

The Pureblood Pretense

By: murkybluematter

Harriett Potter dreams of going to Hogwarts, but in an AU where the school only accepts purebloods, the only way to reach her goal is to switch places with her pureblood cousin-the only problem? Her cousin is a boy. Alanna the Lioness take on HP.

Status: complete

Published: 2011-12-06

Updated: 2012-06-21

Words: 229389

Chapters: 22

Rated: Fiction T - Language: English - Genre: Adventure/Friendship - Characters: Harry P., Draco M. - Reviews: 1,001 - Favs: 2,287 - Follows: 899

Original source: <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/7613196/1/The-Pureblood-Pretense>

Exported with the assistance of FicHub.net

The Pureblood Pretense

[Introduction](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Epilogue](#)

Chapter 1

Summary: Half-blood Harriett Potter dreams of going to Hogwarts to study under the greatest Potions Master in England, but in an AU where the school only accepts purebloods, the only way to reach her goal is to switch places with her pureblood cousin-the only problem? Her cousin is a boy.

A/N: This is an Alanna the Lioness take on Harry Potter. You don't have to have read the former series, just know that its premise is a girl who longs to go to knight school and switches places with her twin brother to do so. As far as HP is concerned, this is AU. It's set in a world where there's no prophecy, Voldemort became a politician instead of a terrorist, and-oh yeah, Harry is now Harriett. This, along with many other elements of the general plot, might seem cliché, but I've done my best to make the story both entertaining and moving, realistic and fantastical at turns. Enjoy.

A/N 2: After completing the third book I've decided to begin going back and editing the older chapters in order to bring them stylistically up to the level of the latest ones. No plot elements have been changed-I'm just cleaning up the grammar.

The Pureblood Pretense:

Chapter 1:

"Has one of my father's pranks turned your brains to porridge?"
Arcturus Rigel Black clamped a hand over his cousin's mouth while glancing about the musty hallway anxiously. "You can't just say things like that in the open, Harry. Don't you know what your mum would do to us if she heard?"

Harriett Potter allowed herself to be pulled down the hall, up the narrow staircase, and into Archie's bedroom, quite used to her cousin's dramatics. Her mother was safely out of earshot in the

parlor with her fathers and uncles, and it's not as if the decapitated heads of house-elves past were going to rat them out, but when Archie wanted drama, drama was created. She waited patiently while Archie dragged the chest of drawers over to barricade the door and settled for a very small eye-roll when he stuffed his handkerchief in the keyhole for good measure.

"Now?"

"Okay, now." He plopped down on the bed as if the last five minutes had exhausted him beyond endurance and stared at her through his untidy fringe. "Pleaseplease *please* tell me you weren't joking."

She took in his pathetically hopeful expression with a small smile. "I wasn't. I convinced mum and dad that I want to attend the American Institute of Magic." Not that it had been a hard sell; there were only so many foreign schools of magic, and those that took Halfbloods and Muggleborns readily were almost exclusively located in the liberal United States. The fact that she was showing any amount of enthusiasm for a school other than Hogwarts was a great relief to her parents at this point.

"I can't believe it." Archie flopped back onto the covers and blinked at the ceiling like an owl dazed by the sun. "It's happening. I'm really going to be a Healer. Harry, I-" He took a deep, steadying breath. "I don't know how I'll ever thank you."

Harry reached out to pat her cousin gently on the hand. "You're helping me just as much, remember? Without you taking my place at AIM, I couldn't take yours at Hogwarts."

"Right, guess not." Archie laughed a bit breathlessly and a grin lit up his round face with mischief. "So, what's next?"

Harriett pulled out a well-worn piece of parchment from her pocket. She took quill and ink from Archie's nightstand and crossed off 'lie through teeth to parents' from their list. Archie had written the list, which explained why 'jump with joy' was the only item apart from

'become a girl' that wasn't crossed off. "Well," she said, "we can't switch trunks until the night before we leave, so other than getting hold of the Polyjuice Potion, that's it."

"Okay," Archie said slowly, "So when I get to AIM, I'll tell the headmistress that whoever transcribed the forms over Floo messed up, and my name's Harry, not Harriett. They won't know the English Book of Gold well enough in America to think anything of it."

"Right."

"What I don't get is how *you* -" here Archie pointed skeptically in the general direction of her face, "-are going to be *me* ."

"Because you're so unique," Harry said dryly. "Everyone knows *of* the Black heir, but you don't really have any friends-

"Oi!"

"-besides me, and I inherited enough pureblooded features from my dad to pass even Lord Malfoy's scrutiny," she finished, tilting her nose up to emphasize the afore mentioned 'good' breeding.

Archie narrowed his eyes in mock judgment. "Hmm, yes, this one does have the pureblood nose and cheekbones. The eyes are a bit vulgar-if only they were a stately grey rather than that common green hue-but the perfectly pointed chin more than makes up for it. But the hair! Oh, dear Merlin, never did a pureblood see the like."

Harry tossed a pillow lazily at his snobby expression. "Our hair is the same color-black as your family name."

"It's not the color that's the problem," he chuckled. "It's the texture. The Potter mop is quite distinctive."

"It's not that bad," Harry said, scowling defensively as her cousin gave her an expression of patent disbelief.

Archie shook his head ruefully. "Sorry, cuz, but anyone in England who sees that hair will right away associate it with your father. His picture's in the paper too often. The hair has to go if you want to pass as me."

"But you have long hair." She frowned, fingering a shoulder-length lock. "It'll seem odd if you suddenly wear it short."

"We'll make it a grand gesture. Tomorrow you and I are both cutting our hair in honor of the end of our childhood. With luck, it'll make you look like a girlish boy and me like a boyish girl," Archie said. She noted he didn't sound enthusiastic at the prospect.

Harry grimaced herself, just imagining the look on her mother's face when they came back from the salon. There was nothing for it, though. They had to look as alike as possible, if this plan of theirs was going to last beyond the first term. Once their ruse got underway, a few inches of hair was going to seem like nothing compared to some of the other things they'd have to do.

-0

-0

The next day, she and Archie went to one of the Diagon barbershops and said goodbye to their long, and in Harry's case unruly, hair. Before she knew it, the wayward crow's nest her father always tousled when she came near was gone. In its place were close-cropped locks that curled gently around her forehead and ears.

"I look too delicate with my face all exposed." Harriett frowned while squinting at herself in the mirror. "They'll know I'm a girl."

"They won't," Archie assured her, admiring his own shorter style. She had to admit that, put next to one another, there was a remarkable similarity between the two of them. Not enough for their parents to mistake them, but enough to put doubt into a stranger, perhaps.

"Pureblooded children generally have delicate features anyway. You only think you look exposed because you're used to that lion's mane overwhelming your features."

He reached over from the chair next to her and plucked the glasses from her face. "There, don't we look like twins?"

"I can't see anything without my glasses," she said, rolling blurry eyes.

Archie grinned. "That's going to be a problem. We need to get you contacts-I'm thinking steel colored or maybe argent." He peered at himself in the mirror thoughtfully. "What do you think, do I look like an argent to you?"

"You look like an idiot to me," Harry informed him.

"Well you better practice your village idiot expressions, then," Archie laughed. "Seeing as you have to *be* me in a few days."

"Maybe I'll improve you," Harry said, smiling. "By the time you're yourself again I'll have set the bar so high people will say 'What happened to that Archie Black? He was so collected in school and now he seems rather buffoonish.'"

"Careful, cousin, or I might do something novel to *your* reputation, too," Archie threatened with an answering grin.

"Do your worst," Harry shrugged. "I'll just assume your identity permanently."

Archie grimaced. "Can we make every effort to not have that happen? No offense to womankind, but I really don't want to be a girl forever."

"You're not actually going to be a girl," she reminded him. "I'm the one who has to lie about my gender for seven years."

They both lapsed into a thoughtful silence, the full scope of their intentions beginning to creep past their mental defenses. "It'll be worth it," Archie said at last, just before the hairdresser returned with their bill.

"It will," she agreed. It would have to be.

-0

[AbAbAb]

-0

Their last night at home arrived quickly, and Archie packed up everything he could possibly need for a school he wouldn't ever be attending. He had mixed feelings about their ruse, despite his readiness to go forward with it. The prospect of lying to his dad for the next seven years was an unhappy one. Now that Mum was gone, he was all his dad had left, and if their deception was discovered it would likely cause a rift in their relationship, but on the other hand... it's not as if they were *hurting* anyone. Harry got to chase her dream of studying under Master Snape, and AIM had the best Healer certification track of any Western magical school; by the time he graduated he'd be a fully qualified Mediwizard, several years ahead of an equivalent student of Hogwarts standards. Well, he would be if the two of them could pull it off, that is.

When he'd finished packing what was essentially Harry's trunk, he and his dad went over to Potter's Place in Godric's Hollow for dinner. Uncle Remus was already there, setting the table. Of course, Remus wasn't really his uncle; nor was James, come to that, but they all considered one another family, so exact blood relations didn't really matter.

"So are you psyched to go to school, Archie?" James asked once they'd all sat down at the table. Lily nudged him reprovably with her elbow, glancing at Harry with unveiled concern, but James grinned reassuringly at his wife and continued talking over the spread.

"You're going to love Hogwarts-no place like it anywhere. Why, the things me and your uncle and father got up to when we were there... As the representative of the second generation of Marauders, you'll have to carry on the family legacy-"

"-of pranking the daylights out of unsuspecting Defense Against the Dark Arts professors," Sirius cut in, barking out a laugh and slapping Remus, who was sitting next to him, on the back in reminiscence. Remus shook his head exasperatedly at his best friend, but didn't say anything to rebuke him. Archie knew it was Remus' opinion that Sirius laughed much too rarely. Lady Black, Archie's mother, had passed away a few years ago of a rare wasting sickness, and his dad really hadn't been the same since. Neither had he, for that matter.

"Why just the Defense professors?" Archie asked, playing along. "Is that part of the tradition?"

"Eh, not really. It's just that they're usually the best targets." James rubbed his neck in thought. "See, the job's been cursed as long as anyone can remember, so you never get the same one two years in a row."

"And rookie professors are the easiest marks." Sirius winked at his son. "Though if you want to prank Snivellus once or twice your old man would be much obliged."

"Don't call him that, Sirius," Lily said automatically, her tone revealing the frequency with which she had to make the request. "He's a good man."

"Not to mention a genius," Harry added quietly into her fish. No one acknowledged this remark, as it, too, was commonplace.

Harry had been in a state of near-idol worship with their dads' old school rival ever since she read an article in *Potions Quarterly* about his work with the Wolfsbane potion. His cousin came off as dull and uninteresting, if not downright cold, to most people, but she had

harbored a deep fascination for potions. She'd been spending the better part of her free time stirring up unlikely concoctions in her parents' basement for as long as he could remember. Archie knew his cousin wanted nothing in the world but to brew potions for the rest of her life, preferable alone, but in her mind mediocrity in the art was not enough. The only way to become the greatest Potions Mistress in the country was to study under the greatest Potions Master in the country, and *he*, if you believed Harry's judgment on the subject, was at Hogwarts. Archie could relate to her single-mindedness on the subject-he felt much the same about Healing.

"Eleven years later and you're still defending the man," James sighed.

"Eleven years later and you're still holding onto a childish rivalry," Lily returned, looking to Remus for support. "Remus thinks it's ridiculous, don't you?"

"She has a point," the werewolf said mildly. He glanced between James and Sirius with a slight smile. "There's no need to perpetuate this, is there? I'm sure by now he's washed his hair."

Sirius and James burst into fresh gales of laughter, and Lily gave Remus an exasperated, thanks-for-nothing stare. He held his hands up in surrender and cheerfully changed the subject. "So, Harry, how are you looking forward to America?"

"Can't wait," the newly shorn girl said, glancing up at Archie before continuing, "It'll be interesting to travel abroad. I'm, ah, actually thinking of trying the Healer-track."

"Really?" Remus chewed thoughtfully as her parents exchanged confused looks. "That's quite a difficult area of specialization. I thought you were planning on pursuing a Potions career, though."

"Well all the really advanced Healing is done with potions nowadays," Harry said, toying casually with her vegetables. "If I want

to make potions to help people, not just brew them for money, then I should see the problem from the other side, too."

Archie didn't think she was lying-she almost never did, directly. She had mentioned wanting one day to be able to help people with the potions she invented, and Medi wizards *did* rely heavily on potions for the more complicated cures, but he knew if it weren't for him she wouldn't even consider a specialty in Healing. That was all Archie. After watching his mother suffer for months under the influence of an illness there was no viable treatment for, he became obsessed with the idea of one day saving lives.

When he first decided he wanted to be a Healer one day, he'd asked his father if he could accompany Harry to a school in America instead of taking the place reserved for him at Hogwarts. Sirius wouldn't hear of it. Archie thought his father's unusual unreasonableness on the subject was a combination of his fear that he'd be losing his son in a way, too, if he went so far away and his desire for Archie to have the same wonderful experiences he'd had in school. Hogwarts was where Sirius had met his best friends, James and Remus, and where he'd met and fallen in love with Diana, Archie's mother. Their arguments on the subject of Archie's schooling had become so sour that when Harry had first idly suggested switching places to solve both their frustrations, Archie considered it seriously. He didn't want to disappoint his dad, but Sirius lived his life in the past, and Archie couldn't change that. He knew he could never bring his mum back. He might be able to one day be the difference that saved someone else's loved one, however, and to see that dream become a reality he'd lie to the whole world if he had to.

After dinner the two cousins went up to Harry's room for a private goodbye. They wouldn't see one another until winter break at the earliest, and they had never been apart that long before. The long separation wasn't at the forefront of their minds, however.

"Did you get your dad to shrink yours, too?" Harry asked, producing a miniaturized trunk from a bookshelf.

Archie produced his miniaturized trunk from his pocket and exchanged it for Harry's thankfully not-too-feminine one. They wouldn't be unshrunk until they reached their respective schools the following evening. "Did you nick the potions from Uncle James' Auror kit?" This was the part of their plan he was least sure about. Unlike the rest of it, which seemed fairly innocent, stealing was so obviously wrong. He supposed he'd better get used to living in a state of moral greyness.

"Here." Harry pulled out two beakers from under her bed, pouring doses of the mud-brown liquid into vials, one for each of them. "You'll have to keep the beaker hidden. I've replaced it with a neutral concoction that smells and tastes as bad, but doesn't do anything. Hopefully he'll assume it's a defective batch."

Archie nodded his understanding and they both plucked hairs without further ado. Switching vials, they each drank the dose with the other's essence. The transformation was more painful than he'd anticipated, but soon enough it was over and he felt as if he were looking into a mirror.

"Weird." Archie squinted his newly green eyes. "You have *awful* eyesight, Harry. Give me your glasses."

"That explains why the world's so blurry." Harriett took off her spectacles and blinked at the world around her, apparently enjoying her now-perfect vision. Archie put the glasses on with a sigh of distaste. It would only be for a little while.

They had enough stolen Polyjuice to last until they were safely away from their parents the next morning, and after that Harriett had the contacts he'd gotten her to correct her vision and change her eye color to an unremarkable grey, while he had green contacts for thoroughness' sake. He wasn't expecting to run into anyone at AIM who had even heard of the Potters. Harry was the one who would have the hard time pulling off their deception.

"I packed extra potions books into my trunk for you, so study up in case Mum mentions something in a letter I should know about," Harry said. "Don't forget to learn a handwriting charm first thing so you can answer my parents' correspondence, and I'll do the same for the letters your dad sends. Keep an extra copy of what you write and we'll exchange them by owl post at the end of the school year so we can keep our stories straight over the summer."

"All right, I remember," Archie said. Honestly, Harry acted as though it fell to her to take his mum's place sometimes. Not that he minded. Much. He could see through her in any case. Harry was more nervous than she looked if she was rambling out instructions they'd already agreed upon.

"That's it then. This is... goodbye." Harry looked a little lost for a moment, but quickly pulled it together to give him a firm, "Good luck."

"Yeah." Archie felt a bit lost himself at the magnitude of what they were about to undertake.

"Arch?"

"Yeah?"

Harry took a deep breath. "Even if this blows up in our face and they kick me out before the first class, I'm saying right now: I don't regret anything."

Archie was taken aback at her forthrightness, but squared his eleven-year-old shoulders nonetheless. "Me neither. Thank you. This was your idea and without it I would have taken years longer to reach my goal. It's also going to be a lot more dangerous for you, and, well, I'm grateful for everything, no matter what happens."

"Same. Thanks for letting me borrow your name, Arch," Harry said, lightening the air between them with a lame attempt at levity. "I'll try not to blacken it too much in the next seven years."

"Do your worst," Archie said, grinning.

-0

-0

Harry ducked into the boys' bathroom on the Hogwarts Express and waited in a stall for the Polyjuice to wear off. Every moment seemed like an eternity, but she knew that was just her nerves getting the best of her. When she was herself again, she changed into Archie's school robes and moved out to the sink to blink her new lenses into place. Staring back at her from the mirror was a sober-looking eleven-year-old boy with a halo of onyx curls and flat, grey eyes. Her eyelashes were perhaps a bit too long to be masculine, but the lips were thin enough and the fragile bone structure could have belonged to any number of pureblood lines. She'd heard the Malfoys in particular were known for their pointed faces. Her voice was too high-pitched at first, but with a little practice it dropped slightly to a more natural octave for a young boy.

Satisfied, she exited the restroom and began to walk the length of the train looking for a spare compartment. Glancing around at all the excited faces, it began to dawn on her that she'd really done it. She'd got as far as the train without discovery, and everyone she met from now on would be complete strangers, so anything she messed up on would simply be attributed to Arcturus Black's unknown character. She pondered that for a moment. Arcturus Black. Arcturus Rigel Black. She wrinkled her nose. It felt too strange to be taking Archie's name. A name he didn't even like, no less. Should she refer to herself in her head as Archie, just to lessen the chance that she'd get confused and mess up? But then how would she refer to Archie? After thinking on it for a long moment, she decided that as long as she was appropriating Archie's person she might as well be decisive about it. As long as she was playing Archie's part, she would go by his middle name. *From now on I'll be Rigel Black, the best Potions student Hogwarts has ever seen.*

Rigel-and wasn't it odd to rename herself in her own thoughts for convenience's sake?-was nearly to the end of the train before she saw what looked like a promising compartment. There was only one boy sitting quietly within, reading what she recognized as the first-year Herbology textbook. She slid open the door and nodded slightly in greeting when the boy looked up. He had an open, cheerful face, with lank brown hair that fell across his forehead and plain brown eyes that held not a hint of malice. There was something familiar about it, but she didn't dwell long on what.

"Are you saving these seats for anyone?" she asked.

"Uh, no." The kid looked surprised that she would think that. "You can sit, if you want."

"Thank you." She shut the door and took a seat across from him. "I'm Rigel," she said, trying out the name for the first time aloud.

"Neville." He smiled tentatively, and looked as though he would say something else, but refrained. He was probably used to giving his last name when introducing himself, she figured. Most purebloods gave their family name as a courtesy, according to Archie. She'd rather not bring up her borrowed last name just yet, however. Chances were either he was a Light-raised kid and would automatically hate anyone named Black, or his Dark pureblood parents had told him the only Blacks left were blood-traitors.

"Pleased to meet you. Is that *1000 Magical Herbs and Fungi*?" Rigel nodded at the book in Neville's lap.

He glanced down at it as if to check, but caught himself and flushed. "Yeah. Um, have you read much of it yet?"

"I have," she said, then backtracked as the boy looked significantly alarmed. "I don't think you need to have read any of it, though. I was only interested because Herbology has a lot to do with Potions."

"Oh." Neville looked much relieved. "So you like Potions, then? I read the introduction to that textbook, too, but it looks quite complicated. And the first potion listed uses toad parts. I have a toad. His name is Trevor," the boy explained. "I don't know if I like the idea of dissecting animals for parts."

"You won't have to do the harvesting, most likely. The professor will have the ingredients already," Rigel said.

"You think? Maybe it won't be so bad, then." Neville swung his feet a bit nervously, then blurted, "What House do you think you'll be sorted into?"

"I'm hoping for Slytherin," she said honestly.

"You-Slytherin?" Neville squeaked.

"From that reaction, I'm guessing your family are Gryffindors. So are mine," Rigel admitted.

"And you're actually *hoping* for Slytherin?" He looked half-doubtful, half-confused.

"The Potions master at Hogwarts is the head of Slytherin House," she explained. "I've heard he favors his own House, so the best chance I have at getting extra tutoring from him is to be in Slytherin."

"You'd go against your line for some extra help in Potions?" Neville bit his lip, "Can you even do that? Pick your House against tradition, I mean."

"Maybe not, but I think I can meet the requirements if I get the chance. I just have to be cunning and ambitious, right?" The last bit was facetious, but she didn't think Neville noticed.

"Well, good luck," he offered kindly.

"Thank you," she said. "I hope you like the House you get, as well."

They spent the rest of the trip in comfortable silence. The only interruption was when Neville quietly asked if Rigel would leave so he could change into his school robes. Rigel didn't mind stepping outside to wait if it made the shy boy more comfortable, though she was quite desensitized to the male form thanks to her growing up with Archie's complete lack of modesty.

While she was standing outside the compartment, a tall boy with deep-set features and a surly expression approached from the left end of the train. Due to the narrowness of the corridor, she was partially blocking his way. Instead of just walking around her, however, he veered and slammed a heavily muscled shoulder into her side. Not expecting it, she fell sideways to the ugly carpet and awkwardly broke her fall with her elbows. Pushing herself back up to her knees, she glared at the boy, who was sneering down at her.

"Are you blind?" she asked, remembering to pitch her voice deeper, the way Archie's went when he got angry, just in time.

The moment the older boy's eyes narrowed, she knew she shouldn't have said that. The other boy was much larger and meaner-looking than any kid she'd ever met, and despite her reluctance to take open hostility lying down, she had to admit that her position was rather precarious to be openly hostile with anyone.

The bigger boy advanced on her almost casually, whipping a foot toward her middle. Only a swift roll in the opposite direction saved her from a bruised rib or two. She got to her feet and rounded on the kid, who could have been maybe a fifth or sixth year. "My apologies," she said through gritted teeth, thinking to defuse the situation. "Obviously you're not blind, just rather upset, but there's no need to take it out on me."

He took a step toward her with clenched fists, then paused and pulled out his wand instead, a nasty smirk on his face. "Little first-years should know better than to talk faster than their wands can move. Consider this your first lesson: when an upper-classman kicks you, stay down."

I might if I thought it would make you go away, Rigel thought resignedly, stiffening her spine and preparing to take whatever curse he tossed her way.

Before either of them could make a move, a stern voice from down the train broke in. "You, there! No fighting on the train!" A thin, redheaded boy with a gleaming gold badge on his chest strutted importantly up to stand between Rigel and the surly boy, neither of whom had relaxed their stance. "Flint," the redhead said upon catching sight of the other boy's face. "I might have known. I'll be taking ten points from Slytherin when we get to Hogwarts for pulling your wand on another student-and a first year, no less."

Flint curled his lip at the boy. "Weasley." Apparently that was enough said in his opinion, for he turned and stalked off, with one last annoyed glare in Rigel's direction.

"Nothing but trouble this time of year, that one," sighed the freckled boy. He looked down at Rigel with a slight frown. "You all right there? Bad luck getting in Flint's way your first day. He likes to hold a grudge for a little while, so be sure to steer clear for a few weeks, okay?"

"I certainly won't go seeking him out," she said, straightening her robes. "Thank you for the intervention."

"It was no trouble," the boy said airily. "I was only doing my duty as a prefect."

Rigel nodded once more in thanks, then turned to rejoin Neville in their compartment. If he wondered why she'd stayed out for so long, he didn't say anything. She reclaimed her seat quietly, lost in thought. Not even to Hogwarts yet and she'd already made an enemy. She hoped fervently this wasn't a sign of more such instances to come. She also hoped Archie was faring better with his side of the ruse, wherever he was.

-0

[end of chapter one].

A/N: To anyone who's read this far: thank you for giving an unusual idea a chance. To clear up any initial confusion (though everything will be explained in time, of course), Hogwarts at this time only takes pureblooded students. This was not always the case. Remus and Snape of course are halfbloods, and when they attended school at Hogwarts only muggleborns were banned. Since then the laws have become more strict. Harry and Archie are not truly cousins in the literal sense, but as James and Sirius are distant relations they consider themselves 'cousins' in a loose sense. Again, thank you for reading.

All the best,

-Violet Matter

Chapter 2

A/N : Disclaimer: Forgot to put this in chapter one, but I don't own anything; the characters and world are JKR's and Tamora Pierce's respectively.

The Pureblood Pretense:

Chapter Two:

As the train began to slow, she could see the lights of Hogsmeade Station in the distance. Compartment doors began to slam open one after another, so she and Neville joined the crowd pushing toward the exits. They got separated from one another in the crush, and by the time she'd departed the train, the small boy was nowhere to be seen. A man larger than anyone Rigel had ever seen led them to the shore of a deep-water lake, where tiny wooden boats awaited them. She wound up sharing a boat with a pair of girls and a freckled boy with the same shade of red hair as the prefect she'd met on the train. She tried not to wonder if the rickety old things were seaworthy, but the fact that the boats moved forward under a kind of mass hypnotic spell didn't burgeon her faith in the crafts. Once safely ashore, she and the others followed the giant man, Hagrid, up to the castle. It was bigger than she'd imagined, but other than its size, she wasn't able to gain much impression of it in the dark. The great doors beckoned them inside, and they stood quietly in the Entrance Hall until a stern-faced woman-who introduced herself as the Transfiguration professor, McGonagall-came out to collect them.

She herded them into a line in no particular order and led them through the big oak doors into the Great Hall. Rigel's eyes widened involuntarily at the sheer number of students in the hall. She'd thought there would be a lot fewer, with the school only accepting purebloods now, but she supposed not many people "married out of magic" these days. It just wasn't done. She'd heard that not so long ago about fifty percent of Wizarding children were halfbloods. Now

most of the Muggle blood had been bred out of the gene pool once more, so Muggleborns and halfbloods like herself only made up about twenty percent of the population.

There were four long tables that took up the bulk of the Hall, and a smaller, perpendicularly placed table at the far end of the room that looked to be for professors and staff. As the students gracing each table seemed to be sorted according to tie color, Rigel deduced the seating arrangements were separated by House. She glanced about the room in general to avoid looking at anyone directly as they were led to a spot in front of the head table designated by a lump of fabric sitting on a short stool. The ceiling caught her eye and she sucked in her breath quietly. It looked as though the whole galaxy had been brought down to fill the hall. Such stars as she'd never seen before graced the empyrean. She'd heard that out in the wilderness, away from the lights of the cities, the stars and planets shone brighter, but she'd never imagined it would be such a *spectacle* .

Just when she had come to think perhaps there *was* no ceiling, only empty space, a nudge from behind brought her back to her surroundings. A girl with short blonde hair cut at a fashionable angle away from her face leaned close to whisper, "It's enchanted to look like the sky outside, but if you don't stop gaping like a fish at it, everyone will think you're a commoner before you even get Sorted."

Rigel turned her artificial grey eyes to meet amused blue ones. The blonde girl was obviously from one of the more prominent pureblood families; everything from the articulate way she spoke to the poised way she held herself suggested hours upon hours of social instruction as a child. The other girl smiled to show she wasn't trying to be catty, but helpful, so Rigel nodded to show she was grateful for the advice. She was about to introduce herself properly when her words were cut off; the lump of fabric on the stool had begun to sing. Loudly.

"Welcome, welcome, one and all

To this fine place, in this Great Hall.

Yes, it's that time of year once more
When I help master Dumbledore
To place you where you need to be:
The House that is your destiny.
To those of you who always yearn
To know as much as you can learn,
Who seek the truth in every way
And plan to study every day,
Don't worry-here you're not alone
In Ravenclaw you'll find your home.
To any who have talent-yes,
And always try to do their best,
Who only take the things they earn
And wait with patience for their turn
And value loyalty and trust,
Why, you belong in Hufflepuff.
If you know that you have ambition
And a cunning disposition,
If you keep your secrets close
And know that wisdom never boasts

And want to find your truest friends,
Then you must go to Slytherin.
To those of you with steady nerve,
The stout of heart who never swerve
From any duty come their way,
Who aren't afraid to speak their say
And meet the danger at their door,
You will be great in Gryffindor.
So come to me and put me on;
I've never once been told I'm wrong.
I'll find inside your deepest soul
The House able to make you whole.
Maybe it's not a pretty sight
But this old hat will steer you right."

The hall broke into thunderous applause, all the first-years joining in with bemusement. "We just have to try it on?" The redhead she'd shared a boat with laughed. "That's easy!"

Professor McGonagall pulled a scroll from her robes and unrolled it. "When I call your name, come forward, sit on the stool, and try on the hat. Abbot, Hannah."

A mousy-looking blonde girl with pigtails aquiver stepped forward nervously and sat on the stool. She gingerly placed the hat on her

head, wrinkling her nose a bit as though she'd encountered a foul smell.

"HUFFLEPUFF!" the hat cried.

"So whatever you do, don't think about how bad the hat smells or it'll punish you by sending you to the badgers," the short-haired girl from earlier whispered into Rigel's ear. She had to bite her lip to hide her slight smile of amusement.

"Black, Arcturus."

Rigel smoothed her face into an expression of detached politeness—by far the easiest neutral expression to maintain while nervous—and stepped forward toward the stool Abbot had just vacated. Her last thought before putting the hat on was that it didn't really smell that bad.

" *Why thank you, young lady,*" the hat murmured in her head.

If she weren't so tense, she would have jumped, but she kept the blank mask on her face while thinking to the hat, " *You're not going to kick me out, are you? Please let me stay. I'll work hard, I promise—*"

" *Calm down, Miss Potter, I'm not a snitch—I'm a hat! I'm here to sort you, not pass judgment on your life choices. Now, let's see... You do have quite a bit of talent, and you're willing to work hard, but I can see that you have greater ambitions than self-satisfaction. It was courageous of you to risk so much to be here, and clever to have planned it out so perfectly, but above all sneaky, so very sly. I know just where to put someone with so many secrets to keep. Good luck in...*

"SLYTHERIN!"

Rigel stood calmly, though on the inside she was weak with relief. She carefully removed the hat after a whispered, "Thank you," and turned toward the table that was clapping. On the way, her eyes met

those of the girl she'd been standing next to, who mouthed, "Good job!" at her and subtly mimed holding her breath to avoid a stinky smell.

She told herself it was rude to laugh at Hufflepuffs as she took a seat at the end of the Slytherin table. There was an array of empty places around her, presumably for the other new first-years. They were who she should be focusing on-the other students who would soon become her housemates-not the ones made Hufflepuffs. Still, when "Bones, Susan" went to Hufflepuff after a similarly distasteful expression on her face, Rigel's lips twitched upwards at the corners without her conscious control.

Before long, she was joined by "Bulstrode, Millicent" and "Crabbe, Vincent." Tracey Davis, Daphne Greengrass, and Gregory Goyle all quickly followed. After that, there was a lull until a sharply put-together boy with platinum blond hair and a confident expression strode forward to the tune of, "Malfoy, Draco." Davis and Greengrass, whom Rigel had already pegged as uninteresting lackwits based on their discussing the merits of linen versus silk tablecloths upon claiming their seats, made small swooning noises as they watched the Malfoy scion put the hat on without even bothering to sit. The hat seemed to shout, "SLYTHERIN" before it even touched his perfectly groomed hair, and Rigel thought she might not have bothered to sit down either if she had been *that* sure of the outcome.

Malfoy's eyes scanned the table coolly as he approached. Across the table, the large boys Crabbe and Goyle moved over hastily to make room between them, which left Rigel staring straight into slate grey eyes as the heir to one of the oldest and most influential Dark pureblood families slid into the seat directly across from her. He nodded slightly in her direction, and she was nonplussed until she realized that, with her as Arcturus Black, they were cousins through Draco's mother, Narcissa Malfoy née Black. She nodded back just as slightly and both turned their attention to the sorting once more as "Nott, Theodore" was made a Slytherin as well. When "Parkinson,

Pansy" was called, the girl who'd warned her about acting like a peasant moved gracefully toward the stool. Her sorting took only slightly longer than Malfoy's, though she made a great show of sitting primly on the stool and adjusting the hat on her head before brushing off imaginary lint from its brim as she set it back on the stool.

Rigel moved over just enough to extend an invitation to sit beside her without seeming eager about it, and Parkinson politely smiled her thanks as she sat to Rigel's left and tucked her robes gracefully beneath her. "I knew you were Slytherin material," Parkinson confided quietly, seeming content to ignore the Sorting for the time being.

"Oh really?" Rigel lifted an eyebrow in the manner she'd seen Archie appropriate when he was in pureblood-mode. "And how did you figure that while I was gaping like a country bumpkin?" There. Let the girl think she took the comment as a compliment.

The blonde girl twinkled prettily at her. "I just know these things," she said. "For instance, I can tell you that there's only one student left over there who will join us at this table, and he won't be called until the very end, so you can stop trying to divide your attention between me and the hat."

Rigel let herself blink once at the other girl. "You're quite perceptive, Miss Parkinson."

"Call me Pansy," the blonde said after a considering pause. "We are, after all, going to be great friends, Mr. Black."

"All of my great friends call me Rigel," she said, trying out a grin that was based on her Uncle Sirius' roguish expressions.

It must have worked, because Pansy looked ever so slightly taken aback for a moment before allowing a wry smile to grace her aristocratic features. "You are certainly your father's son, Rigel."

"Do you know my father?" She feigned surprise. "I shall have to chastise him for keeping such a gem to himself." She was laying it on pretty thick, and she honestly hoped what people said about first impressions was true and she never had to act like this again, because it was making her feel a bit queasy. It was necessary that people believed she was the son of Sirius Black, however, so for a little while she would channel her uncle's irrepressible spirit.

"Suffice it to say that every girl at this table has been warned by her mother to steer clear of the Black scion if she wishes to keep her reputation in tact." Pansy smiled with amusement, not seeming too concerned about steering clear herself. "But I think you're all talk."

She made a mental note to ask Sirius what he'd done at Hogwarts that had mothers a decade later fearing for their daughters' virtue in the presence of an eleven-year-old. Though, on the other hand, she supposed she'd rather not know.

"I'm grateful that you've decided to look past those unmitigated rumors and give me a chance," Rigel chose to say.

Whatever reply Pansy might have made was forgotten as "Zabini, Blaise" was Sorted into Slytherin, and McGonagall took the hat and stool away. As Dumbledore stood to make his opening speech, Pansy and Rigel turned their attention his way. With her face looking toward the headmaster's chair, Rigel couldn't help but notice, from the corner of her eye, the scrutinizing gaze one Draco Malfoy was leveling at her from across the table. He must have been very curious about the cousin he'd never met, she thought.

Dumbledore was clearly an eccentric. His long, white beard was braided with ribbons in the four House colors and his pointed hat was covered with tropical flowers and birds. He said a few words, the impenetrability of which suggested that he chose them randomly from the dictionary, and waved his hands dramatically. Immediately, the tables in front of them filled with every imaginable kind of food. Starters, soups, entrees, desserts, and drinks were spread before them in a chaotic mess, and as children all around the hall began

grabbing whatever was closest to them, she wondered if the randomness of placement wasn't intended.

Rigel put her napkin in her lap, noting that all the napkins at the Slytherin table were black, and therefore wouldn't leave noticeable residue on black school robes the way a white napkin would have. She supposed she could get used to such details. Across the table, Crabbe and Goyle were stuffing themselves with chocolate confections, not even bothering with plates, while the blond boy between them slowly piled a variety of foods onto his plate, as though he was playing diplomat to each food group and was reluctant to show favoritism. Rigel asked Greengrass to pass the garden salad and, although the girl blinked at Rigel entirely too many times in the process, she did hand it over. Rigel piled her plate high with the leaves and dug in.

When she finished the plate and was still hungry, she helped herself to another serving of leafy goodness, ignoring the plate of steaming chicken legs directly before her.

"Don't you want anything more substantial than that?" Pansy glanced askance at her plate with obvious curiosity.

Rigel swallowed carefully before answering. "No, thank you." Pansy waited a beat, but when it became clear that Rigel had no intention of elaborating, she shrugged and turned to her own dinner. Rigel was both impressed and amused at the other girl's expression of studied disinterest, so she offered, "I'm a vegetarian."

Pansy turned back with raised eyebrows. "Is that so?"

"You don't eat *any* meat?" the dark-haired girl, Bulstrode, asked, glancing down at her own steak and kidney pie as if she couldn't bear the thought of giving it up forever.

"I eat some fish," Rigel said. The sturdy girl only shook her head mournfully in response and turned back to her own dinner.

Rigel had debated whether or not to change her diet for this masquerade, but eventually decided against it. For one, she wasn't sure if she could fake a liking for meat for seven years, and for another, her vegetarian diet would go a long way toward explaining why she remained so small and scrawny while the other boys were growing taller and broader. Archie wasn't a vegetarian, but no one here would know that, and if it somehow got back to Sirius that his son's eating habits had changed, she could always say she had done it out of nostalgia for her cousin. It was the kind of thing Archie would do in a fit of dramatics.

She finished her dinner quietly, finding the pumpkin juice to be dessert enough for her, and almost didn't notice when the Malfoy heir once again turned his considering gaze her way. He wasn't very subtle, however, and after his second obvious glance Rigel noticed Pansy noticing it, too. Pansy didn't look surprised that Malfoy might be curious about Rigel, so she supposed all the kids here must know the intricate system of blood connections that bound them to one another.

By the time everyone had finished eating, it was quite late, and Rigel was more than ready to go to sleep. Even her nerves at having come this far couldn't make her listen with more than half an ear to Dumbledore's informational speech about rules, forbidden forests, and so on. When they were finally released, she fell into step beside Pansy as they and the other first-years followed the Slytherin prefects into the dungeons. By the time they reached the entrance to the common room, she was freezing as well as sleepy. Didn't they heat anything below the kitchens? One of the prefects, a girl with long, black hair and heavy eye-makeup, turned and addressed their group.

"This is the common room. You probably won't be able to find it on your own for a few weeks because it just looks like a blank stretch of wall, but that's to stop the other Houses from finding it, so whatever you do don't draw a map or place markers along the corridors to find your way back." She said it in such a way that Rigel suspected the

rules were based on experience. "Just follow an older Slytherin until you learn your way around."

"Don't be too proud to ask directions, either," another prefect added. "The upper-years had to do the same thing when they were first-years. In this House, no one expects you to figure everything out on your own like a Ravenclaw but, on the other hand, we're not Hufflepuffs. If you want help, you have to ask, and don't expect it to be free."

"The password is Ouroboros," said the first prefect. She stood to the side as the wall slid open and blessedly warm air from the common room wafted out into the corridor. If keeping the corridors in the dungeons uncommonly cold was some sort of psychological trick to make them associate the common room with cozy hospitableness, she couldn't fault its execution. They all shuffled inside gratefully, and the prefects herded them over to one of the great fireplaces along the walls to get their bearings and warm up.

The common room was very dark, with the light of flickering flames from the torches and fires casting eerie shadows over every surface. Once she grew accustomed to the low lighting, though, she found it quite elegant, if a little claustrophobic due to the low ceilings. The windows didn't help, since all they revealed at the moment was pitch-black lake water, but she supposed more light would filter down from the surface during the day. The furniture she thought well suited to House Slytherin. All of it was low-backed, so that it would be obvious who was in each seat even from behind, and none of it was cluttered too closely together or tucked way back into corners. There was nowhere to hide. Thankfully, the furnishings were made of basic, dark woods that left the green and silver fabric scheme something short of garish. Seven different hallways led off like spokes on half a wheel from the main room. One for each year, she figured.

The prefect with the long, black hair came back over to them and said. "Change of plans. Something's come up, so our Head of House will hold the start-of-term meeting in the morning instead of this evening. That means all of you must be up and finished with

breakfast thirty minutes early tomorrow, so as soon as you get situated, go to bed. First-year dorms are down the hallway all the way to your right. To protect the safety and privacy of Slytherin students, no one but the students in each year can pass through the doorway to their respective halls. Use this privacy wisely, as students who abuse the privilege will find it revoked for all their year mates." She waved them all toward their dorms, saying, "Go on, little snakes; your room assignments are on the outside of the doors. Oh, and boys: I wouldn't recommend trying to go into one of the girls' dorms. You won't like the consequences. Goodnight."

Rigel tiredly followed Pansy and the others down the first-year hallway. There were four doors along the corridor, two for the girls, and two for the boys. The girls were quite pleased to only be two to a room, instead of three like the boys, but the only boy who looked put out by the room assignments was Zabini, who was assigned to a room with Crabbe and Goyle. At the very end of the hall, on the right hand side, was a door with "Arcturus Black" written right above "Draco Malfoy" and "Theodore Nott," which Rigel pushed open mechanically, making a beeline for the bed with her trunk sitting at the foot. Her roommates filed in behind her and presumably started getting ready for bed, but she didn't pay them any attention. Instead, she went straight to her mattress and was asleep upon it within moments. The relief she felt at having made it all the way to the Slytherin dorms without being kicked out followed her into her dreams, making her smile peacefully as she drifted off to thoughts of what the morning would bring.

-0

[end of chapter two].

A/N: Important: I know in canon most of the kids are half-bloods, not purebloods, but I'm changing it so that in this AU, pureblood society is so ingrained that their parents never married Muggles or Muggleborns but still had kids. Because of this, many kids that in canon are halfbloods or even Muggleborns will probably still be

included in the story at Hogwarts. There will also be more purebloods of the OC variety to fill in the gaps, and to make realistic a society that didn't experience the loss of numbers in a civil war the way canon's HP universe did. Unless stated otherwise, assume a character is pureblood.

On Pansy's appearance: In the movies she's got brown hair, but in the books it doesn't say. So she's blonde.

Finally: I know you're thinking: no scar? no prophesy? This is just a schoolyard fic then. Well, maybe at first, but you don't need a scar on your head to start a revolution, or to be the focus of a political maelstrom, which is where this fic is headed. If you're looking for a quick romance with a quirky gender-bender plot to provide hijinks, maybe this isn't for you. It's a serious look at the perils and consequences of playing dangerous games with dangerous people. That said, it's also funny, light-hearted in places, thought-provoking, and exciting. So I hope you enjoy it. Thanks for reading.

-Violet

Chapter 3

The Pureblood Pretense

Chapter Three:

(Draco POV)

It was the third time Draco Malfoy leveled his gaze at Rigel Black, and still the boy remained unaware. It wasn't just any gaze, either. It was the one his father had taught him, the weighty one, meant to be felt across ballrooms. If Draco hadn't known the Black Heir was raised by blood traitors before, it would have been made obvious by the boy's sheer obliviousness. No child raised in a proper pureblood house would have been able to sleep through such pointed scrutiny, and each moment he stared, getting not so much as a twitch from the other boy, brought fresh annoyance to Draco's mood.

He was supposed to write a letter to his mother this morning about the sorting, and particularly about the Black Heir, but how was he to do that when so far he had nothing to say? He'd walked the train a couple of times before it had left the station, but hadn't seen anyone who looked like the picture of a young Sirius Black from his mother's family tree. He'd not looked again after that, but he had thought he would be able to meet Black at some point before the sorting, or at the very least during dinner if he was sorted into Slytherin like his mother had hoped. But although he'd initiated contact (the head nod in greeting) and given him plenty of impetus to speak to him (the blatant staring at dinner), the dark-haired boy hadn't reacted to his presence at all. And when they ended up in the same room, he thought-now for sure he'll introduce himself like any proper pureblood would. Nott certainly remembered his manners the night before, but instead, Black went straight to sleep! All in all, Draco Malfoy thought, the other boy was quite irksome, and he didn't know why his mother expected him to befriend Black, just because they

were related. Clearly, he wasn't anything resembling company befitting a Malfoy.

Finally, at half-past sunrise, Rigel Black began to stir. Draco would have loved to take credit for that, but it appeared the darker boy was used to awakening at such a time, for he looked neither confused nor surprised when he glanced at the watch on his bedside table. Draco thought his father would be proud of him for the patience he showed waiting for Black to notice him. He may as well have been waiting for Goyle to find his brain, however, for Rigel Black apparently had even less self-awareness than he thought. The boy got out of bed and stretched, never once looking around. Draco's short supply of patience ran out when Black started to pick out his clothes for the day, and he cleared his throat with a practiced decorum only a Malfoy could have held onto so early in the day.

***That** got his attention,* Draco thought exasperatedly, *how did this airhead get into Slytherin ?*

"Going somewhere?" he said out loud.

Black paused, bent over his trunk, a towel slung over his shoulder and a brush in one hand, "Yeah," he said, shutting his trunk. He gathered his bundle of clean clothes (Draco inwardly winced at the way perfectly good robes were callously wrinkled) and strode over to the door to their bathroom, stepping inside and shutting it behind him. Draco heard the distinct click of the lock, and huffed grumpily.

"Well, good morning to you too, sunshine," he muttered, flinging himself from where he sat on his bed and striding over to the standing wardrobe where he'd unpacked and stored all of his robes the night before, *like any normal person*, he thought sourly. Forget the promise he made to his mother, no vague inkling of a political alliance in the future was worth it if that was how Rigel Black was going to be all the time.

