unfair. Who walked around life just waiting for dramatic things to happen to them? That was asking for trouble. Rigel simply wanted to mind her own business and get to the bottom of this saffron pricing mystery.

She was distracted for the rest of her shopping and suspected she overpaid slightly for a jar of bat spleens. By the time she joined Pansy outside, she had determined one thing, however: she couldn't

mind her own business any longer. With Matheus' example fresh in her mind, she realized there was someone she needed to see.

"I realized what I need help with, Pan. I need to talk to Delacour," she said. "Can you help me find her?" She and Millie had been keeping tabs on the competitors, so it was a fair guess that Pansy would know exactly where the French girl was staying.

Pansy nodded slowly. "I can take you to her current apartment. It changes regularly," she added in answer to Rigel's curious look. "The girl has a prodigious number of admirers-more even than you, I daresay."

Rigel snorted. "Impossible," she said with a snooty lift to her nose. "The great Rigel Black is unrivaled."

"If you keep calling yourself that, I'll have it engraved on your dormitory door."

"As long as Draco's name is in smaller print," Rigel agreed.

They kept up a light banter through town, until Pansy turned down a small street and led her to the very end. "Up those stairs, number two," Pansy said. "I'll go and join the others. Meet us for lunch at the Three Broomsticks?"

She agreed, and Pansy gave her one long, parting look before adding, "Don't do anything Gryffindor."

Rigel looked up the wrought iron staircase and sighed, hoping she wasn't about to go knocking on trouble's door. She climbed steadily, each step echoing like the beat of her heart. The Vow was shivering in her veins, trying to discern her intentions. Would helping a competitor set it off? *Not as long as there's an advantage in it for me*, she told herself firmly. *Anyway, who would I be if I didn't try? This is the right thing to do.*



She rapped on the plain door to number two, but there was no answer. Rigel didn't hear anything inside the apartment, but a hunch made her flare her magical awareness through the door. A very still pocket of energy gave off a return too large to be anything but a magical being. "Delacour, I know you're in there," she called. "It's Rigel Black. We need to talk."

Low French curses accompanied the sound of a bolt being drawn back, and Rigel felt the faint shudder of protective wards falling before the door unsealed slightly. Fleur peered out at her, eyes darting in narrow appraisal about the walkway. Once satisfied that Rigel was alone, Delacour jerked open the door and pinned Rigel in place with her wand.

"To prove you are not lying: 'oo was ze first champion you met in ze tournament?"

Rigel cast her mind back to Halloween, when the preliminary candidates had met for a brief socializing event before the official announcement. Seafoam eyes flashed beneath a blunt red haircut and she remembered. "Antiope. Then you."

The lovely French witch lowered her wand and backed away from the door. Rigel stepped into the small apartment and sneezed. Every surface overflowed with flowers-vases crowded the tables, bouquets languished on chairs, and a pile of what appeared to be rose petals littered one corner.

Delacour began to reset the wards, and Rigel felt her stomach clench. "Would you mind leaving them down for now?" she asked.

The older girl tossed her silver hair. "Zey scramble ze locating charms. Ozerwise, more of zis will come." She gestured to the stockpile of cut flowers.

"You could just vanish them," Rigel suggested hopefully. "I'm sorry, but wards make me uncomfortable."

"You live under ze most powerful wards in Europe," Delacour reminded her, tapping her wand restlessly on her leg. She didn't respond to the suggestion that she vanish her admirers' gifts, and Rigel wondered if she didn't really mind them as much as she claimed to. Then again, there was a real paranoia in the way the other champion had answered the door.

"Are you all right?" Rigel asked, concerned by the girl's nervous demeanor. Fleur Delacour clung to her composure with pride; it would take more than flowers to ruffle her to this extent. "Has someone been bothering you?" It wasn't hard to imagine that a young woman as charming as Delacour could attract admirers that took their appreciation too far.

Fleur avoided her eyes as she cleared a space on the sofa. "Zere are some 'oo feel zat one such as I ought not to win zis tournament. Flowers are not all zat comes."

Rigel felt a flare of indignation on her behalf. "Anyone who thinks that is stupid. You should reverse the tracking spell and send their nastiness right back to them."

Delacour's eyebrows rose as she sat down and gestured for Rigel to do the same. "You do not 'ave experience wiz hate, I zink. Engaging zese people will only encourage zeir madness."

She made a face, unable to refute that observation. "Let someone know if you need any help, then," she said as she sank into the sofa.

"Ze 'Ogwarts staff has been very 'elpful," the girl said stiffly. "Zey set up ze wards and find me new accommodation when eet is needed. Now. Why are you 'ere?"

Recalled to her original purpose, Rigel asked, "Did they tell you that one of the items we recovered in the lake was a clue for the fifth task?"

Her lips twisted. "Zey did."

"Was one of your items a silver diadem-a circlet?" Rigel asked.

Fleur's eyes lit with suspicion. "Why would I tell you?"

She shrugged. "You don't have to. It was only a guess. Mine was a replica of Salazar Slytherin's locket. I think Owens had Hufflepuff's Chalice of Truth, too. I don't know whether the founders themselves are part of the clue or merely symbolic, but I do think that the function of the items is a clue for what is going to be tested in the next task."

The older girl frowned, shaking her head in a way that caused her star-lit hair to slide like water over her shoulders. "Why have you come to tell me *zis*? You should not be helping me. Perhaps you are here to trick me, instead." At the last, she barred her perfect teeth in a fierce smile.

Rigel paused to reassess how best to explain. "I... want to win the tournament. I don't expect you to believe that it is for reasons other than personal glory, but it is. That said, I don't like the way the tournament is being run. I think the tasks are too brutal, too cruel. They ask too much of us, and I think if they keep pushing this way, one of us is going to get seriously injured or die."

Surprise flittered through Fleur's eyes briefly, but almost at once, it settled into grim agreement. "Yes. I 'ave also seen *zis*."

Relieved that this, at least, they could agree on, Rigel pressed on. "Today, I saw Matheus Sousa in the apothecary."

Delacour reared back, true astonishment on her face. "Ze Amazonian wizard? 'e ees still 'ere?"

"He came to warn me. The tournament organizers recruited him to brew a potion for the fifth task. He seemed reluctant to say too much, but he told me it's *bad* ."

"Bad? What ees bad?"

"I don't know exactly, but I also have the clue from the lake. I want to give it to you, so that you can properly prepare." Rigel held Fleur's gaze so the other witch could read her honest concern. "I think it's going to be very dangerous, and I'm afraid of what will happen if you walk into it blind."

"Zen tell me," Fleur demanded, eyes flashing a challenge.

Rigel paused delicately. "I want to. I also want to win. You understand?"

"You want an alliance. Or... a deal?" Delacour held her chin firm. "I do not want to owe you anyzing. But tell me: 'ave you offered Owens ze same?"

"I haven't, actually," Rigel said quietly. "There's-I don't know why, but I don't entirely trust him."

"Good. 'e eez a snake. No offense meant," Fleur offered after glancing at the crest on Rigel's scarf.

Rigel narrowed her eyes curiously. "You don't like him either?"

" *Non* . 'e sends ze ugliest flowers to mock me." Fleur gestured to a bouquet discarded on an end table. The plants inside looked more like a collection of thick, green tubers than flowers. There were no visible petals, almost as though the stems had been cut before they could bloom. She tried to recall what type of flower had such thick stalks. There were three of them, wrinkly and twisted, with a bulb-like thickening at the tip. "Also, I zink 'e means you ill. Sometimes, when you are not zere, he says ze most-"

"Delacour, how long have you had these?" Rigel interrupted, her eyes riveted on the ugly bouquet. She recognized the plant now: *Amorphophallus*. It brought the tremor of disgust back to her stomach. Rigel hoped Fleur was unaware of how the plant got its name, and the vulgar implications therein.

Fleur broke off and thought for a moment. "I zink two days, no more. I was going to give zem back when I saw 'im next. Zey are 'ideous."

Rigel stood and circled around to peer closer at the offending bouquet. There was a tightly coiled root ball at the base, wrapped in damp sackcloth. To keep it alive, she guessed, her irritation with Owens growing stronger. "This is Snake Lily, did you know? Looks ready to bloom."

Delacour's eyebrows rose, unimpressed. "A snake. 'ow fitting. Zen it will 'ave flowers?"

"Enormous ones," Rigel confirmed. With a wrinkled nose, she added, "They'll smell like a corpse."

With a screech, Fleur sprung to her feet and vanished the flowers. "Zat boy ees a-" She broke into French too fast for Rigel to completely follow, though she got the gist. "A pox on zis tournament." Her hair hovered almost menacingly about her face, and Rigel thought she could see a bit of orange burning deep in the girl's striking eyes. "Tell me what you want for ze information. I am not dying for zis."

She had understood the threat, then, in the flower. Rigel felt ambiguous about accepting help even tangentially from Owens, but if it pressed Delacour into helping them both by accepting her deal, then she wouldn't complain.

"I will tell you everything I know and help you come up with a strategy for surviving the next task. In return, I'm asking for a promise: if it comes down to you or me, in the end, you'll let me win." Rigel held her breath as Fleur silently considered it. She knew it was an extraordinary demand-the tournament was what they were both there for, after all. She also knew that Fleur had no clue as to what the next task would entail.

"A verbal agreement?" Fleur clarified slowly. "On my 'onor, wiz no magic to enforce it?"

Rigel examined what she knew of Fleur. The older girl was not above fighting dirty, but she was also proud. "That's right," she agreed after a moment. "I'm not asking you to throw the tasks, either. If you outperform me to a clear victory, I won't stand in your way. If, however, the outcome is close enough to question..."

"Zen I will defer," Fleur said, voice flat. "I understand."

Rigel got out a sheet of parchment and began to copy down the clue from her memory, explaining as she went. At the end of their discussion, Fleur had three book titles on filtering poison from the body, and a written introduction to Madam Pomfrey, for rudimentary Healing lessons.

"The equinox is next week, so you have three weeks until the task," Rigel concluded. "If you need help with any aspect of this, please don't hesitate to ask."

Fleur fingered the piece of parchment with the clue stanzas scribbled down it and muttered, "I did not sign up for zis. I 'ope you do win, Black. I want to go 'ome and never see zese people again."

So did Rigel, though she was already in too deep to back out now. She left Delacour's apartment feeling more drained than satisfied. *It wasn't blackmail*, she told herself. The Vow wouldn't let her help for nothing, and they were direct competitors-not like how it was with Hermione in the preliminaries. *She could have died walking into the next task blind. It was the right thing to do. Right?*

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She had chalk on her hands, in her hair, and across her nose, but she grinned in triumph when the last rune was etched into the array.

"I think my hand at Chinese runes has really improved," she said, pleased with the gracefulness of her lines.

"Shall we see whether that increases the efficiency of the transmutation?" Dumbledore smiled genially down at her work, all the while perfectly aware that handwriting, no matter how neat, would effect no such change.

"I'd rather see this 'interesting effect' you mentioned," Rigel said, her eyes running over the patterns again, curious. It was a moderately tricky array, designed to turn sand to glass through the pairing of two slightly tangential signifying runes, rather than the use of a single, clear signifying rune.

Dumbledore gestured magnanimously for her to activate the array, and Rigel touched her finger to the input circle. Usually, when she imbued an array with magic, she could feel it building steadily in potential energy, like a pitcher being filled with water. This time, however, the magic she poured into the array began to... shiver, almost. It trembled, as though that same pitcher was in the midst of a localized earthquake. With a glance at the Headmaster's serene expression, Rigel persevered, forcing the magic to stabilize with an effort of will and continuing to imbue until the activation threshold had been met.

The normal flash of light occurred, but with it came a physical tremor in the worktable. Chalk rolled onto the floor and Rigel took a quick step backwards, instinctively throwing up a shield as the array shuddered. For a few moments, she felt it attempting to do its work, to follow the patterns as they were laid down, but there was something unquestionably wrong. After an agonizing, jarring struggle, the array went dark. She dropped the shield and examined the materials left. Part of the sand was twisted and half-melted, while the rest of it remained untouched. Black marks ran raggedly through her carefully chalked runes-they would not be able to try it again without erasing and redrawing the entire thing.

"What did I do wrong?" she asked, familiar enough with Dumbledore's style of teaching to wait for the other shoe to drop.

"Nothing," Dumbledore said, a bit too cheerful at the results of the choked array. "Or perhaps it is better to say *nothing that you could have done otherwise.*"

Rigel parsed through that sentence for a moment. "So it was something intrinsic to me that caused this?"

"Your magic, to be precise," Dumbledore revealed.

Rigel flinched, but sense caught up with her a moment later. "It-it does not act out of my control anymore."

The old wizard inclined his head apologetically. "Forgive my alacrity. It was not your magic's boisterous nature, but rather its natural affinity that reacted negatively with the array."

Rigel's eyes widened with understanding. "This is a signature-sensitive array?" She had read about them, but they had yet to have a practical lesson with one. "It is Light-aligned, then?"

"Neutral, actually," Dumbledore corrected her.

She frowned. "My magic is mostly Neutral, though." Most halfbloods had a mix of Neutral wild magic from their muggleborn ancestor and either Dark or Light depending on their magical family history. Hers was a little too wild to be considered truly Light, despite the Potter influence, so she described it as 'mostly Neutral' when pressed. It was not too far a stretch for the scion of a Dark family to have wound up with recessive magic that produced mixed results, and Archie's magic truly was a Neutral-Dark mix that owed something to Diana's family, she thought.

"The strict balance in this array is maintained only delicately. Any slight shift on the affinity scale from exact Neutral will upset it."



Rigel's eyebrows rose. "That would narrow the potential users significantly. Why design an array this way?"

Dumbledore chuckled. "It is said to have been developed by scholars of an ancient order who specialized in the aligning of individual affinities. Admittedly, that may be mere legend, but I find there is often more truth in old stories than contemporary minds would credence." He fell into a thoughtful silence for a moment, then came back to himself to add, "How it came about isn't the purpose of the lesson, however. I wanted to show you the effects of a misaligned array, so that you may recognize one if you come across it in your future studies."

"I'd rather know how to recognize such an array *before* it scars my worktable," Rigel said dryly.

"We can never eliminate all the unexpected occurrences from the world," Dumbledore advised.

"So there isn't a way to recognize a signature-sensitive array before it explodes?"

"I did not say that." A smile twitched under his long beard. "Consider the array clockwise, beginning with the rune of lowest numeric value."

She scanned the runes. "There are two in the sequence that stand for 'one' in Numerology," she pointed out.

"Use the northmost one to start," Dumbledore said.

Rigel pointed to the simple roman numeral I, which was often used in sequences to represent magic, looking as it did like a wizard's wand. "The wizard is the first card in the Tarot deck." She moved her finger clockwise to the next symbol in the array. "Then *fehu*, the initiating rune, is first in the Nordic system. Next is *kun*, the receptacle of the initiating force, defining the field of the array. *Kun* is the second hexagram, so that would be a two in Numerology." She looked up at

Dumbledore questioningly, and he nodded encouragingly. She continued in a puzzled tone, "The next one is the Egyptian hieroglyph for grains of sand. It doesn't really have a number associated-oh, there are three grains of sand! One, one, two, three... wait, but the next two break the sequence."

"Those two are paired," Dumbledore reminded her.

"Ah. I can add them. *Thurisaz* is the third Norse rune, and it's been paired with *huo* for fire." Together, Thor's rune and fire were supposed to signify lightning. Rigel thought it was a rather clumsy expression, as there were other, better runes for lightning. Still, Dumbledore never taught her anything that wasn't important, even if she couldn't always see it right away. "Huo is the... second element in the Wu Elemental system, so if it's paired with three it makes five. Then *lemniscate* to cycle the energy back through the array-it is a Fibonacci sequence!" Rigel grinned with satisfied intellectual pride.

"And never forget that circular arrays can always be considered a 'zero' as well," Dumbledore said. "Well done, Rigel. Have you ever seen a perfect Fibonacci sequence in a circular array before?"

She shook her head. "I don't think so, although I'm not sure I would have noticed if I didn't look at the numeric associations in sequence."

"You would have noticed when the array didn't work for you," Dumbledore told her. "Fibonacci arrays are always perfectly Neutral-in this way, they mimic exactly the natural, wild magic of the world."

"So if I notice that an array follows the Fibonacci sequence, then it must be signature-sensitive," she concluded. "But that's only for perfectly Neutral arrays. There are other arrays that are sensitive in different ways, aren't there?"

"Quite so," Dumbledore agreed. "You'll find that the next chapter of your self-paced reading will describe common patterns found in such arrays. It is not exhaustive, of course, as there are a great many arrays and rituals in the world, not all of which conform to typical

forms. Still, I hope you find it useful enough to be worth the effort of memorizing. I have certainly found it to be so."

Rigel nodded. It would definitely be helpful if she ever wanted to try a new array unsupervised. She had a question that had been building in the back of her mind since the array had malfunctioned, however. "You mentioned that some think this array was designed by wizards who specialized in 'aligning their affinities' with nature. Does that mean that it may be possible to alter your own magical signature to be more or less Dark or Light over time?"

Dumbledore's wizened face took on a troubled expression. "Our signatures do not reflect any intrinsic quality in ourselves, only in the magic we happen to be blessed with."

She blinked. "I understand, Sir. I'm not interested in the moral implications, but the practical ones. If I could change my magical signature to be more Neutral, for instance, I could use this array."

"Ah, yes. In theory, that is."

"Aside from that, though: if the input signature needs to be Neutral, there should be a way of making that happen without having to change the signature of the one imbuing the array," Rigel said, her mind leaping from one stone to the next easily. "It's just like in Potions, when you have to alter the reactivity of a brew before you add certain ingredients. Sometimes the base needs to be more acidic, other times more basic, and it can move back and forth along the scale depending on what you add to it *regardless of how acidic or basic the original ingredients were* ."

Dumbledore peered at her with a curious expression. "Can you expand on that analogy? How would you apply it to Alchemy?"

Rigel's train of thought moved from Potions to Shaped Imbuing to the ways in which magic could lose its natural signature. "If the magic that goes into the array needs to be at a certain place on the affinity scale, then maybe it needs to be severed from the direct

influence of the wizard whose affinity isn't Neutral. When you cast a spell, your magic usually loses its own natural signature as it takes on the shape imposed by the spell. What if it were possible to sort of filter the signature from the magic before it encountered the array?"

"I believe that once his magic is changed sufficiently, a wizard can no longer direct it," Dumbledore said idly.

"That's true," Rigel said, nodding quickly, "but it can be directed externally, can't it? By runes, in the case of Alchemy. Perhaps a separate array could be added before the magic encountered the main array that you wanted it to enact-a sort of pre-array component that would, using runic equations dedicated to the conversion, adjust the signature of the magic that was imbued before it reached the second array, which is signature-sensitive?"

A surprised noise was startled from Dumbledore's throat. He cleared it and said, "My boy, I think you are on to something. The idea is sound, yes, quite elegant. The execution... it bears looking into."

Rigel beamed. "Of course, it would be difficult. Reactions in Alchemy happen so much faster than in Potions. Everything would have to be drawn out and defined ahead of time."

"Not to mention discovering the language necessary to describe precise differences in magical signatures. I'm not certain the same expressions could be used for adjusting the affinity of a Light wizard as were appropriate for a Dark wizard, for instance." Dumbledore gestured to the air and it produced an oversized peacock quill and parchment for him. Under her astonished stare, he jotted something down and slipped the piece of parchment into his pocket. Never, in all of their sessions together, had she ever seen Albus Dumbledore make a *note*. "If you don't mind, Rigel, I would like to pose your question to my old friend, Nicholas."

Her eyes widened. "I don't mind at all, Sir. I'd be very interested in what he has to say." Another thought occurred to her and she added, "You may consider reaching out to my aunt, too."

"Lady Potter?" Dumbledore smiled. "I have not had the pleasure of her conversation in several months. I would be delighted to write her on any pretext, but do you think she will have a particular insight into this matter?"

She nodded, reaching into her sweater to pull out the necklace she wore underneath. "Aunt Lily gave me this pendant when I started the tournament. She calls it a Dark Defense Disk. There are sequences embedded in it so long I had to consult another, more gifted student to decipher it even in part. Aunt Lily says they describe Dark magic, though, as the disk is specifically designed to defend against Dark Arts and not Light. If there is a good way to express magical affinity with runes, Aunt Lily can help."

Dumbledore bent closer to the obsidian disk. "May I?" he inquired politely. At her nod, the Headmaster cast a wordless revealing charm and hummed with interest as the block of runes materialized in the air between them. He read the sequences with a practiced eye, nodding here and there with a particularly pleased noise. "It seems I am suddenly behind the curve in magical advancements," he said, looking happier than the utterance suggested. "Lily Potter has just thrust the field of Defense Against the Dark Arts into uncharted waters. I daresay these expressions will soon be under patent, if they are not already," he added seriously. "I thank you for allowing an old man to slate his intellectual curiosity, but you might be more protective of the mechanics of your disk in the future."

Rigel flushed. "Yes, Sir. I will be." She supposed she ought to ask Blaise whether he'd kept a copy of the runes he'd transposed for her. He probably had-Blaise liked nothing so much as to know things no one else did. She was certain he would honor a request that he keep the information proprietary, if she asked. "I have another question," she ventured after a few minutes of uninterrupted thought.

Dumbledore raised his eyebrows. "I'm not sure the academic world can withstand two questions from Rigel Black in a day. Shall we find out?"

She laughed. "It's just-I've been researching magical transference on my own, you know, and when Hermione Granger came to Hogwarts for the tournament last term, she shared her research concerning the Fade."

"Yes, Madam Pince mentioned the young American girl with rather ferocious reading habits."

"Hermione swallows books whole before they can fight back," Rigel confirmed. "In dovetailing our research, we noticed that attempts to transfer magic of an adult wizard to an infant suffering from the Fade are not successful in stopping the illness from draining the child of life. The magic doesn't stick in that way to an infant's core, and I wondered if that was because the magical signature of the parent wasn't close enough to the infant's natural signature to mesh properly. My question is: if it were possible to alter a magical signature, even temporarily, to match another's, could that altered magic fuse with the core of the one it was given to?"

Dumbledore let out a long breath. "I don't know the answer to that. It depends on a deep understanding of the way our magical cores create and store magic, which, I am sorry to say, currently escapes even our brightest minds. Have you looked into the case of ritual transference we discussed last term?"

"I have," Rigel said. "My conclusion is that it demonstrates that magic sometimes retains its magical signature when it is transferred and remains mixed with but *independent from* the magic of the recipient's core, causing the resonance described. This is the unusual instance, however, as most magic does not retain its own signature long after it has been severed from the original core." This she had confirmed with extensive research after Millicent and Blaise pointed out the strange case of her own Medi-minis persisting for so long. "For most people, the same ritual would result in a temporary resonance that dissipated over time entirely, as the donated magic eventually rejoined the wild magic of the world." She paused to gather her thoughts before adding firmly, "I don't think that such shallow transference ever actually *gives* magic to the recipient. The

recipient holds it for a time, provided their core has room, but the magic isn't theirs. Either it dissipates eventually, or it sits there, unable to be used by them because it doesn't match their own signature."

"That would mean that any ritual claiming to confer magical power upon the recipient is false," Dumbledore pointed out. Rather than disagreeing, he seemed to patiently await her judgement on the matter.

"I think most of them are," Rigel said slowly. "The ones that really have been demonstrated to transfer power-the conference of a magical gift, for instance-all involve more than mere magic being donated. It isn't as easy as moving a bit of magic from here to there, the way the lady in our example tried to. Real transference rituals require an exchange of blood, and after the ritual, accounts always describe the recipient's magic as significantly altered. A Neutral wizard is suddenly Light-natured, or a fire core becomes an earth core. There is a fundamental change, almost as though the core itself has been transplanted. At that point, it's not a question of assimilating foreign magic into a core, but of altering the core itself so that it can receive the foreign magic." She shuddered. "There's a reason those rituals are considered in most cases Dark or at least intensely intrusive. I don't think it provides a good solution for the Fade. Forcing an infant's core to mutate to become exactly like the parent's... that sort of thing would stifle all variation in a bloodline, not to mention it seems a perversion of the baby's natural expression of magic."

"It is a distasteful solution, but not as pitiable as an infant perishing," Dumbledore put forth.

Rigel grimaced. "Hermione said the same thing when she suggested amputating the infant's core before the baby could become dependent on magic. It *would* stop the Fade, if it could be done, but the cost... I don't see many parents agreeing to it. I want to find a better way. There's just so much we don't understand about how

magical cores really work." She sighed. "I suppose it was a far-fetched question. The research just isn't there yet."

"More research does need to be done on the subject," Dumbledore mused. "Have you considered doing it yourself?"

"Doing... the research? I'm nowhere near qualified-I'm not even halfway through the Healing program here, much less at the level of a Master trusted to engage in human research." Rigel was astonished that he'd suggested it-even she wasn't audacious enough to attempt experiments on anyone other than herself, and she'd already established that her own magic was not a good benchmark for 'normal.'

"And yet you possess an ability that none of those qualified Masters can boast," Dumbledore said. "Even Mind Healers cannot go *into* the magical cores of their patients. You, Rigel, can walk right through them."

She gaped at him. "I... I could see for myself what was happening in the core," she repeated dumbly. Why hadn't she thought of that before? She'd spent most of the last three years pretending she didn't have a unique and strange ability instead of considering what she might *learn* from it. Resolve solidified in her stomach, like a rock that she'd held up for too long dropping to the earth at last. "That's what I need to do, then. That's my contribution."

Dumbledore clapped his hands together, the sound bringing her out of her reverie. "Wonderful. It is so inspiring to see today's youth collaborating across international borders to tackle the pressing challenges of the moment. Reminds me a bit of myself, if it is not too brash to say."

Rigel gave a wry smile. "Perhaps some good will come from this tournament after all. If nothing else, it brought Hermione Granger to England."



The Headmaster chortled appreciatively. "Your greatest strength will always be the friends you make, Rigel. One day, you will certainly appreciate the connections you have forged in so many corners of the globe."

She genuinely hoped that one day she would look back with such equanimity on the year. At the moment, it was a very thin silver lining on a thundercloud of trouble.

"Speaking of making friends," the Headmaster said, seemingly unaware of the entirely obvious nature of his segue. "There is a little soiree I throw every spring, and this year, a number of people have asked whether you would be amenable to attending."

Thrown for a loop, Rigel prevaricated. "Isn't it during the school year?" She had heard of Dumbledore's Soiree, of course-it was as emblematic of Light Society as the Malfoys' Garden Party was of the Dark. It was held around Easter, usually, though she hadn't cause to pay it much mind before.

"Over the long weekend holiday," Dumbledore assured her. Sensing her hesitation, he added, "Some of your current friends, including Mr. Weasley and Mr. Longbottom, will be in attendance. In the current political climate, it never hurts to make a few more."

"That's true," she said slowly. The last thing she wanted to do was be paraded at another event as the Hogwarts champion, but Dumbledore had a point. She was in a political position, and if she attended a prominent Light gathering and made nice... perhaps she could create a little more leverage against Riddle's legislation. She had promised herself she would try, at least, with what little notoriety was now afforded to her. "All right. I'll be glad to attend; thank you."

Dumbledore led her back through the 'secret' passage to his office with a cheerful twinkle. "Not at all, Rigel. With you in attendance, it will be the talk of the town."

For once, she hoped that was true.

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That evening, she managed to find Blaise at his own table in the common room. Rigel took a seat across from him, intending to ask him to be careful with the runic sequence he'd copied from her mother's Dark Detection Disk. Before she could say anything, however, the boy held up a slim hand to forestall her and said, "One moment. I'm in the middle of a calculation."

Ever-respectful of the titanic grip of true academic pensée, Rigel waited patiently for him to bring his train of thought to its intended station. When he had put down his quill, she smiled politely. "Is that the same project you've been working on all term?"

He nodded ruefully. "It's a little above my current abilities, but Mother wanted to challenge me."

"Is it just an exercise or will it have a real-world application?" she asked, distracted from her original purpose.

Blaise shrugged. "I don't know. Probably it's a variation on something she's already working on; every now and then she gets an interesting commission and lets me try my hand at it for practice."

"Could I see?" Rigel peered interestedly at the sheaf of parchment splayed out before him. Blaise hesitated palpably, a reserved expression concealing his emotions. Rigel raised an eyebrow, surprised at his reticence. "I won't steal the design or tell anyone," she said gently. "I showed you Aunt Lily's work, remember?" It felt cheap to invoke the principle of reciprocity, but trust was a two-way street, at least in Slytherin House.

Acknowledgement flickered in his serious gaze as he inclined his head. "That's true. I trust you will be as discrete with this as I will be with your Aunt's sequences."

Pleased that they had reached an understanding so easily, Rigel bent her attention to the parchment Blaise pushed across the table. At once, she could tell it was a ward of some kind. Her interest in wards had taken a sharp dip after the previous year, though she had devoured several tomes on breaking them, which in retrospect had probably been a bit compulsive. *At least they aren't goblin runes*, she thought as she traced the general structure with her finger.

Blaise appeared to be almost finished with the project. The sequences were elegant and balanced, mostly in the western systems of runes, so that they worked together with a synergy that was hard to replicate when you mixed too many different systems. Catching on an inverted barrier rune, Rigel's eyes narrowed.

"This is a cage," she said flatly.

Blaise winced. "It isn't, actually."

"I think I know a containment ward when I see one," she said sharply. "What is it for?"

"Rigel, take a breath," Blaise said firmly. When she had visibly deflated from the defensiveness that gripped her, he continued calmly. "It is an enclosure, but it's cast from the inside, see? It will keep things inside from leaving, but its primary purpose is to keep those outside from entering. It's designed to be taken down from the inside, too-see the inverted cornerstone?"

She nodded slowly, but still had to know. "What will it be used for?"

"Dueling wards, I think," he said carefully. "I can't confirm it, but I believe Mother already has a buyer in mind. Likely Regulus Black, as he is often involved in large event wards, and these would work well for something like the tournament or the World Cup, don't you think?"

She studied them for a few more minutes, inwardly relieved that the purpose was so innocuous. She could even confirm that Regulus

had used something similar to facilitate the Lower Alley tournament. Rigel had thought Regulus designed his own wards, but perhaps the extra business he'd been getting lately had saturated his time. "So if the caster would be inside with the event participants, he would have to access all four cornerstones at once to put the ward up," she said slowly. "It seems as though you'd need more than one caster, if the ward was really big enough to encompass a whole dueling arena."

"That's right," Blaise said with a nod. "Four casters are needed from the inside, but only one is necessary to take it down. This chain of runes will destabilize it from any of the cornerstones."

Rigel smiled weakly. "That's good. In case one of the casters is incapacitated when it needs to come down."

Blaise returned the smile, albeit grimly. "It's a lesson learned from the World Cup. It took too many people working in tandem to get the wards down once they were set. These wards will fall all at once, as long as at least one person can get to a cornerstone."

She thought of her father and said, "That means extra security around the cornerstones, but it's probably worth it to have a quicker exit strategy. That's an impressive addition, Blaise. Did you come up with it?"

He flushed slightly. "I did. The only trouble is, the simple chain holding them together makes the wards a little too weak. I'm trying to figure out how to keep them easy to disassemble from the inside while making it harder for the ward to be penetrated from without. At the moment, this ward is no stronger than your average house wards. A group of determined wizards could probably take them down by force."

Rigel saw what he meant. More runes added to stabilizing the ward against attack would inevitably complicate the sequence needed to take it down from within. "You need more power without using more runes," she said.

Blaise gaped at her for a moment. "That's... exactly what Mother said when I asked her for a hint. She didn't elaborate, though. How do I increase the power without adding any more runes? I can't add more casters without adding more cornerstones, and the structure is already at optimum stability with four."

"Perhaps a source of power that isn't the casters themselves?" Rigel suggested.

He smacked the table with sudden elation. "*A ley line* . Rigel, you're a genius." He grabbed the parchment back from her hands and began to scribble in the margins excitedly.

"You're the one who came up with the answer," she said, amused to see Blaise so worked up over something. He was so rarely ruffled in any way. "Are you going to add an amplification chain so it can be set up on a ley line to boost the power, then?"

"Just going to work in general tie points so it's optional," he muttered distractedly, still writing. "Then whoever casts it can tie the ward to whatever is closest-ley line, other wards, it won't matter. It can borrow that power to support itself, while staying simple enough to be unraveled by a single wizard." With a grin, Blaise cast sand over his notes and sat up straight once more. "I'll send it off to Mother for grading this week, but I think this is the answer, Rigel. Thanks for your help. It's been driving me spare."

She shook her head. "I think you just needed to talk it out with someone. I make a lot of breakthroughs when I voice my problem out loud."

"Still, I-"

"There you nerds are!" Theo slammed his Transfiguration book onto the table. He was echoed a moment later by the thuds of Pansy's, Millicent's, and Draco's books joining the spread. "We were waiting like idiots at our usual table by the fire, only to find you bookworms have started without us."

Blaise extracted his designs from beneath the corner of Theo's heavy book with a long-suffering expression. "Rigel and I had some real thinking to do before our more passive academic peers distracted us with the monotony of their prescribed homework assignments."

"Oi! You're the one who asked me to explain the difference between British and European Gobbledegook dialects tonight," Theo shot back.

"I'm sure Millicent or Draco could do just as well," Blaise drawled, deliberately provoking the other boy.

"Somehow I doubt goblins are included in International Relations," Theo sneered.

"Pansy, then."

Pansy shot him a reproachful look. "Goblins aren't covered in Care of Magical Creatures; they're *beings*, Blaise. You of all people shouldn't make a joke like that."

He shrugged one shoulder, his face blank. "These days, who knows what's considered a being?"

Pansy's face softened. "Is your Mother still annoyed with Riddle about the tournament definitions of blood purity? We missed her at the Yule Ball."

"She declined her invitation," Blaise confirmed. With a sigh, he added, "Honestly, none of those in the shifter community are *pleased*."

Millicent muttered, "This tournament has been a disaster for magical relations on a number of fronts. The Centaurs are still upset about the first task, and the Merfolk didn't exactly enjoy being cast as the villains during the fourth."

"Wonder which group of magical beings we'll manage to piss off in the fifth task," Theo said cheerfully. "Rigel, any guesses?"

She shook her head. "I think we're going to be drugged or something, actually."

Draco whipped his head around to stare at her. "What does that mean? And why are you so calm about it?"

Rigel tilted her head. "Nothing I can do about it, if that's what the task is."

"Should you be telling us this?" Pansy asked, looking casually around the common room.

She realized she hadn't told them about the necklace yet; Pansy must be worried Rigel was admitting to a mysterious source. "We got a clue at the end of the last task," she explained, smiling apologetically at their exasperated faces. "Professor Snape helped me work it out. It basically says we're going to have our clarity clouded and then be asked to do something while in that confused state. Sounds fun." The joke fell flat.

"If you know, can't you just take a bezoar?" Millicent asked.

"I will, if we're allowed to have any items for this one," she said. "Riddle hasn't told us yet. Anyway, bezoars only work against poisons. They might dose us with something that isn't technically poisonous."

"Such as a drug," Pansy repeated, her eyes flashing. She looked as though she wanted to be angry but didn't have anyone present to direct the feeling toward.

Draco patted her shoulder, murmuring, "Only two more tasks," in a low voice that seems to calm the blonde girl somewhat.

"Two more tasks," Rigel agreed. "It'll be over before we know it." She didn't know who she was trying to convince.

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In preparation for the fifth task, some of her lessons with Snape had necessitated a rather dubious turn. Snape didn't like it, and Rigel hated to ask it of him, but she needed practice filtering foreign substances from her blood. After considering the potential consequences of miscalculating her ability, she admitted it was safer to do with supervision.

Her Head of House stood with arms crossed in disapproval as she slowly injected herself with concentrated essence of Aconite. She knew what to expect-texts described the dizziness and fluttering heartbeat in laconic terms. She also knew she could begin filtering immediately and stave off the worse effects, but that wasn't the point. Rigel needed to be able to climb out of the worst of it, for Snape suspected she would not be allowed to combat the effects of whatever they imposed on the champions right away.

From her experience dueling Ralph over the summer, Rigel was familiar with the treacherous tingling that crept through her limbs, heralding the coming incapacitation with sweeping softness. Sweat beaded on her forehead, and she struggled to control her breathing until Snape said, "Now." There was a clock ticking away the seconds as she turned her attention inward and attempted to channel her magic without diverting it first to her wand.

This was the second part of their strategy. If Rigel could battle the effects of the substance from within, it would keep her hands-and wand-free to deal with whatever came at her from without. The poison was swift. Her limbs were weak, but she couldn't undo the damage there until she won the battle in her bloodstream. In most



danger was her heart, so it was into her veins that Rigel sent her Healing magic first, shaped by the strength of her will alone.

"Thirty seconds."

She heard Snape's voice as though from a tunnel. Her blood was almost clear. The rest was only flushing out the poison from where trace amounts had already been deposited. Rigel swept each system carefully, all the while trying to ignore the strange purple color crawling from the edges of her vision.

"One minute."

"Done." Rigel stretched her neck and stood. She wobbled slightly, but shook it off with impatience.

"You've adequate speed, but it still requires all of your concentration," Snape commented.

She nodded. "It's tricky, because Aconite might actually kill if left unattended. I have to be fast when dealing with it. Whatever they give us in the tournament probably won't be as bad at that. I'll be able to split my attention."

"You don't know that," Snape argued. "You ought to practice with a lower risk substance and attempt to multitask."

"I've done that already," she told him. At his scowl, she smiled. "You don't really want to know where I got the Firewhiskey, do you?" She was kidding, but Snape did not seem to appreciate the jest.

He crossed to the wall and took her apron from its hook, tossing it to her with impatient force. "If you aren't going to take the tournament seriously, you can at least spend the evening improving your brewing."

Rigel brightened. "I had a recipe I wanted to try, actually. The specifics came to me after our last session-remember the deathcaps

you had to throw out because the preservation charms had worn off the jars?"

Snape's mouth lifted in a sneer. "I had words with Burke. It won't happen again."

"That's great, but it got me thinking," Rigel said. "Not about ingredients, really, but about the potions themselves. How many do you think people throw out every year because they bought them for emergencies and haven't used them before the expiration date?"

"That necessity keeps us in business," Snape said drolly.

She made a face at him. "As if you don't resent every replacement batch of Pain Relief you brew for the Hospital Wing. What if you could increase the shelf-life of potions like that without having to alter the recipes?"

Snape lifted one eyebrow slowly. "I'm listening."

"It's annoying that most potions can't be exposed to a lot of direct magic without destabilizing, right? It makes preservation charms on potions themselves unreliable at best. I want to create something that is like a stasis charm, which is less reactive than a preservation charm. Stasis spells can't be maintained for more than a few days at most, though, and what I'm thinking would last years if done right." Rigel pulled a piece of scrap parchment from her pocket. "This is just a start, but I think with a little tweaking I can get it to work. It'll be a base-kind of like the neutral base you created for my cousin Harry-but built around raw amber. When it's mixed with other neutral potions-I wouldn't recommend volatile ones, unless we test them specifically-it should act as a sort of liquid medi-mini, encasing and trapping the magic in the existing brew, so it doesn't dissipate as quickly. The hard part is making sure the amber base doesn't interact with the potion itself-I don't want to indiscriminately increase the effectiveness or longevity of the potion once ingested." She imagined a Blood Replenisher that kept producing blood indefinitely and shuddered. "So, what do you think? Will it work?"

"Amber is an inspired choice," Snape said after a long moment of thought. "To ensure it doesn't incorporate with the potion in question, this base must be perfectly balanced. Its ingredients should be bonded and sealed completely to one another before it is added to the recipient brew."

She nodded, understanding the danger if one or more ingredients from the amber base separated and reacted with ingredients in the potion it was meant to preserve. "I was also thinking it should be more oil than liquid base, you know? That way, you could just coat a bottle with the amber base before adding the potion you want to preserve."

Her professor nodded once. "Sound theory. Let's see it."

Rigel grinned. "Thanks, Professor. I really want to get this finished in time for the twins' birthday."

He stiffened. "I forbid you to supply the Weasley terrorists."

She widened her eyes earnestly. "Please, Professor. I don't often ask for favors, do I?"

"I will not be party to it."

"They've been really good friends to me," she argued. "They saved my life in the first task by giving me those fireworks." As Snape's jaw clenched, she pressed home the point. "They've also single-handedly run a public relations campaign for me."

"A *prank* campaign."

"Which *worked* ."

They stared at one another, both stubbornly refusing to blink.

"Don't you think it's a creative application of Zygmunt Budge's principle of amplification without interaction-"

"Do not insult me."

Rigel groped for another argument and settled on, "It's important that I not be in anyone's debt, isn't it?"

Snape scowled fiercely. Even he could not argue with one of the tenants of Salazar Slytherin, however. "Do what you will, then."

Rigel resisted the urge to hug him. "Thank you! Uh, if it works, would you also be able to submit it to the Guild for testing? Nothing extensive, just to make sure it's safe for human consumption."

"Don't push your luck."

"That's okay, I can have Harry submit it," she said. Master Thompson would help, though he would grumble almost as much as Snape.

"You will not give her credit for your invention," Snape snapped. "I will take care of it. Just get to the cauldron and *brew*."

Rigel grinned and did as she was told.

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She was grinning again a week later, when she sidled up to the Gryffindor table and edged through the throng of admirers around where the twins were holding court.

"Puppy! You came!"

"How honored we are to have the Hogwarts Champion, Romantic Rigel himself, at our birthday celebration!"

"I eat breakfast here every morning, same as the rest of the school," Rigel said.

They pulled her onto the bench between them. "As long as you're here, you can watch us open presents," Fred suggested cheerfully.

She applauded politely through three boxes of Bertie Bots and a bag of hastily hidden stink bombs. As the pile of gifts dwindled, the crowd around the twins diminished, until finally it was just their usual friends left at the table. Rigel couldn't contain her impatience any longer. "Don't you want to know what I got you?"

The twins froze and exchanged a skeptical look over her head.

"The last time Puppy got us a gift, we melted into piles of glittery goo," George said.

"This time, I can't remember what we've done to annoy him," Fred added, looking vaguely worried.

"On my honor as a trickster, it isn't a prank," Rigel said, laughing. She pulled out two plainly wrapped boxes, each no bigger than her palm. "Happy Birthday!"

They waited a beat, as though to be sure the boxes wouldn't reach out and bite them, before apparently deciding she was sincere. Rigel supposed it was difficult to know who to trust when your birthday was April 1st and you were a pair of notorious pranksters.

George opened his first. They had learned something from last time, then. He plucked a grey, unpolished stone from within and turned it over in his hand. "Pretty?" he said, questioning.

Fred leaned across Rigel to peer at it. His eyes widened. "George, look at the aura."

George narrowed his eyes in concentration and a moment later yelped and nearly dropped it. "Rigel, what-"

"Read the card," she prompted helpfully.

He dove into the box and came up with a square card and a small roll of parchment. Upon scanning the short message in the card, his eyes widened and his face lost a little color, making his freckles stand out in alarm. "Rigel, this is..."

He passed the card to Fred, who read it quickly. "No kidding..." His voice sounded faint and a little awestruck.

Rigel frowned at their reactions. "It's just a little magic," she huffed. "For your experiments. I know sometimes all an inventor needs is a little extra stabilizing power." Extra magic could make the experimental process safer and smoother, and thus faster, too. "Anyway, that's only half the gift. The scroll is a recipe. I think you'll find it useful when you start stockpiling an inventory for your shop."

George was still staring at the stone. "Rigel, how do we even use this?"

She made a noise of understanding. "Ah, I forgot to explain. The runes in gold are reversible, see?" She pointed to a line of golden runes etched between dozens of lines of red. "Red means don't adjust, okay? I used an attractant array so the stone would suck in the magic I imbued and keep it as long as the array is active-you'll know if it starts to fail, because the runes will flicker. When you reverse these runes, it becomes a repellant array, instead, and the magic will start to leak out."

"And this equation?" Fred said weakly, pointing to the alchemic expression she'd included in the card.

"That describes the relationship between the number of seconds the stone leaks and the associated decrease in the coefficient of whatever brew, ritual, or array you're trying to imbue," Rigel said, pretty proud of the calculations. "You just plop the stone into the potion or field of magic for whatever you're working on, count the seconds you need, then levitate it back out and reverse the runes again. It can be used an indefinite number of times, until the magic inside is spent. Cool, huh?"

"Rigel..." George let out a strangled laugh. "Yeah, this is *cool* . Maybe the coolest thing anyone's ever given us," he added lowly.

"I'm a little afraid to ask what the recipe is for, but I also really want to know," Fred said. A wide smile was winning out over the earlier surprise. "Is it for a prank?"

She shook her head. "I'll leave that sort of invention to you two. It's a little boring, but very practical," she said. "Professor Snape helped me come up with it." She ignored the twin choking noises that statement produced. "He'll probably deny it if you ask."

"This has to be a prank," Fred muttered, opening his own box to dig out his copy of the recipe from under the matching stone within and unroll it. "It's... a preservation oil?"

"Exactly! For when you start making big batches of product to sell one day. If you coat a container in this before adding the potion you'll store in it, the oil will help extend the shelf life of the potion. I haven't done exhaustive calculations, yet, but I think for an average potion it'll be between two and three times the shelf life." She could hear herself rambling, but she couldn't help it. The recipe had been an immensely satisfying short-term project. "Professor Snape was the one who suggested the color-change component. When the oil turns brown, it's lost the magic that sustains it. At that point, the potion inside will only have its normal shelf-life remaining."

"Professor Snape gave us birthday presents," George whispered, horror in his tone.

She elbowed him. "Don't let him hear you say that. He helped with the recipe out of *academic interest only*. "

"This is most surreal, Rigel," Fred confided, rolling up the recipe. "Somehow, your shockingly unique gifts feel like their own sort of prank. We're grateful! Thank you, I mean, but..."

"Yes, thank you!" George exclaimed from her other side. They both appeared overwhelmed.

"It's the least I could do," she said quietly. "I haven't forgotten all the things you've done for me over the years. From splinting my wrist in first year to literally saving my skin with your handy firework display. You went so far above and beyond casual friendship when you helped me recover from the unfortunate blood magic incident in the third task." She looked between the two of them and shrugged a bit helplessly. "I'm not the best at expressing gratitude on a regular basis, but I wanted to help you both with your ambitions, the way you've helped me with mine."

She thought she saw tears welling in Fred's eyes, but before she could be sure, Rigel was enveloped in twin hugs that pinned her to the bench. She held very still, careful not to breathe too deeply, until Fred and George gathered themselves and pulled back with matching sighs.

"Rigel, I don't know what we'll do with this yet," George said as he clutched the stone in his palm. "I do know that one day there will be a truly *epic* prank product named in your honor."

"What more could I ask for?" Rigel said, a glad grin stretched across her face.

"Seriously, *thank you*," Fred said fervently. "This recipe-it's gold, Rigel. You could patent it and sell it to manufacturing companies for-I don't even know. What in Godric's name you're giving it to us for, I don't know either, but we're sure as spit going to use it."