By the time Draco had brushed out his robes and combed his hair back (and therefore felt like he had regained his dignity), he had

calmed down somewhat. *One week, thought Draco, I'll be friendly and (Merlin forbid) **slightly** solicitous for one week, but after that if Black is still a taciturn little nobody, even mother can't blame me for moving on to more suitable acquaintanceships .*

(Rigel POV)

Rigel leaned back against the closed bathroom door shakily. She didn't think she'd ever been stared at so much in her life. What did Malfoy want? A picture? She'd practically raced to the bathroom to get out from under his heavy gaze-the boy had a glare like a hammer!-but a quick look in the mirror showed nothing unusual. No green hair or fangs or subtle suggestion that she wasn't a boy. In short, nothing that would merit such intense scrutiny. Shivering slightly with a feeling of vague foreboding, she checked the lock on the door again and got undressed and into the shower. She was still getting used to how little time she had to spend getting ready in the morning without long hair to deal with, so she'd have to find something to do in the mornings now if she didn't start waking up later. Come to think of it, what was the Malfoy boy doing up so early (besides drilling holes into the back of people's heads with his eyes)? Deciding it was none of her business, she got out, dried her hair with a towel, and dressed.

As she re-entered the dorm room she was met with a blindingly cheerful smile and a "Good morning," from Nott, who was apparently just as bad in the mornings as Archie; all sunshine and bluebirds. He was waiting with tousled brown hair and a toothbrush in one hand, "Finished?"

"Yes," she said, moving out of the doorway, "Did I wake you with the shower?"

"Naw," he tossed a grin at her as he brushed past, "It was Draco with his Malfoy-stare-of-death."

Not sure what to say to that, she merely nodded and continued to her bed, which was between Nott's and Malfoy's, where she hung her towel over the silver canopy to dry. She saw Malfoy glance confusedly at her out of the corner of her eye, but ignored him, thinking he probably had never re-used a towel in his life, and so was wondering why she would hang her towel up instead of dumping it in the clothes hamper for the elves.

She was forced to re-think her conclusion when he intercepted her on her way to the door.

"I don't think we've been properly introduced," he said, "I'm Draco Malfoy."

"Rigel Black," she said, "Pleased to meet you."

"Are you going to breakfast already?" he asked politely, a friendly smile on his face as if he hadn't just practically leapt in front of her to formally introduce himself, "It doesn't start for another twenty minutes, I don't think."

"Unless you have a map of the school, it may take that long for me to find my way," she said, stepping pointedly around him. She knew it was rude beyond belief, but the one thing she didn't need, the one thing that could ruin everything, was attention from the wrong kind of people. And if Malfoy didn't qualify as wrong, she'd eat her Potions ingredients.

"You could ask an older student," he pointed out to her back. The lack of irritation or censure in his voice impressed her enough that she turned around to face him once more.

"I doubt they're headed to breakfast this early," she said, feeling every-so-slightly vindicated in her curt words when she saw his eyes flash and his lip protrude a tiny bit before the polite smile could distract from it. There was the spoiled child she'd expected of the Malfoy scion. Underneath all his cool, unpracticed artifice was the

boy who pouted, however briefly, when things didn't fall into their place at his feet.

"They would be in twenty minutes, when it starts," he said slowly, his overly-patient tone that of someone explaining something he shouldn't have to.

"You're probably right," she offered him the tiniest of smiles, barely more than a crinkle, and proceeded to turn around and open the door to the first-year's hall, "Good morning, Mr. Malfoy."

She allowed herself another smile, this one genuine, at the look she imagined on his face as she shut the door firmly behind her. She had a habit of imagining other things onto people's faces that she'd picked up from a masquerade party her parents had dragged her to once. Every since then she'd juxtaposed exaggerated faces and expressions onto people's heads in her imagination whenever she got bored. It was entertaining, if perhaps a bit strange.

The common room was indeed deserted. Even though they had to finish breakfast thirty minutes earlier than they would normally in order to meet with their Head of House that morning, there wasn't any reason for students to be about before the elves had even begun serving it, so Rigel enjoyed the silence as she crossed to the common room entrance. Faced with the blank wall she realized she didn't know how to open it from the inside. "Ouroboros?" she guessed, pleasantly surprised when the wall slid to the side silently. It actually made good sense, she thought as it closed just as quietly behind her. This way, you wouldn't be able to leave the common room without knowing the password to get back in, making it less likely that someone would be caught outside in the cold dungeon air all night.

When she had walked far enough to be out of the immediate sight of anyone coming out of the common room, she pulled out the deceptively blank piece of parchment Archie gave her after Sirius had given it to him. James and Sirius had told Archie what it was, reminiscing about the time Filch confiscated it from them. Apparently

they'd gone back a few years after they graduated and claimed it as their property, though they never admitted to the old caretaker what it was. They'd gotten Remus to help them improve it, as well, and Archie had explained the new features in jealous longing, but the Map wouldn't do him any good at AIM, so he'd handed it over, nobly refusing to take her dad's invisibility cloak in return.

With the Marauders' Map in hand, she traversed the dungeons, thinking she might as well start exploring what was closest to her new "home" first. After almost twenty minutes had past, she made a bee-line for the staircase that would take her back up to the Entrance Hall, and from there to the Great Hall. She wiped the parchment clean again and tucked it away as she started to ascend the stairs, and was halfway up when a voice called out from behind her. She glanced over her shoulder to see Nott hurrying up the staircase to catch up with her, Malfoy and an older Slytherin the blonde apparently knew quite well following at a more sedate pace.

"Are you just now going up?" Nott asked incredulously, "You left ages ago."

"The dungeons are quite extensive," she said, as the slower two joined them.

"So you've been lost all this time?" the older Slytherin, an athletic-looking boy with common brown hair and eyes asked, obviously amused.

"It's not as if I had a map," she said straight-faced. If Archie were here, he would share the joke.

"Well, no better way to learn than to get lost," the boy shrugged, leading the way into the Great Hall, "I'm Adrian Pucey."

She took his hand absently, "Rigel Black."

Pucey frowned slightly as they found seats near the middle of the Slytherin table, "Forgive me, but I had thought it was *Arcturus* Black."

"Rigel is my middle name," she said, noting as she poured herself a glass of milk that her roommates were listening attentively. Nott and Pucey exchanged a confused glance when she started eating a bowl of porridge and they realized that was going to leave it at that. She thought Malfoy's eyebrow might have twitched before he turned to his eggs.

Rigel was just finishing up when Pansy walked into the Hall. She came to stand behind Nott, who was seated to Rigel's left, and cleared her throat delicately. The lanky boy immediately moved down a bit, crowding the boy on his left to allow Pansy room to sit. She nodded like a queen who had just received a bow from one of her courtiers, and greeted Rigel somewhat coolly, "Good morning, Mr. Black," she served herself a plate of fruit, fussing over which piece of melon she wanted, before continuing, "I was a bit surprised to see that you'd already left this morning." There was an unstated *without me* at the end of that sentence, but if Pansy thought to throw Rigel off she should have been more direct. There was really nothing she did better than communicating without speaking.

"I've always been an early riser," she said. *You weren't there when I left.*

"I see," Pansy said, "and just what about the early morning do you find so agreeable?" *Would it be worth my while to rise early as well?*

"I find the general lack of noise to be appealing," Rigel said, pretending not to notice Pansy stiffening in offense as she paused to finish her milk before continuing, "it allows one to understand the few things they do hear more clearly." *I wake early to avoid people, but I would make an exception for you because I value your company and would like to better understand you.* Truly, the second half of Rigel's statement might also be interpreted as a desire to have more intimate conversation, away from prying eyes and distractions, but she thought that between their young age and Pansy's good sense she was unlikely to be misunderstood.

"There seems to be some value in what you say," Pansy demurred, offering a small smile to show that Rigel had escaped Pansy's irritation for the time being. Her statement was so neutral that it could have meant anything, but Rigel chose to interpret it as a *maybe*. Whether or not Pansy would rise early with her tomorrow didn't matter. Pansy had gotten what she wanted, an explanation and an invitation, if not an apology. Rigel wondered if she could expect such maneuvering from the blonde every time she became miffed at her. She certainly seemed to be enjoying herself from the smug satisfaction radiating from her every gesture.

Rigel inwardly berated herself for forgetting that as a pureblood "boy" who had made the acquaintance of a pureblood girl, it would be considered expected that she escort her to the next meal they had together, and was glad Pansy hadn't taken her slip as a personal snub.

At thirty-five minutes till the end of breakfast, Slytherin House rose as one and retreated to the dungeons, startling a few first-year Hufflepuffs on their way out of the Hall. Their Head of House was already present when they arrived. He stood tall and silent in the middle of the common room as the students crowded in and filled the edges of the room. The first-years kept together in a group by one of the study tables, unsure what else to do. When the silence had just begun to stretch from expectant to uncomfortable, he spoke.

"For those of you who do not know," he looked toward their group of eleven-year-olds and Rigel found herself riveted against her will. He had a gaze that sprung like a trap if you were foolish enough to let his eyes catch yours, "I am Potions Master Severus Snape, your Head of House. I apologize for my absence last evening; I was unavoidably detained, as will happen sometimes. Nevertheless," he began to turn in a circle as he talked, including everyone in the room by his gaze alone, "As the new term begins you will be expected to remember, or in the case of our newest members, to discover, what it means to be a Slytherin. To some of you, whose forbearers walked these dungeon halls, it means tradition, and to others it simply

means unqualified acceptance, but for all of you, Slytherin means a chance to carve and forge your destiny as you see fit.

"As your Head of House it is my duty to assist you in furthering the ambitions that secured you your place here in this room. For seven years, your goals are my goals. Your plans and dreams and schemes will become my own motivations, and as long as you dwell herein I pledge to assist you in realizing all your endeavors," he paused for a moment to let his words, incredible as they were, sink in before continuing, "In that vein, if at any time you require assistance, simply seek a portrait of Salazar Slytherin, and he will find me posthaste," he gestured to a picture of a dark-haired, green-eyed man hanging above the main fireplace.

Rigel mentally looked her new Head of House over as he spoke, searching for the tell-tale signs... yes, there in the fire-proof robes, and *there* in the close-cut fingernails, and even there in the slight flaring of the nostrils as his nose prepared to inventory the scents in the room-this was truly a Potions Master. She took in his body language, proud and stiff. He looked more like a general appraising his ranks than any teacher she'd every heard of. When he turned to directly face the first-years, Rigel noted that he was much more menacing in person than he had seemed on paper, with his hawk-like features and looming presence, and yet at the same time his words were so much kinder than she'd expected. In his articles, he spent as much time tossing out acerbic comments about his incompetent contemporaries in the field as he did presenting his revolutionary findings and brilliant deductions. She'd already steeled herself against immediate hostility merely because of who Archie's dad was, but Snape seemed not to have even noticed her.

"In Slytherin House we stick together, because a lone snake is no match for a lion, an eagle, or, yes, even a badger sometimes. We draw strength from our solidarity, our connections, and any other resources that become available," he paused to smirk in a way that had most of the older students chuckling darkly, "There are very few rules in Slytherin that cannot be bent to some extent. One is the

policy against inner-House fighting. If you have a problem with a member of your House, settle it with words in private or wands over the holidays. In this school, as far as anyone else is concerned, my snakes do not turn their fangs on one another. Any other issues are considered on a case by case basis. When you have crossed a line, you will know it, and pray you have the intelligence not to make the same mistake twice," he bared his teeth in a parody of a grin, and Rigel vowed then and there to never get on his bad side.

He nodded, apparently satisfied his point had been received (indeed even Malfoy looked like he wanted to squirm), and then he left. The vacuum left behind by his presence was such that it took several seconds after the common room wall slid closed for anyone to move. Finally a prefect cleared his throat and said, "Your schedules should have been delivered to your dorms by now, and whoever has class near the Charms classroom first is responsible for showing the snakelets the way."

Rigel met Pansy's gaze, and the blonde raised her eyebrow in a silent question. She took her time, mulling over her impressions as they walked toward their rooms, and finally decided that a shrug was the best reply she could give. Pansy smiled, as if she had expected such a reaction and was already growing fond of it. Rigel supposed she was nothing if not socially predictable.

"Well, I think he's cool," Pansy said, "My father tells me he's quite renown as a Potions Master, and everyone says he's a good Head of House."

Nott, who was walking behind them, snorted with incredulous amusement, "Everyone in Slytherin, maybe. The rest of the Houses think he's a right bastard."

Pansy frowned at his language, but merely said, "Who cares what they think? They're wrong."

Rigel left them to argue about it, still thinking about her first encounter with her... idol? Certainly not. If there was anything

Severus Snape wasn't, it was worshipable. Her hero, perhaps? No, too childish. Her future mentor, she decided, with any luck at all. He was just as larger-than-life in person as she'd imagined, but despite his words about approaching him with their ambitions, there was something... inaccessible about him. She couldn't imagine going up to him and demanding his attention, especially considering the last name she was borrowing (and her real last name, for that matter). She'd just have to work twice as hard and make *him* notice *her* .

[end of chapter three]

So we're almost to the end of the perfunctory, explanatory chapters (yay), just bear with the tedium a bit longer *_*.

Chapter 4

A great big thank you to DwellingOnDreams7 and also to Kichi for your splendid reviews. They mean more than you can know to me on my first story, and you've inspired me to keep going :).

Also thank you to those of you who might have reviewed before I took down the story, changed the characterization, and reposted it a few days ago, you helped me find a better direction for it and I in no way mean to disregard your helpful advice and comments.

The Pureblood Pretense

Chapter Four:

Malfoy kept pace with her on their way to their first class, Charms. She alternatively walked slightly faster, then slower, to see if he became unconsciously frustrated, but he didn't seem to be thrown off balance. In fact, he adjusted smoothly to her gait each time she modified it, and never missed a conversational beat (not that she was giving him much fodder for conversing with).

"Looking forward to class, Black?" Malfoy asked, his tone bland but politely curious.

"To Charms?" Rigel glanced over at the boy who seemed almost determined to be friendly to her, "Or to classes in general?"

"Either," he smiled in a way that would be charming in a few years, "Both."

"Oh," she nodded in exaggerated understanding, "No."

This time she was sure his eyebrow twitched.

"None of them?" he pressed gently, "Not even Flying? I personally can't wait to show those Gryffindors how Quidditch is supposed to be

played."

She debated turning the conversation toward his interest in Quidditch, but acknowledged that since he had given her one of his likes, it was only fair to reciprocate. "I suppose I am looking forward to Potions," she offered, thinking that the flash of triumph in Malfoy's eyes wasn't at all suspicious.

"Potions? It's lucky you're in Slytherin then," he said as they walked into the Charms classroom. She thought perhaps he would leave it at that and go sit with Nott or Zabini, but instead he practically herded her toward the table Pansy had just sat down at, which had two extra seats. She ended up in the middle seat and wondered if Malfoy thought sitting her by Pansy would make her comfortable enough to answer all his "friendly" questions. She also wondered if he was planning on writing up a dossier on her and sending it to his parents, but, as usual, she kept her wonderings to herself.

"What's lucky?" Pansy asked, having only caught part of Malfoy's remark.

"That Black is in Slytherin, since his interest is in Potions."

Yeah, lucky, Rigel thought somewhat ironically.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Pansy asked, a small bite to her usually cool voice. Rigel realized she must have voiced her comment out-loud, and then realized it sounded like she was sarcastically maligning her House on the first day. This was confirmed when Pansy continued quietly, so as not to let on to others that there was tension between two snakes, "You should be proud to be in Slytherin. Just because your dad might not approve-"

"Pansy," Rigel interrupted, just as quietly, "I didn't mean I considered myself *un* lucky to be in Slytherin. I meant it wasn't really luck that I was put here. I wanted to be in Slytherin." *Not to mention I exercised more cunning in just coming to Hogwarts than most of the idiots in our year combined. As if I could be put anywhere else.*

"But your father's a-" she caught herself before she said "blood-traitor" but the sentiment was there, "Well, why would you want to be in Slytherin?"

"Malfoy's already told you that," Rigel said.

Malfoy and Pansy shared a look of veiled disbelief. "You wanted to be in Slytherin so that Snape would help you with Potions?" Malfoy clarified. It was clear he thought that a pretty weak reason for abandoning family values, even if her family was a bunch of blood-traitors.

Rigel shrugged, grateful that the professor had arrived at last and she could discontinue their conversation. She really hadn't meant to share even that much, but it would be hazardous to her health for the other Slytherins to think she was holding prejudice against her own House.

Professor Flitwick was exactly how she might have expected someone with the name "Flitwick" to appear. He was small and chipper, and began calling role immediately after hefting himself onto a large stack of books. Rigel thought he must have impeccable balance from perching on top of books all day, which would explain why he was such a superb dueler in his youth.

Charms class was much as Rigel had anticipated. The most exciting part of the class was when she asked Professor Flitwick to use Rigel as her first name when he called role. He explained the theory behind the first charm they were learning, the Levitation Charm, and set them all to practicing on feathers for the rest of the period. Rigel watched as Pansy and Draco eventually got good enough with their feathers to try dueling with them mid-air. It wasn't exactly thrilling, as even when the feathers would clash it was with a pathetic, whispering motion, so they got bored of that rather quickly.

"Why don't you try, Rigel?" Pansy suggested, "If you don't have it learned you'll only have to do it for homework."

"I guess," she sighed, trying to ignore the intent way Malfoy was staring at her feather, as if he had good reason to suspect it was a cleverly disguised bomb. She waved her wand, saying "Winguardium Leviosa," but nothing happened. She tried again, and then again several more times, and still nothing.

"Hmmm, maybe the feather's made of lead," Pansy said, leaning down until she was eye-level with the table, "Wait-I think it moved a bit!"

"That was you breathing on it, Parkinson," Malfoy said. He looked quite disappointed for some reason, "Try again, Black."

She did. For the rest of the lesson she practiced until she thought she could perform the wand-movement in her sleep. For all the good it did her.

"I just don't understand," Pansy kept saying, even as they walked to their next class, History of Magic, "It isn't supposed to be that difficult. Are you sure you were trying hard enough?"

"Yes." Maybe. Rigel suppressed a sigh. She had to get through almost an entire week of these worthless classes before she'd be anywhere near a cauldron. They didn't have Potions until Thursday, unfortunately, and even that was only theory. She wouldn't actually get to brew anything until Friday, and that's assuming Professor Snape let them brew the first week.

All through History of Magic, Pansy and Malfoy gave her meaningful looks. She didn't know *what* exactly they meant, but they would look at her, then look at each other, and then look back at her, and it certainly seemed to *mean* something to them, though Rigel couldn't make heads or tails of it. By lunch, she was ready to hex both of them, only she didn't actually know any hexes, and she was pretty sure both Pansy and Malfoy had been taught Shield Charms by their paranoid parents. *Then again, if I had as many enemies as the Malfoys, I'd make sure my kids could defend themselves too .*

Just when she thought they'd gotten over their first Charms lesson, Malfoy dragged Pucey into the discussion over the lunch table. "Adrian, how long did it take you to learn the Levitation Charm?" he asked across the table.

"Oh, a while, actually," Pucey scratched his head, "Nearly the whole class period I think, but then again, my parents were a bit more strict on the rules about underage magic than yours. I never did magic on purpose until I came to Hogwarts."

Malfoy and Pansy both looked upset at this. Malfoy, Rigel could understand. If he were looking for something interesting to dish on her, he would be sadly disappointed by her spell-casting skills, of which she had none. Pansy though... Rigel frowned, or at least she let her eyebrows crease together a bit. Perhaps Pansy was regretting making friends with Rigel now that she was revealed to be magically average (*or slightly below average*, she thought with a mental grimace).

Apparently Pucey had been filled in while she was lost in thought, because he turned to her with an expression of surprise and concern, "You couldn't even get it off the table?"

She shrugged.

"Not even a twitch," Pansy supplied. How nice to have such blunt friends.

"Well, how hard were you trying?" Pucey asked.

"I tried many times," she said, "My wand movement and pronunciation were correct, it just didn't work."

"And you're sure you're not using a fake wand?" Pansy glanced at her sleeve, obviously expecting a rubber chicken to emerge and give the game up.

"Yes, I'm sure." Twelve inches, ash: unicorn hair. Ollivander called it "well-balanced."

"But wait," Pucey said, "You said that you tried several times, but not how *hard* you tried."

Rigel gazed at him blankly.

"Oh for-" Malfoy, it seemed, had run out of patience for the day. She gave him points for almost making it through lunch, "You have to *want* the magic to work, Black. You can't just wave your wand and expect it to do stuff."

"That's right," Pucey said, "Intent is crucial when casting a spell, along with concentration and determination."

*How silly, Rigel thought, in Potions you can't get a better result by simply wanting it more. You have to go through the necessary procedure. It's no wonder wizards act like a bunch of spoiled children if most of their needs are met the moment they **want** it badly enough.* But all she said was, "Oh," before turning back to her meal. She chewed on a carrot thoughtfully while Malfoy huffed moodily next to her and the other two gave it up as a bad job altogether.

Defense Against the Dark Arts was, if anything, worse than Charms. Their professor was a stuttering young man who had apparently had a bad run-in with Vampires while on his tour of the continent the year before. Rigel could see why Sirius and her father would think such professors would make easy targets for practical jokes. He did seem to know at least the basics of defense, however, and he started them off trying to light their wand-tips with the Lumos spell. Pansy yawned dramatically, and from Malfoy's expression of agreement Rigel assumed this was one of the spells that any kid whose parents weren't strictly law-abiding would have already learned. Which left the two of them with nothing better to do than to tutor Rigel.

"No, no, say it more forcefully."

"Wave your wand like you mean it."

Finally she placed her wand on the desk and turned to her little cheerleaders, "Are you two in Hufflepuff?"

"What?"

"No!"

"Then stop badgering me."

They both looked highly offended and Pansy grumbled a bit, but they settled for amusing themselves with critiquing the others in their class. Rigel diligently kept at it until the end of the class period, despite what a waste of time it felt like. She added Lumos to the list of spells whose wand movements she had committed to muscle memory, and was glad when class was finally over.

They had free time to do homework and the like every day before dinner, so Rigel, Pansy, and Malfoy headed back to the dungeons to work on an assignment Professor Binns had given them. They had to list what they thought were the most important historical events in the last century, but as all three were well-versed in recent wizarding history (Pansy and Malfoy because they were taught all wizarding history and Rigel because she read the newspaper) it didn't take too long. Unfortunately, that meant there was plenty of time for them to bug Rigel about her spell-casting.

"It's like you're a muggle," Malfoy said.

"Maybe I am," she said. Both purebloods flinched back almost involuntarily before their brains caught up.

"No, you're not," Pansy said, "You just aren't trying hard enough. Like, what do you want more than anything else right now?"

"I want you to stop bugging me."

"Well, that's why it's not working," Malfoy said, "The feather won't float until the thing you want most in the world for one moment is to make it float."

"But why would I want to make it float?" she asked reasonably, "It would be easier and faster for me to pick it up."

"What if you wanted to move a boulder?"

"Can you move a boulder with Winguardium Leviosa?"

"Well, no, you need a stronger spell, but just imagine."

"I can't think of a single time in my life when I've thought to myself, oh if only I could move that boulder," Rigel shrugged, "It just seems rather pointless, I guess."

Pansy sighed, "Okay, then what about the Lumos Charm? It's very useful."

"But it isn't dark in here," she gestured to the common-room, "I have no need of a lit wand."

"You are never going to learn magic like that," Malfoy said, his eyes narrowed.

Rigel shrugged. After all, she was here to learn Potions, not magic.

After dinner she retreated to her rooms and started writing a letter to Sirius. She didn't know how to change her handwriting yet, so she used a dicto-quill and hoped Sirius assumed his son was just too lazy to write it himself.

Dear Dad,

Miss me yet? I miss having my own room already, but the food here is way better than the stuff you cook, ha ha. The train ride was fun, I met a nice boy called Neville (I think he's a Longbottom), and the castle is just as cool and you and Uncle James always said! So don't

freak out, but I was sorted into Slytherin-surprise! Don't worry, cause everyone's been really cool to me so far and the other boys in my dorm are nice enough, although some of the girls in our year were giving me looks like they thought I would pounce on them at any moment. What exactly did you do to their mothers when you were here, dad?

My first day of classes went well, but history's really boring! Our DADA professor looks like one good prank would scare him out of his garlic necklace, but I guess I won't know until I try, huh? So yeah, everything's good here, don't worry too much and promise not to turn my bedroom into a pool hall or something, ok?

With love,

Archie

(P.S.-the you-know-what still works)

She thought it sounded enough like her cousin to pass muster. She was careful not to mention any Snapes, Malfoys, or the trouble she was having with spells. No need for Sirius to get upset; if he ever came to visit the school, everything would be ruined. She knew it was going to be imperative that she avoid things like injuries, massive amounts of detentions, or anything else that would give Sirius a reason to show up at Hogwarts. Her acting was good when she bothered, but he was bound to notice she wasn't Archie unless he hit him with a Conjunctivitis Curse as soon as he walked in the door.

Rigel packed away the dicto-quill and looked around her dorm. It was still a good forty minutes until curfew, so neither of her roommates was asleep. Nott was playing a game of exploding snap with Zabini, who was apparently already sick of dumb and dumber's illustrious company. Malfoy was... oh great, he appeared to be writing a letter as well. That meant she probably wouldn't be going to the Owlery alone. She pulled out the Marauders' Map casually, knowing any suspicious movement would only trigger her fellow

Slytherin's notice. She began quietly muttering aloud nonsense phrases, seeming for all the world as if she was reading a portion of her letter out loud under her breath to check the wording. She slipped "I solemnly swear that I am up to no good" in the middle and worked quickly to memorize the fastest route to the Owlery. Wiping the map in the same manner, she tucked it away once more and rolled up her letter as unobtrusively as possible.

She pulled on her gloves and wrapped a scarf around her neck snugly. Sirius had charmed Archie's robes to be weather-resistant, so she didn't need a cloak. She stood casually, slipping her letter into the folds of her school robes. She was almost (so close) to the door when, surprise of surprises, Malfoy stopped her.

"Going somewhere, Black?" he asked.

Is he going to say that every time it becomes clear that I am, in fact, going somewhere ? She mentally rolled her eyes a bit, "Yes, Malfoy."

"You're going to send a letter," he said it like an accusation, "You're going to the Owlery."

She shrugged noncommittally, which she supposed was as good as an admission. He rose from his bed and began rolling his own letter, saying, "It's only a half-hour or so until curfew."

"It shouldn't take more than fifteen minutes each way," she pointed out.

"It took you twenty minutes just to get out of the dungeons this morning," Malfoy said evenly, "I'm coming with you."

"There's really no need," Rigel said half-heartedly.

Nott spoke up from across the room, "Sure there is. You don't to be wandering alone this late at night in Gryff and Claw territory. Weren't you listening to Professor Snape this morning?"

"It's no trouble," Malfoy assured her, his grin flashing a bit too much tooth to be completely friendly, "I need to send my letter with Archimedes anyway."

A Malfoy **would** have an owl named Archimedes, she thought, but she gave in with a modicum of good grace. She had expected Malfoy to insist upon coming anyway. They walked down their hall and across the common room in silence, broken only by Malfoy speaking the password to the wall-door for them to leave.

The dungeons were cold and eerily quiet; their footsteps echoed as they walked, which she thought would be both an advantage if you needed to hear intruders coming, and a disadvantage if you wanted to move about unseen. She took the turns that led to the Entrance Hall confidently, and Malfoy seemed content to follow her lead until they reached the ground floor. He turned toward the main stair, which would lead to the connecting stairway that ran up the middle of the castle, while she turned toward the West stairway, which led up the side of the castle. They both stopped and stared at one another.

"We should take the main stair," Malfoy said, "We don't know the castle well enough to take side-routes and the more remote an area is, the easier it is to get ambushed there."

"Isn't that why you came with me? To prevent attack from anyone who might take on a lone snake?" she asked, with a look on her face that said clearly: *you can go wherever you want, but I'm going this way* .

He made a noise like a smothered sigh in the back of his throat, but walked determinately over to the West stairs, glaring at her all the time. Rigel ignored his dark look and led them up three flights of stairs to the fourth floor, and it wasn't until she turned down a corridor that Malfoy spoke up exasperatedly, "Okay, now I know we're going the wrong way. You're turning East, and the Owlery is next to the West Tower. We should have kept going up the next flight of stairs."

Rigel kept walking until she reached a tapestry of two young wizards dueling over a blonde-haired maiden. She moved the hanging aside and glanced back as if to say, *Coming?* Malfoy shut his mouth and eyed the passageway she'd revealed untrusting.

"How do I know this isn't a trap?" he said as he slowly peered into the gloomy space. It was a steep, narrow staircase that seemed to go almost straight up.

"Yes, Malfoy, I forced you to follow me to the Owlery so I could get expelled my first night by pushing the Malfoy scion down a flight of stairs," Rigel said.

He looked close to huffing, but he pushed past her and started up the stairs nevertheless. He lit his wand with the Lumos spell and sent her a look over his shoulder that said *see how useful it is ?* She followed with amusement, calling, "Watch out for step thirty-three."

He stopped dead. She could almost hear him counting to ten in his head before he spoke, "Come again?"

She drew level with him, barely managing it in the narrow passage, "We are now on the twenty-fourth stair, and I thought you should know that the thirty-third step is, in fact, a trap."

He stared at her, probably imagining a violent strangulation of the Black heir, "Why don't you go first?"

She did, gladly, stepping exaggeratedly over the trick stair to make sure Malfoy didn't forget, as amusing as it would have been to watch him become trapped knee-deep in a hidden staircase. They came out of the passage on the seventh floor, a few meters East of the entrance to the Owlery stairs. Malfoy pursed his lips, but was too proud to ask her how she'd known the way. Just as well, since she would only have lied and said she heard about it in passing from an older student.

They took the steps up to the Owlery quickly. It wasn't yet cold enough for the stairs to be icy, but it was close, and the biting wind discouraged any lingering. Rigel went to find a school owl to take her letter and Malfoy whistled sharply for his. Rigel said, "Sirius Black" very clearly and watched the Screech Owl fly off into the night. She turned around and saw Malfoy muttering agitatedly to himself beside his Eagle Owl. She suddenly realized that while she had dressed warmly for her trip to the Owlery, which was always freezing because it had to be exposed for the birds to get in and out, Malfoy (being too preoccupied with insisting on accompanying her) hadn't.

In that moment, he truly looked his eleven years. His nose was slightly red, as were the tips of his ears, and his hair was a wind-blown mess. He cursed quietly again as he fumbled and dropped his tightly rolled scroll, and Rigel guessed his fingers were numb as well. She stooped down to catch the letter before it could hit the ground and become covered in bird-droppings. Malfoy looked up sharply, his usual frozen expression made less effective by the knowledge that he probably was freezing. So she ignored his glower, tied the scroll securely to his stately owl's leg, and said, "To your father?"

"None of your business," he snapped.

She raised an eyebrow, "Shall I plug my ears while you give your owl instructions then?"

He might have flushed, but it was too cold to tell, "Malfoy Manor," he told the bird.

Rigel eyed the bird as it took flight, wondering how much of that letter was about her, but then shrugged mentally, thinking she might be a little too good at pretending to be her cousin if she was already so vain. She turned back to Malfoy, whose breath was coming in short puffs between lips that had lost most of their color. She took off her scarf and quickly wound it around the pale boy's neck and mouth, effectively muffling his spluttered protests for a few crucial moments. By the time he wrestled his chin free of the thick fabric

she'd stripped off her gloves and roughly grabbed hold of one of his hands, tisking when she found it trembling with cold.

"What-" he started through clenched teeth.

"Hold these for me, won't you Malfoy?" she said, shoving his hand into one of her already-warm gloves and proceeding to do the same with the other, "Thanks."

"You-"

But Rigel was already headed away from him toward the stairs, "Hurry up, Malfoy, we don't want to be late."

"As long as we're back to the dungeons before curfew, Snape won't take points," he said moving quickly to catch up, and she noticed his voice was muffled again. She bit her lip to keep from smiling at the picture the youngest Malfoy made with his face half-buried in her scarf once more. He looked like a baby bird peeking out of its nest, except he had another nest on the top of his head in the form of his once-perfect hair.

They walked back to the common room in relative silence, Malfoy choosing not to comment on the way Rigel navigated the dungeons perfectly. He was learning that it was better not to question her, since she never gave a straight answer anyway. At the entrance to their rooms he quickly divested himself of her scarf and gloves and pushed them into her hands before opening the door and heading for his side of the room without looking back.

She stored the articles of clothing into her trunk and took off her shoes, then lay down on her bed and willed sleep to come. Nott glanced over at her through his hangings and said, "Don't you wear night clothes? Or at least sleep under the covers?"

"No," she said. She had decided it would be stranger for her to change in the bathroom every time she put pj's on than for her to just sleep in her clothes. She'd rather come off as paranoid than have

them think she had something to hide. She slept on top of the covers so that if there was an emergency or she was attacked in the middle of the night she wouldn't be hampered by heavy bedclothes, and between sleeping in her robes and the small fireplace always lit by the elves in the evening, she doubted she'd need them.

Nott chuckled and let the matter drop, turning away from her onto his side. Rigel stared up at the canopy thinking over her first day at Hogwarts. She wouldn't know if she'd made the right choice until Friday, but so far it was both better and worse than she'd expected. She had a good (if sometimes nosy) friend in Pansy, and even Malfoy was mildly entertaining at times. On the other hand, classes had been a disaster so far. She didn't expect Transfiguration to be much better, though Herbology would be fine. She knew a lot about plants, or at least the ones used for Potions ingredients. And then she had an entire afternoon of Flying class. She sighed quietly to herself, wishing that she didn't have to take all those other, boring classes. All she wanted to do was brew. Soon after, sleep took her away in its arms, and she dreamed peacefully of simmering cauldrons, once again oblivious to the silver stare directed at her from the bed to her right.

Draco POV:

He stared at the sleeping boy on the next bed over as if he could answer all the questions swimming about in Draco's head. *And*, Draco thought, *he probably could, if he wanted to*. But Rigel Black was proving to be most unforthcoming. All day he'd spent with Black, and all he knew about the other boy was that he had a vague interest in Potions and was absolutely dismal at magic in general. Not much to write home about (though he had, of course), and usually not enough to warrant any continuing interest on his part, but there was something about Rigel Black that had Draco determined to know more. The boy had apparently gotten hopelessly lost that morning before breakfast, but then, perhaps as a result of that time spent wandering, he had demonstrated complete confidence in

navigating the dungeons that very evening. And when in Morgan's name had Black had time to find out about that passage to the seventh floor?

He didn't act much like the son of Sirius Black either, from what Malfoy had heard about his mother's cousin. Aside from the casual flirting he exhibited at the Welcoming Feast, Black seemed quite different, at least personality wise. He did have his father's hair and eye color, and the aristocratic features so carefully bred into the Black line. Black's eyes were a duller grey than his, but then, he had a silver sheen distinctive to the Malfoys to complement his mother's genes. Rigel Black was quiet, withdrawn, and had no compunction ignoring social norms when it pleased him. He had kept most personal information close to his chest, and yet he had chosen to dictate his letter to his father out loud, which didn't fit at all.

And that letter! Draco had been able to hear most of it from where he was writing his own, and either Black was keeping his real personality locked up tight so far or he was out-and-out lying to his dad. Draco was leaning toward the second, because several of the things in the letter really had been lies. Rigel Black didn't seem the type to be interested in pranks, though Draco knew Sirius and James Potter had been, and his classes most certainly hadn't gone well.

Also, Black had been borderline rude to Draco most of the day, but had given up his own scarf and gloves in the Owlery like it was nothing. Overall, the boy was extremely contradictory, if not downright suspicious, and Draco would be keeping a close watch on the newest Black regardless of what his mother had to say about it. *Sooner or later he'll show his hand, Draco thought, and I'll be there .*

[end of chapter four]

A/N: in Canon I think they don't try any actual charms until Halloween, but I'm speeding things along, because I think magic should come a bit more naturally to wizards (well... most wizards).

Also: I'm trying to write at least 2000 words a day on this story, but it'll be a lot more consistent after 12/14/2011, when my finals end.

If you want to know the complete timetable for reference:

Monday: Charms, HoM, Lunch, DADA

Tuesday: Transfiguration, Herbology, Lunch, Flying

Wednesday: Charms, HoM, Lunch, DADA, Astronomy

Thursday: (no 1st period b/c up late for Ast.), Potions (theory), Lunch, Transfiguration

Friday: Double Potions (practical), Lunch, Herbology

Chapter 5

The Pureblood Pretense

Chapter Five :

The next morning when Rigel stepped into the common room, she found Pansy sitting quietly on one of the low-backed chairs, glancing through their Transfiguration text. The blonde girl was really quite pretty in the pale green light coming through the windows from the lake, Rigel noted objectively. She strode over to her friend and waited for Pansy to acknowledge her. Pansy closed the book neatly and flicked luminous blue eyes up to meet grey ones.

"Good morning, Rigel," she said.

"Morning," Rigel nodded toward the common room door, "I'm going to take a walk."

"I would love to come with you," Pansy grinned, and Rigel noticed she was already dressed to go to breakfast, despite the early hour. She gallantly offered her arm, feeling beyond silly even as Pansy gracefully rose and rested her hand lightly on Rigel's elbow. They left the common room and Rigel led them immediately toward the Entrance Hall. She thought Pansy's robes and shoes looked too thin for dungeon-wear, and she'd already explored the dungeons anyway, so she decided they'd walk the first floor, and perhaps the basement if they had time. Rigel especially wanted to figure out where exactly the painting that led to the kitchens was.

As they walked, Rigel learned many things about her friend. Pansy was named after a kind of violet, because her mother was so fond of them, and she was an only child. Her parents had arranged many private tutors for her over the years, so she had come to Hogwarts with a full background in Wizarding Law, Pureblood Etiquette, and Magical History, which included extensive knowledge of the most

famous and influential people and families in the Western Wizarding World. She confided to Rigel that the reason no one had ever tried to have their History professor, Binns, replaced by someone more competent was because most of the students, and especially those from influential families like the Malfoys and Parkinsons, were already so well versed in it.

Pansy also mentioned she was interested in taking Care of Magical Creatures in her third year, because when she was younger a herd of unicorns had moved into the forest behind her mansion, which was a Wizarding Wildlife Preserve, and she had been quite close to the beautiful creatures before they had moved on. Rigel had known Pansy was mostly innocent, as any eleven year old would be, but she hadn't realized just how much it meant to Pansy until then, and she made a silent vow to protect that innocence as much as possible in the next seven years.

By the time they entered the Great Hall for breakfast, Rigel knew that Pansy's favorite color was periwinkle, that she hated the smell of Lavender (because she was allergic), and that at present her greatest ambition was to learn to bake, because her grandmother made the most delicious pies and cakes, better than any house elf, but her mother refused to let her practice at home. Rigel found she didn't mind Pansy's company as long as Pansy was content to talk about herself. She reminded Rigel of Archie a bit, the way she carried the whole conversation easily without becoming annoying (at least not to Rigel, who didn't like to talk much). Come to think of it, Draco reminded her a bit of Archie too, the way he impulsively pursued whatever he happened to be interested in at the time. It seemed Rigel had unconsciously drifted toward the familiar here at Hogwarts, however much it had seemed like Pansy and Draco attached themselves to her. They strolled over to the Slytherin table together and Rigel waited politely for Pansy to take a seat before doing so herself, noting as she did so that Pansy had maneuvered her into sitting next to Malfoy once again. She wondered if it was her fate to be ever between the two of them.

"Good Morning," Pansy said to the general assembly of first-years.

"Where were you two this morning?" Davis asked.

"Walking," Pansy said, buttering a scone with care, "It's a rather refreshing way to begin the day."

"Just walking?" Greengrass asked lowly, obviously still suspicious of the son of infamous playboy Sirius Black.

"There was talking involved as well, I believe," Rigel said. She blinked when Pansy gave a startled laugh.

"You have quite a way with understatement, Rigel," she said, eyes twinkling mischievously and looking for all the world as if she had solved a great puzzle, "I knew you must have a sense of humor if you were raised by Sirius Black and James Potter."

"I think most of the professors are waiting anxiously for the practical jokes to begin," Zabini said, a slight smile playing about his mouth, "And the Weasley terrors have spent every meal since the sorting on the edge of their seats with anticipation."

Rigel looked with interest at the Gryffindor table, where there did indeed seem to be two identical redheads alternatively glancing around the Hall and staring at her with confused expressions. She shrugged her shoulders, saying, "I have no talent for pranks."

"Well, as your dorm mate, I am much relieved," Nott told her, "And if you ever decide to take up the family mantle, do us a favor and practice on the Hufflepuffs."

"I'm not sure that Malfoy and Pansy would take it very well," she said blandly.

The others gave her confused looks, but Malfoy kicked her shin below the table and Pansy shoved her lightly.

"Rigel thinks he's being funny, by calling us Hufflepuffs because we 'badgered' him so much yesterday," Pansy said, a sweet smile blooming on her face as she began her revenge, "You see, he had a little trouble with the charms we learned, and we were only trying to help, weren't we Malfoy?"

Rigel groaned inwardly as Malfoy answered her, just as sweetly, "We were indeed, and Black's not the only one with a talent for understatement. His attempts were simply abysmal, weren't they Parkinson?"

"Oh, you must call me Pansy," the blonde girl said cheerfully, "After all, we'll be working together a long time if we're to try and teach this plebian how magic is supposed to be performed."

"Then I insist you call me Draco," Malfoy said gallantly, shaking his head sadly at Rigel, "For I do fear we have a long road ahead of us."

"See if I sit by you two in Transfiguration," Rigel muttered into her cantaloupe.

"Oh you will, if only because *we* sit by *you*," Pansy assured her.

Rigel supposed she deserved it for calling them Puffs in front of their year-mates, but now everyone half-suspected she was a Squib, if their looks her way were any indication. Ten minutes later they followed a prefect to Transfiguration, where a cat sat silently on the professor's empty desk. Rigel stared at the cat, a suspicion forming in her mind. She'd been around animagi for the whole of her childhood, and between Sirius, James, and Remus when he was on Wolfsbane, she knew an animal that was not an animal when she saw one.

Sure enough, as the clock on the wall chimed the hour, the cat leapt off the desk, transforming mid-air into the stern-faced woman who'd met them before their Sorting. Most of the class released quiet gasps, and looked at their neighbors in awe. Professor McGonagall strode to the blackboard and waved her wand at a piece of chalk. It

animated and began writing out notes on theory while she introduced herself and called role.

"Welcome to Transfiguration," she said, not sounding at all welcoming, "This is a very difficult subject and I expect you all to work hard and apply yourselves to it. There will be no fooling around in here; next to Potions it is perhaps the branch of magic where things can most easily go wrong if you aren't extremely careful. Mr. Black!" she called.

Rigel contained her jump, but knew she must have still looked startled, "Yes, ma'am?"

"You knew or guessed I was not all I seemed when you first walked in," she commented.

Rigel wondered just how she had figured that out, but said, "Yes, ma'am."

"How?"

"You were too still," Rigel said, referring to the Professor's cat-form, "Cats are naturally quiet animals, but you were very watchful, so I guessed you were a human in animal form."

"Why not just assume I was a familiar or some other intelligent animal?" she pressed. Rigel sensed she was the kind of professor who always wanted the most complete answer possible.

She couldn't tell the class that her father and uncle were unregistered animagi, so she just shrugged, saying, "All of our professors have been in the classroom when we arrived so far, I noticed you left the staff table before we finished breakfast, and the markings around your eyes were unusual for a tabby cat."

"Excellent observational skills," McGonagall nodded briskly, "Five points to Slytherin. It is vital that you begin to develop an awareness for magic at all times. Magic can be used to deceive the

unsuspecting, especially Transfiguration, which is the magic of turning one thing into another, but there are almost always signs, if you remember to look for them."

She spent the rest of the lesson teaching them to turn matches into needles, and Pansy and Malfoy predictably had much better luck than Rigel did.

"Mine's gone silver, I think," Pansy noted, beaming. They had been warned that the chances of anyone succeeding the first day were slim.

"I think I've got a hole in one end of mine," Malfoy added, looking quite pleased.

The two of them turned to Rigel expectantly and she glanced down at her match, "Oh, look, I've made a match," she said, feigning a dreamy sort of joy. They both sighed at her, so she gave a small, but real smile and said, "You both did very well. I'm so proud," she added, just to see them scowl at her again. They looked like twins when they did that, side by side, both pale-skinned with blonde hair and expressions of amused exasperation on their faces.

"You're impossible," Malfoy said, "At this rate they'll kick you out by the end of the week, and then Pansy will cry, and Zabini will move into our dorm to get away from the numbskull brothers, and I heard he snores. I'll miss out on my beauty sleep, and Pansy won't be able to use her glamour spells on me-"

"I do not use a glamour!"

"-because she'll be too distraught and crying, and I'll grow up to be ugly and therefore uninfluential and it will be all your fault!" he finished grandly.

Rigel rolled her eyes and turned back to her match, figuring she could at least practice the incantation some more. She felt Malfoy glaring at her like she'd committed some unconscionable *crime* by

not being talented like he was as Pansy chewed his ear off about the glamour comment, and wished fervently that she had something pointy to job him with so the superior jerk would stop bothering her!

Pansy broke off her tirade with a gasp and Malfoy stared dumbly down at her match-except it wasn't a match anymore. It was a needle.

"Oh, well done, Mr. Black," Professor McGonagall had come over to check their work and seen her needle transform, "Ten more points to Slytherin. Mr. Malfoy, Miss Parkinson, you have made very good attempts as well."

As soon as she walked away, Pansy squealed, "Fifteen points to Slytherin in one class!"

Malfoy shot her a look that said *focus*, "Black, how in Merlin's name did you do that?"

"Same as you, only better," Rigel smirked, quite shocked at herself but unwilling to show it.

"You didn't even say the incantation," he whispered fiercely.

The look of awed pleasure on his face made Rigel uncomfortable, so she lied, "Yes I did, you must not have heard it over Pansy's nattering."

He looked unconvinced, "But still, you were dismal at Charms and Defense, and this is supposed to be much harder."

"What did you do differently?" Pansy asked, "I mean, what were you thinking when you did it?"

"I was thinking I'd like something to poke Malfoy's eye out," Rigel said.

Pansy looked like she couldn't tell if Rigel was joking or not, "I guess maybe you just needed the right motivation, then."

Malfoy smirked and this time Rigel *did* groan softly, "So this means we can annoy you in every class-in fact, we're practically obligated to. Pansy and I are the key to your success."

After Transfiguration, on the way to Herbology, Zabini approached them. Rigel didn't know much about the boy, besides what people said about his dangerously beautiful mother, but he had a quiet presence when he spoke, despite his young age.

"I noticed your success in McGonagall's class," he said casually, "Looks like those two were exaggerating this morning," he nodded at her friends (and when did Malfoy become one of her friends?), "You seem to be full of surprises."

"I think it was just a fluke," Rigel said, "Perhaps that particular match had been a needle before."

"Uh huh," the dark boy raised an eyebrow, "In any case, Slytherin House seems to have gained a valuable and unexpected asset in you, Black."

"Likewise, I'm sure, Zabini," Rigel nodded politely as they reached the greenhouses and Professor Sprout ushered them inside the first one.

Professor Sprout was a very interesting teacher, Rigel thought. She set them to examining different kinds of soils and guessing what types of magical plants would grow best in each one. Rigel knew about the properties of a lot of plants, but she'd never known that the growing conditions had so much impact on the potency of a plant's magical properties and parts. She was shocked to discover that if grown in the wrong soil, Flitterbloom lost half of its nutritional value, so for a vitamin potion to be up to standard it would require twice as much! She would have to start asking where the ingredients she purchased were grown before using them in her potions.

After Herbology they were all slightly dirty, but no one bothered cleaning up before lunch since they all had Flying that afternoon, and

were bound to work up a sweat again. Malfoy was practically vibrating in his seat, he was so excited, although his face was stoic as always. Rigel put a hand on his arm the fourth time his leg bumped into hers because he couldn't stop himself from bouncing it, and he finally calmed enough to finish his lunch with some decorum. She shared an amused glance with Pansy, who was completely unimpressed by the idea of flying on a broom in general.

They had Flying with the Gryffindors, and the barrier between the Houses was never more apparent to Rigel than the moment they reached the pitch and the Gryffs lined up along one side while the Slytherins took the other. She recognized Neville from the train and smiled slightly (as much as she ever did) in his direction when he noticed her. Pansy was giving a girl called Lavender an ugly look, probably hating her just on principle because of her allergy, and Malfoy was staring down the gangly redhead she knew was related to the Weasley twins, probably a younger brother. The boy looked just as unhappy to be looking at Malfoy, and Rigel thought she'd have to keep them away from one another if she wanted a peaceful existence at Hogwarts.

Madam Hooch blew her whistle to get their attention and said, "Today we're just going to cover the basics. I know many of you have brooms of your own at home, and will likely think this review beneath you, but if you plan to play Quidditch for your House, you'll want to be sure you have the fundamentals down. Don't worry," she grinned like a shark, "If you've been doing it wrong your whole life, I'll tell you."

Completely unreassured, the class nevertheless followed her directions and started screaming, "UP!" at their brooms. Malfoy rolled his eyes and snapped his fingers imperiously at the old Comet beside him and said, " *Up* ." It flew into his hand as if it had just been waiting for an opportunity to do so.

Pansy got hers to roll over a few times, and eventually got fed up and just picked it up off the ground with a scowl on her face. Rigel

said, "Up," in a tone that was apparently not convincing enough for her Shooting Star.

Malfoy, who was on Rigel's right, looked over and said, "It's the same thing as a Winguardium Leviosa, but the broom channels the magic instead of your wand. You have to mean it, Black."

"Why can't I pick it up like Pansy did?" she asked, knowing full well what Malfoy was going to say.

"Because you'll never learn that way," he shot Pansy a look around Rigel and said, "Pansy doesn't want to learn, but you should take this seriously."

"Why?" she said, deciding Malfoy was much more fun exasperated. She wondered how long she could pretend to be bad at Quidditch just to annoy him, "I don't want to learn either."

He frowned at her, "You have to like Quidditch. If Pansy doesn't like it, you have to so that I'm not the only one in our group."

She raised her eyebrows at his rather childish reasoning, trying to ignore the part of her that was flattered that he considered her and Pansy's opinions the only ones worth considering. "Fine," she said, "Up."

The broom rose steadily to her waiting hand and the wood seemed to thrum with anticipation beneath her fingers. She looked regretfully down at the old broom, knowing it would be ever so disappointed when she acted ignorant in the air. Still, if people knew she wasn't horrible on a broom they would want her to try out for the House Team, and that would detract from her Potions studies. Not to mention the unwanted attention if she did somehow make the team, coupled with the inevitable hi-jinks that came with trying to hide her biological gender in changing rooms, etc. Add to that the 100% probability that if her Uncle Sirius came to watch her play he'd realize instantly she wasn't Archie, and there was no way she could afford to be good at Quidditch.

"Mount your brooms," Madam Hooch called, demonstrating how they were to swing one leg over to the other side. Everyone got more or less situated and she said, "Now, on the count of three I want all of you to push lightly off the ground, hover for a moment, then come back down by leaning forward slightly. One-

But Neville was already in the air, and rising steadily. The class gasped, and the round-faced boy gripped the broom tightly, his face chalk-white with terror. Hooch pushed off the ground and flew toward him, stretching out a hand to try and pull him to safety, but by the time she reached him, Neville's grip had failed. He plummeted straight down and Rigel barely had time to think, as she watched with frozen dismay, that if she ever wanted to make anything levitate in her whole life, it was Neville, right now. Then, amazingly, he was slowing, stopping, hovering a few inches above the ground, and Rigel realized she was holding her wand with the tip pointed directly at the stunned Gryffindor. His milky hazel eyes met hers and the look of abject gratitude in them made her hand tremble. The spell broke and Neville landed with a relieved exhalation of breath on the soft grass. Hooch landed a few seconds after, and helped the boy to his feet. When it was clear that he was shaking too much to stand she said, "Poor boy, you've had quite a scare. Let's get you to the Hospital Wing for a calming draught," she swung him up into her arms, showing surprising strength, and called over her shoulder, "Stay here and keep on the ground or you'll be in detention until you graduate."

Rigel had hurriedly stowed her wand away when Neville hit the ground, but it was too late to avoid detection, and most of the class was staring at her. She could see the Gryffindors being torn between relief that their classmate hadn't been hurt and suspicion that a slimy snake would help a lion for seemingly no reason. Her own Housemates were just plain gaping at her, having been under the impression that she couldn't even perform the Levitation Charm, much less on a heavy, moving object under pressure. Rigel, not wanting to examine that line of questioning herself, turned pointedly to Pansy and said, "Do you think Professor Sprout will care where

we get the soil sample we're supposed to analyze for our homework assignment?"

Pansy just blinked at her, at a loss for coherence. Rigel sighed and turned to Malfoy, "I mean, she can't expect us to traipse through the Forbidden Forest, right? We could probably just ask the Gamekeeper for a sample from his garden."

Malfoy looked like he was considering slapping her, so she narrowed her eyes and snapped, "Stop looking at me like I'm hysterical. Just drop it."

"Drop-" he swore softly, "You are beyond words sometimes, and that is not a compliment."

She shrugged, and was about to change the subject again when she noticed the redheaded Gryffindor walking their way. With a foreboding feeling in her stomach she put on the friendliest expression she could muster while still kind of freaking out inside.

"Hey-" he began hotly.

Rigel interrupted, "Hey, you know Neville, right?"

"I-yeah, of course," the redhead frowned, "He's in our dorm, but-"

"Great!" she smiled stiffly, "Can you tell him I hope he's okay when you see him next?"

"Well, sure, I guess," he looked very confused now.

"Oh, of course, how rude of me," Rigel stuck her hand in the Gryffindor's face, "I'm Rigel Black. If you just tell him Rigel said 'hi' he'll know who you mean."

"Ron Weasley," he scrutinized her hand carefully, which made Pansy huff angrily.

"It's fine, Pansy," Rigel said soothingly, "If my brothers were the Weasley twins I'd be in the habit of looking for pranks everywhere too. On my honor, it's just a hand," she said to Weasley.

He had the decency to flush embarrassedly at being called out for his rudeness, but seized on the excuse as he shook her hand briefly, "Can't be too careful with those two."

"I understand," Rigel assured him seriously. Malfoy was glaring something fierce at Weasley, but Rigel hoped he would keep his comments to himself.

The Gryffindor seemed to remember suddenly why he'd come over in the first place, and said aggressively, "Why'd you stop Neville from falling?"

"I didn't realize my intervening would offend anyone," she said, deciding that bluffing and acting as if she'd meant to do it would be best for now, "I'll be sure to leave it to you next time."

"That's not- I mean-," he bit his lip in open frustration, "What's in it for you?"

"It's always a tragedy when good blood goes to waste," she said, "The Longbottom family is very ancient, and it would be a shame for their line to die out from such an avoidable accident."

She was actually rather proud of that response. She thought it sounded appropriately pureblooded and mercenary considering the reputation of her House. Weasley looked as if all his worst fears had been realized, so she must have said something right, and he scoffed dismissively at her before starting to walk back to his side of the pitch. Perhaps it would have ended there if only Malfoy had kept his big mouth shut.

He snorted rather rudely, "Oh yes, what a tragedy to lose someone with so much potential to grow up into a snot-nosed muggle-loving blood-traitor like his parents."

Weasley immediately drew his wand, and said a spell so fast Rigel reflected later that he was probably just waiting for an excuse. A jet of sickly-yellow light shot toward Malfoy, who looked gob-smacked at the idea of anyone actually attacking him for what he probably considered casual banter. Pansy shrieked angrily, but it was Rigel who unthinkingly moved sideways to push Malfoy out of the path of the jinx. It struck her in the shoulder and knocked her backwards into the grass.

Distantly she heard Pansy shriek again and Malfoy shout something angrily while Weasley stuttered that it was supposed to have hit Malfoy. This of course didn't make Malfoy any happier, and as Rigel sat up slowly, wondering at the ache in her elbow where she'd hit the ground, she saw Weasley running back toward his House-mates while Crabbe and Goyle held Malfoy back from pursuing.

"What a funny little picture," she said blearily, "I do hope someone tells Malfoy he looks like an angry Scottish terrier right now."

Pansy turned toward her at the sound of her voice and said, "Draco, come here! Rigel's fine."

Malfoy whipped his head around and broke angrily from Crabbe and Goyle's hold. He strode over to where Rigel was still sitting happily in the dirt and crouched down next to Pansy, "You alright, Black?"

"I'm all- *wrong*," she said, smiling stupidly into his concerned face, "Like my eyes. These aren't my eyes. I've stolen yours, I'm afraid."

"What?" he frowned down at her, "Black you're not making any sense."

"You can't make sense," she said wisely, "You have to find it." This statement struck her as funny, so she flopped back onto the ground and laughed heartily at the sky, asking it pretty please to rain honey for a day or two in her head.

"What's wrong with him?" Malfoy demanded, "Weasley, what the bloody hell did you do to him!"

"It was just a Jelly-legs Jinx," Weasley yelled, still red in the face but looking slightly worried too, "It wasn't supposed to even knock him down!"

"A Jelly-legs Jinx is orange-red in color," Zabini said coldly, peering down at Rigel, "That one looked more like a Jelly-brains Jinx to me."

"Jelly- *brains* !" Pansy started shrieking again, "You turned his brains to *jelly* ?"

"Pan, it's okay," Rigel said in her best calming tone, which came out a bit on the giggly side, "The sky is going to rain honey for me tomorrow, and if we have jelly too then everyone can have toast."

Malfoy growled, "You better get your arse over here and fix him this instant you stupid git, or my father is going to-"

"What in Merlin's name is going on here?" Madam Hooch was back, and she looked like an Amazon queen ready to call down a storm, "Mr. Black, are you alright?"

"No!" Pansy said hysterically, "No, he's not alright, he's got *jelly* for *brains* !"

"Ah," the Flying instructor pulled Rigel up into a sitting position once more by her shoulders and stared intently into Rigel's face, "The Jelly-brains Jinx, was it? Not to worry, Miss Parkinson, it'll wear off in a few minutes. Who is responsible for this?"

"Weasley," Malfoy ground out, "This is how the Gryffindors decided to repay Black for saving their useless House-mate's life."

"I didn't do that," Rigel said earnestly, "It was my wand what did it. I was just holding it at the time. You shouldn't be so angry," she

added, looking sadly at her blonde friend, "It makes your eyebrows twitch something terrible."

Pansy choked on a laugh and flung her arms around Rigel, "You idiot! Why would you do such a thing?"

"Seriously, Black," Malfoy was scowling now, "Of the three of us, you're the only one who hasn't been taught a Shield Charm yet. What gives you the right to jump in front of an unknown spell, huh?"

Rigel carefully disentangled herself from Pansy, "I'd rather you didn't hug me, Pan," she said, "I don't want your mother to get the wrong idea."

Pansy chuckled wryly, "Why would she get the wrong idea? Don't you like me like that? I'm crushed, really."

"I thought you might be," Rigel sighed, "It's all Sirius' fault. He made all the girls afraid of me, so now I'm stuck being friends with a Malfoy."

"I'd resent that if you were in your right mind," Malfoy said, "Consider yourself blessed to even be worthy of my presence."

"Are you an angel, then, Malfoy?" she grinned, "You look a bit like one, but without a halo it's hard to be sure."

Madam Hooch blew her whistle and announced that the class was dismissed, so Pansy and Malfoy stood her up and marched her as quickly as possible back to the castle, throwing dirty looks at the Gryffindors on their way off the pitch. The jinx didn't wear off until they were almost back to the common room, at which point she groaned, pulled away from their hold, and gripped her head fiercely.

"Rigel?" Pansy asked cautiously.

"I know why it's called the Jelly-brains Jinx now," she moaned though her pounding headache, "It's because your head feels like it's been

squished like a grape when it wears off. Seriously, ouch."

Her friends let out twin sighs of relief. "Thank Merlin," Malfoy drawled, "I don't think I could take another minute of the inanities that were dribbling out of your mouth."

"Oh, hush, Draco," Pansy said softly, trying not to cause Rigel any more pain, "He took that curse for you, after all."

"Nobody asked him to," Malfoy muttered.

"You're welcome," Rigel said, heading toward the inconspicuous stretch of wall up ahead, "Ouroboros."

They caught up with her as she entered the common room, and an unspoken agreement was made not to bring up the Flying lesson, Neville's near-fall, or Rigel's stint in la-la-land for the rest of the day, at least. They worked on their Herbology assignment until dinner (well, Pansy and Draco did theirs and Rigel pretended to work while thinking about Potions), and Rigel went to bed early that evening, exhausted and confused by the day's events.

Little did she know that she wasn't the only one. Pansy and Draco both lay awake that night, thinking that there was much more to their new friend than either of them would have imagined when they'd met him just two days before.

[end of chapter five].

A/N: so this one was much longer than I intended. I'm trying to keep the chapters to 3000 words each but they keep getting away from me (this one's 4900 _). So tell me what you think about the characterization so far (since we haven't gotten into plot yet), and thank you so much for even reading this far :).

Chapter 6

A/N: Merry Holidays, etc. So sorry about the last few weeks-my dad surprised us with a trip to Europe, which means I lived like a caveman without internet for the entire break. It was super fun, but I felt so bad for neglecting this story (which I doubt many people are reading, but still), so I'm updating three chapters at once and the next as soon as I finish it. As always, thanks for reading, and if you have any questions just ask-sometimes things make sense in my head but not to anyone who is... not in my head.

(A/N2: ignore the Lily / regret symbolism in Potions class if you know what I'm talking about)

(A/N3: James, Sirius, and Remus presumably made several improvements to the Map after they reclaimed it, in hopes that their children would one day carry it. It automatically updates all passwords set on doors and passages in the castle, though it won't, of course, get you through places that need a magical signature to open. It also heats up if a Professor approaches within fifty feet of you after hours, unless it recognizes you as being in one of the dorms. It can't differentiate between students, so you still have to watch for prefects, but if you ask it to find a certain person it zooms in on their location.)

The Pureblood Pretense

Chapter Six :

Rigel woke Thursday morning in a rare mood, filled with a childish excitement that was largely foreign to her, and she thought perhaps Hogwarts was good for her temperament. It seemed to breathe magic into the most ordinary of things. Not that Thursday was ordinary- it was their first day of Potions theory.

Rigel was the first to arrive in Potions that morning. The classroom was near-freezing to accommodate the ingredients and was almost blindingly well-lit. The tables were wide enough for two cauldrons to sit comfortably and still have enough room to prepare ingredients, and the aisles were spacious, so that people could walk without brushing their robes against another's station. Rigel thoroughly approved and happily stowed her bag under the table closest to the black chalkboard after taking out her textbook for a quick refresher of the Potions in chapter one.

She had managed to give Malfoy and Pansy the slip during breakfast mostly due to the fact that neither of them was speaking to her. Wednesday had been a trial for all of them. The day started off fine. She and Pansy took their pre-breakfast walk, this time about the second floor, and Malfoy hadn't bothered her once about the events of Tuesday's Flying class while they ate. Then they had gone to Charms, and Wednesday turned like old dairy. She couldn't reproduce the Levitation Charm ("Yes, Malfoy, I am trying") for Professor Flitwick, which lost Slytherin five points and caused her housemates to suspect her of sabotaging them on purpose, since they'd all seen her perform the Charm perfectly the day before, in defense of a Gryffindor, no less.

She had to hear about it from Malfoy and Pansy all through History, and by the time they got to Defense, Rigel was so sick of it that she went and sat with Crabbe and Goyle, neither of whose said anything when she couldn't do the Lumos Charm. Malfoy took the hint but Pansy took offense and publicly snubbed Rigel by sitting pointedly with Davis and Greengrass during dinner. She hadn't spoken to Rigel since.

Malfoy kept his cool until Astronomy. After explaining how their telescopes worked, Professor Sinistra set them all to identifying various stars and constellations. Malfoy pestered her for answers, and when she finally told him she didn't know which star was Orion, Malfoy scowled darkly and accused her of being a stuck-up git who was selfishly hoarding his knowledge of spells and stars from his

friends. He didn't believe Rigel really couldn't perform the spells in class (because he'd seen her do it the day before) and that she really didn't know the names of the stars (because, after all, why wouldn't the Black Heir know the names on his own family tree?). He'd stormed over to work with Zabini And Nott after that, and so it wasn't much of a hassle for Rigel to slip away from two people who were sternly ignoring her at breakfast Thursday morning.

She was glancing over the footnotes on cauldron bottom thickness-fascinating stuff- when Neville and the youngest Weasley came in carrying rolls and napkins filled with bacon between them.

"Are you sure we're allowed to have food in here?" Neville asked as they made their way to a table on the other side of the room.

"Probably not," Weasley shrugged, "But we'll finish before Snape gets here, and better this than being late because we stayed at breakfast. Remember how mad McGonagall was?"

"I'll never forget the look on her face," Neville shuddered, "She would have eaten us if she was any big- oomph!" Weasley had noticed Rigel and promptly elbowed Neville in the side, "Wha- oh. Hi, Rigel."

"Hi, Neville," Rigel nodded politely, "Hello, Weasley."

"Black," the redhead nodded back stiffly.

"How are you feeling today, Neville?" she asked, speaking just loud enough to carry across the room. Neville grinned at how silly they were all being and came bounding over to stand by her table, followed slowly by Weasley.

"Fine," his round face smiled widely, "Madam Pomphrey made me stay in the Hospital Wing for the rest of the day yesterday. My gran talked to the Headmaster when they fire-called her and- well, she was really rude, actually, but I'm excused from Flying lessons for the year on account of trauma."

He looked quite pleased with this, so Rigel said, "Congratulations."

"Thanks," he grinned, "And thanks for saving me, too."

"I already told you why he did that," Weasley muttered.

"Rigel didn't mean that, Ron," Neville said, "He just has to say stuff like that to be a good Slytherin, right?"

Rigel smiled, "Yes, well, about yesterday," she widened her eyes earnestly, "It wasn't really anything I did that saved you. My wand did the spell by itself."

"That's impossible," Weasley scoffed.

"Well, that's what happened," she said, "I think since that's the only spell I knew, my wand reacted instinctively to my panic."

"I guess that makes sense," Ron said slowly, "Though I've never heard of accidental magic with a wand."

"Still, thanks." Neville said.

"Don't thank me," she made a small motion with her shoulders that could have been a shrug, "We were just really lucky."

Neville made a sound of fervent agreement while polishing off his roll. Weasley eyed her warily, and then stuck his hand out toward her with violent determination.

"You're an alright sort, Black."

Rigel took his lightly tanned hand, "You as well, Weasley."

He made a face that twisted his freckles around, "Ron, please. I have too many siblings here for you to call us all Weasley."

"Very well," she said, "Then I am Rigel."

"Not Arcturus?" he pronounced the name awkwardly.

"Rigel is my middle name," she said. The door to the classroom opened and Malfoy walked in, closely followed by Pansy and Nott.

"See you, Rigel," Ron said, walking back to his table.

Neville darted a nervous glance at Malfoy and jerked his head up and down, "Bye, Rigel."

Rigel turned back to her book, but had only read three sentences when a pale, perfectly manicured hand snatched it away from her. She looked up into angry grey eyes and knew for a moment the formidable man her young classmate would become. She'd heard it said that eyes could be arresting, and though Malfoy's certainly were, Rigel thought coming under his gaze when he looked like that was a lot more like landing on the moon. There was a moment of confused disorientation when she was surprised by something she knew she shouldn't be. Then the sensation that she couldn't find her footing again, and then the fear pressed in; the momentary fear that something was pulling her away from the ground, instead of toward it, as if the universe has reversed itself and no one told her.

Then Malfoy spoke, a sharp, petulant sound that broke the illusion and brought her back to Earth with a relieved jolt. She blinked rapidly and focused on Malfoy's refined forehead instead of those anti-gravity eyes.

"Those no-account peasants call you by your first name?" he demanded, not bothering to keep his voice down. Rigel glanced over at Neville and Ron, who were fortunately too engrossed in finishing their bacon to notice. Pansy and Nott had heard, however, and both smirked at her, clearly enjoying the sight of a Malfoy practically up in arms at someone.

"Yes," Rigel said, turning her gaze pointedly toward the book he was holding hostage. He moved it behind his back just as pointedly.

"I don't even call you by your first name," he bit out.

"That's true."

Malfoy huffed and his lower lip protruded ever so slightly, "And Pansy only uses it so that others will think she's in good with the mysterious Black Heir."

"Hey!" Pansy said, "Rigel that's not true-we're friends, aren't we?"

"Are you speaking to me again?" she asked innocently, and Pansy flushed, "I'm not mysterious, though," she said, leaning to the side and trying to see around Malfoy to where he was hiding her Potions book.

"Yeah, right," Nott snorted.

Malfoy moved sideways so that he was directly in front of her again, "Stop that!"

Rigel straightened up obediently and blinked in a way she knew made her look like an abandoned baby owl, "Why are you so upset, Malfoy?"

It was Malfoy's turn to stare stupidly down at her, "Upset- I'm not-"

"You can call me 'Rigel' if you really want to," she said, making her eyes go even wider and tilting her head just so.

"Well, alright then," the blonde boy said uncertainly. Rigel wasn't sure if 'the look' worked the same without her startling green orbs, but from Malfoy's dazed and vaguely apologetic expression it was still effectively disarming with short hair and grey contacts. He gave his head a little shake and said quickly, "But you have to call me 'Draco.'"

"Okay, Draco," she said, and she smiled with her whole face for a single, agonizing second. She made sure her eyes crinkled and her nose scrunched up the tiniest bit and her teeth flashed shyly, and

then she whipped her hand around and snatched her book from the dumbstruck boy's slackened grip before he could remember his name.

Pansy and Nott chuckled loudly. The door opened again and Nott went off to join Zabini at a table in the back. Pansy sat at the table next to them, where she was joined shortly by Davis, and Draco sat down distractedly in the seat next to Rigel. She flipped cheerfully to the index and began to cross-reference stirring-rod materials with their uses and dangers. Five more minutes went by before Draco finally turned to her and said, "How did you do that?"

She glanced at him blankly.

"Oh, never mind," he muttered, pulling out a parchment and quill to take notes. Rigel smiled on the inside as Draco ran a hand through his hair with vague confusion in his eyes. She didn't feel sorry for him- he had stolen her Potions book after all, and he still hadn't apologized for blowing up at her yesterday. 'The look,' which was really a series of looks that took advantage of her delicate features had been developed with the help of Archie, who could do 'the look' even better than she could, worked every time on family, friends, and enemies alike. The theory was that most people had a deep-seeded infant-instinct that caused them to respond unconsciously to things that triggered it, like puppies and babies, even if they weren't the type to show it openly. A species survival thing, maybe. 'The look' was scientifically engineered to activate those instincts by arranging the facial muscles to express innocence, helplessness, fragility, etc. Rigel wielded it with merciless humor when it suited her.

A few minutes later, the door at the front of the classroom swung open and the entire class fell silent as Professor Snape stalked like a shadow into the room. He flicked his wrist at the door leading to the dungeons. It slammed shut and locked with an audible click just as the bell rang. Rigel saw Ron nudging Neville knowingly out of the corner of her eye.

Several people gulped.

"Clear your desks," Professor Snape said. He moved to stand at the blackboard and gazed down his nose at them. There was a sense of rehearsal about him as he called roll that spoke both of old familiarity and new disdain. Every now and then he paused on a name and something that on a man with free facial expressions would have been a grimace tilted the edges of his mouth. He wasn't old enough to have taught any of their parents, so Rigel thought he was recalling names from his own years of school, like hers, or older siblings, like in the case of Ron Weasley. She didn't think the grimace meant anything good for those unfortunate enough to remind Snape of their relatives. He seemed to be less than endeared with his memories of them.

After Zabini had waved his hand half-heartedly to indicate his presence, Snape began to pace the length of the room. About twenty pairs of eyes followed his movements, the way a weaker animal tracks the gait of a panther that may or may not be hungry. Snape's voice was soft and slid so smoothly into the silent air that most didn't realize he'd begun speaking until halfway through his second sentence; they were left mentally scrambling to catch up.

"Many of you have already heard about this class, and for those of you who haven't," his smirk was a nasty piece of work, "You will. However, for the sake of those of you to whom comprehension does not often follow explanation- and I don't doubt this will include a percentage of you large enough to give me new dread for the future of the magical race- I," here he paused directly in front of Rigel and fixed his nearly-black eyes on her, "am Professor Severus Snape, the Potions Master."

Rigel dropped her gaze to the table, her heart beating erratically with nervous anticipation. It was finally time for her dream to start becoming reality. Now she was studying under Potions Master Snape, arguably the greatest creative mind in the Potions community. Now, finally she would learn the things the Potions journals and articles only mentioned and the books only hinted at. She held her breath without realizing it as she heard Snape move

away once more, all the while speaking in that sibilant baritone, which was practically engineered for dripping secret Potions knowledge into an eagerly waiting student's ears.

"Potions is a demanding art," he told them, "One which always takes more than it gives."

"Sounds like my father's mistress," Nott snorted indelicately from the table behind her.

More like the basic laws of energy, Rigel thought, irritated that Nott had interrupted the Professor so disrespectfully, Of course the end result is less than what you put into it- there will always be energy and matter lost in the transaction. The point is that you also get more than you put in, because you end up with something that wasn't there before. Professor Snape is just reminding us of the invisible sacrifices that get lost sometimes in only focusing on the process, both literally and metaphorically.

"Unlike your father's latest two-Knut paramour," Professor Snape glanced repressively at Nott, "Mastering this subject will give you things your soft little minds can scarcely dream of. Pay attention, work hard, and I can teach you how to bottle fame, brew glory, and even put a stopper in death." (HPSS).

By now Professor Snape was back at the front of the room, and not a soul moved a muscle until-

"Weasley!" Snape barked at the redhead, who jumped and gaped for a moment before remembering how to speak.

"Y-yes?" Ron shifted nervously, his hands clenching and unclenching on the table.

"What is peeled shrivelfig most commonly used in?" Snape took a single step toward Ron's table and the boy paled dramatically, his freckles standing out like speckles on a Thrush egg.

"Uh... no idea, sorry," he said.

Draco scoffed a tad too loud to be tasteful, "What kind of brainless oaf has never heard of a shrinking solution?"

Snape turned his attention to the blonde, "Correct, Mr. Malfoy. Five points to Slytherin."

The Gryffindors seemed to deflate simultaneously.

It's also used commonly in Euphoria Inducers, Rigel thought, And technically it's the juice inside the skinned shrivelfig that's used in shrinking solutions.

"Patil," Snape turned toward a girl with caramel skin and luminous golden eyes, and a plait of black hair down her back, "When would you ingest the leaves of the aconite plant?"

The girl bit her lip. Her pretty eyes shifted from her desk to Professor Snape's collar, and back, "Um, never? Because it's poisonous, isn't it?"

"I wonder what you will do, Miss Patil, when your blood pressure is dangerously high, but you refuse to take the heart sedative because there is aconite in it," Professor Snape said with a bit more rancor than was perhaps needed to make his point, "Or when you can't take a sweat inducer for your fever for the same reason."

Patil shrunk back into her seat, cheeks red and lip trembling. Rigel thought Snape might have mentioned that aconite leaves *are* poisonous, and that you only ingest them in potions with strong neutralizing agents, and you never *should* eat the leaves by themselves, but she assumed Snape meant to show them that there is no "always" or "never" in Potions so she refocused on the next person being questioned with a mental shrug.

Draco answered a question about whether angel trumpet flowers were poisonous correctly, and Pansy took a wild guess when asked

for the uses of armadillo bile, but Rigel wasn't called on until after Goyle suggested that antimony was used to keep vampires away. Professor Snape swooped down on her (or so it seemed from her admittedly low vantage point) and from his emotionless expression and the fact that he had put her off until last, Rigel assumed he was trying very hard to treat her neutrally. He couldn't favor her like he would any other Slytherin yet, because of the way her "father" Sirius had treated him in school, but because she was a snake he also didn't want to be seen treating her like a Gryffindor.

"Black," he said when he was close enough to pierce her with his sharp eyes, "What would I get if I mixed powdered root of asphodel into an infusion of wormwood?"

Rigel blinked. *That potion isn't anywhere on the first year syllabus. The other questions have all been about ingredient usage and dangers, which makes sense for an introduction class, and I guess this qualifies, but I doubt anyone else will know that-*

"They make the Draught of Living Death, sir."

Snape's eyes sharpened to black drills, boring across the distance between them and studying her as if she were a strange plant he'd come across in the forest but wasn't sure whether it could be used in a Potion or not.

"And what is the difference between monkshood and wolfsbane?" he pressed.

Rigel, surprised to get a second question, glanced at Draco, who had also answered his correctly, but he was equally mystified. Snape noticed their strange looks and said smoothly, "You are the last student, Mr. Black, but I have a few questions left over. The material must be covered, so I will simply ask you. Unless you don't know the answer," Snape suggested reasonably, "In which case I can always ask Longbottom again."

Rigel didn't have to glance at Neville to know he was probably sending her a pleading look, "They are both the same as the poisonous plant Patil mentioned earlier," she said, "Aconite."

"Indeed," Snape said. She thought she heard a thoughtful note in his voice, but that was probably wishful thinking on her part, "What is a bezoar, Mr. Black, and where would you look if you needed to find one?"

"It's a small stone which neutralizes poisons, though it doesn't work very well on snake venom or nightshade-based toxins. It is usually taken from the stomach of a goat that is older than fifteen months but no older than eight years," Rigel said, ignoring the intensely interested look Draco was giving her and focusing only on Snape. He didn't look angry that she'd run her answer on longer than necessary, but he didn't look as though he were gearing up to offer her an apprenticeship on the spot either. Rigel mentally rolled her eyes at the very idea. *It's okay if I don't dazzle him on the first day, she berated herself, I have to back off the know-it-all train before I rouse his disdain.*

Snape peered at her for a few more seconds before turning away to address the rest of the class, "You will be tested on all of the information given today. Class dismissed." Snape swept his robes behind him and left by the same door he'd entered through. He left behind him a class mentally exhausted from sitting in fear of being called on and then wracking their brains for the answers, some of which weren't even found in chapter one of their book (the only thing on the syllabus for that week).

Rigel gathered her things from under the table and headed for the door. With any luck they'd get to lunch before the Great Hall was too crowded and noisy. Draco and Pansy fell into step beside her before she'd gone far in the winding dungeons.

"How'd you know all that?" Draco asked.

"Yeah, did Professor Snape warn you about the questions ahead of time like he did Draco?" Pansy asked innocently. Rigel glanced sideways as Draco, who flushed slightly, "Ha! I knew it," Pansy grinned.

"What? He's my Godfather, of course he's going to help me out," Draco said, "But I know he didn't tell you."

"That's true," Rigel said, slipping her hands into her pockets to warm them after that cold classroom.

"I think... you were telling the truth the other day when you said that ridiculous thing about being a Slytherin to get on Snape's good side," Draco said slowly, as if he were still in the process of convincing himself of this, "You actually knew all that stuff, didn't you?"

Rigel smiled slightly at the disgruntled look on Draco's face. He really wasn't so bad, for a pure blood snob.

Pansy sighed, "So you really *can't* do spells for coppers, if that's how up-front you are when you're actually good at a class."

"Spells are much harder than Potions," Rigel said, "And not as interesting."

Draco and Pansy exchanged a long look, then Draco nodded and pressed his mouth into a line, "Rigel, we're sorry for yesterday. We understand you better now... sort of." He grimaced, but shrugged and slung an arm over them both, dragging them by the neck up the main dungeon stairs, "Now let's go eat before the upperclassmen eat all the treacle tart."

Pansy extracted herself from Draco's strangle hold gracefully, saying, "Yes, and this afternoon we'll get Rigel to show us how to do that Needle Transfiguration."

"I told you," Rigel said, letting Draco tow her along passively, "You just have to really want to poke someone," she glanced up at the

blonde boy through her hair, "I could probably do it right now, if you want."

The slightly taller boy glared down at her and Pansy smiled cheekily at them both. Rigel knew suddenly, like she knew that Doxie Eggs were two sickles an ounce, that the three of them would be friends for a long time. She hoped they wouldn't hate her on the day her secrets refused to be kept. With any luck, that day would be years down the road.

She couldn't produce the needle in Transfiguration, but that was okay; after all, she didn't really *need* a needle. Professor McGonagall favored her with a severe look, but then again, all her looks were severe.

After dinner, Pansy went off with Bulstrode, who wanted to introduce her to a few upperclassmen, and Draco went to the Owlrey to send a letter to his father. Even though he'd glanced at her about fifteen times while writing it, Rigel thought it definitely wasn't about her.

Left to her own devices and not yet brave enough to venture the spare Potions workrooms she'd found in the dungeons, Rigel went to walk the third floor with the Marauder's Map. She was about two-thirds of the way through exploring the floor from North to South when a crashing noise rent the air and a door up ahead of her shook on its hinges.

She quickly checked the Map, thinking it might be Peeves, who she was quite interested to meet, but not about to go running in just in case it was the caretaker, Filch, getting on the wrong end of some student's practical joke. The little dot on the Map, however, said "Marcus Flint." Disappointed, and reasoning that even if that explosion meant he was in some kind of trouble it was nothing a first-year could help an upperclassman with, she stowed the Map once more and walked straight past the room, mentally reminding herself to come back later, just in case there was something interesting in there.

She was three more doors toward the far end of the corridor when the one she had passed slammed open. She kept walking, but a second later Flint's low voice filled the hallway, stopping her. Rigel turned, recognizing the guy instantly as the same Flint who'd been rude to her on the train (she had assumed there was only one Flint in Hogwarts, but who really knew?).

"Hey!" he called, his voice naturally harsh, so that she couldn't tell if he was angry or not, "What's a snakelet like you doing lurking about so far from the dungeons?"

"Walking," she said evenly, "Sorry to have disturbed you, Flint."

He walked over to where she stood, looked her up and down, and nodded to himself, "Thought that was you, Black," he said her last name oddly, "Learned some manners since the train, have you?"

"Yes," she said, thinking she would be a fool indeed if she made the mistake of antagonizing Flint twice.

He grunted, his dark green eyes tracing her features lazily, "Don't think that will be enough to save you, little snake," he grinned down at her, "If it was just rudeness between us, I'd leave you be, but I'm afraid we've other business to settle."

She frowned openly, unable to think of any other animosity between them. As far as she knew, the Flints had no beef with any Black.

"Oh, don't look so perplexed, snakelet," he said, "I'm not angry with you- in fact you've caught me in a good mood as I've just blown off some steam- but I know your secret, and we don't keep such dangerous secrets for free in Slytherin, even if we are feeling generous."

Rigel went very, very still and fixed her solemn eyes on Flint's bronze-flecked dark green ones, "My secret?" she asked neutrally, "Pray tell, what secret would that be?"

"What, got so many you can't keep track?" he laughed- actually laughed!- at her, "I don't doubt that, but I was referring to the fact that you've been using someone else's name."

Rigel's eyes sharpened into ice chips and she turned sharply toward the nearest door, yanking it open and gesturing for Flint to proceed her, "Why don't we take this out of the corridors?" she suggested politely, the steely look in her eyes belying the illusion of optionally. Flint stepped through to the old classroom, smirking assuredly. She closed the door firmly behind them and took a relaxed posture against the door. The worst thing she could do would be to draw her wand or act too defensive- aka guilty.

"Now what's this really about, Flint?" she asked lightly, "After all, everyone knows Rigel isn't really my first name, but you must admit that Arcturus is a bit pretentious." She smiled cajolingly, the way she'd seen Uncle Sirius do when he wanted Uncle Remus to join in one of his more ridiculous and irresponsible ideas.

Flint merely smiled enigmatically down at her from the closest row of desks, which he had propped a hip against. He crossed his arms and said, "Nice try, little snake, and if I wasn't already 100% sure of my information, I might even have believed your act. However," he pinned her with his fathomless eyes again and she knew she wouldn't be able to talk her way around this one, "I've known Archie Black since he was old enough to understand Quidditch, and though you're a good actor, you're not him."

Mentally, Rigel cursed Archie for his forgetfulness- the one other pureblood he'd probably ever met and Archie neglected to mention him. Outwardly she was calm and calculating, "What do you want, Flint?"

"Oh, several things," he said easily, as if he had not just accused her of a serious criminal offense- blood identity theft. Such a deception was treated very seriously in the current political climate. If she were found out, the consequences would be much more crippling for her than they would be for Archie-but she'd known that going into it. Flint

continued, "I'd ask why, but I think I've got most of it figured; you can just confirm it for me. You see, Archie has been going to see the Wimbledon Wasps every home game since he was about four. His father books them two seats in the VIP Box for every match, which is where my father and I happen to sit every game."

Rigel was becoming more and more annoyed with Arch the more Flint talked. She'd known he went to those games every season, but had no idea he'd struck up a regular friendship there. They were practically childhood playmates! Her "cousin" had a lot of explaining to do if they made it through this intact.

"We talked often," he continued, "Gravitated toward each other as the only boys of a relative age in the box, and after his mother died and he started coming by himself because Black Sr. refused to leave the house, Archie told me his ambition of becoming a Healer." Rigel tried not to show her surprise that another knew of Archie's dearest wish, and still Flint talked, "I figure the only way you're here is because Archie's where he wants to be, in America, but needs someone to pose as him so his father won't catch on to the fact that Archie's not at Hogwarts. That's where you come in," he nodded at her, an expression of satisfaction on his face, "You must have been originally slotted to go to America, so that Arch could take your place, but your accent is British, which means you must not really be a pureblood at all, or you'd have been down for Hogwarts. Your features are refined enough to pass as Archie, though, so I doubt you're a muggleborn- and you're in Slytherin besides. So you're a half-blood, posing as Arch so that he can get his Healer training, and you benefit from this by getting to go to Hogwarts, the best school for general education. The only thing I don't know is *who you are* ."

Rigel took a deep breath, but was grinning a bit inside. He didn't know she was a girl, he didn't know she was a Potter, and he thought the whole thing was Archie's plan, and she just a convenient stand-in; he was friends with Archie and so was unlikely to ruin his dream by turning her in, and he hadn't sneered enough when he

said half-blood to want to turn her in just for spite. That meant he just wanted to blackmail her, and blackmail she could handle.

"I'm just a friend of Archie's," she said.

"Archie's never mentioned any male friends to me," Flint countered.

"He's never mentioned you to me either, obviously," she said the last word with just the right amount of bitterness, and Flint laughed again.

"Fair enough, I guess it doesn't matter. I'll call you Rigel, since Archie hates his middle name anyway," Flint said, still gazing at her with smug expectation.

"You haven't told me what else you want," she said, looking him in the eye as if she was completely unafraid of his demands. And she was. Mostly.

"I'm in a good mood, like I said," he drawled, "And there's really only one thing I need right now. You know I had to repeat this year?" he asked, clearly more amused than upset at doing his fifth year over again, "Well it wasn't like everyone thought, that I failed all my exams. It was because I didn't do a single assignment or paper last year, so they used that as an excuse to hold me back, even though I knew the material."

Rigel nodded, both to show she followed and to prompt him to get to the point.

"McGonagall and a few others are already on my case this year," he rolled his eyes, "So what I need is a bright, eager little snakelet to do my work for me. I win because I don't have to waste my time writing about things I've already learned, the Professors win because they can pretend their methods are working, and you win because as long as my homework is done on time I don't think anyone needs to know where the real Arcturus Black is. Oh, and Archie wins, too, I guess," he smirked again, apparently pleased that all was right in the world.

Rigel took her time in thinking it over. As long as her Potions work didn't suffer, she could afford to take on extra work. She'd just make sure it didn't affect her friendships with Draco and Pansy so much that anyone suspected.

"Can a first year really do a fifth year's work?" she asked slowly, "Won't it make you look bad?"

"I don't care what gets turned in as long as it meets the requirements and they can't find an excuse to hold me back again," he said, "And it's not like you have to do the spells, just research them. There's a whole library for that, I hear."

She considered this. If nothing else she was bound to learn a lot of advanced stuff, some of which might be applicable to Potions, besides the Potions homework itself. And to keep her secret and preserve both her and Archie's ambitions? She would do nearly anything for that.

"Deal," she said, holding out her hand, which Flint shook solidly, "Mail me your assignments and I'll mail them back before they're due," she straightened from the door, hoping her legs would hold her through her relief, "I hope you will consider our business from here on to be concluded."

"Who can say what may come up in the world of business," Flint prevaricated, "But for now I am quite satisfied."

Realizing this was all she was going to get, Rigel nodded, opened the door, and strode off toward the stairs, calling, "I'll leave the handwriting charms for you to figure out," over her shoulder. The sound of Flint's harsh laughter followed her down the corridor.

By the time she got to the first floor, her hands were shaking, and she hurried through the dungeons to a small alcove concealed behind a tapestry of Salazar Slytherin's familiar, a foot-long baby basilisk which didn't move like the other paintings. Rigel took a fleeting moment to hope that was because the painting hadn't been

treated in the right glaze, not because the basilisk was still alive. She collapsed onto the shallow, window-seat-like projection in the alcove and buried her hands in her short hair.

That was close she told herself, *First thing in the morning I need to owl Archie and make sure he hasn't forgotten anything else. Then I need to find a fifth year student to help me with Flint's assignments. Most of it I can find in books, but there will be things that only come from cumulative learning experience, which I'll need to ask someone about. I need someone who won't ask too many questions. A fifth year would be ideal, since they'll have the most relevant knowledge, and they'll be so stressed-out going through their first big exams that they won't think too hard about an overly curious first year.*

I'll also have to find an excuse for slipping away to the library so often. My spotty spell-work might work. It is sort of strange if I really think about it... Ah, well, she shrugged, *I'll have to work on that in my free time, too. I can't continue Potions unless I at least pass my other classes, after all .* She stood, already stronger than she was a few moments ago and checked the Map before stepping into the dungeon corridor; though it would have warned her if there were any Professors about, it couldn't recognize prefects. She made her way toward the common room.

According to the Map, the password had been changed to "Caduceus." She gave the new password to the wall and stopped at Pansy's room on the way to her own. They chatted about the older Slytherins Pansy had met that evening, and Rigel expressed her regrets to Pansy that she couldn't take their walk the next morning because she had to write and send a letter to her cousin.

By then it was quite late, and Nott was already asleep when she entered her dorm room. Draco was in the bathroom, probably brushing his teeth judging by the sound of running water coming from the open door. She took off her shoes and waited for Malfoy to finish and douse the lights. He came out with a towel over his face, gently patting his skin dry, and Rigel stifled a smile. A Malfoy *would* wash his face every night before bed at the tender age of eleven.

Then again, all pureblooded children were raised to be as mature and self-controlled as possible, at least around their parents.

Draco lowered the towel and jumped a little at seeing her sitting there on her bed, "Where've you been?" he asked bluntly. His face was splotchy from the hot water on his pale complexion and a few drops of moisture fell from his bangs to land on his delicate nose.

"Library," she said, laying the foundation for her cover story, "I'm sure I'll be able to do those spells if I understand them better."

"Oh," he said, reaching into his wardrobe for his night-shirt, "Good idea."

Rigel nodded, and went to close the hangings when Draco's voice stopped her.

"Rigel?" he said, his voice soft in deference to their sleeping roommate.

"Yes, Draco," she glanced over at him. He was propped up on his pillows, staring at her very seriously.

"I wrote my father tonight," he said, still staring at her, the way a child stares at a bird they are trying not to scare away.

"I know."