"Use it well," Rigel said, still smiling. She stood, waving farewell to the other Gryffindor sixth years, who gaped at her in silent reproach.

"Sure, arm the agents of chaos and walk away," Angelina Johnson muttered.

Rigel resisted the urge to cackle maniacally, but it was a near thing.



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In such a good mood, she decided to try again at a task that had been frustrating her for months. Animagus transformation, she had found, was unlike any other form of magic she'd studied before. Her own magic was apparently next to useless until she discovered the 'inner enlightenment' that would solidify her connection to the raven.

She settled into her lab to meditate, struggling to find the animal within her even as the animal in her care slithered from his rock to her lap and coiled in peaceful repose. Dom, on the other hand, was less than helpful. He had finally finished filtering Riddle's magic out of her core and now had *decidedly* too much free time on his hands. That he spent that extra time blowing raspberries at random intervals in her mind should not have surprised her.

*Brrrrrt!*

Rigel broke her meditation with a huff, not giving the construct the satisfaction of an admonition, and hissed an apology to Treeslider for disturbing him as she stretched her legs. She'd been at it several hours, and when she checked the time, she realized Archie would be waking up soon. Feeling mildly vindictive after her own peaceful moment was interrupted, Rigel dug out the mirror and shouted into it. "Harry! Haaaaarrryyyyy-"

"Damn it all, cousin, what?" Archie's face appeared in the surface of the mirror, his eyes bleary with sleep.

"Morning, cuz," she chirped, good humor restored at the sight of his disgruntlement. She wondered vaguely whether her emotions were a zero-sum game, but shrugged off the suspicion in favor of watching Archie yawn.

"If you tell me you didn't wake me on purpose, I won't believe you," he grumbled. The view shifted as her cousin sat up in bed and shook his head back and forth sharply. His hair was getting long, she noted. She supposed he'd been shrinking it up with his Metamorphmagus ability rather than bothering to actually cut it.

"Early bird gets the worm," she said.

"You'd know." He yawned again.

"Actually, that's sort of the problem," she admitted, stroking Treelider absently. "I can't get this Animagus thing to work, so I thought I'd commiserate with you to make myself feel better."

Archie's expression perked visibly. "Well, I hate to disappoint you," he said slyly.

She gaped at him. "You... already?"

Her cousin moved the mirror against something solid and let go of it. A moment later, there was a handsome red fox perched atop his rumpled bedcovers.

Treelider hissed at the image. "*Interloper! Ssseize it, Ssspeaker.*"

Rigel moaned in defeat as Archie turned back into himself, startling her snake into another fit of hissing. As Treelider slid off her lap and left the lab in a disgruntled snit, her cousin laughed at her. "Pretty impressive, huh? Start to finish in a year, no less. Dad'll be plussed when I tell him."

"How did you do it?" she begged. "I'm getting nowhere, no matter how long I meditate on the 'qualities of the raven.'"

Archie scratched his chin, where the faintest hint of stubble was visible, and said, "It wasn't about defining the qualities of my fox so much as it was admitting to myself that those were my qualities, too."

"That's what Tahil said. I still don't really understand."

Archie was quiet for a long moment, but then he began to explain. "I didn't get it either at first. I had to admit, really accept, that the fox *is* me. I am cunning and sneaky. I am also loyal and protective. It's okay to be all those things." His voice dropped lower as he went on. "It was more than just the Animagus thing that clicked when I accepted that, you know? I actually feel much better about the ruse, now, too. It's been weighing on me-well, I've told you some of it. I thought I was turning into a bad person, with all the lying and trickery, but I've reached a sort of rapport with that now. I accept who I am. As long as I am sneaky for a reason I agree with, then I haven't lost myself at all. In fact, the fox enhances me and my goals. It reminded me that it was *because of* loyalty to my family that I wanted to be a Healer in the first place. Because of Mum. And it was that same familial protectiveness that drove me to agree to the ruse. It was for your dreams, too."

"Archie..." She didn't know what to say, but her heart ached with his.

"I can also admit I'm not fully happy with the way things have turned out," he said, speaking over her gently. "It asked more of me than I knew. Going forward, I'm going to try to be truer to myself, until we find a path through all of this. And Harry-I just want you to know that whatever the raven represents to you, whatever you're scared to admit to yourself, that's okay, too. When you accept that part of yourself, you'll be more at peace. It won't happen meditating or combing through arcane magic, either," he added with a self-deprecating smile. "I figured it out in the middle of a tuna sandwich. Just be patient, and when the voice inside you tells you things you don't want to hear... try listening."

*I think I like this kid.*

She shoved Dom back to the recesses of her mind. *He is not talking about you!*

"Thanks, Arch. I know things haven't turned out the way we planned." She ran a hand through her fringe, feeling helpless to comfort him so far away. It was obvious he was going through

something profound, and she hated that she couldn't be there in person to help. "I know I've been distant this year, too. Busy. After this tournament, it won't be so crazy."

Archie smiled, but it didn't have his usual shine. "I know. I don't blame you. I'm all right, anyway. Coming to terms with some things, but that's part of growing up. Don't worry about me, okay? Just come home safe. We'll sort it all out this summer."

"Okay." She swallowed the rest of her apologies and offered, "How's Hermione?"

His expression sharpened. "That's right! She's been asking me if you read through her notes. The woman is obsessed with the Fade, Harry. She's not even doing extra credit assignments for her classes anymore." His wide eyes told her that this was, indeed, a large deviation from character.

"I did read them," Rigel said. "Twice. I'm not sure I completely understand her conclusions; she thinks the common understanding of the way cores produce magic is flawed? She postulates that there is little evidence other than assumption supporting the idea that magic is created by a wizard's core alone, from scratch. While I agree the process isn't well-understood, I'm not sure there's *no* evidence. Then there are notes about a potential experiment to test her theory, but they aren't complete."

Archie nodded. "She's having a hard time coming up with a way to control all the variables she wants to. I hope you figure out what she's talking about and explain it to me before this summer, because she's expecting to meet up with 'Rigel' at some point to discuss the experiment face to face."

"I'll write her back after the next task," she promised. "Knowing Hermione, she's probably onto something shocking."

"Maybe you two can talk it over using the mirror," Archie suggested. "Letters take forever, and I don't mind letting her borrow it whenever."

Rigel agreed to set a date when the fifth task was finished. Her cousin caught her gaze in the mirror and said, "Good luck in the next task, cuz. If you need anything, ask."

"I will. Thanks, Arch."

They disconnected the mirrors, and Rigel found herself alone in her lab with restless energy coursing through her. The next task couldn't come fast enough. The sooner this tournament was done with, the sooner life could get back to normal.

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They could see it being constructed for a week before the task. Oliver Wood was frequently caught staring toward the Quidditch pitch, misty-eyed and solemn. Rigel tried not to look, but the monstrosity was hard to miss. It grew in twisting spirals, like Jack's proverbial beanstalk, only instead of green life stretching high into the clouds, it was metal, black and silver, cobbled together with only the barest allowance made for structural integrity.

From the base of the stadium gates, some of the more curious students said, you could see the top swaying in the wind. No one was allowed close enough to study the structure in detail, but Rigel could sometimes hear the ghostly voice from the locket mocking her.

*"A fortnight past the equinox, three heroes will ascend."*

The tower seemed to follow her for days, just visible through the open doors of the Entrance Hall, hovering over her shoulder during their morning runs. Rigel had taken to averting her face when she passed a window, which was probably why she ran smack into Auror Dawlish on her way up a set of stairs on the third floor.

He righted her with perfunctory efficiency, then adjusted his own olive trench coat. "Black. You appear distracted." Disapproval was heavily implied.

"What's your excuse, Professor?" she quipped. At his unimpressed look, she quelled. "Sorry for running into you. I have a lot on my mind."

"That much has never been in question." His sharp eyes took in the slump in her shoulders, the bags under her eyes. "Why don't you join me for a counseling session in my office?"

"I have a..." she trailed off, aware that she couldn't exactly explain she was on her way to a dueling club that didn't exist. "Never mind. Sure, Professor."

She'd apologize to Draco, but she honestly didn't think he'd mind too much. The club tended to run smoother when she wasn't there to distract the others, who inevitably had questions about some trick she'd pulled in the tournament.

Dawlish left the door to his office propped open but set up a silencing ward so that their conversation couldn't carry. He snapped his fingers twice and a set of steaming teacups appeared on the otherwise empty surface. Rigel took a cup with murmured thanks, looking around the office with muted curiosity. It looked like the space of a man who didn't intend to stay long.

"Your uncle is worried about you," Dawlish said bluntly. "He thinks the tournament is too much strain." The blank expression on his face suggested he didn't care either way, but was obliged to ask.

"Tell him I'm fine."

"I don't lie to my boss."

She straightened in her seat and scowled over her teacup. "Then tell him I will be when this is all over."

Dawlish tapped a finger on the desk next to his untouched tea.  
"You've been holding back in class."

Rigel blinked at the non sequitur. "I get a lot of Defense practice outside of lessons," she said dryly. "I don't think my peers would appreciate my treating the classroom the way I treat a dueling arena, Sir."

"It isn't just my class." Dawlish's gaze seemed to pierce right through her. "The other professors talk about you, did you know?"

She shook her head, eyes widening in mild alarm.

The Auror ticked them off his fingers. "From what he's seen in the tournament, Flitwick suspects you know every Charm in the textbook for at least two grades above your own. Sprout says she ran out of things to teach you about plants in third year. Potions doesn't need to be touched upon, as you already know where you stand with Snape, but McGonagall... she thinks you might be a prodigy." Even as Rigel continued to shake her head slowly, Dawlish inclined his own. "Yes, she says you continuously imply an understanding of topics not covered until well into NEWT-level Transfigurations, and that's without adding in the Alchemic principles you dovetail into her field from the Headmaster's personal tutelage."

"I just study ahead. I'm not some kind of genius."

Ignoring her, Dawlish went on, "Now for my part, the Defense class as it currently exists seems to be a complete waste of your time. Barring a slight improvement in your reflexes, I cannot claim to have effected any significant improvement in you through my instruction. Don't deny it," he added sternly. "I watched the first four tasks, same as anyone. Your demonstrative ability in handling dangerous magical creatures, spell-defense, and high-stakes dueling is beyond contestation. I'd give you an NEWT right now, if that was in my power. It's not. Don't be surprised if your post fills up with pamphlets from the Auror Corps in a few years, though."

She grimaced. "No offense to Uncle James, but I'm not interested in being an Auror. I'm going to be a Healer."

He stared at her, blinked long and hard, then barked out a laugh. "A Healer? Magic does love her little jokes. A Healer. Boy, you could be the most lethal thing to come out of the Auror's Officer in a decade. Moody is itching to get his hands on you. A Healer." He laughed again, shaking his head.

Rigel sighed. "Sorry to disappoint, but I wasn't trying to get recruited for anything. I'm just trying to survive this tournament and get back to my studies." Reminded of something, she reached into her bookbag and pulled out the worn copy of the *Auror's Field Guide* he'd given her the previous term. "Here. It was very helpful, but I've finished with it."

"It's your uncle's," Dawlish told her.

"I figured. I'm sure you'll see him before I do," she said, shrugging. "Thank you for the tea, Professor, and the information. Was there anything else?"

He shook his head, but belied that by adding, "You can't play dumb forever."

"I'd have to be pretty stupid to think I could," she muttered, standing. As she turned to go, she heard the Auror take up the book and flip it open. A bark of laughter cut off as she stepped through the silencing wards. Her mouth lifted in a small smile. The notes in the margins had been intended for James, but perhaps Dawlish would appreciate the suggestions, too.

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Putting on what she had mentally dubbed her 'tournament uniform' for the fifth time was almost anti-climactic. Risking her life for the sport of others had, impossibly, become almost routine. She moved through the familiar scenes easily: accepting jubilant well-wishes from her housemates, giving solemn assurances to her friends, avoiding the worried gazes of her professors in the Great Hall. Rigel even had her standard 'last meal' down to an art-just enough that she would be energized without risking lethargy or nausea.

She had to be down at the pitch earlier than usual, at least half an hour before the advertised starting time for the fifth task. Draco and Pansy walked her down to the champion's tent, neither saying much. She knew they, too, were worn thin by the constant string of tasks, the never-ending cycle of preparation and recovery. Rigel felt even more awkward than usual, naked as she was without her potions kit, but Riddle had finally told them they weren't allowed any items except their wands this time. Despite this, she summoned a smile for them at the entrance to the champion's tent and said, "I'll be okay. This time, I have a good idea of what to expect going in."

That what she expected was going to be decidedly unpleasant went unvoiced.

She ducked into the tent and paused for a moment to get her bearings. Rather than the usual open space with scattered chairs, there were three cots set up around the center pole. Owens was stretched out in one as though he were only there to take a nap, and Delacour sat primly on another. Rigel climbed onto the third and said, "Any idea what they're dosing us with yet?"

"Sousa was 'ere already," Delacour said, her face set in an unhappy scowl. "'e went to find ze official 'oo was to 'old ze substance."

"So you both figured it out, too?" Owens said, sounding surprised. "This'll be fun, then. I was worried about you, Delacour."

"Not worried enough to tell me ze clue," the French girl spat.

"Hey, I sent flowers," Owens protested, a mean grin on his face.

"Corpse flowers," Delacour muttered, eyes flashing orange for a moment. "Pray our wands do not cross before zis eez over."

Owens appeared more amused at the threat than intimidated. Before he could goad her further, Matheus came back into the tent, three vials in hand.

"Good. You all are here." He held up the vials with a grin that was just a little too strained to be truly believable. "This is your task-most of it. The hard part. The rest is climbing."

"Now, Mr. Sousa, don't give away too much just yet," Bagman admonished jovially as he pushed his way into the tent ahead of Crouch and the other organizers.

Riddle swept them with his gaze as he entered, Lucius Malfoy and Crouch Jr. at his heels. The sight of the twitchy man put Rigel's hackles up, but Riddle caught her gaze briefly and sternly, and she supposed she was meant to interpret Barty Crouch's continued presence of evidence that Riddle had handled the situation. Lucius gave her a slow nod when she flicked her gaze to him, and Rigel sent him a small smile. He didn't return it. There was a warning in his eyes that sent a bare chill down her spine.

"This test will not be like the others," Riddle told them after a moment of quiet expectation circled the room. "In some of the tasks you have been limited on the items you bring or the actions you take, but in this task, you will be limited in the faculties you can bring to bear on the challenge ahead. In many ancient wizarding cultures around the globe, the youth were set to similar trials-sent to face the unknown in an altered frame of mind-and they returned enlightened and vindicated, adults in the eyes of the world."

Rigel thought that was putting a rather thick layer of icing on a cake that was, at best, mildly culturally appropriative and, at worst, objectively offensive to those very cultures, many of whom still

practiced a variation of such coming-of-age rights. She glanced around to see if anyone else was embarrassed to be party to this particular aesthetic choice, but most of those in the tent hung on Riddle's words as though he might accidentally utter the secrets of magic at any moment. In exceptions, there were only two-Delacour and Owens. Her fellow champions were more interested in what exactly they'd have to do than the symbolic reasons behind it.

"Matheus Sousa has generously agreed to collaborate with the committee on this task." Riddle put a hand on the young Brazilian boy's shoulder. "His unique talents have been applied in preparing the draught that each of you will drink before attempting the main portion of the task."

"The draught has, of course, been screened by several Medi wizards," Bagman hastened to add. "Not to worry. It's designed to make the task *difficult*, but not impossible."

"Will we each be given an equal dose?" Rigel asked, cognizant of the fact that Owens was bigger than both her and Delacour.

Matheus shot her a dramatic pout. "I am insulted. Of course, I calibrate the correct dose for each."

Crouch nodded sharply. "Indeed. Your heights, weights, and genders have been taken into account when considering the optimum dose. Not to worry, Mr. Black. Each champion will receive a dose suited to his or her own biological limits."

She felt herself blanch, but put on a polite smile and nodded as though relieved. Inwardly, she cursed her luck. If the brew was metabolized differently according to sex, then she would be getting a dose suited for a *boy* of her size. Rigel hoped the practice she put in with Snape would pay dividends-it would certainly be problematic to be knocked unconscious by a dose of a drug she *ought to* have been able to handle.

"After ingestion, you will be monitored for twenty minutes. During that time, no circumvention or mitigation via physical or magical means is permitted." Bagman clapped his hands together as though this were an exciting twist. Certainly, Rigel could feel something twisting in her stomach. Twenty minutes? Their systems would be completely saturated by the time they were allowed to fight it off.

"Once the twenty minutes is up, the task begins," Crouch continued. He looked at them one after another with a stern eye. "You will all attempt the task at the same time. It is a race to the top of the tower that has been built in the arena. Unlike the other tasks, there are no subjective scoring categories. The first to the top will receive top score. Understood?"

Rigel nodded with the other two, at once amazed by the straightforward nature of the task and disgusted by its convolutions. To force them to attempt such a thing while mentally *and* physically compromised was-well, she had expected it, but that somehow didn't make it any more palatable.

"Will zere be safeguards in place around ze tower?" Delacour asked softly. "In case we fall."

Riddle's lip curled in what he probably meant to be a reassuring smile. It looked more like a sneer. "I would advise against falling, Miss Delacour, if you wish to complete the task. In the event that it becomes unavoidable... you won't physically perish."

He managed to convey clearly that any such embarrassing display was discouraged and would result in a very different perishment-that of their chances in the tournament. Rigel sneered back at him. Did he think anyone was planning to fall on purpose?

Owens fell back onto the pillow. "Let's get this going, then. I want to know what the fuss is all about." He offered his arm toward Sousa, tapping his vein with a teasing wink.

Matheus smiled slowly. "You must drink it. It is not delicious."

That was an understatement. Rigel got a waft of the brew as Sousa passed her the vial with her name on it. Even held at arm's length, it was enough to cause her stomach to clamp down in protest.

Bagman fished a headband out from his robe pocket and put it on, giving them a thumbs up to indicate it was transmitting before saying, "Welcome, one and all, to the New Triwizard Tournament fifth task! If you haven't taken your seats yet, not to worry; this is only being broadcast for transparency. The task will start in twenty minutes, but at this very moment our three remaining competitors have been given... a Draught of Delirium! They will drink it, and in twenty minutes, take up the challenge of the tower under the auspices of one of the most potent combinations of mind- and magic-altering substances known to the Wizarding World!" Bagman paused, presumably for the cheers he imagined would follow his pronouncement. He gestured urgently from beyond the viewpoint of the transmitting headband, and the three of them clenched their vials tighter. "Now, the champions will imbibe their potions!"

Rigel held her breath and downed her vial in one go. She did not release her breath until she was certain the liquid had made it all the way into her stomach, and even then, the smell of what was left in the vial almost brought it back up.

Delacour covered her mouth with a hand, eyes wide in disgust, and Owens choked and spluttered for an agonizing moment before deciding to keep the brew down.

Bagman let out a staged chuckle, though his eyes winced in sympathy for them. "There you have it! Get comfortable, folks. In twenty minutes exactly, the fifth task will begin!" He took off the headband and added, "You lot all right there?"

"It's disgusting," Owens gritted out.

Delacour nodded, tears in the corners of her eyes.

They both looked at Rigel, who grimaced. "I've actually had worse."

Madam Pomfrey bustled into the tent with flared nostrils and a glare that could keel over a hippogriff. "I should have been here from the *moment* they took it. Why did no one summon me?"

Crouch lifted a placating arm. "The tournament organizers are going to monitor-"

"Like hell they will." Pomfrey brandished her wand at Delacour. "Lay down this instant. I need to check your blood pressure. You're going to feel the effects first, I'm afraid. Black, you'd best lay down as well. Try not to move."

She did as she was told, rather grateful to have the strong-willed Mediwitch there as the poison began coursing through her veins. It would be doubly uncomfortable to slowly lose her senses in a space without anyone she could count on to have her back.

"The rest of you can go, unless you take some amusement from the slow torture of three helpless young people," Madam Pomfrey added with a sniff.

"Torture? No, Poppy, don't be so dramatic," Bagman said, looking uncomfortable. "It's only part of the task."

"Vertigo, dizziness, shortness of breath, sweating, vomiting, palpitations, paranoia, confusion, fear, loss of muscle control, involuntary stimulus to the visual cortex-shall I go on? Does this not sound torturous to you, Ludo?" Pomfrey's sarcastic indignation seemed hot enough to burn down the entire stadium with the right spark. "Or perhaps you'd like to take a vial for your own entertainment? I'm sure Mr. Sousa can scrounge up another dose."

Bagman was not quite foolish enough to press the witch any further. "Well, perhaps it is for the best that a trained professional take over the monitoring." He checked his watch. "Right then. Bring them to the pitch in fifteen minutes, if you please. Gentlemen? We'd best get up to the Judges' Box."

All eyes moved to Riddle, who inclined his head gracefully. "Best of luck to you three. Do make the most of your last chance for advantage before the finals."

The men left-all except Sousa, who hovered uncertainly by the entrance. When it was clear no one was going to come back in, he slouched closer to their beds and said, "I try to dial it down. Riddle has no mercy."

"What's in it?" Rigel asked. She couldn't feel it yet, but wanted to plan what she would do while her head was still clear.

"Yohimbe bark and Ayahuasca, mostly," he said quietly.

Delacour frowned. "Are you allowed to tell us zis?"

Matheus shrugged. "No one is here to stop me."

He glanced at the Mediwitch, who very pointedly did not say anything other than, "I disagreed with the concept of this task from the start. They didn't listen when I told them that twenty minutes was too long to wait in counteracting this sort of concoction-at least if they want you to be able to move your limbs."

Owens half-rose in alarm. "Is it that strong? What the f- is Yohimbe bark?"

Matheus glanced at Rigel, who answered, "It's an alkaloid commonly taken as a stimulant. It's not meant to be mixed with Ayahuasca, however, which is a brew that combines DMT with a monoamine oxidase inhibitor."

"What language are you speaking, Black? I thought this was going to be like LSD or some crap." Owens ran his fingers up and down his arm restlessly.

"This is faster and longer," Matheus said helpfully.

"The MAOI stops your digestive track from metabolizing the drug as it normally would. Instead, it will cross the blood-brain barrier and severely impair many primary functions for several hours," Madam Pomfrey added with a sniff.

"When will it start?" Delacour asked.

"Soon. Expect severe nausea, tremors, and dizziness first," Madam Pomfrey said gently. "Then it will move into unpredictable visual and audio stimulus, loss of motor control, confusion, and fear. You may think about purging prematurely if possible."

The French girl frowned. "I zought we are not allowed."

The Mediwitch raised her eyebrows and looked pointedly around the tent. She conjured a bucket and set it on the floor beside the girl before moving to the entrance to 'check the weather.'

The moment Pomfrey had ducked out of the tent, Fleur dove for the bucket. Rigel looked away as the girl held back her own hair and turned her wand on her throat. Retching noises followed, coupled with a quick vanishing charm. Rigel glanced over at Owens, curious to know whether he would say anything about the deviation from tournament rules, and caught him sliding a slim vial back into his sleeve. The pained look on his face as he averted his eyes from the sunlight coming through the slits in the tent told her what he'd taken: Sobering Draught.

She was impressed by his sneakiness, but doubted a brew designed to tackle the effects of alcohol would be very effective against the powerful psychedelic created by the vines of the Amazon basin.

Delacour performed a breath-freshening charm wordlessly and offered Rigel the bucket. She declined. "I'm all right, thank you." She'd been monitoring the draught internally, and knew that it had been absorbed too quickly for regurgitation to help much at this point. She could feel real nausea setting in, and cold sweat on her forehead.



Madam Pomfrey came back in and moved to Rigel's bedside. "I'm going to perform a basic diagnostic-"

"No, thank you. I refuse," Rigel said calmly, swallowing against her churning stomach.

Madam Pomfrey scowled at her. In a low voice, the woman said, "I'm not allowed to heal you. They'll be checking my wand, no doubt, but I *can* tell you what I see."

She smiled in gratitude, but shook her head. "I can diagnose myself. It is already in my bloodstream and beginning to permeate my general nervous system. I'll do what I can," she promised, already having begun directing her magic toward metabolizing the poison one area at a time.

The nurse gave her an unhappy nod and moved to Owens' bed.

"Five minutes," Matheus said.

Vertigo was beginning to set in. Rigel focused her magic toward her digestive system first, clearing the rest of the draught from her stomach and intestines before it could be absorbed further. After that, the long, slow process of sweeping her other systems began. "The heart is the most vulnerable," she said out loud, in case the others were wondering where to start. "Once we begin physical exertion, the palpitations will be dangerous."

She heard Owens curse and Delacour murmur, "Zank you." Rigel hoped the girl had managed enough practice filtering blood in the last two weeks to at least spare her heart long-term damage. This task was really too much.

Barty Crouch came in to collect them when it was time. "Figured you may need an extra pair of hands to get them out there," he said with a rather nasty smirk.

Delacour tried to stand and immediately buckled on trembling knees. She caught herself on her cot and snapped, "Do not touch me," when it seemed as though Barty would attempt to lend her his support.

Madam Pomfrey stepped in, letting the French girl lean on her as they slowly made their way out of the tent. Owens put a hand out to Matheus impatiently and said, "A little help, man? This is your fault, anyway. Least you could do, really."

Sousa sighed, but obligingly swung Owens' arm over his shoulder. He glanced at Rigel and Crouch Jr., clearly not willing to leave them. Rigel forced magic into her limbs to stabilize them and slowly swung her feet over the edge of the cot. Her vision swam away from her for a moment and she swayed, but regained her balance before toppling, at least. With a sharp jerk of her head, she said, "Let's go."

Barty crossed his arms as Rigel slowly made her way toward the entrance under her own power. "You're faring well, Black." He leaned closer and she had to suppress the urge to flinch as his tongue darted out to lick his lips. "Almost as though you didn't get a full dose."

She raised an eyebrow at him, not sure what he was trying to imply. She'd drunk the full vial, in front of the whole world, no less. "I've swallowed a lot of poison in my life," she said sweetly. "I guess it doesn't bother me so much anymore."

They moved slowly, more like a string of wounded soldiers limping toward a casualty camp than three young heroes marching into battle.

Rigel could feel her pulse in her stomach and see it in her elbow when she pulled back her green jersey sleeve. She was sweeping her cardiovascular and respiratory systems as quickly as she could, trying to target the areas that kept her body alive first and worry about what it was doing in her mind second. Her magic was slower to respond than usual, though. It wasn't like fighting off a poison such

as Aconite, which affected only her body. As the draught began to affect her mind more keenly, the connection between her will and her magic felt strangely dampened, clogged like a gunk-filled pipe.

Every step was an exercise in complete concentration, and she had no idea how she was supposed to complete a task in that state. Delacour could barely stand upright, and Owens had begun to mutter quietly to himself, eyes darting here and there uneasily.

They finally reached the pitch, the din of applause and stamping cheers enough to cause Owens, still suffering the after-effects of his Sobering Draught, to double over and purge violently. Barty Crouch led Rigel to her starting point at the base of the metal tower.

"Look up, boy," he said conversationally. "See the top?" She squinted up the steep incline, her eyes crossing briefly without her impetus. The tip of the spire doubled and swayed in her confused vision, and she shut her eyes with a low groan. "There are no traps along the way," Barty went on brightly. "Not a single curse or beastie to stop you until you get to the very end. All you have to do is climb. You can even use magic-whatever magic you want. If you can, that is." He slapped the black metal of the tower fondly and laughed. "You're in for it this time, Black."

Rigel knew she was having trouble parsing through his words. Her brain felt heavy and slow in a way it hadn't since those feverish days in Pettigrew's pit. She hated it, but found it difficult to sustain the energy required to be angry. Bagman was shouting something, his magnified voice ringing all around the stadium, going on and on and on and-

*Kid, what's going on!?*

*Dom?* Disoriented, Rigel tried to concentrate. "Dom, what are you doing out here?" she murmured, looking around the pitch.

*I'm still in here, idiot! You need to come see this-it's everywhere. It's going to burn down the whole mindscape at this rate-*

That jolted something inside her, some residual panic that had been squatting in her chest for a rainy day, perhaps. Rigel took a deep breath and clutched her dizzy head. She reached for her magic to continue filtering the draught from her nervous system-when had she stopped?-but it twisted away, just beyond her grasp. *My magic*, she thought with deliberate force. *My magic... I can't-!*

*I know. Stop panicking. You're making it worse.* He pushed a wave of calm across her mind, and for a moment, there was clarity.

*Dom!* Rigel thought as fast as she could. *It's the fifth task. We were drugged, and I have to climb a...* The thought was so close. *A tower! I have to climb a tower.*

She struggled against the tide of chemicals in her system that just wanted her to lie down and stop moving. After a moment, Dom answered. *All right, you can't come in here right now, then. You've got to win that tournament. I will take care of things in here.*

Yes. She could have sobbed in relief. The confusion crept back at the edges of her mind. *Handle it. Protect my mind. Use whatever magic you need.*

There was a short, almost horrified pause. Then Dom's voice came again. *When you have control of your magic back, I'll let you know, but until then, you have to keep going on your own.*

"Keep going?" She said it slowly, testing the words. Where was she going?

*Climb, kid! Climb the tower!*

Rigel blinked, noticing the monstrous tower in front of her nose. There were people all around, screaming at her, something... something. *Climb!* The voice in her head insisted. Rigel reached for the first rung and started to climb. Her limbs were wooden, but they worked to a degree. One step, two. She reached a small platform. It was big enough to stretch out on. Maybe if she-

*Climb!*

Right. She was climbing. Her hand reached up and found the next handhold.

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It was an invasion of burning spores. Dom perceived them as they drifted into the mindscape, accompanied by a sourceless fog, and climbed to his perch atop the mountain to better see. They appeared at first glance to be fireflies, faintly twinkling spots of light that wafted aimlessly in the breeze. Where one landed on the mountain, the flowers caught fire. Dom leapt to stamp it out; his foot was aflame in moments. With a howl of annoyance, he flicked the small amount of magic he had saved from his last 'allowance' at the fire and doused it. As he lifted his head, a sea of burning embers met his gaze, each a fiery snowflake floating gently toward an unsuspecting landscape.

His urgent cry to the girl rang through the mindscape, and her resulting panic sent the spores into a flurry. They landed in his hair, his clothes, and everything they touched turned to ash. Within minutes, it was chaos.

*Protect my mind.*

The command called to the runic arrays etched into his construct. Protection was the construct's primary directive. Purpose swelled in his breast.

*Use whatever magic you need.*

A well of bottomless hunger opened up in his gullet. Whatever he needed to protect her mind. A joyful shout bubbled up inside him, even as he swatted a spore away from his face with a whip of sheer

magic. Dom folded his way through the mindscape faster than a blink, materializing before the unassuming door to his Mistress' ever-sacred Space Room. The seat of her inner self. She never let him come here unsupervised, but he knew the password well from her many visits. Silly girl; she thought if she only *thought* the password and didn't say it, he couldn't hear it.

He murmured the phrase with an ironic lift to his voice, and the door opened. Her magic awaited, warm, sweet waves of it that rolled over him. Bliss, pure and welcoming. He didn't have time to bask in it, however. With an outstretched hand, he called to the sun. Her magic resisted at first, wary of him-as it should be-and already trembling under the force of the attack on the girl's mind. Despite her magic being too unsettled to respond readily, the will she had attached to her edict was unshakable, whether she had the attention to enforce it at the moment or not.

*Use whatever magic you need.*

The truth of it was undeniable, and the magic acquiesced with a shudder. He drank it in until he was swollen with power. Not all of it-not even most. Just enough to send these impudent, infidelic spores back into oblivion.

He barred the door to the Space Room with a wall of fire and swept through the corridors like an ancient plague, sucking the life from every spore, crashing up into the study on a tidal wave of power. The scrolls with carefully constructed decoy memories were on fire, and the carpet that concealed the trapdoor was nothing but ash. None of that worried him-mental objects could be recreated on a whim. What drew his immediate notice was the open cabinet door swinging freely from its broken hinge.

That man's magic was loose. Whether the spores had somehow damaged the lock or the foreign magic had sensed the inattention of its keeper, it was gone from its prison, only an empty vial remaining.

With a roar, Dom vaporized the spores in view and went hunting. The little vial of collected magic lacked true autonomy, so removed from its owner-it could not have gone far. He stepped out of the mountain and drew on the fresh magic in his stomach. On a great breath, his form stretched and grew, until he more resembled a colossal cheetah, claws like knives and teeth enough to rip through anything in his path. In a skin befitting his magnificence, Dom tore across the mountainscape in a streak of menace, consuming the spores in his way. The whole world was fire, but his was the hotter flame.

Time was ephemeral, but he had spent nearly all the magic he'd taken by the time the last of the spores had been snuffed. Dom regained his humanoid form with a faint scowl. He had not found the foreign magic.

With the immediate enemy defeated, Dom closed his eyes and took stock of the whole of his domain, one piece at a time, soothing the worst of the damage, until he found it. With a smirk, he stepped from the mountainside to the pyramid. The ball of magic had managed to shift between the layers in the girl's mind. It struggled and squirmed, caught in the claw of a curious Sphinx. Dom shook a finger at it. "Naughty, naughty. You shouldn't wander. Thank you, lovely." He gave the lion-bodied guard a measured stroke and relieved her of her prize.

He transported them back to the mountain layer in a flash, a frown of contemplation on his face. What to do with the enterprising little ball of snot? His host had enough to worry about without wondering if her enemy's magic was gamboling about whenever his back was turned.

Dom sat heavily in his chair by the fire, patting his belly, full for the first time in ages, with regret. He shuddered, clenched his construct's muscles, and let the magic go. It climbed out of his throat, scalding as it went, and scurried back to join with its larger part in the Space Room. Dom watched it flee, breathing heavily. When the warmth of the sun had faded from his system, he turned his gaze to the magic

captive in his fist. It was better not to risk re-mixing them, he knew, but it didn't make his next meal any more appetizing.

With a decisive lunge, he swallowed it. The magic struggled all the way down, but it, as all magic before it, bent to his will in the end.

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"This is not on." Ron's voice was flat with righteous indignation. Neville didn't have to ask what he meant; it was everything. All of it.

They were in the highest section of the Southwest stands, with a clear view of Rigel's side of the tower. As its near-vertical face twisted around the corner, they could barely make out Owens' form, too. Delacour wasn't visible, but they could see her progress on the large mirrors, which transitioned smoothly between transmission runes set at various angles around the tower and stadium.

"He's halfway through," Neville said quietly. It was cold reassurance, and they both knew it. This task had seemed cruel from the start; now, it was beginning to look impossible. Rigel had stopped again, shaking his head slowly back and forth, a confused frown on his sweaty face whenever the mirrors reflected it up close. This was the dozenth or so time he'd stopped, and each time it took longer before the Slytherin started moving again.

"Owens is catching up."

Neville wasn't sure which of the Gryffindors around them had said it, but they were quickly shushed. He eyed Owens' jerky progress in relation to Rigel's. The American wizard kept twitching to look behind him, and there was a wild, unsteady look in his eyes that the mirror magnified a hundredfold. Whatever they'd had to drink, it had almost completely compromised their higher thought processes.



Rigel started to move again, but it was slow-so slow it was painful to watch. The boy's head suddenly whipped around in confusion, and a moment later, Neville heard what had caught his attention-a scream. The mirror flashed over to Fleur, who lay crumpled in a heap, her foot twisted at an unnatural angle.

"Bloody hell," Ron croaked. "I think she fell to a lower platform."

The French witch's limbs trembled visibly in the mirror and tears fell freely down to her chin, where they caught for a moment before dripping to the metal plate under her hands. Neville looked to the Medi wizards standing below on the pitch, but none of them moved to rescue the girl. One of them appeared to be physically restraining Madam Pomfrey, whose shouts were carried away by the wind.

His voice caught in his chest a little as he said, "They aren't going to help her."

Ron cursed colorfully, his face beginning to turn red. Neville understood his frustration. This wasn't entertainment; it was pure, unbridled torture. What were they supposed to be proving-how much absolute misery they could handle before giving up?

"How long do you think it would take to prank Riddle?"

Neville craned his neck around to see Fred and George in the row behind them, red heads bent together. George had his eyes fixed on Rigel's slowly climbing form, but Fred's gaze was lasered in on the Top Box.

"At least a year," George answered. When Neville realized they were serious, he winced. The twins were scary when they dropped the joker act.

"Lotta surveillance, probably," Fred agreed. "Might have to turn someone on the inside."

"I reckon we could-"

Ron sucked in a breath and Neville whirled back around to face the pitch. Rigel's foot had slipped, the only thing keeping him from a nasty fall the fingers of his left hand, which were stuck fast to the metal rung. "Thank Godric for those gloves of his," Ron said with a sigh of relief. "Blimey, this is gonna give me grey hairs"

Neville watched Rigel shake his head sharply and haul himself up to the next rung. He was high enough now that the wind buffeted him violently, his hair and jersey in constant motion. Neville felt his stomach turn over as the mirror zoomed in on Rigel's scared, confused features one more. It didn't seem right that a nice bloke like Rigel should have to go through this. Neville had watched the first task in sheer terror, but comforted himself with the thought that Rigel had probably known what he was getting into. The second and third tasks had been rough, but his friend got through them well enough. He hadn't known what to make of the fourth task-it seemed as though someone had been trying to make a point, but he wasn't sure what it was. This, though... it was just mean. Whoever reached the top first wouldn't be the best wizard. They'd just be the one who fumbled their way to the finish with the least accidents.

Rigel groped for the next rung. George whispered from over Neville's shoulder. "Come on, Pup."

"Keep going, Rigel." Ron stared at the boy as though the fervency of his gaze alone could sustain him.

Neville added his own murmur to the hundreds of others that were no doubt going up around the stadium. "You can do it, Rigel. Don't give up."

It was hard to believe it helped. With a series of cringe-worthy lurches, Rigel finally topped the last of the platforms. Neville's knees felt weak with relief and he watched the boy approach the flag that represented the finish line. His heart rose-then froze, as Rigel's hand came up against an invisible barrier.

"No..."

"That's cheap!" Ron's snarl of outrage drowned out his own weak protest.

It wasn't fair. It wasn't-he made it to the top. What kind of sick game were they playing? Rigel beat against the barrier weakly, the most pathetic look of hopeless denial on his face.

"What do they expect him to do in that state?" Ron snapped. "He's barely upright."

"It's not enough to get to the end of the task. He's got to beat the draught, too." George said it with a resigned sort of realization. "This won't end until one of them fully fights through the drug."

Neville felt his shoulders slump. Who knew how long that would take? Delacour hadn't moved from where she landed, all the fight seeming to have gone out of her. Owens had his wand out and his back against the tower. He brandished the stick wildly in every direction, seeming to see something no one else could. And Rigel-Rigel was staring dumbly at the invisible barrier, a frozen denial on his face.

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The sky tilted on its axis, spilling blue all over, and the sun rolled above her. She shut her eyes and rested her head on a wall that wasn't there. She was so tired. So lost. How did she get here?

*Climb .*

That voice had been echoing for what felt like hours, but there was nowhere left to climb. A sob bubbled up in her chest. Where was she supposed to go now?

Behind her eyelids, people and places swam together in a sea of sound and color that had been swirled all out of order. She could smell fish and goat cheese and taste fairy wine. There was a trick there... somewhere. Archie was whispering her name-why was Archie there? He pressed a knife into her hand. She didn't understand. There was a trick here. Somewhere.

*Kid, what are you doing?*

Her ears pricked, she tried to decide whether the words were real. She opened her eyes but didn't see anyone beside her. "I don't know," she told the voice, just in case.

*Did you finish?*

"I finished... climbing," she decided, looking around the barren platform. "No more-no *where* left."

*That doesn't... never mind. I got things under control in here. You should be able to use your magic again.*

Magic. She liked her magic. She opened and closed her hands, then frowned. That wasn't right. How to reach-there. It was inside her, warm and comforting. Strangely, it made her want to cry. She was so tired.

*That's it, girl. Use the magic. I can help, but you've got to be the one deciding. You want to flush the confusion out, don't you?*

She nodded slowly. She wanted the fog to blow away. Then she could see the trick.

*Will it. I'll guide it to start-just wish as hard as you can.*

She closed her eyes and put a hand to her heart. *Please, please, please, take the confusion away. Wash it off, blow it out, scrape it, squash it, please, please.*

*Got it. Hang in there.*

The warm magic was wrestled gently from her grasp, and she almost cried out, but immediately she felt the trembling confusion recede the tiniest of bits. This was good. She wanted this. Strand by strand, she felt the tapestry of her conscious mind delicately woven back into place. When she remembered what she was supposed to be doing, she stiffened and her eyes snapped open.

The tournament. The task. The tower.

The stands were just above her-she was at the top. Students screamed down at her, some pointing. Rigel shook her head, her vision swimming as she caught a glimpse of the ground, so far below her.

She felt the shimmering magic of an active ward a few inches from her nose-could recognize it now, and Rigel realized there was something else she had to do before she could rest. Dom was making swift work of the chemicals in her nervous system. She could feel motor control returning to her muscles, along with an ache as they protested their recent treatment. Rigel didn't want to think about how she had no clear memory of climbing the tower at all.

She flexed her control, grasped the reigns of her magic and pushed Dom firmly aside with a mental wave of gratitude. It had been his voice, she knew now, urging her over and over to keep climbing. She knew she didn't have time to completely flush her system of the draught, but she could mitigate its effects on her mind with sheer magic for a relatively short period of time, the same way she'd forced her limbs to cooperate with magic until they were properly under her control again.

Rigel held her faculties as steady as she could, determined to finish this task quickly. First, she had to know what kind of ward she was dealing with. She flared her magical awareness and flinched-there was a core right behind her. She spun on her knees to see Owens towering over her, his footing unsteady and his eyes wide. There was something wild in his gaze, something glazed that told her he wasn't seeing *her* in that moment.

"Owens..." she said, her voice croaking. She held up a placating hand, even as the other one groped for her wand. "We don't have to fight. We'll both get top marks if we get through together."

"You're not... supposed to be here," he snarled between deep, unsteady breaths. "I left you... there. I left you."

"The draught is making you see things, Owens-Jacob," she pleaded as he lurched forward a step. "Listen to me. Do you understand?"

He swayed in the wind, trying to step toward her. "I understand *everything* . You don't under-"

He tripped, and Rigel stunned him. The bolt of light was weak and wobbling as it left her wand, but Owens was in no condition to dodge. She caught him, lowering the boy to the precarious platform with trembling arms, and panted for a moment to regain her strength.

The ward. She had to take down the ward. The drug pulsed against her magic, so many compromised synapses firing out of turn. Archie. The knife. What-

*Focus, kid.*

With a heave of mental effort, she put her train of thought back on track and flared her magic at the ward again. Rigel whimpered as she recognized it-a blood ward. A bloody *blood* ward.

Whose blood did she need? Her brain was in physical pain from the strain of forcing it to fire along the pathways she needed it to. They didn't have her blood. It shouldn't matter... Rigel eyed Owens for a long moment. She could use his... a tiny cut, just a baby one, an Addy little...

She shook her head sharply. Tested the ward again. Groaned. "Willing, has to be willing." Okay. That was fine. Why was it fine? She had a... trick! There was a trick. It was hers.

Quickly, Rigel took off her fingerless gauntlet and glove, feeling the skin on her left wrist as it pulsed with the force of her blood pressure. Her fingers grasped for the smallest of edges... there. Visibly concealed, but perceivable with a careful touch, was evidence of the skin graft performed months ago.

Willing... yes, Archie had been willing to give it.

Her wand, sharpened with a shaky whisper, sliced carefully through the graft to the flat pouch of blood behind it. The barest of trickles as liquid was released, her wrist against the barrier, and she was falling forward. She caught herself raggedly on the flagpole and buried her face in the white folds for a long moment. The noise in the stadium was unbearably loud. Someone was shouting something-Bagman, she thought-but her energy was flagging rapidly.

She couldn't keep control of the magic any longer. As the bulwark fell, the tide of chemicals advanced once more, and she felt her consciousness falter, flicker, and sink.

She was floating, rocking, cradled by the soft hands of magic herself. Content to drift, she let the gentle motion take her deeper, pulling her under like a riptide until its abrupt cessation startled her awake once more.

Madam Pomfrey stood above her. Rigel was back in the tent, staring up from her cot, and for a long, suspended moment, she wondered if the entire thing had been a dream. The thought that she might not have even started the fifth task yet was so upsetting she forced herself upright, straining against gravity to sit up and stare about her.

"Lie down this instant, Mr. Black. You have been through quite an ordeal and I must heal you-"

"No." The word was torn from her lips at once. "No, I will heal myself."

She was not quite as bad off as she had been before. Some things were still confusing-how had she gotten back to the tent? How long ago had the task ended?-but others Rigel was perfectly clear on. No one would treat her. She and Dom would work through it in their own time.

"The others," she said through dry lips.

"They are here," Pomfrey assured her, gesturing to the other cots.

Rigel blinked. So they were. Had she missed them coming in? Owens was unconscious-her doing, she dimly recalled. Fleur was awake, but wracked with convulsions, her eyes straining up toward the ceiling. Two Medi wizards stood over her, wands out, murmuring diagnostic spells.

"See to Owens," Rigel insisted, laying back down slowly. "I can handle the rest of it." She hoped she could, at least.

As Pomfrey moved over to Owens' cot, or maybe much later-it was difficult to know-Sousa ducked into the tent. His expressive eyes went to Delacour, still trembling, now unconscious, and he said, "I come to apologize. It should not... the dose should not have done this."

One of the Medi wizards looked over with a dark scowl. "The amount in her system is out of order. She could have died."

Matheus shook his head helplessly. "I calculate it right. I don't know... the dose must be tampered with." The boy ran a hand through his beautiful hair. "But if they are switched, one of you should be only weakly affected." As Owens was still unconscious, he turned to Rigel. "Were you pretending?"

She blinked at him, having only followed most of the conversation.

He sighed. "No, I see. These British ingredients are unreliable, or her creature blood messed up the dose." He apologized again, eyes



lingering on the pale French witch, before retreating from the tent.

Rigel drifted in and out of the world, and slowly her mind turned the problem over. She wondered about the doses. If the wrong dose almost killed Delacour, then a double dose should have killed Rigel. If it didn't, then she couldn't have taken a double dose. Which meant... she grasped at the answer for a long time. Finally, it solidified in her stomach. The doses were switched. If she drank Fleur's, and Fleur drank Rigel's... then Rigel had only had the regular dose intended for a female, and Delacour had been double-dosed.

The conclusion satisfied her, until the implications crept up over her shoulder. Someone had switched the doses. To make sure Fleur lost... or, more likely, to make sure Rigel won. Not knowing she was a girl, someone must have assumed she'd perform significantly better under what should have been a half-dose for a boy.

"Bastard," she muttered to no one in particular.

One moment, she was glaring at the tent ceiling, the next, someone was nudging her awake. Rigel jerked violently and blinked her vision back into a single picture. It was Owens, standing over her again, only this time, his eyes were sane.

"Just checking to see if you're still alive," he said casually.