"He and Mother are very curious about you," Draco said carefully, "Since we're cousins. I wrote a bit about you. I hope you don't mind," he added quickly, "It's just that I told him we were friends and... a Malfoy is always honest with his real friends," he gazed expectantly at her, so she offered him a slightly bewildered smile, "We're real friends, aren't we?" Draco prompted, stiffly vulnerable.

Rigel hesitated, a strange sort of sad guilt coming over her, "Draco, I'm a very private person. I am honored that you would consider me a true friend, and I would like to return that regard," she smiled as

gently as she could, "You remind me of another true friend, but I demand no honesty from you. There are things I probably won't feel comfortable telling you about me, but I would value this friendship as much as I am able."

Draco surprised her by grinning, "Spoken like a true Slytherin," he said, "And I accept your not-necessarily-honest friendship as long as you're okay with me writing home about some of the more interesting possible-truths about you."

Rigel blinked, nodding dazedly. The Malfoy scion was unpredictable as well, it seemed. She wondered at his easy acceptance of such a strange friendship. Could they have a true camaraderie with secrets and lies between them? Rigel didn't know, but somehow in the last week the proud, impetuous, impossibly demanding, suddenly earnest, and unexpectedly human boy had become something more tolerable than a burr and less dangerous than a viper in her mind. He was a friend now, for better or worse- Pansy, too. Rigel had been called many things, from Potions-obsessed to creepily apathetic, but she was not cold-hearted. She lied to her family and friends out of necessity, but she valued them all the same.

"Great," Draco said, hopping up to douse the lights, since they hadn't learned the Nox spell yet, "Then you should know that Mother has invited you to sit with us for the first Quidditch game."

"What?" she blinked in the darkness.

"Father is on the Board of Governors, so he comes to watch the school Quidditch games in the Staff Box sometimes with Mother," Draco said, climbing back into bed, "I wasn't allowed before, because I was too young, but now I have a seat because my family sits there, and Mother has extended the invitation to you."

"What about Pansy?" Rigel asked softly, her voice seeming louder in the dark.

"I already asked her, which was mostly for propriety's sake, since she actually corresponds with Mother through their tea circle, but she hates Quidditch and doesn't even want to go to the games," Draco said.

"Alright, then," Rigel grimaced since no one could see her face, "I'll send you mother an owl tomorrow accepting her gracious invitation."

"Okay, night, Rigel."

"Goodnight Draco," she said, trying not to think about how she was going to convince Mrs. Malfoy that she was the son of the Sirius Black when Mrs. Malfoy had actually *known* Sirius and grown up with him as cousins. She had too much to think about already. She rolled over and pulled the blankets over her head. *When in doubt, recite Potion recepies*, she thought, *Blood-Replenishing Potion: Step One, treat the inside of the cauldron with a non-acidic moisture-catching oil. Step Two, heat the cauldron over a small, dense flame until the oil begins to glisten. Step Three, add half a liter of hand-filtered dragon bile, making sure no stray pieces of the dragon's stomach lining make it into the cauldron while it is hot. Step Four, crush two stalks of St. Stewart's Bane...*

[end of chapter six].

Chapter 7

A/N: From now on I'll be deviating from canon in potions recipes and procedure when I need to, so pay no mind to how Potions like the Boil-cure are supposed to be made.

A/N2: There's no lore that mentions the twins' eye color, I don't *think*, but Ron has blue eyes, so that's what I'm going with.

A Pureblood Pretense

Chapter Seven:

The next morning, Rigel took the shortcut through the dueling knights tapestry on the fourth floor toward the Owlrey. She made her way carefully in the pitch blackness, noticing that the cloistered space made it hard to hear anything, but about five steps up the narrow stairway she was thrown off her feet by a solid body crashing into her.

"Woah!" a young, male voice cried out as they fell tumbling downwards, "Oi, Gred, there's someone else in here!" he added when he'd landed.

Rigel pushed the boy, who had knocked her back down to the small space between the back of the tapestry and the stairs, gently but firmly off of her lower legs so they didn't get crushed and bruised any more than they were.

"Lumos," a second voice came from about halfway up the steps. The light from the wand, held high above its owner's head, revealed her attackers to be none other than the Weasley Twins. She would recognize their hair, the same shade as Ron's, if not their unique mannerisms.

The one on the floor next to Rigel stood and offered a hand down to her, which she took. He hauled her up cheerfully, making a grand

show of checking her shoulders and head for imaginary dirt, "Alright there?" he asked, "Can't tell if that's muck or just the color of your hair in this light."

"Course she's not," the other one said bounding down the stairs to get a look at her in his wand light, "Terribly sorry, chap. Forge here has always been the clumsy one."

Rigel opened her mouth, but they cut across her with their lightning-fast responses.

"Don't listen to him, good fellow," 'Forge' said, "I'm not the clumsy one, *Gred* is the forgetful one. He forgot that *I'm* the pretty one, and *he's* the clumsy one, which is why I usually go first down these stairs and therefore I was the one who ran into you."

Rigel nodded in a way that conveyed more acceptance than understanding.

"Unfortunately, Forge is also the rude one," the other said, "I'm Fred, maybe."

"George, likewise."

"And we're the Weasley Twins," they chorused.

"Never heard of you," Rigel said absolutely deadpan.

Their faces split into identical grins.

"A kindred spirit!" George crowed.

"He jokes! An heir!" Fred laughed delightedly and ruffled her hair violently. It turned out there *was* dirt in it, and Rigel sneezed, causing them to laugh again.

"We must know the name of our prodigy," George declared.

"Indeed, who is it that possesses such a refined sense of bodily humor?" Fred asked.

"I'm Rigel," she said, a little unnerved at standing in a dark secret passageway she wasn't expecting anyone else to even know about with the two most infamous trouble makers in the school.

"Rigel, Rigel," Fred muttered, glancing questioningly at his twin, "Doesn't ring a bell."

"You sure that's your name?" George asked, "Don't feel too bad, I forget mine's Forge all the time."

"Silly, I'm Forge," Fred said, "I told you he was the forgetful one."

"Actually, it was your brother who told me that /you/ were the forgetful one," Rigel said, "Back when he was Forge instead of you."

"Ah, yes," Fred looked confused for a moment, "Well, I guess he was right, though of course if it was Fred that told you that it might as well have been me. I'm Fred most of the time."

Rigel didn't even try to make sense of that.

"Clever little thing; you a Ravenclaw, Rigel?" George asked. He peered at her robes and Rigel realized she hadn't put on her green and silver tie that morning. She had been planning on grabbing it before breakfast.

"I'm a Slytherin," she told them honestly. She expected them to recoil, as if they were the snakes, but if anything their grins got even wider, making them look manic in the dim wand light. Rigel thought she had good reason to be concerned.

"Now I know why your mud-colored hair looks familiar," George said, "You're Sirius Black's son, Arcturus."

"And we thought we had trouble with names," Fred shook his head sadly, "You've gone and given yourself a whole new one."

If only you knew.

"Rigel is my middle name," she said, "But yes, Sirius Black is my father."

"Is it true he once performed a Conditional Transfiguration on the Main Stair that turned it into a slide every time someone said the word 'homework' while standing on it?" Fred asked, grabbing her hands and swinging them like a five year old.

"Actually, that was James Potter," Rigel said, amazed that they had even heard of that prank. The Marauders had published a book of jokes and pranks a few years after Rigel and Archie were born, which had been a huge success at Zonko's Joke Shop, but as far as she knew that one wasn't in it, "My dad was the one who charmed the mirrors in the bathrooms on the first, third, and fifth floors to spit grape juice at anyone who tried to walk out without washing their hands."

The twins stared, their cobalt blue eyes as wide and bright as galleons.

"That was *him* ? There's a mirror on the fifth floor that still does that!" Fred exclaimed.

"The Marauders are our heroes," George explained.

"Yeah," Fred bounced on his toes as he spoke, "The Marauder Line at Zonko's always has the best prank supplies. Our parents actually knew them when they were seventh years at Hogwarts and the Marauders were just really noisy firsties."

"Who'd have thought they'd go on to be legends?" George shook his head in apparent amazement.

"Imagine being raised by the four of them," Fred said, "Was it as wonderful as it sounds?"

"Only three, actually," Rigel said, used to having to explain this. The Marauder Line was labeled with MWP&P, and even though Peter wasn't around anymore, they left his moniker, Wormtail, on their line of products in tribute to the time of childish, care-free joy that had inspired them, "Peter Pettigrew, the fourth Marauder, doesn't associate with the other three anymore. He joined the Cow Movement and decided he couldn't afford such juvenile friends."

The twins nodded solemnly. The S.O.W. Movement- standing for Save Our World, but oh so affectionately dubbed the Cow Party by its opponents- was a radical political movement headed by Mr. Riddle that sought to "cleanse" the world of undesirables. It was this Party that pushed for Hogwarts to close its doors to muggleborns, citing security risks.

"It really was wonderful, though," Rigel went on, "If you like waking up with purple scales where your hair used to be every now and then."

"Wicked," they breathed as one.

"I guess," she said, "Now if you'll excuse me, I need to mail a letter before breakfast."

"Not to worry, little puppy," Fred declared, "We know the way, so we'll escort you. It's right through-" he faltered and glanced about the passage way, "Actually, the fastest way is up these stairs, so I'm guessing from your presence that you already knew that..." he trailed off sheepishly.

George elbowed him in the side, "As if the next-generation Marauder doesn't know his way around the castle. Our little pup was probably born with the sacred knowledge."

"Still, you couldn't ask for better company this fine morning," Fred said, taking one of her arms and looping it through his like a dandy.

George did the same one her other side, saying, "Too true, brother mine. And it would be oh so irresponsible of us as Gryffindors to allow a baby snake to wander the nest unattended."

"Quite so," George said, "Shall we?"

"We shall."

With that the two redheads began towing her up the stairs, skipping over the trick step automatically and lifting her over it like a child between them. They chatted all the way to the Owlrey, leaping from topic to topic with all the grace of a pair of fire dancers who had leapt over flames together all their lives.

"-and don't even get me started on Percy," Fred shuddered dramatically, "Ron's an alright sort, for a hot-headed git-"

"Though he might not be so hot-headed if we hadn't fed him so many pepper imps when he was little," George put in thoughtfully.

"-but our brother Percy is a *rule-lover*," Fred whispered the term like it was a reference to sacrilege.

"Is he a redheaded prefect?" Rigel asked.

"Oh, the shame," Fred sighed, "Trickster gods help him, he is."

"He helped me out on the train, I think" Rigel said, thinking fast, "And since he's your brother I feel that he deserves a proper thank you. Why don't you introduce me later?"

Fred and George turned their sharp eyes toward one another in a silent conference that only true soul mates could usually perform. Rigel knew they were looking for the trick, the turn, the moment the joke becomes apparent and effective; the punch line. She also knew they wouldn't find it, because they didn't have all the pieces of the puzzle.

"Sure, we'll introduce you," Fred said slowly.

"Though if you're planning to prank the poor sot we insist that no permanent harm be done to him. He *is* our brother, after all," George warned. He was smiling, but there was marble in the way his jaw firmed and his chin tilted. Rigel was suddenly glad she wasn't planning on crossing any of the other Weasleys. They had more protection than they probably realized.

"I just want to talk to him," Rigel said, "It's always nice to have an upperclassman to go to for advice, and he seems the type to enjoy giving it out."

"Too true, that," Fred said ruefully, "Well this is the Owlrey, so we'll leave you to your business."

"Look us up after last period and we'll introduce you to Perc," George added over his shoulder as they descended the steps once more, "We'll be down by the lake with Lee."

Rigel watched them go before reaching into her pockets and pulling out the letters she needed to send. The first one, to Draco's mother, was simple enough.

Dear Mrs. Malfoy,

Thank you for the gracious invitation to watch this year's first Quidditch game with your family. I would be honored to sit with you and your son, as well as your husband if he, too, is attending, as long as it is no inconvenience. I look forward to being formally introduced.

Yours Sincerely,

Arcturus Rigel Black

She rolled the letter carefully so that the Black family crest on the paper was visible, and tied it with a green ribbon to a young owl with gentle claws.

"Take this to Narcissa Malfoy," she said softly. The owl flew gracefully through the window, and Rigel turned to the second letter. This one was much less formal, but much more complicated. She couldn't risk the letter being read by someone else, so she'd had to write it in a sort of code.

Dear Harry,

How are you! I miss you so, so much and don't you dare roll your eyes at me- I know you secretly deep down miss me too. How are classes going? I was surprised to hear you were starting the Healing program, but I think you'll do great. Just don't let it affect your Potions studies, haha, as if anything could! So guess who I ran into today? Marcus Flint! You know, the guy who always sits with me and Dad at the Quidditch games. Oh, wait, I never told you about him, did I? Oops, well he's an old friend of mine, and I didn't expect to see him here at Hogwarts. We spent all yesterday catching up, and he remembers almost everything I've ever told him, isn't that something? I felt bad that I couldn't do the same, but you know how terrible my memory is. You're always having to remind me of things.

Anyway, classes are going well. I made a few friends, with Draco Malfoy of all people if you can believe it, and Pansy Parkinson, as well as a few Weasleys, and of course there's Marcus. You know, I think you would like Marcus. He's really laid back for an upperclassman, and definitely not the type to cause drama or trouble just because he can. I think he prefers to settle his problems under the table haha, and I know you always tell me I should be less dramatic and just deal with things. I think I'm getting better at that. Maybe I'll introduce you this summer and the two of you can write while we're at school. I worry about you all the way in America by yourself.

Anyway, I hope you're well.

Your cousin,

Rigel

P.S. I'm not really going by Archie anymore. I think it's time I took a more mature name, so I've been using my middle name- what do you think? Maybe I'll go back to being Archie someday, but for now it's just Rigel.

There. She rolled the second letter and sent it off with a Screech Owl, another kind of code between the two of them. Sending a letter with a Screech Owl meant it was important, but still safe to read around others. A Barn Owl meant nothing important, just general news, and an Eagle Owl meant an emergency.

She was pleased with the letter, though if it hadn't been Archie she was sending it to it could have been a little more subtle. Still, she had warned him that Flint was here, that he recognized her as not Archie, but that he was making a deal instead of reporting them. She'd told him to write Flint himself and also to "remind" her of any other things she was supposed to "remember" about Archie's life. She'd also reminded him not to slack too much in Potions, which would be a give away to their parents when they saw grade reports, and warned him to refer to her as Rigel.

Seeing that the sun was already up and climbing, Rigel hurried down to breakfast. Draco and Pansy were talking about their Herbology assignment, which Rigel was planning on doing during lunch. She didn't think Draco or Pansy would appreciate her cutting it so close, so she stayed mostly out of the conversation, only giving her typical one or two word responses when required to. When the post came, she looked up automatically, but was actually quite surprised to see two owls swoop down onto her breakfast and thrust their legs at her.

One she recognized. It was Uncle Sirius' tawny owl. It had a permanently rumpled look that Rigel thought Sirius had chosen it for, and before she'd left home she and Archie had had to bribe the family owls for weeks to convince them to bring their letters to one another. Owls were really much cleverer than most people gave them credit for. She took that letter and waved the owl, Ruffles, graciously toward her bacon as she curiously took the other owl's

letter. It looked like a common school owl, and when she peeked at the letter she understood why. It was from Flint.

That was fast she thought, stowing that one in her pocket to read later. She unfolded the first letter instead, the one from Sirius.

Archie,

How are you? You sounded good in your letter, but then again I've never known you to not sound good, not that I could actually hear your letter as sound of course, I just meant that you write with a very strong voice-

Moony says I'm rambling, but what does he know? Anyway, glad things are going so well, son. I know you wanted to go to a school with a better Healing program, but your experience at Hogwarts will far out-weigh any head start on your adult career. Don't be in such a hurry to grow up!

So have you pranked anyone yet? That Defense Professor sounds like a perfect trial target, or maybe one of those snake roommates of yours- no, I'm not mad about your House, and I'm not just saying that because Moony is hitting me for making cracks at your new friends. Ouch, yeah he's got quite a swat, our Moony. Almost as good as Lily's. OUCH! Okay so I deserved that. Anyway, Arch, I should have known you'd be a Slytherin with all that ambition to be a Healer, of course that's honest ambition, not really Slytherin ambition, but the hat probably can't tell the difference.

But if you're going to be a Slytherin, you're gonna have to go all the way with it- no half-arsed Slytherins in our family! I've redecorated the entire house on green and silver and I expect you to try out for your House Quidditch Team, even if you don't like the game as much as Harri does. James says she doesn't think she'll have time to play for her school team, since she'll be doing boring stuff like studying instead- I know, what a waste of talent! I've checked with the Board of Governors (are you sure Malfoy's not evil?) and the rules have been recently changed in the interest of security, so that parents

can't come watch the games anymore. It's apparently only students, staff, and Board of Governors members now, so I won't get to see you play, but you can still tell me all about it in loving detail. Moony wants to write now, so have fun, and don't work too hard.

Love, Dad.

Hey Archie, it's Remus, how's school? I hope you don't think your father is serious- no not that joke again!- when he says not to focus on your studies. Have fun, and trying out for Quidditch is a great idea, but learns lots too, so that you can achieve the ambition that got you into Slytherin House. We wouldn't want all this green and silver tinsel to go to waste. No, I'm afraid I'm not joking. There are dancing snakes in the front yard, too. Hurry home for Christmas Break and control your father!

Love, Uncle Remus.

Rigel smiled and tucked the letter into her book bag. She hoped Sirius and Remus never changed, because there weren't enough light-hearted people in the world as it was. Sirius seemed to be climbing back from the dark place he'd sunk to after the tragic death of his wife as well. He was designing jokes for Zonko again, and Rigel would try (as Archie) to convince him to start going to Wasp games again, too.

She, Pansy, and Draco finished breakfast and headed to Potions. They had the practical lesson today, and Rigel was vibrating with anticipation. After that speech yesterday, she really hoped Professor Snape meant to teach them something wonderful. As soon as the bell rang and class began, however, Snape just strode in and waved his wand at the blackboard, causing a recipe to appear there, along with a page number for where the Potion could be found in their textbook. Rigel recognized it easily as a Potion to cure boils. Her heart fell back into a normal rhythm as she realized they would be starting with Potions that were little more than herbal remedies. She only hoped they moved quickly onto the more fascinating concoctions. She had been waiting to try things like Polyjuice,

Amortentia, and Wolfsbane, partially because the ingredients were so expensive and dangerous and mostly because the Potions were illegal to brew outside of a classroom without a license.

She flipped to the correct page in her textbook to make sure the Potion was transcribed correctly just to have something to do. She knew the Boil-cure Potion wouldn't take very long to make, so she wasn't in any hurry to get started like some of her more eager (or perhaps fearful) classmates. She went through the motions of putting her textbook back under the table and setting up her station fluidly, not even needing to go to the student cupboards for a Potion like this. All the ingredients were in their basic kits.

She heated, then settled the flame under the cauldron and waited for the entire bottom to get hot before adding the first ingredients- the wet ones that would form the base. There were no tricks to this Potion; it was basic add and stir, with a few extra steps for filtering and re-heating, so she glanced around at the other students while she stirred slowly, counting first clockwise and then counterclockwise in her head. Crabbe was squinting hopelessly at the blackboard. Nott was enthusiastically, but barbarically, chopping his dandelion roots; his potion would be slightly too acidic to use on human skin judging by the way the violent motion of his knife was making the edges of the roots ragged. They would likely catch the frog spores and prevent them from dissolving like they should, and when the roots were strained out, the spores, needed to sooth the tincture, would be strained out too.

Rigel herself had a set of beautiful platinum knives that Remus, Lily, and Archie had all chipped in to get her for her tenth birthday. She normally used them for everything, as they were less reactive than silver and handled heat better than mercury, but she thought their quality would be wasted on a Boil-cure Potion, and so opted to use the basic silver-lined steel that came with the first-year kit. Rigel took a moment to appreciate her short hair. It made for much easier brewing. There was a girl in a Gryffindor tie who was dangling her

hair in her cauldron, which wouldn't do much except make her hair smell like swamp gas, but it was bad sanitation practice all the same.

Rigel guessed she understood why Snape was starting with such a boring Potion if this is what he had to work with. It's not like the school let in muggle-born students, who would understandably have no idea what to do. These kids all had magical parents, so why were they so clueless about basic brewing techniques? It's one of the only things you *can* teach a kid before they have a wand, after all, and most purebloods had tutors in History and such. She took her Potion off the fire before adding the porcupine quills (she had learned the hard way what happened if you switched those two steps, and the black mark where her cauldron had been still hadn't come out of her mother's rug. From then on she was only allowed to "experiment" in the basement.

With at least half an hour of their block period to spare, Rigel bottled her sample and cleared her space. She had taken her time with her Potion, so really most people should be finished by now, but only Draco and Goyle were finished. Though in Goyle's case it was less that he'd completed his Potion and more that his Potion was simply finished. It looked like black tar congealed in the bottom of his cauldron, but he was gamely scraping some out and into a vial, so that was something.

Draco was yawning dramatically beside his finished sample, which would probably work as a boil-cure, if whoever was using it didn't get so nauseous from inhaling the undercooked dillysprout fumes that they couldn't apply it properly. She supposed he may well gloat, since he had still done better than most. Pansy was glaring at her Potion, which was a cheerful yellow-colored soup when it was supposed to be a dark green paste. Rigel thought she'd probably skipped the step that told you to add the knotgrass entirely. Knotgrass was a thickening agent and green enough to be responsible for the final ideal color. Neville's Potion wasn't too bad, just off-color and emitting faint brown smoke. He'd probably just gotten nervous and lost count of his counterclockwise stirring. The

smoke made her remember that the contacts she had in were gas-permeable, which meant any chemicals in the air would stick to them and be trapped in her eyes. She would have to wash them out thoroughly in the sink after class and see about asking Professor Snape to perform a protection spell on her eyes before each practical, or else getting a pair of goggles.

She and Draco packed up their station and took their samples to Professor Snape's desk. He had spent the lesson watching the students closely like a bird of prey, circling those students who seemed weak, but instead of death, it was salvation that was delivered to them when he swooped down. Oh, he wasn't nice about it, but he had stopped several explosions from occurring involving mishandled porcupine quills already. He nodded curtly as they left their samples on his desk, not even glancing at them. He was sitting now that the dangerous steps were out of the way, but his eyes still moved restlessly about the room. Rigel thought he looked rather disappointed with what he saw, and in that impulsive way she had sometimes she decided then and there that she would try and rekindle Professor Snape's optimism for his students. She would try her best, even on dinky little barely-Potions like this one, and show him that there was at least one student who wanted to learn what he had to teach.

"When you are finished you may get started on an eight-inch essay regarding the safety precautions one should take while working with such things as volatile ingredients, open flames, and sharp cutting implements," Snape barked loudly, "Due Monday."

Nobody dared to groan. Rigel took out a fresh roll of parchment and began her essay. She could see Draco glancing at her paper from the corner of his eyes, but she didn't look over. If he had a question he would ask. Sure enough, when she started a new paragraph he whispered, "Are you going to write the whole thing from memory?"

She nodded, mentally organizing her points as she worked. She thought it would be better to write the essay in the chronological

order of the safety precautions one should take, instead of grouping them by the danger they prevented or combated.

Draco hummed disbelievingly, "Then what are you putting for dealing with the flames? It's not like you can just make them colder if you want the Potion to work," he said.

"You should start by tying back all loose articles of clothing. Sleeves should be rolled, hair tied back, etc. This way you won't catch on fire by accident. Then you should clear away unnecessary materials. None of the Potions ingredients are wrapped in paper for a reason. The glass jars are resistant to heat, but if your textbook is on the table by the flame and someone walks by and bumps your station it could easily go up in flames. That's why Professor Snape puts the recipe on the board even though it's also in the book. When the cauldron is on the fire, you don't want your book anywhere near it," she said all this while writing about the merits of using built-in fumigation spells when working with certain ingredients, "That enough to start?"

"Uh, yeah," Draco shook his head ruefully, "You really do know all this. I thought maybe you were making your Potion without the textbook to show off your memorization skills," he admitted, "I never would have guessed so much thought went into everything."

"Seventy percent of all serious magical accidents involve Potions, not including Flying accidents," Rigel said absently, "There's an entire specialized field in Potions that deals with improving safety in the lab and educating people about the dangers of certain ingredients and tools."

"You're like a Potions encyclopedia, Rigel," Pansy said quietly as she pulled up a chair. She had come over to their table to work on her essay after giving up on turning her Potion green somehow. Rigel just shrugged. When you liked something, you knew stuff about it.

"Yeah, Snape is sure to notice eventually," Draco said reassuringly, "He's just always really busy and distracted at the start of term. I

used to never see him from August until October."

"If he doesn't, I'll just have to try harder," Rigel said.

"Or you could just... tell him what your ambitions are," Draco said, "He was serious in his speech on Monday. Snape takes really good care of his Slytherins. All you have to do is ask and he'll do almost anything for one of his snakes."

"Where's the fun in that?" she asked as she measured the inches she had written.

"I can't tell if he's serious," Pansy told Draco.

Uncle Sirius would be pleased to know that so many Slytherins were being mistaken for him, she thought wryly, but she wasn't serious, not really. Perhaps Snape might be willing to dance on a limb for any of the others, but for the son of his enemy? No, she would have to prove that she was worth his time and effort.

She double-checked that she had eight-and-three-quarter inches of medium-small writing. Not exactly eight, which would indicate she gave up the essay as soon as she could, but not long enough that it seemed she didn't respect his requirements.

The bell rang as she was brushing the drying sand off of her essay. She rolled it up and waved Draco and Pansy to go ahead of her. She watched the rest of the class file out, shoulders slumped dejectedly, and when it was clear that Snape had no pressing business after class, but was just tidying up the room, she approached him. He had his back to her, wiping the blackboard clean with his wand, when she coughed quietly (an actual cough, not one of those annoying 'hem' noises some people made).

He turned his head sharply, nostrils flared, and Rigel was struck with the idea that he was a man who had lived with danger over his shoulder if his immediate response to being surprised was to locate the source and supply oxygen to the brain for quick-thinking. His

face assumed the blank expression she was coming to associate with herself, and he lowered his wand carefully, as if he had to think hard about leaving himself open to attack around her. She hoped now that her short hair and grey eyes didn't make her look *too* much like Sirius, though that had been her original intention.

"Mr. Black," he looked down his prominent nose at her, but kept his voice studiously neutral, "Do you have a question about the lesson or essay?"

"No, Sir," she said as politely and deferentially as she could. She kept her hands still and her eyes at a level just below his, "I've finished my essay, and I was wondering if you would be able to give me an additional assignment for the weekend."

She met his eyes for a moment but found only blank fathoms there.

"I would of course understand if you had no time to grade a second essay," she added, hoping she wasn't being too presumptuous with his time.

He blinked hard, once, and lowered his chin to catch her eye directly, "Any extra work would be factored into your grade as if it were required, and do not make the mistake of believing that doing twice as much means you can work half as diligently on each."

"Of course, sir," she kept his gaze steadily, willing him to take a chance on her. He turned his head toward his desk until his eyes came to rest on the sample labeled "Black." Snape pursed his lips and frowned sharply at the innocuous vile of green paste.

"Give me the essay I have already assigned, and if I find that it is neither rushed and sloppy nor hopelessly inaccurate I will consider giving you an additional assignment," he held out his hand for her scroll, which she handed over, "Come to my office after dinner to either collect this essay for revision or receive more work."

"Yes, sir," she nodded shortly, "Thank you."

She walked quickly over to her table and grabbed her things, aware that he could not go to lunch until the classroom was emptied, and also aware that she had a Herbology assignment to complete in the next hour. If she had looked back she would have seen Snape checking the essay she'd handed him for prank jinxes, but as it was she headed obliviously for the gamekeeper's hut, filled with hope that Professor Snape would find merit with her work.

The gamekeeper, Hagrid, was very friendly. When she knocked on his door she was bowled over by a huge (to her) dog named Fang, who apparently thought she needed a second bath that day and generously slobbered all over her.

"Fang!" the large man growled, "Get off 'im."

"It's quite alright," she said, wiping her face on her sleeve, "I was wondering if it would be okay if I took a sample of soil from your garden, Mr. Hagrid, for my Herbology assignment."

"Just Hagrid," he smiled kindly down at her, "And take whatever ya need, just keep an eye ter the forest."

"Okay, thank you, Hagrid," she said, and headed over to his pumpkin patch. She took a sample from the soil and, spying a patch of knotgrass just inside the line of trees bordering the Forbidden Forest, she darted in to grab a sample from there as well, thinking it would be more interesting to compare them. Then she headed back to the castle with her samples to analyze them. They'd been shown a spell to separate the components of dirt in class, but she couldn't do it yet, so she went to the Great Hall to ask an older student to do it for her.

"Where have you been?" Pansy asked when Rigel sat down at the Slytherin table, "Professor Snape came in ten minutes ago."

"I was playing with dirt," she said. Pansy screwed up her face in confused distaste until Rigel pulled out her soil samples and set them on the bench next to her, safely away from anyone's food.

"Oh, our Herbology assignment," she frowned, "You haven't done it yet? It's due next period."

"That's why I'm doing it now," Rigel said, picking up a pea from the platter in front of her and lobbing it in a graceful arch toward Adrian Pucey. It bounced against his cheek bone and he whipped his head around toward them in bewildered offense.

"Draco," Rigel said reprovingly, "I asked you to get his attention, not throw your food at him!"

Draco's mouth fell open as Pucey looked from Rigel, to Draco, to Draco's plate, which did indeed have peas on it. Pucey frowned, obviously thinking it strange that Draco, a well-bred young scion, not to mention the son of Narcissa Malfoy née Black, would throw food at him, but just then Rigel turned 'the look' on him and he forgot all about the pea.

"Pucey, would you mind helping me with this spell? Professor Sprout showed it to us, but I couldn't see very well from the back of the class," she widened her eyes further, and saw his features soften into an indulgent smirk, "And I have to get this soil separated by next period."

Pucey moved down the bench and took out his wand, "No problem, Black, though you really shouldn't leave things until the last minute like this."

"I just wanted to try by myself first," she mumbled in a way that sounded embarrassed.

"That's good," the older boy nodded, "But next time ask for help earlier. Any Slytherin will lend a hand."

"For a price," Draco snorted, staring in a way that was both disgusted and grudgingly impressed.

"That's right!" Rigel said, sounding dismayed and apologetic, "I'll make it up to you, Pucey, I swear. Anytime you need help with Potions, just let me know," she nodded earnestly.

Pucey gave her a look that clearly said he'd never be taking her up on her offer, because how often would he have a question a first-year could answer, but said, "I accept, thank you." He waved his wand over her samples and muttered a spell. The soils separated into layers within the sample jars so that she could clearly identify the components. On the bottom were the small rocks, then a layer of sand and dirt, followed by a thin layer of minerals, then any organic matter trapped in the sample, and on the top was a layer of water, magically prevented from re-absorbing into the sand and dirt. It was a matter of minutes for Rigel to write down all the parts in each, as well as what plants the textbook said would grow well there, and she was done before Pansy started her second cup of tea.

"Thanks, Pucey, this is perfect," she said, smiling just the tiniest bit up at him.

"Anytime," he said dazedly, stowing his wand once more.

"Oh, for the love of Salazar," Draco scowled and this time really *did* throw one of his peas at Pucey, "Are you a Slytherin or not, man? Can't you see he's playing you?"

"What?" Pucey said blankly, looking from Rigel to Draco, unable to make the connection.

"You-" Draco glanced at her and scowled, "Rigel, turn that face off right now."

Rigel adopted her more usual solemn expression and let her eyes go flat by bringing her lashes down a fraction. Pucey frowned at her, shaking his head perplexedly.

"Don't worry about it," Pansy told him patronizingly, "Rigel got Draco with that earlier and it took him several minutes to snap out of it."

"Only because no one helped me," Draco narrowed his eyes at her, "In fact, I vaguely recall you and Nott laughing. And you," he rounded on Rigel, "You can't just go around *looking* at people like that when you want something from them-"

"I'll try to avoid looking at people in the future."

"-it's completely unfair, not to mention creepy-" Draco ranted.

"But it gets me what I want."

"Rigel's got a point," Pansy said, "You two are the ones who weren't sly enough to see through him. You're only mad because it worked."

"Thanks Pansy," Rigel said sweetly, "You're the only one who gets me." She tilted her head so the light shone on her contacts and gave the blonde girl a tremulously grateful smile.

"Uh, yeah," Pansy stared, mouth slightly open, "You... Huh."

Draco and Pucey snickered as Rigel dropped "the look" and smiled quite evilly.

"Not so fun when it's turned on you, is it?" Draco poked Pansy in the arm, "Do you see why this weapon must be controlled?"

"You should probably not use that on any girls, Rigel," Pansy said slowly, "I'm your friend, but a couple of those looks could send the wrong impression to a girl, especially coming from the son of Sirius Black, no offense."

"I usually don't, because girls trust me implicitly without 'the look,' but I sort of wanted to watch you lose your brain for a minute," Rigel said earnestly.

"The point is," Draco said, "It's your own fault that you put off your assignment so late- and no I don't believe that crap about you wanting to do it yourself- and Pucey did you a real favor, which you can't get out of by just turning your face into a baby unicorn or

something," he lectured, turning to include Pucey as well, "And you *will* take Rigel up on his offer to return the favor."

"But-" Pucey started.

"No buts," Draco said firmly, "Rigel can probably help you with any Potions problem you have, and if he can't, he'll go to the library and figure it out for you, *won't he?* " Draco glared pointedly at her.

"Well I wouldn't trust most of the library books on Potions, as generic Potions books often contradict one another," Rigel said, adding quickly as Draco frowned at her, "But, yes, feel free to ask and sorry I deceived you."

"If you're sure..." Pucey said, "Thanks, I guess."

"Same," Rigel said, packing away her Herbology assignment and grabbing a few bites to eat before lunch was over. Pansy shook her head at Draco's zealous behavior and Rigel's complete insincerity, but simply sipped her tea and let the wizards be foolish if they wanted to, as any good pureblooded witch would.

[end of chapter seven]

A/N: Just to clarify, 'the look' is in no way intended to make Rigel / Harriett look like a damsel in distress or something, which would completely defeat the point of her disguise. I imagine it more as a boy-chan style puppy-dog eyed look, like Honey from Ouran High School Host Club might display, which is cute and disarming, but not at all necessarily feminine. It was just intended to give Rigel a mischievous side. I imagine her like the main character from Nabari no Ou, who is cool on the surface but can easily act in different characters in order to get his way by pretending to be helpless or stupid and throw people off guard. No one ever suspects a person they think as stupider or weaker than themselves of deceiving them.

Chapter 8

A/N: As always (even though sometimes I forget to say it, please know that it's implied) none of the characters, world, plot pattern, etc, are mine. And thanks for reading :)

A/N2: Also, just to preempt any questions, no there won't be a romance involving Rigel and Professor Snape. Not that I don't love Snape, I do, but he's playing the role of Myles for anyone who's ready Alanna the Lioness. If you haven't, he's a mentor type figure, sometimes a fatherly figure (though Snape won't do much of that because Rigel has a father already and Snape's not really that kind of character.)

A Pureblood Pretense

Chapter Eight:

After Herbology, in which they'd moved on to soils used for plants that grew in more exotic places, such as the ones that grew on the tops of mountains or the bottom of lakes and oceans, Rigel let Draco and Pansy walk ahead of her. While they continued up toward the castle, she slipped away to the lake where she was supposed to meet Fred and George, about whom she wasn't quite sure what to think yet.

There was a group of big, sturdy trees not far from the shore of the lake, so she headed that way. There weren't any redheads that she could see, though a few older students who must have had free periods Friday afternoons were lazing under the trees, obviously enjoying their free time before the semester picked up. She had been standing under a leafy branch only a few minutes when an unfamiliar voice called out from behind her.

"Hey, you're Rigel Black, yeah?" the speaker was a cheerful boy with dark skin and very white teeth. He had dreadlocks that just touched

his shoulders and large brown eyes framed by thick, spiky lashes.

"Yes, I am," said Rigel, turning to face the new boy fully.

"Lee Jordan, or just Lee," he stuck out a hand, which she took, "Fred and George told me about you- don't worry, I've known them long enough not to believe a word."

"They mentioned you to me this morning," Rigel said, "Pleased to meet you."

He laughed, "I see what they mean; you say that like you mean it."

"I do mean it," Rigel said, confused.

"A Slytherin never means anything," he waved his hand, "And neither does a prankster, so you're actually in excellent company."

"I heard that this morning too," she said wryly.

Lee grinned knowingly, "Fred and George been telling you how wonderful they are?"

Rigel smiled with her eyes, "Something like that."

"Well, don't be too dazzled by them," he shrugged easily, "They're fun to hang out with, but at the end of the day-" Lee broke off, cocking his head toward the sound of a commotion coming their way.

"-no, no, you two are not throwing me in the lake!" a boy shouted from behind them. They turned to see Fred and George literally dragging their older brother down the path. Percy had a look of panic on his face and was struggling vainly, "I mean it this time, I'll owl Mum if you don't release me this instant!"

Fred and George dropped Percy's arms like they had caught on fire.

"No need to drag poor old Mum into this," Fred began.

"-and I'm telling her you called her old and poor-"

"Now, Perce, there's no need for all that," George cut across his brother quickly, "We've just brought you here to meet someone, see?"

"Who?" Percy demanded, glancing around, "I've already met Lee and-"

"No, no, the little one behind Lee," Fred moved forward and dragged Rigel into clearer view, "This one here."

"Oh," Percy adjusted his horn-rimmed glasses and stepped forward to meet her, "I'm Percy. My brothers didn't drag you down here too, did they?" he asked suspiciously.

" *Drag* ? What drag?" Fred said, affronted.

"No, I asked them to introduce us," Rigel said, "I'm Rigel Black, and you helped me out on the train ride here, so when I found out who you were I wanted to thank you formally."

"Well," Percy looked taken aback, as though no one had ever thanked him for anything before, "There's no need for all that, but you're welcome. That Flint isn't really a bad sort, but he's always in a terrible mood the first week or so of school, and sometimes he takes it out on others."

"I understand," Rigel said, "He's in my House, so we've worked out our differences now, but I still wanted to thank you for stepping in when you did."

"Just doing my duty as a Prefect," Percy flushed as his brothers clapped him on the back admiringly.

"Regardless, I'll pay back a favor someday, if you should need one," she said.

The tallest redhead nodded a tad uncomfortably, "And if you should need help again, I'd be glad to do what I can."

Rigel widened her eyes guiltlessly, "Would you?" she asked wonderingly. This was just the opening she'd been waiting for, "I wouldn't want to be a bother, and I'd ask a Ravenclaw, but I don't know any, and you seem so smart and, well..."

"Yes?" Percy prompted, preening a bit, "What is it?"

"Well I'm curious about so many things, but sometimes I don't understand it the way the book explains. Could I come ask you when I get confused in my studies?" she asked, making sure her voice was filled with innocent hope.

"Of course!" Percy assured her, "Far be it from me to keep an eager young mind from knowledge. Anytime you want to discuss something academic just come up and knock on the Gryffindor common room. Fred and George can show you where if you don't know, and even if I'm not there, someone will be able to find me."

"Okay," Rigel smiled her best please-like-me smile up at the Prefect.

"Yes, well," Percy adjusted his glasses and nodded curtly to her, "Just maybe don't wear that tie, and it should be fine." With that, he said goodbye to Lee and his brothers and started back up the path toward the castle.

"Well, I'm impressed," said Lee when Percy had gone, "It took Fred and George three months to get an invite into the Slytherin common room."

"Though they never did let us come back after that first time," Fred said wistfully.

"Some people just can't hold their jinxed canary creams," George shrugged, "But we would have let you in the common room-supervised of course- if you'd just asked."

"I just wanted to talk to your brother," Rigel said honestly, "I think he'll be a wonderful resource for my studies."

"Sure, sure, whatever you say," Fred said.

"Just don't forget to stop in and say 'hi' when you come up to the Nest," George added.

"We gotta go, Oliver's getting the team together tonight to talk about trials next week and McGonagall wants to talk to me about commentating," Lee said after performing a Tempus Spell, "We've got just enough time to grab dinner first."

"Nice meeting you, Lee," Rigel said.

"One day I'll believe you, kid," Lee laughed as the three of them ran off, "But not today!"

Dinner was spent nervously twisting her vegetables across her plate and avoiding Draco's increasingly exasperated questions about where she went after Herbology. It was Pansy who finally shut him up.

"Draco," she said repressively, "Sometimes Rigel is going to disappear for no apparent reason, because that's just the kind of person he is. The sooner you accept that and learn not to care where he goes when he wants to wander off alone, the happier you and everyone around you will be."

Draco set his face mulishly, but subsided for at least that moment. He started to wind up again when Rigel told them she had somewhere to be after dinner, but a look from Pansy made him shrug as nonchalantly as an eleven-year-old could manage and head toward the Slytherin Common Room without another word.

Rigel approached Snape's office in the dungeons with slow, deliberate steps. She'd waited exactly five minutes after the Professor had left the Staff Table to head to their appointment,

because she wanted to seem respectfully punctual, but not overbearingly impatient. The door to Snape's office was made of sturdy oak, and was one of the rooms she hadn't been able to explore yet. She knew the password when it was locked was "Asclepius" from the Marauder's Map, but it was also warded with a magical signature when the Professor wasn't inside, so this would be the first opportunity to satisfy her curiosity. Or it would have been if she wasn't so nervous. *What if he hated my essay, or too many of the things I wrote down were obvious?* she thought unhappily, *I thought the assignment seemed too easy. There was probably a trick somewhere I missed and now he's going to think I'm the dumbest student who ever had the nerve to waste their Professor's time.*

She knocked gently, but firmly on the wide door and turned the silver handle (curious metal to use on a door handle) immediately when she heard Snape call "Enter!" from within. Disproportionately relieved that he hadn't just told her to go away, she entered the small, square space, closing the door softly behind her. Professor Snape's office was a sparse, eerie room, decorated with the most gruesome of Potions ingredients, which stood like trophies on shelves about the walls. There were no books, no art besides a portrait of Salazar Slytherin, and no furniture besides the basic wooden desk and the chair Snape was sitting on. His desk was empty but for a stack of order forms and trays that looked like they'd hold essays later in the year. His chair looked fairly comfortable, indicating he likely sat in it for a few hours a day at least, but Rigel thought he probably spent most of his free time in his personal quarters, and that this office was just for show. She could certainly see how it would be intimidating, especially since the students who came to ask help from the Potions Master would have to stand.

Professor Snape looked up from his order forms as she moved to stand in front of his desk, feet shoulder width apart and hands held folded behind her back. She gave him a stare that was deferential, but defiant in the pride that it revealed. It said that she respected him, but if he'd called her here just to ridicule her she would not back down from defending herself. He took in her stance and expression,

and the lines on his face softened the way people's faces did when they were caught off guard by a memory they thought they'd forgotten. It passed quickly, however, and Professor Snape pressed his mouth into an even thinner line than it usually presented.

"Mr. Black," he began, his tone once again one of carefully correct neutrality when addressing her, "I find it... difficult to imagine that you completed the essay I assigned in the extra time at the end of today's lesson."

She opened her mouth, but he held up a hand and continued, "I am not accusing you of anything, but it is possible that a student would be able to get the essay topic from a Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff year mate who had their practical lesson yesterday, and complete the essay ahead of time with an older student's help in a misguided endeavor to 'get into my good books' as they say."

Rigel's eyes widened in for-once-unfabricated dismay. Of course he would be suspicious. He had probably dealt with dishonest brown-nosers before, and while she *might* be kissing up just a tad (okay, a lot) she was certainly not dishonest in her work, "Is there any way I can convince you of my sincerity?" she asked with no small amount of trepidation.

"There is," Snape said, "Since you apparently do not require references when writing such an assignment, I would ask you to write another now, in my presence. Know that I do not mean to attack you, Mr. Black. This is just a way for me to accurately gauge your capability, but if you choose to, you may leave here without writing this assignment and as far as I am concerned our dealings will remain the same as any of your Slytherin classmates.

"I did not bring quill and parchment," she said grimly.

He reached into one of his desk drawers and pulled out a clean roll of parchment along with a quill and ink pot and set them on the desk in front of him silently.

"What is the essay, sir?" she asked, not yet reaching to take the offered writing implements. There would be no point starting an essay she couldn't complete.

"There is no length requirement," he said, "And is not an essay, per se. Simply list every Potions ingredient you know of, followed by any dangers and uses you remember. It is meant to be along the same lines as what we covered in class yesterday, though if you know of others not discussed in class, please add those as well. Take your time."

Rigel nodded, and reached to take the writing supplies, eager now to get started, "May I use the other side of your desk to write on, sir?" she asked.

He raised an eyebrow, "I have not often been called fair," he said dryly, "But I have never yet forced a student to write an essay standing up." So saying he pulled out his wand and conjured a basic desk and chair in the corner of the room for her use. She thanked him, then sat and immediately began writing.

Abberra Leaves- used in Skele-Grow (sliced) and Nutrient Potion (diced). Must be harvested by pulling the roots of the plant up intact, or the leaves dry out and become poisonous within three days.

Aconite- used in Wolfsbane (the flowers, crushed), various poisons (usually the stalks, shredded) and recently in Ardor Increasing Potions (just the pollinated stamens, though this method is largely untested). Very dangerous to collect, as it grows most prolifically in werewolf territory and must be harvested with silver at the full moon. Also poisonous to ingest and difficult to add to Potions without causing them to explode, as it is highly reactive to most other ingredients.

Adder Stingers- used mainly in prank Potions to cause embarrassing rashes or other skin conditions, with the exception of its use in Morning Sickness Remedies for pregnant witches in their first trimester. Dangerous because too much in any Potion can make it

too hot to drink without burning the throat of the drinker severely. Should wear gloves when working with it.

Aesop's Flower- used by those in the field of Divination for Dream Walking Potions. Strong hallucinogen and sometimes sold on the black market in dangerous quantities as a recreational drug. Dangerously addictive in frequent, heavy doses...

And so it went. Rigel wrote all the way to: Mellonite- used for Muscle Cramp Relief Potions (ground and dried) as well as in Intestinal Regulation Potions and in many balms and pastes for sore or stiff muscles. Dangerous only if a person inhales the fumes of a Potion while Mellonite is stewing in it, which causes them to lose some muscle control, especially in the hands and feet, and could possibly cause an accident if the Potioneer continued to try and handle ingredients. And then she ran out of parchment.

She rose and walked the few steps over to Snape's desk. He seemed to be drafting a letter of some kind, so she kept her eyes politely away from his parchment and waited for him to come to a stopping point. He set down his quill and reached out a hand toward her, palm up.

"Finished?" he asked, seeming surprised when he noticed how low the torches had burned.

"No, sir," Rigel said apologetically, "I need more parchment."

"More parchment?" he repeated, frowning fiercely.

"Yes, sir," she said, thinking he was irritated she had used so much, "I'll be sure to reimburse you the supplies I use."

"Reimb-" he scowled blackly, "Give me that!" he snatched the roll of parchment from her hand and unrolled it, staring at the writing on the front, then slowly turning it over to the back side, which was also filled with small, evenly spaced writing.

"I only got halfway through the 'M's," she said helpfully.

His eyes snapped up to fix on her, "Sit. Now." He crooked his finger at the chair she was sitting in, which zoomed over to face his desk and gestured imperiously for her to use it. She sat quietly while he sank slowly into his own chair, his eyes moving rapidly across, then down, the scroll. She mentally composed the rest of the ingredients she remembered, in case he asked for her to recite them orally instead of finishing the essay.

Minutes passed in silence, the only interruption when Snape flipped the roll over to the back impatiently and kept reading. At last, he flung down the roll and pinned her with an iron stare, "Do you have a photographic memory, Mr. Black?" he demanded.

"No, sir," she said.

"An... extreme fascination for Herbology, then," he suggested. She thought he sounded sick.

"Not particularly, sir," she said quietly.

"Am I to understand, then, that you have more than a passing interest in Potions, Mr. Black?" Snape clenched his teeth on her surname convulsively.

"Very much so, sir," she looked up into his face, eyes flicking desperately over too-pale skin and flame-retardant gel slicked into neglected hair, "You understand, don't you, sir? No one else does, and mostly I'm told I know enough about Potions and to concentrate on something else, but you'll teach me new things, won't you? I don't mean to impose, and I'm sure you get a lot of requests for tutelage considering your position in the Potions community. It's just, I'm so tired of learning from books."

His eyes closed like steel curtains for a long moment. Rigel tried to focus on the ugly jars of dead things, the situation with Flint, her new and strange friendship with Draco, anything but Snape and his

unreadable expression. To her young, untried soul, which had not yet opened its eyes to the vastness of the world, it seemed that her Fate hung in the balance in that moment. Her Professor sighed heavily, and when he spoke Rigel realized he sounded tired, not sick.

"The level of knowledge you have displayed today is nothing short of incredible, so perhaps you will forgive me for being somewhat reluctant to believe it at first," Snape said, rubbing his hands across his eyes, nostrils flaring as he tried to think, "I do understand."

Rigel hadn't realized what those words would mean, placed together like that and coming from Potions Master Snape, until she heard them. She'd known people to say that you could lose a weight you didn't know you carried, but to Rigel it felt like a window had opened and she hadn't even known she was indoors. Like she'd been looking at a world removed by glass without realizing it, and now she could feel and smell the breeze. She closed her eyes to savor those words, then opened them and poured everything she felt for Potion-making into her gaze. It was more difficult than she expected it to be, perhaps because she was unpracticed in putting real emotions into her face, but she projected all the passion and longing and triumph and despair-oh the despair when she realized her dream was here at Hogwarts, where she could never be- toward Professor Snape, wanting him to see, to *know* as she knew, that Potions was the only thing she could ever do.

One moment she was willing Snape to understand and wondering desolately what Professor Snape thought of her work, and the next moment her consciousness was suddenly filled with foreign thoughts: *disbelief and ambivalent consternation- she didn't know what to do. She was gleeful, to have found a Slytherin at last who had the potential she needed, and suspicious that it was a cruel joke, for she knew that good things were never true, and bitterly resentful that it would be Black to have such a son. A son that by rights the universe should have given him, one who was wasted on Black if the boy had to spend his life and talent learning Potions from a book-* and then she was gasping for air, feeling familiar things, like her own

bewilderment and nausea. She opened her eyes to find herself slumped over Snape's desk and raised herself slowly into a seated position once more. Snape was sitting stiffly in his own chair, eyes wide and face frozen in an expression of surprised anger.

"What just happened?" Rigel asked, putting a hand to her temple in the universal symbol for complete and utter confusion.

"I would ask *you* that, if it did not already know *what* happened. I was in your mind, unless I am very much mistaken, specifically in the part of it which is concerned with Potions, and you were in *my mind*," his eyes flashed menacingly, "specifically in the portion that was concerned with my opinion of you."

Rigel flinched, still completely confused, "You were in my mind? *What did you see ?*" she said, her voice rising automatically toward her natural octave, "I don't understand *how* this could-" her voice failed her, and she buried her face in her hands, trembling violently. It couldn't all end here, it just couldn't.

"Exactly," Snape said, breathing deeply to calm himself, " *How* did you do this? I have extremely strong Occlumency shields, and in any case that was no Legilimency I've ever experienced. For one thing, there were no images, no memories, only blunt feeling, but it was as though I were originator of them, instead of merely an observer to your experiences. I need you to calm down and focus, so that you can explain what you were trying to do, Mr. Black. Mr. Black?"

She couldn't hear him, or if she did it didn't register that he was talking to her. He spoke louder, "Mr. Black. Arctur- Rigel. Rigel!"

"Huh- what me?" Rigel gulped the air desperately.

"Yes of course, boy, who else-" Snape collected himself, "Rigel, you are having a panic attack. Take slower breaths and talk through it."

"Okay. Okay, I'm sorry," she sucked in air carefully and babbled as coherently as she could, "I just can't go home because of this, it's not

fair. I don't even know what happened, I mean, how does this happen? I just wanted to show you I was serious about Potions, not go in your head, which is really complicated in case you didn't know, and oh crap you were in my mind- *what did you see!* " Rigel groaned into her hands, "Are you going to expel me, now? For what it's worth I'm really sorry, and I never meant to hurt anyone."

"I am not going to expel you, Rigel," Snape said slowly and clearly, "I don't know what you are so afraid of, nor will I press you to tell me, but from your mind I gleaned nothing more or less than the all-encompassing passion you have for brewing and understanding Potions."

"Oh," Rigel stopped hyperventilating almost immediately, realizing in retrospect that he had still referred to her as 'boy' as well as 'Mr. Black' and that if his experiences had been as disorientating as hers it was unlikely he'd noticed anything concrete, "So... so what now, sir?"

"I don't understand what happened here, but some good may yet come of it. For one, it has cleared any doubts I may have had about your sincerity in learning my art," Professor Snape said carefully, "Provided it does not happen again, I see no reason for the last ten minutes to affect anything beyond this room."

Her head shot up so fast it cricked uncomfortably and she stared, wide eyed and wild haired, into Snape's lined face, "Truly, sir? You would give me another chance?"

Snape set his face determinately, "Yes. I will do this. *We* will do this. Your father does not factor here, and whatever just occurred in our minds has no bearing either. You have talent, or at least exceptional drive, and I will cheer for Gryffindor before I see that ability atrophy."

Rigel wasn't sure which of them he was trying to convince, but her heart was near to bursting with all she felt. Relief and joy and a strange sort of vertigo left her reeling with the day's events. All she wanted to do now was sleep. Snape must have noticed her

momentum waning, for he stood and gestured for her to rise as well so he could vanish the extra furniture.

"It's been a long day for us both, Mr. Black," he said, and she noticed his voice wasn't entirely neutral around her anymore. It drifted ever so slightly toward luke-warm, "Go to bed, now, and we will deal with the details and consequences of this when we must. For Monday, you may choose one ingredient from the list you compiled and write ten inches on an in-depth discussion of it."

"Yes, sir." Rigel said, moving toward the door, "Thank you."

He nodded curtly, still looking a bit off-balance. She turned at the door, one hand on the handle, and said, "You won't regret this, Professor Snape. I promise you."

"Of that I have no doubts, Mr. Black."

[end of chapter eight].

A/N: Sorry that one was short (certainly not the 7000+ of chapter 6), but I had to cut it off here or the next chapter would be way too long. So things are moving forward for our sometimes difficult heroine. I kind of like it, so far, at least ^^ . I know it seems strange to say that Rigel is Harry Potter turned Harriett Potter, masquerading as an OC and a Black in a Hogwarts that is changed almost beyond recognition... but such is the power of fanfiction. If it makes you feel better, we can consider Rigel an OC altogether and not even try to make her a "what if" version of Harry, simply because too many variables and facets of her personality differ from the original. Really, she's been slipped into Harry's theoretical place in this twisted version of JK's world and given a new purpose, but a part of me wants to still consider this fanfiction. If it offends anyone that so many liberties have been taken away or added, I'm truly sorry, and I wish them the best of luck in finding a more appealing story elsewhere.

Chapter 9

A/N: (I know, I know, I overuse the author's note privilege. Sorry). Just wanted to say that although I don't detail it, Rigel's hygiene is not actually that dismal. It's just tedious in a story to say when she showers and brushes her teeth, and you guys don't want to read that every time either, right? So assume it happens some magical time every day unless specified otherwise.

A/N2: Also-mega huge thanks to both TamariChan and DwellingOnDreams7 for your super kind reviews on chapter eight! ^^ You make me happy today.

The Pureblood Pretense

Chapter Nine:

Rigel reflected later that after her first week of school, she really shouldn't have expected the weekend to be any different, but she woke Saturday with naive optimism. She thought she'd get an early start on her and Flint's homework assignments that morning, so she put on her shoes quietly and grabbed her schoolbag, with Flint's letter in it, on her way out the door. She followed the quickest route on the Marauder's Map to the Library and headed toward the stacks, pulling out Flint's letter as she went. There was no salutation or damning reiteration of their deal. It was short and to the point.

Due Monday: 14 inches on the properties of the Venimus Tentacula plant, including how it is grown and harvested and a labeled diagram drawn to scale of the important features.

Due Wednesday: 10 inches on Switching Spells and how they relate to and compare with Swapping Spells.

Also due Wednesday, 12 inches on the late sixteenth century goblin rebellions headed by Urlag the Terrible.

Due Thursday: 1 roll of parchment on the merits and consequences of using different materials in brewing Potions that affect the Nervous system.

Rigel rolled up the parchment and tucked it away. She could do this. She could think of several arguments to make for the Potions essay already, and she knew enough about Venimous Tentacula not to have to look too much up for the Herbology essay- though her drawing abilities were zero, so she hoped Professor Sprout didn't grade on artistry. The History essay she had no clue about, same with Charms, so she headed to those two sections first.

She took out the Standard Book of Spells, Grade Five first, along with a book called Charms of Equal Exchange, which looked promising, and headed over to a nearby table to work quietly through the Charms essay. It took Rigel four more trips back to the shelves for more specific books before she thought she had enough information compiled to do an accurate comparison of Swapping and Switching spells, but a few hours later she had ten inches that she was quite pleased with, so she went in search of History texts.

She ran into trouble, because the History section was organized by author, not by period (which would have made more intuitive sense to Rigel), so she had no idea where to start beyond *A History of Magic* by Bathilda Bagshot, which contained a brief synopsis of the rebellion, but was really more of an overview of everything than a good source for in-depth information on anything. Rigel only had an hour to look before she would be missed at lunch (and she had already skipped breakfast anyway), so she returned the Charms books to their places and went to ask the Librarian for help.

Madam Pince sat like a ramrod behind her ornate desk in the center of the Library, stamping books lovingly as she picked them up from the Returns pile, while her eyes raked the stacks for funny business. There was something vulture-like about her that wasn't in her stick-like posture, but in the air of underfed savagery about her as her thin, bony hands grasped at the covers of her books with a desperate sort of hunger.

"Excuse me?" Rigel kept her voice to a sotto whisper that wouldn't disturb the peace of the Library.

The older woman turned her clear, sharp eyes on her, "What?" she said in a harsh whisper.

"I need information on a specific goblin rebellion," Rigel said softly, "But I don't know what book I need or who it's by so I wondered if you had an idea."

"Which rebellion?" she asked impatiently.

"Urlag the Terrible's uprising in the-"

"Late sixteenth century," she snapped, "Yes, yes, North side of the fourth stack to the left in that section. Sixth shelf from the bottom. There are three texts, all written by Wilheilma Pofkey, embossed with silver on the spines. Now go, and be quiet."

Rigel blinked several times, but obediently turned and made her way back to the History section. She wondered at the kind of mind capable of retaining such exact information, and thought she understood why Dumbledore didn't replace the old woman with a gentler soul. She counted the stacks and found the books Pince recommended. They looked like exactly what she needed, so she carried them to her table and started compiling information for the History essay. Wilheilma Pofkey had written three books on the sixteenth-century magical world; one on the politics of that time, one on the economy and trade, and one on the art and culture. Urlag's rebellion was discussed in each of them, in light of how it affected each aspect of the time period.

Rigel had about eight inches written when she glanced at the big clock by the doors to the Library and realized she had five minutes before lunch started. She rolled up her work reluctantly-it turned out Urlag was a fascinating goblin for his time period, and had invented several revolutionary techniques for goblin warfare, most of which essentially starved their wizard enemies into desperation by cutting

off trade options until they agreed to renegotiate the goblins' contracts.

Rigel stacked the three books on the sixteenth century and toted them over to the checkout desk so she could finish the essay in her room later. Madam Punce looked at her sourly, but pulled the books toward her to update the checkout logs.

"Name?" she asked curtly.

"Rigel Black."

Madam Pince froze, her hands clutching at the air convulsively, "Black?" she choked out, springing into movement and grabbing the books away from Rigel with a speed that belied her age, "No books for you, you-" she glared at Rigel, who was too stunned at the can of vitriol she'd unknowingly opened to defend herself, her nostrils flaring as she exhaled fiercely, "Sirius Black nearly *burned down* my Divination section! Most of those books are handwritten accounts of long dead seers- priceless tombs of knowledge! No, no son of his is welcome here. Out! Get out!" she was shrieking by the end of her tirade, and Rigel was drawing dirty looks from students trying to study, so she abandoned the books and high-tailed it out of there as fast as she could.

More and more it seemed as though pretending to be Sirius' son was more of a hindrance than a help.

Rigel didn't slow until she passed a series of paintings that were unfamiliar to her and realized she hadn't been paying attention to where she was going. She moved into the shadows behind a suit of armor and took out the Map, pretty sure she had gone up a flight of stairs or two in her hurry to get away from the monster librarian. Sure enough, when she said her name out loud the Map zoomed in to the East-most corridor on the fifth floor.

Deciding the best she could do was go to lunch and work out the Library situation later, Rigel hiked up her book bag, re-zipping it

when she realized she had left it hanging open-it wouldn't do for her letter from Flint to fall out accidentally, no matter how innocent it seemed. After double-checking the Map for the quickest route, Rigel made for the set of stairs at the end of the corridor, which were made of crumbling stone and only wide enough for two people, but which led directly to the third floor, by-passing the fourth floor completely for some reason probably only the Founders understood.

Rigel was halfway down the stairs and thinking longingly of rice pudding when something hot pierced her calf from behind. She recognized the feel of a Trip-Jinx immediately; it was one of Archie's favorite tricks to play on her, and she immediately brought her hands up to protect her head and face. She had time to think she would definitely be missing lunch, and then she was toppling, her bag swinging wildly out in front of her and pulling her ever further off-balance, down into oblivion.

When she woke, it was to sharp pain in several places on her body. Her throbbing neck could be explained by the uncomfortable angle it was tilted at-half-scrunched against the bottom step of the stairs she'd apparently bounced down, if she bruises that colored her limbs were any indication. Her tongue felt swollen, as if she had bitten it at some point, and she thought at first her back was injured, because of the awkward position it was in, but then realized she was laying on top of her book bag. She hoped the essays weren't too squished.

She braced her right hand against the steps to roll herself onto her knees, but when she shifted her left hand she let out a whimper that was pitiful both in volume and in the pain it expressed. After carefully maneuvering around that hand, she realized the strap on her bag had been wrapped around her left wrist when she was tripped, and that the fall had caused it to tangle in her other limbs and tighten forcibly until her wrist snapped under the strain. She prodded the broken appendage miserably. Curse Archie and his insistence on unbreakable straps for all their bags.

Rigel levered herself up onto the bottom stair with her right arm and her legs, wishing she knew a spell to detangle the strap from her

broken wrist. If she tried to do it manually, there was no guarantee she wouldn't pass out again from the pain. She decided she could possibly carry her bag in her right hand, keeping the extra strap slack, until she got back to her room, where she could find a pair of scissors. She had just checked to see that nothing had fallen out of her bag on her impromptu flight when cheerful voices came from the corridor ahead. She arranged herself as casually as she could and tried to drape her robes over her left hand inconspicuously as the voices grew louder and two boys came around the corner. It was Ron and Neville, obviously on their way back from lunch.

They stopped in surprise when they saw her sitting on the ground in front of them. She tried to act as if she did this sort of thing every day, but knew her voice sounded strained and that her clothes and hair were a mess, "Oh, hi Neville, hi Ron," she gritted her teeth in a small smile, "How are you guys doing today?"

The two Gryffindors gave her skeptical looks.

"We're good," Ron said, "But what are you doing up here?"

"On the ground, too?" Neville added.

"Just got tired from walking around and thought I'd take a rest on these stairs. I didn't realize how out of shape I was until I came to school here. This castle sure doesn't breed lethargy, huh?" she said.

"I know," Neville said, nodding, "I almost wish I had been a Hufflepuff. At least they don't have to walk up and down all these stairs just to go to lunch."

Ron sent Rigel a mulish look that said he wasn't going to be misdirected so easily, "You're a bit far from your Common Room to be taking a walk," he pointed out, "And you don't look tired, you look ill or something. You're paler than usual and you keep gritting your teeth and clenching your right fist on your knee."

Rigel blinked, not having realized how observant the youngest Weasley was. She supposed that came from having so many older brothers to watch out for.

Neville's eyes widened, "Are you okay, Rigel? You're not hurt are you? You can tell us if you are, there aren't any Slytherins around to see."

Rigel thought Neville was taking the Slytherin thing a bit too far; after all, the sorting hat wasn't going to re-sort her after the fact because she stopped acting like a Slytherin, but she just summoned up another small smile and said, "Don't worry so much, Neville. And I just missed breakfast and lunch, Ron, so I suppose I am a bit peckish.

"Well that explains why Malfoy was glaring at the doors in the Great Hall all through both meals today," Ron said, and Rigel winced at the thought of the lecture she was going to get later, "But it doesn't explain why you've been missing all day, your clothes are torn in a few places, and your face is getting greener by the moment. Hell, you look like you just fell off a cliff-" he broke off, his eyes darting from her, to the stairs behind her, to her limbs, three of which looked normal and one of which was hidden from view. His mouth settled into a grim line, "Or down a flight of stone steps. Show us your left wrist, Rigel."

"Oh, no," Neville moaned as if it had been him to fall two stories downhill, "Did you trip?"

"Yeah, sort of," she said, moving her robes more firmly over her wrist, "I'm really okay, though, so you guys just go back to whatever you were-"

Ron strode forward and grabbed her forearm with incredible speed. She thought he'd make a good keeper one day when his reach had grown longer, but as he yanked her left hand out of her robes and it pulled the tangled strap taut around it, her thoughts turned less charitable. An ugly cry was ripped from her throat, and Ron dropped

her arm with a startled sound of his own. She cradled it protectively, blinking back another wave of tears, and Neville hissed sympathetically. She looked down at her wrist. It was still trapped in the book bag strap and bent unnaturally away from her. Her hand was purple from the blood being constricted by the strap, and she swallowed heavily. It really did look pretty bad.

"That's broken," Ron said, "Neville, stay here while I go find a Professor or someone who knows where the Hospital Wing is. I think it's somewhere on the first floor, but it'll take too long to try and find-"

"No!" Rigel gasped out, "No Hospital Wing."

They looked at her like she was crazy.

"I hate Hospitals," she said, "And doctors, and Medi-wizards and - witches, too."

"Well you can't just leave it like that," Neville said, "It h-has to be set, and healed, right?"

Ron was thinking hard, pacing back and forth as he tried to decide what to do, "Okay, if you won't go get a Professor, then we'll take you back to our Common Room. Percy's there, and he's a prefect. He'll know what to do. Maybe he can set the bone, or something."

"Fine," Rigel nodded. The pain was starting to overwhelm her as her brain slowly allowed her nerves to receive distress signals once more. In short, her shock was wearing off.

Neville helped her stand and balance as Ron held her book bag for her carefully, close enough to avoid pulling on her wrist but far enough to avoid accidental jostling. The three of them made their way slowly back up the stairs, down the sixth floor corridor to another flight of stairs, until they stopped in front of a huge portrait of an overweight woman in pink. She knew it was the entrance to the Gryffindor Common Room, though she had only seen it on the Map.

"Flitterglibs," Ron said clearly, and the Portrait swung outward to reveal a hole behind it large enough to clamber through. They all piled in carefully, and Neville took her bag from Ron and led her to the furniture in front of the fire while Ron ran off to find his brother.

She had been sitting on one of the plushy red couches for only a minute or so when something that sounded like an avalanche came clambering down a nearby set of stairs. Judging by the number of stairs placed around the room, Rigel thought they must lead to dormitories. The crashing sound turned out to be Fred and George, both of whom were laughing uproariously as they pulled a protesting Ron along behind them.

"No, Fred, George," Ron grunted, "I have to get Percy, I don't have time for this!"

"Percy is incapacitated," George said in between laughs, "I promise you really don't want to see him right now, baby brother."

"No! Gred or Forge or whoever you are, let go of me! I need Percy right now-"

"Now, now, ickle Ronnikins," Fred said, "What could you possibly need Percy for when you've got us? Just tell us your little first-year woes and we promise not to mock you extensively."

"Unless you really, really deserve it," George grinned.

"Unless *you* can heal bones all of a sudden, you'd better go undo whatever you did to Percy so he can help me," Ron demanded, his face flaming like his hair as he huffed angrily.

The twins sobered up almost immediately.

"Broken bones, you say? We've some experience with those, haven't we Forge?" Fred said.

"Indeed we have, Gred," George said, "Depending on the type, of course. Whose bones did you break, Ron?" His eyes moved critically over Ron's thin form, "Cause all yours look just fine to me."

"Not me," Ron said tiredly, "Another first year fell down some stairs and his wrist looks pretty bad."

"Ooh, wrist bones are tricky," George said, "Tell him to go to the Hospital Wing."

"He hates Hospitals and Mediworkers," Ron explained, "Can't you do something to help? Or do I need to get Percy after all?"

"Oh, we can do something," Fred said cheerfully, "It'll hurt like Hell though."

Ron blanched, "Uh, never mind, then, I'll just..." he glanced helplessly over at the fireplace, where Neville was watching the exchange anxiously and Rigel listened amusedly. The twins followed his glance and broke into surprised grins.

"Rigel!" Fred cried happily, bounding over to where she sat, "What are you doing here?"

"We didn't expect to see you so soon, little snake," George's smile faded as he caught sight of her cradled wrist, "Oh, so the broken first-year is you, is it? We might have known."

"You do have a talent for falling down stairs, Puppy," Fred examined the break, then shook his head grimly, "I'm afraid we're going to have to amputate this."

Ron blanched again and Neville wobbled dangerously on his feet.

"Just kidding!" Fred said, "Actually, Fred and I break bones all the time."

"You're Fred today, you forgetful git," George said, rolling his eyes affectionately, "But he's right. We do. We can set it for you if you

really don't want to go to see Madam Pomfrey, but there are too many little bones in the wrist for me to risk fixing it magically myself. I can get them in about the right places, but they'll need to adjust by themselves a few millimeters here or there over the course of the healing."

"Yep. It'll have to heal on its own, which will take about, oh, seven weeks would you say?" Fred glanced at George.

"More like five, with all the ambient magic in this place helping out," George estimated, "But we can't numb it until after it's set, because the only numbing spell we know freezes the muscles as well to prevent usage."

Rigel nodded tightly, "Thanks. Just do it."

The Twins shrugged simultaneously. Ron looked on in horror as his brothers rolled up their sleeves ominously and Neville turned his face away, looking greener than Rigel.

"Hold still," Fred said, taking out his wand. He pointed it at the strap and used a Vanishing Spell to make it disappear and leave her hand dangling free. She moaned softly as the blood rushed freely through her wrist once more.

"I know, puppy," George said soothingly. Rigel wished her mum was there. Lily was the best at soothing, "Just a bit longer. You're going to feel a pop on three. One-"

He snapped out a word in Latin and Rigel blacked out again when she felt her bones grind against one another violently as they returned to their rightful places. The next she knew was a tanned hand shaking her as someone else conjured a stiff bandage around a wrist she could no longer feel.

"Rigel," George said, "It's okay now, Fred numbed and wrapped it, and it should stay numb until your body produces enough

endorphins on its own, but you need to eat a big dinner and make sure you position it so you can't roll onto it in your sleep tonight, ok?"

If anyone thought it was funny that a pair of third-year Gryffindors were mothering a first-year Slytherin in their own Common Room, no one laughed.

"It still looks awful," Neville said, peeking at the bandage, which went from Rigel's thumb to her elbow.

"Heh, I might have over-done the bandage a bit," Fred said, "Mum's way better at it. It's really not so bad, Neville. Rigel just won't be doing much left-handed for a while."

"It's not my stirring or chopping hand, anyway," Rigel mumbled, feeling slow and sleepy as her body pumped her with its own natural drugs.

"How're you going to explain this?" Ron asked keenly, "People will want to know what happened, and also why you didn't go to Madam Pomfrey."

"I would like to know that, too," George said mildly, "The last time you fell down a flight of stairs, we ran smack into you in the dark," his youngest brother sent him a questioning glance, which George ignored, "And you don't strike me as the clumsy sort, so who ran into you this time?"

"No one ran into me," she said honestly, "I tripped."

"Who tripped you, then?" Fred asked.

"I... don't know," she sighed, "They got me from behind. It could have been anyone, but it was on the fifth floor, East side..."

"So chances are, it's a Gryffindor," Ron said grimly, glancing around the Common Room.

"Maybe not," Rigel said, "It would be remarkably Slytherin to stage an attack as far from the snake den as possible."

"Either way, someone wants our new toy to be hurt," Fred said sadly, "I'm afraid when we find out who did this we'll have to show them what's what, Gred."

"Well, of course we will," George said, his casual words contrasting with his steady eyes, "Or my name isn't Forge."

After thanking Fred, George, Ron, and Neville for their help, and swearing them all to silence, Rigel made her way down toward the dungeons with her newly repaired book bag, courtesy of George. She'd fixed her bandage so that it was short but tight. It wrapped around her wrist and thumb, but at long as she let the arm hang by her side or kept it in her pocket (which she wasn't actually supposed to do, as it should be elevated, but needs must), the sleeves of her robes would cover it. As far as Rigel was concerned, no one ever needed to know of her injury. That would only lead to a trip to the Hospital Wing, and who knew what Madam Pomfrey would be able to tell with her experience as a Medi-witch? Rigel couldn't take the chance that the Healer would know a girl when she saw one, no matter her disguise.

She entered the Common Room quietly, but her labor of stealth was not to bear any fruit. She had barely closed the door when Pansy called out from one of the study tables, "Rigel, there you are."

Rigel turned just in time to see Draco's head whip around towards her with molten silver in his eyes. It was sort of pretty, but she didn't think it was a good sign. She walked in no hurry over to where they sat. Making sure her left hand was safely out of view, she placed her book bag on the table with her right hand and sat down next to Pansy, with Draco opposite them. She knew Draco was dying to know where she'd been, but she also knew he wouldn't ask out of pride, so she feigned ignorance, politely asking Pansy how her day was going instead of answering the myriad questions simmering in her friend's eyes.

"It's not going very well, I'm afraid," Pansy sniffed, "Certain nosy people kept wondering where you were, and of course I didn't know, and then there's this Charms assignment that doesn't make any sense," she sighed prettily, "I don't think I'm very good at Charms."

"I think your many charms are the best thing about you," Rigel said, summoning the energy to pull her own Charms assignment out of her bag.

"Oh, you know just what to say to make me feel better," Pansy smiled happily, "Let's get this finished so we can have the rest of the day off."

Rigel turned to her assignment. It was a worksheet that asked them to answer 'yes' or 'no' to whether they could lift each of the objects using 'Wingardium Leviosa' or not. There were things like apples, rocks, tree limbs, etc. Pansy kept practicing the Charm, trying to gauge whether it was strong enough to lift a dinner plate or not. Rigel just put 'no' for everything except 'a human' and called it done. Pansy finished hers soon after.

"Wonderful!" she said, rolling up her assignment, "I feel like going for a walk."

"Well, I haven't finished my Potions essay yet," Draco said moodily, "So I guess you'll have to run along without me."

"Actually, I haven't finished mine either," Rigel said, "But perhaps we can go walking another time, Pansy."

"But you looked like you finished yours in class Friday," Pansy said.

"And if you weren't in the Library working on our Charms and Potions assignments then what were you doing all day with your book bag?" Draco nodded his head at the bag that had brought her so much trouble that day.

"I got kicked out of the Library before I could get any work done. Then I went for a walk," Rigel said.

"Kicked out? What did you do?" Pansy asked.

"Nothing," Rigel shrugged.

Draco huffed exasperatedly, "Whatever. Let me see your Potions essay. I'm not sure mine makes any sense in the last section."

"I don't have it," Rigel said.

"Then go get it," Draco waved her toward the dorms.

"It's not there either. I finished it already and gave it to Professor Snape," Rigel said, pulling out a clean sheet of parchment with her right hand and carefully pinning it down with stones while she pulled her dicto-quill out as well.

"But you just said you hadn't finished it," even Pansy looked slightly exasperated with her now.

"Snape gave me another one to complete for Monday," Rigel said.

"Snape gave you extra work just for turning something in early?" Draco said, "Bad luck. He's usually nicer to Slytherins."

"No, I asked for the extra work," Rigel said absently, missing the look her friends exchanged that said Rigel was crazier than they'd thought, "Do you mind if I dictate my essay?" she asked Draco.

"Why don't you just write it?"

"I'm incredibly lazy," she said solemnly.

Pansy and Draco didn't seem like they believed her, but neither could come up with another reason why she'd want to dictate it, so they let it be. Draco shrugged his permission and Pansy left to find Blaise to escort her on a walk around the grounds.

"Quill start," Rigel said, and the dicto-quill sprung to upright attention over the parchment, "Essay on Nimue's Breath. New Line. Nimue's Breath, commonly called The Widow Maker for it's history as the main ingredient in Merlicide, the poison of choice for women seeking to murder their husbands, is a small, blue flower with sharp, black thorns. It is commonly found in dark, damp caves near salty bodies of water. The flower is the only part of the plant useful for Potions, and the flower is usually placed in the cauldron whole (unless the Potion specifically calls for the essence or perfume of Nimue's Breath, such as in certain inhibition-lowering Potions). As such, special care must be taken when harvesting to ensure the petals don't separate or become crushed. It is best to use a small, serrated knife made of anything but gold to cut the stem as close to the root as possible. The thorns are fewer at the base of the flower, although dragon hide or similar gloves are recommended to prevent pricks, because although the thorns are not poisonous like the flower is, any blood spilt over the flower causes it to lose it's potency immediately."

Rigel spoke smoothly, barely pausing between sentences, and soon Draco had forgotten his own essay in favor of just listening to his friend, who was more interesting than any book he'd ever read on Potions. Strangely enough, it wasn't the information that was interesting, for that could be found in any old book. It was simply the way Rigel said it. Like it was the most fascinating thing Rigel had ever known.

"Nimue's Breath is often mistaken for the Parcilia Flower, which is the same size, shape, and color. The Parcilia Flower isn't remotely poisonous, so it is important to differentiate between the two of them, but by no means should one check which flower they've come across by smell. There *is* a difference; Parcilia smells slightly like Lavender, while Nimue's Breath smells like honey and milk, but the smell of Nimue's Breath is what makes it so dangerous. The perfume released by the flower contains a chemical that temporarily shuts down the brain's ability to make logical deductions and stimulates the part that usually reacts to pleasure. Inhaling it directly causes a wizard to feel so irrationally happy and satisfied that he often refuses

to leave the flower, taking in more and more of the perfume and neglecting to do anything else until he either dies of dehydration or exposure or is rescued by someone unaffected. The Ancient Greeks had a myth about an island full of these flowers, which claimed them to be the creation of Orpheus. As long as one does not breathe in directly over the stamen, however, the perfume should not be a problem. New Line.

"Nimue's Breath is used in many variations of Merlicide and other basic poisons, and it is interesting to note that this flower is almost always used in the same manner. No matter which poison one is attempting to create, the base, usually composed of common herbs and spices boiled into water for the sole purpose of disguising the more distinctively poisonous ingredients, is prepared first. Next the Potioneer might add anything from nightshade to aconite, even common gnome poison, so long as whatever is added to the base is deadly. This is the poisonous component, which, if correctly proportioned, disappears completely into the base. Then, Nimue's Breath is added. It only takes a single flower, whole and untouched, placed in the mixture at boiling temperature. The flower dissolves instantly and leaves behind its entrancing perfume. Though it poisons the mind, Nimue's Breath is not deadly on its own. However, Nimue's Breath causes an already deadly poison to become irresistible to the drinker, who believes he is drinking the sweetest of nectar. It was common especially in the mid-fourteenth century for witches to slip a Potion laced with Nimue's Breath into their husband's food or drink, then simply watch as their victim gulped or gobbled the poison desperately, laughing as the victim demanded more of their own death. New Line.

"It is vital that Nimue's Breath be added to a Potion at boiling point; otherwise, instead of dissolving, the flower will either burst and disperse its fragrance into the brewer's face (if the base is too hot), or else congeal into a tar-like substance and stick annoyingly to the side of the cauldron (if it is too cool). Therefore, the flower must be added while brewing a poison for the first time. One cannot purchase or pre-make a poison, then add Nimue's Breath to it after re-heating

it to boiling point, because a second heating de-stabilizes most poisons and renders them either harmless or so acidic they smoke and eat through any goblet they are placed in, which defeats the purpose of the poisoning. New Line.

"Sometimes the essence or nectar of the Nimue's Breath flower is added in tiny doses to anti-inhibitors, such as certain alcoholic beverages, recreational drugs, or aphrodisiacs, but the essence is usually added just below boiling point, for better control of the way it disperses, and so it does not dissolve completely. One can recognize the presence of Nimue's Breath in one's drink by looking for a characteristic Mother-of-Pearl sheen out of the corner of one's eye. Nimue's Breath sells for approximately eleven sickles per flower, though it becomes more expensive during the flood season due to the increased difficulty in procuring it as the snow melts and its natural caves fill with water. Stop Quill."

Rigel cast drying sand on the parchment evenly, glad she didn't have to go back and cut things out, as it looked to be right about ten inches. She turned to see if Draco still needed help with his essay, but he wasn't working on it, and the tip of his quill had long since dried of ink. The blonde was staring at her like a kid staring through the bars of the Big Cats exhibit at the zoo. Rigel was half-tempted to yawn widely, as she'd seen a lion do to great effect when she and Archie had gone once, but suspected her teeth weren't quite so impressive.

Draco swallowed heavily before he spoke, as if he'd let saliva pool in his mouth for some time. Rigel wondered if she'd bored him into a stupor and he'd started drooling (or at least the closest a Malfoy came to drooling), like Goyle did during History of Magic.

"Why are you even in Potions?" Draco asked bluntly. Rigel raised an eyebrow to communicate her confusion. Draco ran a hand through his hair, something he seemed to do a lot around her, saying, "I mean, it sounds like you already know *everything*. You should be teaching this stuff or something."

"Maybe I know more than the other first-years," Rigel said, frowning, "Though I still don't see why parents wouldn't teach their kids this stuff, but by Potions Master standards I'm a raw beginner. Knowledge of ingredients and recipes to a Potions Master is like knowing the ABC's is to a great poet. I've learned all I can on my own, but I need years of instruction before I can even qualify for Journeyman status. I have to know much more than facts about components. I have to develop instincts, and learn the things they don't put in books, because they're only guesses someone's made off of intuition and there's not a clear logic behind them. Not to mention there are tons of Potions I only know in theory, because the ingredients are only sold to licensed Potioneers, and they all require different techniques for stirring and timing, and things which can only be worked out in practice, and-"

"Okay, okay," Draco held his hands out in surrender, "I get it, you're not quite at Snape's level yet."

"As if I'll ever be," Rigel sighed.

"Is my Godfather really that good?" Draco asked skeptically, "I mean, he spends his time teaching kids, after all."

"He's the best in all Britain," Rigel said with steady conviction, "His work is on the cutting edge of Potion's research. He's invented several original Potions recipes, not to mention significant improvements to Potions like Wolfsbane and Blood-Replacement Serum, which are notoriously hard to work with. But it's not just his physical contributions to the science of Potions," Rigel tried to explain, "It's his understanding of the *art* of it. All the articles in publications like *Potions Today*, *Cauldron Quarterly*, and such are impressive intellectually, but Snape's articles are the ones you read again. The way he writes about Potions is like the way other people *breathe* . Reading it, you can only think that, to Professor Snape, Potions *is* breathing. It's all so natural to him, and he manipulates a cauldron like it's an extension of himself-that's how good he is. That's the whole reason I'm here," Rigel spoke directly from her heart, "To

learn from the best, so that someday, Potions is like breathing to me, too."

"Well," Draco cleared his throat, obviously taken aback by her uncharacteristic fervor, "I'm sure if anyone can surpass Snape, it's you, Rigel. In fact," he smiled across the table at her, "I'm going to be proud to say I know you, one day. I can tell."

Rigel ran her right hand across her face embarrassedly, "Ah, thanks. Sorry I just went off on you like that. You caught me in Potions-mode, I'm afraid."

"No problem," Draco said, though he truthfully still seemed a bit dazed, "It was really interesting, anyway. I never knew all that stuff about my Godfather. He doesn't like to boast about his work. I think that's why he and Father get along so well," Draco smiled wryly, "Father hates people who boast."

Good to know for when I meet him, Rigel noted silently.

"Well, anyway, still need help with your essay?" Rigel asked awkwardly. She couldn't believe she'd spouted off like an obsessive Potions encyclopedia again. Archie would have slapped her by now, if he had been here.

"Sure," Draco grinned, "If you look over it before I turn it in, I'm sure to get a good mark."

Rigel reached across the table for Draco's essay, remembering just in time not to use her left hand. It was going to take some practice before she managed to make using one hand for everything look natural. She was hoping no one would get suspicious simply because they had no reason to be. Without the suggestion of duplicity, most people wouldn't bother to look for it. And really, why would anyone care that she'd injured her hand in the first place?

After all their assignments were completed (the ones Draco knew about, at least), Draco informed Rigel they were going outside to

practice their flying. Rigel politely refused, citing exhaustion that was in no way feigned, and Draco leveled a solemn look at her through his bangs.

"Rigel, I've barely seen you in days," he said, face intent as he watched her reaction to his brazen exaggeration carefully, "Tryouts are next weekend for Slytherin, because Gryffindor moved theirs up so early this year, and they just changed that dumb rule about first-years trying out for the House teams a few years ago, so we should take advantage of it."

That wasn't exactly true, Rigel thought. The rules about first-years having brooms and being on the House teams were changed almost immediately after muggleborns were banned from the school. The argument was that the rules were only put in place to even the playing field and give muggle-raised kids, who hadn't had exposure to brooms like pureblooded children, a fair shot at competing by requiring a year of Flying lessons before eligibility to play. The repeals had happened about twenty years ago, when Mr. Riddle's Political Party had gained enough clout to push his anti-muggle legislation packages through the Wizengamot.

Draco's expression was so earnestly imploring, however, that Rigel's resistance crumbled. The blonde boy was endearing himself to her at an alarming rate. She tried mentally overlaying his face with something ferocious, that she could mentally resist, but all she came up with was the face of a stray Labrador she'd found out in the rain once. It suited him, in a quirky way that Archie would appreciate, but she recognized that it made it even harder to say no to Draco when all she could think about was poor, wet puppies.

So it was that twenty minutes later found Rigel on the Quidditch Pitch, holding an old school broom in her right hand and wondering how in Merlin's name she was going to play one-on-one Quidditch with only one good hand, while not letting on that she was doing so.

Normally, it would be the kind of challenge she enjoyed, or at least didn't shirk from. All positions in Quidditch involved some one-

handed flying, of course, and beaters more than any, spending the entire game with one hand gripping a bat, but there was a difference between flying with one hand free and flying with no hand to grip the broom, while protecting an injured hand against jostling-a hand that ached like anything under G-forces, despite the numbing spell.

Still, if Archie had wanted to go Flying, she'd have gone with him no matter what, and Draco was her friend just the same, only newer, she figured, so she told herself to suck it up, for her friend's sake. With this attitude in mind, Rigel mounted her broom and accepted a beater's bat from Draco, who also tied a bag of golden-colored orbs that looked a bit like golf balls to her broom. Draco was riding the latest Comet, and leaped into the sky so fast he might have been a firework, just waiting to be set off. She held on to her own broom with her knees, cradling her left hand in her lap, so that from a distance it looked like she was holding on with that hand (albeit with an incorrect grip).

Draco wanted to try out for seeker, so Rigel helped him practice by using her bat to propel the small, gold balls through the air with as much speed as she could manage for him to catch. Beater was Rigel's favorite position to play, and the one she probably would have tried out for, if circumstances were different. After Sirius' letter, she had thought she might actually try out anyway, and deal with any issues as they arose, but now that her wrist was useless, she supposed she'd have to lie to Archie's dad again and tell him she simply hadn't made the team this year.

Draco wasn't too bad as far as she could tell. Rigel wasn't swinging the bat with her usual speed, due to having less leverage without an extra hand bracing her, but her aim was fine, even if it was a bit difficult to set her bat across her lap, grab a ball and toss it into the air, then swiftly grip her bat and swing it to intercept the ball midair all with the same hand. Rigel gave Draco a good workout by sending the little balls one way, then the other, for about an hour. It was too dark to take out a real snitch by then, so she and Draco practiced flying maneuvers-well, Draco showed her all his tricks and Rigel

concentrated on staying steady in the air and not letting her discomfort show in her face or body language.

Ten minutes before dinner, they headed inside. Draco was grinning confidently, hair stuck wildly about his head and cheeks flushed from the exercise. Rigel's face was pale, and she was sweating. She knew she probably looked very out of shape, when in reality it wasn't a sweat she'd worked up strenuously, but a cold sweat, from the small waves of nausea and pain that had lapped at her for the last half-hour or so. But while she looked like an over-heated mess (not helped by the slight fever she was running as her body fought off possible infections as a reaction to physical trauma), Draco looked like he'd stepped out of a 1940's add for muggle aeronauts. She could easily picture him with one of those long military scarves and a set of pilot goggles perched atop his head.

He was still talking animatedly about their practice as they sat between Pansy and Nott in the Great Hall, "You're really not that bad on a broom," he was saying, "It's hard to balance with only one hand while swinging a bat if you're not used to it."

"It was quite a challenge," Rigel said, serving herself a large bowl of pasta. Usually she didn't eat many carbohydrates, as they sat heavily in her stomach, and she felt even less inclined toward them than usual with her nausea, but her body needed the energy to heal.

"Yeah," Draco grinned sideways at her, "Don't worry too much about your horrible aim, though. It was actually *more* challenging, trying to catch all your wild, off-target hits."

Rigel smiled enigmatically at her friend, wondering how long it would take him knowing her before he learned to give her a little more credit. Just what did he think she *should* have been aiming at? Him? That would hardly help him get better, since she doubted the snitch would fly *toward* him in a game. Then again, most people never imagined an eleven-year-old could be so deliberate in their actions, so Rigel didn't blame Draco for his easy assumptions.

"Are you guys trying out for the team next Saturday, then?" Nott asked over his kidney pie.

"Yes," Draco said, "I'm for seeker."

"No," Rigel said.

"You could," Draco said supportively, "You could be a keeper. They don't have to aim in order to hit or shoot anything."

"Maybe next year," Rigel said.

"Well, good luck, Draco," Nott said.

"Thanks, Theo."

Rigel wondered when her roommates had switched to first names, and what else she'd missed while being preoccupied with duplicity and blackmail and ambitions the past week.

Rigel excused herself from dinner early and made her way back to the dorms. Her plan was to wake up early the next day and find a way into the Library, so she could finish those essays and mail them back to Flint. As a last resort, she could always use the invisibility cloak. She just wanted to get all of Flint's assignments out of the way so she could spend the week concentrating on her own schoolwork.

She was so tired, mentally and physically, from her first day off that she fell asleep without even bothering to take off her shoes or pull her hangings. Her broken wrist was held protectively against her side, and her last, ominous thought before dropping like a stone into the River Sleep was that she still had no idea who wanted her hurt badly enough to hex her down a flight of stone steps in broad daylight.

[end of chapter nine].

A/N: Almost 8000 words ^^ a new record! Thanks again to you wonderful people who review, it means so much, and this chapter

was for you. It's good to be back in the States, where there is a house with internet and therefore happiness (although if you live in Europe, don't get me wrong-it was *amazing*).

Chapter 10

A/N: None of the recognizable plot, people, etc, belongs to me, non-profit etc.