The American looked as though he'd never drank the Delirium Draught, and Rigel thought enviously that she could be as put together, too, if she allowed Madam Pomfrey to heal her. The temptation was brief; there were far too many reasons why that was a bad idea. She had never wanted someone else combing through her mind less.

With a groan of annoyance, she waved the boy away, rolling over to put her back to him pointedly. Rigel would deal with him later, if she had to deal with him at all.

Owens laughed softly and said, "Suit yourself. Sousa says this stuff might wear off on its own in another hour or two."

The thought was a bleak one, but it kindled her resolve. She had to stay awake. Had to start flushing the toxins in earnest, again. Her rest was over.

When she heard Owens' voice again, her first thought was that he hadn't left, after all. When she rolled back over, she realized he had left the tent, but was standing just to the side of the entrance, speaking low-but not lowly enough that she couldn't hear him.

"Don't bother. He's still out of it."

"I thought you were going to-"

"I did. It's not my fault the draught knocked him on his ass."

"You speak as though you fared any better." Rigel knew that voice. She cursed the confused neurons in her brain. She *knew* she knew it.

Owens let out a hiss of annoyance. "What's so special about him, anyway? You've held his hand through this entire tournament. Every task was geared toward him or fixed for him. Every clue. Every test. / should be your apprentice, not some half-reluctant, hostile little-"

"That. Is. Enough. Now is not the time or place to brandish your insecurities."

Her mind produced images without context: The Chamber of Secrets, Tom the teenager, insecurities fresh on the surface, the locket from the lake, the article about Morfin and Marvolo-Riddle! She held tight to the understanding. Riddle's voice had been the one she recognized, though there was something weird about it, soft and subtle...

Rigel shook herself back to reality and looked around. Owens was gone. She didn't see or hear either him or Riddle. She looked over to the lone Mediwizard who was still standing over Fleur's bed, a troubled frown on his face.

"Did you hear that?" she asked.

He looked over at her, surprised to see her awake, perhaps. "Hear what?"

"That conversation..."

The Mediwizard gave her a pitying look. "You're going to hear things and see things that aren't real until the drugs wear off."

Rigel nodded, slumping back to her cot once more. Everything was so confusing. She just wanted to sleep. Before she could summon the willpower to either fight through the rest of the draught or let herself slip back into unconsciousness, the decision was made for her.

"Rigel! Thank Merlin."

Pansy's arms were around her shoulders; Draco's palm was on her head.

"Pomfrey says you won't let them heal you, so we're taking you back to the common room," he said.

Rigel looked between them, not entirely sure whether they were real or whether her mind had conjured the most comforting image it could come up with. "Really?" she asked, hope threading her voice. "Are you really here?"

"Oh, Rigel." Pansy squeezed her gently and stood. "Nothing could keep us from you."

"Nothing and no one," Draco confirmed. "If we have to carry you, levitate you, or smuggle you transfigured as a rock, we're getting you

out of here one way or another."

"We're taking you home."

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[end of chapter twelve].

A/N: Thanks to everyone for reading! This one was rough, huh? Approaching the end of the book, now. Expect two more chapters, I think. If you're impatient for a new chapter and need something to chew on in the meantime, there are a lot of beautifully imagined and crafted spin-off fics on FFN and AO3, with an entire slew of short stories about to be released in association with the Rigel Black Chronicles Exchange organized on the Discord server.

For everyone who was wondering, I've finished my cross-country move and am settled in safe at my new place. I hope all you readers are safe at home, either teleworking or just hunkering down to wait this pandemic out. If you're out there providing a service in these difficult times, thank you from the bottom of my heart and stay safe!

I promised to answer more questions. No spoilers or vital information ahead, so don't worry about reading on if you aren't interested.

1. How do you come up with and keep straight the world building and laws of magic?

I will be the first to say I am not great at keeping everything perfectly straight and not contradicting myself. I try, but the series has grown to the point that I don't pretend to remember everything I've written. Not good author practice, but it's true. I keep a running document of important details I reference often, but other than that I tend to make it up as I go and hope it meshes with what has come before. Sorry it isn't more consistent. One of my favorite things to do is to incorporate real science and facts into the magical world, to ground it a bit in terms that people from our world might be familiar with. I use

chemistry and medicine, math and physics, to try and inject as much realism into the unrealistic as possible. Basing it to some extent on real laws of the universe helps keep it consistent, I hope.

Sometimes, I get carried away researching things that don't even make it into the story-I recently spent an embarrassing amount of time reading about deathcaps, which had nothing to do with the last chapter-but I love to learn new things, so the research aspect of story-writing is always fun for me.

## 2. How is your Original Fic coming along?

I've finished the first draft, and am now in the happy stages of insecurity where an author must decide whether it is good enough to expose to other eyes. I've been procrastinating calling it 'finished' because that means I have to find an editor, agent, or self-publishing vehicle, so I'm calling it 'drafted' and embarrassedly avoiding the next step. I'm hoping to spend a little time polishing it this month, but my work is sort of hard to predict right now.

## 3. When do you think you will complete the series and how many books will there be?

I am hoping to finish the series before I publish my Original Fic. Ideally, the conclusion of this story and the publishing of an original world take on the concept would be near-simultaneous. I know that isn't a timeline, but I'm honestly not sure if that will take a year or three years. I have five books solidly planned, with room for a sixth if I think it's necessary to the overarching narrative. So far, I haven't been planning too far advanced of where I am in writing, so thinking beyond book five is hard, but I'm willing to play it by ear and see how the story evolves.

## 4. Are there any plans to move the series to AO3?

I think I made an account there once, but I haven't moved the story over nor do I have immediate plans to. Part of it is I like to read all the reviews and messages I get (albeit very time-late, usually), and I thought originally it would be harder to juggle two platforms at once. I

do think I would be amenable to moving the story over when it is finished, or perhaps each book one at a time as I find the time to go back and edit. The first couple of books especially are rather embarrassing for me to revisit, in terms of editing cleanliness.

5. Do you have references for what certain characters look like?

I really don't. I have little to no artistic imagination, actually. When coming up with a character, I generally get as far as the hair color and sometimes eye color and then my imagination gives up on the visual and dives into their mannerisms, intonation, and motives. In my head, the characters are flat little stick figures with HUGE personalities haha. I leave it to the artistically minded readers to come up with their interpretation of what the characters really look like, and I deeply enjoy seeing what people come up with. Shout out to all the artists in the Discord 'Harry get some sleep,' on tumblr, and beyond who make this story visually come alive. Another shout out to the readers of the Soundcloud podfic version of Rigel's story, who are giving it a true voice for the first time.

As always, thank you all for your support and feedback!

Best wishes. -Violet

## Chapter 13

**A/N:** My POV machine gained sentience and tried to take over the last half of this chapter. Sorry for the long wait; I have a hard time letting go.

### The Futile Façade:

#### Chapter 13:

It was hard to accept congratulations for the fifth task when she didn't remember most of it. Everyone in the castle seemed supremely confident that she would win the tournament outright. Hadn't she outperformed the challengers at every turn? Wasn't she looking forward to carrying the champion cup into the Great Hall at the end of year feast?

Rigel tried to avoid the well-wishers, and when she couldn't, her friends ran interference. *Rigel has to prepare for the final task. You can congratulate him when it's over.*

Under the weight of such eyes everywhere she went, she found her head often bowed and the breath heavy in her chest. When Dumbledore stopped by the Slytherin table with a formal invitation to his soiree, she grasped it with both hands.

"What is that?" The flat tone told her Draco already knew. Rigel admitted to herself that she probably had forgotten to mention she was attending.

"Dumbledore invited me to the spring soiree this year."

"That is highly inappropriate," Pansy protested. "He's your headmaster. He shouldn't be steering you politically."

"But it's okay for everyone else to?" she said dryly. "I'm not the only student who will be there."

"The Weasleys, Bones, and Longbottoms attend every year," Millicent allowed. "But they are all Light-aligned."

"Are you sure I'm not?"

There was general spluttering at that. "You go to the SOW gala every year," Draco said. "And my parents' summer garden party."

"And I still will. I'm Neutral," she said firmly.

"You're the Triwizard champion," Theo said with exasperation. "Don't you know what it looks like, you going to this thing?"

"Yes, I do."

Theo gaped at her. "So, you're throwing your support behind the Light? You can't do that and claim neutrality. I knew there were some things about our platform you didn't agree with fully, but I thought..."

"You thought I would support a platform I didn't believe in? One that actively works against the interests of people I love? Why?"

"Ambition," he muttered. "Thought you and Snape were birds of a feather."

Rigel felt her gaze go cold. "I don't think you understand Professor Snape or me at all."

Pansy put a hand on hers and said, "Let's not argue over breakfast. Rigel, you can support whatever platform you like. Just be careful. Some of the Light sect won't be able to look past your connections to the other side."

She pulled her hand from beneath Pansy's and looked her square in the eye. "They told me the same thing about your sect, and they were right. There are uncompromising people on both sides." She could still remember the way her schoolmates had stood very still and quiet the first time she encountered Caelum Lestrange at a Party function. "I won't apologize for not being one of them."



"No one is asking you to apologize," Blaise said. He sounded tired. "If you want people to understand you, you just have to explain yourself every once and a while."

Rigel deflated. Now she wanted to apologize, but for what she wasn't sure. Her friends were never the ones she wanted to push away.

"Go and schmooze with the Gryffindors, then," Draco said, dismissive pride in every syllable. "Just don't forget who was with you at the start."

"I haven't." The start was further back than he imagined, though. Draco and Pansy and the others got to know her as Heir Black, but before that Harriet Potter had a start of her own. It was to that beginning that she owed allegiance. It was for the Harrys of the world that she would go to Dumbledore's soiree.

It sounded noble in her head, but she felt like a villain as she put on her dress robes at the end of the week. Draco and Theo ignored her when she said, "See you later," on her way out of the dorm. Blaise at least looked up from his periodical to nod.

Pansy met her at the common room door. She looked down at Rigel's boots and said, "No." A transfiguration that Pansy promised would wear off by the end of the day, two straightening charms for the wrinkles, and a smoothing spell for her hair later, Pansy put her wand away. "I suppose you'll do," she said, attempting a smile.

"Thanks, Pan. I'm hopeless without you." Rigel shifted in her altered shoes. "Also, I'm sorry for what I said the other day. You've been nothing but welcoming."

"I know it wasn't aimed at me." Pansy's smile was stronger, though, when she bid Rigel farewell.

She resisted the urge to jog across the sweeping lawn in her dress robes, though something about the field of new spring grass made her want to run. Her heart lifted just a little at the thought. What

would it be like to start running and never stop, never look back? Rigel squashed the urge ruthlessly until her pulse was calm and steady again. There was no room for regrets on her path.

As she approached the group of students at the gate, she heard a voice say loudly, "What is *he* doing here?"

The cluster shifted as people turned to look her way, and she saw all four Weasleys, Neville, and a number of other Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs she knew.

"Albright, wasn't it? Nice to see you again," she addressed the shorter boy who'd called her out.

He scowled in her general direction without looking at her. "Someone tell Black this is a Light event."

"Get over yourself, Eric," Fred said lightly. George grinned in a less-than-friendly way.

"Yeah, Rigel is a cool Slytherin," Ron put in fiercely. He looked over at her uncertainly. "What, ah, are you doing here, though? You never come to the soiree."

"I haven't been invited before."

"Your folks come every year," Neville said softly. "Not that we aren't glad to have you now."

"Rigel doesn't do politics until he does." Ginny had her arm looped through the elbow of a girl with long, wispy blonde hair and a Ravenclaw tie. "Have you met our neighbor, Luna? Luna, this is Rigel."

The girl blinked large eyes at her and tilted her head in a way that bounced a radish-shaped earring against her cheek. "Daddy did a segment about you in his newspaper," she said, her voice a little

breathy. "We both think it was terribly inhumane to set those nargles on you in the fifth task."

Rigel glanced at Ginny, whose sharp smile was vaguely threatening, and said, "Thank you, Luna. It's nice to meet you."

"Meeting people is nice, isn't it?"

"The portkey is warming up," Cedric Diggory called. They pressed into a tighter cluster around a long rope that had begun to glow faintly.

Ron passed a loop into Rigel's hand and she gripped the rough length of it tightly in her fist. The glow became a flash and her guts tried to move through space without her before the rest of her body caught up like a rubber band snapping back into place. She landed hard on the ground, sprawled beside the others, and grasped dazedly at the first hand in her face.

Diggory pulled her to her feet with a grin. "Portkeys are endless fun, eh Black? I wonder what wizard first taught the universe to chew people up and spit them back out."

"I'm sure the universe has always known how to do that. Some cheeky witch probably just condensed the experience down to a single instant." She straightened her robes just in time for Ron to slap her on the back and rumple them again.

"Good one, Rigel. It's always the witches. Come on, then; you remember the Burrow, I hope?"

She shook her head as she took in the Leaning Tower of Weasley presiding over an entire field of festivities. Enormous white pavilions dominated the yard, their panels secured by colored ribbons to golden poles. Food sprawled in piles on every surface and refreshments bubbled out of fountains interspersed between the pavilions. Each tent was guarded by an ice sculpture as big as a man, which ranged from lions, badgers, and ravens to phoenixes,

dragons, and sphynxes. "I think I'd remember if you lived at the circus, Ron."

"Mum's really outdone herself this year," he agreed. "The ice animals were probably Dumbledore's doing, though."

"You'll notice there aren't any snakes," Albright hissed from behind them.

She eyed him as he passed. "Could have fooled me."

"Don't let him get to you," Ron advised. "The Albrights are a bunch of self-righteous types."

"Twats, you mean." Ginny bumped her other arm companionably. "Rigel knows well enough how to handle those-got a whole house full of them, don't you?"

"I hope you're referring to my school house and not my family."

Ginny affected an alarmed look. "Would I insult your beloved Harriet?"

"You have repeatedly done so to her face."

"That's how I show affection."

"That explains so much, little sis." Fed pounced on the girl like an oversized cat. She yowled fiercely but was unable to escape the hair-mussing that followed.

"All this time we thought you hated us, when really you were crying out for *affection* ." George encapsulated the girl and his twin in a rather violent embrace.

"I yield," Ginny spluttered from the eye of the hurricane. "I take it back. Get off me!"

Her words only encouraged the twins, until Ron said mildly, "Mum'll be torched if Gin's dress robes are wrinkled."

Fred and George sprang back like guilty children. George coughed a quick straightening charm under his breath as Fred looked around for any sign of Molly bearing down on them. There was a Weasley headed their way, but it was Bill.

"Oi, the party is over here, you lot." Bill eyed his younger siblings with wry amusement. "Your straightening charm needs work, George."

"No straightening charm in the world can un-bend Gin," Fred said with a sly smile.

Gin elbowed him in the gut and stomped on a foot for good measure. "Anything else you'd like to say in polite company?"

"Just a general warning to all against little sisters," he muttered through a grimace.

"It's a special bond you have," Luna said suddenly. "I used to pretend you were my older brothers, too, when Ginny let me play here."

The Weasleys exchanged uncomfortable glances, and Rigel marveled at the Ravenclaw's ability to disarm all five of them simultaneously.

"Well, I came to wrangle the four of you before you scatter to the winds," Bill said when the awkward moment had passed.

George nodded seriously. "The general wants a word?"

"You guessed it."

"Better go make our reports, then. Rigel, want to say hi to our mum?"

"Not if you're looking for a human shield."

"Puppy, puppy, would we admit it if we were?"

"Please, Rigel," Ron wheedled. "She's much nicer to us around strangers."

Ginny tossed her hair and struck her brothers with a scathing glance. "Cowards, all of you. Come, Luna." She strode toward the house, the dainty Ravenclaw on her arm.

"Witches." Ron shook his head like a dog shedding water. He peered at Rigel hopefully. "Sure you don't want to come with?"

She looked over at Neville, who was hovering uncertainly. The pale boy shrugged his shoulders. "If you come with me, you'll have to say hi to Gran..."

"Are you all afraid of your female relatives?"

"You aren't?" Ron seemed genuinely bewildered.

"Course he is." Fred sounded sure. "Have you forgot he's literally related to Bellatrix Lestrangle?"

"Lady Malfoy, too," George said, ticking off his fingers. "Plus Andromeda Tonks, Nymphadora-don't-ever-call-me-that-again-or-I'll-eat-your-bollocks-Tonks, and the late but still horrifying in rumor Walburga Black."

A sudden chill passed a shudder between them.

"You forgot Aunt Lily," Rigel pointed out.

"Lady Potter? But she's so nice," Neville protested.

Rigel laughed. "Nice doesn't eat the Dark Arts for breakfast. Aunt Lily is terrifying."

There was a pause as the boys considered this.

"Maybe we should just stay here and not talk to anyone."

"Come off it, Ron." Fred shook his head.

George nodded. "It'll hurt worse if they have to hunt us down."

"To our doom, then?" Rigel suggested lightly.

Bill raised a hand to his heart. "Your sacrifice won't be forgotten."

"Where will you be, then?"

"Avoiding Mum, obviously." Bill slunk in the opposite direction, shoulders slouched and chin tucked as though his mother wouldn't be able to pick his distinctive shade of hair out of a crowd in milliseconds.

"That turncoat. I bet Mum never even wanted a word with us." Ron looked after his older brother with disgust. "Where's the top cover? The brotherly loyalty? He just wanted to throw us in her path as a distraction."

"Still, I should probably pay my respects to the hostess," Rigel said, somewhat apologetically.

Ron groaned. "And the first thing she'll say is 'where's Ron?'"

"You can do this," Rigel assured him with a bracing pat on the shoulder.

"Easy for you to say. You faced down a dragon, Rigel."

"Same basic principles," she offered weakly.

"Sure, just keep your wand at the ready-"

"-apply fire-free liberally-"

"-and don't ever turn your back on it!"

Fred and George dissolved into guffaws, but Neville straightened, a serious glint in his eyes. "There's no other choice, is there?"

Rigel grinned. "Exactly, Neville. When you realize the hard way is the only path forward, hesitation and fear become meaningless."

"Meaningless," he repeated, unconvinced.

"You'll still feel the curdling in your stomach, but it can't stop your feet if you really want them to move." She took a large step toward the party in the distance. "You try."

With a wry smile, he mirrored her movement. Fred and George hollered a war cry and made running leaps, and even Ron took an exaggerated stride. All solemnity dissolved, they made an ungainly series of leaps and jumps toward the square-pointed tents. As they squeezed between two pavilions, Fred and George traded off in single-file leaps over one another, finally spilling in a tumble of limbs and grins at their mother's feet.

"Oh, for Godric's sake, boys. Could you not last five minutes without working each other into a state of hysterical-Rigel! How good to see you, dear. What on earth are they feeding you up at that school? Come, get a plate; the pork hash is just come out."

"Thank you so much for having me, Mrs. Weasley," she said, bowing at the waist.

"So polite." Molly sighed and shifted narrowed eyes toward her brood.

Ginny held up her hands at once. "Now, now, Mum. Remember, Rigel likes me rude."

The fiery-haired woman looked between Rigel and her daughter with exasperation, but turned her attention to Ron instead. "Grown again, have you?"



Ron looked down at his pant leg, which came an inch or two above his ankle, and grimaced. "Bill was looking for you," he lied.

"I saw him ducking me earlier." Molly clucked her tongue. "Come to Dumbledore's soirée looking like a pirate-he should be afraid. Speaking of which." Her eyes cut to Neville, where they thawed. "Madam Longbottom is by the ice punch."

Neville slumped. "Probably looking to find something wrong with it."

"I dare her to try." Molly lifted her chin. "Rigel, you ought to say hello as well. She personally requested your presence this year."

That was news to Rigel. She turned curious eyes on Neville, who shrugged. "Not like she explains herself to me," the boy said.

The twins gave her wide-eyed looked of betrayal as she bowed again to excuse herself.

Neville blew out a breath when they were out of earshot. "I like Ron's family, but in pieces."

"Their cumulative presence is more than the sum of their parts," she agreed. "Did you really not know your gran asked Dumbledore to invite me?"

The Gryffindor slid a nervous glance her way. "She's asked me about you. Nothing personal; political stances and views, mostly. I think she's hoping you'll come over to our side."

Rigel frowned. "I've always agreed with Light politics. No one has to convince me."

Neville shot her a surprised look. "Thought you wanted to stay Neutral."

"I thought I did, too." She took a long breath. "I tried to. Used to think if I didn't bother anyone, didn't draw attention to myself, the world would leave me to my cauldrons. Now I find myself on the opposite

side from what I would have chosen, simply because I didn't choose until it was too late."

"I don't think it's ever too late," Neville said slowly.

She smiled thinly. "I hope you're right."

They approached a towering fountain of pale blue punch that fell from the upper tiers in sparkling crystals like snow. Augusta Longbottom, formidably attired in stiff brocade with a stuffed vulture in pride of place on her wide-brimmed hat, held a wide-lipped glass before her eyes.

"Am I meant to wait until the drink melts or lap at it like a child with an ice cone?"

Alice Longbottom held her own glass beneath the gentle snowfall and watched the blue crystals collect with a smile. "I think it's fun."

"Fun. Good. That's why we gather the most prominent forces for the Light here in the wilds of Ottery St. Catchpole each year. For fun."

"Neville!" Frank Longbottom caught sight of his son cutting through the crowd and raised a hand to wave. Alice whirled and a smile beamed across the distance.

Neville shot Rigel an embarrassed look, but strode forward more quickly to embrace his parents nonetheless. "Hi, Mum. Dad."

"Sweetums, we've missed you. How is your second term going?"

"Made much progress on that Potions mark?" Augusta asked sharply.

Neville's ears turned red. "A little, grandmother."

Madam Longbottom appraised him sternly for a long moment, then set her drink on the rim of the fountain and opened her arms. "Well, come greet me properly, Heir."

Neville ducked his head to hide a grin and embraced the old woman gently.

"That's enough of that." Augusta reclaimed the delicate glass and prodded Neville upright. "Going to introduce us to your friend?"

"We've met before, Madam Longbottom," Rigel said, stepping closer when the family created space in their midst. At least, Sirius claimed they had. She had no memory of it, but they'd apparently been taken to Dumbledore's soiree as small children until they were too old to be carried in their mothers' arms.

"I doubt you recall it, young man. You introduced me to your invisible griffin who ate whole sticks of butter."

Rigel closed her eyes in embarrassment for Archie. "Finny ate raisins, too," she said with a wry smile.

"I believe it was you who ate the raisins, Heir Black."

She bowed with a flourish. "Raisin-eater and griffin-tamer at your service, Madam Longbottom."

Alice laughed. "How like Sirius you are. Is he here today?"

"Probably, but I haven't seen him yet," she admitted.

"Making the rounds before greeting your own family?" Augusta did not look impressed.

"Rigel came through on the portkey with us," Neville put in on her behalf. "He went to pay respects to Mrs. Weasley first, and she directed him to speak with you, grandma."

"As well she should. Do you know why you are here, Heir Black?"

"It would be foolish to guess if you are about to tell me," she said carefully.

"You are here to make an account of yourself to the Light."

"Mother, please." Frank turned a long-suffering face her direction.  
"He's fourteen."

"Do you suppose the Dark cares how old he is?" Augusta drew herself up to full height and glared down the slope of her nose. "Heir Black, you are the Triwizard Champion."

"The last task decides-"

"Don't interrupt. It is plain to all watching that you are the wizard who will emerge victorious. What is not plain is which side you will stand with when that happens."

Rigel waited a moment to be sure Augusta was finished speaking. "I stand with my family, as always."

"Well said," Frank muttered.

"I will be having words with Lord Black as well today," Augusta declared. "Left us in quite the lurch, turning Neutral all of a sudden. I understand he did it to keep a closer eye on you as you gambol about Dark society with your school friends."

Rigel could not refute that, so she inclined her head.

"I admit I wrote you off when you were sorted. Despite good influences, I assumed the Black genes had reasserted themselves."

"Mother..." Frank winced.

"However," she said with a sharp jerk of her chin. "My grandson tells me otherwise. Now I would like to hear it from you. Have you reconsidered your allegiances?"

"I have never declared them," she said.

"You did in deed if not word."

Rigel held her chin steady. "By attending my friend's birthday party, you mean?"

"By accepting blood ties to the Malfoys."

"A Life Debt is *sacred*, Mother. I am very sorry, Heir Black," Frank said firmly.

"I take no offense. I have learned that to be in the public eye is to face scrutiny for private relationships. I am a friend to the Malfoys. I am also a friend to the Potters, the Weasleys, and, if it pleases you, the Longbottoms." She sent a small smile to Neville, who returned it uncertainly. "I keep diverse company, and part of that is the nature of the house I was sorted into, and part of it is my own upbringing and preference. Those relationships don't dictate my politics, Madam. I... I support the Light."

There, she had declared it.

"And what does that mean to you?" Augusta pushed. "Good over evil? Truth against villainy?"

She wrinkled her nose. "Light politics, Madam, not fairy tales. It means I support the rights of muggleborns and halfbloods to equal protection under the law in all aspects of society. I believe in the humane treatment of all magical creatures and in fair dealings with our fellow magical beings. I oppose discrimination on the basis of blood or gender or magical ability. I oppose the doctrine of Magic is Might. I oppose political structures that benefit the few at the expense of the many. I oppose, in general, the concept of lineage as an argument for social superiority at all-and that includes the title I hold as Heir to the House of Black. Most of all, I oppose any system which puts children into moral or social categories before they learn how to hold a wand straight."

The Longbottoms, to a one, stared at her, until Augusta said, "It seems I was mistaken, then. I might have guessed, of course; your

father declared his path late in life as well. Mind you don't do something so dramatic as running away on a flying motorcar."

"I'll strive to refrain from such a scene," she said dryly.

"Do."

"Mother..."

"Do what?" Sirius stole up behind her and clapped a hand down on Rigel's shoulder. "Frank, Alice, it's been a while. And young Neville, you are the spitting image of Frank in school, if you don't mind me saying. Madam Longbottom-but no, you haven't aged a day. Be honest-have you phoenixes in your ancestry?" He eyed the vulture on her hat with a devilish glint.

Augusta sneered. "Only the Blacks have what it takes to conceive of such unnatural things."

"Well, that is the Black family motto-'whatever it takes to conceive!'"

Rigel groaned. "Ugh, Dad, gross. Can we change that or something?"

"I'm afraid you need a supermajority of Blacks to change the motto, and Reggie won't be budged."

She lifted an eyebrow. "I bet I could get Aunt Cissy on my side."

"She doesn't count. You'll have to produce sons until you outnumber us." Sirius seemed to relish the horrified look on her face as he added, "Why do you think the motto never changes? It's a Catch-22."

"You haven't read that book."

"Lily explained it to me ad nauseum."

"Where is Aunt Lily?" Rigel shot back. "I can't imagine she let you off your leash so soon."

"I outwitted her."

"Unlikely. You recruited Uncle James to distract her, right?"

He barked out a laugh. "Close. I charmed Addy's hair to look like tiny snakes and ran away while she was figuring out how to fix it."

Rigel made a show of checking her pocket watch. "So you've got, what, sixty seconds until she bears down on you with the wrath of nesting dragon?"

"You'd know more about dragons than me," Sirius said, inspecting his fingernails unconcernedly.

"I hope you at least planted a false trail."

"I mentioned hours ago how eager I was to catch up with Gideon and Fabian."

She nodded in approval. "I'm impressed, Dad. The plan almost certainly hinged on her ally, Remus, being home after the moon, but still. You don't usually think it through that far."

"Lately, the future has weighed on me a bit. What is my legacy? What do I strive for? Why, I even have a vague inkling as to what I'll eat for dinner tonight." He sighed. "Must be getting old. Not as old as Augusta, mind you, but—"

"Enough! You Blacks are nothing if not tiresome." Augusta poured her glass of blue snow back into the fountain and set the empty container pointedly on its rim. "If you wish to disarm us, words are not enough. No amount of antics will make us forget who you call kin. I need deeds, Sirius, and your slide backwards into Neutrality is not reassuring to witness."

Sirius let the ready smile fall from his face. "Can't choose our kin, Madam."

"You can choose the Light."

"I have," he said quietly. "My public stance doesn't change that."

"You *cannot* be so naïve." The venerable woman fairly shook with the vehemence with which she spoke. "Public perception is everything to this campaign. All the world watches as the Black Heir proves the concept of blood purity and his father steps firmly back from his progressive platforms. Next thing I hear you're to organize a joint charity venture with Lucius Malfoy. Do you want Riddle to cash in every chip he's wagered for the past decade? Will you be satisfied when-"

"That will do, Mother." Frank's mouth had set into an unhappy line. "I'm sure you've given our friends plenty to think about."

"The time for thinking is almost over. Only actions matter now."

Augusta Longbottom drew her brocade overskirt back from her feet and left their company. Frank started to apologize, but Sirius held up a hand.

"She's right to be frustrated. I have made things difficult."

"You did it for me," Rigel said, nudging him gently. Guilty waves lapped at her heart. "Dad, you know... I mean, I never planned to make friends in Slytherin. It just happened. And then, I-I certainly never thought you'd have to sacrifice anything over it." When Sirius declared Neutral, it hadn't made the ruse any easier, but there had been a certain easing in tension between him and Archie. Perhaps it hadn't been worth it.

"Don't be such a martyring Gryffindor," Sirius said, a bit of his usual cheer threading into his tone. "I've made my choices and my peace with them."

"I would do anything for Neville," Alice said suddenly. She curled a protective hand around her son's arm. "I'd walk any path, if it led to his happiness. Augusta is set in her ways like most of the old guard,



but we understand you, Sirius, and the complexities of the situation. Please don't think you've lost any friends over a label."

Sirius' smile was one she'd never seen before: fragile and uncertain, like it was built on air. "Thank you, Alice. Frank. Sorry to have spoiled the mood."

Frank waved his apology away. "The soiree is always more politics than party. We've come to expect a few dramatic moments-wouldn't be worth getting dressed up if no one made shocking declarations or mortally offended an Albright."

"Now, there's a goal I can get behind," Sirius said, making a show of looking around. "Where is old Ulrich Albright?"

"Probably inspecting the alloy ratios in the flatware," Alice said with a sly grin. As her eyes glinted with mischief, Rigel could suddenly see how she and Lily became friends.

"Want to watch your old man bully an even older man?" Sirius looked hopeful, but Rigel shook her head.

"Riveting as that would be, I'm going to find James and Lily." As his eyes flew wide in pronounced fear, she smiled. "I won't tell Lily I've seen you."

"This is why you're my favorite son."

"Where are you hiding the others, anyway?"

"Somewhere safe, in case you step out of line."

Neville coughed to cover a sudden laugh, and Sirius sent him a wicked grin. "Glad you were born Light, eh kid?"

"More and more, Lord Black," Neville muttered into his collar.

Rigel wandered through the various tents, looking for her mother's distinctive coloring. She finally found her near the apparition point at

the outskirts of the party, glaring up at two men with matching cinnamon manes.

"-swear we haven't seen him," one of the men was saying, all the earnestness of a veteran player in his voice.

"Looking for Sirius, Aunt Lily?" Rigel called.

Lily spun, pure predation in her eyes as she clutched Addy's snake-free head to her chest. "Archie. Where is the wretch?"

"Gone to annoy Aldermaster Albright," she said. "He feels no repentance and will likely avoid you for the rest of the party."

One of Lily's victims edged away with a wide grin that revealed his genetic connection to Fred and George. "You see, Lily, might as well enjoy the soiree now-"

"-and punish Sirius at your leisure later," his brother finished.

Lily blew a lock of hair back from her face and readjusted Addy in her arms. "I suppose it's foolish to try tracking him all over Molly's garden."

"Well then-"

"-If that's settled."

The men executed a tactical attack in the opposite direction, and Lily scowled after them. "Those two..." She fumbled a moment as Addy made to dive from her arms. "Ah, yes, darling, you can go to Archie."

Rigel caught the free-diving toddler with an alarmed lurch in her stomach. "Hi, Addy," she said, a bit breathless as her sister gazed up at her with wide eyes.

"Hawee," Addy said, batting her hand against Rigel's mouth insistently.

Rigel craned her neck away from the sticky appendage. "No, Addy, it's Archie. Ar-chie."

"Ha wee !" Addy shouted, her voice a little bursting crack.

Lily smiled at her apologetically. "You really do look very alike, Archie."

She sighed. "I know. Where's Uncle James?"

"I sent him to hunt down Sirius in case Fabian and Gideon were decoys."

"They're probably having drinks together right now," Rigel surmised.

"Dink?" Addy opened and closed her mouth like a fish out of water.

"You know that one, huh?" She grinned down at the copper-headed toddler. "Want to see a drink fountain that makes blue snow?"

"Dink."

With solemn approval from the goddler, Rigel led the way. As they wove through ribbon-wrapped tent poles, Lily said quietly, "How are you doing, Archie? We've heard... disturbing things about the fifth task."

"It was disturbing," she agreed, her face twisting. Addy smacked her clenched jaw and surprised a smile out of her. "Ow, Addy."

"Oh."

"Ouch."

"Ooch."

"I think she's making fun of me."

"This one is going to have some strange ideas about social norms," Lily said ruefully. She caught Rigel's eyes. "You didn't answer my question."

"I'm doing as well as can be expected," she said, aware that it was not entirely reassuring. "I just... I'm tired, Aunt Lily."

"Sirius has been beside himself with worry," Lily told her, a careful lack of reproof in her voice. "I think it's harder for him to hear about the tasks than it would be to witness them for himself."

She winced. "I didn't mean to make it harder on you all." She caught Addy's hand before it could smack her in the lip again and examined the tiny fingernails. Without looking at Lily, she added, "I feel like a different person in these tasks. Part of me doesn't want you to see that."

Lily wrapped her in a hug that gracefully encompassed Addy, too. "We would never think differently of you, Archie. These tasks are dangerous. Do what you must to survive with your mind and body intact. I understand how your decisions might be clearer when you don't have to worry what we'll think. I just want you to know that it won't matter to us either way. We just want you home."

Rigel bit back the moisture in her eyes with ruthless willpower. "I love you," she whispered. "I don't say it enough."

"We know, sweetheart." Lily held her until Addy squealed a protest at being squished between them.

She took a deep breath to clear the urge to break into shuddering sobs from her lungs. When she thought she could speak without croaking, she said, "It's fine if you all want to come to the last task. It's only right that you should be there at the end."

It was only one more task. The excitement of the tournament finale and their worry for Archie would likely forestall any questions her performance stirred.

The Longbottoms had wandered elsewhere, but there were a pair of familiar wizards inspecting the extravagant fountain when they approached.

"Lady Potter! The lioness herself appears." Raoul Goldentower swept a courtly bow, his husband a beat behind him.

"Lords Goldentower." Lily curtsied with the flare of a dancer. "I'm sure I don't have to remind you that I was not a Gryffindor."

"And yet, you are everything the fair house was built to emulate," Gareth declared. "Where is James? We've been meaning to duel him for your hand."

"As I am Lord Potter's champion, you'd be dueling me, I'm afraid," Lily said with a grin.

"Damned clever of him, making the task insurmountable," Raoul mused.

"Have you met my nephew, Archie?"

"At the Yule Ball, we had the pleasure," Raoul confirmed. "Mr. Black, how are you holding up?"

She shrugged, bouncing Addy into giggles in the process. "Well enough, Lord Goldentower. The finish line is fast approaching."

"And you seem poised to cross it first," Raoul said frankly. His partner snorted into his glass of ice punch. "It's not favoritism, Gary, only cold truth. I don't see the other two overtaking you in the last task."

"Do you know what the final task is?" Lily asked, unmasked concern in her gaze.

"It's no secret," Raoul confirmed. "They've begun growing the maze already."

Had they? That was news to Rigel, but then, she wasn't the most plugged into the happenings at Hogwarts.

"A maze? That seems..."

"Suspiciously wholesome after the last few?" Gareth gave a dark chuckle. "I wouldn't trust it."

"What do you think, Mr. Black?" Raoul's dark eyes glinted like whetstones.

Rigel grimaced. "I've no doubt in the organizers' ability to overwhelm us with their creativity."

"Keep that cynicism, boy. In the position you now hold, it'll serve you well," Raoul suggested.

Lily looked at her with significantly less approval. She knew it was not something Archie would have said-at least, not the Archie their family knew.

Gareth, perhaps sensing the solemn moment, changed the subject abruptly. "I'll be looking forward to Miss Potter's coursework when it comes in again this summer. After our last meeting, I read a few of her essays-damned insightful, if I do say so myself."

"You have, repeatedly," Raoul put in dryly.

Some of Lily's worry for Archie was swept away by surprise. "The correspondence course, you mean? Is she still doing that?"

"You didn't know?"

"I remember her asking for the tuition the first year, but then... I suppose I forgot." She glanced at Addy almost guiltily.

"Harry uses her earnings from brewing to pay for the courses," she explained quietly.

"She sells potions? At, what, fourteen?" Gareth shook his head in amazement. "Well, that explains the rigor of her assignments in that category."

"Who does she contract with?" Raoul asked.

"A couple of apothecaries in Diagon Alley," she said carefully. "Horace Burke has her on the hook for Blood Replenishers and a few others, as well."

"Burke? The devil never mentioned anything so interesting." Raoul seemed affronted at having been left in the dark on gossip of any kind.

"I'm sure Harry appreciates his discretion," she murmured.

"And I'm sure it was more self-serving than not. There's some who wouldn't trust a fourteen-year-old's brews, no matter her brilliance," Raoul said shrewdly.

"She must have been brewing younger than that, if she's been paying her tuition for two years with it," Gareth added. His confusion was polite, but marked.

Lily looked uncomfortably confused as well.

"Harry's always been practically minded," she said, trying to sound upbeat. "Combine that with Aunt Lily's brains, Uncle James' entrepreneurial instincts, Remus' organizational abilities, and Sirius' bad influence, and..."

The adults laughed. "Quite the pair of heirs you lot raised," Raoul complained. "Leave something of the world for the rest of ours, won't you?"

"How is Gilmyn?"

Raoul raised a hand to his lips and an ear-splitting whistle rang out. He gazed about imperiously, and Rigel supposed it must be nice

occasionally to be head and shoulders above the crowd. "Ah. Here he comes."

"He's not a dog, Raoul," Gareth muttered.

"You're the one who objected to the leash charm."

"This is equally demeaning."

A curly-haired three-or-four-year-old shot around the fountain and nearly barreled into Raoul's feet. "Dad. Pa. I found you!"

"That you did, sport." Raoul hefted the child onto one shoulder and grinned proudly. "This here's my heir, Gilmyn. Gilmyn, say hello to Lady Lilian Potter, Miss Adriana Potter, and Mr. Arcturus Black."

At the sound of Archie's name, the boy's jaw dropped.

"Awe you lying, Dad?" He had the rounded speech of a boy who was not confident in his 'r's yet.

Gareth snorted, but Raoul ignored him. "Ask him yourself!"

Gilmyn stared down at her with something approaching awe and whispered, "Awe you weally A'cturus Black?"

She secured Addy to her hip and gave a proper bow. "At your service, Heir Gilmyn. Did you get my note?"

The boy nodded, eyes wide. The moment was broken by Addy's open hand slapping against Rigel's cheek with a resounding smack. She flinched. "Ouch, Addy." Addy giggled, and so did Gilmyn. Rigel smiled ruefully. "Fiercer than a dragon, this one."

"Awe you scawed of dwagons? I am." Gilmyn blurted.

She nodded. "Very scared. Dragons are super dangerous and they do not like wizards."



"But you fought one!"

"I was scared the whole time," she said seriously.

"Oh. That's okay. Papa says e'erybody gets scawed."

"He's right."

"And he says even G'yffindors do."

"That's true as well."

"And he says Daddy is the scawiest of all."

She hid a smile as Raoul's ears turned pink. "I can't speak to that one, but your Papa sounds very wise."

"Oh. I like you."

"I like you, too."

Raoul cleared his throat. "All right, little parrot. Where's your minder?"

"Aunt Buwi is with Aunt Thayet."

"Well, we can't trust those two together for long, can we? Better go find them, sprout."

Gilmyn laughed into his fist as he scampered away. Lily gazed after him with a wistful smile. "They grow so fast."

"Faster, if they have Goldentower genes," Gareth said, pointedly glancing at Raoul's long legs.

"We can't all be part giant."

She turned at the sound of James' voice, and took in the sight of him. Her father clasped hands with Raoul and took a clap on the

back from Gareth before tossing a grin her way, "All right there, Arch?"

"All right, Uncle James."

"Did you find Sirius?" Lily asked pointedly.

James swept his immediate surroundings for escape almost automatically before manfully clearing his throat and saying, "Nope."

"Aren't you paid to find people, Uncle James?" Rigel affected polite confusion.

"Not anymore," he said defensively. "Now I'm paid to manage the people who find people."

"Like my wayward apprentice?" Auror Moody, as grizzled in person as he was in rumor, stalked into their midst with all the social grace of a hungry tiger. He wore robes that were not technically Auror garb, but mimicked it perfectly in cut and style. "She's supposed to be running perimeter."

"As this is not an official Ministry event, I am not technically responsible for its security," James said weakly.

"It's Dumbledore's soiree," Raoul said, rolling his neck unconcernedly. "You'd be mad to try and crash it."

"Dark wizards are not known for their rational, goal-oriented approaches." Moody glared around the loose circle with his piercing blue eyes as though one of them might be a Dark wizard in disguise. The sharp gaze landed on Rigel. "You."

"Yes, sir." The response came without conscious fashioning.

"Good lesson you taught my recruits in the fourth task."

"I didn't know I wasn't supposed to fight them..."

"Like I say-good lesson for them. *Constant vigilance*. " He shouted more than said it, and James winced.

"If we see Tonks, we'll point her your way," James assured the old Auror.

Moody would not be hurried along. His eyes still fixed on Rigel, he said slowly, "You're a damned good duelist, Black. Your daddy didn't teach you all those fancy moves."

"Uncle Remus taught me dueling, actually."

"Bull."

"Remus did tutor him this summer," Lily confirmed. "Sirius and I did, too. He was progressing well."

"What I saw was more than 'progressing,' Closer to professional." Moody did not hide his annoyance with that fact. "So what's this nonsense I hear from Dawlish about healing?"

Rigel blinked. "As I told Auror Dawlish, I won't be joining the Auror corps." James whipped his head around in surprise, and she smiled reassuringly around Addy's hair. "I intend to become a healer."

"Give it up." Moody jerked his head in a dismissive toss. "I saw the way you dealt with Owens. You don't like innocents being hurt."

She dropped her eyes to Addy's sweet face, which was scrunched in a yawn. "That's why I want to heal people," she explained patiently as the toddler nestled into her shoulder.

"Bah. Help me bring Dark wizards to task-unless... you *sympathize* with them."

"That's enough, Moody. Archie's always wanted to be a healer." James put a hand on her shoulder firmly. "I think it's noble."

"It's a bloody waste," the senior Auror muttered. "Now, more than ever, we need people in the fight."

"Let's not talk shop-" James tried.

"Nonsense. People ought to know their cozy peace has an expiration date."

The Lords Goldentower exchanged frowns, and Gareth said slowly, "Auror Moody, we all know it's your job to prepare for worst-case scenarios. What's so different about these recent attacks that sets them apart from dozens of other isolated events over the past few decades?"

Moody inflated his chest like an overgrown bird. "Everything. They're organized. They're connected. There's messaging."

"Some of that rational, goal-orientedness, you mean?" Raoul drawled.

"Laugh while you can," Moody grouched. "I've got sources from all the bad places that say there's something worse come into the shadows of late. Targeting traditionally violent groups. Recruiting. Orchestrating. And you think it's a coincidence extreme bigotry is being aired for all the world to see? No. I don't think so."

Rigel wondered if one of his sources was her anonymous tip. She wouldn't be surprised to hear that Bill Weasley was funneling information to the Light, too. He had invaluable access to the underworld of the alleys, for all that the thief's code would stop him short of giving specific names.

"I think you're right, Auror Moody," she offered, shifting a dozing Addy carefully to her other arm and shaking out the one that had gone numb. "It's not a coincidence."

"Certainly, the tournament has emboldened a few fringe groups, but that doesn't imply a direct connection between the two." James

sounded as though he'd had this argument with his old mentor before.

There was a direct connection-Riddle, in two horrifying manifestations-but she couldn't say as much.

"There's Andromeda," Lily said suddenly. "Perhaps she knows where Nymphadora has gone."

Moody's head swiveled, a hound after a scent. Doubtfully, he grumbled, "If 'Dromeda had dragged her spawn here, she wouldn't be late."

"Only one way to be sure," Lily cajoled.

With a final, hard look around the circle, Moody went to hound Andromeda Tonks.

"Old Moody only has one track," Raoul said.

James nodded, though a frown pinched his brow. "He's been wrong before... but more often, he's right."

"When your hypothesis is 'Dark wizards are evil,' it's hard to be wrong."

Rigel didn't recognize the forceful voice, but she caught a grimace on both her parents' faces before they hid them behind polite smiles.

"Ulrich, impeccable timing, as usual," Raoul said, face blank.

"I was loath to interrupt such a serious conversation," the man said, striding into their midst with his shoulders rolled back and chin tilted up.

"And yet," James muttered.

The newcomer did not appear to hear him. He was a head shorter than the other Lords, and even Rigel had an inch or two advantage,

but he made up for it in solid stockiness. Ash blonde hair bristled thickly on his round head and curled in a neat beard from broad cheekbones.

"Raoul, Gary. Potters. And..." He peered at Rigel for a moment before it clicked. "Ah. Heir Black. Your father mentioned you were about while he was making a nuisance of himself earlier."

"That's his general equilibrium," she said with a small smile. "Pleased to meet you, Aldermaster Albright. Your heir and I are classmates, of a sort."

"He's mentioned no such thing," Albright said with narrowed eyes. "Aren't you a fourth-year?"

"I'm in Dumbledore's Alchemy class," she explained. "We don't have class together, but as we are the only two students-"

"Alchemy is a Light art."

Rigel held back a sigh. She could see where Eric Albright had absorbed his rather skewed opinions.

"It was designed initially around Light runes, and the transition to the Neutral art we study today is *fascinating*," Lily said forcefully. "Did you know it was a Lady Black in the twelfth century who first applied Arithmancy to the calculation of material coefficients? Well, of course you did." She laughed and toasted Ulrich Albright with a glass of blue snow. "You are the Aldermaster of the Alchemy Guild."

"Indeed." Ulrich wrinkled his short nose, but didn't argue further. "And your heiress, Potters? I hear she's started down the guild route herself. Malcolm never shuts up about her," he added with a slight sneer.

"Harry is doing well, thank you for asking," James said through stiff lips.

"Not as well as thing one, though, eh?" Ulrich pinned her with storm-grey eyes. "Pureblood champion. It's thanks to you we've called in every political favor on our books this session."

"Now, Ulrich-" Raoul protested.

"He knows it, I'm sure," Albright drawled. "Slytherin, isn't he? Baptized in politics from the cradle."

"I was once baptized in the Dark Arts by our family House Elf," Rigel said blandly.

James snorted before he caught himself in a cough. "Ah, that House Elf was mad, Archie."

"Still, I was in a cradle," she said earnestly.