A/N2 : The consensus online is that a roll of parchment is about 15 inches, and that's usually what people sell them in increments of now a days as well, so that's the assumption I'm using for this fic.

A/N3: Thank you thank you to: DwellingOnDreams7 and TamariChan for your reviews on chapter nine. I love reviews so much! I thought when I first published it that I wouldn't care what people wrote about my story-but I do ^^, it's somehow more exciting to write and publish when I know someone is reading, so thank you from the murky blue places in my soul. That said, would it be annoying if I responded personally to each review at the beginning of every chapter like some writers do? Should I respond in a private message? Anyway, thank for everything.

The Pureblood Pretense :

Chapter 10 :

Sunday began less optimistically than Saturday, but much more creatively. Rigel was up before even the sun, quietly gathering her school bag and leaving her two roommates dozing quietly behind their velvet hangings. She had a tentative plan in mind that had the benefit of appeasing her curiosity while also helping her finish Flint's essays. Map in hand, Rigel made her way carefully through the basement corridors, which were above the dungeons, but below the ground floor. She had already explored some of the basement with Pansy on their first walk, but they'd only gotten as far as the Hufflepuff common room before heading up to breakfast. A part of her, the part that liked to glory over secret Potions knowledge in the dark of the night and the part that would rather do important things

alone, in case they went badly, than accept the help of a friend, was glad she would be exploring this next corridor of the basement alone.

The still-life portrait was hard to miss, being several times larger than she was, but even though the Map was clear about what to do next, Rigel felt extremely foolish as she stretched out her right hand toward the bowl of fruit. She copied the tiny figure on the Map and tentatively tickled the giant green pear. It giggled, which was perhaps more startling than it should have been, and Rigel thought she saw it grow an eye and wink at her before the portrait swung inwards. Rigel grinned in undisguised triumph-there was no one around, after all, and besides-she'd just found the kitchens.

Unexpectedly, and in flagrant disregard to the probabilities of architecture, the kitchens were at least as big as the Great Hall. Taking in the five long tables, situated in exactly the same manner as the House and Staff tables, Rigel realized the kitchens must be exactly beneath the Great Hall, and that food was somehow transferred vertically up through the ceiling once it was placed on the tables in the kitchen. Also unexpectedly, the kitchens were a great deal noisier than the Great Hall during meal times, which Rigel hadn't thought even magically possible. Pots and pans were being whisked from surface to surface by house-elves, clanging and occasionally crashing into one another. There was a huge fireplace that roared impressively every time the grate was opened to add something to the pots of stew levitating over the flames. Rhythmic chopping and slicing noises came from elves cutting vegetables and timers seemed to go off every few seconds, blending together in a way that Rigel would have found impossible to keep straight. Yet, woven through the chaos, there was order, or at least there seemed to be some kind of plan. The elves danced around one another, apparently thinking nothing of bare-misses with sharp knives and boiling hot sauces, in a kind of beautiful pageantry that it would have taken humans years to even choreograph, much less attempt to execute.

Rigel stood uncomfortably to the side, intimidated by the sense of purpose all the house-elves were displaying, and definitely not wanting to cause a snag in the whole process by interrupting one of them. Within a couple minutes, however, and with no cue that Rigel could pick up, a house elf with a pink tea cozy around her waist and a necklace of champagne corks broke from the ranks and cheerfully approached her.

"Hello," the house-elf squeaked, curtsying gracefully, "We is very sorry for the wait. What can Binny do for you?"

"Hi, Binny," Rigel crouched down so she was on Binny's level, "I don't want to bother you if you're busy making breakfast, but I was hoping someone here could help me with something."

"Binny is not busy, Binny is on her..." the house-elf moved her face closer, whispering, " *break*," like it was a filthy word.

"Oh, well, I wouldn't want to take up your break, either," Rigel said uncertainly, unable to tear her eyes from Binny's luminous gaze.

"Oh, please, Young Sir," Binny glanced around nervously, "Dumblydoor is making us take breaks from cooking every hour, but you is not needing help cooking, is you?"

"Well, no-"

"Then Binny is helping you!" the elf squealed happily.

Rigel smiled ruefully at the happy little creature, "Alright, I won't tell Dumbledore if you won't."

Binny made an exaggerated zipping motion across her lips, bouncing on her toes excitedly. She reminded Rigel of a cute little five-year-old girl, and Rigel had to sternly remind herself not to talk down to the elf, who was probably much older than she was, anyway.

"I need to disguise myself," Rigel explained, "Not for anything bad!" she added, seeing Binny's look of dismay, "I'm not going to use it to break any school rules, I promise, but I need a uniform that doesn't have a Slytherin crest on it."

Binny frowned dejectedly into Rigel's face, "We is not supposed to be helping students with mischief."

"It's not even for mischief," Rigel said, "I'm going to use it to study, actually."

Binny blinked slowly, "You is telling the truth. Binny can tell."

"Then can you help me?" Rigel smiled imploringly at the house elf, "You guys do the laundry, right? Surely you could let me borrow another student's dirty robe, if I bring it back tonight so it can be returned?"

Binny shook her head fiercely, her ears swinging wildly, "No, no, no. We can't be giving you other students' dirty clothes."

"Oh," Rigel sighed, "I understand. I wouldn't want to get you into trouble."

Binny bounced nervously on her feet again, then froze, a look of fearful enlightenment dawning on her expressive face. She darted suspicious glances at all the other house-elves, none of whom were so much as glancing their way, then leaned even closer and said, "Is you losing one of your robes?"

"What?" Rigel whispered back, frowning in bemusement.

"You is!" Binny squealed loudly, and Rigel jumped with surprise, "If you is losing a robe, you is coming with me! The lost and found pile is right through here!" Binny pitched her voice above the clanking of dishes and winked broadly at Rigel before taking off through the melee. Rigel scrambled to keep up, ducking and even jumping

various bowls of food as she followed Binny over to a door on the other side of the kitchens.

She emerged in a much quieter, but not much smaller room, which was filled with huge vats of water and lined on every side by labeled laundry bins. There had to be at least one for each dormitory in the whole school, judging by sheer numbers. Binny was waving her impatiently toward the right side of the room, where there was a large bin nearly overflowing with clothes that was labeled "Lost and Found."

"Here you is," Binny grinned triumphantly up at her, "Since you is wanting to find some robes, you must be losing them first. There is all kinds of lost things in here, and maybe you be finding something you is *losing* in here, yes, Young Sir?"

" *Ooh*," Rigel smiled back at Binny, "Yes, how silly of me, I'm sure I lost something I need to find in here. Thank you, Binny." She surveyed the bin critically. It looked like there was everything from Quidditch uniforms to high-heeled shoes inside. It was perfect.

"You better be taking anything you is finding," Binny said seriously, "If you is coming back for it later, it is maybe not being here."

"Do people usually come back for their things, then?" Rigel pursed her lips, she didn't like the idea of stealing anything someone actually wanted.

"Oh, no, Young Sir," Binny shook her head for emphasis, "No one is ever coming for these things, but they is going sometimes."

"Going where?" Rigel asked curiously.

"To the Room of Lost Things," Binny said matter-of-factly, "If it is being lost for long enough, or if it is being lost on purpose, it sometimes is going to the Room."

"How can you lose something on purpose?" Rigel wondered aloud.

"Maybe you is not wanting to be finding it again," Binny shrugged her bony little shoulders.

"Or just not wanting anyone else to find it," Rigel said thoughtfully, "It sounds like a room for hiding things. Interesting."

"Hiding or losing, if you is wanting to find something from the bin, you is not wanting it to go there, is you?" Binny said logically.

"I suppose not," Rigel smiled, "Thank you, Binny, you've been really helpful."

"You is welcome," Binny cocked her head at a sound Rigel didn't catch, "Binny is going back to work now. Good luck with your finding, Young Sir."

Binny left toward the kitchen at a happy run, and Rigel turned toward the Lost and Found bin and eyed it determinately. Time to find a disguise that would fool the Library troll. She began the painstaking (because she only had one good hand) process of taking things out and sorting them into two piles; one pile for things that looked like they might fit her (and weren't totally out of place, like the hoop skirt or the coattails), and one pile for the things that clearly wouldn't work. By the time she had gotten to the bottom of the bin, she had enough for several different disguises, which would be good in case Madam Pince unmasked one of her disguises unexpectedly.

Rigel now had one school robe for each of the other three Houses, complete with House crest on the chest pocket and colored ties to match. The sleeves on all three robes were long enough to cover her bandage, but not so long it was obvious they weren't hers. She found a pair of glasses that were just a little crooked, which she kept, and a fake handlebar mustache, which she immediately discarded as ridiculous. She also had picked out three wigs from a collection of eight she'd found in the bin. She wondered at how many people must simply forget about their Halloween costumes once the opportunity to wear them had passed. The wigs were an unexpected boon. Rigel had been planning on using one of the abandoned

Potions workrooms in the dungeons to mix up some basic hair dyes, but had been worried that the dye wouldn't take very well to her black hair. It would also be hard to explain if she forgot to wash it out. She had one redheaded wig that was shaggy and sort of curly around the ends, as well as a mousy-brown colored wig that featured pin-straight, ear-length hair. Her third wig was to be a last resort, she decided. It was a girl's wig, with long, blonde hair that was neatly braided, and had straight-cut bangs. It was to be a very last resort.

She gathered her spoils together under one arm and tried to figure out a way to get them back into the dorms without anyone noticing. By the time she'd put everything back in the bins, there were bound to be other Slytherins awake in the common room, not to mention her roommates. Rigel struck upon inspiration when she glanced over the laundry bins lining the room. There was really no reason it wouldn't work...

Rigel moved to the nearest bin. It was labeled: Ravenclaw 4-G-1. She peered inside, feeling oddly uncomfortable, and saw that unlike the Lost and Found bin, this one was separated into parts. There were five segments in the bin, and on cursory inspection all of them seemed to have female accoutrements mixed in with the generic school robes. Working from the guess that that one was the first bin for the fourth-year Ravenclaw girls, Rigel made her way around the room until she came to the bin that read: Slytherin 1-B-2. Sure enough, inside there were three segments, and in one of them she recognized Archie's bright gold boxer shorts (Why, Archie, why?). She chose one set of robes for use right then and stuffed the rest down into her section of the laundry bin, along with the two extra wigs. The redheaded wig she kept, and stored carefully with the glasses and the red and gold tie in her book bag.

She left the laundry room carrying the Gryffindor robes (with the crest hidden) and politely thanked Binny for helping her "find" her lost robes on her way through the kitchens, which were noticeably less busy than before. Binny winked cheerfully at her from behind a huge bowl of strawberries and told her to come back and visit soon.

Rigel rolled the extra robes up using her knee as an awkward sort of table and pushed them into her book bag too, grateful for the undetectable expansion charm Sirius had added, in case his son needed to carry suspiciously-shaped objects casually. She headed for the Great Hall, assuming that if the kitchens were slowing, breakfast must be starting.

She didn't get any questions over breakfast about where she had been all morning, and no one seemed to think it odd that her left hand was kept in her lap at all times. Rigel used the opportunity to scarf down her porridge as fast as she could manage while staying within the bounds of proper Slytherin decorum. She smiled gratefully at her friends, trying to tell them without words that she appreciated them leaving her alone about her strange schedule, and as soon as she'd downed her glass of pumpkin juice, she took off again, determined to finish those essays before lunch.

Rigel chose the bathroom closest to the Library to change in, since that way less people would see her wandering around the school disguised as a student who didn't exist. She swapped robes, placing her Slytherin robes in her book bag, and listened carefully to make sure she was alone. She emerged from the stall and made her way to one of the sinks, wetting her hair with water until she could slick it back enough for the wig to hide it. The wig was almost impossible to force on one-handed, but Rigel eventually managed it, heart beating fast as she thought that someone could walk in any second. She made a face at the feel of the scratchy underside of the wig sliding against wet hair as she adjusted it, and decided she'd have to come up with a better way for keeping her hair back eventually. When it was settled, she turned to the mirror. A boy with flat, grey eyes and messy, red hair looked back at her. She thought she looked a bit like a Weasley, which was why she chose the Gryffindor robes for this wig. Hopefully, Madam Pince cared too much about her books to keep all the students straight, and a red-headed Gryffindor was a common enough sight not to cause the old woman to be suspicious.

Rigel put the large, round glasses on her nose, and stepped back to take in the effect. With the glasses on, her grey contacts, which looked strange with red hair, were fairly obscured, and thankfully the glasses were reading glasses, not prescription, so they didn't mess with her already corrected vision much. In a flash of inspiration, Rigel rooted in her bag for her pot of ink. She carefully watered down a small amount until it was a murky grey and then dabbed the ink across her nose and cheeks with the point of her quill. She couldn't help but chuckle a bit at her reflection, which looked quite silly up close, but when she moved further away the ink blurred into freckles and she thought she looked like a passably different person.

Satisfied, she stored the ink and straightened her robes, trying to look Gryffindor. After a few minutes of staring blankly at her reflection, she realized she had no idea how to look Gryffindor, or even what that would entail, so she mentally shrugged and hoped she could count on people seeing what they expected to.

The Library was quiet so early on a Sunday, though she didn't doubt it would be bustling that evening, when students tried to finish their homework all at once. Rigel casually looked away from the checkout desk as she entered, walking in a bee-line toward the History section. She found the books she needed for the goblin rebellion essay easily, but decided to take them out one at a time, in case Madam Pince remembered recommending them to her, and she didn't think she could carry all three with one hand, anyway. So, with the book on the economy of the sixteenth century in hand, she grabbed a table and got to work.

The glasses were annoying, but she learned quickly to slip them low on her face and read over the top of the lenses if she didn't want to go cross-eyed. The wig was itchy, but she dared not scratch at it, and strands of red hair kept falling into her line of sight and making her twitch with surprise. She finished the History essay an hour later, however, and the books on *Venimus Tentacula* were thankfully easy to find in the Herbology section.

She found one with colored illustrations and set to trying her hand at labeled diagrams. She sketched (not easy with a quill) and labeled and tried artfully varying her line thickness like the book did, and when she leaned back to appraise the end result, she nearly cried. It was awful. It looked like a five-year-old had scribbled on the page and then someone else had gone back and written a bunch of meaningless words around the edges. Her rendition really looked more like the giant squid than the plant she was trying to draw, which, she defended herself, might have something to do with all the tentacles. Rigel crumpled her pitiful attempt into a ball and tapped her fingers against the table agitatedly. She couldn't mail the essay back without the diagram, but she couldn't ask anyone for help with drawing it, because it would be completely obvious that she was doing an older student's assignment.

She supposed she could... she glanced at Madam Pince surreptitiously and cringed when she saw that the old woman was screeching quietly at a cowering Ravenclaw, who appeared to have dog eared a couple pages in a book he checked out. No, she definitely didn't want to risk being caught *actually* defacing a book. Still, she couldn't think of any other way to get a decent diagram short of art lessons, and besides, Rigel argued to herself, it's not like she was going to make the book unreadable. No one would even be able to tell when she was done. She moved her book bag carefully over in front of her on the table so that it blocked the view of her immediate workspace from Madam Pince. With her left elbow bracing the book open, she began slowly and carefully tracing the lines of the book's illustration in ink. The ink pooled and sat wetly on the top of the page, not soaking in a bit as she'd expected, and Rigel breathed a sigh of relief; the book had been magically waterproofed, so it wouldn't actually take any damage from this. Still, she mentally vowed, when she got her allowance she would buy another copy of this book and donate it anonymously to the Library in penance for being willing to damage it.

Once she had traced all the major lines over in ink, she used her teeth to hold one edge and her right hand to hold the other, and

slowly lowered her parchment down onto the wet page. The ink soaked up into the parchment perfectly, and when she pulled the parchment away, not thinking about how stupid she must look with parchment held delicately between her front teeth, she had a rough tracing of the plant diagram that was in the book. She set her stolen illustration aside and blotted the Library book carefully, leaving it to dry completely before she shut it again. Rigel sighed with relief that Pince hadn't noticed, and filled in her tracing with details and labels until it was finished.

The rest of Flint's homework was much easier to complete. Though the Herbology and Potions essays were the longest, she knew far more about the topics, so it was a work of an hour and a half to finish both of them. She returned the books while the sand was drying and, after painstakingly packing up her things one-handed, she averted her face once more on the way out the door. Rigel was more than happy to be able to take off the wig and glasses and wipe the "freckles" off her face in the nearest bathroom. That particular disguise would take some getting used to.

Once more herself, she decided it would be best to get the trip to the Owlrey out of the way first, and then spend the rest of the day with Draco and Pansy, if they weren't busy.

Rigel made her way carefully up the steep steps leading the Owlrey. The late morning wind was bracing, and she kept her chin tucked into her collar to keep her nose warm. Unfortunately, she sacrificed much of her line of sight in order to shelter her face from the elements, and the strength of the wind so high up dried out her contacts and forced her to blink rapidly and squint. It was because of all this, she thought, that she didn't see the small girl in blonde pigtails coming down the stairs until she had run smack into her. Later, as her left wrist throbbed in time with her heartbeat, she would wonder rather uncharitably just what the blonde girl's excuse was, but the pain of collision as it happened transcended even bitter thoughts.

Both girls gasped as they fell sideways into the railing, Rigel with muted agony and the other girl with surprise and fear. The railings were quite strong, not even shaking as they took the full brunt of the girls' (admittedly meager) weight, but the little blonde cried out with terror and clutched desperately to Rigel's right arm (her left arm having been unceremoniously yanked out of the other girl's reach).

Three calming breathes later, Rigel felt safe in unclenching her teeth.

"Are you alright?" Rigel asked automatically, though she knew it was her who was the most adversely affected by the fall.

"I think so," the girl, clearly a first-year Hufflepuff from her yellow and black tie and submissive expression, sniffed woefully up at Rigel. She had sunk to the hard steps immediately upon realizing they were both still alive and, still holding onto Rigel's arm, had dragged her down into a sort of pseudo-crouch. Rigel smiled as politely as she could and stood, firmly pulling her arm up, intending to make the girl relinquish it. Instead, she clung tighter to Rigel's arm and used it to lever herself back into a standing position as well. "I'm so sorry," she moaned, patting her hair back into place nervously, "I wasn't looking where I was going, but I didn't mean to run into anyone, I swear."

She seemed genuinely flustered, so Rigel gamely ignored the shooting pain in her wrist and offered her good hand as a gesture of forgiveness, "No problem. I'm Rigel Black."

The girl's smile froze on her face as her eyes darted to Rigel's green and silver tie, then to the crest on her robes, as if there was some mistake, then back to Rigel's face. Her cheeks turned a miserable shade of pink and she took Rigel's hand in her pale, shaking one, "H-Hannah Abbott. Sorry, so sorry, Black, I didn't mean... I mean, you're not... angry, are you?"

Rigel purposely softened her gaze, shaking the girl's hand as gently and kindly as she could, "Of course not, it was just an accident," she

smiled with equanimity she didn't feel, "Pleased to meet you, Miss Abbott. I recognize you now, from the sorting."

"Oh," Abbott looked confused, as if she'd expected Rigel to curse her *after* helping her up off the cold steps and introducing herself, "Yes." She stared dazedly at Rigel for long enough that Rigel's fake smile began to feel even more stiff, and then she blinked, turned yet a different shade of pink, and hurried off down the stairs, pigtails flying behind her in the wind.

"Right," Rigel muttered, adjusting her bag on her shoulder and thinking it would be a miracle if she got these essays to Flint in one piece.

She chose a nondescript school owl to carry her essays, which she had stacked and rolled together as if they were one thick letter. She thought it would be less suspicious that way. With a feeling of relief, Rigel took the stairs back down to the seventh floor, this time with her eyes wide open despite the wind. She was in a good mood, ignoring the extra ache in her wrist. She felt free for the first time in days. It was the first time she'd really taken a moment to appreciate the novelty of her current circumstances. Here she was—a halfblood—at Hogwarts, the school of dreams (if you listened to her father talk about it), and she was studying under the brightest mind in her prospective field. Who cared about an injured wrist or a little blackmail between causal acquaintances in light of all that had gone gloriously *right* in the past week?

Rigel by-passed the secret passage to the third floor in favor of taking a new route down to the dungeons. One should never pass up an opportunity to explore. She perused the Map and eventually decided to take the Northwest stairs down to the fifth floor, then cut across that to the Main Stairs. She stowed the Map in her bag and headed North (having just come out of the West tower), stopping whenever something looked interesting to investigate.

She was just starting down the relatively secluded Northwest stairs when they disappeared out from under her. She dropped straight

down, breath caught on a yell, foot unable to find purchase, hand missing the railing by scant inches, and in the same, disorienting instant a jet of hot air whistled over her head in a confusion of red light. In the next moments, she became aware of several things: she hadn't fallen through a trap door, but had rather fallen prey to the stone-like jaws of a particularly nasty trick stair, which had swallowed her right leg in a clamp up to mid-thigh. Her one good hand had found purchase on the stair above her and was currently assisting her left leg in keeping her from falling into the staircase up to her crotch, which was bound to be painful even if she *wasn't* a real boy, and her left arm was curled tightly against her chest. Her book bag had landed a few steps down the stairs and was out of reach, along with her wand (much good though it would have undoubtedly done her). Also, someone had sent a curse at her, and missed when their target had unexpectedly moved two feet downwards.

Rigel tried to twist her body around but cursed when her grip on the smooth stone step failed her and she sank another few inches into the trap. She gritted her teeth and braced the elbow of her uninjured arm against the step above her, craning her neck over her shoulder to try and catch a second attack. None came. Instead, she heard footsteps approaching the landing. If only she could see -

The footsteps came closer. They paused at what Rigel estimated was about the top of the stairs, just a few meters behind her, but she couldn't get her torso to move that way with two limbs braced and the other two useless. There was a window on the left side of the landing, and whoever it was must have passed in front of it, because suddenly there was a silhouette drawn in shadow below her on the right side of the stairwell. Rigel thought she could make out long hair and medium height and then the shadow's arm rose in an arch and she heard something clunk onto the stair behind her. Whatever it was exploded before she could curl her head away and a stench she was disgustingly familiar with assaulted her nose and mouth. Her eyes watered and she sneezed violently several times. She blearily watched the shadow retreat and heard the footsteps running fast away from the scene, and then she was coughing, unable to move

away from the source of the horrid smell or even cover her airways properly while holding herself half-out of the trick stair.

The dung bomb rolled into view, taunting her from its position just far enough from her left ear so as to be impossible to nudge down the stairs. She wriggled again, now struggling out of pure stubbornness, but gave up again after several minutes and mentally bemoaned her current predicament. *Curse my awful luck with stairs! This stupid trick step wasn't even on the Map*, she huffed sulkily before realizing she should probably be grateful she got stuck in a stair instead of struck by an unfamiliar spell. For all she knew, the trick step had saved her from a terrible fate. Still, it was hard to be appreciative while lying in stone quicksand.

Just when she thought the situation couldn't possibly get any worse, she heard the sound of harsh, growling laughter coming from the upper landing. She'd been so busy glaring at the dung bomb and fuming over yet another stair-related catastrophe that she failed to notice the new silhouette adorning the stairwell wall. This one was taller, broader, and before she could be thankful that at least it wasn't her attacker, she recognized the laughter and realized who it was .

"Well, here's something you don't see every day," heavy footsteps marked the newcomer's progress toward her entanglement, "And to think I had begun feeling guilty for taking up your free time, when it appears that even with the extra work you still have the leisure to sprawl carelessly about the castle-and in the Gryffin's territory, no less."

Ugh. Flint . Rigel fought a grimace as the older Slytherin appeared in her peripheral vision. He had his hand to his chin in exaggerated contemplation and made a great show of examining her position from all angles before stopping on the steps just below the one she was trapped in. Even though he was standing on a lower step, she had to stretch her neck to meet his eyes, and he made no move to bend over or crouch down for her sake.

"You know," he said thoughtfully, "I don't think you're supposed to do it like that."

Rigel sighed, the sound less exasperated and more desperate than she'd intended, "Will you please help me out of here, Flint?"

"Why can't you get yourself out?" he asked, putting his hands in his pockets to demonstrate his unwillingness to assist her.

"I'm not strong enough to pry the trap apart," *with one hand*, "my wand is out of reach, and I can't pull my leg straight out without skinning it until the trap is disabled," she said, trying without much success to keep her voice even. She was nearly panting with the effort of holding herself out of the step for so long; even with her other leg for leverage, she was slowly sinking, centimeter by centimeter.

Flint seemed to consider this very carefully. He hemmed and hawed and shifted ingenuously from foot to foot, all the while watching Rigel wait and sweat, like a dark-winged god of judgment meting out punishment and reward from his gilded throne. Eventually he snapped his fingers as if happening on a brilliant idea and smiled down at her, "Maybe you should try using both hands."

Rigel nearly growled, "I can't."

"Hmm..." Flint tapped his foot slowly, "Well if you can't, you can't. I guess I can help you out. Here, take my hand."

He reached out, sticking said appendage lazily in her direction. He didn't bend down nearly enough for her to grasp his hand with her right one without falling the rest of the way into the trap, and from the sharp grin on his face he knew that. He also probably realized that even if she did give him her hand, he'd just be scraping her leg raw if he tried to directly pull her out. She glared up at him mutinously.

"Perhaps you could just pry open the stair? Or better yet, disable the trap," she said.

"What, don't you trust me?" he stretched his hand a little further, teasingly brushing his fingertips across her head. Rigel jerked her head away pointedly, "Well, alright, no need to be rude about it," he laughed again, "And just how do you propose I disable this little mechanism?"

"Usually there's a switch on the underside of the railings near the trick step," Rigel said.

Flint sighed, but dutifully checked the railings on either side of the stairwell, "Yeah, I'm not seeing anything. You sure there isn't a password or something?"

That's actually not a bad guess, Rigel thought, annoyed that she hadn't thought of it. *But it's too late for that now. The Map's out of reach, and anyway, I'm not about to use it with Flint here*, "No idea. Can't you just pry the things open? Please, Flint." She didn't look him in the eye when she said it, but he grunted in surprise all the same.

"Hn," Flint bent down at last and rolled up his sleeves, "Phew, the stench is even worse down here. You owe me an extra credit assignment for this."

"Deal," she sighed.

Flint firmly gripped both sides of the trick stair and pulled. The pseudo-stone shuddered in protest, but the two sides of the vise-like trap slowly began to move sideways toward the edges of the staircase. When she had enough room to pull her leg free, Rigel summoned her energy and twisted her body upwards with a great heft until she could collapse sideways on the stair below, her injured wrist still held protectively to her front and none the worse for wear. As soon as she was clear of the edges, Flint allowed the trap to snap back into place with a sickening thud.

"Thanks," Rigel said tiredly. She stretched the aching muscles in her limbs as best she could and retrieved her bag from the steps below.

"I'd say 'anytime' but... I probably won't ever do anything like this again," Flint said, his graceless smile back in place, "So, you wanna tell me what the dung bomb was about?"

"Not particularly," Rigel avoided the upperclassman's eyes.

"And you aren't going to explain what's wrong with your left arm, either?" Flint guessed.

"Wasn't planning on it," she hoisted her bag over her right shoulder and gave her savior / blackmailer an especially sarcastic salute as she started down the stairs once more, "Thanks again, Flint. Oh, and that thing I owe you is in the mail."

She thought wryly as his laughter followed her out of sight once more that she might actually get used to the harsh, grating sound at this rate.

Returning to the common room at last felt like what Rigel imagined soldiers experienced coming home after a particularly drawn-out war. She was mentally and physically drained, for what felt like the umpteenth day in a row, and she couldn't really remember what it was like to have ordinary days since coming to Hogwarts. Pansy greeted her before she'd made it across the threshold, but Rigel found she couldn't bring herself to mind. There was really nothing like the comfort of friendship after a long, hard day of-

"Eugh, Rigel, you smell like dragon dung," Pansy exclaimed upon approaching her. The blonde girl waved her hands frantically at the air around Rigel's head, "I was going to introduce you to some people I met today, but that's definitely going to have to wait for another time. I really wouldn't be caught dead with you in this state."

There was really nothing like the brunt of a true friend's opinion to slap you out of melancholic contemplation, Rigel thought.

"Sorry, Pansy," she smiled ruefully, "I got caught with a dung bomb by Peeves just now."

"Oh," Pansy clicked her tongue disapprovingly. Rigel decided not to tell her how much the action made her sound like Rigel's mother, "Well, you'll never get rid of the stench on your own. Come on, I'll help you wash it out."

So saying, Pansy marched her across the common room and down the first-year hall. Rigel was about to tell her she wasn't allowed in Pansy's room when she realized they were walking straight past it and headed for Rigel's dorm. Pansy knocked twice for propriety's sake, then threw open the door and walked right in.

"Pansy? What in Salazar's name are you-Rigel!" Draco appeared to be at a loss. He was sitting on his bed in his casual weekend clothes, and there was a book in his lap he'd obviously been reading before Pansy had burst in on him, "Is something wro-oh, *Merlin*, what is that smell?"

He clapped a hand over his nose and mouth and glared in horrified affront at them.

"I know. It's awful, right?" Pansy breezed by the choking boy and towed Rigel toward the bathroom, "Rigel got hit with a dung bomb by Peeves, and he needs help washing it out. Come on, Draco," she added when Draco appeared to want no part in it, "Surely a Malfoy doesn't cringe from something like an unpleasant odor."

Draco leveled a look at Rigel that clearly said he was debating whether she was really worth coming any closer to, but in the end he rolled his eyes and moved past them to turn on the water in the sink. Rigel thought about protesting, saying she was perfectly capable of washing her own hair, but her two friends looked so adorably determined to brave to unbearable stink of the dung bomb in order to help her out that she simply grabbed a spare towel to put around her neck and knelt in front of the sink sedately.

When Draco okayed the water temperature, Pansy gently pushed her head forward until she was leaning over the basin, her hair directly under the faucet. Rigel screwed up her eyes so her contacts

didn't get rinsed out and went patiently still while Draco and Pansy bickered good-naturedly about what shampoo would be most effective. Pansy wanted to use the one with the strongest scent, to counteract the smell of dung, while Draco wanted to use the one with the strongest scouring agent. In the end, they used both. It was a strange feeling, having two sets of hands alternately pulling and scrubbing at her head, but twenty minutes later she was declared "fit for human company" and set free.

Her scalp felt very tingly and pink, but she couldn't smell dung every time she inhaled anymore, so she thanked the blonde duo graciously.

"Don't thank us," Draco waved a hand dismissively.

"Yeah," Pansy inhaled dramatically, "It's our noses we saved, since you didn't seem to be at all bothered by it."

"If you'd grown up at my house, you'd have learned to tolerate it as well," Rigel said while towel-drying her hair and cleaning her ears of water.

"Well, anyway, you guys stay here a minute while I go and grab something. Your roommate won't mind if I hang out in here, will he?" Pansy very clearly directed her question to Draco.

"Nott won't care," Draco shrugged, "He invites Zabini in all the time."

Rigel hadn't known it had already become such a frequent occurrence, which she guessed was why Pansy had asked Draco, not her. She really was missing things, wrapped up in her own world. Usually that didn't bother her, but somehow... ah, well. Rigel mentally shrugged. Someday she would sit down and think about all the things that needed thinking about, like mysterious and cowardly assailants who shot spells at her from behind, but that day was not yet come.

Pansy was back shortly with a deck of wizarding playing cards and a large pink tin that turned out to be full of cookies. She set both on the middle of Draco's bedspread and plopped down at the foot of his mattress, gesturing impatiently for them to join her. Rigel sat awkwardly at first, perched on one side of the bed while Draco sat gingerly on the other. Pansy laughed at them and offered them each a cookie.

"My grandmother sent them to me this morning," she explained, "She's amazing with food, and since Rigel missed lunch today I thought he ought to have something to eat, even if it's rather unhealthy."

Rigel smiled her thanks and nearly swallowed her cookie whole, she was so hungry. Draco squawked indignantly that she was getting crumbs on his bed, eating like a barbarian, and Rigel in turn made a show of picking invisible (read: nonexistent) crumbs off the green and silver bedspread and eating them, making sure to lick her fingers for added effect. All three of them laughed lightly at that, and Draco and Rigel relaxed enough to sit properly on the large mattress. The three of them ate cookies and played cards all afternoon, talking about classes, people they knew, and sometimes just nothing in particular until it was time to go to dinner. None of them ate much, being full from the cookies, but they chatted comfortably across the table and all the way back to the dorms as well.

As she climbed onto her bed that night, Rigel gave thanks to the friendship gods. Sunday would have been a lot worse without them. She also thanked them for shooting Flint with the friendship dart, even if the effects turned out to be a temporary amusement to him, as she suspected they would. All and all, she thought, her first week at Hogwarts could have been a lot worse. She'd made it through, and that was all that mattered.

[end of chapter ten].

A/N: Perhaps it seems unlikely that Rigel has such trouble with staircases to certain readers, but with 142 staircases in the castle, it seems to me that some major events must, for probability's sake, take place there ^^ . Also, it occurs to me that Rigel sighs a lot. If this was the scarlet letter, that would be a motif lol, but since it's not, let me know if it gets annoying. As always, thanks for reading (to anyone who actually is reading) it means a lot to me.

Chapter 11

A/N : Wow, so I never check my email, but when I did this weekend I realized that it tells you when people add your story to their Alerts or Favorites-in other words, I was completely sure that only like five people were reading my story, but now I know better and I'm so happy ^^ . So thank you so much, both to the readers who faithfully review and to the ones who bother to read my story at all-this one's for you.

A/N2: Also, now that the first week has been detailed, things will start moving faster. You won't see the whole snowball until about March in the story, but it's headed in an exciting direction, I think, which still compliments both stories that I'm drawing information from and parallels between.

The Pureblood Pretense:

Chapter 11

All through Rigel's second week at Hogwarts she felt like a bug trapped in a glass jar and put on display in Snape's office; eyes, everywhere she felt eyes on her, heavy and itchy, and her shoulder blades twitched with the needles of scrutiny she could feel but not pick out. Someone or multiple someones were watching her, and it was slowly grating on her nerves. The feeling varied with intensity; it was worse during meal times, so Rigel was fairly sure at least one of her observers was from another House or year. It was nothing like Draco's patented Malfoy gaze or Pansy's coyly assessing look, so Rigel felt safe with her friends, but everywhere else she was on her guard, making sure to never show weakness, to keep her injury hidden, and to act as uninteresting and even stupid as possible. She hoped whoever was watching her would eventually get bored and quit, but it didn't seem likely to be so easy, especially considering at least one set of eyes probably belonged to her mysterious attacker.

So she played the bumbling, unexciting first-year, a role that was made extremely believable by her performance in most of her classes. Rigel's grades in Herbology, History of Magic, Astronomy, and Potions were just fine, but Charms, Transfiguration, and Defense Against the Dark Arts were proving nearly impossible for her. After her stuttering success the first week, she hadn't been able to get any of the charms or spells they learned to work, much to her professors' exasperation, and even the Flying instructor had look disappointedly at her as she wobbled in the air on Wednesday, her right and only usable arm shaking on her broom and compromising her control. She'd worn out her arm muscles potting plants one-handed in Herbology that morning, and even Neville had managed better balance on his broom than her.

At the same time, her friendship with Pansy and Draco grew by leaps and bounds. She spent nearly all her time with them, since they were the among the only people she was sure had nothing to do with her ill-wisher, and by the end of the week, the stiff, linen formality of their friendship had given way to the malleable threads of common interests and mutual, allied affection. They respected her privacy in most matters, though she didn't begrudge them general information about her 'dad' Sirius and she tried to be as forthcoming as possible about her life before Hogwarts while still not giving away her true origins. In return they told her about their families, likes, dislikes, goals, and interests. Draco had decided his favorite subject was Transfiguration, after Flying, both because DADA was boring with Quirrel as a teacher and because Transfiguration was so difficult, and therefore an impressive thing to be good at. Rigel got the feeling most of Draco's goals revolved around being impressive, and therefore valuable to his father's career and worthy of being important to him. Pansy was quite good at Charms, but she enjoyed Astronomy best. She had a great interest in the night sky, and had already learned on her own much of what was taught their first year, but she didn't mind sitting through the lessons again, because she said the view of the sky was so much clearer from Hogwarts' towers than what she was used to.

The three became thicker than Goyle's skull, and although they associated with Zabini, Nott, Greengrass, and others in their year, the ones they looked for first when they entered a room were each other.

Still, the eyes were making Rigel as irritable as a nesting dragoness, so when she noticed someone following her on her way to Transfiguration on Thursday afternoon, she whirled around angrily, determined to catch whoever was so interested in her in the act. Draco and Pansy were walking ahead of her, so they didn't notice when she suddenly arrested her motion and glared into space behind her, but Zabini did, and he stopped as well.

"What is it?" he asked quietly. His dark eyes scanned the empty hallway behind them coolly, and as Rigel glanced at his blank expression she couldn't help but think he already knew the answer to his question.

"I thought I noticed someone following-us," Rigel decided against using 'me' at the last moment, "Like a fluttering at the corner of my vision."

Zabini smiled a wolf's smile, "So you finally noticed. The little blonde butterfly has been trailing you all week."

"Butterfly?" Rigel blinked, turning to check behind them once more. The hallway was still empty-but wait! The top of a head peeked briefly around the corner at the end of the hall, before being snatched back. Rigel frowned and started after it, but Zabini's firm hand on her right shoulder held her back.

"They'll be gone by the time you get there," he said, removing his hand politely now that he had her attention, "Can you not hear the frantic beating of wings in flight?"

She cocked her head sideways and realized she could indeed hear the sound of running footsteps fading quickly. She pressed her lips together in frustration, and turned back to Zabini, who was looking at

her with amusement, "Why didn't you tell me someone was following me? Who was that?"

"If you had not noticed eventually, you would not deserve to be told," he said, moving away from her and starting toward their classroom once more, "As for who it was, I imagine you'll know soon enough. Come along, Black, you don't want to be late for the quiz today."

Rigel hurried to catch up, dismissing the strange incident in favor of worrying about the quiz she was about to fail. She and Zabini made it into the classroom just in time, and Rigel claimed her usual seat between Pansy and Draco while McGonagall was passing out the written portion of the test.

"You will have thirty minutes to complete the short-answer section. You won't need all thirty minutes, but I will be coming around to each of you and asking you to demonstrate the Matchstick-to-Needle Transfiguration for me while you work. Please turn over your papers, and begin," Professor McGonagall waved her wand and a projection of the current time appeared on the board.

Rigel turned her quiz over and worked steadily through it. The questions started out fairly straight-forward ("Name the five elemental laws of Transfiguration") and slowly became more theoretical ("Why is it harder to attempt to turn an inanimate object animate, rather than the other way around?"), until she reached the last question, "How would you classify a Transfiguration that resulted in: a beetle growing the nose of a mouse and a mouse losing its nose completely?" She was confident in all of her answers, which had been discussed both in class and in the textbook, but glancing around at her peers she was surprised to find most of them frowning dejectedly or else staring blankly at their papers. McGonagall was slowly making her way around the room, and by the time she got to their table, Rigel, Pansy, and Draco had all three finished their quizzes and turned them face down on the table so they could chat quietly.

The professor placed a matchstick in front of Pansy first. "Please turn this into a needle, Miss Parkinson, and know that your grade is not based solely on the final result, so don't be nervous if you can't change it all the way."

Pansy picked up her wand and waved it confidently, speaking the incantation clearly and carefully, if not very firmly. Her matchstick seemed to hesitate for an instant, vibrating slightly as it wavered, then all at once it became a shiny, silver needle and lay still again. McGonagall picked it up and inspected it, checking the hole and the point, and nodded approvingly, "Very good. You next, Mr. Black."

Rigel studied her matchstick apprehensively for a moment, before taking a deep breath and saying the incantation, automatically waving her wand in the complicated wrist-movement over the match. It stayed a match. Professor McGonagall frowned slightly, but waved for her to try again. She tried a second time, and was sure her incantation was perfect and her wand-movement precise, but no transformation occurred. After the third time, McGonagall made a small "Hmm"-ing noise in the back of her throat, and said, "Take a moment to focus your intent, Mr. Black, while I test Mr. Malfoy."

Draco shot her a worried glance, then focused on his own match. He set his mouth in an uncompromising line and *glared* at it, waving his wand precisely and speaking the spell forcefully. His Transfiguration was less abrupt than Pansy's had been. His match morphed smoothly into a needle, as if it hadn't ever dreamed of being anything else, and Draco put his wand back down smugly. McGonagall inspected it, raising her eyebrows at the lethal-looking point, and nodded once more, "Very nice, Mr. Malfoy," the professor turned to Rigel once more, "Mr. Black, if you would."

Rigel performed the wrist movement once more and said the incantation. She mentally tried to coax her magic into thinking she really wanted this match to be a needle. McGonagall, Pansy, Draco, and Rigel stared expectantly at the match, but no change occurred. It was still, and probably always would be, a match.

McGonagall sighed and made a mark on her clipboard, "I can give you points for the correct incantation and wand-movement, Mr. Black, but you'd best hope you did well on the written portion of this quiz. I expect more effort from you in the future." She moved on to the next table and Draco and Pansy immediately started comforting her.

"You did everything right, it must have been a faulty match or something," Pansy said soothingly, "I'm sure it doesn't count for much of our grade, anyway."

"That's right," Draco added, though his voice lacked true conviction, "You'll be able to make it up later in the term. Don't worry about it."

"Yeah, thanks guys," Rigel said, stowing her useless wand in her bag and trying to ignore the looks coming from her classmates who had finished their quizzes in time to witness her failure.

"At least it's over with," Draco said bracingly, "We won't have to think about it until Tuesday."

"And we've got double Potions to look forward to tomorrow," Pansy said brightly, "That will take your mind off of it."

Rigel smiled at her friends, "Thanks for lying to me. It helps."

"Anytime," Draco said, and they all laughed softly.

At the end of the lesson, most of the class bolted for the door, more than ready to get out and forget about classes for the day, but McGonagall called out, "Mr. Black, please stay behind," and so Rigel waved her friends ahead of her and slowly shouldered her bag, picking her way through the tables to the professor's desk.

"Yes, Professor?" she asked politely when everyone had left.

"Mr. Black, I'm sorry to say that you were the only first-year in all of my classes who was unable to effect even a partial Transfiguration

for this quiz. The Needle Transfiguration is the very first thing I taught, and I thought for sure everyone would be able to manage it by the second week of school," the older woman peered concernedly through her spectacles at her, "Can you explain why you are so far behind?"

"No, Professor," Rigel said, thinking dejectedly that if she could explain it, she would be halfway to fixing it.

"Very well," Professor McGonagall frowned, perhaps thinking she was just being difficult, "In that case I have no choice but to assign you a detention for tomorrow night, to be served with Mr. Filch at seven o'clock. I hope that this, along with the poor score that you will no doubt receive on your quiz today, will inspire you to take your studies a little more seriously."

"Yes, Professor," Rigel said tonelessly. She accepted the detention slip, which told her to meet Filch in the trophy room at seven on Friday, and left the classroom with a slight frown on her face, wondering how she was going to tell Pansy that she couldn't meet the people Pansy had wanted to introduce her to on Friday after all.

Her friends were waiting outside the classroom, and they 'ooh'-ed sympathetically when they saw the pink slip of paper in her hands.

"That's so unfair," Pansy said, after reading the detention slip aloud for Draco's benefit, "How can she give you detention for a bad grade? The grade's supposed to be the punishment."

"On Friday night, too," Draco grimaced, "And with Filch. That's just cruel."

"Friday!" Pansy double-checked the slip, "Oh, darn, I'll have to introduce you to my new acquaintances another time, I suppose."

"Sorry," Rigel offered, reclaiming the slip and tucking it into her bag.

"It's not your fault," her friend waved her hand dismissively, "I mean it is, sort of, but I don't blame you for getting detention specifically on Friday."

"We've really got to fix whatever this is, though," Draco said as they began walking toward the dungeons, "Soon our ignorant classmates are going to think you really are a Squib."

"Would you stop being my friend if I was?" Rigel felt compelled to ask.

Pansy and Draco shared a look that she wasn't pureblood enough to decipher.

"Noo," Pansy said slowly, "We'd still be your friend, although it would become a great deal harder if the information got back to our parents."

"But you're not, so it doesn't matter," Draco said firmly, "Stop being so morbid, and let's go practice Quidditch some more. Pansy can watch."

"Joy of joys," Pansy rolled her eyes, "You'd better make it entertaining if I'm going to watch you flit about on an overgrown matchstick."

Rigel shook the unhelpful thoughts from her brain easily and prepared herself for another session of awkward ball-hitting for the benefit of Draco's seeker skills. Her left wrist gave a preemptory throb at the thought, but at least it would probably be the last one she'd have to endure, since tryouts were Saturday and she had detention the following night. Rigel didn't know how she was going to make it all the way to mid-October without anyone noticing her injury, but all she could do was take one day at a time. She was good at that.

Friday night's detention was only eclipsed on the scale of misery by the time she and Archie had accidentally uncovered the portrait of

Sirius' mother from the attic and activated it when Archie stumbled into the frame and cut himself, his blood breaking the sealing enchantment that was on it. The foul old woman had shrieked at them from her painted cage and Sirius had come running and caught them trying unsuccessfully to shut her up by putting drapes over the portrait. He had been livid, lecturing them about how long it had taken James and Remus to figure out how to seal the portrait away with blood magic and how much serious trouble they could have gotten into tromping about the Black Family attic and spilling a Black Heir's blood all over the place. Rigel and Archie had known he was mostly just worried for their safety and upset that he had to see his mother again to re-seal her painting, but it was the only time she could ever remember Sirius being seriously angry at them, and until that day she hadn't really understood how ugly and perverted most of the Black Family had been. The vitriol that awful woman had spewed at them shocked and scared the two seven-year-olds, and Walberga Black's demented cackle and phosphoric insults still haunted her dreams some nights. After that they were much more careful around old family artifacts.

Filch's disdainful muttering all through her detention with him brought the memory of that day back fresh, and Rigel thought spitefully that it would serve both Filch and Walburga right to have been distant relations of some kind. The thought of the perceived shame the hateful old woman would have knowing she was related to a squib made Rigel smile vindictively as she polished trophies under the caretaker's watchful eyes. The way he sneered at her, mumbling insults and complaints under his breath to his cat while she worked, would have done the old Black family house-elves proud, had any been alive to witness it.

Rigel had been put to work straight away when she arrived at her detention, and was told in no uncertain terms that she would be here until the job was finished-the job being the polishing of every single trophy and award in the room. It took her hours to get through it all, due in part to the careful maneuvering she had to do around her crippled hand, and all the while the caretaker muttered and mumbled

and generally acted like a crazed, bitter old cat-lady. When she was finally done, she barely had enough time to make it to the dungeons before curfew, but she still felt nothing but pure relief and happiness when she exited the now-sparkling trophy room.

She was just breaking off of the Entrance Hall when she heard it-the faint echo of a single set of footsteps behind her.

She didn't pause or give any indication that she noticed, but she did slow her breathing so she could hear better and wished she hadn't been too afraid of Filch searching her to bring the Map that night. The footsteps got closer, Rigel estimated they were ten meters behind her, and she turned the first corner in the dungeons calmly, despite her racing heartbeat. Just as she had decided to turn and surprise them before they came around the bend she heard a whisper of sound that she realized too late was an incantation, and a jet of white light struck her uninjured arm squarely, knocking her sideways out of the way of another, orange-colored spell and into the stone wall. She cried out as her broken wrist smacked against the stone and snapped her head in the direction of the curses, but all she could see was a wand tip poking out from around the corner.

Rigel debated a split second whether she should rush her attacker and surprise them or not, but as a greenish-yellow spell struck the ground near where she stood, she took off at a run in the opposite direction. Some might call her a coward, but although Quirell had finally taught them a shielding charm that Wednesday, she had yet to get it to work, and didn't fancy trying it against an enemy of unknown power and skill (though admittedly terrible aim) when she had the advantage of home-territory. She was careful not to lead her pursuer-for she could easily hear their footsteps echoing behind her as she ran-toward the common room, but instead made them chase her through the labyrinth of tunnels beyond the Potions classrooms, where not even the Slytherins would have any reason to go.

Luckily, the house elves still cleaned this part of the castle, or her attacker could have easily followed her dusty footprints through the maze. As it was, ten minutes later she was sure she'd lost them, and

she circled around the long way back toward the common room as quickly and quietly as she could. By the time she made it through the false wall, it was way past curfew. That didn't mean no one was awake-it was a Friday night, after all, and the common room was packed. She cringed internally as every head in the room turned toward her entrance, painfully aware of how sweaty and disheveled she must look after hours of polishing and running through the castle. Some of the other students stared at her, obviously curious at who was just getting back so long after curfew and why they looked like they'd run from the North Tower.

"Rigel, over here!"

Draco and Pansy held their hands up so she could see them and some of the other first-years grouped by one of the fireplaces, and Rigel gratefully stumbled over and sunk into one of the low-backed chairs. Now that she was drained of fear and adrenaline, her body began to take stock of itself. Her injured wrist throbbed dully as her pulse skittered over it, but her attention was pulled toward her other arm, where a sharper, newer pain was localized. Shaking back her sleeve gingerly, she realized the white spell that landed on her upper arm had been a Stinging Hex. The skin from Rigel's bicep to her lower forearm was swollen and red. The skin felt tight and itchy, like a mosquito bite magnified to cover her entire arm. She'd never been attacked by a dozen bees at once, but she imagined the effect was about the same.

"Merlin, Rigel," Nott leaned over in his seat to get a better look.

"What happened?" Pansy demanded, jumping up, seizing her sleeve, and pulling it up so she could tuck it into Rigel's collar and assess the damage.

"You didn't jump in front of another curse, did you?" Draco asked.

"Well, since you weren't there-no," Rigel tried to laugh but it came out shaky, "Ow, Pan, don't poke it, it burns when you do that."

Pansy blew out a breath and shook her head regretfully, "Well, it's definitely a Stinging Hex. Nothing to do but wait till it disperses."

"Was it the butterfly?" Zabini asked softly from his seat next to her.

"I didn't see their face," Rigel gritted her teeth as Pansy prodded her arm again.

"You were shot at from behind?" Draco exclaimed in outrage, drawing curious looks from the groups of students sitting closest to their circle, "Didn't you at least turn and look at the coward?"

"They were shooting from behind me and out of sight by sticking their wand around the corner. That's why I was only hit once-terrible aim," Rigel said, "That and I didn't stick around until they got me with something worse."

"You ran away," Nott chuckled, "Good form, Back."

Rigel smiled slightly in rueful acknowledgment, "They couldn't keep up in the dungeons, so it definitely wasn't another Slytherin."

"Probably a Gryffindor," Draco grumbled, "Only they'd be stupid enough to chase you through the dungeons."

Adrian Pucey ambled over to their circle to see what the commotion was about, "What's this, Black? You were attacked by a Gryffindor outside the common room?"

His question was loud, and even in the noisy common room it garnered other Slytherins' attention.

" *Attacked ?*"

"One of our first-years?"

"They wouldn't dare."

"We don't know it was a Gryffindor," Rigel said, but she was ignored.

The mutterings grew louder and more students came over to have a look at Rigel's arm, which Pansy prevented her from covering up embarrassedly. She felt crowded and hemmed in, and as Draco recounted what she'd told her friends to the listening crowd it seemed that no one wanted to hear that it wasn't a big deal, and that she could take care of herself.

Pucey dropped a hand on her shoulder and said, "It's out of your hands now. No one tries to gut a snakelet in our own dungeons-even if your family is a bunch of blood traitors."

Rigel sighed and stood pointedly when the discussion turned toward revenge. "See you guys tomorrow," she nodded to Pansy and Draco before pushing her way gingerly through the crowd, trying to ignore the assessing stares coming her way from all corners of the room.

Great, more eyes .

Rigel went to bed uncomfortable, which was becoming the usual for her, though she knew the Stinging Hex would wear off in an hour or so, long before she woke the next morning. She had narrowed her attacker's identity down to the other three Houses, at least, but somehow, with one wrist throbbing and the other arm burning, it didn't feel like much of an accomplishment.

The weather was pleasantly cool the next day, with a cloudless sky and no wind to speak of. In other words, it was a-

"Perfect day for Quidditch!" Draco grinned at them over lunch on Saturday. He was piling his plate with energy-rich foods and alternatively turning his head from side to side as he addressed his running monologue to first Rigel, then Pansy, checking to see that they were as excited as they'd been thirty seconds ago, "Of course, there won't be any tail-wind, but since I'm not trying out for a position that only flies in one direction it wouldn't be much advantage for me anyway." He paused with a spoonful of carrots hovering over his plate, realized with a bemused quirk of his eyebrows that there was no room left on his, and magnanimously turned to dump them onto

Rigel's. "You like vegetables," he told her cheerfully. He then dug into the feast he'd compiled as gracefully as anyone with that much food could.

"Aren't you afraid you'll get sick, eating all that?" Pansy asked, clearly thinking the Malfoy scion had been replaced with some kind of bourgeois doppelganger with only the bare skeletons of table manners.

"Seekers will probably try out last," Rigel said, seeing that Draco had his mouth full, "So he'll have time to digest some of it before hand, and if they play a real game there's no telling how long he might be in the air."

"And," Draco added when he came up for air (or at least pumpkin juice), "A Malfoy never gets sick."

Pansy and Rigel shared a fond look. Ten minutes later, Flint stood lazily from his seat down the table. This was apparently the cue for all the other would-be players to follow him out of the hall like sycophantic courtiers, and the Slytherin table began emptying as curious spectators followed the procession as well.

"Well, this is it," Draco set his utensils down deliberately and flashed them a confident, poster-boy grin, "Don't bother wishing me luck." He stood dramatically, but paused to look down at them expectantly before heading off, "You guys are coming to watch, right?"

"We'll be there," Pansy assured him, "In fact, we'll be cheering for you so loudly you'll be embarrassed to know us."

Rigel raised an eyebrow to show that she had not been informed of such a plan, but Draco's eyes lit up like twin Lumos Charms and he was obviously trying to stop his choreographed grin from becoming a beaming smile of Hufflepuffian affection, so she merely nodded her agreement.

"Okay," Draco said, "I have to go get ready, then. Come soon so you don't miss anything important."

He left the Great Hall at a pace that would be called a run, if he weren't a Malfoy.

"Eleven years of good breeding out the window as soon as Quidditch is mentioned," Pansy smiled, " *Boys* ."

Rigel remembered just in time that it would be strange if she nodded in agreement, so instead she returned (with what she hoped was the appropriate amount of amused disgust), " *Girls* ."

Pansy laughed, but then her cheerful demeanor retreated, and she glanced sideways at Rigel while toying with her teacup saucer.

"Rigel, where were you this morning? You don't have to tell me," Pansy added before Rigel could open her mouth, "I know you do your own things sometimes, but you've hardly disappeared at all this week, so I just wondered..." she trailed off, embarrassed at the weak, rambling quality of her voice.

Rigel swallowed her bite of carrots (well, she *did* like vegetables) slowly, trying to decide how to answer. It should have been easy-she had an excuse already planned, but she wanted to lie as little as possible. She hadn't thought about how suspicious it would be for her to go off in disguise to work on the essays she'd gotten from Flint at breakfast that morning after spending all week fairly glued to Pansy and Draco's sides to avoid 'the eyes.'

"I was in the Library," Rigel said, "That's where I go on the weekends. It's not to work on any of our assignments-I do those with you and Draco-it's just extra research I do on top of our studies, which I didn't think would interest you guys."

Pansy nodded slowly, and Rigel guessed she was trying to take her words as the truth.

"I thought you were kicked out of the Library," Pansy said quietly, blushing at her blunt query.

"I was, but I found a way around it," Rigel said, "I promise I don't have some exciting, secret life that I'm hiding from you and Draco because I want to have all the fun to myself. It really is quite boring work."

Rigel told herself that it wasn't really a lie, since the secret parts of her life were too serious and dangerous to be exciting, but it felt weak even in her head.

"Is it Potions research?" Pansy asked.

"Some of it," she admitted, thinking, *technically not a lie*, "I'm also trying to figure out what's going on with my magic," *complete lie*, "I don't fancy another detention like last night's." *Also true*.

Rigel made a face at the memory and Pansy graciously allowed the conversation to be steered away from extra curricular activities.

"That's right, we never asked you how it went because of all the excitement last night. Was it awful?"

"Tell you on the way to the pitch," Rigel said, standing and offering her arm to Pansy for the walk, "If we're not there by the time the chasers start, Draco will fret."

They made their way down to the stadium and found seats in the stands with the other spectators. It looked like Flint had just ordered everyone trying out to take a lap around the pitch, and was separating them into *maybes* and *no-way-in-hells*. Those who flew terribly enough to get cut so quickly joined the students watching in the stands, and since none of them looked terribly down-cast, Rigel assumed they hadn't been too serious in trying out. Flint called the chasers and keepers to try out first, simultaneously, and Pansy waved excitedly to Draco as he made his way to the side of the pitch with the other Slytherins who were trying for beater or seeker.

By the end of the chaser-keeper round of tryouts, it was looking likely that Flint intended to keep the same team as last year, and that he was merely observing formality. He picked the same three chasers (including Pucey, who waved smugly at them as he left to change) and keeper from the old team, and the potential beaters and seekers were looking less enthusiastic as the captain called them forward. Draco, though, strode right out onto the pitch, confident smile in place and head held at just the right angle for the sunlight to catch his silver eyes brilliantly. Pansy laughed at their friend's artful posturing and cheered loudly, elbowing Rigel into clapping and smiling along. Draco tossed his head like the purebred stallion she was sure he'd been frequently compared to in contemptuous answer and winked at them.

The sounds of Pansy and Rigel's sarcastic clapping was immediately drowned out by the sound of Greengrass, Davis, and several girls from second year sighing and squealing and generally giggling like twits from two rows in front of them. Rigel and Pansy shared an amused glance at Draco's slightly surprised expression. He clearly hadn't expected the girls in their grade to take his playful, self-mocking flirtation seriously. He shrugged it off, however, and turned to listen to Flint explain the drill.

There would be four bludgers let loose, to preserve the game-ratio for the eight beaters trying out, and to make the scrimmage go faster there would be three snitches released to occupy the three seekers. Whichever seeker caught the first snitch won, and the beaters were responsible for knocking bludgers toward both the seekers and each other, so it was also a test of maneuvering abilities for all the players. Rigel thought it sounded much more dangerous than a regular game, with no chasers to distract the beaters, and therefore much more challenging. She almost wished she could have tried out, now.

Flint blew his whistle after all the balls had been released and all fourteen players took to the air.

"Do you think he'll get it?" Pansy asked, her clear blue eyes narrowed against the sun, "He's only a first-year, after all."

"It seems like a straightforward competition for seeker," Rigel said, "So if he catches it first it'll be hard to deny him a spot."

"Yeah."

They lapsed into silence as they both tracked Draco's figure through the skies. He was in good form, Rigel thought, trying to be objective. Their practices (and her deliberately wild aim) had given Draco great skill at changing directions quickly, so he was able to avoid the bludgers fairly easily, and his strategy seemed to involve sticking closely to Higgs, the veteran seeker. No one was having any luck searching for the snitch, however, as the chaos of four bludgers and eight beaters, not to mention so many people looking for the snitch at once, meant that everyone was interrupted in their search every other minute. There was something naturally elegant about Draco on a broom, though. Almost as if he had been born to fly, and his grace on the earth was the true marvel.

Twenty minutes later, Pansy sighed and sat back against the seats behind them, "Well, I tried. I've been very supportive and patient, and now I'm bored. Rigel, entertain me."

Rigel spoke without taking her eyes from the drill, "What's there to be bored about? We've seen about five near-deadly accidents so far-"

"I don't think you can call them 'accidents' if someone is purposely aiming a big steel ball at you and hoping you fall fifty feet to the ground."

"-and as a human being, not to mention a Slytherin, you're supposed to be vastly entertained by mindless bloodshed," Rigel finished as if the blonde girl hadn't interrupted. She only looked away from the pseudo-match when a third voice broke into their friendly banter.

"Now, I object to the 'mindless' part of that," Flint said, nudging a couple of third-years out of his way so he could sit next to them on the bench, "I'll have you know this violence serves a very important purpose."

"And what is that?" Rigel asked politely, ignoring the looks Pansy was shooting her, knowing without looking that her friend wanted to know why Flint, a fifth-year and Quidditch captain besides, was talking to them.

"This little spectacle, while dangerous beyond reason and pretty much useless in helping to determine Quidditch potential, is part of a brilliant campaign of misinformation that is vital to our team's success," Flint explained after settling into the seat next to Rigel and training his eyes toward the chaos happening above their heads.

Pansy gave a polite cough and leaned around Rigel to say, "What do you mean by that, Mr. Flint?"

Flint gave a bark of his harsh laughter at the "Mr." and merely nudged Rigel to explain for him, still watching the players wheeling about in the air intently.

Rigel shot Pansy a small smile, saying, "Flint means he thinks the other Houses will send spies to our tryouts. When they see this nonsense, they'll think all the Slytherin players are crazy demons with broomsticks, and their morale will drop, which will do half of the Slytherin team's work for them come game time."

"Scare tactics, Mr. Flint?" Pansy chuckled appreciatively, "How devious."

Rigel saw Flint cut his eyes over toward the blonde first-year out of the corner of her eye.

"Just Flint," he said lowly, "And devious has got nothing to do with it. People deserve to have their expectations met, I figure, and one glimpse of this will vindicate the Gryffindors' every assumption about violent, bloodthirsty Slytherins."

"Then you may call me Pansy," she said, hesitating, but deciding it would be too awkward to offer her hand around Rigel's torso.

Flint grunted, "At least you don't giggle."

Pansy seemed to take this as a great compliment, and smiled with self-satisfaction as she settled back in her seat.

"Don't act like you're not also hoping someone runs and tells Wood about this," Rigel said, glancing over at the captain's hard profile.

Flint smirked, "Smart money says old Wood'll be having his team practice with four bludgers within the week. With any luck, one of those chasers gets too injured to play, and we wipe the floor with them."

Rigel frowned as something struck her, "So this whole tryout's just a farce? You'll be picking the old team no matter what?"

"Why not?" Flint shrugged unconcernedly as he watched the poor, hopeless souls battle it out in vain to further the team's consequence, "Already got a good team, and the players are young, so there's no need to add new blood for a couple years."

Rigel looked over at Pansy to see she was looking just as miserably back at her. *Draco will be so disappointed*, she thought. Just then, one of the players went into a steep dive. Just as she had identified the flyer as Higgs-another player on the other side of the field dived as well! Both players were weaving between beaters, dodging bludgers, and the heads in the crowd moved rapidly back and forth between the two of them as it became clear that neither was feinting.

"That's Draco!" Pansy said excitedly, pointing to the second diving figure. Rigel caught a better look as the player leveled out to follow his snitch's new trajectory and smiled at the sight of familiar, silver-blond hair and fluid skill in maneuvering the broom. Even though she knew it wouldn't make a difference, Rigel inwardly cheered her friend on. Pansy didn't bother with inwardly and yelled wildly for Draco to go *faster* because he was so *close* !

The first seeker, Higgs, caught his snitch just a hairsbreadth before Draco did, and Flint immediately blew his whistle and left the stands to meet with the players on the pitch, briefly waving off Pansy's faint-hearted farewell as he went.

Rigel patted Pansy's arm as they swallowed their disappointment on Draco's behalf and waited in silence for Flint to dismiss the players. Whatever the captain had to say evidently didn't take long, and soon those who'd tried out were groaning and gathering their equipment, some angrily, some dejectedly, and heading back to the castle to clean up. Rigel and Pansy lagged behind the rest of the spectators as they filled out, and soon they caught sight of a sweaty, red-faced Malfoy moving quickly up the stairs toward them. Draco dropped his broom when he was close enough and launched himself at them. He ended up half-sprawled across Rigel's lap, with one arm around her neck and the other around Pansy's shoulder. Pansy yelped and even Rigel stiffened with surprise, but neither pushed him off when he buried his face between their shoulders and gasped for air.

"Can. You. Believe it?" he panted, his voice distorted with fatigue and emotional upset.

"I know," Pansy said, patting his head soothingly, "It's quite ridiculous."

"Flint's an ass," Rigel agreed.

"What?" Draco pulled back with a confused look on his sweaty face.

"What?" Pansy and Rigel echoed, dumbly. Draco didn't look nearly as torn up as they'd expected.

"Well, whatever-isn't it great!" he beamed, "I made the team!"

They stared at him blankly, both trying to re-wire their responses according to this influx of contradictory information.

"What?" Draco deflated a bit, still panting slightly, but looking more put-out by the second, "It's only reserve seeker, but it's still pretty-"

Rigel was the first to catch up with the situation and she smiled suddenly into Draco's confused face, causing him to unintentionally lose his train of thought. She used her right arm to return his awkward-half hug with an equally awkward half-hug of her own, and said, "Draco, that's awesome! We thought-well, it looked like Flint wasn't adding any new players to the team." She shrugged and pulled back so Pansy, who was beaming herself now, could hug Draco in turn.

"He didn't," Draco was smiling again, one arm around each of them. If Rigel's other arm was usable she could have wrapped it around Pansy and formed a kind of huddle-triangle, "He picked all the same players as last year, but he said I had so much potential he was taking me on as a reserve, to train me up as Higg's replacement!"

"Wow, Draco, that's really high praise coming from the captain," Pansy congratulated, stepping back to smooth her robes and reminding them they were in public.

Draco and Rigel stepped back as well, and Draco said, "Well, he didn't say it exactly like that, but that's really what he meant."

They laughed, and Draco retrieved his broom from where it'd rolled under the bench in front of them.

"Let's head back to the castle," Pansy suggested, "Draco, you can get cleaned up, and Rigel can disappear mysteriously until dinner." Pansy winked at her to show she didn't really mind.

"Well, it's not mysterious now, Pansy," Rigel sighed melodramatically, "I'll have to spend all afternoon with you guys, now, if only to preserve my air of unpredictability. Besides," she nudged Draco as they started out of the stands, "We have to celebrate our group's first monumental victory together. No disappearing until tomorrow, I promise."

As they made their way up to the castle, Draco said casually, "Now that I'm on the team, I'll be watching the game from the players' box."

"O-kay," Pansy was waiting for the punch line, but Rigel could already see where this was going.

"Oh, bu-" she started, but Draco cut her off with practiced efficiency.

"Not to worry, Rigel, my mother's invitation remains open, of course. I'm sure you'll have a wonderful time watching the first game with my parents even without my illustrious presence to invigorate you," he said, his bright smile turning much more sinister, at least in Rigel's mind.

"But who will introduce us properly if you aren't even there when we meet?" she argued reasonably, shaking her head as if she could deny this new turn of events. Without Draco there to distract his mother there was nothing to stop Mrs. Malfoy from noticing all the ways in which she was *not* like Sirius Black, "It just wouldn't be proper."

"Nonsense," Draco smirked, a little bounce in his step telling her how much he was enjoying making her uncomfortable, "Pansy gets along famously with my mother, or so I've heard. She can introduce you."

"But I'm not going to the-"

"Oh, yes you are," Rigel cut Pansy desperately, "You have to sit in that box with me, Pansy. Please, Pan."

"Well, I suppose it would be alright, since I was invited originally anyway, and even if there are a limited number of seats reserved, Draco's just given up his..." Pansy pursed her lips, "But a couple of hours of Quidditch... you'll owe me."

"Done," Rigel nodded instantly, "Anything."

"You make it sound like you're facing a dragon," Draco scowled, "I'll have you know my mother is perfectly nice to people who don't get on her bad side."

"Introductions," Pansy decided, "I'll go with you if you give me a few hours tomorrow to introduce you to people I think you need to know."

Rigel hesitated. She'd been hoping to avoid that as long as possible, not knowing how exactly she was going to navigate the myriad political and social waters of Slytherin House just yet, but there was no way she could face the Malfoys alone in just a few weeks. Her disguise hadn't been perfected, trained into her muscles and mind, yet, and then there was the matter of distracting from her broken wrist as well. Call it paranoia kicking in, but all it took was one mistake-one instant of thinking, 'oh, so-and-so probably won't notice that' or 'no one looks that closely' and then she (and Archie's) entire fort came crumbling down.

"Deal," she said, choosing scrutiny from students over scrutiny by older, experienced snakes as the lesser of two dangers. All three of them now satisfied, the trio headed for the dungeons to celebrate Draco's victory in style.

[end of chapter eleven].

A/N: Gosh, I'm so sorry this took an entire week to get out. The good news is I now have an outline for the entire story through first year-yay! Which means there's no chance of it being abandoned and also that chapters should come faster, since I know what needs to be in each one now. As always, the disclaimer that I don't own anything is, I hope, implied, and thank you to everyone who is reading.

Chapter 12

A/N: Hello, my wonderful, beautiful readers. This chapter is a record 14,900 words (cue confetti), but in the middle of the chapter there's a lot of theoretical academic nonsense about magic, so if that doesn't interest you, I'm terribly sorry (because I find it fascinating), and I'll try to put more action in the next chapter. As always, don't own, disclaim, etc, and thank you so, so much for reading. Also a special thanks to Failing Mentality for your helpful reviews on chapter 11.

The Pureblood Pretense:

Chapter 12:

The next morning, Rigel, Draco, and Nott woke to the sound of brisk knocking on their door. They were content to ignore it for a while, as all the first-years had been up past midnight celebrating Draco's spot on the House team, but the knocking only got louder and more impatient, so they sat up and moved back their hangings, exchanging bleary-eyed looks and wondering that such audacious knocking existed in the world.

Nott checked the time, then cursed and flung himself back onto his bed. "Oh, Hell, no," he muttered irritably.

Draco and Rigel looked at each other, and Draco's eyes narrowed, "You're dressed. You get it." Apparently Draco's pajamas didn't count as 'dressed.' Rigel supposed this was her punishment for sleeping in her clothes. She rolled out of bed and shivered as her bare feet met the cold dungeon floor. She padded her way to the door and cracked it to peer into the hall, intending to tell the knocker to go away and then go right back to sleep.

Unfortunately for that plan, the person at the door was Pansy. She breezed past Rigel and cast the Lumos Charm swiftly, drawing a

groan from Nott's bed and a sound of startled indignation from Draco when he caught sight of her.

"Pans!" he hastened to run his fingers through his hair and attempt to look dignified in his nightclothes, "You can't just barge into a gentleman's room first thing in the morning. And you!" he scowled at Rigel, "The reason you answered the door and not us is because you're already decent. If you let the person in, it defeats the purpose."

Rigel rolled her eyes, "I answered the door because you guys were too lazy to, and besides, a *gentleman* never refuses a lady."

"Not to mention the fact that a lady never gives a gentleman the chance to," Pansy said.

"Why are you here, Parkinson?" Nott's voice was muffled by his pillow.

"I'm here to get Rigel ready for breakfast," she said, as if her every motive was readily transparent.

"And Rigel can't dress himself because...?" Draco glanced pointedly at Rigel, "Oh, wait, he's already dressed, so please come back later."

Pansy gave Rigel's clothes a dubious once-over, "I'm sure he could, normally, but today we're doing introductions after breakfast, and I need him to look like a pureblood Heir."

"He *is* a pureblood Heir," Draco rolled his eyes, "So however he looks must be how one is supposed to look."

"Of course," Pansy said, "But visual clues will re-enforce his consequence for those who are too stupid to think for themselves."

"You're introducing me to stupid people?" Rigel asked.

"Well, *no*, but-" Pansy set her jaw and strode toward Rigel menacingly, "Since I'm the one doing the introduction, your image

reflects on me. Is this how you thank me for going out on a social limb for you?" She gestured exasperatedly at Rigel's wrinkled clothes, which would have hurt if Rigel hadn't been planning on changing after she showered anyway-even she didn't wear the same clothes two days in a row.

"But breakfast doesn't even start for two whole hours," Nott said.

"Perfection takes time," Pansy said.

"I will let you stay as long as you stop quoting my mother," Draco groaned, "And be quiet so the rest of us can sleep another couple hours."

Nott cheered weakly and shut his hangings immediately.

"What about me?" Rigel gazed imploringly at Draco.

"Hmm, yeah, that's too bad about your beauty sleep," Draco settled back into his bed and closed his curtains as well, leaving Rigel at the questionable mercy of her other friend.

"Now, Pansy, I'm sure I can make myself presentable if you give me a chance," Rigel tried, backing away slowly.

"Well, after I show you what I want, you can try all by yourself next time," Pansy smiled the way one might smile at a precocious child, "Don't look so scared-this is going to be fun!"

...

Rigel was going to get Pansy a dictionary for Christmas, for in no way did the next two hours resemble fun.

First Pansy sent Rigel off to the shower, with instructions to wash everything but her hair, and gave her a set of clothes she was to change into after drying off. These weren't the clothes she would be wearing, of course. These were what Pansy called 'control clothes,' which would act as a passive backdrop for trying out various hair-

styles and save the 'real' clothes from getting wrinkles or water-spots before they were ready to be worn.

Rigel showered. She scrubbed and washed and was generally grateful Pansy hadn't insisted on being involved in this particular part of the process. She carefully held her left wrist out of the spray, and when she was done she wrapped it with clean bandages she had hidden under the sink. The control clothes weren't too bad, loose and comfortable, with sleeves long enough to hide her new bandages, and when she opened the bathroom door Pansy was waiting with a basket of products so numerous they couldn't possibly all be for different things. She pushed Rigel back into the bathroom and onto the stool in front of the sink so she could wash her hair. Rigel actually liked getting her hair washed. It was strangely comforting. She was sure Pansy had put more than shampoo and cream rinse in it, but she had decided not to ask questions, and instead sat as passively as she could as Pansy rinsed, repeated, or whatever she was doing to her hair.

Once it was washed, Pansy arranged the short locks about her head and performed a charm that would keep the hair perfectly still as it dried naturally.

"Never let anyone use a heat charm on your hair," she told Rigel firmly, "It'll wreak havoc on your ends, and the texture is too wild to take a blow-out well."

Rigel nodded very seriously, and Pansy moved on to her nails. She took Rigel's right hand and started inspecting her cuticles, but Rigel snatched it back frantically. Pansy gave her a stern look, "You have to have clean nail beds, or no one will trust you."

Rigel raised an eyebrow in patent disbelief.

"It's true," Pansy insisted, "People associate cleanliness with trustworthiness, because clean money is less risk than dirty money, and people associate immorality with the unwashed masses."

"Some people associate immorality with Slytherins," Rigel pointed out, "That doesn't make them right."

"We're trimming your cuticles and that's that," Pansy said.

"Teach me how to do it, then," Rigel suggested, "It's too girly if I sit here and let you do it."

Pansy rolled her eyes, "Boys. Okay fine, I'll do one hand and you can do the other."

Rigel immediately presented Pansy with her right hand, grinning inside at how perfectly it had worked out (Rigel wouldn't have been able to use her left hand to do her right hand anyway). Pansy finished Rigel's right side and then watched her carefully work on her left hand. Rigel was sure to keep the sleeve covering everything but the fingertips of her hand as she worked, and in the end Pansy was satisfied, if a little bemused.

Next, Pansy attacked her eyebrows.

"Not a lot," she promised, brandishing the tweezers to make her point, "Yours aren't actually that bad. Just a few hairs off of each end so they look natural, but not messy."

Rigel grimaced through the whole thing, but she didn't go so far as to refuse. Pansy leaned back to inspect her work, and sighed, "I do wish your eyes weren't so flat." She suddenly blushed, as if she'd not meant to say that out loud, "Not that they aren't nice, Rigel. Just... I think I remember hearing that your father's eyes sparkled a bit, or something."

"It's okay," Rigel shrugged, "If you want, I'll put in eye drops right before you introduce me."

Pansy grinned at the idea, "I can see it now. Your lost-puppy look would be about ten times as effective if your eyes glistened every so slightly. I wouldn't even have to say a word."

"I thought I wasn't allowed to do that anymore," Rigel said.

"Well, not to *us*, but with the older Slytherins... particularly these two... it can't hurt to have an Ace up your sleeve," Pansy allowed.

At that point Rigel was allowed out of the bathroom so that she could sit on her bed while Pansy rummaged through her closet. Archie had all kinds of clothes, most of which Rigel hadn't even looked at except to hang them up when Draco scolded her about leaving perfectly good fabrics in the stale air of her trunk. Pansy squealed with delight when she saw all the different robes she had to work with, and she immediately began taking out different colors to hold up against Rigel's skin tone. Most of them worked fine, since she and Archie were of a color, but a few of the more outlandish robes drew horrified glances from her blonde friend.

"My dad has a disreputable sense of humor," she explained when Pansy came across a particularly garish robe of lime green with orange and yellow striped trimming. It had flowers in a pattern along the border, but where the flower petals would usually be, there were fish heads instead. "He and my uncles have matching sets," she admitted, smiling wryly as she remembered the occasion they'd been commissioned for. Her father, James, had been forced to attend the wedding of a particularly boorish co-worker, and Sirius had seized upon the opportunity to make everyone think twice about inviting the Marauders anywhere. She had no idea why Archie had even packed them.

"Well, I suppose it would be an excellent ice-breaker," Pansy gingerly tucked the monstrosity into the back of the closet, "But not *quite* what I had in mind for today. Now this, on the other hand, should do quite nicely."

She held up a set of casual robes that looked regular-black to the shallow eye, but were in fact a very dark grey. They were perfect for weekend wear, but the material was a bit thin, so Rigel had avoided them so far. It wasn't that she had anything to hide in the chest department yet, just that she was afraid to wear anything that would

make her look even more delicate. She had to admit, however, that the robes would strike a perfect tone of effortless sophistication. Pansy shooed her off to the bathroom to change once more, with strict instructions not to muss her hair (easier said than done while trying to pull robes on one-handed, but she managed), while Pansy decided on shoes.

When she came back out, Draco had finally woken back up and was watching with amusement as Pansy scowled fiercely at a pile of Rigel's shoes, all of which were, apparently, rejects. Shoes were the only thing Rigel and Archie had kept their own, mostly because Archie's feet were two sizes bigger than hers, and it simply wouldn't have worked. She shut the bathroom door behind her and found herself the new focus of Pansy's ire.

"Just what are these things supposed to be?" the girl demanded.

"Shoes," Rigel said, biting back the word 'obviously' with difficulty.

"They don't match anything here!" she nearly wailed, "And they're bulky."

"They're protected against most types of acid," Rigel informed her, "Not to mention fire-proof, water-proof, and resistant to corrosion."

"Yes, yes, I'm sure they're very... serviceable," Pansy sighed, "But they don't go with the robes I picked out."

"I could wear different robes," Rigel said, though inwardly dreading having to drag another pair of robes on and off around her injury.

"No, don't be ridiculous," Pansy turned to Draco, "We'll have to borrow some of yours."

"You-what?" Draco stared at Pansy, "You want my shoes?"

"Not me, Rigel," Pansy said soothingly, "Just for the morning. I'll see them cleaned myself before they're returned, and of course you're

welcome to demand a similar favor in return."

"I seriously doubt I'll be asking to borrow your shoes anytime soon, Pansy, thanks though," Draco rolled his eyes, "And I can see to my own shoe-cleaning."

"So you agree? Great!" Pansy nearly dove for his closet in her joy, "Because I noticed you wearing a dove-grey pair last week that would be just perfect..."

"If they fit," Rigel said quietly.

"He's right," Draco grimaced, "I haven't quite grown into my size yet, you see, and-"

"Oh, but these are tiny!" Pansy pulled out the shoes she wanted, but eyed them sadly, "They're almost as small as mine are. I'm not sure these will fit at all.

Rigel was actually surprised, for she had been expecting the opposite problem. One of the good things about her shoes was that they added the appearance of extra length and breadth to her feet, which were smaller than she thought a boy's should be. If Draco had small feet too, however, there might not be a problem. She reached absently to take the shoes from Pansy, along with the socks that had been approved for her outfit, and set to trying them on.

They fit almost perfectly, to Pansy's surprise and Draco's pleasure (it seemed he wasn't the only boy with small feet in their year). They were a bit wider than her foot, but the length was good, and even Rigel could see that they contrasted nicely with the dark robes.

"Oh, yes!" Pansy circled Rigel happily, "Now there's a perfect note of symmetry between your eyes and your shoes. Doesn't he look pureblooded, Draco?"

"He looks rich and refined, if that's what you mean," Draco shrugged, "I certainly wouldn't think him out of place at one of Mother's casual

luncheons."

Rigel fidgeted uncomfortably while they discussed how pureblooded she looked. She had never felt her deception more keenly than that moment. The mirror she was looking into might as well have been a painting. She couldn't see herself anywhere in the grey eyes, the perfectly arranged curls, the elegant robes that Harriet Potter had always considered too impractical, and the shoes-oh, Merlin those shoes-which she could never take anywhere near a cauldron. For a moment she was terrified. Is this what it means to chase your dreams? Do you have to sacrifice your real self to find your would-be self? And even if you find it, and all your dreams become the facts of your reality, is there a way to get back to that dreamer unchanged? She didn't know, and that thought was enough to halt her thinking altogether.

"Will you take this charm off of my hair now, Pan?" Rigel asked, "It's making my head feel a bit heavy, I think."

"Yes, it should be dry by now," Pansy lifted the charm and used her fingers to tweak the positioning of a couple of the dark locks, "Perfect. I'm afraid there's nothing more for me to do."

Draco sighed as he helped Rigel put all her shoes back into her closet neatly, "I'm sure we'll miss you terribly, but don't let the door hit you on the way out."

Pansy sniffed, "Well, it's a good thing breakfast starts in fifteen minutes then, so you won't be bereft of my company for longer than it will take to wake Nott from his coma."

She gathered up her products quickly and the warning glance she sent Rigel as she paused by the door veritably *dared* her to change anything in her appearance before going to breakfast. Rigel smiled meekly. "Thank you, Pansy," she said as the blonde girl left.

"I can't remember which of us made friends with her first," Draco said after Pansy had gone, "But we are going to have a long seven

years."

"Never dull, though," Rigel smiled, "And when people look at pictures of all the interesting things that happen in the next seven years, you can rest assured that we'll at least be the best-dressed ones in the frame."

Draco smiled ruefully, "I'm sure one day I'll appreciate that, but right now I just wish I could have slept some more."

"You?" Rigel raised an eyebrow, "What about me?"

"Again, what about you?" Draco grinned, "And instead of arguing about which one of us got less sleep this morning-"

"As if it's even up for dispute."

"-we should be waking Theo up so that he can enjoy the fresh dungeon air as well."

Rigel glanced over at Nott's bed, which was eclipsed by hangings that probably muted light and sound, and from which steady, sickeningly comfortable breathing noises were emerging.

"It *is* almost time for breakfast," she said.

"That's the spirit!" Draco grinned, "Practically doing him a favor, aren't we?"

Fifteen minutes later, Draco and Rigel met Pansy in the common room. Nott was conspicuously absent. After taking in Rigel's wide-eyed, shell-shocked look and hearing Draco mutter, "I thought he was a morning person," while brushing futilely at a singed portion of his sleeve, Pansy decided not to ask, and they all three headed for breakfast.

Rigel received several interesting looks from the girls in their grade over breakfast-the one from Bulstrode making her the least uncomfortable, as the solidly built girl seemed to be calculating

something considerably less romantic than Davis and Greengrass were. Pansy kept sending her smug little *see-how-much-difference-it-makes?* smiles from across the table, and even Draco found the sight of their classmates ogling someone other than him to be a nice change.

When the post came, Rigel received her long-awaited reply from Archie. It was delivered by a Barn Owl, so she opened it right away.

Dear Rigel (I like the change by the way),

I was so glad to receive your letter! I did miss you, no matter how annoying I think you are, Rigel rolled her eyes. Archie was about as bad at pretending to be her as she was pretending to be him, *and it's good that you're doing well at Hogwarts so far-though why anyone would want to go to that pretentious place I really don't understand.* Rigel thought he was laying it on a bit thick there. *I'm glad you've made friends already, and it was really brave of you to befriend a Malfoy after all dad and Uncle Sirius have told us about them. As for Marcus Flint, you did tell me about him, remember? I specifically recall you describing him to me as 'rough around the edges' but 'much nicer than he looks' when you told me about meeting him and his terrifyingly prejudiced father in the VIP box. You mentioned something about a troubled home life and a mother with a chronic illness (which was part of the reason you told him about your ambition to be a Healer after your own mum passed, wasn't it?), and said if I ever met him I should try and look past the surface, which you said is mostly just a front-am I remembering that right? Anyway, he does seem nice, so perhaps I'll send him an owl and see if we can't all become good friends.*

My classes are going well, and my Potions professor was especially impressed with my understanding of the art (I bet yours was too, considering how much of my knowledge must have rubbed off on you over the years). I don't think I'll have any problems becoming a Healer here, and I hope you aren't too jealous of me-I'll share everything I learn with you over the summers, and it'll be like we're both in Healer training. I'm sure by the time you graduate you'll be

able to pass the Healer Certification Tests with ease. I've also made a few friends-the closest of which is a muggleborn witch who's also from England, Hermione Granger. She's terrifyingly brilliant, but also very helpful and friendly, if a bit bossy at times.

Well, that's really all I have to report so far-sorry my reply took so long, I've been really busy settling in. Imagine I said something sappy and heart-felt about missing you, etc.

-Harry

Rigel smiled fondly as she folded up the letter and tucked it into her pocket. Archie was going to write Flint, it seemed, and hopefully he would cement an agreement from Flint to keep their secret indefinitely.

"Letter from my cousin," she explained when Draco and Pansy sent her politely questioning looks.

Draco frowned thoughtfully, "The Blacks are related to nearly all the old wizarding families, but I can't think of any with children old enough to write to who aren't here at Hogwarts. Did you mean an older cousin, who'd already graduated?"

Pansy coughed delicately, "I think perhaps he meant a cousin attending a different magical school."

"But Hogwarts is the best," Draco said blankly, "What family with connections to the Blacks would send their child anywhere else?"

Pansy sent Draco a meaningful look, at which he made a little 'oh' with his mouth and said, "Are they from the continent, then? You know, the Malfoys came over from France with the Norman Conquest, and a lot of old wizarding roots can be found in ancient European civilizations."

Rigel smiled a bit stiffly, "No, my cousin is not from the continent. My cousin attends the American Institute of Magic."

Rigel could see the exact moment Malfoy realized that the only British magical children who went to America were those who could not attend Hogwarts because of their blood-status. The blonde boy looked surprised, then faintly embarrassed, that Rigel had been openly corresponding with someone tainted by muggle. Pansy sighed at Draco's uncomfortable expression and Rigel's stiffly unapologetic posture, but wisely did not presume to interfere.

"Ah, so," Draco cast around for something non-inflammatory to say. He valued blood and magic as any good Malfoy should, but he valued his friendship with Rigel, too, and everyone knew of her father's unfortunate political leanings, "So, that would be the Potter Heir, then? You two must have spent some time together as children, with your fathers so close in school."

"Yes," Rigel relaxed slightly when Draco didn't immediately hurl ugly slurs around. She berated herself for not giving her friend more credit. So far he had said nothing against her or Sirius, despite the reputation she knew the last two Blacks had in Slytherin House. She promised she'd give Draco a chance to be fair-minded before she assumed too much about his reactions to things, "Harry and I grew up together."

"Harriet Potter goes by Harry?" Pansy asked curiously, "What's she like? I've heard her mentioned in our tea circle, of course, by those who saw her as a baby, before the Potters and the Blacks stepped out of society." Rigel thought that was a very diplomatic way of describing how the Potters and Blacks (along with about fifty other Dumbledore-aligned families at the time) had angrily turned their backs on pureblooded society altogether in a politically-motivated snub known as the Great Split of 1981.

On Halloween night, 1981, Mr. Riddle had launched a secret coup of the Wizengamot-that is, he had gathered enough supporters from council members he allegedly bribed to call a secret meeting around midnight, while most of the light-supporting council members were out celebrating and therefore 'mysteriously' and 'unfortunately' missed their summons to the council. Using the absence of most of

his opposition, Mr. Riddle had ruthlessly pushed through a series of laws, which included in their number restrictions against anyone schooled outside of the UK from holding high office in government or publicly-run companies in Great Britain, laws forbidding any witch or wizard with creature blood from voting in public elections or enlisting in any law-enforcement agency, and laws to keep the Wizengamot from overturning any already-sanctioned law with less than a three-fourths majority. The families whose council members had been excluded from the vote were outraged, and in silent, furious protest they had to a one cut the rest of pureblooded society (mostly consisting of dark purebloods) altogether. Never since then had any of the offended light families attended a social event hosted by the wife or child of one of the Heads of Family who had been present that Halloween evening. It was an incredibly sore point for most of the dark pureblood hostesses, who suddenly had half the attendees at their balls and luncheons, but Pansy managed to reference it casually, as if the Great Split had not affected her at all.

"Does she really have eyes as green as a serpent's finely polished scales?" Pansy asked.

Draco and Rigel turned disbelieving looks on her. Pansy's cheeks became ever-so-slightly rose-tinted.

"What?" she shrugged artlessly, "The Potter Heir was a baby last time anyone saw her, so all they can talk about is the color of her hair and eyes."

"But-" Draco broke off to suppress a snort of laughter, then raised his eyebrows, "Who says they're 'green as a serpent's whatever'?"

Pansy rolled her eyes, "Don't laugh, you know how my mother is. She thinks she's a tortured soul, but her turn of phrase rubs off on me every now and then." Draco nodded in understanding, but his eyes still gleamed with mirth. "Oh, just answer my question, Rigel," Pansy said.

Rigel cocked her head, wondering if she'd be able to talk about herself as if she were someone else. She found it was easier if she used 'Harry' or 'Harriet' to describe her real self, and 'Rigel' to refer to her alter ego, when she was trying to keep everything straight in her head. Not that Rigel wasn't just as much her *real* self... she hoped it would get easier in time, but worried that she'd have multiple identities by the time she was seventeen.

"Well," Rigel began, "Harry's eyes are definitely green. She takes after her dad's coloring, mostly, but everyone says her eyes are her mom's."

"Lily Potter nee Evans, right?" Pansy said, looking contemplative, "They say she was quite lovely."

"She still is," Rigel said evenly, "Aunt Lily is one of those people that never seems to age a day."

"My mother is the same way," Draco smiled. Then he paused, a small frown on his face as he wondered at the ease with which he compared Narcissa Black with a woman of muggle birth.

"The mark of true beauty," Pansy said wisely, "Were you and Harriet close as children?"

"Yes," Rigel said, hesitating before saying, "My Uncle Remus didn't have any children, so she was my only friend, before I met you two." Rigel thought that even from Archie's position it was true, if you didn't count Marcus Flint. They had been the only children of an age in their part of Godric's Hollow, since most of the inhabitants were elderly, like their neighbor Mrs. Bagshot.

Pansy and Draco looked torn between pleasure at being considered two of her closest three friends, and sadness at how isolated Rigel's life had been compared to theirs. The consequence of the light families stepping out of pureblooded society was that, without attending the teas and structured play dates designed to socialize heirs, their children consorted mostly with their neighbors and

siblings, and didn't meet many other wizarding children until they came to Hogwarts.

"You must have been more like siblings than friends, then," Pansy said thoughtfully.