The Goldentowers laughed, but Albright's disapproving smile never faltered. "You're aware as well, I suppose, that if you win, public support will swing irreparably in favor of the S.O.W. Party and they'll pass the biggest packet of legislation since the 1989 Split?"

"Here, now," James began, fierce protectiveness on his face.

Rigel frowned. "It's all right, Uncle James." She met Albright's gaze. "I am aware of that, Aldermaster Albright. I wasn't when I started this tournament, but it makes little difference what my intentions were. I'll be judged by the results."

"As are we all," Gareth said with a pointed stare at Albright.

The Aldermaster seemed immune to peer censure. "What will you do about it, then?"

She pretended to misunderstand. "I'm not sure what I can do at this stage beyond surviving the last task."

Albright let out a hollow laugh. "Certainly don't die. Last thing we need is a pureblood martyr. A second-place finish wouldn't hurt,

though, particularly if that Owens boy comes first."

"Are you suggesting my nephew throw an international tournament?" James had an Auror's warning in his voice.

Albright shrugged. "Not suggesting anything. Just noting the results of a hypothetical outcome out loud."

Rigel kept her face blank against the grimace that wanted to form. Of course, the one thing likely to help combat the legislation was the one thing the Unbreakable Vow prevented her from doing. "Is there no way to block the legislation regardless of public sentiment?"

The Aldermaster snorted and cut his eyes challengingly to Lord Goldentower. "Well, Raoul? You're the resident expert on the Wizengamot."

Raoul rolled a shoulder uncomfortably. "We're focused on swaying the Neutral members with a preponderance of seats. Unfortunately, the most principled of the Neutral sect see it as their duty to vote in accordance with the electorate's wishes. On this highly-publicized issue, it means public favor counts more than it might for more obscure legislation."

She ran the issue through her mind, the gears shifting and realigning with uncomfortable friction. Her free hand came up to cradle the back of Addy's head, as though she could shield her little sister from the dark turn of her thoughts. "I could become the villain," she said slowly. The adults around her went still. She looked at them uncertainly. "I could... do something terrible. Be caught in a scandal, or perform some barely-legal dark magic in the last task. If people were ashamed to support me, perhaps it would extend some unpopularity to the legislation I've become the symbol for."

There was silence for a moment. Lily and James stared at her in mild horror, but she could see their minds racing. Would it work? Would it be worth it?



Albright was the first to speak. "It's too late for that. You underestimate your base if you think they wouldn't rather deny your deeds than admit their mistake in believing in you."

She winced. That was perhaps the most cynical thing she'd ever heard.

James nodded, his face set in harsh lines. "You're better off untarnished, Archie. It sounds callous, but if the legislation goes through, we may need your pureblood credentials to soften the impact."

Raoul made a noise of unhappy agreement. "You make a good role model right now. What you do, other purebloods and even halfbloods may emulate. Don't throw that away."

Rigel wasn't sure if she should feel relief or frustration. On the one hand, she didn't want to bring shame to Archie's good name. On the other, she didn't relish the idea of playing the moderate pureblood for social politics.

"It seems I have found the gloomiest group in the garden." Dumbledore smiled genially as the circle opened for him. "Don't tell me you aren't enjoying your first soiree, Mr. Black; however will I convince you to come back next year?"

She hitched her mouth up for the older wizard's benefit. "On the contrary, Sir. It's just the diversion I needed."

He fixed her with a penetrating stare. "While I do believe you're in need of an escape, dear child, my suspicious old brain doubts you have found any relief from the pressures of the tournament here." Dumbledore shifted his gaze to the others in the circle, who, one by one, dropped or averted theirs.

Rigel hid a real smile. "We were just discussing the merits and pitfalls of popularity, Headmaster. Nothing too serious."

"Ah. Well, as someone who has experienced both unaccountable popularity and incontestable villainization, I would say public opinion is rather overrated." His eyes twinkled and he smiled with the serenity of a man who had long risen above the cares of his fellows. "My advice, for whatever small measure of the human experience it represents, is to seek truth, be faithful to your principles, do the best you can in every situation, and learn from your mistakes while forgiving others theirs."

She felt her heart sink a little. "And should we forgive ourselves for our mistakes?" she asked quietly, flexing the hand in Addy's curls. The pile of regrets in the back of her mind throbbed, like a tooth compulsively prodded.

Dumbledore's eyes stopped twinkling. "He who learns to do that may be the wisest of us all."

In the silence that followed, James took a deep breath. "Well, Archie, you've managed to depress even Dumbledore. You're officially the wet blanket of the party."

She snorted. "I am the common denominator, aren't I?"

"I know you don't want to hear it, Lily, but this situation requires Sirius intervention," he added.

Lily rolled her eyes. "A Weasley would do just as well, and you know it."

Rigel nodded. "One ought never convene a circle without a Weasley. Only solemnity can follow."

"There are certainly enough of them to go around," Gareth muttered.

James's face was animated as he gathered steam. "They ought to start a public utility company-get your Weasley! Instant levity to any moment!"

"Take a set of twins, double your money," Lily suggested.

Rigel gave a wry grin. "Discounts on the acrimonious she-Weasley. One-of-a-kind!"

Dumbledore hummed doubtfully. "Miss Weasley would be unlikely to participate in such a venture."

"She'd shave her head first," Rigel agreed.

"When I'm pressed to explain the unlikely friendship between the Potters and Blacks, I reference these nonsensical interludes." Raoul looked between Rigel and her parents with pure bemusement on his face.

James shrugged and Lily frowned thoughtfully. "I wonder if we learned it from Sirius or Sirius from us?"

"I'm convinced our families share a particularly mad gene somewhere in-"

They were cut short by a cry of rage that had been magnified tenfold on the wings of a Sonorous Charm. Addy woke at once and screeched for her mother, but Lily had drawn her wand. She held up a hand toward Rigel and said, "Keep her." Rigel clutched Addy tightly, despite the toddler's attempts at diving toward her primary caregiver.

"Was that-?" James looked to Dumbledore.

"Alastor." Dumbledore gestured to the ground beneath him, and it obligingly rose in a wave of earth that sent the rest of them stumbling backwards. The mound carried the wizard up a dozen feet, where he swept the horizon with a terrifyingly calm stare. "The apparition point."

James set off at a run. Lily took one step after him, but checked herself with a glance at Rigel and Addy.

"We'll be fine here," she started to say.

Dumbledore interrupted as he descended from his vantage point. The earth smoothed out beneath him like a blanket under the hand of an experienced maid. "There's no immediate danger." His blue eyes caught Rigel's. "Your services may be required, Mr. Black."

He made for the apparition point in long strides that reminded Rigel how tall the Headmaster was. Rigel relinquished Addy to Lily's bewildered arms and started after him.

"You've got your pendent?" Lily called after her.

She touched it and nodded, unworried. Dumbledore wouldn't lead one of his students into danger.

They approached the apparition point and found James and Moody bent over a prone figure in the shadow of the tree line. Molly and Arthur reached them at the same time, wands at the ready and a ghostly pallor in their cheeks.

"Not Andy's girl," Molly moaned, one hand coming up to her lips as she got a look at the crumpled body.

Arthur's grip on his wand was white-knuckled as he stared into the trees. "Attackers?"

"Dumped her here and left," Moody growled. He had fingers on his trainee's pulse and murder in his eyes. "Bled her first, but she's hanging on."

Rigel hurried forward and dropped to her knees beside the young woman, trying not to notice how her hair had reverted to its natural brown color. Her chest barely moved, and up close she realized Moody wasn't taking her pulse-he was holding her neck together.

She swept her magic out and took over the staunching while assessing the extent of the damage. Pulse not palpable, punctured

trachea, hematoma over the anterior aspect of the neck, plus the neck laceration.

"Roll her over. I'm going to stabilize the cervical spine."

She wasn't fully aware of Moody following her instruction; most of her attention was on knitting the girl's airways back together while keeping the bleeding in check. When the trachea had fused, she immediately set her magic to the manual circulation of airflow through the lungs while the rest of her focus shifted to repairing the carotid artery.

"You can let go, now," she murmured.

Moody released his pressure on the young woman's neck, and blood immediately oozed out of the skin lesion. He went to put his hand back, but she stopped him.

"It's fine. Her blood vessels are healed-see how there's no pressure to the leak? That's just the hematoma draining."

She inspected the esophagus, double-checked the spine and the delicate vocal cords, and cleared residual blood from the site before closing the surface wound. She withdrew her magic carefully, waiting until the patient's system had taken over completely before switching to diagnostics.

Rigel dug into her pocket for a Blood-Replenisher. Moody caught her arm as she moved it toward his trainee and growled, "You just happen to have that on you, do you?"

"It's one of several emergency potions I always carry with me," she said. "I also have Pain Reliever, Modified Weightless Draught, Fever Reducer, Nutrient Potion, and a bezoar." James stared at her. She shrugged. "Harry insists."

Her father nodded. "That checks out, Moody. Harry carries an entire library of potions when she goes anywhere. I can't say it hasn't

proved useful."

When Moody continued to glare suspiciously at her, she reminded him, "She's lost at least a couple pints. Her blood pressure won't recover until there's more in her veins."

He took the vial and held it up to the sun, swirling it. He inspected the cork seal, popped it open, and let a drop fall into his palm. Once satisfied, he handed it back with a scowl.

Rigel spelled the contents into the woman's stomach, then sat back on her heels. "Give that a minute, then it's safe to wake her."

Molly bustled the two of them out of the way. "There's still time to get that stain out," she said with a hiccup. Her lips trembled, but her wand was steady as she siphoned the blood from Tonks' clothing. "She'll want to be presentable when she wakes," Molly murmured, more to herself, it seemed. "Andy won't want to see all the... the..." She took a deep breath and met Arthur's pained gaze. "On our own land, Arthur. How could this have happened?"

"They got her somewhere else," James said. "Dumbledore would have noticed at once if someone uninvited crossed the wards."

"She didn't apparate herself here in that state," Arthur said slowly.

Moody brushed Molly's hovering hands away and searched Tonks' pockets efficiently. He pulled out a scrap of paper and a growl escaped him. "How many times have I told her to *memorize* the bloody coordinates?" He crumpled the parchment in a fist. "Someone side-alonged her here on purpose. It's a message, Dumbledore. Our people aren't safe."

Dumbledore's eyes were focused on something far-away, and his voice was heavy with consideration for a dozen variables Rigel would probably never understand. "Nymphadora is yet to be inducted. There is no more reason to target her than any other child

of the Light. Less, as her Auror training presents a harder defense than the average witch or wizard."

"Perhaps she was in the wrong place at the wrong time," James said quietly.

"There are no coincidences in this world," Moody spat.

"Evil does not discriminate," Molly murmured.

"Humans do, though." Moody glared at Rigel. "Wake her."

Rigel roused the young woman with a gentle Rennervate. Tonks came to like a fish leaping from the water; with a gasp, her hand shot to her neck and she sat up so fast she almost head-butted Rigel.

"Vampire," was the first word from her lips. Her eyes caught Moody, and her entire demeanor calmed at once. "Sir. I was accosted en route to the apparition point near my apartment. Two men in rough garb. One in his late teens, dark skin and long hair. The other was six foot, but wore a cloth mask that obscured his face. I had my wand out, facing them, when something faster than my eye could track got me from behind. It moved like a vampire, and I thought it bit me, but..." she felt along the ridge of her newly-patched neck, and shivered.

"That was a knife wound, not a bite," Rigel said.

Tonks absorbed the information soberly. "Did you patch me up, little cousin?"

"Sorry I couldn't fix your face, too," Rigel offered with a lopsided grin.

Tonks turned her nose into a pig's snout and snorted at her.

"Focus," Moody snarled.

Tonks let her face relax into its true shape and frowned. "They didn't ask me any questions. Didn't even spout propaganda or insults at

me. Just..." Tonks touched her neck again. "So suddenly," she murmured.

Rigel pressed her lips together even as her heart shook with a memory. A shadowed alley. A blue vest. Death was always a surprise.

"How did I get here?" Tonks asked suddenly.

"They apparated you here with the coordinates in your pocket," Moody said gruffly.

Tonks blanched. "Is everyone-did they try anything? Sweet Merlin, I put you all in danger."

"They'd be mad to move directly against Dumbledore," Arthur said firmly.

"Everyone is fine, dear," Molly added soothingly. "Your mother is-"  
"Here."

Andromeda Tonks bore down on them with a storm in her eyes. In that moment, she really did look astonishingly like Bellatrix.

"Mum!" Tonks glanced down at her robes, but Molly had gotten most of the blood off already.

"Are you quite finished interrogating my child, Moody?" Andromeda moved the man away from her daughter with the sheer force of her gaze.

"I'm fine, Mum," Tonks croaked.

"You are fine only thanks to your cousin's magic," Andromeda snapped. She turned a challenging stare to Dumbledore. "I am taking my daughter home." With a withering glance at Moody, she added quietly, "She's not a soldier yet." She set her hand firmly on Tonks' shoulder and Disapparated them both with a twisting pop.



Dumbledore appeared pained, his head bowed slightly. To Arthur and Molly, he said, "I think it wise for the rest of us to follow suit." His gaze shifted to Rigel. "Brilliant application of Madam Pomfrey's teachings, Mr. Black. If we were on school grounds, I would award Slytherin two hundred house points."

She felt her mouth hitch. "It's for the best, then. Professor Snape would have been hospitalized for shock."

James choked on a laugh he stifled too late.

Rigel turned to give him a long hug. "I'm going to round up the other students. Say goodbye to Dad for me?"

James squeezed her hard and promised he would. "Good work, Archie. Really, really, well done. It seems I'm constantly thanking Godric for your interest in Healing."

"It's only because of Mum," she murmured quietly into his chest. "I never wanted to be the one watching someone die again."

James' voice was thick. "Diana would be so proud of you. We all are. You're gonna be better than all of us."

They broke apart, both composing themselves as the Weasleys and Dumbledore pretended not to notice. Moody just scowled at them. "Are you ready to work now, *Head Auror*?"

James put on his hard face and took out his wand. "I'll trace the last dozen coordinates. If they apparated her somewhere else before coming here, we might find a connection to them."

Rigel accompanied Dumbledore to the other side of the lawn, picking up Hogwarts students as they went. He fashioned them a new portkey with calm efficiency, using a *conjured* length of rope to anchor the magic, which Rigel hadn't known was even possible.

Before the sick feeling of dread in her stomach was overtaken by the literal nausea of the activated portkey, Rigel met Dumbledore's eyes and understood the regret that nested there. She summoned a rueful smile, realizing it had been foolish to seek some kind of respite at the soirée. There was no escape from their cold reality.

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A letter of heavy vellum landed on Rigel's plate with a dull thump that drew the attention of her year mates at once.

Millicent actually leaned around Pansy to admire the smooth texture. "Is that vintage calfskin?"

Pansy plucked it from Rigel's hand so she could see it better. "With Moonglass ink, no less."

Millie raised her eyebrows. "Are you corresponding with a duke, Rigel? The vizier of a small kingdom, perhaps?"

"Someone French?" Pansy guessed.

Rigel took the letter back and gently untied the soft black ribbon. As she opened it to reveal ornate calligraphy in shimmering moonstone grey, the girls sighed in appreciation.

"Who is it from?" Millicent wheedled.

"And where do they shop?" Pansy added with a grin.

She skipped down to the signature and smiled. "Just an old-fashioned colleague."

"From the Potions Guild?"

Rigel tilted her head. "He's not technically a member, I suppose. More of an... enthusiast."

"How old is he?" Draco eyed the letter with a hard-to-read look.

"Ancient," Rigel said, amused.

After a few more appreciative comments about the smoothness of the vellum and fluid, uninterrupted lines of script, her friends went back to their breakfast. She pushed her plate to the side and dove into the letter's content properly.

*Esteemed Friend,*

*In response to your query regarding our coven's well-being, we are not well at all. My laboratory was spared the conflagration, but several of my animals perished of smoke inhalation. Grandfather is most irate. The loss of his lieutenant is a foul blow. He is not technically perished; rather, lost in the literal sense. Since discovering his empty sickbed, Irvina stalks the alleys, bereft. I suspect she will not find him. Sometimes, when one of our kind senses the end is near, he will abandon his mate so she does not have to witness the passing.*

*I am ignorant to the nature of what evil poison affected Gavril so. Grandfather did not permit me to take his blood for examination. Even still, the most curious effects of mental deceleration, memory loss, and confusion lead me to suspect an unusual neuro-toxin. I mean unusual in the sense that it would be capable of affecting our kind, of course; I trust you know that such effects are not unusual at all in neuro-toxins generally.*

*I thank you for your concern, and for your munificent offer to assist in replacing lost ingredients, should there have been any. Fear not, for my work continues apace.*

*Yours in Common Purpose,*

*Kasten*

Vampire. That's what Tonks said. Rigel closed the letter mechanically, worry making her fingers stiff. The Lamia's attack and Gavril's subsequent disappearance, Tonks' superhuman attacker—were they related? It seemed a large coincidence, but perhaps only because she was connected to both situations.

Moody's voice echoed ominously in her memory. *There are no coincidences in this world.*

"Bad news?" Draco asked, catching the frown on her face.

Rigel nodded. "It seems there are grim tidings everywhere these days."

"This will cheer you up, then." Pansy pushed a copy of the *Daily Prophet* toward her. Rigel looked down, and the headline "Date Set for Landmark Legislation Vote" screamed back at her.

Rigel's heart clenched, but Millicent was quick to reassure her. "It's set to the end of the session, see? Mid-June."

"Dumbledore's faction managed to buy a few extra weeks," Theo grumbled through his sausage. "For what good that will do them."

Her heartbeat slowed. "After the tournament, then."

Relief swept through her, a cool breeze after the sweltering humidity of stress. Rigel smiled. One thing had finally gone in her favor. As long as she won the tournament, Riddle could not directly intervene in the vote. He had carried it this far, but would have to rely on momentum to get it across the finish line. And she would be there waiting with every ally the light could muster standing in its way.

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At 3am on Sunday morning, Rigel work to the sound of her cousin calling her name softly from the mirror she kept under her pillow.

"Rigel....pssst, Riiigeeeeel."

Groggily, and accompanied by her roommates' annoyed grumbles, she pulled out the mirror and mumbled into it.

"Hang on, Harry."

"Ri-oh, good, you're up."

"Shhhh."

She tucked her toes into slippers and stumbled in her crumpled robes to the common room.

"Is this an emergency?" she asked through a yawn. Her cousin didn't sound frantic, but one never knew with Archie.

"Yes and no...."

"No, then."

The fires were low, but imminently coaxable. She stoked one higher and pulled a silver throw over to a low-backed armchair, settling into the comfortable cushion with a sigh.

"All right, cuz. What is it? I'm in the common room, mind."

"Great, no worries, I've got Hermione here, actually."

She felt her eyebrow twitch. Now he tells her. "Hermione, how are you?"

The curly-haired witch leaned into the mirror next to Archie. "Hi, Rigel! Sorry to wake you. I forgot about the time change in my

excitement but-I mean-this is really something. I think."

"It really is," Archie confirmed.

"What is?"

"Well..." Hermione trailed off, unusually tentative. "I don't even know where to start," she said helplessly.

"Topic?" Rigel asked with another yawn.

"The Fade."

Some of her sleepiness vanished. "Right. Give me a moment, actually. Binny?"

"Who?"

"Not you."

Binny popped into the common room with the look of curious expectation common to House Elves when they answered a call on instinct alone. "Young Master Black! You is rarely calling me so late."

Rigel smiled sheepishly. "Sorry, Binny. Could I trouble you for a cup of strong tea?"

Binny's eyes crinkled in pleasure. "Binny is happy to provide!"

A cup of English black tea appeared on the small table beside her armchair, and Rigel thanked the elf before returning to the mirror. Armed with her wits after the first couple of sips, she said, "I'm ready. Tell me everything."

Archie set the mirror on some surface and moved back a bit so she could see them both. Hermione's hair had reached supernova levels of mass, and she had a scab on her lip from where she had nearly chewed it through. Rigel braced herself.

"You know I've been working on an experiment to test my theory of core replenishment," Hermione began.

Rigel nodded. "I didn't understand all of it in your letter."

"I hadn't really grounded it yet, but now I have," Hermione said breathlessly. "You see, I think everything wizards believe about their magic is a lie."

She blinked. "That's... something."

"I know how it sounds-there's no other explanation, though. Oh, I'm doing this all wrong." Hermione took a breath. "Sorry."

"The experiment," Archie prompted gently.

"Yes. I disproved the hypothesis that wizards create their own magic."

Rigel choked on her tea. "You what?"

"It's the most fundamental assumption to all the research, and I just thought-what if we're wrong? So I designed a ward that blocked the flow of ambient magic through the air." Hermione spoke very quickly, as though the explanation has been building inside of her like a river behind a dam. "It was a two-part experiment. I used several classmates with different affinities in both parts. First, I found an obscure spell that measures the density of magic by volume and used it to measure the ambient magic within a set of my magic-impermeable wards. Then, I introduced a subject who had cast several high-powered spells in quick succession, making their core fatigued. After allowing them sufficient time to recover their magical reserves, I measured the ambient magic within the wards again and- it *decreased* ."

Hermione took a deep breath as Rigel opened and closed her mouth soundlessly for a few moments. "You... invented a set of perfectly impermeable wards for this experiment?" Most wards were designed

to block active magic-shaped magic, not ambient wild magic. One may as well block the molecules of the air itself. But Hermione had done it. And that wasn't even the most incredible thing she'd said. "And you-wait, so you're saying wizards draw on the magic in the air when we replenish our own stores? That's..."

"I know, I know. But I reverse tested it, too!" Hermione said it forcefully, evidently aware of how completely earth-shattering her theory was. "Part two of the experiment involved placing a magic-fatigued individual inside a ward that had already been depleted of ambient magic. I wanted to see if it would take longer for them to recover without the help of the ambient magic, and- *they didn't, though*. Every one of the subjects remained core-fatigued until they left the ward. Do you see what that means? Not only do we tap into the wild magic around us whenever we replenish our magic, but we are dependent on it *entirely*, Rigel!"

The air left her lungs in a whoosh. "Hermione," she croaked. "That's..."

"I know."

"We know," Archie added, sounding a bit shell-shocked himself.

Rigel gulped the rest of her tea and marshaled her thoughts quickly. "We don't produce magic; we absorb it." She tested the words on her tongue, wonderingly. "How does that explain the way the inner core feeds the outer core?" she asked. "For that matter, why do we have affinities at all, instead of purely Neutral magic, if it's all wild magic?"

Hermione shook her head. "I don't know exactly, but I have to theorize that some mechanism in the structure of the inner core alters the magic as it is absorbed. There is energy being used in the process of replenishment-plenty of studies prove that food and rest are key to a fast recovery. But what if the energy we use goes to *shaping* the magic, adjusting it to match our own personal signatures as it is incorporated into our cores?"



Rigel nodded slowly. "That could be... Hermione, this is terrifying. Brilliant, but really, utterly terrifying, do you realize that?"

"Yes." A slightly-hysterical laugh escaped the girl. "I expect the idea that wizards are just sentient plants photosynthesizing will generate some controversy."

"Controversy? People will riot in the streets," she said faintly. "This turns on its head the very idea that magic belongs to wizards. Merlin, there are people that believe it comes from a wizard's very *soul* ."

Archie grinned. "All along, our greatest arrogance was assuming we own this spectacular thing inside of us at all."

"Exactly!" Hermione burst out. "Magic isn't yours or mine. It belongs to the world."

*Magic belongs to the world.* Riddle's words in Hermione's mouth. Something fundamental about the universe had surely cracked in two.

"Then-" The implications were dizzying.

"Back to the Fade," Archie reminded Hermione.

"Oh! Yes, so then... babies don't produce their own magic either, don't you see? They absorb it. That's the mechanism that must be broken. Transmitting magic to their cores doesn't help, because they don't know what to *do* with it." Hermione's eyes were bright through the mirror. "Rigel, if we can isolate the exact way the core alters the wild magic to make it storable, we'll finally have a *real* cause for the Fade."

"Why the fading, though? Why do the babies waste away...?" Rigel murmured the question out loud, trying to connect all the dots.

"Their bodies are still throwing energy at the problem," Hermione guessed. "It's just not being used correctly. The mother's supply of

magic is cut off, and by the time the baby needs to convert wild magic and can't, it's already dependent on magic to survive."

"Explain muggleborns, then, or halfbloods whose mother is non-magic," Rigel challenged.

Hermione grimaced. "I've been wondering about that too. I don't know yet."

Archie ventured a suggestion. "Do you think the initial donation of mother's magic during a magical pregnancy influences the way the infant learns to shape the magic it absorbs?"

"What do you mean?" Hermione demanded.

"Well, it might explain why certain affinities or traits can run in a family, aside from genealogy," Archie said.

"Genetics..." Hermione trailed off as her eyes lost focus. "Yes, maybe there's a faulty gene expression involved."

Rigel frowned. "I'm not really versed in genes, beyond the basic inherited traits theory."

"I'll look into that portion of it," Hermione said, waving a hand dismissively.

"Then I'll try to isolate the mechanism of conversion you're talking about," Rigel offered.

"That's going to be the hardest part," Hermione cautioned. "The core's inner workings are entirely mysterious, which is why no one has proved this theory before."

"I have a way of seeing into a person's core," Rigel said.

Archie made a noise of realization. "That's right! Your core-diving thing."

"Core-diving?" Hermione's eyebrows furrowed.

"It's a freaky unique thing only Rigel can do," Archie said helpfully.

"He's... not wrong." He's...

Hermione seemed skeptical, but said, "All right. I'll leave that part to you, then."

"What can I do?" Archie asked.

"Look into what is known about muggleborn magical development," Rigel suggested. "I think we're missing something there, but most of the literature I've seen treats muggleborns as non-entities until they turn up at school at eleven. Sorry," she added as Hermione winced.

"It's true. We're identified too late. If only there was some way of finding muggleborns at birth..." Hermione's expression was torn for a moment, but cleared with a sharp breath. "My next project, perhaps."

"After you cure the incurable Fade, you mean," Archie said, elbowing her with a grin.

Hermione cracked a smile in return. "One thing at a time, as my father likes to say."

"Or all things simultaneously, as *my* father likes to say."

"No one should take research advice from your father," Rigel said, shaking her head.

"He comes up with lots of ideas!"

"And never sees them through. Remus has to do all the technical work."

"Because Dad's an *artist* ."

"I'm sure they all bring something to the team," Hermione said. She glanced between Archie and the mirror and added, "Just like us."

"Team Cure!" Archie crowed.

"Team Cure," Rigel repeated.

For the first time, she let herself believe it.

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Even halfway through the brewing, she couldn't believe it. Her hands felt as light as soap bubbles, as though the ingredients were adding themselves, and her magic slept peacefully in her core, undisturbed. Her Head of House grew quieter and more still as the minutes dragged near to an hour and not a single. Thing. Happened.

Rigel finished the potion and set down her stirring rod. She turned the fire off with tingling fingers, her eyes searching for something in Snape's face. Approval. Respect. Both were there, but the third thing trapped the breath of relief in her chest. Awe.

"I think it will work," she said.

"I am certain it will." Snape shifted his gaze to the cauldron, where an innocuous alkaline brine glistened, and a crease like a smile folded into his jaw. "You..." He cleared his throat. "I have never seen anyone complete an original free brew without stifling unstable magic even once."

She smoothed a hand down the front of her pristine apron, soothing the glow of pride in her belly. "Perhaps we should end on that auspicious note, then."

Snape inclined his head with a wry tilt. "You've done enough tonight for the annals of potioneering history."

Rigel bottled the potion and stoppered each dose carefully. She set the bottles on one of the spare work benches, and said, "I've no real use for a dozen vials of homesick-relief. Perhaps you could test them on first-year Hufflepuffs next term."

"A clinical trial would be valuable experience in your medicinal potions education," Snape agreed, sly amusement hidden in a deceptively dry tone.

He wouldn't really use them before the Ministry approved the brew for human consumption, but he also didn't refuse the doses. Knowing that she'd created something good enough for Master Snape to keep around sent another round of warmth through her stomach.

She carried the cauldron to the sink to scrub it clean, and Snape began meticulously re-shelving the leftover ingredients. They worked in companionable silence, until Snape asked, "What were you thinking, while you brewed?"

Rigel slowed the water and spoke over the tinny sound of it hitting the metal cauldron. "I wasn't thinking anything, really. It was as though-have you seen the Acromantula nests in the forest?"

Snape let out a bark of laughter. "You think yourself akin to a spider in its web?"

She scowled at him good-naturedly. "It was like that. My mind was suspended over everything in perfect understanding, but connected to dozens of avenues at once. I could see all the ways it could turn out, without really consciously playing through them."

Her professor considered that for a moment before asking, "Do you play chess?"

Rigel chuckled. "We're more of a checkers family."

"Even the werewolf?"

She frowned at his use of the descriptor, but admitted, "Uncle Remus did try to teach us. I know enough to draw out a game, but I find it frustratingly limited. In real life, the pieces are more flexible."

He raised an eyebrow as he closed the cupboard. "How so?"

Rigel gestured to the castle around them. "If Hogwarts was a piece, do you really think it would only move back and forth in the corner?"

Snape snorted. "Hogwarts would have an entirely invisible dimension in which only it could move."

"Exactly. And the king-he's artificially restrained in chess. In situations that are not battles, which is most situations in the modern world, the king has a much more expansive role."

"Who is the king? The Minister?"

She eyed him with disappointment. "Dumbledore, of course." She returned to rinsing the cauldron and bit out, "Riddle for black, I suppose. The Ministry... is the board they play on, if anything."

"What am I?" Snape asked, a dangerous edge to his voice.

"A knight." She flashed him a grin. "The Weasleys got that one right, sir."

He sneered. "And what are you?"

"I'm not on the board," she said quickly.

"Your denial is fathomless."

"But not unexpected."

He shook his head at that, but let the subject go. She set the cauldron upside down to dry and they wiped down the surfaces together.

"What will my next assignment be?" she asked as she pried the lid off the oil tin.

"What would you like it to be?"

Rigel grinned. "I want to dive deeper into dragon's blood as a signifying ingredient."

"Dangerous and unpredictable-your inner lion is showing."

"No ambition is realized without risk," she teased.

Snape took the oil rag from her fingers with a sniff. "Quoting Salazar won't get you out of everything."

"What about, 'nothing is lost for striving, striving at every turn and striving despite the odds'?"

"Have you swallowed a book of Slytherin sayings?"

"Draco keeps flashcards in his pockets."

Snape snorted. "He does not. How do you know about flashcards?"

"Aunt Lily swears by them. She keeps all her ideas pinned up on a board in the basement..." she trailed off as Snape's expression closed. After a moment's hesitation, she said, "Did Dumbledore mention what she's working on?"

He shook his head sharply. "We do not speak of such things."

"Well, she's invented runic expressions for describing the exact properties of Dark Magic." Rigel took out the amulet and held up the disk. He glanced at it briefly. "Then she created this amulet to detect and counter those specific signatures. I'm sorry if I'm overstepping,

but no one else knows what you've done, so no one else can tell you this, sir. Because of Aunt Lily's work in experimental magic-work that you secured for her-the most dangerous Dark Arts are one step closer to being blunted. I'll say it for all the people who can't ever know: thank you."

Snape set the oiled cauldron down and stared hard at her. "That is quite enough."

"It won't ever be enough," she shot back. His eyes flared in warning and she subsided to a calmer tone. "Some things cannot be repaid in thanks alone."

"Some things are not done in anticipation of repayment."

She bowed her head in acknowledgement of that. "I'll pay it forward, then. What you've taught me... potions and all the rest. I'll pass it on one day."

Snape drew his composure around himself like a cape. "If you intend to publish a memoir, you'd best ensure I'm dead in my grave first."

Rigel huffed. "Skeeter will get to you before I do."

He narrowed his eyes. "That may be the most harrowing curse I've ever heard."

"One day, young Slytherins will be quoting *me* ."

"If you think your past statements reflect wisdom, you must not remember any of them."

She affected an offended eyebrow-raise. "I am profound, Professor. Ask anyone."

He crossed his arms. "Shall I choose a few at random?" He put on a guileless tone that was so out of place she choked. "'But Professor, how does a doxy even make eggs if they have no-?'"



Rigel cleared her throat loudly. "No need to spoil the ending." She wrinkled her nose. "Only promise if I die in the next task that won't be on my headstone."

Snape stiffened. "Do not joke about such things. You are not invincible, Rigel."

She sobered. "I know that-I really do. I-" The wand in her pocket buzzed, and she checked the time with a grimace. "Damn. Sorry, sir. I promised Dray I would..." she groped for a moment before offering, "Play Exploding Snap tonight."

Her Head of House tapped his fingers on the counter. "Ah. I suppose that is where Draco, Miss Parkinson, and dozens of other students from all four Houses have been disappearing to on the seventh floor every week. An Exploding Snap league, is it?"

Rigel swallowed soundlessly and nodded, belatedly reinforcing her Occlumency shields.

"How unexpected," he drawled. "I thought for certain it was an underground dueling club."

She forced a laugh, the words *plausible deniability* pulsing in her brain. "That would be so sneaky and irresponsible, professor. Definitely not something Pansy would be involved in."

"Saying nothing of the others."

"Well..." She closed her mouth.

After a beat of silence, Snape rolled his eyes. "Go make your Exploding Snap appointment, Rigel."

She backed slowly out of the room, her feet pushing across the cushioned floor in soft bounces. "Great. I will, sir." She hung up her protection gear and reclaimed her bag at the door. "About the next assignment..."

"I will speak to Albus about it and we will revisit your ideas after the last task."

"After the task, great. See you later, Professor."

"Mind you don't exhaust yourself with that card game."

She fled before he could make any further insinuations, wondering how she ought to break it to Draco that Snape had known about their illegal dueling club all along.

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Draco had the club warming up when she slipped into the Room of Requirement. Rigel jogged over to where Pansy was demonstrating a truly gamine stretching position and took a spot between her friend and a blushing Ravenclaw who was very pointedly not-looking.

"That stretch should come with a warning label," Rigel said, grinning.

"The stretch *is* the warning label," Pansy retorted, sending the flustered Ravenclaw a wink. She flicked her eyes over Rigel's brewing robes and trusty boots. "You're going to exercise in that?"

Rigel shrugged. "It's already dirty."

Pansy raised an eyebrow. "You don't think we can give you a real challenge."

She winced. "Don't put words in my mouth."

"You're right, though." Pansy bent at the waist and looked up at her with her cheek pressed to her ankle. "You've outgrown this club. Be honest; do you come just to support Draco?"

"Maybe I come for your stretching."

Pansy flipped her hair in Rigel's general direction. "I've reconciled my inability to sway you, Rye. It helps that everyone else has failed, too."

"Thanks?" Rigel shook her head.

"Stretch, Rigel!" Draco called from his place in the center of the room. "Can't have our champion pulling a muscle two days before the last task."

Rigel lifted a hand in mock-salute. "Aye-aye, *mon Capitaine* ."

When everyone was limbered to Draco's satisfaction, he ran the advanced students through a new set of footwork and set up a line of dummies for the younger students to practice Flipendo.

It was achingly normal. Contrary to Pansy's prediction, Rigel worked up a decent sweat getting down the new patterns, and she gratefully accepted a cup of water from the ringleader himself when the session wrapped up for the evening.

"I can't believe you wore your potions getup to practice," Draco said, giving her the same once-over that Pansy had.

"I came straight from the lab," Rigel said between gulps. She wiped her mouth and remembered her conversation with Snape. "And this is in no way my fault, but Snape definitely knows about the-"

"Seriously, Rigel? You can't keep one secret from the man?"

She shook her head quickly. "It wasn't me, Dray. I told him I had to go play Exploding Snap and he said 'oh, I thought you had an illegal club to get to' or something."

"Exploding Snap? That was the best you could come up with?"

"I lost track of time, all right? My alarm went off right in the middle of-"

"Boys, what are we arguing about?" Pansy took the cup from Rigel's hand to refill it from a Room-provided pitcher.

"Rigel told Snape about the club-"

"Draco thinks I can't keep a secret-"

Pansy dumped the water on Rigel's head. While she spluttered and wiped at her eyes, Pansy calmly refilled the glass and tossed it in Draco's face. "You're both ridiculous. Snape is smart enough to have figured it out himself, Draco." As Rigel let out a triumphant sound, Pansy spoke over her. "And Rigel is conspicuous enough in Snape's field of view to have led him straight here."

She set the pitcher down on its table and planted her hands on her hips. "Regardless, you're both wrong. I told Snape." Rigel and Draco gaped at her. She sighed. "Honestly. You think it's a coincidence that all the members' detentions have been conveniently deconflicted? That none of the other teachers have grown suspicious? We needed an ally on staff."

"Snape expressly forbid me from running this club," Draco hissed.

"Yes, Draco. Snape openly and expressly told you not to have a club." Pansy's face clearly said 'do you see it yet?'

Draco opened his mouth, shut it again, and crossed his arms defensively. "Uncle Sev is very convincing."

Rigel patted him on the back. In truth, Draco had no idea how many masks his godfather wore. "Just be glad to have such a powerful piece on our side."

"Uncle Sev's not a piece-he's a player."

"I'm going to delete that sentence from my memory," Fred declared loudly from over Draco's shoulder.

Draco spun around. "That isn't what I meant-"

"Too late. Deleted. Thanks for the subconscious trauma, Captain."

"What are you eavesdropping for anyway?"

George appeared on Draco's other side and leaned a heavy arm on the boy's shoulder before he could escape. "So glad you asked. We were thinking this might be the last chance to catch Rigel before the big to-do."

"Consider me caught," Rigel said, intrigued. "Have you another firework display for me to show off?"

"Firstly, yes ." George pressed a dangerously innocuous disk into her palm with a grin that invited her to join him in epic anticipation.

"And speaking of lighting one off, what say we take a trip down to the kitchens for a little pre-accomplishment celebration?" Fred wagged his eyebrows at each of them in turn.

Pansy smiled. "Isn't it bad luck to celebrate before winning?"

"Bad taste, maybe, but luck? Who needs it?" George slung an arm around Rigel's shoulder and turned his best puppy-eyed pout on Pansy. "Doesn't Rigel deserve to unwind a bit?"

"We've noticed a few new grey hairs," Fred added, plucking one from her head without so much as a by-your-leave. He examined the perfectly black hair for a moment before letting it fall, pretending not to notice Rigel wandlessly vanishing it as it hit the floor. "As your friends and advisors, we're concerned for your health."

"And your sanity."

"And your fun-ness, which overall seems much diminished of late."

"Will it appease your disquiet if I go and have cake in the kitchens with you?" Rigel asked on a laugh.

"It's a good start," George said seriously.

Rigel gestured for them to lead the way.

Fred cupped his hand over his mouth and shouted to the entire room, "AFTER PARTY IN THE KITCHENS!"

A general cheer went up, and before Rigel could wonder if she'd let the twins pull her farther from shore than was wise, she was caught in the riptide of students marching gayly down to the basement. If any professors had come across the mixed group of sweaty teens, they'd have strained credulity with any story they could have fabricated.

They burst through the portrait hole amidst numerous exclamations from those in their party who had never traversed the Elves' territory.

Binny met them with crossed arms and a stern expression as her fellows froze in the midst of polishing the dinnerware. "You is bringing the whole school tonight, Mr. and Mr. Weasleys?"

Fred looked over his shoulder in exaggerated surprise while George said, "Us? They're not here with us."

"They is spontaneously finding their way here?" Binny squinted up at them.

Fred snapped his fingers. "By George, I think we were followed!"

"By Fred, I'm certain we were."

Rigel pushed her way to the front of the crowd. "Binny, good evening. Our apologies for the intrusion."

Binny dipped a curtsy. "Mr. Black, you is always welcome." The Elf ignored the twins miming tears as they held one another. "Is you bringing Mr. Draco?"

"It's his illegal club," Ron called from the back.

Binny clapped her hands and two Elves jumped up from the pile of silver. "Tarts. Many and quickly."

Rigel shot her friend a grin as his ears turned pink. "This is why we love you, Binny."

"Binny is loving all of Hogwarts' students," the Elf said solemnly. She leaned close enough for her champagne cork necklace to brush Rigel's knee and added, "But Mr. Black is being extra special."

"She used to say we were special," George mourned.

"Guard your heart, Rigel-that she-Elf is fickle as a boggart," Fred lamented.

"That she hasn't murdered you both in your beds speaks volumes to her steadiness and loyalty," Ron said flatly.

Binny flicked her fingers and one of the long tables cleared itself. At a twitch of her left ear, a sumptuous tablecloth rolled a path from end to end, and with a twirl of her pinky, flagons of pumpkin juice crowded the center. The round of applause that burst from the group set Binny to curtseying again. "Mind you is in bed before curfew," she cautioned.

"Thank you, Binny," Rigel said as her schoolmates crowded the table with empty goblets. The Elves who had jumped-to at Binny's command were already ferrying piles of Raspberry tarts to the table, and the flurry of new activity in the kitchen promised a plethora of treats to follow.

The Elves pretended not to notice when Fred and George spiked one of the flagons, and Rigel pretended not to notice when Draco poured himself a generous helping. She took a sausage-stuffed roll and held her hand over the top of her goblet when George went to top her plain juice off with something stronger.

"It's a celebration, Rigel," he wheedled.

"I'll celebrate properly when it's over," she promised.

"That's the difference between our Houses," George said with a grin. "We celebrate first, because a Gryffindor does not assume he's going to see the end of the fight."

Rigel considered her goblet seriously. Hadn't she said something similar to her Head of House? Perhaps it was foolish to put off gaiety until a time of perfect, uncomplicated peace. With the rate at which she picked up problems, there was a good chance that day would never come.

George grimaced. "It was only a joke, Rigel. I know you'll make it through all-"

"One cup." She took her hand away from the rim and let him fill it to the brim.

George's smile was back full-blast. "To heroes!" He clinked their cups together soundly.

"To friends." She tossed back a large gulp before it could slosh too much over her hand.

"To the Hogwarts Champion!" Someone leaned over from behind her and tapped their cup to hers, and she drank politely.

"To Rigel's victory!" That call came from Ron, but at the answering round of cheers, she lifted her own glass again.

If only that were the end of it.

"To Rigel's strength!"

"To Rigel's cunning!"

"To his loyalty!"

"No-to his erudite- *hic* -ness!"



Draco laughed lowly as he slid into a seat beside her. "To Rigel's patience." He clinked their cups and Rigel took a very small sip while staring at him over the top of the rim. "Salazar, if you could feel the enmity coming off you right now."

"To Rigel's iron stomach!" Fred set the group off again, and Rigel slammed her empty goblet down on the table.

"Thank you, that's quite enough!" The sweet pumpkin juice became cloying in combination with whatever the twins had used to supplement it, and she was not keen to put Fred's toast to the test.

"No such thing." Aldon swiped another pitcher from George and refilled her goblet. "Can't have an empty glass in front of our guest of honor."

Rigel protested, "I can't make myself sick two days before the last task."

Her argument failed to impress him. "The greatest young Potions brewer this school has ever seen can surely make himself a draught in the morning."

She could, at that. Still, there was something unprincipled about it, and she said so.

George shook his head. "If I've learned anything from Percy over the years, it's that it isn't fun to be the most principled person in the room."

"Nor is it wise to be the least," she retorted.

George looked to where his brother was climbing on the end of the table with his tie wrapped around his head. "No danger of that."

Aldon reached over to clink their cups. "Go on, Rigel. You've been on edge for days."

She frowned. "I have not."

"You snarled at a first-year yesterday," Draco reminded her.

Rigel shot him a betrayed look. "I just corrected his homework."

"You said 'the notion that dragon liver should ever be mixed with undiluted bulbotuber puss is so misguided as to border on sociopathic.'"

She winced. "Which one was that again?" She had no recollection of using those exact words, but she should probably apologize.

"Carrow, but he forgave you after getting an E on the assignment," Pansy said from Draco's other side.

She sighed into her cup, but George clapped her smartly on the back. "No moping-it's a party, Rigel. Or don't you have those in Slytherin?"

"Rigel doesn't come to the parties," Draco said. His serious tone was somewhat blunted by the way his eyes blinked slow and heavy.

"Have you ever even been sloshed, then?"

She shook her head slowly, but stopped when she remembered. "A little, when I was practicing for the fifth task. I didn't like it."

"Not surprising, if it was a form of survival training." Aldon topped her glass off, then Draco's, then his own. "To better reasons for drinking."

"To never going back in time and re-doing the fifth task," she murmured.

"Only you would have to specifically rule that out." Draco sniggered.

Edmund physically nudged Aldon sideways on the bench and claimed the resulting space. "Corrupting the fourth-years, Al?"

"For all you know, I'm saving their immortal souls."

"Saving it from what?" Draco put a hand over his stomach, a bit protectively.

" *Witches* ." Aldon smirked at Pansy, who rolled her eyes.

At Draco's confused look, Pansy shook her head. "It's a muggle thing. Aldon thinks he's being funny."

"So what else is new?" Draco yawned into his goblet. "Edmund, when's the stag party? You know it's my birthday in June, right?"

"Are you asking because you want to combine the two or deconflict them?" Aldon's smile had points. "Only I don't recall getting an invitation to your birthday party, Draco."

The blond boy wrinkled his nose. "My parents only let me invite my year-mates."

"But anyone of age can come to the garden party," Pansy pointed out.

Draco nodded enthusiastically. "Tha's right. You should both come this year."

"What's the average age at the Malfoy Summer Garden Party? Over one hundred?" Aldon grinned into his palm. "No thanks, mate."

"Oh. Yeah, true." Draco was still nodding, but much slower. "When's the stag party, then?"

Edmund slid his heavy gaze to Aldon. "I'm afraid Al's in charge of that."

Aldon leaned across the table on his hand, a smirk threatening to colonize his ear. "Are you sure you're up to it?"

Draco attempted to draw himself upright, but was interrupted by a yawn. "A Malfoy is up to anything."

"I don't know... it won't exactly be tailored to the fifteen-and-under crowd."

"I'm sure you know I'm *highly* mature for my age."

"Exceedingly so," Rigel added dryly.

"Are you recommending him, Rigel? I might consider it then." Aldon had pure mischief in his eyes as Draco looked blearily between the two of them.

Rigel eyed her friend's unfocused gaze. "He does hold his drink well, doesn't he?"

Draco inclined his head in thanks as Pansy smothered a sigh from his other side.

"So far-but the night is even younger than you lot." Aldon filled Draco's cup again and Rigel began to silently calculate the doses of Pain Relief and Sobering Draught that would be most effective for someone of Draco's size and metabolic class.

She stopped when the accelerating half-life co-efficient started to waltz. Her head felt as though Dom had filled the mindscape with water again and set her thoughts to swimming.

"Rigel?"

Someone poked her in the side, and she jerked her gaze up from the table. "Yes, George?"

"You zoned out there for a spell. All right?"

She nodded. Then she considered the question and shook her head. "I don't want anymore."

George downed the rest of her cup without hesitating. "Then no more shall you have." With a grin, he added, "You look more relaxed, anyway, which was the entire point."

Rigel stiffened her spine with effort, mildly alarmed by that pronouncement. Relaxation was something to which she could never completely surrender.

George laughed. "Only you would see relaxation as the enemy."

She blinked. *Did I say that out loud?*

"Yes, you did." George shook his head with a smile tugging on his lips. "That's what happens when you toast a dozen times in a row-it all catches up to you at once."

"What did you put in the pumpkin juice?" she asked, realizing that question was overdue.

"Not butterbeer," he said.

"Fairy wine?" she guessed hopefully.

"Something stronger," the redhead admitted. "We've been watching the young ones, though-no one's had too much."

"I have."

"You've had exactly as much as you needed. All of your friends have noticed you spinning yourself into orbit this week. Come back down to earth for a night and remember that you're not taking on the whole world by yourself."

She glanced around the table at the others. Aldon and Edmund nodded in unqualified agreement, Pansy gave her a guilty grimace, and Draco had his head pillowed on his arms. He rolled onto one ear to murmur, "You haven't been sleeping much."

Rigel rubbed her temple. "I have a lot on my mind."

"The maze." Edmund's rumbling voice gave weight to the phrase.

She dropped her hand to her lap and clenched it into a fist. "Yes." She'd spent too many hours to count staring up at the dark ceiling, wondering what awaited her in the hedges.

"You think it'll be bad?" George asked quietly.

She let out a slightly-hysterical laugh. "I keep wondering that. Will it somehow be worse than everything that came before? Or will it be... anticlimactic?"

"You're thinking 'bout politics, too," Draco grumbled into the table.

Of course she was. The dire possibilities shouted at her every time she closed her eyes. Would the legislation go through without Riddle's direct involvement after she won? Would the rights of halfbloods and muggleborns alike flicker and die in a gust of pureblood pride? Would the country explode into civil war to keep it from happening? Would anyone care at all?

"What if it's all for nothing?" she whispered.

"You done more'n anyone." Draco's mouth stretched into a yawn that he hid in his own elbow.

"He's right." Aldon toasted her with his cup. "Even if your plan doesn't work in the near term, you've hamstrung them for decades."

Edmund frowned at his friend. "What plan is this?"

Rigel wrinkled her nose. "It's a great, complicated thing."

"A conspiracy," Draco agreed.

"You *conspirators* should be careful," Pansy said sharply.

"Being careful is all I ever do," Rigel said mournfully.

"No one watching from the outside would guess," George said wryly. He, too, looked curious, but after Pansy's warning, neither he nor

Edmund pressed them.

"It's all inside," Rigel put a hand to her chest and tugged at her robes in frustration. "Some days I'm so *sick* of it. Most days... I'm just really tired."

"I'm tired too," Draco offered.

"You shouldn't be so hard on yourself," Pansy said over Draco's slumped form. "No one is asking more of you."

"They should." Rigel stared at Pansy. A sudden conviction reached into her throat and choked the words that came next. "You should, Pan; I'm a big fraud, really."

"A fraud doesn't slay a basilisk or cure a deadly illness," Aldon observed.

"It wasn't deadly," Draco muttered.

"A fraud doesn't earn the trust and loyalty of so many," Edmund added evenly.

"Riddle did." The words came hoarsely as she let the comparison rankle. "I don't deserve my friends."

"It's not about deserving." George's tone brooked no further argument.

"We're your friends forever, Rigel, whether you deserve it or not," Pansy said fiercely.

"No matter what you do," Aldon agreed.

Edmund slid his best friend a dry look. "No matter how annoying you are."

Rigel's mouth hitched for their sake. "Thanks." They didn't know what they promised, but it didn't hurt to hear it.

Fred sprawled into George's lap without warning, a laugh still on his lips. He looked about the group and fixed Rigel with an exasperated stare. "Mate, I hate to tell you, but the cloud of doom and gloom that's been hovering over your head all year appears to be *procreating* ."

George dumped Fred onto the table, upsetting every glass in his path. "Bite your tongue! Moroseness never met a more menacing match than me!"

Draco startled upright as juice doused his fair strands and Pansy gasped in displeasure as he shook the drops into her face. Aldon leaned back on the bench and refilled his upturned cup from the river dripping off the edge of the table. He caught Rigel's eye and shrugged. "Ce la vie, Rigel. Drink while there's drink. Make merry while you've friends to be merry with. Time enough for melancholy later, when you're alone."

She watched Fred bowl himself down the length of the table to the accompaniment of general mayhem and felt her spirits lift a little. Time enough, indeed.

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Music swanned across the lawn on the wings of the stadium's amplification spells. Descending from the castle with Draco and Pansy, Rigel saw a river of colored tents clustered about the main entrance to the pitch. The painted flags and souvenir stalls gave her a strong sense of déjà vu; it was like a very small World Cup, if most of the attendees had been sober. And children.

Her friends flitted to the stalls, fingering sparkling commodities with the energy of those who did not have an invisible weight on their shoulders. Pansy held up a scarf with Rigel's image patterned in



thread and grinned mischievously. "Shall I pick up a few, for posterity's sake?"

"Get Dray one for his birthday."

Draco wrinkled his nose. "I'd rather have the animated hat. Look, it even speaks Parseltongue."

Rigel pressed her lips together at the incomprehensible spitting noises emanating from the headwear in question. With a straight face, she said, "You should hear what it's saying about your mother."

Draco dropped it in horrified surprise. "That's not funny."

Pansy's muffled laughter disagreed. The two moved on to a stand selling omnioculars, and didn't notice immediately when Rigel drifted away. She caught a familiar face in her periphery and stole closer for a better look.

Leo moved amidst a group of gayly dressed players, a pair of striped pantaloons accentuating his long legs as he marched with exaggerated aplomb. Bells on his shoes chimed sharply with every step, but it was his hands that drew the eye-they juggled half a dozen colored balls with the easy grace of old habit, weaving through the air like an artist with an invisible brush.

She had to marvel at how well he fit. Leo was a chameleon, blending effortlessly in any surroundings. He engaged the crowd with an easy grin, charming smiles and even blushes from the Hogwarts students. Cora, resplendent in silver sequins, tossed one of her juggling knives toward Leo. He ducked, bells jangling as he shook with exaggerated fear. Another performer caught the knife as it sailed over Leo's head, and the crowd laughed as he shook a finger admonishingly at the precocious child.

Rigel turned away before he spotted her. As nice as it was to see her friend, she wasn't prepared to speak to him as Archie. If there was one deception she could yet avoid, surely it was that one.

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He watched the boy slip off without a word from the corner of his eye. Harry's cousin presented a curious puzzle. A pampered pureblood with a split personality who'd done *much* better than anyone expected in the high-profile tournament. The Black scion came off obviously chipper at first acquaintance, but scratch the façade and something surprisingly savvy lurked beneath. He didn't look so cheerful today, but Leo wouldn't either, were he in the boy's spot.

A girl with long, raven hair tossed a Galleon as he winked at her—an entire *Galleon*, and wasn't it a bit sickening how much disposable income these children seemed to have? Cora goggled at the golden coin before her knives demanded her attention once more. The distraction cost her, and she stuck out a foot to hastily bounce the hilt of a knife back up into the air at the last moment. Several of the students whooped, and Cora smiled like she hadn't a care in the world. Like a Galleon wouldn't feed her for two months.

Arcturus had rejoined his friends. Leo followed the boy's ambling progress toward the stadium without seeming to. He hoped for Harry's sake the boy made it through the night all right. The task was only half of it—big tourney like this, sparkling in the public's imagination, would be an irresistible target to the likes of those wreaking havoc across the country of late. Judging by the number of plainclothes Aurors skulking about, he wasn't the only one who expected the ugly side of humanity to rear its head.

Leo tipped his cap to the audience as he swapped out with another performer. Jacques caught his eye and nodded. If there was trouble like the Cup, he and his troupe would help sort it. This time, they wouldn't have an entire brigade of players out their worldly possessions. Leo trailed Arcturus and his friends from a subtle

distance. At the least, he would see the boy got home to his cousin. For her sake.

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"Sport, over here!"

"Is he talking to you?" Draco murmured, a slightly disbelieving sneer on his mouth.

Rigel waved to Sirius, who grinned back from his spot between Lily and Remus. "That's my dad you're mocking."

"Not mocking," Draco protested. "Just constantly questioning the sanity of."

"I'm not sure that made grammatical sense," Pansy muttered through the side of her polite smile.

Rigel shook her head with a laugh. "No need to strain your manners. I'll see you both after."

Pansy took her in a brief hug. "Be careful."

Draco gave her a serious nod. "Do your best-we'll be watching."

"I daren't let you down," she said, sweeping them a playful bow. "Until we meet again."

"Good luck!" Pansy called after her. They locked eyes until Draco tugged the blonde girl toward the stands.

Rigel jogged over to her waiting family. "You all came, huh?"

Sirius crushed her in a hug that was slightly too desperate to be a mere greeting. "Course we did. How do you feel? Ready?"

She nodded, trying to project confidence and ease into her face. She would never be as convincing as Archie, but they would excuse any slips as nerves.

Sirius stepped back and clenched his fists as though to stop himself reaching for her again. "Last one," he said bracingly.

"You're going to be great," Remus said. "Just remember the basics."

"I've been practicing like mad," she said, laughing embarrassedly. "I hope it's enough."

Lily reached out to touch the cord around her neck. "You only have to come out alive, Archie."

She nodded reassuringly, but inside, her heart clenched. If only it were that easy. Surviving wasn't enough, though. She had to win.

"Rigel."

She turned. Professor Snape stood at an awkward distance, his hands in his robe pockets. He didn't acknowledge her family members, and simply said, "It's time."

She smiled apologetically at the other adults. "Looks like I'm running late, as usual. Sorry to run off—"

Sirius just hugged her again, resting a heavy hand on her head. "Good luck, son."

She gulped back a sudden sting in her eyes and closed them in a smile to hide the moisture. "Thanks, Dad."

Rigel stepped back and waved more confidently than she felt. Snape set a steady pace and she fell into sync with him automatically. As they stepped through the entrance, the air caught a bit in her chest. The pitch was gone. Only the maze remained.

"It's monstrous," she said.

"It's nothing but an overgrown garden," Snape said firmly. He gestured to the end of the stadium, where a square stage perched proudly on elegant legs-too elegant to be functional, she thought with a snort. How many stabilizing runes had *that* required? "That is your aim. The cup in the center of the maze is a portkey to the winner's podium. All of this-" he gestured dismissively to the great hedge before them "-is distraction. Keep focused on your goal, and I believe nothing can stop you."

Rigel eyed the roman-style podium fixed to the gazelle-like stage with a grimace. "It's a literal pedestal."

"Too late to shy from the lime light now," Snape said, clearly amused at her expense.

"There are hats out there with my face on them," she revealed, letting all the disquiet she felt drip into her voice.

Snape laughed before he caught himself. He led her to a narrow gap in the hedge. The other champions waited in the shadow of the great maze, both lost in their own thoughts. Snape placed a hand on her shoulder briefly and cleared his throat. "Make us proud," he said quietly.

Rigel nodded once, too overcome with emotion to offer more, and Snape left her. She looked around at Owens and Fleur, but neither met her gaze for long. The maze inexorably drew their attention, and she understood why. It bled magic like something radioactive. Waves of the power that went into its creation lapped at her senses, almost numbing in their intensity. Rigel didn't realize she was in its thrall until Bagman was at her shoulder.

"Ready, Champions?"

She spun around, shaking her head sharply. The stands were full, roaring noise all around her, and Bagman and Crouch waited like a pair of boatmen on the river Styx. Crouch thrust a headband toward

her, and she put it on automatically, hardly noticing the weight of it anymore.

"I'm sure you're all chomping at the bit," Bagman said, clapping his hands together as though he, too, were anxious to get into the maze. "A bit of admin first, though."

Owens muttered something impolite under his breath, and Bagman pretended not to hear him.

"As you know, the champion with the highest running score will enter the maze first-that's you, Mr. Black. Next will be Mr. Owens after five minutes have passed, with Ms. Delacour entering last at the ten-minute mark." Bagman gave Fleur a patronizing smile. "I'm sure that will be plenty of time, darling, don't you worry. The criteria for winning-and this is very important, Mr. Owens, so please pay attention-well, all you have to do is touch the Triwizard Cup at the center of the maze. It will transport you instantly to the stage below the judges box, and there you will be crowned the True Triwizard Champion. You'll be expected to give a winner's speech at the podium, of course, so think of what you want to say while you're wandering around in our little puzzle. Any questions?"

"Are we allowed to hinder one another?" Predictably, it was Owens who voiced the crass query.

Bagman raised his eyebrows. "Well, there's no rule against it."

Crouch cut in sharply. "Whatever happens in there, just remember you have to live with it out here, young man."

Owens shrugged. Fleur glared at him and Rigel vowed to watch her back.

"Well, that's all we have for you. Good luck! Mr. Black, please take your starting position."

She moved to the mouth of the maze and stared into the darkness. Some cruel soul had fed it a twisting mist that denied the eye more than a dozen feet of visibility. The magic of the maze throbbed at her, and something inside her throbbed back in sympathy. It was all down to one last task.

She wasn't consciously aware of the cannon that signaled the start, but her feet moved on their own, and the maze swallowed her whole.

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She watched her nephew enter the maze with a fearless stride, more worried for Sirius than for him. Their friend had been on edge all year, half-convinced that Archie's every goodbye would be his last. He clutched the edge of the balcony tight enough to test the strengthening charms, and Lily breathed a small sigh of relief when James pushed his way into the family box. James was better at calming Sirius than she or Remus.

"Sorry, had to placate the Minister," James said, dropping a warm kiss onto her cheek. "Has he gone in?"

"Just now," Remus said quietly. When James glanced over, he nodded meaningfully toward Sirius, who was staring intently down at the impenetrable hedge maze.

James followed his gaze and made a noise of understanding. "The mist will turn transparent once all the champions are in the maze," he revealed. "That way no one can pass information to them beforehand."

As he said it, the canon sounded a third time and the Beauxbatons champion darted into the maze. The great mirrors, suspended above the hedge in a gaudy sort of chandelier, cleared at once to reveal

what each champion saw. Simultaneously, the mist that filled the maze shimmered into translucency.

Remus looked between the maze itself and the mirrors above it. "The mist is only transparent from above," he mused. "They'll be virtually blind in there."

The balcony rail grimaced under Sirius' hands.

"Look, there's Archie," James said, pointing left to a small figure near the beginning of the maze. "Not got much sense of direction, has he?"

"Gets that from his mum," Sirius murmured, his mouth quirking.

His grip relaxed a tad, and Lily sent James a grateful smile. He nodded slightly, soft understanding in his beautiful eyes. They would all be relieved when this tournament was over. Why Archie had insisted on participating, they still didn't fully understand. It was his right... but. If he could see what it was doing to Sirius...

"Is that a hippogriff?" Remus asked, pointing to a winged creature stalking the far-right side of the maze.

"And so many spells," Lily said, eyeing the tell-tale shimmer hanging in the air at several crucial junctures.

"Wizards, too," Sirius said. "Friends of yours, James?"

James winced. "The request came in, and I couldn't very well say no. I also considered the alternative-better trained, responsible Aurors than some duelist-for-hire or dangerous creature-"

"You mean like that Acromantula?" Sirius jutted his chin toward the scuttling spider almost as tall as the hedge itself and drawled, "Glad we avoided that."

James muttered a curse under his breath. "I talked them out of more dragons, at least."



"Those aren't all Aurors," Remus pointed out. He set a pair of omnioculars to his eyes and peered toward a small figure in shining armor.

Sirius swiped them and let out a grunt of surprise. "It's that Athenian champion. Antipathy or something."

"Antiope," Remus corrected, taking the glasses back. "Did they bring back all the previous champions?"

"Just the three who excelled in combat," James confirmed. "Antiope and Krum, and-"

"Oi, some kind of animal is going for Archie!" Sirius grabbed for the omnioculars and Remus surrendered them with a sigh of annoyance.

"That's not an animal, Sirius, it's an-"

" *Animagus* ." Sirius hissed as the hyena sprang for Archie's shoulder.

"That'll be the third ex-champion," James agreed.

"What's happening?" Remus asked. When Sirius didn't answer, utterly engrossed in watching his son's progress, he nudged him with an elbow. "I asked if you wanted your own pair, you-"

"Here, Remus." Lily passed him her pair of omnioculars. "You narrate it for us."

Remus adjusted the settings to his preference and put them to his face. "He's doing well-he's *fast* ."

"Archie or the hyena?" Lily asked, leaning forward to see Archie's mirror a bit better. It was difficult to get a sense of how his confrontation was going, as the view bobbed and swayed with Archie's every move.

"Both," Remus said. Admiration colored his tone. "Archie's got serious reflexes. He's dodging every bite and-whoops, caught a scratch in the elbow I think." Sirius drew in a sharp breath, glued to his omnioculars, and Remus hurriedly added, "Nothing serious, though. He's on the offensive, now. *Good*, Archie. He got the other boy with a stinging jinx to the nose. He's weaving again, did you know he could move so quick, Sirius? Now he's thrown the animagus into the side of the hedge and- yes, he's got him pinned. Good use of Incarcerous."

Sirius let the omnioculars fall with a long breath of relief. He dabbed at a bead of sweat on his neck, and James jumped in to distract him. "Antiope's found the Delacour girl."

At the sound of the French champion's name, a pair of stunningly beautiful heads turned to regard James with affront. Her oblivious husband kept talking, even as Lily pressed a hand to his arm in warning.

"I heard she really trounced the poor girl in the semi-finals."

A woman who could only be Delacour's mother hissed and a younger silver-haired girl made a tiny claw with her fingers. James froze, his instinct for danger finally alerting him to the very annoyed part-Veela on the other side of the families' box.

"It's a different story this time," Remus said, omnioculars fixed on the dueling witches. "Delacour must have learned a lot from their last match-look at her pivot!"

The hair on the back of James' neck settled as Delacour's family reined in the strength of their glares. As Remus' commentary turned complimentary, they returned their attention to the task.

"Antiope is not letting up; I think there's some bad blood there."

"Probably thinks she should have won the halfblood spot," James guessed.

"Owens has run into trouble, too," Lily pointed out. The American champion had chosen the middle-most path, but the Durmstrang boy was waiting for him. "I hear Krum is quite the duelist."

"Owens beat him last time," Remus said. "He can do it again."

"That's the boy that took Harry's friend, Hermione, to the ball, isn't it?" Lily and Remus turned to stare at James. He held up his hands. "What? I remember things."

"It is," Remus confirmed, turning his omnioculars toward the pair of boys. "Bad blood there, too-Owens was particularly harsh on Hermione in the semi-finals, according to the accounts I've read."

"So their past behavior plays a part tonight," James mused.

"What about Archie?" Sirius asked suddenly. "Does he have any enemies in there?"

Remus shook his head. "By all accounts, he's very well liked, despite having won nearly every task."

Sirius grinned. "'Course he is. Archie's a good kid."

James groaned through his teeth. "Oh no. Not *that* way, Arch."

Sirius whirled back around. "What is it?"

"Dawlish."

Lily squinted and could just make out the prowling form of James' most trusted lieutenant, lying in wait around the next corner Archie would round.

"He won't go full out against a kid," James muttered. She didn't know if he was trying to convince Sirius or himself.

Sirius was clenching the railing again, any equanimity he might have gained in the last few minutes erased. "If he hurts Archie-"

"He's just doing his job, Sirius. He won't take it too far."

Lily didn't think Sirius even heard the words. Every fiber of his being was tuned toward the pitch, where his son crept closer to the next surprise.

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She hadn't realized how dependent she'd become on her sensing ability. In the maze, *everything* was magic. Unlike the comforting ambient magic of the castle, or the neutral backdrop of light and dark creatures of the forest, the maze was a thick, cloying presence. It was barely-tamed, semi-sentient magic that had been given one central, life-like directive: growth. Awash in its power, she was snow-blind.

At a crossroads, she paused. There were no landmarks in the maze—the mists blotted out the setting sun and every path looked the same. Which way to go? "Point me." The wand spun in her hand endlessly, as confused by all the ambient magic as she was. With a sigh, she went left again.

Rigel had no idea how long she'd been in the maze. She'd come across Tahil in his animagus form almost immediately. The scratch on her arm stung as she jogged, and she felt a little better about spraining his ankle to slow him down. It wasn't easy to tie him up without hurting him, and she was in a race.

She did think she'd traveled farther than the length of a Quidditch pitch. Some kind of devilishly tricky expansion charms were at work. Even the sound of her own footsteps was muffled by the oppressive mist. As she rounded the next corner, instinct more than insight had her dropping into a slide to avoid the hex that came at chin-height.

Rigel came out of the roll in a defensive crouch and deflected two more spells before she even realized who she was facing.

"Professor?"

"Not tonight." Dawlish darted into her comfort zone and she scarcely avoided an elbow to the nose.

She countered with a leg sweep and regained space to use her wand in a quick double-stunner. Dawlish parried them easily, even seemed to be enjoying himself. She had read the Auror handbook front to back, knew all the moves he was supposed to make, but Dawlish's style had evolved beyond the basic defensive postures taught at the Auror Academy. He was aggressively straightforward, but so fast that the directness was not much of a disadvantage.

Rigel sped up her own movements to match his pace, then pushed him a little further, speeding and slowing her spells at random, knowing she only needed that one moment of miscalculation to get under his guard. Dawlish had a good eye for spell speed, though, and he countered every one of her varied spells despite their unpredictability.

"You've been holding back in class," he accused her. She could take some consolation in the way he panted the words.

"I've heard this theory before." She took the duel closer in, betting that she could out-spar him hand to hand if their wands were out of play. He frustrated her at every turn, somehow maintaining exactly the distance he needed even with hedges hemming them in on either side.

When a mad sort of inspiration hit her, she didn't hesitate. Rigel cast a mirrored shield-not around herself, but around *Dawlish*. She held the magic around him, her wand arm quivering with the strain of it. He barely parried his own rebounded stunner. The Auror stared at her, and she at him through the fractal shield between them. "We're at an impasse," he said, gesturing to the shield. "I can't cast through it, and you can't drop it to cast at me."

She smiled, and brought her left hand up, palm out. The overpowered Banishing charm shoved him, shield and all, through the thick hedge at bruising speed. He lay winded in the next aisle, gazing wide-eyed at her through the hole in the hedge.

"That was for hexing Draco so many times," she called.

He wheezed out a dry laugh. "It was... the only way to get you... to respond."

The hedge grew together between one breath and the next, and the sound of Dawlish's laughter vanished, as though he had never been there.

She took a second to shake out her limbs, then began her slow jog to the next juncture. As she pivoted left and right, debating a direction, she noticed the color of the leaves changing slightly in the wandlight. To the right, the hedges were darker.

*It took weeks to grow these hedges, she thought. New growth is a lighter green. The center of the maze grew first, which means...*

She went right.

Immediately, the magic seemed to press tighter around her, and she knew she'd made the correct choice. It went against every instinct to run toward that feeling instead of away from it, but she put her head down and pressed forward.

In the middle of the next aisle, a Sphynx stirred from her nap, sat on her hind legs, and stared patiently at her.

Rigel was tempted to try stunning her straight off, but the gleam in the creature's eyes almost seemed to beg her to try it. "Is this... a riddle thing?"

The Sphynx stretched her wide jaw in a menacing yawn. "What can be learned but never taught?"

Rigel stared at the Sphinx. "Is that... all of it?"

The Sphinx smiled. "Would you like to answer two riddles?"

"No. Thank you." Rigel ran a hand through her short hair, wincing when her fingers caught on the plait Pansy had done on one side.

"What can be learned but never taught? Lots of things, I'd think. Pain, maybe. Or... love?"

"These things can be shown by others, and thus taught," the Sphinx said with a haughty toss of her head. "There is but one thing that cannot be demonstrated by another."

Rigel blinked. "Are you... giving me a hint?"

"You seem significantly stupider without your maned companion."

"Maned-Hermione?" Rigel let out a breath. "Yeah, she's much better at these. One thing that cannot be demonstrated or taught... like, how to make your heart beat? No, that can't really be learned, either. Is it... self-confidence?"

She stared at the Sphinx. The Sphinx stared back. "I'm going to have to fight you, aren't I?"

The creature's smile was answer enough.

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"Come on, Archie, it's not that hard," Lily bemoaned.

"I'd fight it, too," James said with a shrug. "Riddles are nonsensical."

Remus kept his eyes on Archie, but he could feel the heavy eye-roll Lily gave her husband. As the boy began to weave around the

Sphinx's claws, Remus sharpened his omnioculars and slowed them down a few notches. Archie's style was unorthodox, but incredibly effective. He never hesitated, seeming as much a creature as the being he fought in the way his instincts guided his reactions.

Archie was nowhere near that skilled over the summer.

"How did he get so good?" Remus muttered the words to himself, but James heard him and answered.

"Training?"

"From who?" Remus shook his head. "This style is nothing like what is taught at Hogwarts, and they didn't even offer the dueling class this year."

Lily's gasp had them focusing on the maze once more, where Archie had caught the Sphinx in a partial-petrification. The creature panted harshly as its legs turned slowly to stone. Archie wiped the sweat from his brow, and began to move on.

"It's you."

The mirror transmitted the Sphinx's words loud and clear. Archie paused in the frame. "What?" he asked dully.

"The truth none can teach you; it's who *you* are."

Archie winced. "Oh. I suppose you're right."

He walked on. The sound pivoted to Owens, who was caught in some kind of vertigo spell. Remus tuned it out in favor of asking Sirius, "Has he mentioned extra training to you?"

"Why are you so fixated on his training?" Sirius muttered, avoiding Remus' gaze.

Remus gestured at Archie's mirror with an impatient hand. "Who is that boy up there, Sirius? How could he have changed so much so



quickly?"

"Somehow Snape's involved, I just know it." James yelled as Lily slapped his shoulder.

"Even Severus's style doesn't quite match. How could-"

"He's my *son*," Sirius snapped. "It doesn't matter how he does it, only that he survives it."

"He out-dueled an *Auror*," Remus growled. "There's something not right, Sirius, I-"

"I know that!" Sirius rounded on him, his face so close Remus could smell the fear on his breath. Lily pulled gently on his arm, and Sirius backed away slightly. "I know, Remus. He's different. I don't know why or how, okay? I don't know my own son anymore." He whispered the last, his expression harshly bracketed in pain.

Remus regretted upsetting Sirius further, but he knew in his gut something was wrong. "You don't think he'd..." He couldn't finish the question.

Sirius sneered. "Pay someone else to do the tournament for him?" Remus winced at the way it sounded, but Sirius merely shook his head. "No. *I* would, but Archie is better than me. Anyway," he added under his breath, turning back toward the maze. "It's been longer than an hour."

It had been, at that.

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Rigel could swear the hedge was growing more restless as she neared the center. She wondered if it was annoyed at her-she had

blown a Professor-Dawlish-sized hole through one of its appendages.

*Don't personify the hedge*, she told herself sharply.

It rustled in an invisible wind, banishing all other sound until the only thing she could hear was the rushing of leaves. She gritted her teeth against the sound current and pressed on. The hedge fairly screamed at her as she turned the next corner. It felt like running into a headwind of pure magic-she had to be close.

The mists parted like a veil just a few steps from the junction, and the rest of the corridor was revealed in sudden, sharp relief-the cup stood in the center, gleaming with an active portkey's tell-tale glow, and on the far side-Fleur.

The silver-haired girl slumped slightly, a slash through her shoulder that was bleeding profusely. Rigel tensed the muscles in her legs and took a deep breath. They'd have to race for it. Her toes dug into the grass as she shot forward in an all-out sprint. Fleur was running, too-was it slower than she'd seen the girl run before? She couldn't be sure. She pumped her legs on sheer willpower, eating up the ground between herself and the cup. Her fast-twitch muscles protested, but she was past feeling the pain. They came within fifteen feet of the cup. Ten feet, eight, and-the hedge *erupted* around them.

Vines snaked out, tripped both of them, and Rigel went down hard as she grappled with the cantankerous bush. It dragged her across the ground, up, then back down, and she fought the nauseating vertigo as she struggled to right herself against the maze's will. She flared her magic violently, but there was something resistant in the plant's makeup. The bloody thing was imbued with more magic than made any sense, and raw power alone wasn't-

A spell, white-hot and sizzling, sliced through the hedge cleanly. The bulk of what had attached itself to Rigel fell away, and she dropped to the ground on a rough roll. She came out of it in a backwards scramble and saw Fleur still trapped in the hedge ten feet away. In an instant, she knew what had happened. The other girl didn't meet

her eyes, appeared to still be struggling with the hedge herself, but who else could it have been?

Fleur had deferred.

Rigel took the chance the other girl had bought her. She wrapped a shield around herself and dove for the cup. Vines grasped for purchase and failed. Five steps. Two. She put her wand back in its holster, and palmed the disk the twins had slipped her for the grand finale in her left hand. One step. It was over.

Her right hand closed on the handle and the world tilted sideways.

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*Finally* . With a stumbling gasp, all of his plans fell into place. The boy *won* .

He would never admit to nerves, but it had been grating to watch the Delacour chit come so close. The boy had an unnatural luck-her spell misfired and released Rigel instead. He took the chance, naturally, Slytherin that he was. The great mirror shone white as the portkey activated.

He allowed himself a smile as the Minister stood to officiate the crowning. The boy reappeared on the stage, disheveled but whole and unquestionably-

Magic lashed out from the four corners of the stage. Tom reared to his feet, wand in hand, Dumbledore a moment behind.

"Tom, what have you-"

He hissed at the old fool. "Not. Me."

Five figures reillusioned themselves on the platform. One at each corner-ward casters. *Barty*, he cursed, eyes drawn to the blithering imbecile at the northern corner. He sharpened his magical sight, and now he could see the runes, hidden cleverly among innocuous strengthening arrays, bleeding to life across the structure.

He cast at the wards before anyone could react. His spell resounded against them with a thundering crack, but the winner's platform was left untouched. The fifth figure, standing in the center of the stage near their bewildered champion, threw back his hood and glared up at Tom defiantly, as though he was meant to recognize him.

A vampire, that much was obvious. He had never crossed the covens. Whosoever had the gall to interrupt his tournament was going to regret crossing *him*, however.

Dumbledore let loose an outlandish display of magic that poured over the wards like an undammed river. Those near them in the box backed away from the force of it, but Tom stood his ground a pace away. The old man strained visibly before coming to the conclusion Tom had reached already. As he pulled back his magic, for once looking all his hundred-some years, Dumbledore spoke the terrible realization aloud.

"They've anchored to Hogwarts."

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Bloody. Damn. Wards.

Rigel's magic lashed out in terrified fury. She *wouldnotbetrapped  
wouldnotbetrappedagain*.

It didn't make it far from her skin. A vacuum opened up, like a gaping tear in the world, and sucked the magic away from her grasp. Rigel pushed herself up on shaking hands, eyes darting about the platform. *Where did it go?* She let a smaller amount of magic loose, and this time followed it carefully. It traveled less than a foot before being swept up in some kind of current, like metal shavings to a magnet. The invisible current carried it to the gaudy roman pedestal, stage center-left.

The podium was a magical magnet.

"Powerful, isn't it?"

That voice. Like dust on a stone step. She looked up and stared as *Gavril* threw back his hood and raised his sharp chin toward the judges' box. Magic slapped the side of the ward in a dull roar, and Rigel belatedly realized: this was not part of the task at all.

"Gavril. What are you...?"

Her voice echoed strangely all around her, and she realized her headband was still transmitting. She stopped speaking when a sinister smile, the likes of which she had never seen on the lieutenant, crawled over his face. She forced her exhausted legs to stand and turned in a slow circle.

Barty Jr was behind her at the nearest corner of the platform. A woman she didn't recognize stood at another, a masked man she knew as Scar, and-

She blinked. *Jordan?*

Lee Jordan sneered at her from across the square stage, but Gavril drew her attention as he took a menacing step toward her.

"So you recognize my host?" the vampire chuckled, a mirthless, creaking sound. "Small world. I wonder if you'll be so quick to recognize me."

Host...

Something that had been lurking in the back of her mind, a fear that she had never put fully to bed, rose up from its tangle of sheets with a strangled cry. *Voldemort* .

She dropped her wand into her hand and struck out with the laser-sharp point of a piercing spell. It flew like an arrow-until it curved back and fizzled against the podium's runes.

"A magical attractant," Gavril- *Voldemort*, dropped the words almost idly. "Well worth what it cost to procure, judging by the magic you're throwing around-someone's grown into their core, hm?" He gestured to the other four, all of whom knelt in obsequious patience, waiting for... something. "When they brought me tales of how powerful you'd become, I was dismissive... but then, I underestimated you once before, didn't I?"

"What are you trying to achieve, Voldemort? This stadium is surrounded. Aurors, Hogwarts professors, not to mention Dumbledore and *Riddle* ." She spat the last name in his face and watched it twist with a vicious sense of satisfaction. "Do you think any of them will let you get away?"

"Do *not* speak my name." He took another step toward her. They were almost within arm's length.

"You shouldn't share a name you don't want people to use," she hissed.

His face contorted with fury and she use the moment of distraction to strike, slamming her foot into his knee-or where his knee should have been. A fist like a stone that she never saw coming smashed into the side of her head and Rigel hit the deck hard.

Through the ringing in her ears, she could just make out the sound of Gavril's stolen laugh. *Vampire, kid*, Dom whispered in her ear. Right.

Rigel sent magic to her wounded head and breathed a small sigh of relief when it wasn't sucked away by the magical attractant. The magic within her skin seemed to be safe; she could heal herself, at least. Dom helped her focus through the dizziness to stem the internal bleeding, and as her eardrums repaired themselves, she heard the battering ram of concussive magic pounding away at the platform wards in successive blows. The Aurors were working in tandem, and others would be helping-her family, her teachers. The wards couldn't withstand that forever. She just had to stall.

Rigel pushed herself up onto hands and knees and spat a glob of blood into her sleeve. "You must be... very weak."

Voldemort whirled to glare at her, the movements unnaturally graceful in the vampiric form he possessed. "I could crush you with two fingers, boy."

"Physically, sure," she bit out, forcing a laugh. "Like a muggle. You're magically weak, though, aren't you? That's why you need help from a school drop-out, an alley thug, a greedy politician's son, and... I assume, a lady with poor taste in friends."

The redheaded woman barred yellow teeth at her, but Voldemort bent close enough to block out the others and hissed, "I have magic enough to come back from the grave, boy. Magic enough to survive for years as mere shadow and vapor. Magic enough to possess the darkest of creatures-"

"With some help from Jordan's neuro-toxins, right?" Rigel sneered. "Face it. Without these wards, you'd already be finished-there are

hundreds of wizards out there more powerful than you."

"But not more powerful than *you*," Voldemort said lowly.

He appeared behind her faster than her eyes could track. Her magic was whisked away as quickly as it left her skin. Her arms were wrenched behind her back and her wand torn from her hand with enough force to break two of her fingers. She cried out, enraged to see it taken, and Voldemort laughed into her ear. "Whoops. Don't know my own *strength* ."

Each of her arms was secured to the podium, and she could feel the greedy magnet at her back suckling the stray edges of her magic. She wrapped it tightly inside herself and clamped down. It was trapped, as surely as she was, but not forever.

Voldemort stepped back to inspect his handiwork and twirled her wand in long, pale fingers. He frowned down at the tool, turning it over and over in his hands. "This wand. It calls to me..."

As well it might; it was his original wand's brother.

He tried to cast with it, but the holly wand's tip barely sparked. She thought he must have forgotten what happened when he tried to use her wand while possessing Ginny. With a moue of disappointment, he pocketed it. "Magic is beyond me in this form," he admitted. His eyes locked with hers, and she noticed they were a deep, glowing red. "Not for much longer, though."

She struggled instinctively against the bonds, every part of her rebelling against the thought of it. "I *won't* let you possess me," she growled.

"Tried that already." He shrugged, strangely nonchalant. "I do believe you'd die first. I don't need your body, however. Only your magic."

He snapped his fingers, and Lee Jordan approached from the far corner of the stage. He cradled a stone-grey device like a turnip in



his hands, runes of darkest amethyst shining along it in twisting ribbons.

"I asked to be here," he said as he stopped in the middle. "I want to look into your eyes when the magic drains out of you."

Rigel stared at him. "You shame your House, Lee Jordan."

His handsome face contorted. "You-"

"Enough." Voldemort took the device from the boy and waved him back. When the center of the platform was clear, he took the device by the stem and spun it like a top. It whirled across the stage, spitting runes out in patterns much faster than anyone could have drawn them. Hundreds of runes were laid in the space of a minute. It was a marvel, and it told her one thing: he was conscious of the time, too. He knew the wards wouldn't last forever.

Scar stepped forward next. As he walked, he peeled an illusion away from a great cauldron at the back of the stage. Rigel goggled at it-it was the largest she'd ever seen. Scar hefted it carefully toward the center of the runic array. Smoke like dry ice drifted over its surface in cirrus clouds. She didn't recognize the brew, but it was certainly in the advanced stage. Coupled with a runic array large enough to fill half the platform... she didn't know what they had planned, but it wasn't casual magic.

Rigel steeled herself for the worst.

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[LmLmLm]

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Lucius tried to follow the rapid argument unfolding beside him, but it was difficult to tear his eyes from the platform where Rigel Black was

being held hostage. Narcissa trembled against him in impotent fury, and he felt much the same.

"They've anchored that ward to Hogwarts herself, Minister, what part of that don't you comprehend?"

Lucius winced. It was not like his lord to be so blunt with the Minister, but then, time was wasting.

"To get through it, we must dismantle the entire ward system around the school," Dumbledore told him. "There is no other way."

Fudge spluttered. "Those wards have stood since the Founders!"

"A child is in danger, Cornelius." Madam Marchbanks spoke sharply.

"But we don't even know what's going on yet! To tear down the Founder's wards just like that-"

"There is no discussion of *if*," Lord Riddle cut in, stark finality in his tone. "Only how."

Dumbledore inclined his head. "Well said, Tom. I will go to the lodestone and begin the unweaving."

"Begin the what-"

A flash of fire and heat prompted a flinch Lucius would deny to his dying breath. When he opened his eyes, Dumbledore was gone.

"Bloody phoenix," Goldentower muttered, wiping soot from his face.

"What on Merlin's green earth..."

Narcissa gripped his forearm hard enough to draw blood beneath his coat. Lucius turned back to the platform, where an array as large as the main foyer in his mansion had appeared out of nowhere.

"How..." he clamped his mouth shut before he could embarrass himself further. Turning to Lord Riddle, he said, "Is there anything we can do?"

The most powerful man Lucius knew clenched his fist helplessly and stared down at the unfolding drama. "Until he unravels the anchors, I can do nothing."

Lucius held his wife close, and thanked every ghost in his family tree that his son had not been selected for the tournament after all.

"I hate this, Lucius," Narcissa whispered for his ears alone.

"Rigel is strong. Believe in him."

The vampire-Voldemort, Rigel kept calling him, and what kind of French demon was that?-drew something small from his robes. A pair of vials, they could see through Rigel's mirror. Filled with... blood. Something sunk in Lucius' chest. Blood magic was never good.

"Recognize this, clever boy? It's yours." The creature tipped a vial over the input array, and the runes captured its contents in floating stasis. The empty vial was tossed aside, and the vampire sneered down at Rigel. "No use taking it now, when it will be so much more potent willingly given."

" *Barty*, " Lord Riddle snarled.

Lucius frowned, trying to follow the logic of his rage, and Narcissa whispered, "The fifth task."

Of course. The final ward had required a blood sacrifice. But that meant...

"They meant him to win." Goldentower said it slowly, somewhat disbelieving. "Someone planned it months in advance, and designed the tasks to culminate in this moment." The man turned a weighty

gaze on Lord Riddle, who drew himself to full height as his nostrils flared.

"Be careful whom you paint with accusations. Barty is a *traitor* and will be dealt with accordingly."

"By which you mean a fair trial and equitable sentence," Goldentower drawled, sarcastic disgust in every syllable.

"The second vial," Marchbanks said suddenly. She looked to Goldentower and they communicated something silently. "You don't think..."

They didn't have to wonder long. Rigel shook with anger as his captor upended the second vial onto the runes. "Your cousin's."

Rigel bucked wildly against the restraints. "If you've touched a hair on Harry's head, I'll-"

"Your *blood cousin*, fool."

"Tonks." The horrified whisper echoed throughout the stadium as Rigel slumped against the podium.

"She squealed like a pig when we cut her throat."

Narcissa went limp beside him. "Andy's child..." she moaned.

"She's alive." Goldentower said it confidently, leaving no room for doubt. "Rigel healed her in time."

" *Silence* ." Riddle was fixated on the platform below, listening hard.

"The ritual is stronger with blood from a living family member-to give consent, so to speak." Voldemort said it slowly, mockingly. Every word was designed to hurt. "It'll anchor on your shared gift, and tear that from you, too."

The redheaded woman stepped forward. Lucius didn't recognize her- didn't recognize any of the interlopers apart from Crouch's misbegotten son-but she had the ragged look of a person who spent too much of their lives in drudgery. She held a weathered tome in both hands and when she spoke, it was with the Old Tongue.

The box was silent as they absorbed the words. Lucius had to till the frozen fields of his youth to recall their significance, but at last, it came to him.

"It's an ancient magical transference ritual," Lucius murmured, in case his lord didn't recognize it. Lord Riddle tilted his head slightly to indicate he was listening. "Its use is strongly discouraged. It will convey a pureblood's magic to a lesser vessel, but was only intended for times of true peril to a family line."

"The gift he speaks of..." It was not a question, but Lucius supplied the answer anyway.

"The boy's Metamorphmism-his cousin shares it." At Riddle's sharp look, he elaborated. "A passive give, as I understand it, and not much under the boy's control. He may be hoping the ritual will amplify it."

Sharp gasps sounded throughout the box as the cauldron on the platform boiled over in ash-grey smoke.

The vampire stepped toward the cauldron, anticipation lighting his ancient features.

"You don't want to do this." Rigel pleaded with the creature, and Lucius' heart burned for him. A scion as powerful and talented as Rigel Black, stripped of his magic before his prime. It was unthinkable. But the ritual was immutable. If Dumbledore didn't work quickly, it would be too late. Squibhood... or worse.

The thing stalking the platform only laughed. It stepped into the cauldron, and its laugh turned to a shriek that slowly choked itself

into silence.

The stadium held its breath as runes all across the array lit up in a blaze of power. The four humans bent to the edges of the circle and added their own power to it. Something writhed in the cauldron, obscured by the ashy mist.

Rigel screamed. He writhed and panted against his bonds, and Lucius had to master his stomach before he could sharpen his Sight and *look* as the ritual sunk its hooks into the child-or tried to. The connection between the cauldron and Rigel was warped, somehow.

"Something is awry," he breathed.

The figure in the cauldron stumbled out into a haze of magic that roiled in the air, seeking but denied an outlet. Rigel screamed again, and it was echoed by the other figures on the platform as magic unfettered burst in an uncontrolled wave from the array. Rigel was pressed to the podium as the others fell to the deck, and the magic was so thick Lucius could see the attractant attempting to pull it all into its powerful ensnarement.

The creature in the center fought through the storm of magic. "WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?"

The smoke from the cauldron cleared, and Lucius sucked in a breath as the figure was revealed-no longer a vampire, but a boy of perhaps seventeen. He turned in slow horror to regard his lord, whose features differed from the creature on the stage only in maturity. Their fury was perfectly matched.

A warning squeeze from Narcissa pulled his attention back to Rigel. The boy watched the newly-risen creature approach, his eyes narrowed against the intensity of the magical winds.

The... thing that looked so much like a young Riddle wrapped its hands around Rigel's neck and squeezed. Lucius braced himself, but

Rigel didn't appear to be suffocating. "His vampiric strength is gone," he heard Goldentower say.

"What. Did. You. Do?"

In the mirror, they could see the hard lines of wrath and fear in the creature's face. Rigel's thin voice echoed through the stadium almost softly.

"You fucked up. The ritual won't work."

The creature turned on one of his own disciples with a howl. "Jordan. Fix this!"

The dark-skinned boy held up his hands in supplication. "The runes are correct, master! It's the boy-or the blood. The s-signatures aren't compatible!"

When it seemed as though the creature would strike his follower, Rigel laughed. It was a coarse, bruised sound, but there was unmistakable humor running through it like a thread of steel.

"Bad idea to use a... signature-sensitive ritual. So... *delicate*, aren't they?"

The creature took up Rigel's wand and attempted to cast with it. When it failed, he tossed the tool aside in utter fury. "Whose blood was that?"

Rigel gave a pained grin. "Not mine."

Narcissa gasped. Lucius bit his lip to keep from doing the same.

Marchbanks was unable to contain herself. "He used someone else's blood in the fifth task? How could he have anticipated...?"

"Draco calls him paranoid," Narcissa murmured.

"Perhaps it has saved him." Lucius held her hand tightly.

"No." Riddle said the word with bleak certainty, even as the creature below snarled.

"Take his blood. We will salvage it."

Barty Jr. advanced on Rigel with his wand outstretched.

"It won't be as strong unwilling," Lucius said, quietly desperate. "He may only get a portion."

Narcissa averted her eyes as Barty Jr. cut one of Rigel's arms free to bleed it. There was a blur of motion, and Barty stumbled back, clutching his stomach where a dark stain spread quickly. The creature let out a cry of anger and bodily hauled the stuck man out of the circle before he could bleed on the runes. Rigel held a knife in the hand that had been freed, and blood dripped from its blade to the decking.

"Here's your... blood," Rigel panted, flicking the tip of the knife toward the array. The masked man moved quickly, and his magic caught the drops just before they touched the circle.

Lucius loosed a frustrated growl. "So close... he almost ruined it." At Narcissa's questioning look, he said quietly, "The ritual can take one mistake, but two?" He shook his head. The boy was brilliant. It really would be such a loss.

The woman kicked the knife from Rigel's fingers, and the Jordan boy punched Rigel across the mouth. His head snapped back into the podium, and blood spluttered from his mouth as he coughed to keep from choking on it.

The dark-skinned boy wiped his fingers through the red liquid dribbling down Rigel's chin and smiled. He bent and smeared it on the runic array. Lucius braced himself as the magic snapped into a controlled whirlwind on the platform. With his Sight, he watched the connection re-establish itself-and sputter into nothing.



"It isn't working." The words felt wondering on his lips. A spark of hope flickered in his breast-and quailed as Lord Riddle erupted into furious Parseltongue. Lucius looked back at the boy with a lurch in his stomach, but no, it really *wasn't* working. And wasn't that a good thing? But then, why did Riddle look more furious than ever?

Jordan cowered on the platform as the creature laid its wrath on him for a second time. "Master, please, the b-blood-it isn't *compatible* . Look at the runes..."

" *You just took it from him* ."

"It's not *pure* ."

Lucius felt his blood freeze. He couldn't mean...

The creature on the platform turned slowly back to Rigel, who stood against the podium with his head held high, trembling and defiant... and not at all confused.

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It was almost funny. Watching their faces contort. Watching their plans fall to pieces.

"How arrogant to use a ritual so specific," she muttered. She felt a little apathetic, watching him scream uselessly at her in his little boy body. "The blood of the family member should match the blood given. The magical signature in the blood given should match the magic being transferred. And most importantly... it's an unequal transfer." She rested her head against the podium, which still pulsed with magic behind her, bloated on all it had absorbed. "Pureblood to halfblood, I believe it was intended. Maybe it could be wrangled to work halfblood to muggleborn. But halfblood to halfblood?" She

closed her eyes and shook her head with a wry smile. "Absolutely not."

The magic roared around them, twisted and shuddering as the ritual tried and failed to contain and channel it. Voldemort screamed over top of it, his voice echoing through her headband to every corner of the stadium.

"You. Are not. Arcturus Black. WHO ARE YOU!?"

It was *almost* funny.

The question she woke with every morning. The question she went to bed with every night.

She was so close to breaking free. Her untethered hand, unwisely cut free, was working on the ropes, but it was clumsy with newly-healed fingers. Her other hand still clutched what she'd portkeyed onto the platform with, what seems like hours ago.

There were still the wards to deal with, but she'd had time now to study them. Blaise had already shown her what to do, and she would think about why her friend's wards had been erected by Riddle's evil construct later. First, she had to get rid of the magical attractant. Free magic wouldn't work. Magic had to be bound by runes to get far from her skin.

Voldemort was bent double against the press of a magical storm of his own making. He wasn't nearly so strong now that he'd abandoned Gavril's body. The vampire lay crumpled beside the cauldron, and she spared a hope that there was something left of him when this was all over.

"I WILL TEAR THE TRUTH FROM YOUR MIND, IMPOSTER!"

*The only power remaining to him*, she thought tiredly. There was no question whether she was strong enough to fight off a Legilimency attack-she wasn't.

Cold hands gripped her neck once more and she felt his entry like a blade to her brain, like nails raking her very soul. Rigel thrashed, trying to use the pain as an anchor, to stay awake and fight. She was so close to finishing. The imbuing was... almost... there...

The violence of his intrusion slammed her into unconsciousness.

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[DjDjDj]

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The enemy came boldly-foolishly. He tore through the snowstorm, leaving scars on the girl's mindscape that would take time and magic to heal.

Dom met him at the foot of the mountain with a forbidding scowl. "No vacancy, mate."

The curiously constructed bit of magic paused, looked him over, and sneered. "I won't be fooled twice by that puppet."

The fragile ego encased in magic attempted to move past him, and Dom pulled the mindscape out from under him.

"Agh!" The enemy construct slammed into a wall and reared back, finding itself suddenly in a crumbling tomb. It took a step back and-

Fell off the top of the mountain. Before it could re-orient itself, it slammed into the side of a pyramid and-

*Bam*, into one of the tunnels beneath the mountain and-

*Splash*, into the Nile. It came up wet and spluttering and found itself buried to the neck in the burning sand.

A Sphinx rested her taloned paw on the enemy's head, and Dom bent down to talk to the head in his most reasonable tone. "You like

magic so much? Here's a little on the house."

He shuddered as the magic clawed its way up from his belly. With a great heave, he spat the little ball of foreign magic onto the construct's sand-crusted head. It caught fire, and smoldered as the enemy construct screamed.

"The resonance burns a bit, doesn't it?" Dom stood and stretched his arms. "Now, about your presence in this realm."

He hauled the construct up by the neck and stared into its soulless eyes. For a single, frozen moment, he let the sentient ball of angst see the endless depths of his existence. He revealed the ages of silence, the terrible question without an answer, the unending, unraveled, aloneness. Then he whispered.

"The position of magical advisor has been filled."

No longer wary of mingling her magic with the vile stuff in his belly, Dom drew on the golden sun and banished the construct through the mists.

*The rest is up to you, kid. WAKE UP.*

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Rigel came to with a gasp. The podium dug into her back, but the knots were loose. She ripped at them with a grunt of effort, trying to get enough slack to slip them from her other arm. Blood rushed back into her limbs with a vengeance, but she dulled the pain automatically, her magic circulating inside her like a caged lioness.

Voldemort was seizing on the platform, the whites of his eyes showing. His minions hovered over him uncertainly; Scar waved his wand intently above the convulsing chest.

*The resonance, Dom whispered with an ominous laugh. It's just different enough from his warped signature to be extremely unpleasant.*

This was her only chance. She gave up on the bonds and focused on the tiny disk clenched in her left hand. She'd imbued it to the hilt, pumping magic straight from her palm too fast for the podium to steal. Rigel shoved just a little more magic into it. The runes started to heat uncomfortably against her skin.

Voldemort began to rouse. The only words he choked out were, "Kill him. *Kill. Him.* "

Barty was still slumped and bleeding, but Jordan started toward her. A device glinted in his hands-it looked sharp.

"The world can watch what happens to filth when it reaches too high," he crooned.

*This is going to hurt,* Rigel acknowledged.

When he was within reach, she slammed her forehead into his. The crack of his skull against the headband sounded like a thunderclap in the stadium. Her knee came up to meet his crotch, her free arm grabbed the device from his limp hands, and she used the sharp end to cut the remainder of her bonds in one precise slice.

She dropped the disk and dove.

The pedestal latched onto the artifact that pulsed to the brim with power. It was pulled into the stone-

And exploded.

Rigel threw up a shield at her back and knew the magical attractant had been destroyed when it held. She heard Jordan scream as the shards of the podium found him unprepared. Cracks and booms and

unintelligible light filled the platform as dozens of overpowered fireworks went off all at once, right on top of one another.

She couldn't hear anything but static, couldn't see beyond an impression of overwhelming light and force, but then, one color cut through all the rest.

A beam of green light, coming right for her.

*Miscalculation*, was all she could think as the Killing Curse washed out the world.

Heat in her chest, and she wondered-was this death? This light, so bright and unending; this warmth, like a searing sun setting in her heart.

She took a breath. Two breaths.

The light receded enough to identify the source-her necklace. Her mother's amulet was *glowing* . It was the burning in her chest. It had *stopped* the unstoppable curse.

The fireworks crackled out. Scar stared at his wand and everyone else stared at her.

She clung to the heartbeat in her veins and the air in her breath. Everything else could be wondered at later. Rigel unleashed her magic at last.

It blew the others back like a jet-stream, clearing the way to the nearest corner of the wards. Only one person was necessary to take it down from the inside. Rigel took the steps almost serenely.

She reached out to the anchoring runes and *ripped* . The wards resisted, like stakes frozen into the ground, but Rigel's will was stronger than the pull of whatever ley line they were tied into. With a groan, the wards rippled and strained, but they. Gave. Way.

A strange sort of vindictive pleasure rose in her as the wards shattered into a thousand shards of magic. The trapped little girl who had to be saved last year had broken the cage herself this time.

The roar of the crowd slammed into her. She could see everything clearer, now. The people in the stands, the Minister gaping just above her from his box. Riddle looked ready to flay her alive, and the Malfoys-they didn't seem to recognize her at all. Aurors rushed the stage. Scar saw them coming, looked at the injured Barty and Jordan, and apparated away with the convulsing construct in his arms. The redheaded woman was a beat behind him.

The anti-apparition wards were down. It took her a moment to realize what that meant.

Aurors started toward her, but an explosion outside the stadium turned every head but one.

In a sort of trance, she saw Sirius coming across the platform toward her. His hands were bloodied, as though he'd beat them against the wards. She reached up with numb fingers and pulled the transmitter off her head. She tossed it to the platform floor and summoned her wand, which lay abandoned on the other side of the stage. Sirius's face was so close she could see the exact moment it crumpled in disbelief.

She turned on the spot, and felt the whoosh of displaced air as his fingers almost caught her.

She didn't go far.

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All around him, people shouted. They'd been shouting and panicking ever since Rigel touched that cup.

Draco held Pansy's hand, because he didn't know what else to do. His first instinct, when they realized something was wrong, had been to find his parents, but what could they do that Dumbledore and Riddle weren't already trying? He had to believe that Rigel would get out of it-he always had before.

And then, without any warning, Rigel wasn't Rigel. Or he was, but something really messed up was going on. A man shot the Killing Curse at him, and he had never heard Pansy scream like that before. He never wanted to hear it again.

Nothing made any sense after that. Rigel wasn't dead. Rigel tore down what seemed to be every ward for miles, and suddenly people were shouting about the stands being unstable. And they were shouting other things that he didn't want to hear.

"Are they going to arrest him?"

"How is he not *dead*? "

"He's some kind of undead-"

"He's a monster!"

Draco was barely holding it together under the absolute tsunami of emotions rioting around him. His friends weren't helping in the slightest. Blaise was pale, his lips white as he pressed them together against whatever words wanted to come out.

"Why did he run?" Millicent moaned. "Rigel, you idiot, you never run."

"Course he ran," Theo snarled. "Millie, you saw the ritual fail. If he stays here, it'll be just like Greengrass! Worse, even. You could tell he *knew* it."



"Shut up," Draco snapped. "We don't know anything yet."

"You can't be that stupid-"

"Be *quiet*, Theodore." Pansy jumped into the argument with vehemence. "You cannot possibly presume to know circumstances-"

Draco tuned them out. He couldn't think. He pushed his way through the stands, not caring who he elbowed on his way to the stairs. As he rounded the first landing, he saw Sirius Black, kneeling with his head bowed on the winner's platform. A green headband clutched in his fingers.

He shook his head to erase the image. *Not my problem. I've got to find Rigel.*

Rigel. Where would Rigel go?

He slipped out of the chaos of the stadium, running as fast as he could back toward the castle. He passed a team of Aurors with tracking crups fanning out across the grounds.

"Young apparators can't go very far-search the forest!"

Draco cursed his own laziness for not learning to apparate over the summer like his father suggested. Still, he hadn't trained all those mornings for nothing. His legs soared over the flagstones of the entrance hall. He pounded down the stairs and flew through the dungeon corridors on wings of desperation.

The world had gone crazy. Rigel was a dizzying mess of contradictions, but a few fundamental truths wouldn't shift, no matter what else had.

He'd never leave without his potions kit.

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She collapsed on her bed, the breath coming in short gasps between her ribs. For one, keening moment she wanted to cry.

There was no time.

She pointed her wand at the door and locked it with the strongest charm she knew. Her eyes traced the room. First, the bed. Slipping to the floor, she vanished her blankets, bedsheets, and pillows. The mirror went into her pocket.

The trunk was next. She slammed open the lid and rifled through it, deciding moment to moment what to vanish and what to take. The uniforms she wore, Archie's underclothes and socks-all vanished. No item of clothing survived, save for her father's cloak. With a mental apology, she vanished the shoes Draco had occasionally lent her.

She tore through the rest of the room. Her toiletries were removed from the bathroom, her towel-even the rug had to go. Anything she'd touched or might have shed essence on.

Her school bag was the last. Emptied of papers, notes, and books. All of it vanished along with every letter she'd ever kept-all but the Map. She swung the potions kit over her shoulder-

The door slammed open. She whirled, and caught Draco in the doorway, the knife Sirius had once given him shaking in his hand.

His eyes took in the room, the missing objects, and he shook his head slowly. "Rigel, what are you doing?"

"I don't have time to explain right now, Draco. I have to go."

"No. You should stay."

"I *can't* ." She pleaded with her eyes, begged him to understand.

He took a step toward her, empty hand outstretched. "You've been through hell just now, Rye. Everyone will understand you panicked, but don't make it worse. Just come with me and explain."

"I can't explain."

"Everything will be like it was," he said.

She shook her head helplessly. "I can't... they all heard."

"That psychopath doesn't know anything about you," Draco said firmly. "We'll prove you're who you are. Here-" He held out the dagger, hilt toward her. "Take it. It will prove you're a Black. We can prove it to them..."

She heard the words he wasn't saying. *Please, prove it to me .*

She wanted to. She wanted to take all the doubt and confusion in his eyes and vanish it like everything else she'd touched. She held her hand out and moved it slowly toward the dagger. Perhaps she could overpower the recognition spell. Trick the mechanics, somehow...

Before she'd even touched it, the hilt turned an angry red and Draco hissed as it burned his fingers. She closed her fist and felt her heart solidify.

"I can't. Because it's true."

"No." He dropped the dagger to the carpet and shook his head angrily. "What does an old knife know?"

"Draco." She caught his gaze and held it. "It's *true* ."

"I don't understand. Are you a bastard?"

She shook her head. "I'm not related to the Blacks at all. I'm not a pureblood-I'm not even English."

Draco flinched. "Did... did Rigel get you to do the tournament for him?"

Her face pinched and her eyes burned. "No. I've always been here. I'm just not... I wanted-" She blew out a shaky breath. "It doesn't matter what I wanted. I have to leave, now, Draco. I'm sorry."

"No, Rigel. We'll figure something out-"

"Don't you get it?" she snapped. He stared at her, and she said it as clearly and slowly as she could. "That's not even my name."

Understanding, cold and unforgiving, began to dawn at last in his eyes. She swept the room one last time, making certain she hadn't forgotten anything incriminating. When she turned back to her friend, he looked at her, lost. She had set him utterly adrift.

There was nothing she could do about it.

"You won't look for me," she said, building ice in careful layers with her words.

"I can't just forget everything-"

"You won't look for me, because I'm calling in your Life Debt."

Draco's face went white. "You can't."

"I, who saved you from the Sleeping Sickness, do hereby claim the debt of life you owe me." Her voice didn't shake, didn't crack like her insides were cracking. "You and your family, having taken on the debt in kind, shall not look for the boy you know as Rigel Black. You shall not seek news of him, search for signs of him, or participate in hunting for him at the direction of another. Through this, your debt is discharged. So mote it be."

Light flared between them, and Draco clutched at his heart. She wondered if a weight had settled there as surely as it had nested in her breast.

"How could you?" he whispered. "Rigel..."

"There is no Rigel."

"There was, though. We were friends."

She shook her head, and pushed him a little closer to hate. "That was just an elaborate lie, Draco Malfoy. Rigel Black isn't real. And I don't have any friends."

*A clean break*, she thought, her own heart breaking. She turned on the spot, and was gone before his knees hit the floor.

The tears made the journey with her, but didn't fall until she reappeared in the shadow of the clock tower. She knew she had to gather her strength, had to apparate a few more times to get safely away, but her mind couldn't focus past the look of betrayal on Draco's face.

She vomited into the bushes, vanished it shakily with a jerk of her wand, and sobbed into her fist until she could breathe again.

Before she was ready for the next jump, she felt anti-apparition spells spring like a trap over the school. They'd begun re-weaving the wards already. She pulled out the Map with shaking hands and processed the dotted lines of strangers in every direction. They'd set up a perimeter.

She had to get out.

Her mind raced through options, each more outlandish than the last.

She could don the cloak and try to sneak past highly alert Aurors who were on the lookout for someone sneaking around. She could fight the Aurors, and hope she got away before someone she couldn't overpower arrived.

She could hide in the Room of Requirement. She could brew Polyjuice and when a month had gone by and the search had died

down, she could take the form of someone else and just... walk out.

Only she didn't have a month to lose hiding.

She could summon a broom, hope no one noticed it flying around unescorted, and ride it beyond the edges of the wards under the cloak.

The more she looked up at the dark night sky, the more attractive that option seemed. It might be easy. There were a few Aurors on brooms, but their patrols weren't seamless. She could slip through.

She closed her eyes and tried not to feel like a coward. Maybe Draco was right, and running away was the wrong thing to do. She wanted to, though. The desire to escape, to just flee, fluttered like wings in her ribcage. For once, she wanted to do the easy thing, not the hard thing. For once, she wanted to give into the urge that had been building in her quietly for years. She wanted to fly away, and never look back.

The urge became a wish, became a need, and she-

She became a bird.

All the thoughts in her head went quiet. Her wings reached out to touch the sky, and the sky was the only thing that mattered. Forward was the only direction left.

Her tears dried up in the wind.

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[end of chapter thirteen].

A/N: So. That one took a while to get out. For about six months, Harry was lost in that maze and I didn't know how to get her out. But she is free now. Thanks to everyone still reading! I know it's a bit of a cliff there, but I'm going to try to get the final chapter for book four done really quickly. It's all falling action, but man does it fall.

I hope everyone is staying safe this year. I know how hard it's been,  
and I wish you all a good holiday season.

Violet

# Chapter 14

**A/N:** This chapter is dedicated to Marisol. Happy Birthday!

## **The Futile Façade:**

### **Chapter 14:**

He'd been on the hunt all night. The coordinates they traced took them back to the boy's dorm room, then the clock tower, then nothing.

The boy had found some other means of escape.

Ground sweeps turned up nothing; no brooms had been recorded leaving the hastily erected perimeter wards. Even the two they'd captured at the scene-Jordan and Crouch Juniors-only knew as much as everyone else had witnessed. Moody was handling the investigation into this Voldemort person; budding Dark Lords were just his cup of tea.

James was personally selected to head the search for the boy once known as Rigel Black. A halfblood masquerading as a pureblood scion, fooling everyone in British society for... well, they really didn't know how long. The Minister was embarrassed, which meant the hunt for RBC-the Rigel Black Child-was his top priority.

He'd begged off shift nearing noon the next morning, citing the need for sleep. He left the hastily compiled task force plotting a timeline and drafting lists of potential character witnesses. On his way out of the office, he chartered an emergency international portkey. The trainee on duty didn't question the coordinates; crazier things would be done in the midst of this mess.

When he Flooed through to Potter's Place to check in with Lily, Sirius met him at the grate.



"Anything?"

James shook his head. "He's in the wind."

"What next?" Sirius rocked on his heels, looking one loud noise from bolting. James felt sick just imagining what he must be thinking-his son was missing, wanted for questioning in a case of blood identity theft, and Sirius had no idea how long ago the swap had been made. There was no way to know if Archie was complicit or incapacitated-or alive at all.

It wasn't often his official responsibilities and family duties collided. James felt the tension in the line he walked as he removed his Head Auror badge and drew the portkey out of his pocket. "Harry."

Sirius nodded, eyes shadowed. Harry was the only person closer to Archie than Sirius. If anyone other than Archie himself knew something about this doppelganger, it was she.

"James." Lily came through the open doorway, Addy on her hip. James met her with an embrace, feeling the weight of the last twelve hours ease somewhat as she burrowed her face into his neck. "Is there any word?"

"Not yet. I'm going to talk to Harry."

"To America?" Lily drew back, a crease between her brows. "It can't wait until she's home next week?"

He shook his head sharply. "This is going to get out of control fast. There's already talk of blood-testing the whole school, and only Sirius' lordship has shielded him from official questioning. That won't last. If there's anything Harry knows... anything she even suspects, I have to know."

"As her father, or as the Head Auror?"

He grimaced. "Both."

Sirius put a hand on his shoulder. "Best we go." His voice held a harsh tremor, a frisson of horror that had not yet come to rest in his mind.

Lily bit her lip, but nodded. "Quickly, then. You won't be the only ones to think of her."

James pressed their foreheads together, kissed Addy's cheek, and stepped back. He held out the other end of the portkey to Sirius, knowing it was unprofessional and potentially unwise to bring the shattered man along. He also knew if he didn't offer Sirius a direction, his friend would pursue an even less wise one on his own; better Sirius felt he was part of the investigation.

At the activation phrase, they were swept into the distorted shadow-hand of magic and borne painfully through a rip in the world.

Sirius heaved as they hit the manicured lawn of the American Institute of Magic. Cross-Atlantic portkeys carried a small risk of scrambling body parts, but it was the magical backlash that deterred most from resorting to such travel. Still, James winced to see the usually collected man so affected by international travel; his brother in all but blood was reeling, and it showed. Sirius kept what little there was in his stomach and pulled himself upright on shaking legs. James swept the dew from their robes and cast a glance around the unfamiliar grounds. He and Lily had seen it only in pictures. The main entrance was easy to spot: a set of handsome double doors shining in the early morning light, and he set off toward them at a brisk pace.

A witch with Molly Weasley's build and stare met them at the entrance. She wore American style short-robes in Healer's blue and took in his distinctively cut uniform swiftly, eyes lingering on the spot where his badge ought to hang. "What business does the British Ministry have at our school? I hope you know we require a warrant for any searches."

James chose his words carefully. "Britain has no official business here yet. I've simply come to speak to my kid. Harry Potter."

"This is most unusual. The children have just started their final exams."

"I don't care," James said.

"Family emergency," Sirius put in softly.

The witch looked between them somewhat mistrustfully. James could tell she didn't like the way Sirius' eyes shifted restlessly between her face and the school. "I see. And do you have identification to prove your relationship, Mr. Potter?"

"It's Lord Potter," Sirius muttered. If anything, the woman's face closed further.

James gave an apologetic grimace and reached into his robes for his wand. It was internationally registered, as his work often took him abroad. "Will this do?"

She took out her own wand and ran a standard identification charm. "Mahogany, eleven inches, registered to Auror James Potter. Very well." She handed his wand back and produced a list out of thin air. After a moment's consultation, she said, "Potter is taking his first exam in auditorium 1B, right down the first hallway-"

James' heart stopped.

*His?*

They'd gotten to his little girl, too.

James pushed past the witch at a sprint, ignoring her startled cry. He rounded the corner and flew down the corridor with darkness pushing the edges of his thoughts closer together.

*This one won't get away.*

He burst into the lecture hall. A dozen heads looked up from their papers, but his gaze caught the one in the third row wearing his daughter's face. The professor shouted something; James didn't hear it. He took a bit of pleasure watching the boy scramble up from the bench as he stalked up the stairs toward him. Whatever he saw in James' face must have terrified him.

"I can explain-"

James levered the imposter up by his collar and growled. *"Where is she?"*

One of the students-Hermione, of course-tries to stun him. James batted the spell away without loosening his grip.

"Put him down!" the girl shrieked. Two other students grabbed her wand arm before she could hurl something stronger, but James had his focus entirely on the gasping body-snatcher in his daughter's school robes.

"In three seconds, I'm going to forget I'm an Auror and you're going to regret the day you were born if you don't-"

The boy choked, hands scrambling at James' wrist. "P-please... Unc..le..Ja-"

James dropped him like a hot stone.

"Arch?" Sirius came up the stairs beside him. James hated the way the hope clawed up into his friend's voice.

The boy looked between them, swallowing against the pain in his throat convulsively. "Dad? What's going on?"

Sirius fairly vibrated with conflicting impulses. His hand reached out shakily, but James held an arm between them. "Security question," he snapped.

Sirius licked his lips. "What... what animals did I find in your room over winter hols?"

The green-eyed boy regarded them for a long moment, then said quietly, "A fox and a raven."

Sirius released a ragged sob and collapsed on his son, holding him as though he would never again let go. James was left to clench the air between his fists, everything he'd assumed re-evaluated between heartbeats.

As Sirius cried into the boy's- *Archie's* AIM uniform, James tried not to imagine where his own child could be. Was she the imposter at Hogwarts? The idea was dizzying. Devastating.

"You're coming with us, Arch," he managed hoarsely.

The professor protested once more. "I demand you cease this violent interruption into our final examination, Aurors. Whatever business you have with Mr. Potter-"

Sirius let out a hic-cupping laugh and James felt his expression fold into something dangerous. Before he could refute the woman, Archie pushed back from his father's embrace.

"Something's happened to Rigel, hasn't it? Is he... dead?" Archie's voice cracked on the last word and the fear in his eyes made James' stomach sink.

He shook his head slowly, and the relief in Archie's face was staggering.

"Thank Merlin," the boy whispered.

Hermione could contain herself no longer. She reached across Sirius to pull Archie a little closer toward her. "What's happening, Harry? What are they talking about? If you don't want to go with them, I *won't* let them take you."

Archie looked at the girl, willing to fight two grown wizards for him, and his eyes glistened. To James' frustration, the boy attempted a wry smile. "Somehow, I thought it would be more dramatic than this."

"It *was* dramatic, I assure you," James bit out.

Archie winced. He took his classmate's hand in both of his and let out a shaky breath. "You're going to read some terrible things about me in the paper. Just know... it wasn't ever what they'll say it was, and I'll never regret coming here and being your friend."

The girl scowled fiercely. "Harry, what-"

"That's not his name," James snapped. "Harry is my daughter's name."

"But he *is* your daughter," Hermione said, still scowling. The contradiction in gender appeared to mean nothing to her.

Archie squeezed her hand and shook his head. "No... I'm not. My name is Archie, and I was never Harry Potter."

Hermione took half a step back, visibly unnerved, and Archie dropped her hand.

"I'll explain it all in a letter, if you'll read it."

First, he would be explaining it to his father, then him and Lily, then likely all of magical Britain.

Hermione searched Archie's eyes for a long moment, and lifted her chin. "I'll expect the letter on my desk by Monday morning."

"I promise," Archie whispered.

James put a hand on his shoulder and steered him toward the door.

"Your exam-" the professor said weakly, clearly unclear on what to do. The witch who had met them at the entrance put a hand on her

colleague's arm and shook her head.

"From the sound of it, that's the least of his troubles." She met James' gaze with a steely challenge. "Now that it has been established this is not your son, Mr. Potter, I'm no longer sure you have the right to remove him from our campus."

"He's *my* son," Sirius growled. He moved between the two witches and Archie faster than they could draw their wands. "This is the Heir to the House of Black and you will not be preventing his return to England."

"He's also a person of interest in an open investigation into blood-identify theft."

"That's not a crime here in the States," the blue-robed Healer argued.

"It was a crime where they committed it. Consider this a lawful extradition." He pulled out his badge and held it up for her scrutiny.

The witch looked regretfully toward Archie, who shook his head quickly. "It's all right, Healer Beauchamps. This is my dad and uncle, and... I am in a lot of trouble." He fell into a deep bow. "I'm very sorry for lying to you all these years."

*Years* . The word stuck James like a physical blow.

He clamped down on the boy's shoulder and near-dragged him the rest of the way out of the auditorium. As the doors swung shut behind them, he backed the boy up against the corridor wall and got right into his face. With a voice he'd never used on his nephew before, he demanded. "Where. Is. Harry?"

Archie's chin set stubbornly. "If you don't know... then she's safe."

" *Archie*," James snarled.

"The mirror," Sirius put in quickly. "Does she have it?"

Archie shook his head. "No, we gave it to Rigel."

"Who is Rigel?"

"What is going *on*, Archie?" Sirius added, desperately confused, but increasingly present as his worst fears receded.

Archie was the picture of miserable guilt. "It's... complicated. What happened at Hogwarts?"

In his relief and confusion, Sirius forgot the first rule of interrogation-give no information until you know the extent of *their* information. "Some maniac crashed the last task and tried to drain your-his-magic. Whatever game you were playing was blown right out the water when they realized *he* wasn't *you* ."

Archie had gone white again. "Did-did they take Rigel's magic?"

"We don't think so, considering he pulled down centuries-old wards and apparated away."

"Enough, Sirius," James interrupted. "Archie, who is that person? Is it..." He had to ask. "Is it Harry?"

Sirius' face fell into dismayed shock. "No..."

"No!" Archie shook his head vigorously, suddenly full of information. "No, it's just this kid we met. He wanted to go to Hogwarts, and I didn't really want to. Harry let me take her place here, and she..."

"Where?" James had to hold himself back from shaking the boy as he hesitated. "Tell me where she is right now, Arcturus Black, or so help me-"

Archie looked to the side, shame hooding his gaze. "I don't know for certain, but she's usually in London."

"London." James gave Archie a flat look.



"Diagon Alley," he muttered. "If you let me get my things from Pettingill, I have the address."

James released him, fighting the relief in his chest that wanted to lull him into relaxation. His girl was fine. Probably wondering what to do next, but fine. In so much trouble she was never leaving the house again-but fine. And Archie was fine. So Sirius would be fine. The rest of it mattered less.

"Quickly," he bit out. "We have a return portkey in twenty minutes."

"I'll go with him." Sirius offered as though it weren't obvious he wasn't letting Archie out of his sight anytime soon.

James made for the lawn, head down as he tried to reconcile everything Archie had just said with what had been revealed the night before. Some kid-and when had they even met and *when* had they switched?-had taken Archie's place at Hogwarts. Archie was at AIM. And Harry was...

His mind tallied everything in a single column. The Guild internship. Her entrepreneurial ventures. All the time spent in Diagon Alley over the summer hols. The Hurst kid.

Harry was brewing potions. It always came back to that.

Archie and Sirius hurried back across the lawn. Archie was explaining something with a guilty tone.

"-haven't seen the paper yet this morning. Hermione and I were up all night studying for our finals, and I figured Rigel would give a ring on the mirror if anything this bad had happened. I don't know why he wouldn't warn me..."

"So you haven't heard from him?" James cut in sharply.

"Mirror's been quiet the past few days. Nothing seemed off when we spoke last."

James grunted.

"Uncle James, I'm sorry this all-"

James shot him a dark look. "I'm not prepared to take your apology until we find Harry. If anything's happened to her..."

Archie understood that he would never be forgiven unless Harry was all right. "I take full responsibility." As the portkey lit from within, James heard him add under his breath, "Just as she would for me."

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It was hours of flying before she was calm enough to change back. Well into the wild Scottish countryside, she collapsed in a heap of limp limbs and disheveled clothing. The leaves of the trees rustled just like the maze, sending shivers of energy down her spine.

Rest was a luxury she had not yet earned.

She pushed to her feet, straightened her robes, and turned on the spot. Again and again, gasping for breath between each jump like a sprinter running consecutive races. When the black edges of her vision receded, she jumped again, knowing even as she ran against the clock that her deadline was no clear thing.

Archie was the only one who could tell them where she was-would be. It would take time for anyone to figure out he was at AIM. She may have to lay low for several days before Archie realized what had happened and came forward. She dared not use the mirror-it was exploitable by à priori magic. While conversations couldn't be replayed, the right spell would reveal how often and for how long the mirrors were connected. Archie had to retain plausible deniability-communicating with 'Rigel' after he was revealed a felon would not help his case.

She had to trust her cousin would follow their plan.

Hours later, Harry leaned against the crumbling wall of an alley in downtown London. The sun threatened to rise at any moment. Her legs trembled in the wake of the chain apparition, but there was no time to strengthen them. She pulled her cloak, temporarily spelled to appear a nondescript grey, tighter around her as she stepped shakily out onto the street. The hood was deep and too heavy to blow in the wind; it easily shadowed a face that no longer served any purpose.

The Leaky Cauldron was sparsely populated at the early hour, but every customer she passed had their face in a newspaper. She tried not to look, but the headline-HOGWARTS HALFBLOOD FLEES THE SCENE-WHO IS RBC?-shouted at her. The picture was blurry, but it showed her fingers curled into claws as she tore through the wards imprisoning-

She hurried out of the pub, breathing heavily through her nose to keep the dizziness at bay.

Diagon Alley was similarly depopulated. She moved as quickly as she dared along the long street, keeping her eyes to the cobblestones. As she passed the intersection where one of the great mirrors had been established for the tournament, she had to consciously resist the urge to hunch guiltily. A hastily draped length of fabric did not disguise what had happened; broken glass littered the street. Someone had shattered it.

Harry moved past it with a purpose and didn't pause until she reached the steps of Gringotts.

The goblin at the door held his spear across it when she tried to enter. "No withdrawals today."

She put some gravel in her voice as she asked, "Why not?"

"Anti-volatility measure. Due to recent political events," the goblin drawled.

"That's fine. I'm here to deposit."

He peered distrustfully into the shadows of her hood, but stood aside.

She was approached by one of the tellers as soon as she entered- that alone was unusual enough to tell her the goblins were unnerved. "Business?" he asked briskly.

"I'd like to deposit something in my family vault."

"Name?"

"Potter."

"Wand?"

She faltered. Her wand was registered to Archie's name. Instead, she held out a bare hand. "Will blood suffice?"

He sliced her palm with the tip of his spear. "Wait here."

She hadn't been to her family vault since she was a small child, and never without her parents. Her personal vault was a low-security option: close to the surface, and not requiring identification beyond an account number and signature. That trip would not suffice for what she had to do.

The goblin returned with a clean spear, evidently satisfied by the tests they'd run. "Right this way, Ms. Potter."

She climbed into the cart he specified. As he climbed in after her, she saw his nostrils flare and wondered if he could smell the blood on her clothes. She curled into herself and ignored his stare.

The cart took off with a rattling jerk and plummeted into the darkness.

It was a much longer ride than she was used to. Torches appeared only sporadically to throw their surroundings into sharp relief. She had brief impressions of honeycomb caverns, ornately carved pillars, and the heat of recent dragon fire. Then they turned a corner, and a waterfall splashed down over the cart, soaking them both.

The cart screeched to a halt and Harry had to gulp air desperately and brace against the rail to keep from hurling. The nausea was much worse than she expected; it felt as though a colony of peaceful snakes in her belly had been tossed like lo mein. When it passed, Harry shook the Thief's Downfall from her eyes and looked up. The goblin had his spear at her throat. "Reveal yourself, imposter."

She raised a hand slowly to grasp the edge of the cloak and pushed it back. The goblin's expression did not change; nor did he strike. Harry gave a vapid smile. "Can you blame a girl for her beauty charms?"

"All such magic must be disclosed prior to visiting the deep vaults."

"I forgot," she said with a sniff. "You already tested my blood. Do you really want to test it again?"

The goblin scowled at her, but retreated to his side of the cart and touched a pendant around his neck. The cart took off again, slowly at first, but with increasing speed.

Harry drew her hood back over her face, trying not to think about how different her hair felt beneath her fingers as she tucked it away. She felt a little bit drunk, all the weight in her body having shifted subtly beneath her clothes, and the jostling cart was not helping the feeling of being suddenly off-balance.

The goblin yanked on the handle and the cart screeched in a piercing protest as it came to rest before the Potter family vault. Harry nearly tripped getting out of the vehicle-there was an inch of extra room in her boots now, and her limbs felt as ungainly as a newborn colt's.

She made a show of digging in her bag, stomping her foot in irritation, and turning back to the cart with a flourish. "I forgot to put it in my bag! Ugh."

"You will not be entering the vault?" the goblin growled. His irritation was not an act.

"Sorry, no. I'll have to come back another time."

She didn't know for certain, but she thought the cart took off even faster on the way back up.

The sun was fully risen when she stepped blinking through the marble doors. Diagon bustled, an unspoken tension thrumming beneath its usual energy-or perhaps that was Harry, projecting her own turmoil outward. She peered with a frown up the long street until she realized she was straining her eyes hard enough to give herself a headache.

*Merlin, I forgot how poor my vision was.* She'd have to hope she had a pair of glasses at her flat.

She kept the hood up, but wasn't too worried about anyone catching sight of her face. No one could connect her with Rigel Black now.

Her feet found the familiar turn down Knockturn Alley. She took the less commonly used alleys on her way to Dogwood Lane and didn't see anyone she knew. On the other side of Kyprioth Court, she felt most of the anxiety drain from her shoulders.

She stopped at the nearest market and bought a bag of basic pantry items without bargaining. At the corner of Dogwood Lane, she loitered unobtrusively until she was sure none of her neighbors had their windows open. She stole up the steps to her apartment and fit the rarely used key into the dusty lock with difficulty. Finally, she shut the door behind her and sank to the floor.

Her head came to rest against her knees, and she took several long breaths. Part of her had trouble accepting that she'd actually made it. The rest of her had been stuck on a loop since the lights of Hogwarts fell away beneath her.

It was over.

Everything was over.

And yet-there was still work to do.

Harry dragged herself upright. The food went to the cupboards, a couple pieces of fruit artfully displayed on the counter. She pulled down a dish and placed it in the sink as though dirty.

In the bedroom she dug out a set of clothes Flint's mother had left behind. Relieved that she wouldn't have to conjure anything, she started the shower in the bathroom and shucked the filthy garments from her back as the pipes groaned. She Vanished them as they hit the floor. It stung to lose the jersey the twins had given her, the gloves from Blaise, and Edmund and Aldon's cloak, but that small pain was barely a breeze in the hurricane of hurt that was her heart. Nearly everything she wore as Rigel had to go.

She took the beacon from her ear and what was left of the amulet from around her neck, carefully placing them in her bag with the other items she couldn't bear to destroy. Draco's gauntlets went in there, too, nested with the Invisibility Cloak, Map, and mirror. The watch from Archie. Her wand. All of it would be wrapped in mokeskin, hidden away until the world no longer searched for Rigel Black.

Harry sank to her knees on the bathroom floor, a boot in each hand. She knew she had to, but...

*Are you crying over your shoes?*

*Shut up, Dom.*

She shook the tears from her cheeks and Vanished them both ruthlessly. Her fingers closed over air and she drew another long breath. She was just tired, that was all. She'd get a new pair of boots, a set untainted by Rigel's history.

The steam was visible in the air, so she pushed herself upright again and stepped gingerly into the spray. The water swept over her, erasing the last vestiges of Rigel from her skin. The sweat, blood, and tears of four long years circled the drain almost indifferently. Sharp stinging drew her attention to every scrape and gash, and though she didn't recognize the body she inhabited, she healed it carefully.

She left the shower's thrall after she fell asleep standing up.

Mrs. Flint's clothes didn't fit perfectly, but they were close enough to resize. She ran her fingers through her hair compulsively, eyeing the fogged-over mirror with trepidation. She couldn't avoid her reflection forever.

Her hand slid through the condensation smoothly, and Harriett Potter looked back at her, a girl caught unaware. Her eyes . Had they always been so bright? Against a bloodshot-red backdrop, her natural green looked as vibrant as an emerald.

Her mother's bone structure peeked out from beneath soft cheeks, and a full lower lip gave her a somewhat dissatisfied moue. No one could mistake this girl for a boy. She supposed that was good, all things considered.

Her fingers went to work on the tangles in her hair-the same length but so much curlier, now. She was no hairdresser, but she flipped the part to the opposite side and coaxed the tiniest of growing charms into the tresses to try and cover the way some of it had been sheared. It flopped into her face annoyingly, and for a brief moment she wished Pansy was there to plait it back. The girl in the mirror pressed her lips together. Pansy would never touch her hair again.



Harry hefted her potions kit and took it to the living room to re-pack. Everything associated with Rigel went in a moleskin wrapping at the very bottom of an undetectably extended pocket, and she re-organized the rest of the bag almost automatically. While she was at it, she pulled out a handful of ingredients for a basic strengthening brew and set them on the coffee table.

She had a couple of cauldrons in the cupboard. It took no time at all to set one up in the living room and toss together the base of the potion. With a timer set to the second stage, she curled up on the sofa and sank into its lulling embrace. She could afford a few hours' rest. Maybe there were things she was forgetting, but her brain was too knackered to hold out any longer.

Sleep was what she needed. Everything else could wait.

The front door slamming into its jamb startled her from a dead sleep. Harry tried to summon her wand blearily before she remembered it was packed away in moleskin. She pushed the hair out of her face and froze at the sight of her father silhouetted in righteous anger on her doorstep.

"What's-Dad?" she made a show of stumbling upright, checking the still-simmering cauldron out of the corner of her eye as she stepped toward James uncertainly. The surprise was real, at least-he'd found her much more quickly than she anticipated. She spotted Archie and Sirius on the stairs behind James and allowed her face to fall. "Oh, shite."

"Harry?" James stared, some of the wind seeming to have escaped his sails at the sight of her. His eyes traced her face, got stuck on her eyes, and finally blinked hard. "What does Lily crave when she's pregnant?"

"Ice mice."

James released a long breath and ducked into the small flat. "Thank Godric."

"What's happened?" she looked to Archie, whose expression of utter guilt and misery meant he'd at least partially confessed to the ruse.

Her cousin summoned a grimace as he and Sirius crowded into the living room. "You didn't even watch the task?"

"Can't be seen out of school," she muttered, eyes tightening. "Is Rigel okay?"

"He's gone," Archie said, widening his eyes as though he couldn't quite believe it. Maybe he couldn't-Harry was definitely still processing all that had occurred.

"Gone? What do you mean-"

"Enough. We are not here to chat, Harry." James leveled his Auror-look at her, and Harry affected an appropriately chagrined expression in return. "What in the seven hells is going on? Why are you here and not at school?"

She glanced at Archie, who tucked his chin in the barest of nods. "I've always been here. Since first year."

Sirius made a startled noise. "That long? I thought it was just for the tournament."

Archie shook his head slowly. "We switched before leaving for school, four years ago."

"So all the letters I wrote..." Sirius was pale, his tone just a hair short of accusatory.

Archie's face crumpled with grief. "Rigel always forwarded them to me. But anything about being at Hogwarts... was a lie."

"We've both been lying," Harry offered, trying to take the mountain of guilt from Archie's shoulders. "To all of you. I'm sorry for the lying, but I can't say I'm sorry to have let Archie take my place at AIM."

James scoffed. "I'm sure you had a grand time *skiving*, Harry, but schools exist for a reason; there are things you have to learn, no matter how much you don't want to-"

"I've learned plenty," she shot back, the picture of offended youth. "I'm years ahead of my peers in coursework."

"You think I'm upset about the coursework?" James gestured to the apartment with an exasperated scowl. "Harry, you're living in the lower alleys. Four years with no supervision-do you have any idea what might have happened?"

"I'm fine though, Dad. Nothing happened."

"Fine. You're fine." He repeated the word as though it was stuck in his teeth. "Well, the rest of us aren't fine. Nothing is *fine*, Harry, because there's an international manhunt and our family is about to be caught in the crosshairs-"

"Prongs." Sirius put a hand on James' shoulder and waited until his friend had visibly calmed before turning to Harry and Archie and asking, "Who was going to Hogwarts in Archie's place?" He leveled them with an earnest stare. "It's important that we know. This is bigger than you probably understand right now."

Harry creased her forehead in a perplexed frown. "He said it was better if we didn't know his name."

"He approached you?" James asked sharply.

"Well, Archie met him at Junior Quidditch League the spring before school..."

Archie picked up the thread of the story with a nod. "Yeah, we were in the medic tent together. I had to get my arm patched up, and he was icing his shoulder. We got to talking about schools, and he was envious that I got to go to a school like Hogwarts. Said his family had fallen on hard times and couldn't afford to send him to their ancestral

school, so he was being homeschooled. I felt bad for him, but didn't really think much of it. Then..."

"It was my idea," Harry confessed. "I didn't want to go to AIM. Their potions program is garbage. I knew I could learn more on my own. Archie *did* want to go to AIM, though. But people would notice if he never showed up at Hogwarts. So, I thought, what if there was someone who wanted to go to Hogwarts, but couldn't?"

"And I remembered that other kid!" Archie put in. "I found him at the next match and just asked him point-blank if he wanted to go to Hogwarts. And he said yes."

Sirius and James exchanged disbelieving looks. "You just asked some random kid you met at the International Quidditch League to pretend to be you for four years?"

"Seven years," Harry said, diplomatically ignoring the way her father's face darkened.

"And yeah, pretty much. I mean, at first we weren't taking it too seriously." Archie rubbed his neck sheepishly. "We exchanged letters, and it was almost like a game. We talked and talked about it, until it just... didn't seem so crazy. By the end of the summer, when I couldn't convince you to let me go with Harry, we just... did it."

"What address did you send the letters to? What name did you use?" James ticked the questions off his fingers. "What team was he playing for? What-"

"All right, Uncle James, slow down," Archie said. "Let me think. When we met, I think he said his name was Romeo? Romello? Something with an R-that's why it was easier for him to use my middle name. We didn't use real names in our letters, though."

"He was Rook," Rigel supplied.

Archie nodded. "I was Knight and you were... Bishop? Yeah. We used post office addresses. Harry would pick up and mail our letters from the Diagon Alley post when she went to the apothecary."

"We sent his to the post office in Paris, but it took weeks to get an answer sometimes-I'm not sure he lived near there at all." She said it thoughtfully, as though she hadn't considered the matter very carefully before.

"So he played for one of the French teams?" James clarified. He had a notebook out and had jotted down every detail they relayed.

Archie scrunched up his face. "I... maybe? Which one had a big cat as a mascot? A tiger, or maybe a lion? Or maybe the team was from Lyon? It was definitely blue and white. Or blue and yellow. I think."

"Was he in your age bracket?" Sirius asked. He had a suspicious glint in his eye.

They exchanged a bemused glance. Archie shook his head. "No, I think he was at least one above me."

"He was definitely older," Harry confirmed. She pretended not to notice the way Sirius' face hardened.

James dutifully wrote it down. "Did he have an accent?"

"A slight one, maybe, but by the time we met again to make the switch, I think it was gone. I don't remember it very well, though. It was so long ago," Archie said mournfully. "We never thought it would go so far, but once we did it, there was really no turning back..."

Harry drew their attention with an earnest sigh. "We thought it was the perfect solution. You'd think Archie was at Hogwarts, that I was at AIM, and we all got what we wanted. What was the harm?"

"He was a *halfblood*," James growled.

She froze. Her eyes darted between the two adults frantically. "Oh."

Archie paled several shades, and she wondered if he'd used his metamorphism to make it so dramatic. "That's..."

"Neglected to mention that, did he?"

Harry winced. "Did they arrest him?"

"He ran."

She winced again. "I am starting to appreciate the amount of trouble we're in."

"Welcome to the program. Get your things."

Harry blinked. She looked over at her potion. "Can I just-"

The cauldron exploded. Archie yelped and Harry shielded just in time to avoid singing. James regained control of his magic with an audible growl and Harry frowned reproachfully as the potion seeped over the floorboards.

"I've got downstairs neighbors, Dad," she muttered, Vanishing the mess with a wave of her hand.

"You use magic outside of school, too? Do you have wards up?" James asked gruffly.

"Technically, I'm enrolled in a correspondence course, so I can just say I'm practicing."

"Right. Is this grate connected?"

James started toward the Floo. As he was reaching for the powder pot, a knock came at the door. Harry hurried to answer it before her father or uncle could. It was Mrs. Botting.

"All right, Harry? Heard some shouting, and then it sounded like some crockery might have been dropped." The woman eyed James' Auror robes suspiciously.

"Everything's fine, Mrs. Botting. My... family found out I haven't been at proper school all this time like I said." She widened her eyes as she said it, and hoped the woman would understand. "They've just come to take me home."

Her eyes flitted from James to Harry and back, calculating. "I see. I'll just lock up for you then...?" She gestured vaguely toward the door, but two of her fingers crossed in a question.

*Trouble?*

"Thank you, ma'am," Harry said with a polite smile. "Sorry to disturb you." As she turned toward the Floo with the others, she made a thief sign behind her back.

*All is well.*

How true that turned out to be remained to be seen.

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James marched them into the living room like prisoners of war. They didn't need pillories around their necks to hang their heads at the sight of Lily and Remus' shocked and concerned faces.

"Archie! You're-Harry? Why do you look so...?" Lily reached out a tentative hand toward Harry's face.

"Where did you find him? With Harry?" Remus asked. He took Archie in a hard embrace. "We were worried sick, son."

"I'm sorry," Archie said into his uncle's robes.

"We're both sorry," Harry added, nudged by her father.

"You look like Lily," Remus said wonderingly, getting a proper look at her new features. "But we just saw you a few months ago..."

"That was me," Archie muttered.

"I've... always looked like this." Harry glanced between Lily and Remus, guilt eating a hole in her stomach. Somehow, confessing to them was exponentially worse than James and Sirius.

"What do you mean?" Lily demanded, a frown beginning to trace its way across her lovely brow.

James cleared his throat pointedly, and Archie sent her a pleading glance. Harry withheld a sigh. It was on her, then. "The last four years, Archie and I have been involved in something... unwise. We did a dangerous thing, and what's worse-we lied to you all about it. Mum, I never went to AIM. I let Archie take my place there, so I could focus on my potions."

"She's been living in *Knockturn Alley*," James cut in.

Lily's lips parted on a sharp inhale, and Harry shot her father a scowl. "Not *on* Knockturn. I live in a perfectly respectable neighborhood south of the alleys."

Remus set his mouth in a hard line, and she could tell exactly what he was thinking-that he'd kept a bigger secret for her than he intended.

Her mother was only able to blurt one question. "But what about your O.W.L.s?"

Harry shifted uncomfortably. "I can still take them. I'm enrolled in the-

"-correspondence course." Lily's face settled into understanding. "Oh, Harry. That's no equal to a real education."



"That's all you have to say?" Sirius exclaimed. "Lils, our children have been living an elaborate charade right in front of our eyes for years. Archie's never even set *foot* in Hogwarts."

"I did go to the Yule Ball as Harry," Archie corrected him.

"You-what?" Sirius was easily de-railed. "But how..." He gestured to Archie's rather masculine physique and spluttered, "Polyjuice?"

"Only I had to take Polyjuice," Harry said.

"You both changed your appearance to match Rigel's?" James consulted his notebook with a frown.

"Who *is* Rigel? Not Archie, I take it." Remus rubbed his temple.

"A kid we met at the Junior Quidditch League." Harry withstood Remus' disbelieving stare with guileless alacrity. "He wanted to go to Hogwarts, and that was exactly what we needed for our plan to work."

"How convenient," Remus said slowly.

"It did take some convincing," Archie admitted. "His was the most dangerous part of the ruse."

"The ruse?" Sirius snorted. "Think a lot of your little lie, don't you?"

"It snowballed into a capital-R *Ruse* rather quickly, Dad."

"Of course it did," Lily said. Her eyes were lit with terrible calculation. "To fool even us for so long... Harry, I've seen you Heal. Did you learn that to keep the cover story intact?"

Harry nodded, surprised her mother had picked up on the logical consequences so swiftly.

Sirius was quick on the uptake, too. "I'm certain I overheard you speaking Parseltongue with the snakes, Arch. But that was

something the other kid could do, or at least he claimed to..."

Archie flushed. "I was faking. I can't speak Parseltongue at all. After Rigel's defeat of the basilisk was widely known, I had no choice."

If anything, Sirius looked vaguely relieved. He clapped his hands together and let out a shout as the next realization hit. "And *you* were never sorted into Slytherin! In retrospect, it's so obvious."

Harry kept her mouth shut, and did not roll her eyes even a little bit.

"And you can't out-duel an Auror, either, I suppose?" Remus said quietly. His eyes flickered to Harry very briefly, and she could see the question forming in his eyes.

"Definitely not." Archie shook his head vigorously. "Harry and Rigel trained endlessly in the alleys over summer break, but I was at that internship-"

"The *Healing* internship," Sirius groaned.

"-so I couldn't practice with them."

"You met up with this kid over the holidays, too?" James asked, pen poised. He was using the others as a foil, Harry realized-the interrogation was still happening, only their guard was that much lower with Remus and Lily in the room.

"Sure, we had to switch pretty often," Archie confirmed. "All the events Rigel kept getting invited to, every time we went to or came home from school, plus meet-ups with Hermione... I don't even remember all the times we switched."

"But when did you physically switch?" Remus asked, consternated. "And we would have noticed you taking Polyjuice for weeks at a time... wouldn't we?" The uncertainty in his voice was reflected on all the adults' face, and it was like a cloud settling over the room.

Archie shifted his weight in the silence that followed. "My gift might be... slightly less passive than I let on." He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and let his metamorphism go all at once.

It was Sirius' turn to gasp, and Harry winced to see his eyes well up in an instant. "You look..." He gulped, and took Archie's head in both his hands. "You have Diana's chin."

Archie burst into tears.

Addy wailed from the other room, evidently woken from her nap. Lily rushed to soothe the child, and James scrawled the word *Metamorphmagus* so hard into his notebook it scratched through to the next page.

"What about you, Harry?" Remus asked quietly. Sirius and Archie were stuck in an embrace, oblivious to anything but one another's pain.

"What about me?" she asked as Lily came back into the room with a sniffling toddler.

"How did we not notice you taking Polyjuice for four summers? And why would you have to change appearance at all?" Remus fixed her with a hard look. "If you were mostly out of the picture, surely Archie's morphing would have been enough to cover for this other boy at events."

Harry held her face impassive, but silently cursed Remus' perceptive nature. "At first, we were worried someone who knew Archie in America but lived in Britain would see a picture of me or run into Archie at the airport with my parents and figure out something was up. Best if I looked however Archie looked at school, which means the easiest way was to have just one face, and three people."

"Easiest," Remus repeated, unconvinced. "And the Polyjuice?"

He really wasn't going to let that one go. "I improved the recipe," Harry said. "My version lasts as long as I want it to."

"Harriett Potter, do *not* tell me you're dosing yourself with experimental Potions again." Lily shot her a massively disapproving look over Addy's head.

"It's perfectly safe." As far as she knew. "I didn't use it to change my biological sex, anyway."

"Oh." Mollified, Lily nodded. "It does sound as though you considered the potential ramifications, then."

"Does it?" James skewered them all with a glare. "When you're all done being impressed with our junior criminals, can we discuss the particular ramifications *I'm* concerned with?"

"We didn't *know* he wasn't a pureblood," Archie said earnestly. "They can't really charge us with aiding and abetting, can they?"

"Whether they can or can't remains to be seen, but you must believe they are going to *try*, Archie. The Minister is not pleased. Riddle is fit to be tied, and the international community is in an absolute uproar." James started to pace, but Lily put a hand on his arm.

"They couldn't have predicted this," she said quietly. "I don't condone it. But I... well, how many of us dreamed of a different path? If someone had offered me a seat at Hogwarts when I was eleven, even if I had to change myself drastically... I'm not sure I wouldn't have done it."

James gave her a betrayed look. Lily lifted her lips in a small smile.

"You couldn't really understand, Darling. It was never in doubt for you."

Harry had never felt closer to her mother than in that moment, as she forgave a boy who didn't exist.

"And anyway, Harry didn't do anything," Archie insisted. "I'm the only one who officially abetted him. Harry just... homeschooled herself and lied to her parents."

"Which I feel terrible about," Harry added.

"Me, too." Archie turned to Sirius, who couldn't seem to stop tracing his features with bright eyes. "Dad, it was horrible lying to you, but I had to follow my heart. I know I'm meant to be a Healer."

Remus stifled an incredulous chuckle and breathed, "You really do get the children you raise."

Sirius raised an eyebrow at his friend. "And what's your excuse, werewolf? You were at school with this other kid for a whole year."

Remus' smile dropped. "You're right, but... he smelled like Archie."

A spark of slyness kindled in Archie's eyes. "Fooled you, huh?"

"He sounded like you, too," Remus muttered, eyes narrowed.

"We made a perfume of Archie's sweat and mailed it to him," Harry explained.

James put his head in his hands and shook it slowly back and forth. Sirius just snorted. "Remus, you useless pile of fur-did you think he never showered?"

"He's a teenager." Remus' ears turned pink and he crossed his arms. "I'm never going to live this down."

"Anyone would be fooled by one of Harry's concoctions, Uncle Remus. She's a genius."

"You'd both better hope you're as smart as you think," James said flatly. He pulled out his pocket watch and grimaced. "I can't delay any longer, Arch. I have to take you to the Ministry before the search for the missing Black Heir gets out of hand."

" *The Prophet* says they've posted pictures of Rigel all across Scotland," Lily relayed.

Harry frowned. "Why would they expect him to stay there?"

Her mother gave her a patient look. "He's fourteen. Young wizards can manage perhaps a few miles at a time, but not as many consecutive jumps as would be needed to get as far as Northern Ireland or Northumberland in less than a day."

"He burned a lot of magic in the maze, too," Remus said thoughtfully. "Not to mention what happened after."

Had she? Harry couldn't recall doing anything too strenuous in the maze itself, and while the wards had been grounded strongly, she'd felt the anchor loose even as she pulled on them.

Archie sent her a hard-to-read look. She dropped her gaze in the facsimile of a nod. It wouldn't do them any good to have the search for Rigel Black happening close to home.

"You shouldn't underestimate him." Archie said firmly. "For one, he's not fourteen-he may even be fully of age for all we know."

"And he's known he might have to run for years," Harry added. "To think he'd have no escape plan... I wouldn't make that assumption."

James' face hardened. "You're saying he could be anywhere. Kids, now is not the time to try and protect this person-"

"We're just saying if you ignore everything he's done over the last four years, you'll never find him." Archie looked between the adults with perfect consternation on his face. "This is the guy who slew a basilisk. He faced down a dragon, out-dueled half a dozen rivals-for Merlin's sake, Dad said he tore down the Founders' wards!"

"He *what*?" Harry tried to turn her alarm into detached amazement, but wasn't sure how well she succeeded if the warning flash in

Archie's eyes was any indication.

"Dumbledore had unraveled the lodestone already." James had a far-away look in his eyes. "Still, it was no small feat. I'd assumed he was running on fumes when we lost his trail, but... perhaps we'll distribute those posters a bit further afield."

"Not that there's anyone in the world who doesn't know what he looks like," Sirius put in helpfully. "Really, you're just advertising the fact that he's wanted."

"Poor boy," Lily murmured, holding Addy close. "He'll never know a moment's peace."

"He'll lie low for a while, then change his name," Remus predicted.

"And his face?"

"There are plenty of ways." Sirius clamped a hand down on his son's shoulder and his smile became slightly sharp. "These two figured that out."

They both winced. Archie put a hand up to grasp Sirius' briefly, taking a long breath and letting it out slowly. "We should go, Uncle James."

James nodded, and Harry looked at her father carefully. "Just Archie?"

"He's the only one I have proof committed a crime, so, yes."

"Will I be able to go back to school after?" Archie asked.

"Let's focus on keeping you out of prison, first."

Archie stepped toward the Floo room, Sirius a beat behind him. James looked for a moment as though he would argue, but whatever he saw in Sirius' face dissuaded him. Harry tried not to worry too much.

She had faith in Archie. He already had plausible deniability going for him, and the protection of his blood wasn't nothing. All he had to do was stick to their story.

In their absence, Remus and Lily turned their attention to her in one coordinated movement, and she abruptly realized her own interrogation was just beginning.

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His head hadn't stopped spinning since Uncle James burst into his exam room and everything fell to pieces.

Pre-determined pieces, like glass that had been carefully scored, but pieces all the same.

Merlin bless Harriett Potter. He didn't know how she'd done it-how she'd slipped the security perimeter around Hogwarts, how she'd even survived what sounded like a harrowing disaster of a final task with her magic intact-but she did. There she was napping, perfectly blasé, when they descended on her place in the alleys.

Everything Harry did seemed impossibly effortless. Even Archie couldn't see the ghosts in her eyes anymore.

The Floo didn't help matters in his head. He stumbled out of the grate and opened his eyes-only the slam them shut again as a dozen cameras flashed in his face. A hand came down hard on his shoulder and steered him forward; Archie felt his feet move automatically as the spots in his vision receded.

Reporters. They must have recognized Uncle James when he came through.

"Auror Potter, can you comment?"



"Are you heading the investigation into the Rigel Black Case?"

"Is this the imposter?"

Sirius spoke loudly over the clamoring crowd in the Ministry lobby. "This is *my son*, Arcturus Black, and he is *not* available for comment."

Cameras flashed again, and Archie did his best not to vomit.

"Were you too afraid to fight in the tournament, son?"

"Is the Black Heir under arrest, Auror Potter?"

Uncle James pushed through the throng and pitched his voice in a tone that brooked no argument. "Make way, people. We have a lot of paperwork to do today."

Astonishingly, the wry remark gained a smattering of chuckles. As the reporters cleared a path for James, Archie realized they *liked* him. He didn't think reporters liked anyone.

"Does he know where Rigel Black is?"

"How *long* did this impersonation last?"

Sirius steered him quickly toward the lifts, and Archie felt his hands unclench as the doors closed between them and the story-hungry journalists. Uncle James tapped his foot restlessly as the dial crawled toward Level 2.

"Have they been waiting here all night?" Archie asked quietly.

"Most likely," James confirmed. With a sideways look, he added. "This isn't just some schoolboy hijinks, Arch. What that boy did-what you helped him do-is going to ripple through our world for years."

Archie blinked the moisture back from his eyes. "We didn't set out to change the world," he whispered.

"What you intended no longer matters."

The lift chimed and a woman's voice droned, "Department of Magical Law Enforcement."

James stepped off with surety, Sirius and Archie behind him. Down the long hallway, through the heavy oak doors into the Auror Department talent pool. Heads craned from every cubicle they passed, but no one dared to call out when they caught the look on their boss's face.

"Webber."

A round-faced young man popped up from the cubical at the end of the row like a startled meerkat. "Yes, sir."

"Coffee."

The young Auror-trainee, by the cut of his robes-scrambled to the break room. James started for his office, but the door swung outward before he reached it.

A grizzled Auror with piercing blue eyes and a suspicious expression stepped out, closely followed by a man Archie recognized easily-the Minister of Magic.

"Potter! Did you catch him?" Fudge peered around James with a calculating squint. Archie held very still, even as he felt Sirius bristle behind him like a cornered canine.

"No, Minister." James' voice was firm and quiet, as though he didn't know every Auror in the pit held their breath to better hear. "The boy who impersonated my nephew is still at large."

"Still at-who's this then? A classmate? Does he know something?" Fudge's voice rose with each question, audibly impatient.

James took one step to the side and fixed Archie with a stare that said *I'm not going to make this easy for you.*

Archie cleared his throat and lifted his chin. "I am the real Arcturus Black, Minister."

Fudge looked between Archie and Sirius for a long moment. "Ah. I do see the resemblance. At least *one* person has been found today. Quite confident this is the real one, are you?"

Archie could hear his father's teeth creak.

"We're certain, Minister," James said. "If you'll excuse us, Mr. Black has a number of questions to answer."

The Minister spluttered. "But surely you're not going to interrogate him yourself, Potter!" He looked around at the grizzled Auror and the young trainee who hovered awkwardly with a steaming mug. "Isn't that a conflict of interest?"

James set his jaw, but bowed his head ever-so-slightly. "Indeed. I am merely his escort."

"James-" Sirius began. A sharp gesture cut him off.

"The Minister is correct, Sirius. It would be entirely inappropriate for me to participate in questioning. Moody, can you spare an hour?"

Auror Moody's gaze could have flayed mutton. "I have real Dark Wizards to hunt." He stalked past their group with one last, dismissive look in Archie's direction. "Shame about the other kid. He was really something."

Archie tried not to take that comment personally.

James claimed his coffee and took a long swig while the relieved trainee slunk back to his desk. He pivoted sharply and caught sight of someone too slow in ducking. "Shacklebolt! Get your shiny head over here."

A broad-shouldered Auror with a gold hoop in one ear rose from his cubicle unhurriedly. When he spoke, it was in a low, measured tone.

"Yes, sir?"

"Interrogation room three, fifteen minutes."

Shacklebolt tilted his head agreeably. "Want me to book him?"

"I'll do it," James muttered.

Archie followed his uncle to a room down the hall, where he was somewhat unceremoniously searched and scanned. All the while, James intoned a long list of warnings and caveats that Archie didn't fully understand. He felt a bit dazed by the surrealness of the experience. Often, he had imagined it all going wrong-he pictured himself in Azkaban, sometimes, cold and afraid-but this brusque, barely human interaction with his own uncle was in some ways stranger.

"-can use anything you say against you, against Rigel, and against anyone else implicated-"

His wand went into a box along with his spare testing quill.

"-does not amount to suspension of your right to self-defense or council-"

His school uniform was swapped for a plain set of grey utility robes.

"-use of Veritaserum on minors is strictly prohibited, but a written statement on spelled parchment will be-"

"Uncle James, am I going home?" Archie interrupted, clenching his toes in the too-big shoes he was issued.

"Of course you are," Sirius said fiercely.

James did not agree right away. "If Auror Shacklebolt finds no reason to detain you."

If he didn't confess to an imprisonable offense, in other words.

Archie nodded. James signed his name to the paperwork he was filling out with an angry flourish. "Sirius, fill out the rest of the demographics while you wait."

"Wait?" Sirius clutched Archie's shoulders in both hands.

James shook his head slowly. "He has to do this part alone, Sirius. If there's any hint of nepotism, he'll never shake this."

Archie pulled free of his father's embrace. "Uncle James is right, Dad. I have to answer for this."

Sirius took a deep breath. Then another. Then a shorter one, a faster one, and the next thing Archie knew his father was hyperventilating and James was half-supporting him.

"I-I can't-"

"Sirius, breathe."

"Dad!" Archie dove for his wand and pushed his magic into his father's airways without permission. It was the simplest thing to convert excess oxygen to carbon dioxide. Less simple was facing the devastating fear in his father's eyes.

"I c-can't *lose* you, Arch," Sirius wheezed.

Archie hugged his father hard and swallowed back his tears. "You won't, Dad. I promise. I swear it." He brushed his father's hair back from his face and looked straight into his eyes. "I won't let them take me away, Dad. If they find me guilty, we'll flee the country. Even if they put me in Azkaban, I'll escape."

"No one... escapes Azkaban," Sirius whispered shakily. He clung to Archie weakly.

"I will. I'll use my animagus form and slip right through the bars," Archie said wildly. He would say anything to bring the life back into his father's eyes.

"I'm not hearing this," James muttered. He took Archie's wand away from him and ran a hand through his hair. "Sirius, I'm sorry, but we can't delay much longer. If you require a sedative, I'll-"

"He's fine." Archie shook his father gently by the shoulders. "Aren't you, Dad? We're fine, aren't we? I don't want to you worry. I got myself into this, and I can get myself out."

He tried to sound more confident than he felt. Sirius was shaking his head back and forth mutely, but he was also breathing normally once more.

"It's gonna be okay, Dad. I promise. I'll come home to you and Harry and Remus and everyone. You can ground me for a whole month, all right?"

"A year," Sirius muttered.

"We can talk about it later," Archie said, relieved when that drew a small laugh from his father.

When James was certain that Sirius would be able to compose himself, he opened the door. "This way, Archie."

Archie kept his father's gaze until they left the room. Uncle James took him to a door with a tinted window set into the face. He paused with a hand on the knob and said quietly, "Be respectful. Listen carefully. Don't elaborate unless pressed and *don't* let yourself become emotional."

Archie nodded, though privately he suspected it was too late for the last bit.

James turned him over without a word, and Shacklebolt gestured to the thin, metal chair across from him with an unreadable expression.

He sat, and immediately noticed the seat was sloped in such a way to prevent comfort of any kind. Shacklebolt opened a slim, blue

folder and began to peruse the papers within. The text was too small for Archie to read, but he could tell it had been penned recently-some of the ink still shone dully in the torchlight.

Shacklebolt reviewed the folder leisurely, at times making a noise of surprise or interest. When he finished the last page, the Auror leaned back in his chair-a much sturdier construction of cushioned wood-and regarded Archie silently.

When he could take no more of the quiet, Archie said, "Aren't you going to ask me questions?"

"Is there anything you'd like to tell me, first?"

Archie clamped his mouth shut. Uncle James had *just* told him to listen, not talk.

Shacklebolt shrugged his big shoulders. "Well, that's all right. Not much to say, is there? The chain of events seems pretty clear."

Archie frowned uncertainly. "Er, does it?"

Shacklebolt folded his hands on the table and looked at Archie frankly. "Got in over your head, I'd say. It started off as an easy lark; just a couple of schoolboys switching places, right? You got an American holiday, and this other kid got to attend the most prestigious magical school in the West. I imagine you weren't thinking about it in the terms they're bandying about now-blood theft, capital crimes, and all that." He paused, and peered at Archie curiously.

Archie shook his head slowly. He didn't like that characterization of their ruse, exactly, but he tried to repeat Uncle James' advice in his head and not protest.

"No, of course not. What does a boy know of blood politics?" Shacklebolt tapped his long fingers on the desk idly. "You just wanted to go your own way. Make a path in this world on your own

terms. It's a heady thing... and I suppose it spun out of control at some point."

Archie nodded, then caught the sharp glint in Shacklebolt's steady gaze. "I... what exactly is your question?"

"No question, really," Shacklebolt said. His voice was impossibly smooth, too reassuring to make any sense in the situation. "I'm just trying to understand what happened. We all want to understand, you see?"

He hesitated. What was he supposed to say? *Be respectful*, James had said. "I'm sure it's confusing. How can I help clarify matters?"

Shacklebolt raised his eyebrows. "Well, you might want to clarify just how long this charade of yours went on. There is some speculation that you chickened out of the tournament and paid this less privileged boy to brave the dangers in your place, but I don't believe that." Shacklebolt leaned in, a bit conspiratorially. "For one, you don't look anything like the boy who competed in the tournament. Since not one of his friends seems to have suspected a switch, I'm thinking you've never been to Hogwarts."

"That's correct. I never attended Hogwarts," Archie said carefully. "Four years ago, I went to America and let another kid take my place there."

Shacklebolt clapped his hands together. "That explains it. The boy who participated in the tournament was there at Hogwarts all along- of course his friends didn't notice anything different."

"Of course," Archie agreed.

"But then-it is devilishly odd that your father never noticed this boy wasn't you." Shacklebolt spread his fingers somewhat apologetically. "As we've established-you don't really look like him."

Archie took a deep breath. "Am I allowed to do magic in here?"



Shacklebolt frowned. "Your wand should have been confiscated."

"I don't need one for this, and it'll make more sense if I show you."

The Auror palmed his own wand, then gestured cautiously for Archie to proceed. Archie slipped into Rigel's face easily, like an old hat perfectly molded to his head. He tilted his head to different angles, then let the change drop away.

Shacklebolt slowly took out a quill and made several notes in the blue folder. "That is most enlightening, Mr. Black. Thank you."

Archie felt an easing in his chest and tensed against it. *Too reassuring*, he reminded himself.

Shacklebolt smiled with perfect teeth at him. "I was worried we might have to charge you with use of a controlled substance, but I see that Polyjuice would not have been necessary for you. I suppose only your co-conspirator will have to face that charge."

Archie gulped.

The Auror went on somewhat blithely. "That is the case with many of these charges, of course. You'll both have to answer for academic fraud, but with a little plausible deniability, that is where your part in it will end. Rigel alone will face the blowback for blood identity theft, conspiracy to defraud an international competition, four years of controlled substance abuse--"

"We knew the risks," Archie snapped. He didn't need to be reminded how much greater Harry's risk had been. He lived with the knowledge every day.

Shacklebolt made a noise of understanding. "It was premeditated, then. I didn't realize you were both fully aware of the laws regarding the impersonation of pureblooded wizards by those of inferior birth."

Archie winced. "I didn't say that."

"I'm not sure what you're trying to say, then."

"I just meant-Rigel must have known. It didn't occur to *me* that blood was something to worry about." He tried to channel the dismissive privilege Shacklebolt had all but accused him of. "I wanted to go to school in America, but Dad wouldn't let me. So I found a kid who wanted to go to Hogwarts and we switched. All this other stuff... how could I have known if he was a halfblood?"

Shacklebolt did not look impressed. "Simple logic might suggest that this boy would not have pretended to be you if he could go to Hogwarts as himself. You must have been aware that halfbloods are prohibited from attending the school."

"I suppose I knew that rule, but it didn't affect me, so I didn't pay it much mind." Archie shrugged. "I was selfish. I know that. It's not like I forced Rigel to take my place, though. And since I didn't know he was a halfblood, my only crime was ignorance."

"And also the academic fraud."

"Right. I'll admit to that."

Shacklebolt sighed. "If that's the story you want to stick to, fine, but understand the position we're in: whether you knew it or not, you helped a halfblood pose as a pureblood in an international competition *specifically designed* to challenge the merits of blood discrimination. If this was just about the schooling, Hogwarts would handle it internally. If he'd made a fool of people less powerful, Rigel might have been able to disappear quietly and move on with his life." Shacklebolt shook his head solemnly. "We're far beyond that now, son."

Archie put his head in his hands. "Rigel didn't even want to participate in that stupid tournament. Riddle near well forced him-"

"Regardless of how it happened, it happened," Shacklebolt said smoothly. "All that matters now is straightening it out. For that, we

need to talk to Rigel."

Archie stiffened. "I don't know where-"

"Now, now, no need to say something you'll regret. Here's the thing." Shacklebolt ticked the points off his fingers slowly. "This impersonation of yours was nearly perfect-that takes a lot of coordination and planning, doesn't it? Add to that an escape so smooth we still have no idea where this kid went. You, a wealthy scion of a powerful family, dozens of resources at your fingertips. Him, a halfblood with no name and no one to miss him for four years. You'll understand if I think it's unlikely you had no hand in his exit strategy."

His lips were pressed so tightly together they ached.

Shacklebolt tapped the folder, his expression openly sympathetic. "Look, I understand this is a lot. Your uncle says you're a good kid. I know you got top grades at that American school. We ran an à priori diagnostic on your wand-three dozen spells back, all very advanced Light magic. You're a good person, Mr. Black. I don't think you want to be mixed up in this. You made a mistake, and that's okay. Just help us get to the bottom of this."

Archie stared at the table, not moving a muscle.

"It's like you said," Shacklebolt went on in that even, cajoling tone. "He knew the risks. He knew he was halfblooded, even if you didn't, and he chose to impersonate you anyway. Maybe he told you a sad story about not being able to afford schooling. And you helped him out. What do you really owe him? We just want the truth, son. No more lies. That's what you want, too, isn't it? When we find him, we can get all this straightened out."

It might have worked, if it really had been some kid from the Continent. Just some boy he didn't know very well, who'd been a means to an end but not a true friend.

But it was Harry. And he would *never* .

His hands shook, but his voice didn't. "I'm sorry, sir, but I won't be able to help you."

Shacklebolt opened his mouth, but the door to the interrogation room opened with a wrenching creak and a skinny redhead with a sternness beyond his years strode through it.

Percy Weasley looked down his nose at Auror Shacklebolt and said in a disapproving clip, "Interrogating a minor without his guardian present? I expect better, Kingsley."

Shacklebolt waved a hand toward the left side of the room, and a ward Archie hadn't noticed dropped to reveal a broad panel of clear glass. Sirius, James, the Minister, and several others stood behind it, evidently having witnessed the entire proceeding. Archie felt both better and worse for it.

"Weasley. Come to rescue another poor soul from our evil clutches?" Shacklebolt tucked the papers back into the folder with leisurely resignation.

Percy produced a roll of parchment and passed it to Shacklebolt for his perusal. "My services have been secured for the defense of one Arcturus Rigel Black. Unless you have evidence of any crimes other than what he has already admitted to, I insist you release him into his family's custody."

Shacklebolt hummed. "We're only charging him with academic fraud."

"He'll be happy to pay the fines incurred," Percy said with a sniff.

"He still has to write a statement." Shacklebolt palmed his own roll of parchment and passed it across the table with a quill. "I suggest you include as much as you can, lest we think of any reason to call you back in."

"I hope you realize none of his answers today will be admissible in court," Percy said sharply. To Archie, he added, "They aren't allowed to question you without counsel, as you're underage."

"Answers?" Shacklebolt scratched his bald head with a lazy grin. "I didn't ask him any questions. This upstanding citizen provided information to the DMLE out of what I can only assume is a strong sense of civic duty." To a flummoxed Archie, he added, "I'm sure a guilty conscience had nothing to do with it."

Archie gaped at him. That wasn't right. Shacklebolt had asked him dozens of questions... hadn't he? The Auror saluted James through the glass and left the room whistling.

Archie's stomach turned over. What had he *said*? It was already hard to remember.

"Best write your statement quickly," Percy said quietly. "After that, we can go." With a glance toward the viewing window, he added, "It's truth parchment, mind. You can't write a lie."

His nerves utterly shot, Archie put quill to parchment and did his best to reiterate the truths-and steer clear of the lies.

*I, Arcturus Rigel Black, do hereby affirm the following:*

*That I did knowingly defraud the American Institute of Magic by attending under a false name.*

*That I did knowingly allow another person to defraud Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry by attending in my name.*

*That I did not, at any time, question or inquire into the blood status of the person who impersonated me at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.*

*That I did not encourage my impostor to participate in the Triwizard Tournament.*

*That I did not help my impersonator escape Scotland following the tournament's conclusion.*

*That my father, Lord Sirius Black, had no knowledge of this impersonation.*

*That my adopted uncle, Lord James Potter, had no knowledge of this impersonation.*

*That I did not intend international embarrassment of the British magical community.*

*That I am sorry for all most of the trouble this plot has caused.*

Apart from the burning away of one word in the final line, the statement held up against the runes designed to detect intentional falsehoods.

Sirius met him at the door. James took his statement, but it was snatched up by the Minister at once.

"What is the meaning of this? You *haven't* affirmed you don't know who Rigel Black is. Who is he!?"

"You do not have to answer," Percy said firmly.

Archie met the Minister's eyes with tired resignation. "Rigel Black could be anyone, Minister. That's kind of the point."

Fudge gaped at him. "Just what is that supposed to mean?"

Sirius squeezed his shoulder, but Archie couldn't bite his tongue any longer.

"A no-name halfblood just won an international tournament in Britain's name. The question is not 'who is Rigel Black' but rather, how many more Rigel Blacks are we missing out on?"

"That's quite enough," James said sharply. "Please excuse us, Minister. It's been a long day for everyone."

"Very long." Fudge muttered. "Positively lingering. Go home, then, and this time try to actually get some rest. Tell Moody I want a status report on the whereabouts of that Dark Voldiwart fellow by tomorrow morning."

"I'll tell him."

"And don't speak to *The Prophet* about this without me."

"No one in this office will engage the press."

"Good."

The Minister bustled out toward the lifts, and James ushered the rest of them into his personal office. Sirius enveloped Archie in a firm hug when the door was closed.

"You did good, kid."

"Shacklebolt tricked me," Archie mumbled into Sirius' robes.

"That's his job," James said. He didn't sound apologetic at all.

"Percy, thank you for coming so quickly."

"I dropped everything when I got your message," Percy said quietly. "I'm only sorry I didn't get here sooner."

Archie half-turned from Sirius' hold to say, "You know I'm *not* Rigel, right?"

"I've been fully briefed on the situation."

"But why would you want to help? You don't know me," Archie said, letting his confusion show.

Percy adjusted his glasses fastidiously. "Helping you is the only way I can help him right now."

"You aren't... mad at him, or anything?" Archie asked.

"Rigel is a good person. Anyone who really knows him can't forget that." Percy's eyes grew distant as he added, "He always went out of his way to help people he didn't have to. I can do at least as much."

"Well, thank you. I-Dad, we can cover his rate or something, right?"

Percy cleared his throat sharply. "I won't hear of it. What Rigel has done will echo in the chambers of history. That I am even a small voice on the side of righteousness is his doing. Raising it in his favor is hardly a sacrifice. I only hope he is safe, and that he will remain so."

Archie grimaced guiltily, but Percy held up a hand.

"No, don't tell me. I cannot be party to any criminal activity."

"Nor can I," James grumbled.

Archie bit his lip and thought carefully before saying, "I have no way to know for certain... but I would bet that Rigel is just fine, wherever he is."

Percy smiled approvingly. "That's nice to imagine." He pulled a stack of papers from his briefcase and handed them to Sirius. "These are all the precedents I pulled for his defense. If he gets called in again or formally arrested, please Floo me posthaste."

"We will." Sirius clasped hands with the young redhead gratefully. "My best to your father."

"And our best to your family in these difficult times."

At the office door, Percy paused and said, "Fred and George would like Rigel to know that it's the most brilliant prank they've ever heard



of. They cede the prank war indefinitely."

"I suppose, wherever he is, Rigel would just be gratified to have retained their friendship."

"A Weasley's friendship is not easily lost."

Percy left, and it was just the three of them once more. James took a long breath, then said. "I will finish the paperwork. Archie is officially being treated as a source, not a suspect, in the Rigel Black Case, and the separate charges against him for academic fraud will be settled when the fines are paid. You'll receive an official bill from the court sometime this week."

Sirius nodded. "James, I can't thank you enough-"

James waved him off. "Those words don't pass between us, Sirius. Archie's like my own son, you know that. I'm just relieved he and Harry are safe. As far as I'm concerned, we can conduct the rest of the investigation without them."

"So... we can go home, now?" Archie asked tentatively.

James fixed him with a hard stare. "Are you going to pick up paperwork from the Animagus Registration Office on the way out?"

"That is *exactly* what we were planning to do," Sirius said bracingly.

"Better get two sets," Archie muttered.

James rubbed his temple, opened the door to his office, and barked, "Webber!"

"Yes, sir?"

"Coffee." He held the door open and favored Sirius with a flat look. "Get your son home before I strangle him, Sirius."

His father's hand on his collar marched him out of the Auror pit without argument.

After a short detour at the Improper Use of Magic Office, they were able to sneak out the Floo closest to the lifts before the crowd of milling reporters spotted their exit. Archie stumbled back into the Potters' receiving room with his clothes and wand clutched tightly in his arms.

He could hear Harry talking loudly in the other room-arguing with Remus and Lily, who seemed to be firing questions in rapid succession. Archie rubbed his eyes tiredly, but manfully made his way to the living room to back her up.

"-depends on whether it was Vanished into a temporary spatial pocket or true Nonbeing." Harry was saying. She sounded more than a mite annoyed.

"And how can it be summoned back from true Nonbeing?" Remus demanded.

Harry scowled. "That's impossible, and you know it."

"All right, well how does that square with the Third Law of Recombobulation?" Lily asked sharply. Addy cooed uneasily up at her mother, but the redheaded witch was laser-focused on Harry's response.

"Mum, I *know* that's N.E.W.T. level. Aren't you satisfied yet?"

Lily and Remus exchanged disgruntled looks, and Archie gaped at them. All the while he was being grilled on the exact details of the blood identity theft, Harry was being questioned on her *academics*?

"I just can't believe you learned all of that on your own," Lily grumbled. "You didn't have *any* tutors?"

"I had all the correspondence course instructors," Harry said reprovingly. "I never realized you two were such private school snobs."

"Snobs?" Remus visibly balked at the descriptor. "Just because we know the value of a traditional education-"

"You *assume* the value of such an education can't be duplicated," Harry argued. "I don't know what you gain from arguing the un-substitutable nature of such old-fashioned institutions, anyway."

"That's not-"

Sirius interrupted Lily. "Are you really still on about Harry's schooling? She's clearly no worse off for it. Probably gained some street-smarts, too."

"Easy for you to say, Sirius. Your child still had the benefit of a well-rounded education in all this-"

"But not the benefit of a conferred degree," Archie put in glumly. "I'm going to have to take all those classes over again in my own name."

"You can test out of them, I bet," Harry offered.

Sirius turned to Archie slowly, a somewhat disbelieving look in his eyes. "We just averted a bloody prison sentence and your only concern is going back to that school?"

Archie felt his temper flare. "I did all this in the first place to go to 'that school,' Dad. It *matters* to me."

"Clearly. It mattered more than being honest for four years, didn't it? Mattered more than your cousin getting her education."

"Now hold on, you just said-"

"It must have mattered more than our relationship ever did, as you threw every ounce of my trust and good will away without a second

thought, didn't you?"

His father's words slapped across his already bruised conscience and left their mark unerringly.

Archie's gaze fell to the floor, and he saw Harry's feet come to stand between them.

"I think you should get some rest, Uncle Sirius."

"And I think you've stood between my son and me long enough, Harriet Potter."

"Don't speak to her that way-"

"Someone has to get it through their thick skulls, Lily!" Sirius' magic flared and the lights flickered. Addy began to cry. "I'm relieved to have them safe-Godric knows I am. But what they've done has changed everything. There are things that *cannot* be undone. Someone has to make them understand."

"We do understand," Harry said firmly. Archie didn't know how she could speak at all; his tongue felt like lead in his mouth.

"Oh, you understand?" The sarcasm in Sirius' voice was sharp. "You understand that this country is on the verge of a blood war? You understand that there is discriminatory legislation being voted on in less than a month, and that this throws a giant, stinking dung bomb into the middle of hundreds of peoples' political machinations? Years of planning and compromise to bring a coalition of people together to defeat this bill. You understand that, Harry?"

Harry stood her ground. "Ignoring how hypocritical it is for you to lecture anyone about disrupting society's political calculations, Uncle Sirius, yes, we do understand that. None of us wanted Rigel to be found out-maintaining that neither Archie nor I knew he was even halfblooded-but on top of that, it's entirely *because of* this legislation that Rigel was in that dratted tournament in the first place. Don't you

think it was unwise, for a boy with so many secrets to participate in something so high-profile and ridiculous?"

"I thought it was unwise for *Archie* to do it, much less a halfblood masquerading as him," Remus mused.

"Exactly." Archie looked up to see his cousin's face lit with indignant stubbornness as she went on. "Rigel didn't want to. Riddle blackmailed him into it, first by threatening *our* family-who Rigel has no reason to protect, by the way-and then using the possibility of victory as a political bargaining chip."

Lily turned white and Remus sat down abruptly in the nearest armchair.

"That boy got Riddle to agree to an Unbreakable Vow, Sirius. Because Rigel won the tournament, Riddle can *never* back a piece of discriminatory blood legislation related to employment, healthcare, or marriage *ever* again."

Sirius froze. "What... Riddle would never agree to that."

"He wanted Rigel to participate that badly," Harry said, her voice growing gentler as her words started to sink in. "And he thought Rigel winning would prove the point of pureblood supremacy anyway, and that he wouldn't need any more legislation after the marriage law. But now, don't you see? Rigel has upset the Light's political calculus, sure, but he's upset the Dark's even more. A halfblood won the Triwizard Tournament. Riddle is bound *and* his point will go unproven."

"Disproven, if anything," Archie added. Part of him realized he had yet to feel properly proud of Harry for that. She had won the Triwizard Tournament.

"If we beat this bill... it's the last," Lily said quietly. Wonderingly.

"The last backed by Riddle," Remus corrected her shrewdly. "His party can still introduce legislation."

"But they're hamstrung without his explicit support," Lily said, a smile beginning to form on her lips. "Sirius, sit down. Let's think about this. We must speak with Dumbledore, Augusta, and-I'm not even sure who will believe it."

Sirius shook his head, clenching his fists helplessly. "That's not... it doesn't excuse..."

"Just say why you're really angry, Uncle Sirius," Harry challenged.

Archie stepped around Harry to take his father's hand. "Dad, I know it doesn't change that we lied to you. I will spend the rest of my life making that up to you. Lying to you was the hardest part of it, and I am more sorry than I can say with words alone. I know Harry is, too."

"I am," Harry said impatiently. "But the guilt I feel doesn't mean we can ignore the wider consequences of our actions, including the potentially beneficial ones," Harry added, somewhat unhelpfully. "We're the ones who will be affected by this law if it passes. And we're the ones who just gave the Light its best chance at beating it. You can be mad at us forever, but the chance to beat Riddle is here now."

"She's right." Remus shook his head slowly as Sirius glared at him. "I know, Sirius, but... she's right. I was only thinking about Archie and the trouble he was in, but a halfblood did win the Triwizard Tournament. Not only that-he destroyed the competition. If we get behind this quick enough-"

"I can't hear this right now." Sirius pulled away from Archie, turned his back on the rest of them, and ran his hands through his hair. He looked like a man at the end of his rope. "I'm going to-"

The Floo alarm went off, and they froze. "That can't be James," Lily said, standing with a frown.

"I'll get it," Remus said quickly, urging Lily to stay with Addy on the sofa. "Might be some nosy reporter."

"Oh, Merlin, we'll be inundated," Lily muttered bleakly.

Remus was only gone a few moments, and when he came back, his face was carefully blank. "Sirius." His friend looked over with a drawn expression. "It's for you."

Regulus Black strode into the room on a storm cloud, looking very much like a man who had slept in his robes. "Where is he, brother?"

Sirius groaned aloud. "I do not have the patience today, Reggie."

Regulus grabbed a handful of his older brothers' robes and shook Sirius bodily. "Where. Is. The imposter? Where's the little mongrel that dragged our line through the mud in front of the entire-"

"Gero *ooff*, you rabid arsehole." Sirius shook Regulus loose with a growl. "You think I'm harboring him, do you?"

"Do not pretend you didn't know," Regulus shot back. "You can fool the rest of the world, but I know how close you two are. There's *no* way you were fooled."

Sirius went green, and his hands began to shake.

"Uncle Regulus, that's quite enough," Archie said quickly. "I assure you, my father had no idea, and you making him feel worse about it is not helpful."

Regulus turned to scowl at him, then did a double-take. "You... am I to understand that *you* are my actual nephew?"

"As though my identity matters to you beyond a set of chromosomes?" Archie shook his head. "Whatever your intentions in coming here, we have enough on our plates today."

"And whose fault is that?" Regulus sneered.

"Mine."

"Mine," Harry said at the same time.

Regulus turned to glower at her. "I'm not at all surprised to find you involved, Miss Potter, if I may presume your identity despite a rather desperate shift in outward appearance."

"I beg your pardon-"

"It's fine, Mum. Mr. Black also won't be surprised to know that it was *my* idea," Harry said baldly.

"On the contrary, it confirms my worst suspicions of your influence on my nephew."

"Which nephew? The one you just met, or the one you thought was your nephew that you were so very proud of until you found out he was a halfblood?" Harry's eyes were alight with something Archie had never seen in her before. It was like seeing a light bulb without a lampshade for the first time. There was something unapologetically sharp and bright and free in her eyes, and he wondered if that flame had always been there or if the events of the last 24 hours had ignited it.

"Do you think it funny, to fool so many people with your little game? Do you think it amusing to watch people pin their hopes to a false idol and see their plans in ruins at your feet?" Regulus leaned down to menace over Harry, and Lily got to her feet.

"Be quiet, Regulus. This is my house, and I won't have you-"

"I wouldn't be *here* if my brother were ever at home."

"-barging in to berate my daughter for your own disappointments." Lily took a deep breath.

"Misplaced disappointments at that," Harry added acerbically.  
"Archie is a better heir than Rigel would ever have been, and it's not



because of his perfect pedigree."

Archie wished Harry hadn't found her voice in defending him, as he didn't feel he needed it. Whether or not his uncle liked him really wasn't a hill worth taking, and earning his ire wasn't something Harry needed when she was supposed to be lying low.

Regulus dismissed him with a glance. "The Black line will need more than a good heir to come back from this travesty. We look like fools, brother. Incompetent fools."

Sirius laughed dryly. "That may be my silver lining. Thanks, Reg."

"This is no joke, Sirius! Lord Riddle is *furious*. Do you understand? If I survive the next six months, it will be down to how useful I can be in finding this boy for him."

For the first time, Archie noticed how scared Regulus was, under the veneer of fury.

"You'll never find him," Harry said softly.

"And I'm not going to let you trade Riddle that kid to save your own skin," Sirius spat, disgust in his tone. "Maybe stop serving the psychopath, did you think of that?"

Regulus bared his teeth. "Riddle has *marked* him, Sirius. It is only a matter of time before he tracks him down. The kid is doomed either way, but if we get to him first... Riddle may be merciful."

Sirius took Regulus by the arm and searched his face with a hard stare. "You really believe Riddle will forgive you for not noticing? No, Reggie. He might pretend to, but your days in the sun of the SOW Party are done. You should cut and run."

"A Black doesn't turn his back on his principles-"

"Oh, what principles?" Sirius made an impatient noise. "Is your priority this family or your pride?"

Regulus shrugged off his brother's hand with a sneer. "Rich, coming from you."

"I'm on a hypocritical roll today, apparently."

Remus spoke up tentatively, bravely ignoring Regulus' hostile expression as he asked, "Are you in earnest fear for your life, Regulus? We can protect you."

"You? Or Dumbledore? I would rather be cursed in the back." Regulus tossed his head like an offended stallion. "I will find some other way to get back in Lord Riddle's good graces."

"His bare-tolerance, you mean," Harry said. "Riddle has no good graces."

"You know nothing, you impudent little-"

"I know something that will get you back within tolerance, actually."

Regulus froze. His eyes narrowed. "You know where the imposter is?"

Harry set her chin. "No. But I know something Riddle doesn't, that will change the way he looks for Rigel."

Regulus worked his jaw, clearly torn between believing her and dismissing her. Archie wondered why Harry would offer information to Regulus of all people-she hated him, as far as he knew.

"I won't even make you ask," Harry said briskly. "I don't hate you nearly enough to give Riddle the satisfaction of punishing Rigel through you."

Regulus scowled, but held his tongue for once.

Harry lowered her voice and said, "Tell Riddle that his mark is no longer on Rigel Black."

"And what does that me-"

"Tell him Voldemort bears it instead. If he tracks it, he'll find Voldemort, not Rigel."

"Voldemort? The dark wizard who attacked the tournament?"

"What do you know about this madman, Harry?" Remus asked, disturbed.

"I know he's been recruiting thugs from the lower alleys," Harry said. "I know he attacked a coven of vampires who live up the street from me. I know he's bad news."

"And you somehow know he bears the mark Lord Riddle himself believes is carried by Rigel," Regulus said, suspicion warring with accusation.

Harry bowed her head. "Rigel got a patronus to me, before he fled. He explained what happened in the final task."

"Harry, you didn't mention-"

"Dad can't know." Harry looked around at them all very seriously. "James cannot know that I have been in contact with Rigel since yesterday. I know you don't believe us, Uncle Remus, when we say we don't know who Rigel is or where he is. Mum, I know you have doubts, too. Neither of you is good at hiding your thoughts. It's fine if you don't believe us. But Dad *has* to believe us. It's his career on the line if he has suspicions and doesn't turn us in."

" / should turn you in," Regulus snarled.

"On hearsay?" Harry favored him with an unimpressed look. "And cut off your only source of information on the impostor?"

Regulus looked to Archie, who held up his hands and shook his head. "Don't look at me. Harry was the one in England all this time. Whatever Rigel needed, he went to her." This lie was new, and felt

unwieldy on his lips. He hadn't practiced it. Harry was going off-script.

Regulus took a deep breath, set his gaze on Harry's hard face and let it out. "If you're lying, girl..."

"Riddle will know the truth in any case when he tracks that bit of magic he tried to shove into Rigel's core."

"He *what?* " Remus looked sick, and Lily put a hand to Addy's head in reflexive recoil.

Archie felt a little ill himself, and he didn't fully understand what Harry even meant.

Harry seemed utterly unconcerned. "If you tell him first, Rigel loses nothing, and maybe Riddle doesn't kill you."

"And maybe he comes after *you* when he hears how I knew this," Regulus suggested darkly.

Lily made a noise of distress, but Harry only smiled. "That would be a poor look for him. I think he'll have enough bad press as it is."

Archie hated how confident Harry sounded, as though she faced down terrible men all the time, and it didn't scare her anymore. He knew the ruse had changed them-had felt it within himself, a callous at the center of his soul-but he hadn't realized how much it had affected Harry, on a level so deep that only now, when the first few layers of illusion had violently ruptured, was a hint of it beginning to shine through.

"Take your information and try to repair your tattered reputation, Reggie." Sirius said it tiredly, but his face was firm. "You won't mention Harry if you know what's good for you."

"Then how will I explain-"

"You'll explain that the Black Family Head will disown you if you reveal your source. How much use do you think he'd find you if you had no last name at all, brother?"

Regulus blanched, and backed away from Sirius. With a last glare at all of them, he strode from the room. The flare of the Floo broke the silence that fell in the living room, but only briefly.

"We should... all get some rest," Archie suggested weakly.

Sirius nodded, all his fight having left the room with his younger brother. Remus shuffled slowly toward the door, but Lily waylaid him.

"Will you take Addy for me tonight?"

Addy held out her arms for Remus with happy yammerings of agreement. Remus took her gently, though he looked uncertain.

"Would you rather me stay here to help-?"

"No, thank you. My daughter and I are going to have a talk."

Harry winced, but didn't argue.

Archie wished he could help, but they couldn't protect one another from everything. Anyway, he had his own parental quagmire to wade through and Harry had no one to blame but herself. Helping Regulus made no sense... except, Harry always went out of her way to help people, even when she didn't have to.

And that was kind of the point, wasn't it?

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The first time she tried to use the Floo, it didn't work. The second time, it stung her. Shaking her smarting fingers, Harry ducked into

the kitchen where Lily was feeding Addy for what must have been the twentieth time that morning.

"Mum, the Floo-"

"Talk to your father."

Right. James was holed up in his study, and had been for several weeks. Harry had been avoiding him mostly, aware that his quality of life had significantly worsened since the debacle of the last task and the accompanying fall out. Owls hounded their breakfast table until he adjusted the wards, and now they crowded the front step agitatedly until James got around to collecting or burning their cargo. She'd seen snapshots in the paper of James hassled repeatedly in the Ministry lobby, and finally Amelia Bones had directed James to work from home.

Harry suspected he'd rather be hassled by reporters than attempt to work down the hall from a demanding toddler.

She knocked at the door and took the ensuing grunt for permission to enter. James was surrounded by stacks of newspapers, letters, and blue government folders. He nudged an empty mug her way without looking up from a statement he was taking notes on.

"Could use another cuppa, darling."

"I'll get you one, Dad." Harry reached out for the mug, but James put a hand on it quickly.

"Harry. What is it?"

Harry tensed the muscles in her leg against the impulse to shift her weight uncomfortably. "I just came to ask about the Floo, actually."

"No."

"I-I just wanted to go to the apothecary. I'm low on ingredients."

"No."

Harry swallowed her first and second complaints and tried to see things from his perspective. "I won't talk to any reporters," she said, eyeing the screaming headlines piled on his desk corner.

HOGWARTS HALFBLOOD STILL AT LARGE

WHO IS THE RIGEL BLACK CHILD?

S.O.W. BILL BATTERED IN HAILSTORM HEARING

THE END OF PUREBLOOD POLITICS AS WE KNOW IT?

James set down his quill with an impatient sigh. "It's not about the reporters, Harry. The public is in an uproar. Do you know how many death threats Sirius has received?"

She felt her heart shrink several sizes. "No," she said quietly.

"Suffice to say there are two dozen open cases on malicious harassment for the Blacks alone." James fixed her with a serious look. "For every person celebrating Rigel's win as a symbolic de-yoking of the oppressive status quo, there is someone the status quo benefits who wants this kid dead. The public knows how close the Potters and the Blacks are. It is now common knowledge that the real Black heir was galivanting in America for four years in your name. It's not a large leap to assume you were involved in the plot to destabilize the pureblood hegemony, too."

"But there was no plot," Harry protested.

"That doesn't matter, Harry." James worked his jaw tiredly. "I just... need you to stay in the house right now, all right?"

She nodded. "I'll just get you another coffee, Dad."

He pushed the mug her way, and it was almost a peace offering. In reaching to take it, her elbow caught the edge of a stack of papers

and a mountain slide ensued. The coffee cup was swept off the desk with two dozen copies of *The Daily Prophet* and a tinkling crunch reported its fate.

"Sorry, sorry," Harry muttered, dropping to her knees to stack the papers. "I can't get used to the size of my limbs, and I forgot what not having peripheral vision is like..."

She shot a simple repairing spell from her fingertips and recovered the mug with a relieved smile. James cleared his throat.

"You can't do magic at home like that, Harry. You don't live in the alleys anymore."

Harry winced. "Sorry. I-Remus is devising a revision schedule for me. I'm going to take my O.W.L.s at the end of the summer."

"Until then, no magic without adult supervision."

Harry stood, a stack of papers under one arm and the mug cradled in her hands. "Yes, Dad. Do you need these, or shall I take them...?"

"Just put them in the basement. I may need them later."

She retreated from the study and told herself it wasn't cowardice. Lily took the coffee cup from her when she reached the kitchen.

"I'll handle it, Harry. Maybe you should go study some more."

Studying was all she and Archie were allowed to do, at least until Remus was satisfied he had mapped the edges of their education. No amount of reassurance that they were both well ahead of the standard British syllabus would do. Lily and Remus had to see it proven.

She carried the stack of newspapers down to her lab and arranged them chronologically. Part of her didn't want to know, but it wouldn't do to live in ignorance while the rest of the world went on.



The accounts immediately following the final task were the most damning. Public opinion oscillated wildly between confusion, fear, and outrage. Voldemort was mentioned, misspelled and misquoted, dozens of times. Speculation was quick to tie him to the terrorist activities at the World Cup and violent extremist events over the last year. After that, predictions devolved into a predictable pattern of vampire demonization and Dark wizard accusations leveled like political spears at the S.O.W. Party.

Curiosity and a sense of delecticious scandal seemed to permeate writing about Rigel Black, at least for the first several issues. She could *feel* the relish oozing from Skeeter's pen in a particularly damning essay aimed at the political elite on both sides.

*One has to wonder at it, readers. How could two such celebrated geniuses both be so wildly misled by a child's playacting? Albus Dumbledore harbored RBC amidst the children of our pureblood elite for four years, and sources say the boy was Lord Riddle's own pick for a pureblood spot in what was supposed to be a rigorously vetted international tournament. With a wolf so long-languishing among their sheep, are these the shepherds we should trust to lead us at all?*

Harry shuffled through the next several issues, looking for a shift in the public conversation toward the upcoming legislation vote.

There. An interview with Dumbledore himself.

*Q -Thank you for sitting down with us today, Headmaster. I know this is a busy time of year for you.*

*A -More for my students, as you likely recall, Miss Orinthia [this reporter must confess she does not remember the Hogwarts end-of-term examinations fondly].*

*Q -Of course. So things are proceeding as normal at the school?*

*A -As normal as possible, considering all that has happened. Understandably, the students have a number of questions about their former classmate. Alas, they may never receive complete answers.*

*Q -Rigel Black was well-liked, wasn't he?*

*A -Phenomenally so. You must remember, this is a boy who saved many of his classmates from the evil Sleeping Sickness his first year here.*

*Q -That's right, and he defeated a basilisk that was terrorizing the school his second year, didn't he? Quite a legacy he leaves behind. It almost makes you wonder what his next three years would have been like, had he continued at Hogwarts.*

*A -I will wonder that for the rest of my life.*

*Q -People are also wondering, and I have to ask-you really had no idea? Forgive me, but the general consensus when I went to school was that you knew everything, Headmaster.*

*A -Not everyone will know this, but I have a close relationship with Lord Sirius Black. I met his son several times when he was very small, but a child can change significantly in the first eleven years of his life. Many exhibit radical shifts in identity during their youth, and the boarding school environment actually encourages children to discover themselves independently of the expectations of their families and friends back home.*

*Q -So you chalked up any discrepancies to the boy being a teenager, essentially.*

*A -The simplest explanation is usually the best. In this exceptional case, the explanation was much more complicated than anyone could have possibly imagined. A boy of eleven-do you remember yourself at eleven?*

*Q -By Merlin, I could barely find my way to Charms class.*

*A -A boy of those tender years assumed not only a new name, but a prominent title and an entire chess board of expectations to navigate from the very start. Looking back, I marvel at it. He came here with none of the preparation our pureblooded students receive. None of the private tutors or ancient stockpiles of knowledge. Yet, he was top of his year. He achieved things not seen in half a century at this school.*

*Q -He won an international tournament, pitted against the best students in the world. Yes, I know what you mean. It is incredible, and, you know, it really makes you think. Hogwarts must be one heck of a school.*

*A -I would like to take total credit, but I suspect there was just something extraordinary about the boy we know as Rigel Black.*

Harry had to put the paper down as the words began to blur. She wiped at her eyes and called herself an idiot several times over. Her glasses were smudged by the tears and she removed them with a huff of annoyance. She hated wearing glasses again. At times it made her crave the Modified Polyjuice Potion. She'd gladly look like Archie the rest of her life if it meant she could see-

She froze, the embryo of an idea taking root on the sidewall of her brain without warning. Scrambling for her notebook, she jotted down three words. *Partial Modified Polyjuice.*

"Harry! Come upstairs!"

Halfway between reality and what could be, she shook herself loose of the idea and jogged up the stairs to answer her mother's call.

"Archie's here," Lily said when she came into the kitchen. Addy was somehow still eating. Perhaps toddlers were an exception to Gant's Law, and there was a hole to Nonbeing in Addy's stomach. "Back garden. Thirty minutes."

Ah yes. Their allotted outdoor time. It was more than prisoners of Azkaban got, she reminded herself wryly. Somehow, draconian policies born of a reflexive need to re-exert control hadn't factored into Harry's calculation of this particular scenario.

It was hard to feel indignant, though. She could see every time her parents looked at her how deep the ruse had cut. How confused they were. How betrayed they felt. Sometimes her mother stared at her as though she'd never seen her before. Eventually, they would get used to Harry and Archie's new appearances. Eventually, the wounds of trust would have to heal.

Archie looked up from where he was kicking at a clod of grass and summoned a smile for her. They started walking the perimeter of the lawn automatically, Harry walking a bit faster to keep up with Archie's significantly longer stride.

"How's he been?" Harry asked.

"Better. He stopped all his volunteer work, so he's been a bit restless. It's not good for him to be cooped up, but I've been helping him redecorate the house. We're... I told him we could get rid of the snakes," Archie said, a slightly hysterical laugh bubbling up in his throat. "I think he likes them, though."

Snakes. *Treeslider*. Harry's heart clenched, and she hoped the boomslang had found his way to the kitchens without her. She supposed there were plenty of mice in Hogwarts, but... she did miss having the snake around.

"How are your parents?"

"Kind of distant," she admitted. "Lily especially. She doesn't like keeping a secret from James, but she can't tell him that I knew before he found me that Rigel had fled. It feels like I'm constantly trying not to freak them out. Like I forgot how to be normal at some point."

"They're probably just a lot more observant right now. We really shocked them."

"We really shocked everyone. Have you seen the papers?"

Archie shook his head with a grimace. "I couldn't bear to. Dad either. I think our mail's just piling up somewhere."

"Did you write Hermione?"

"Yeah." Archie blew out a long breath. "Nothing from her yet. Hell, I don't know if she'll ever want to speak to me again."

"If she's that mad, she'll want to tell you," Harry said wryly.

Archie chuckled weakly. "Yeah. It's her dismissal I'm really afraid of."

"I'm trying to figure out how to get those items back from Rigel," Harry said carefully. She wouldn't put it entirely past her parents to have eavesdropping wards on them, though she didn't feel any when she bathed the garden with her magic. "Maybe he can mail them back to us."

"The mirror, you mean?"

"And the locket. Lily's gotten a lot of questions about it, and having the original would help her assess its effectiveness."

"A lot of job offers, too, I bet."

"The Department of Mysteries wants to canonize her, I think."

Archie sent her a sidelong look that was studiously neutral. "Is it true the necklace stopped a Killing Curse?"

Harry nodded, her mood darkening. She'd been so *stupid* that night. So desperate to get free that she left herself wide open to a lethal attack. She shouldn't have survived-wouldn't have, without that locket. "It was like a really powerful ward anchored to the wearer."

The Killing Curse isn't blockable by any magic an individual can summon at a moment's disposal, but it can't penetrate everything. It can be physically stopped, and wards that are anchored firmly enough and woven tightly enough will stop it, too. Lily put weeks of magic into a single moment, ready to be unleashed at the right trigger. The cleverest bit was how she set the triggering mechanisms-it didn't activate any of the dozens of times Rigel was cursed or attacked. Only when he would have otherwise died."

"Ruddy brilliant. She could outfit the whole Auror division, and Dark wizards wouldn't stand a chance," Archie said, admiring.

"It would be hard to scale up significantly without a lot more help," Harry said, mentally calculating the amount of power even one Dark Detection Disk would require.

"What could be more worth throwing magic at than saving lives?" Archie looked up at the sky and grimaced. "That was naïve, huh? I'm working on that."

"Don't." Harry nudged him with her shoulder. "I like that you see the best in the world."

"Do I? Or do I imagine a world that doesn't exist?" He looked down at her glumly. "Lately, I've been wondering if anything I think about the world is real."

"There are good and bad things in this world," Harry said firmly.

"There are evil psychopaths who want to crush other people beneath their boots and then there are really nice pairs of boots, with fireproofing and acid-resistant soles and stretchy leather that's soft on the ankles-"

"I get it, Harry, you miss your boots." Archie laughed, and this time it was stronger. "Little does the world appreciate the true casualty of our double-life."

"It's all about perspective," she agreed. When Archie smiled, her own heart felt a little lighter. "Speaking of perspective, would you be offended if I kept your eyesight after all?"

"You've lost me, Harry."

"I was just thinking I actually missed the Polyjuice a little. I miss being tall, and I really, really miss good vision. Then I thought, what if there was a way to select the exact attributes that Polyjuice imitates? Isolate the genes expressed to one specific desirable trait, instead of clumsily copying the whole strand of genetic material."

"You want to steal my eyes."

"I want to steal your eye *sight* . You can keep the color."

Archie shot her an offended look. "Grey goes with *everything*. "

"It's a Black color. I'd like to try being a Potter for a while, if it's all the same to you."

"Your loss," Archie said. For a moment, it was like they were kids again.

"Arch!"

The back door opened and Sirius came jogging out, holding a smoking red letter in his hand.

"You'd better take this, sport."

Archie eyed it with alarm. "You didn't vanish it like the others?"

"This one's from your friend."

Harry pressed her lips together but couldn't contain a snort.

"Something funny, Harry?"

" *Hermione* sent you a Howler?" Harry burst into laughter. "Sorry. Haha-sorry, sorry. Can I listen?"

"You may not have a choice." Sirius thrust it into Archie's hands hurriedly. "It's gonna blow."

"No, no, I'm not ready for-"

The Howler burst open at Archie's touch and zoomed into the air before him, red paper twisting to form a very displeased moue as it shouted-

"DIDN'T I TELL YOU TO INCLUDE ME IN YOUR STUPID PLOTS!? ALL THIS TIME I COULD HAVE HELPED YOU!"

Sirius choked and Harry had to smother her amusement once more as Archie stared in wondering confusion at the shrieking missive.

"IF I DIDN'T THINK IT ENTIRELY BEYOND YOU, I'D ACCUSE YOU OF SLUMMING IT WITH THE GULLIBLE MUGGLEBORN AND TAKING A SPOT HELD OPEN FOR LESSER BLOODED STUDENTS AT AIM IN THE SAME BREATH."

Archie blanched.

"BUT I KNOW YOU. EVERYTHING MAKES *MORE* SENSE NOW, NOT LESS! DO YOU KNOW HOW OFTEN I QUESTIONED MY OWN SANITY? HOW I DISMISSED MY OWN CONFUSION WHEN WHAT I OBSERVED AND WHAT I KNEW DIDN'T ADD UP? DON'T YOU *EVER* MAKE ME QUESTION MYSELF AGAIN YOU SELFISH, STUPID, BOY-IF THAT IS YOUR PREFERRED GENDER."

Harry muffled an unkind guffaw at the way Archie's face slid from guilt to shame to hope again.

"WHEN YOUR MOST DESERVED GROUNDING COMES TO AN END I EXPECT YOU TO GROVEL PROFUSELY AND APOLOGIZE TO MY PARENTS. THEY ARE QUITE CONCERNED THAT MY



BEST FRIEND HAS BEEN LYING TO ME FOR FOUR YEARS. THEN YOU ARE GOING TO EXPLAIN WHICH ONE OF YOU I WAS RUNNING AROUND THE LOWER ALLEYS WITH ALL SUMMER AND JUST *HOW* YOU INTEND TO CONTINUE YOUR STUDIES WITH YOUR FIRST FOUR YEARS OF MARKS **UTTERLY VOIDED!"**

The letter paused, as though to catch its breath, then said, in a much-softer-but-still-somewhat-shouting tone, "I Do Hope Nothing Bad Has Befallen Rigel. I Have THOUGHTS Regarding His Methods, But He Is A Hero Of Human Rights And A Person Of Relatively Sound Moral Fiber From All I Have Witnessed. Please Write Back. Hermione."

The Howler shredded itself and collapsed in a heap of smoking paper on the lawn. Sirius put it out with his wand and didn't bother to hide the wide smirk on his face.

"You sure know how to pick 'em, Archie."

"I don't deserve her friendship."

"Don't flatter yourself, cousin," Harry teased. "Just be grateful Hermione is a merciful god."

Sirius barked a laugh, and Archie looked immediately more at ease. He blinked the moisture back from his eyes and said, "You're just jealous. I bet none of your friends have sent you a Howler."

Harry stiffened. Forcing a huff, she said, "My brewer is probably drafting one as we speak. It's been weeks since I delivered any orders to him."

Archie grimaced apologetically when Sirius bent to make sure the Howler was no longer a fire-hazard. Harry shrugged uncomfortably. She knew he didn't mean the joke to sting. Certainly, she wouldn't be receiving any letters at all from her former friends, though they might *wish* to send Rigel a Howler. She and Archie had decoupled the mail

spells from their aliases entirely. Only letters addressed to Harriett Potter would reach her now, regardless of what address was used. Letters to Rigel Black would get turned around entirely, as Sirius had explicitly blocked the alias after the first dozen letters descended on Grimmauld Place.

Lily called them in for dinner, and Harry busied herself setting the table. She couldn't afford to wonder which of her friends might have tried to reach out. Probably, they were as angry and confused as everyone else. Draco... she tried not to think about what she'd done to him, but sometimes she woke up in a cold sweat, the weight on his devastated stare between her shoulder blades, unshruggable.

Remus came into the kitchen with James in tow, evidently having pried him from his case files. "Smells delicious, Lily."

"Sirius cooked tonight. He brought it over to escape the construction dust, I gather."

Sirius nodded emphatically. "The kitchen's a warzone, but the oven still functions."

"No dessert?" James asked, opening a covered container with a curious sniff.

"No cake for a month." Sirius sent Archie a stern look that even Harry could tell was mostly for James' benefit.

Archie rolled his eyes. "You could make a cake and not give me any, Dad. This way, we're all suffering."

Sirius pouted and Remus laughed. "Sirius knows he would cave the first time you eyed it longingly."

James and Lily did not laugh, and an awkwardness descended as they all took their seats. Harry had expected Sirius to take the ruse hardest-he depended so much on Archie, and their bond was already strained-but after an initial stormy period of extreme highs

and lows, Sirius seemed to have embraced his parental relationship with Archie with new vigor. He gained visible satisfaction from imposing arbitrary and sometimes ridiculous rules and watching Archie follow them. Her cousin had reportedly gone an entire day without using any form of the verb 'to be' just to humor Sirius.

She supposed after the shock of the lie settled, Sirius was just glad to have an explanation for his son's erratic and distant behavior all these years. Harry's parents, who had no reason whatsoever to worry about her previously, felt the betrayal all the keener. James had the added stress of heading a politically charged investigation he knew she was at least tangentially involved in, and Lily...

Harry suspected she was using concern over Harry's evident lack of formal education to cover a deeper anxiety about the world her daughter inhabited and the measures she had taken to secure a place there. Lily had explicitly begged her to never contact Rigel Black again. She'd all but wept when she explained in wrenching detail exactly what would happen to Harry were she discovered to be any more central to the blood-identity crime. Archie's assertion of guilt was the *only* thing between her and much harsher public scrutiny. The power of Archie's word, vested in the purity of his blood and social status, had saved her, even as their crime threatened to sweep the legs out from under that very power. Lily was terrified for her, and that, Harry thought, translated mostly to a defensive chill.

Out of nowhere, Sirius asked, "That one time when you went to the Weasleys'-was that you or Rigel?"

Archie swallowed a mouthful of carrots. "Me. It was too hard to switch then, so I just pretended to be him for a day."

"You pretended to be yourself," Sirius repeated thoughtfully.

"I pretended to be the kid the Weasleys knew from school," Archie clarified.

"Whenever we picked you up from school..."

"That was Rigel," Archie said quietly. "He'd go home with you. I'd go home with the Potters. Sometime the next day, usually, he would Floo here, Harry would Floo back from Diagon Alley, and we'd all swap."

James stabbed a red potato with unnecessary force.

Remus gestured with his water glass in Harry's direction. "That wasn't you at the Yule Ball."

"Definitely not." Harry made a disgusted face. "Archie took some serious artistic liberties that night."

"I'm not an expert on girls' fashion!"

"That explains so much," Sirius said.

"Horrifying," James agreed with a surly grunt.

"At the Malfoys' summer parties?" Remus asked.

"Rigel. We swapped the day of or before. I've never been to the Malfoys' place," Archie admitted.

Sirius gaped at him. "I went to all those stuffy parties for nothing? What about the New Year's Eve galas?"

Archie pretended to think about it. "Sometimes me. Sometimes Rigel. Harry-were you me once?"

"I don't remember," she lied. "We switched so many times... we had a lot of notes. Burned them," she added as James looked up from his plate inquiringly.

"Right," he muttered.

"I suppose we know why you never brought Hermione over," Lily said quietly.

"Because I don't know her at all, yes," Harry said dryly. "Also, she thought I was a girl who identified and presented as a boy."

"That's... involved," Remus said diplomatically.

"Yeah." Archie paused between bites of potatoes and said seriously. "Also, I'm in love with her."

"She just sent you a Howler," Sirius reminded him.

"Dear Merlin, it's Lily and James all over again." Remus chuckled. "When she hexes you, you'll know it's forever."

Even James and Lily had to smile at that. Something soft passed between them, and it gave Harry hope that everything could be salvaged after all.

A squawk like a dying rooster came from the back door and Addy shrieked back like a werewolf responding to the call of its own kind.

"What the devil now?" James threw his napkin down and stalked to the door. "Bloody owls got no respect for the *morning* part of morning post."

He cracked the door enough to allow the owl to deposit its burden at his feet with another ugly screech. James flipped it a Knut and frowned as he collected the missive-it was a newspaper, but only looked to be a couple of pages thick.

"Special edition," he murmured, slicing through the ties with a table knife.

Harry could read the headline from across the table.

FOREVER DO WE PART: MARRIAGE LAW MEETS DEFEAT!

Lily dropped her fork with a clatter and Sirius jumped to his feet.

"We did it? WE DID IT!" Sirius pulled Addy out of her highchair and spun her around the room with a shout of jubilation.

Addy vomited all over his robes. Sirius held her at arms' length and laughed. He laughed until he began to shake and Lily swiftly rescued her youngest daughter from her human roller-coaster of an uncle.

"The vote wasn't even close," James said wonderingly. His eyes flew across the page. "'Resoundingly rejected by a clear margin' it says. 'A final reckoning for a party plagued with publicity problems who provoked a populist backlash by proving before one and all the puerile pretension on their own platform.' By *Godric*, that's nice to read."

"Skeeter does have a way with alliteration," Harry said. Her cheeks hurt with how hard she wanted to grin.

Lily rounded the table and James embraced her with a laugh that was half-cry. Harry caught Archie's eye, and for the first time in a long time, something like pride bloomed quietly between them.

"Well done," Remus said quietly. Harry looked over and caught the full weight of his approval. "You pushed us to capitalize on Rigel's story. It *worked*, Harry."

"You all made it happen," she said, shrugging slightly. "I was stuck here. Rigel was like... a penalty shot. He gave you the chance, but in the end, the same people who worked all these years to combat systematic discrimination made the final play. So well done you."

"Well done all of us," Sirius said loudly. "James, I'm breaking into your wine cellar."

"We don't have a cellar-"

"I'm diving into the back of that cabinet you think we don't know about in your study!" Sirius made a break for the door, and James darted after him.

"Now, wait just a second. Some of those were inherited-"

Archie put his hand on Harry's and said, comically solemn, "I'm afraid I'm going to have to break our engagement, Miss Potter."

Harry put a hand to heart and fluttered her lashes in distress. "Be honest, is there someone else?"

He squeezed her hand tightly. "I've found my perfect person, it's true, but more than that-I simply don't think you require my protection any longer."

"Let's tear up the contract, then."

"I was thinking we'd burn it."

"Can I keep the cauldrons in the divorce?"

"We both know I wouldn't care for them properly."

Remus laughed. "This can only be for the good of the universe."

"You've certainly proven how dangerous the two of you are together," Lily said on a sigh. She came to lay a soft hand on Harry's curls.

"Remus is right, though. While the rest of us were fumbling, you pushed through the fog with startling clarity. This is your victory, too. The magical world will be a better place for all witches and wizards tomorrow."

"Technically, it will be exactly the same," Archie said slowly. "It just won't have gotten *worse* . The S.O.W. Party still exists."

"The absence of the *threat* of arbitrary discrimination is what makes the world free, Archie." Lily smiled down at Addy with perfect hope.

"The existence of that Party itself is not the problem. The problem is the concentration of power in the hands of those who would use it to arbitrarily constrain the autonomy of others. Such a concentration of arbitrary power will always be a stain on the tapestry of a tolerant and open society, but today that power was blunted. The

discriminatory views of those people no longer matter-because they cannot wield power over us anymore."

"The next step is dismantling the damage they've already done," Remus added. "The legislation that prevents Hogwarts from schooling children based on blood has to be our target. Access to education in the absence of other discriminatory legislation means access to jobs, security, and happiness."

Lily and Remus devolved into a side panel on the logical next avenues of political action, but Harry had trouble focusing. She was still a little shell-shocked. How much time had she spent agonizing over the problem of the marriage law? Especially in the last year, it had come to feel like a problem that was entirely her own. If it passed, it was her fault for winning the tournament as a pureblood. If it failed, it would be because of something she did or said to turn the tide of public sentiment.

Well the tide was turned, but not from anything she could have predicted or wanted. What she said to Remus was the truth. In the end, it had almost nothing to do with her. People all over, who she didn't know and would probably never meet, had made their own voices heard. The status quo would change. The world would adjust in fits and starts to the new balance of power, even though most would never know that the stuttering collapse of S.O.W. momentum hinged on an Unbreakable Vow between one man and one child.

Harry would have to adjust, too. It wasn't just the breaking of the engagement contract with Archie. Unlike her cousin, she had no school to go back to in the Fall. She had no friends to keep in touch with. All she'd done as Rigel was nothing, now. She would have to make her own way at last.

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Narcissa met her at the grate, a look in her eye that told her things were worse than she suspected.

"Pansy, thank you for coming."

"I would have come sooner, but Draco's been ignoring my letters," Pansy said quietly. "How is he?"

Narcissa removed the ashes from Pansy's robes without looking her in the eye. "He's shaken. Angry, but only on the surface."

Pansy didn't have to ask what was beneath that surface-it would be the same churning mass of questions that found purchase in her own chest. Along with a good dose of self-recrimination, knowing Draco.

A crash like glass shattering against stone startled from some distance and Narcissa pursed her lips. "Excuse me, dear. I must see to my husband. You remember the way?"

She nodded. Narcissa left at something slightly slower than a jog, and Pansy wondered what Lord Malfoy had to be so upset about. It had been a trying few weeks for everyone, but then, men were so much more fragile about disappointment.

Draco's door was closed when she approached it. It required true petulance to close a door in a house as big as Malfoy Manor; she braced herself for a scene.

Pansy knocked firmly several times.

"I'm not hungry," Draco called through the door.

Pansy allowed herself an eye-roll and pushed the door open regardless. "I'm not here to bring you a snack, Draco."

"Pansy!" Draco yelped her name more than said it and scrambled up from where he'd been lying indolently on the bedspread. The curtains in the room were drawn tightly together and her nose caught

the musty smell of a boy who had not bathed in days. "What are you doing here?"

"I've come to see why you're ignoring my correspondence," Pansy said primly. "I didn't realize you were sulking. So sorry to have disturbed you." She made as though to leave and heard Draco sigh irritably behind her. With a smile, she looked back over her shoulder and said sweetly, "Unless you'd like to be a big boy today?"

"You're worse than Mother," Draco complained, dragging his feet over to the window to let in some afternoon light.

"Why do you think she recruited me?" Pansy shot back. She inspected the bench at the end of Draco's bed, but thought better of sitting on it when she spied the pile of dirty socks camping out underneath. "How long have you been wallowing?"

"I'm not wallowing," Draco said, running hands through his hair as though he could undo days of bedhead in thirty seconds. "I'm *thinking* ."

"Good, because that's what I've been doing, too." Pansy stared at the socks until Draco found his wand and removed them from her presence. She sat and adjusted her skirts. "What have you concluded, then?"

Draco pulled a chair out from the vanity and sat backwards in it, arms crossed over the back. "Nothing. I'm just going in circles. Nothing makes any *sense* anymore."

"It has been difficult to reconcile it all," Pansy admitted. "My parents cross-examined me at length-I bet everyone else's did, too-and it helped me see a few things more clearly."

Draco rested his forehead on his arms and grumbled into his rumpled shirt, "Good for you."

"Looking back, there were so many things... we knew he was hiding something, but this?" Even now, she marveled at it. "He was a wholly different *person* . Fooling us is one thing, but we saw him with his *family* ."

"Or we thought we did," Draco muttered.

"He could only have fooled Lord Black with extensive training. This was planned for much longer than the papers are speculating, I think." Pansy drummed her fingers on her knee, waiting for Draco to say something constructive.

Her friend only shrugged. "So what, Pansy?"

"So, what are we going to do about it, Draco?"

"Do? Nothing." Draco's voice was flat. Lifeless.

She stared at him. "You don't mean that."

"I have to," he snapped. There it was-real emotion sparked in the depths of his eyes as he glared at her. "Do you know what that sneak did to me? He called in the life debt." Draco stood and threw the chair sideways, where it collided into a wall with a crunching noise she hoped he found satisfying. Lord Malfoy really ought to set a better example. "I'm *forbidden* from looking for him. As if I'd want to." Draco cast a blasting curse at the crumpled chair and it burst violently into pieces.

"You're still angry with him, then?"

"What else should I be?" Draco snarled. "Supportive? Forgiving? That's what a *friend* would do and he made it pretty damn clear that our friendship was a complete lie from the start."

"Draco," Pansy started, but he was already in full ranting mode.

"He was just trying to get in good with my family, Pansy. To-to get leverage over us in case he got caught. He used me, used all of us

to get what he wanted and then-then-" Draco's breath came in rapid pants, so Pansy finished his sentence for him.

"Then he left. And it hurt."

Draco bared his teeth at her and she resisted the urge to slap the manners back into him physically. She would do it verbally, instead.

"Weeks of thinking has gotten you nowhere, I see."

"You weren't there, Pansy. I caught him erasing traces of himself in our dorm room. You didn't hear what he said-"

" *Forget what he said.*" Pansy rose to her feet and looked down her perfect nose at her perfectly obtuse friend. "Honestly, Draco. You find out your best friend has lied to you for four years and *then* you decide to believe everything he says?" Draco froze. Pansy gentled her tone but not the steel in her gaze. "Is Rigel Black a liar, or is he not?"

"I..." Draco closed his mouth, cleared his throat, and addressed her with considerably more deference. "What exactly are you saying, Pansy?"

"That if Rigel's purpose was to stop you from coming after him, then he succeeded on multiple fronts." Pansy moved forward to put a hand on Draco's face. "Didn't you use your empathy at all?"

She was close enough to see his cheeks grow ruddy. "I was too upset. I suppressed it before the last task, and then everything was so confusing. I could barely get hold of my *own* emotions, much less parse through his."

"I'm sure he saw to that," Pansy said. Boys were completely hopeless. "I admit I didn't foresee him using the life debt in this manner. Is your father bound, too?"

"All the Malfoys," he confirmed. "As we took the debt on as a family."

"Can't blame Rigel for that one," Pansy said dryly. Merlin save her from the pride of men. "Very well. Leave this to me."

"You?" Draco frowned at her.

"Of course. I haven't been sitting in my room for three weeks, Draco. Millie is checking with her family's contacts abroad. We can't assume we know what he really looks like, but he knew enough about purebloods to pass as one of us from the start." Pansy began to pace the room. "Either he had a lot of training, or his family is recently impure and he was raised with our traditions. I think the latter more likely, given the timeframe. His English is perfect, but my father heard from a friend at the Ministry that the Aurors are looking closely at the old French lines."

"They think he's a bastard?" Draco seemed surprised by the notion. Pansy wasn't sure how he had rationalized away Rigel's Parseltongue in the last few weeks, but she reflected the lack of his input might not be a real loss for the investigation.

"Or an orphan. Think about it-how could he have gone four years without his own people wondering where he was? Aside from last summer when he was out of touch, he's been in England more or less constantly for four years."

"That internship in the Americas... he never was in the Darian Gap, was he?"

"Probably not. When you accept that there are three of them rather than two, it's easier to sort through the things that are distinctly Heir Black and those that are purely Rigel."

"Three of them?"

Pansy blinked at him. "Rigel, Heir Black, and Miss Potter, of course."

Draco blinked back. "What... do you think Potter has to do with it?"

Salazar, he was slower than usual. "There's absolutely no way she wasn't in on it," Pansy said slowly. "Fooling your parent is one thing, but Harriett Potter and her cousin are closer than close. Looking back over their interactions, don't they seem a little *too* close? In retrospect, Rigel dodged questions from a lot of people over the years. His family did seem confused sometimes, though I brushed it off as him not telling them everything, but Harriett was never confused. She never once questioned him, did she? They defended one another in every situation, and at least some of those times it was Rigel, not Arcturus."

"But if she knew..." Draco shook his head. "She'd never admit it."

"Naturally, as I'd imagine she doesn't relish a stay in Azkaban prison. Her cousin has shielded her by claiming full responsibility. She can claim ignorance with the rest of her family, at least to some extent. That doesn't change the fact that she knew. She certainly knew Heir Black was in America using her name to enroll in one of their schools, and I would be *very* surprised if she didn't know who Rigel was and where he came from, too." The picture was obvious, once you had all the pieces. Pansy caught Draco's gaze and held it confidently. "Black and Potter are the keys. Their families can't keep them hidden away forever. We'll find him, Draco, and then we'll make him explain everything."

"Everything," Draco repeated, holding her eyes almost desperately.

"Just don't give up on him in the meantime," Pansy implored. "The boy who needs your friendship now more than ever was *real*, Drake, and he is out there alone somewhere in a lot of trouble." She took his hand and squeezed it, relieved when he squeezed hers back.

"We always knew he was in over his head with something," Draco said, a quiver to his voice.

"We just didn't understand how far under the surface he was living."

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It was a month before James let her leave the house.

" *One* trip to Tate's and back," he said from the top of the basement stairs. Harry looked up from her cauldron, scarcely daring to hope. James eyed the potion with resignation that was not entirely bad-humored. "Only because you're driving your mother crazy going through the pantry."

Harry stirred the very large vat of tea in her cauldron and fought a small smile. That was the idea. "I'll be back before sundown," she promised.

"You'll be back in one hour exactly, or your cauldrons will be confiscated."

"My studies-"

"Don't insult either of us, Harry. Potions is the last subject you require any additional practice in."

Harry bit her tongue before the argument could devolve further. Before James closed the door behind him, she called, "Thanks, Dad!"

"One hour!"

Harry scrambled for her list and dashed up the stairs. She slid into a pair of trainers she'd left near the back porch and took a couple of her mother's shopping bags from the hook near the keys. Before anyone could change their minds, she was through the Floo.

Stepping into the apothecary was like coming home. She breathed in the herbs, pickling fluids, and chemicals. Rather than wandering the isles first, Harry went straight to the counter.

"Mr. Tate, if I make a big order can you have most of it delivered?"

Tate peered at her a bit strangely. "Certainly, I can do that, Miss...?"

"Oh." She put a hand to her face and cursed her own stupidity. "It's me, Harriet Potter."

"Miss Potter?" Tate's eyes flew wide and realization set in. "Ah! I had heard some rumors that... well, no consequence. Forgive me for not recognizing you."

"Not at all," she said, her stomach falling a bit. She fingered the end of the plain ribbon she'd been using to try and tame her exuberant curls. "I have changed a bit. I don't know exactly what you heard, but I imagine some of those rumors are true," she added, figuring she may as well face it head-on. "I've been using an altered appearance for several years. Now I'm just me again, though."

"Oh." Tate scratched his curly head uncomfortably for a moment, then settled on, "Well, it'll be no trouble recognizing you in the future, then, Miss Potter. I hope your presence here indicates you intend to continue patronizing this shop for some time to come." Tate smiled generously at her, and she smiled back.

"Thank you, Mr. Tate. I certainly don't know where else I'd go for such quality supplies."

"What are you in need of today, then?"

She showed him her list and set about collecting the ingredients she wanted to inspect personally while leaving the bulk items to him. She'd have liked to spend a good deal longer browsing, but thought her father would appreciate it if she were back sooner than absolutely required. Harry stuck to her list, and was back at the counter with her baskets just as Tate finished ringing the rest of it up on his till.



Looking at the heap of fresh ingredients, Harry couldn't help but feel a little anticipatory. Pillaging the pantry hadn't been *strictly* necessary, but she had been scraping the bottom of her stores.

"How much of this do you want to carry out?" Tate asked.

She plucked a handful of items for a potion she wanted to try later than evening. "Just these. The rest are fine to be delivered."

"Your usual tab?"

"If you don't mind."

"Er... could you confirm your account number? Just as... your appearance has altered significantly, Miss Potter."

She grimaced. "Of course, Mr. Tate. I appreciate your attention to security."

Harry rattled off her Gringotts information and made a mental note to get a new wand before someone required more stringent identification from her. Mr. Tate began ferrying her purchases to the storeroom for later packaging, and Harry collected the empty baskets to stack back in their place by the door.

The bell jangled and she stepped to the side automatically to avoid the other customer coming in.

"If it isn't little-miss-homeless."

She looked up from arranging the baskets and her eyebrows flew upwards. Caelum Lestrangle shut the door behind him, looking more disgustingly smug than usual.

"Somehow, you're even uglier than you were, Halfblood."

"Lestrangle," she said flatly. "How did you even recognize me?"

He gave her the most insulting of once-overs and smirked. "Who else could you be?"

"What does that mean?" Harry looked down at her brewing robes, utterly confused as to how he'd managed what Tate hadn't, when Tate had known her so much longer.

Lestrangle ignored her. "I heard you haven't been in America all these years after all," he said. Something about the anticipation in his voice made her think he'd been dying to rib her about the scandal. "They're saying you slept on the streets of London to let your pureblood cousin lark it up across the pond in your place."

"That's ridiculous," Harry said, scowling.

Lestrangle made a moue of mock-sympathy. "You know, you could have crashed with me if you were so desperate."

She clicked her tongue. "Let's not be utterly absurd."

"What's *absurd* is the idea of you slumming it in they alleys for four years instead of attending school like a normal person." Lestrangle sneered, and she saw through it to the jealousy beneath. "It's no wonder you've come up with so many incongruously insane new potioneering methods-you had all the time in the world, and no idea what right even looked like, didn't you?"

Harry put a hand on her hip and made a face at him. "I'm sure there's a compliment in there, but as usual, it's buried under two decades of prejudice and rubbish. Haven't you heard, Lestrangle? Different is the new normal."

Lestrangle gave a low, fake laugh. "Don't tell me you buy into that new wave trite? Nothing has changed, dummy. You're still you and I'm still me. There will never be a world where you're not a freak and I'm not in charge."

"You're really an arse sometimes," Harry said through gritted teeth. "The world is changing course whether you like it or not, Lestrangle. You can adapt to it, or drown in it."

"I think I understand the world better than you, street rat."

Harry shook her head. "I don't have time to keep arguing with you, unfortunately. Fun as this is, I'm expected at home."

"I'm surprised your daddy let you out of his sight," Lestrangle said sweetly. "I bet you, your cousin, and that little blood thief you abetted set his career back twenty years."

Harry pressed her lips together, but the question slipped out anyway. "What did you do with your dose of *Liberespigare*?"

Lestrangle went still. "I... sold it."

She narrowed her eyes. "You, who collect priceless ingredients for the pride of it, sold a potion? I don't think so."

He was on the attack before she could register the snarl on his face. "I suppose you're angry about me helping your little friend's opponent? If I'd known it was going to a *mudblood*, I wouldn't have given it up." He leaned in close enough to hiss. "By the way, you may have everyone fooled, but I don't believe for a *moment* you didn't know that imposter was a halfblood. I bet you loved watching him win, making a fool of every pureblood there."

"He did do that, didn't he?" she spat.

"It wasn't a real competition, brat. How could it prove anything? There wasn't even a pureblood *in* the finals."

Harry shook her head in slow disbelief. "Because the halfblood beat them both."

She didn't understand the intractable hate in his eyes. She couldn't comprehend his point of view at all-what did it cost him, who had

everything, to admit that a halfblood was good at something?

Quietly, she asked, "Did you make the potion for the ritual?" She'd been furiously researching it for weeks, trying to figure out what sort of powers it might give the construct, even botched as the magical transfer had been. She'd determined it had to be a new invention, as even her darkest texts made no mention of anything similar. She recalled a letter from Krait, who had been pressed hard for the identity of his brewer. She remembered a letter from Lestrangle in which he'd boasted of someone taking an interest in his ability to Shaped Imbue.

Lestrangle's face went perfectly blank, and she supposed that was answer enough. "I don't know what you're rambling about," he whispered.

"Teaching you was a mistake," she said.

He jerked away from her and yanked a basket from the stack on his way past. Harry stared sightlessly at the floor for a long moment.

The bell chimed again, jerking her out of the dark pit of what-ifs. A middle-aged woman bustled into the shop and Harry slipped out the door behind her.

Her feet turned home, but a familiar voice rooted her in place.

"Harry."

Leo was waiting for her, leaned up against Tate's apothecary like he'd been there forever, and always would be there.

Harry was acutely aware of how different she looked, how different she felt, and how long it had been since they'd met. Of how Aurors had come knocking on doors in the alleys because of her. Of how no one on Dogwood Lane gave her up or contradicted the story she gave Mrs. Botting in any way. Of how she owed him and everyone he represented a debt that could never be repaid.

Leo gave her a long look, then reached out to twist a curl between his fingers. "It suits you."

Her lip wobbled, and she wanted to die.

"Leo. I-"

He produced a knife from his sleeve, and she stiffened. It was hers- or rather, it was the one he'd given her. Last she'd seen it, the blade was dripping with Barty's blood.

"Nicked this off the young Auror watching the evidence boxes that night," he said, flipping it slowly. "Recognized it at once in the mirror."

Harry tried to swallow. "I... gave it to Rigel for the tournament. Just in case."

Leo caught her gaze and didn't let go. "Margo saw your boots below a hooded cloak, running through the alleys the morning after the last task. I know it was you, lass."

She didn't give her tears permission to fall, but they did anyway. She didn't tell her legs to move forward and she was pretty sure she didn't tell her head to bury itself in Leo's shoulder, but however it happened she was crying, he was holding her, and the cracks of the last month gave way with a wrenching sob and-

"Oh, Harry. What have you gotten yourself into?"

She shattered into pieces.

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[end of chapter fourteen].

A/N: Did I listen to Prisoner by Miley Cyrus and Dua Lipa on repeat while writing this chapter? Maybe. Did it break my heart to end this book, by far my favorite of the series so far? Definitely. This book.

*This book* . I can barely fathom how long I've been writing it, but thank you to everyone who read every chapter and showered me with support and feedback and the motivation to keep making it better and really think out all the different threads. I hope it was as satisfying for you reading it as it was writing it.

The epilogue will be out shortly.

# Epilogue

## The Futile Façade:

### Epilogue:

The rain that dashed itself against the windows didn't stir him. The wind howling at the shutters couldn't move him. He was calm. Focused. He had to be, or the Divination was all but useless.

Severus bent low over a large map, intention in every fiber as he drew his magic through the array with ruthless control. At the center of the runes, a cluster of fluorescent green spheres glowed softly, perfectly imbued far beyond the natural life of such things. Retaining the magical signature of the one who imbued them years before.

The crystal beneath his right hand grew scalding as it absorbed the magic in the array. At the last possible moment, when it was so hot he risked third-degree burns across his palm, he released it. The crystal lurched into the air and hung suspended over the map in quivering uncertainty. Slowly, as he began to strain with the effort of keeping the array active, the crystal lilted, tilted, and slid sideways to hover unerringly over south-east England.

Severus released the magic with a gasp, vindicated. The boy hadn't left the country.

His scrying was not accurate enough to geolocate his wayward pupil, but he was nonetheless satisfied. Let the offended imbeciles scour the continent for him. Severus would find the teen in his own time. Straightening, he fixed his sights on the pristine apron in the corner. It hung limp, abandoned, with no evidence it had ever been worn at all.

A potioneer like Rigel couldn't hide his talents forever.

[TrTrTr]

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The boy had ruined everything. The legislation needed to save the magical world in tatters, votes evaporated in the boil of public outrage.

To add insult to injury, he'd managed to hamstringing his right-hand man on the way out. Lucius and all his resources-useless.

Anger simmered into incredulity, and the dregs of that congealed to insatiable curiosity and he had to know. *How* could the boy have done this? And who *was* he?

His spies at the Ministry reported the boy was European: French, possibly. Speculation put him the bastard of an old line, and naturally so-his magic was too great to be otherwise explained.

Parseltongue was not a trait that ran in European lines, however. He should know. He had traced the line extensively, perhaps further than anyone else. If not a Black, he could only be the by-blow of another family intermingled with the Peverell brothers.

He would find the boy.

The door to his study creaked open, and Jacob Owens strode though it with a sour expression.

Speaking of long-lost Slytherin heirs...

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[end of book four!]

Thank you to everyone for reading this story! If you haven't already, please join the Discord server, Harry Get Some Sleep (a link to which should live in the Rigel Black Forum on FFN). It's an amazing



community of readers and creators of all kinds, and we'd love to have you there.

I don't have a timeline yet, but fear not, readers! The Rigel Black Chronicles continue in Book Five: The Manic Masquerade.