"We were," Rigel said, "Harry's like my little sister-or maybe older sister, the way she mothers me sometimes." Rigel was able to admit this easily. Archie needed to be mothered, in her opinion.

"Does she want to be a Potions Mistress as well?" Draco asked, curious about this unknown Potter despite himself.

"Sort of," Rigel said, trying to figure out how to set up their story in a way that wouldn't be contradicted later, "She does have a strong interest in Potions, but I think she's planning on applying that interest toward Healer studies at the moment. AIM has a fast-track program for getting a Healing Certificate. It's very competitive, and they drop students who can't keep up with the extra workload all the time, but Harry's very determined."

Rigel thought that was the best explanation. This way, if someone learned that Harry had been very interested in Potions before leaving for school, it was explained, and when Archie and Harry eventually switched their lives back, they would say that Harry simply decided Healing wasn't for her at the last minute. Archie would take the Mediwizard Exam under his own name once they'd graduated, saying that he'd been inspired by Harry's studies over the years, and decided to learn Healing on the side (easily accepted considering the amount of time Rigel would be spending in the Library while she was at Hogwarts). The trickiest part of the plan was convincing everyone that Archie was in fact Archie after he came back to claim his name and a generation of people in English wizarding society thought that Archie looked like Rigel. Rigel would have no trouble becoming Harry again, because no one from America was likely to connect the boy Harry Potter with the girl Harriet Potter, simply because none of them moved in the pureblood circles who would know better (being half-or-muggleborn). Archie's reappearance hadn't been entirely

worked out yet, but Rigel was confident she could come up with something in the next six years or so.

"A Mediwitch? That's quite noble," Pansy said.

"Though it might be hard for her to get a good job here in England if she was schooled out of the United Kingdom," Draco added. Pansy sent him a repressing look, which he shrugged off, "Well, it's true, even if some people think it's unfair."

"He's right," Rigel said, "I think Harry will work something out, though." *Like becoming a Potions Mistress and working for private development companies.*

"Will she remain in America, then?" Pansy asked.

"Maybe," Rigel shrugged, "Even I'm not privy to all her plans."

"I thought you two were such close friends," Draco said. Rigel hoped he wasn't honestly jealous, and that the question had come out spitefully on accident.

"Well, you and I are friends just as much, and I don't know all of you guys' plans," Rigel said.

"Point taken," Pansy laughed, "And furthered by the fact that we definitely don't know anything about *your* plans, Rigel."

"What are you talking about?" Rigel finished off her tea neatly, "I want to be a Potions Master. That's really all there is to me."

Her friends exchanged dry looks, but then Pansy realized that people were beginning to leave the Great Hall and quickly removed her napkin from her lap so she could stand.

"Oh, let's get back to the common room quickly," she said, motioning for Rigel and Draco to leave their plates as well, "I told the people I want you to meet that we would be in the common room after

breakfast, and we have to be there before them or we'll be seen as impertinent, making an upperclassman wait."

They got back to the dungeons with plenty of time for Pansy to settle Rigel's short, dark locks one last time and arrange the three of them in seats by one of the fireplaces with extra chairs around it, trying to strike a mood of casual repose (or so she said). "Now, I've known these two since I was a child, and their personalities can be a bit... well, I hope you like them, but don't take offense if they say anything needling-they like to provoke people sometimes."

Rigel nodded a bit apprehensively.

"Why am I here again?" Draco asked while they waited. He was sitting to Rigel's left on a low-backed couch, and Pansy was sitting in a chair that was placed cattycorner to the end of the couch Draco sat on. This left an open space next to Rigel on the couch, and placed her closest to the empty chairs that would be taken by the upperclassmen. This was supposed to show that Draco and Pansy weren't trying to hide or protect Rigel, and that Rigel was not afraid to be the closest open target for a group of more powerful (and possibly hostile) strangers. Rigel was glad she had Pansy to work all this out for her.

"You are here to lend consequence to Rigel's standing in society. What better endorsement for the debut of the new Black Family Heir than the presence of the Malfoy Family Heir?" Pansy explained patiently.

"You make it sound so mercenary, Pans," Draco wrinkled his nose, "There's something unsavory about social maneuvering."

"Those at the top of the social food chain can afford to feel that way," Pansy smiled wryly, "But others must reconcile themselves to the gentle game, no matter how repellant they find it to be at times."

"But you and Rigel aren't exactly bottom feeders," Draco said, "Why is it so important to push him into society right now?"

"It must be while he is at school, because when he is under his father's jurisdiction he can't participate in society unless Black Sr. allows it. School is a place of social neutrality, as it must be if students whose parents are at political odds are expected to coexist peacefully," Pansy said, "And the more Rigel presents himself to the other Slytherins openly, the less they'll have to form an opinion of him based on conjecture and hearsay. If we want our friendship with Rigel to be accepted, we have to show the people in our circles that he has nothing to hide."

Draco glanced at Rigel apologetically, "But he does have things to hide."

Rigel shrugged. It was true.

"Well, what better way to hide things than by giving people no reason to go looking for them?" Pansy said, her head tipped reasonably to the side.

Draco sighed, "Whatever you say, Pansy."

They waited only another few minutes before Pansy stood gracefully and motioned surreptitiously for Draco and Rigel to do the same. They turned to face two older boys making their way toward them from a hallway across the common room. They were about the same height, but one was slightly taller. The taller one had light-brown hair cut close to his head and a firm, square jaw that gave him a stern aura most of the time. The shorter (though still quite tall compared to Rigel), on the other hand, had hair so black it was almost blue, and honey-colored eyes that sparked with humor as they flicked lightly over the first-years. He was thin and delicately built, looking like a playful shadow next to the rock-statue that was his friend, but he was almost beautiful, too.

"Mr. Rookwood, Mr. Rosier, how good of you to join us," Pansy stepped forward with a smile that seemed to be at least in part genuine fondness, "You have met Mr. Malfoy, I believe?" The older Slytherins nodded politely to Draco, who nodded back. "Then, may I

introduce my classmate, Rigel Black?" Pansy turned her head to indicate Rigel, who kept her eyes cool and steady as she received their regard, "Rigel, this is Aldon Rosier and Edmund Rookwood."

"How do you do, Mr. Black?" Rosier, the slighter of the two, stepped forward to shake her hand easily, followed duly by Rookwood. Both handshakes were brief, but firm, and transferred a pleasant warmth despite the dungeon air.

"Very well, thank you," Rigel nodded to each of the older boys in turn, her face a mask of polite interest.

Pansy sat first, followed by Malfoy, then Rookwood and Rosier, and finally Rigel. Rookwood chose the single seat opposite Pansy, and Rosier the one on the couch next to Rigel. She tried to both sit straight and lean back enough for Draco to not feel excluded from the conversation (though he had made it clear he wasn't particularly interested in the whole affair), and Rigel was grateful her injury was on her left side, and was unlikely to draw the scrutiny of the upperclassmen. Everything else about Rigel was, apparently, fair game.

Pansy got the conversation started in true hostess style.

"I'm so pleased you found time in your schedules to sit down with me today," her words were formal, but she injected such emotion into each syllable that it was hard to doubt them, "It's been ages since we saw one another last, and I'm sure you're both quite busy now that the term is picking up."

"Not at all," Rookwood said. If a mountain had a voice, strong and staid, it would have been Rookwood's. He spoke with his eyelids half-lowered, and the effect was like a Transparency Charm had been cast over everything his gaze touched, "Indeed, I cannot think of anyone too busy to spend a few moments with you, Miss Parkinson."

"Though as lowly fourth-years, our schedules are hardly hard-pressed to accommodate anything," Rosier added, winking overtly at Pansy, who to her credit accepted their flattery and cajoling with aplomb, like a queen accepting a bow.

Draco laughed lightly, sounding much more engaged than he'd acted before the other two had arrived, "Oh, don't tell her that-she'll be expecting Rigel and I to be equally accommodating with our time, now."

"And why shouldn't you be?" Pansy asked, eyebrows raised playfully.

"Because you're impossible to live with if you get your way too often," Rigel said, thinking she might as well participate in the banter, since Pansy had gone to so much trouble to arrange everything.

Rookwood and Rosier chuckled, and Draco nodded earnestly, "He's right, you know. You really mustn't spoil our Pansy or she'll become entirely out of hand."

"A woman is always out of hand," Rosier said slyly, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees.

"Though she may never be long out of mind," Rookwood added, leaning back into his chair, as if in counterbalance to Rosier.

Pansy looked torn between pique at being singled out and relief that the ice was steadily breaking down. She settled for smiling good-naturedly and turning the subject once again.

"I take it your studies are progressing smoothly, then, if you've so much time to torment the female race," she said.

"They are," Rosier said, "Or at least as smoothly as can be expected before we settle into career paths."

"Are you considering anything in particular?" Rigel asked. It wasn't hard to project interest into her question; Rookwood and Rosier were interesting people so far, at least on the surface.

"I think I would like to pursue a Mastery in Experimental Theory at some point after graduation," Rosier said, "But Edmund is more interested in hands-on work, aren't you?"

"I find the minding of magical plants and animals to be more satisfying than Arithmancy and the like, yes," Rookwood shrugged, "As for a career, one of my uncles works on an International Creatures Reserve, so I'm applying for an internship there next summer. If it suits me, I might look towards working with Dragons or Hydras in the future."

"Those both sound like fascinating branches of study," Pansy remarked, "I hope by the beginning of my fourth year I have so clear an idea for my future."

"Don't worry if nothing strikes a chord your first year," Rookwood said, "The basics in every subject are fairly dull."

Draco smirked, "Tell that to Rigel. He had his future career picked out before he walked onto the Hogwarts Express."

Rigel fought a grimace at Draco's blunt phrasing. Perhaps it was a bit too confident to plan your life at eleven years old, but if you wanted something, in Rigel's experience, you had to take it. The world surely wasn't going to hand it to you if you just asked nicely.

"Oh?" Rosier ran his eyes across her features, an amused twist at the edge of his mouth as he spoke, "What will you do when you graduate, then?"

Rigel thought it rather gracious of him to ask what she *would* do, rather than what she *wanted* to do, and she answered him honestly, "I hope to pursue a Potions Mastery."

The older Slytherins exchanged a surprised look. Rigel wondered if they had been expecting her to say something like 'Auror' or 'Prank-Inventor.' When they refocused on her, their eyes had grown sharper, more intent, as if they were now engaged in the conversation fully.

"You have chosen a challenging subject to pursue," Rookwood noted, "The Potions Mastery is rumored to be the most difficult to obtain."

"Rigel is up to the challenge," Draco said. The sheer confidence he radiated as he spoke made her cheeks grow the tiniest bit warm.

"A glowing endorsement," Rosier said. Rigel couldn't tell if it was her imagination or if his eyes had really lingered laughingly over her pink-tinged cheekbones when he said 'glowing.' She didn't think he meant to mock her, though-at least not cruelly. The delicate boy simply seemed to have a teasing disposition, and Merlin knew she was familiar enough with those.

"And remarkably apt," Pansy threw in her support of Rigel as well, "Professor Snape has already begun giving Rigel extra tutelage."

This caused another fathomless look to pass between Rosier and Rookwood.

"Professor Snape is good friends with my father," Rosier said slowly, "And he does not share his talents lightly."

"It isn't nearly as exciting as it sounds," Rigel said, "At the moment Professor Snape just assigns me a lot of extra work."

"That sounds like Professor Snape," Rosier laughed.

"Still, that you have gained his notice at all is quite impressive," Rookwood said, not giving any of his thoughts away with his even voice and still-as-stone expression, "And that you have done so this

quickly-well, you must have nursed this ambition for some time before coming to Hogwarts."

Rosier smiled widely, "Long-term ambition would certainly go a long way toward explaining your presence here in Slytherin."

"I wasn't aware that it needed explaining," Rigel said, arching an eyebrow as Draco sometimes did when he was pretending to be obtuse.

Rosier's smile never faltered, "Weren't you? Many, many people are curious about you, Mr. Black. They want to know on which side of the wand you will fall."

"If I do land on one side or the other, rest assured that it will be because I jumped," Rigel said.

"I like this one, Pansy," Rosier grinned, though he didn't take his eyes off Rigel's expressionless face.

"Yes, do bring him around more often," Rookwood agreed.

The upperclassmen stood, each nodding to Draco and bowing over Pansy's hand gracefully.

"Until we meet again, Mr. Black," Rosier favored Rigel with a sly wink while Rookwood just nodded politely.

"Good day, Mr. Rookwood, Mr. Rosier," Rigel nodded respectfully to each of them, then sat slowly back down on the couch once they'd walked away, extremely relieved that the meeting was over.

"Oh, that went so well!" Pansy beamed at her, "Aldon and Edmund have a lot of pull among the upperclassmen. You've made wonderful allies today, Rigel."

"I understand why you wanted me to meet them, but why did they seem so pleased to meet me?" Rigel asked.

"Everyone wants to bring *éclat* to their own family name, and the best way to do that, short of becoming distinguished through your own merits, is to make good connections. You, Rigel, have talent and ambition, not to mention a respected family name, and so there will never be a shortage of people desiring to connect themselves to you."

"But everyone in Slytherin is ambitious, right? Surely they'll all want to be the sought after, rather than the seeking?" Rigel said, a bit confused.

"No reason not to do both," Pansy shrugged, "Then you have twice the clout. Now we only have to hope Aldon and Rosier write to their parents about you. If that happens, their mothers will write to my mother and Draco's mother and we'll be practically ordered to be friends with you!"

"Oh, uh-good?" Rigel smiled tentatively.

"Yes, *wonderful*," Pansy assured her, "Not that we would have dropped you even if the whole House hated you-it's simply not done to treat friends so callously-but this does make life so much easier for us."

"Well, as long as that's settled, let's do something *productive* with the rest of our morning, shall we?" Draco stretched as if he'd been on the couch for hours, rather than ten minutes or so, "We'll go get our books and meet you at those tables over there in five minutes, Pansy. I want to get this History assignment out of the way before lunch."

Rigel finished up her own homework assignments with Draco and Pansy, and after lunch she took leave of them to study up on Potions and Adolescent Magical Theory (aka work on Flint's homework) in the Library.

She was using her Ravenclaw disguise today, which involved the brown, twig-like wig and the same pair of common round glasses. In

this disguise she walked with extremely poor posture, head down so the coarse strands of hair fell into her face, and shuffled along slowly between the stacks. She thought briefly that if she ever did get discovered and summarily thrown out of Hogwarts, she could at least run away to the muggle world and take up acting for a living.

She had done most of Flint's assignments on Saturday morning (and had been pleased to see that Flint included the old, graded assignments in his letter so that she could be sure she wasn't making the same mistake twice), but she was stuck on an essay about Vanishing Theory. It was incredibly complicated, and all the passages she read about it seemed to confuse her further. Just when she would start to wrap her head around the idea, a contradictory concept would crop up, and she'd have to change her understanding in order to reconcile it. Rigel stared morosely at the thick book on Theoretical Transfiguration in front of her. She was sure that Transfiguration was one of those subjects that was extremely cumulative, and that jumping five years ahead was probably impossible for anyone with less than a genius level intellect (which she certainly did not possess).

Rigel packed the half-completed essay away and replaced the books, deciding that now was the time to take Percy Wesley up on his offer of intellectual enlightenment. Without his help, she didn't think she'd be able to ever finish the essay before it was due on Thursday.

She left the Library and made her way quickly to the Gryffindor's Tower. She had taken to moving quickly through the halls since Friday's incident. She didn't go exploring alone anymore (though she still planned on taking walks with Pansy, but honestly, Pansy knew a lot more defensive magic than she did), and she told herself she wouldn't run errands late at night or early in the morning unless she really needed to.

She made it to the Fat Lady's portrait without incident, and, deciding it would be somewhat rude if she got the password off the Map, Rigel knocked several times on the Lady's opulent frame. Moments

later, a girl with blonde, curly hair and a curious expression cracked the portrait and stuck her head out.

She eyed the blue and white tie Rigel had purposely left on after stowing the wig and glasses in her bag and said, "What's up?" in a polite, but not exactly friendly tone.

"Is Percy Weasley in there?" she asked, "He told me to ask for him here if I needed help with some books I was reading."

At the word 'books' the curious expression left her face and she gave a bored nod, "Yeah, come on in, kid," she pushed open the painting and Rigel climbed carefully through the opening. "Prefect Weasley is over there by those tables," she gestured to a group of study tables that were tucked into a niche between two sets of stairs. Percy sat alone at one of them, up to his shoulders in various books and running ink-stained fingers through his fireball red hair, "He's been in a right state since lunch," the curly-haired girl informed her, "So good luck."

Rigel thanked her and headed over to where Percy had barricaded himself into a corner. He seemed to be writing an essay-that or he was just making scratch marks on a sheet of parchment.

"Percy?" she spoke quietly, but he still jumped as if she'd shouted and gaped at her.

"What? Who-oh, Rigel, hello," he sighed heavily and rubbed hands against his face, knocking his horn-rimmed glasses askew, "How are you?"

"Very well, thank you," she surveyed the books Percy had stacked about him, recognizing a few on sight, "Working on a Potions essay?"

"Yes," he scowled down at the mess of ink and parchment before him, "Or I was before Potions decided to become Ancient Mesopotamian, "Dratted books don't make any sense." He shook his

head briefly, then refocused on her, "I'm sorry, did you come for help with something? I need a break from this anyway."

Rigel moved a pile of crumpled parchment from a chair and sat, saying, "I was hoping you could explain the theory behind Vanishing things to me. It was mentioned in a book I was reading about Invisibility Spells and so I looked it up, but I don't understand parts of it."

"Oh?" Percy looked interested, "That's very advanced theory. We're only just now getting into it, in fact." Rigel tried not to fidget guiltily. "What are you having trouble with?"

"I don't understand where things go when they are vanished. The book says they go 'into non-being,' but what is that, like another dimension?" Rigel asked.

"Non-being is a kind of theoretical place from which all of being comes out of. It's not really another dimension, since other dimensions are just a different kind of being, but rather it's the opposite of things that are. Vanished objects don't exactly 'go' there, but they become the opposite of being-that is, they un-become. And once they aren't a being anymore, they are a part of non-being, do you see?" Percy raised his eyebrows expectantly.

"Not really," Rigel frowned, "If they don't exist anymore, then how is it possible to get the objects back by unvanishing them?"

"Well, it's all theoretical," Percy began slowly, "And you don't really have to understand the physics of it to grasp the theory. Basically just realize that you aren't destroying whatever you Vanish-it's not that kind of un-becoming. More like you're giving it the property of lacking presence in this world. It's still the same as it was before you vanished it, only it doesn't exist here anymore, so it's considered non-being in that sense. The key is in distinguishing between non-being and non-existence. An object in non-being *exists*, it just doesn't *exist in being* at the moment. That's why you can retrieve a vanished object, and even a vanished person, if you know how."

"So, if anything, a vanishment is conditionally temporary?" Rigel asked.

"Yes, that's usually the case," Percy nodded.

"I'm confused about another thing," Rigel said, and when Percy gestured for her to go on, she continued, "I've read that in Apparition, for example, where a wizard vanishes and unvanishes himself in two different spatial locations, it's possible for the wizard to splinch himself, without killing himself, which suggests that the connection between vanished parts of an object must survive the vanishment-do you think it's possible that it might work the same for linked charms?"

"How so?" Percy asked, apparently intrigued.

"I mean, if you vanished an object with a link to something in this world, like say you vanished one of the monitoring orbs the Healers use while it was still linked to the person it was monitoring, and then you unvanished it two hours later. Would you have data for those two hours? Would the orb continue to work as a linked object in non-being, if it remains unchanged in non-being?"

"Well, I don't know why it wouldn't, but you should ask Professor McGonagall in class if you really want to be sure," he said.

"Would you mind asking her for me? I don't want to come off as showing off by reading ahead," Rigel ducked her head embarrassedly, and Percy chuckled.

"Well, certainly. I'm quite curious myself."

"And another thing," Rigel smiled apologetically, but she really wanted to figure this all out before she tried to finish Flint's essay, "Also to do with Apparition. It seems to me that Apparition is just the vanishment and unvanishment of a person, but with different spatial dimensions used for the revanishment than were used in the original vanishment.

"That's one way to look at it, I suppose," Percy acknowledged, "Go on."

"So if we consider that an object's location is the result of its intersection point on the spatial-temporal grid, then if it's possible to vanish something across the spatial plane, shouldn't it be possible to also vanish things across the other?" Rigel said.

"You mean time travel?" Percy tilted his head amusedly.

"Yes. Could you vanish an object into the past, for example?"

"I don't know, Rigel. If it were banishing we were talking about the answer would be a definite 'no,' but you are correct in saying that vanishings aren't limited to moving through consecutive points. It might be that Apparition only works because the wizard *is* the vanished object, and therefore able to unvanish *himself* in a different spatial location. I'm not sure if you could send an object across a temporal barrier, because you'd have no control once it was vanished. It's possible to unvanish things usually only to the place they vanished from, though I suppose without any controlling parameters a vanished object could reappear anywhere..." he trailed off, thinking hard.

"And a wizard would have to be impossibly powerful to vanish *themselves* across that barrier, wouldn't they?" Rigel asked.

"I should think so," Percy said, "but I'll ask McGonagall about that too, if you like."

"Yes, thank you," Rigel said, "I'm very interested in figuring all this out."

"Well your grasp of it isn't bad so far," Percy said kindly.

"Thank you. I think I understand it much better now," she said.

"No problem," he smiled, "I actually think I understand it better after helping explain it. And," he said ruefully, "Anything is better than wading through this mess," he gestured to the scattered notes in front of him.

Rigel's eyes traced over the table, taking in the mountains of books and splatters of ink. She could have left. She could have walked away right then and Percy wouldn't have begrudged her for a moment. He would never expect recompense for helping her, Gryffindor that he was, but as she sat there, taking in his pained and hopeless expression, she knew that she had to at least try to help him in return.

"What's the essay on?" she asked, her tone casual in case it turned out to be a topic she couldn't actually help him with.

"Potion Fusion," Percy sighed, "Professor Snape assigned everyone two Potions, and we're supposed to imagine we have a friend who needs to take both at the same time and figure out what needs to be changed about the dosages and ingredients in order to make them both compatible and effective. It's a nightmare, and Professor Snape always gives me the trickiest assignments because he thinks I'm an 'uppity, fact-grasping, know-it-all.'"

Rigel raised her eyebrows at the insult, and Percy flushed sheepishly, "That's what he wrote on my last paper."

"Ah," Rigel took another look at the books on the table, "Well, the first problem is that you're reading Bonagage," she said, "That fool hardly ever gets anything right."

Percy looked at her like she'd grown horns.

"I read Potions Journals," Rigel said, "And the general consensus among the academic community is that Bonagage is a blithering idiot who wouldn't know knotgrass from fluxweed if he had to wipe his ass with them. If you cite him in your essay, Snape probably won't even read it."

Percy blinked several times before resolutely pushing the book in question away from him.

"Could I, ah, borrow those Journals sometime?" he asked politely.

"Sure, but for now, what Potions did you get?" Rigel scooted her chair closer to peer at the prefect's notes.

"Skele-gro and Blood Replenishing Potion," Percy said, "You, ah, know much about Potions, Rigel?"

"Yeah, I like Potions," she said easily, "What have you worked out so far?"

"Well, the biggest trouble is with the bloodroot from the Blood Replenishing Potion, which reacts badly with the skullcap flowers in Skele-gro, and the huge amount of nettle leaves needed for Skele-grow, which tend to explode when placed in dragon bile. Unfortunately, Blood-Replenishing Potion is brewed on a dragon bile base," Percy pursed his lips, "Also, the ginger and the cayenne used in Skele-gro to burn infection away are blood-thinners and circulators, both of which would be very bad to give to someone who's possibly bleeding, having suffered a wound they'd need to take Blood Replenishing Potion for."

"Hmm, this is a tricky one," Rigel tapped her finger against the table unconsciously, "What have you tried tweaking?"

"Well, at first I thought I could use willow bark instead of bloodroot for the Blood Replenisher, but willow bark needs to stew for over an hour, which is too long to leave the vervain in without rendering the whole thing undrinkable. I can't just leave the vervain until last, either, because it has to go in at the same time as the hypericum flowers, which must go in straight after the St. Stewart's Bane in order to bond properly to the dissolving stalks," Percy said all this in a wearily defeated kind of a way.

"Why not use a different pain-killer besides willow bark?" Rigel asked.

"Any of the others that I've come across so far have reacted violently with the trillium, which I can't take out of the Skele-gro without causing the drinker's muscles to cramp around the growing bones and make them re-grow crookedly," Percy said.

"What about feverfew?" Rigel flipped through one of the herbal indexes on the table, but she couldn't find feverfew listed in it.

"Is that an anesthetic?" Percy frowned, "It's not in any of these."

"Yes, it's a rather hairy flower that grows in southeast Europe," Rigel said, "It'll work as a pain killer if you use enough of it-you need about three times as much feverfew as you would bloodroot, but it would go easily with the skullcap flowers, I think."

"You're sure about this?" Percy glanced at her apologetically, "You seem very bright, but Professor Snape already hates me..."

"What have you got to lose?" Rigel smiled slightly, "Incidentally, feverfew also prevents platelets from clumping, so it's really quite perfect for a Blood-Replenishing Potion."

Percy laughed, but wrote it down nonetheless, "Alright, Rigel, what else have you got for me?"

"Well, I think you should consider replacing the ginger and cayenne with oatstraw," Rigel said.

"Oatstraw?" Percy's lips twisted wryly, "Something else that's definitely not in any of these indexes. What does that one do?"

"Well, it's a non-inflammatory, which never hurts, and it's rolling in calcium and other vitamins. It will act as a thickening agent, but you can combat that by adding twice as much chimera milk. Seriously,"

she added as Percy hesitated once more, "Cows eat oatstraw all the time, so you know it's good for bones."

"I'll be sure to tell Professor Snape that," he shook his head, scribbling away, "But what will burn out infections if we take the ginger and cayenne out?"

"We already added feverfew to the Blood Replenishing Potion," Rigel said, "Even though the Skele-gro itself won't have anything to ward off infection, if you're giving them to the person at the same time, it won't matter."

Percy smiled slowly, "That's... brilliant. Except for-

"The nettle leaves," Rigel grimaced, "I know. They're as important to the Skele-gro Potion as the dragon bile is to the Blood Replenisher. You could maybe mimic the effect by adding about two tons of rosemary."

"But the rosemary would mix with the St. Stewart's Bane and make the person vomit both Potions back up, so it's useless," Percy said.

"Yeah," Rigel frowned, "Professor Snape really does hate you."

Percy snorted. "Could be worse. I heard he gave Oliver Wood Amortentia and Wolfsbane."

"... in what situation would you ever have to administer both Amortentia and Wolfsbane at the same time?" Rigel wrinkled her nose, "It would have to be a werewolf who was drinking it or the Wolfsbane would just poison them, and you'd have to be insane to want a soon-to-be-wolf to fall obsessively in lust with you on the night of the full moon."

Percy laughed loudly, causing several people in the main common room to turn and stare at the unusual sight, "I'll tell Oliver to write his essay on that. It's not like Snape doesn't already give him hell for being the Gryffindor Quidditch Captain."

They flipped listlessly through the ingredient indexes, throwing out suggestion after suggestion, until Percy shut his book and laid his glasses down on top of it, massaging his forehead, "I just don't see how you can take the nettle leaves out of Skele-grow. It's impossible."

Rigel sat up straighter, thinking over what Percy had just said, "Maybe you're not supposed to," she said slowly, "Maybe you just have to alter the nettles so that they don't react with the dragon bile."

"But in doing that you would also be stripping the nettles of any regenerative properties they have, which is the entire point of keeping the nettle leaves," Percy said.

"What if it was like a Vanishing Spell, but opposite?" Rigel said excitedly.

"What?" Percy put his glasses back on to stare confusedly at her.

"Temporarily conditional!" Rigel grinned. It was the perfect solution.

"Explain," Percy demanded, quill poised over his notes.

"When a person drinks Blood-Replenishing Potions, what happens to the dragon bile? It gets rejected and drained from the stomach almost immediately, so at most you have about two minutes that the nettles are dangerous if reactive. We coat the nettle leaves with ephedra oil, right before we put them into the base. Ephedra oil is non-reactive, extremely mild, but it disperses naturally-"

"When it bonds with dissolved mullein root!" Percy was grinning now, too, "So we add whole stalks of mullein root to either of the Potions, and when the Blood Replenishing Potion is ingested, the dragon bile will be drained out before the mullein root fully dissolves, and by the time the ephedra oil is gone and the nettles are active again, there's no dragon bile left to react with! It's *genius*."

Rigel smiled as she watched Percy become completely embroiled in his notes, and waited patiently for him to remember her presence.

"Perfect, it all works out perfectly," he muttered happily to himself, "Rigel-oh! Rigel," he turned back to her, "I don't know how to thank you, but this is-"

"It was no trouble," Rigel said, "I like Potions, and you helped me a ton with that Transfiguration Theory."

"Still," he said, practically beaming with excitement, "I'm gonna show Professor Snape this time, and I couldn't have done it without you. Any time you need help with anything, day or night, just come find me."

"Thanks, Percy," Rigel nodded seriously.

"Oi! Percy!" someone called frantically from the portrait hole, "You better get down to the fourth floor! Your brothers-"

"Oh, Merlin, what have they done now?" Percy stood immediately, glancing distractedly at the cluttered table.

"I'll look after your stuff for you until you get back," Rigel offered.

"Will you? Thanks, Rigel," he straightened his robes briskly and headed off toward the portrait hole, "One of these days I'm going to owl mum about those two..."

Rigel pulled out the Transfiguration essay she was writing for Flint and decided to finish it up there, so that she could mail Flint his finished assignments while she was already near the Owlrey. She used the barricade of books to hide her awkward usage of her left hand to pin down the parchment as she wrote, and thirty minutes later she had completed the essay on Vanishing Theory, stowed it in her bag, and had settled into perusing the Potions books on the table, a couple of which she hadn't read more than once.

She was starting to wonder if Percy had been caught up in some horrible prank gone wrong, when she was pulled from her reading by a familiar voice.

"Strange place to do your homework, isn't it?"

Rigel looked up in time to see Lee Jordan claim the seat across from her casually.

"These are the study tables," Rigel pointed out.

"Uh yeah-in the *Gryffindor* common room," Lee laughed, "You're really something else, kid."

Rigel raised her eyebrows, "If you say so."

"I'm not the only one," Lee leaned back until his chair was balanced on the back two legs, "The twins talk about you all the time."

"Do they?" Rigel said in a bland tone of voice.

"Yeah, but that's the Weasley Twins for you," Lee shrugged, "Always going on about their newest discovery. They get tired of things pretty quickly, though-well, everything except one another, I guess."

"And you, too," Rigel said, "You've been their friend for years, haven't you?"

"Yeah, you'd think," Lee said, staring across the common room listlessly, "Sometimes, I don't know. They keep secrets with each other; hide things from me."

"Everyone hides things," Rigel said, "Don't you?"

Lee looked startled, as if he'd never considered that he had things he kept buried as well.

"Hmm," his gaze drifted over to the fire, "Still, when it comes down to it, twins only ever look toward each other."

Rigel said nothing, not wanting to put more of her opinions into the middle of what was obviously a complex and touchy friendship. It turned out she didn't have to say anything, as Lee stood up just as inexplicably as he'd sat, and said, "Don't let them wear you out," as he walked away. Rigel was left feeling very unsettled-for about five seconds.

At that point she was set upon by the tricksters themselves. They led the way through the portrait hole like grand-standers, triumphant grins drawing knowing smirks from the other Gryffindors. Percy came stumbling in behind them, looking drawn and exasperated. The eldest Weasley headed straight for the study tables, ignoring his brothers' attempts to cajole him into accepting their sincerest apologies. It was then Rigel noticed that Percy's prefect badge was spitting confetti with every third step he took.

"Honestly, Perce," Fred was saying when they came within earshot, "That spell was meant to hit Cynthia Bradford, the Slytherin Prefect, not *you* ."

"And that makes it better?" Percy scowled, "You can't just go around pranking prefects for no reason. How does it look? My own brothers, the biggest source of insubordinate machinations-"

"Woah, woah, Percy, who said we did it for no reason?" George said from Percy's other side, "It's not out fault we're involved in the-Rigel?" George looked pleasantly bemused to see her sitting at a study table in their common room.

"Puppy!" Fred cried cheerfully, bounding over to snag a seat next to her at the table. George wasted no time in claiming the seat on her right side, leaving Percy to sit across from them.

Instead, Percy just sighed and began packing up his notes and books, "May as well finish this in my dorm room for all the work I'll get done with these two around. See you, Rigel, and thanks again."

"The gratitude is all mine, Percy," Rigel said, "Until we meet again."

With a short nod, Percy trudged off to the fifth-year boys' staircase.

"So what could a first-year Slytherin possibly be helping our brother the perfect prefect with?" George asked curiously.

"And don't you dare lie to us, for Fred and I always know," Fred said.

"Percy and I have a mutual understanding," Rigel said loftily, "And since we are newly discovered allies, I feel it my duty to ask if you really did make his prefect badge belch confetti on purpose, because that was quite an ingenious spell."

Fred and George laughed, both shaking their heads in synch.

"A happy accident," Fred said proudly.

"The target, not the spell," George clarified.

"Why were you pranking Slytherins?" Rigel put on a sad expression, "Am I not entertainment enough for you?"

"Perish the thought!" Fred put a hand to his mouth in abject horror, "We were performing an odious duty, and nothing more."

"Haven't you heard?" George smiled enigmatically at her, "Slytherin and Gryffindor are involved in a prank war, so our services have been enlisted. It started Friday night. Any guesses why?"

Rigel frowned, "Surely not..."

"Regular martyr, aren't you?" Fred teased, "We heard you were viciously set upon by a cowardly Gryffindor while innocently walking through the dungeons past curfew on Friday night. The Slytherins are apparently so up in arms (or whatever the snakey equivalent of arms is) about it that they've sworn revenge against any and all Gryffindors who cross their path."

"Hence, the prank war," George said, shaking his head with amusement, "As if they needed to come up with such an elaborate

ex-"

"We don't know for certain it was a Gryffindor."

"-... cuse."

"Are you saying you really were attacked?" Fred frowned and sent a troubled look at George, whose face was suddenly very blank, "We thought they just wanted a reason to have a go at us, and made up a sympathetic story about a first-year being attacked unprovoked from behind to keep the Claws and Puffs from ganging up on them."

"Oh, well..." Rigel shrugged, "It really might not have been a Gryffindor."

"But you *were* attacked-again," George's eyes were icy and flat.

"I guess," Rigel said slowly, "Yeah, it was pretty clearly an attack this time. I kind of wish I knew who was doing this."

"You 'kind of' wish you knew?" George repeated, "Rigel, you need to take this more seriously. How many times have you been targeted-be honest."

"Um," Rigel tallied them up in her head. There was the first incident, where she broke her wrist, the one where she got trapped in a trick stair and dung-bombed, and then the stinging hex. "Three, I think."

"You think?" Fred prompted.

"Well, I sort of thought someone was following me between classes one day, but they didn't shoot a spell at me," she said, wondering if the 'blonde butterfly' Zabini was talking about could be her attacker.

"Merlin, Rigel," George took a deep breath, then let it out slowly, "Okay. First of all, you have a stalker."

"And second of all," Fred said, equally serious, "We're walking you back to your common room tonight."

"Tonight?" Rigel craned her neck to try and see outside of the alcove, which had no windows, "What time is it?"

Fred and George both cracked amused smiles, and Rigel felt like all must be okay in the world as long as the Weasley twins could still smile. It was much more reassuring than a hundred concerned glances could ever be.

"It's nearly seven-thirty," George told her, "How long did Percy chain you to these desks?"

"Leaving the chains thing alone for now, it was long enough to drive my friends mad with worry," she sighed, "I can't believe I missed dinner again."

"No problem," Fred grinned, "We'll stop by the kitchens on the way down."

"Can we stop by the Owlrey, too?" she said, "I have some letters I'd rather mail while I'm already in this part of the castle."

"Better you go with us, anyway, considering how steep the Owlrey stairs are," George said, "But first we want to check on your wrist."

Rigel offered up her left arm for their inspection. It was strange to be letting people handle it after a long week of training herself to keep it out of sight. Fred unwrapped it carefully while George checked the range of motion and feeling in her fingers.

"It looks like it hasn't healed much," Fred shook his head regretfully, "So either something is preventing your body from fixing itself or the injury's been treated so roughly in the past week that your body can barely keep it from worsening."

They stared at her expectantly. She fidgeted.

"Oh, Puppy, what did you do?" Fred 'tsked' reprovingly.

Rigel rolled her eyes, "It wasn't my fault." She explained about getting stuck in the trap stair (the twins had never heard of a trick stair on that particular stairway either), then about the g-forces from Flying lessons and helping Draco practice, then getting hexed into a wall after hours of jostling it in detention. "And that's not to mention that crazy Hufflepuff girl body-checking me into the railing on the Owlrey steps," Rigel scowled.

"What Hufflepuff?" George asked.

"Abbot, something Abbot," Rigel said, "She ran smack into me when I was heading up to mail a letter. My wrist felt as horrible after that as it did when I first broke it."

"She didn't see you on the stairs?" Fred asked carefully, his eyes focused on her wrist, but his lips pursed suspiciously.

"She said she wasn't looking. I wasn't either, because of the wind. She just came barreling out of the roost," Rigel shuddered, "Girls are heavier than they look."

"That's sort of strange, isn't it?" George glanced at Fred, "That you ran into her right before you were attacked coming back from the Owlrey?"

"I... guess it was a weird coincidence," Rigel blinked suddenly, "You know, she *is* blonde."

"Blonde?" Fred chuckled, "I know it's not as attractive as red hair, but being blonde isn't actually a crime."

"Zabini said the person-well, he said butterfly, but I'm pretty sure it was a person- who was following me on Thursday was blonde."

"Well, blonde or brunette, you need to be more careful with that wrist," George cast a numbing spell and Rigel sighed involuntarily as pain that hadn't even been registering faded away abruptly. It

surprised a smile out of her, and Fred and George exchanged another one of their *looks* .

Come to think of it, a lot of people send silent messages with their eyes while I'm around. Draco and Pansy, Fred and George (though they probably do that anyway), Rookwood and Rosier (again, probably not me), and even Neville and Ron have done it a few times.

"When the pain gets bad like that, find one of us to re-cast it for you."

"Yes, Dr. George," Rigel quirked her lips wryly.

"You mean Dr. Fred," Fred corrected as he conjured her a new bandage, "I'm Dr. George."

"Whatever you say, Fred," Rigel gathered her book bag and stood.

"This one's clever, Forge," Fred sighed.

"Didn't you see the tie, Gred?" George tugged playfully on Rigel's blue and white necktie.

"Oh, very nice," Fred eyed it appreciatively, "You can't even tell it's a charm. I was wondering how you'd managed to stay in one piece by yourself so long in the Nest. I must say, it's not quite as impressive once you know the trick."

"Hear that, George?" Rigel said, "You've shattered the illusion."

"I'll buy him a new one when I'm rich and famous," George smiled easily.

They headed off to the Owlrey, Fred and George taking their role as bodyguards a bit too far and scaring the wits out of Lee Jordan as he came around the corner toward the Fat Lady's painting. He declined their invitation to join them cheerfully, saying he was headed to a game of exploding snap with Angelina Johnson, and after that the

twins refrained from shooting fire-crackers at anyone they came across unexpectedly.

When they reached the base of the West Tower, Rigel stopped.

Would you two mind waiting for me down here?" she asked, hoping she didn't offend them.

"How can we stop the heartless miscreants from toppling you down the icy-

"They probably won't be icy in mid-September."

"-and *treacherous* stairs, if we aren't on the stairs with you?" Fred raised his eyebrows as if to say *obviously* .

"How about we wait at the top of the stairs, and just cover our ears while you reveal the secrets of the universe to your owl?" George offered, "You can even blind-fold us, if you like."

"It's not that I don't trust you guys," she started, but Fred cut her off good-naturedly.

"It's fine. Everybody has secrets, Rigel."

She smiled, recalling her words to Lee not at hour before. *I guess everyone here really does have secrets. And there was me thinking nondisclosure was such a crime.* She thought about Flint, and his apparently sick mother, then she thought about Binny the house elf, and the sort of secrets she kept so gladly. Probably even the teachers had secrets. Even the ghosts. *And it seems like most people are okay with that, here. How interesting, that muggles often feel so entitled to know the truth about everything, while wizards accept that there can be true meaning expressed in spite of secrets kept. Perhaps wizards are used to looking into the great mysteries of the world and not asking any questions. Or maybe, Rigel thought wryly, we've been naturally selecting for sneakiness, hiding from the muggles all these years.*

"Personally, I wouldn't trust Gred either," George stage-whispered, "But I'll keep a close watch on this rascal."

"Me?" Fred clutched Rigel's right elbow and batted his tawny eyelashes up at her (he'd bent nearly double to achieve that effect), "Don't believe these slanderous lies, Rigel, *he's* the one you have to watch out for-ask anyone! They'll all tell you Fred's the evil twin."

George shot Rigel a glance that was brimming with exasperated fondness, as if to say, *Isn't he wonderful, in a rather strange way ?* Rigel grinned back, and Fred frowned as he caught on, "Oh, you already guessed I was Fred today, didn't you?"

"I'm afraid so," Rigel said.

They reached the top of the stairs and Rigel hurried inside while George and Fred took up positions on either side of the doorway like sentinels. She caught the eyes of a few owls while she pulled her missives from her bag and grouped them. She speed-rolled the new essays for Flint (she was keeping the old essays for reference) and also the letters to Remus, Sirius, and Archie (which contained highly-edited accounts of the last couple weeks). As she was handing the letters to her Uncles off to the first owl (she was sending Remus' with Sirius' because sometimes Remus traveled unexpectedly for his work), Fred began a particularly spirited rendition of *A Cauldron Full of Hot, Strong Love* . George joined in counterpart just as exuberantly, and Rigel realized they were trying to advertise just how much they weren't listening.

She sent the letters off (whispering to the owl that went to Flint, just in case), and jogged back over to the stairs.

"- *I'll boil you u-up some -oomph !*" Fred was elbowed in the stomach by George when he caught sight of her, "Oh, that was fast."

"Didn't want to leave you guys standing out here too long," she said, then stopped and leaned slightly away from them as the redheads broke into identical (and honestly quite alarming), self-satisfied

smiles, "What? I hear the cold air isn't good for people of a delicate or disagreeable humor."

"A-ah, it's too late to insult us now," George linked his arm through her elbow carefully, avoiding her wrist.

Fred took up her other side, "We've already figured out you like us."

Rigel resigned herself to a life of friends and acquaintances. At the rate she was earning new ones, she'd never be able to get rid of them *all* .

Fred and George hung back as they reached the Entrance Hall, and Rigel got the distinct feeling that she was about to be tested. She ignored her escorts' growing smirks of glee as she turned down the basement corridor without prompt, but when she blithely turned abruptly toward a set of stairs that led to the dungeons (and away from the kitchens), Fred groaned dejectedly and Rigel couldn't suppress her sly smile anymore.

"What's this?" George took a finger and tapped Rigel's nose with it, "Gred, our puppy is having us on."

"So you *do* know where the kitchens are?" Fred perked up, "Good one!"

They laughed, and turned back until they reached the still-life painting of fruit, where Fred insisted she 'do the honors' and tickle the pear.

They were barely through the door when they were assaulted by house elves-well, Fred and George were, at least. They were apparently extremely popular with the Hogwarts helpers, and they mingled happily among the little elves, greeting many by name, bouncing some on their shoulders, and swinging others up onto tables so they could see them better. The elves laughed delightedly in their squeaky little voices and steadily presented Fred and George with offerings of food, which the brothers accepted politely and

stuffed into a bottomless bag they seemed to have brought with them for exactly this purpose.

Rigel found a seat at one of the long tables and just watched the vibrant Gryffindors play like primary-school kids among elves at least thrice their age. After a few minutes, an elf she recognized plopped a huge bowl of strawberries down in front of her.

"You is liking these?" Binny smiled hugely at her as she plopped her tiny form on the bench next to Rigel.

"Binny!" Rigel reached over to hug the blushing elf, "Thank you, I do love strawberries. And thanks for the help with the you-know-what the other day."

"Do we know?"

"I don't believe we do."

Rigel cringed as Fred and George appeared over her shoulder without warning.

"Making deals with house elves, little snake?" George sighed despairingly, "I hope you got it in writing, because I have it on good information that Binny here is notoriously difficult to pin down when the blood starts flying."

"Mr. Wesley shouldn't be saying such things," Binny wagged her finger crossly, but even Rigel could tell that this was an old joke between them.

"That's right, Forge, we were sworn to silence, remember? You don't want to go the same way as the other guy, do you?" Fred shook his head mournfully.

"What other guy?" George asked.

"The one that disappeared the same week the elves started serving lumpy gravy."

"Eww," Rigel said, chuckling at the look of exaggerated innocence Binny was now portraying.

"Binny doesn't know what you is talking about," the elf said solemnly, "Binny is never ever serving gravy with suspicious lumps in it. Such a thing is being vicious slander."

Fred and George collapsed onto the table top with laughter, and Binny gave a dainty curtsy as she hopped off the bench.

"Is you wanting anything else?"

"We actually came here because Rigel missed dinner," George said, wiping at his eyes as he collected himself.

Several house elves in the immediate vicinity gasped with dismay and ran to get food for her as fast as their legs could carry them. Rigel watched with wide eyes as plates and plates of vegetables, fishes, fruits, nuts, breads, cheeses, and a pitcher of apple juice were piled in front of her. She thanked them and dug in ravenously.

"You a vegetarian, Puppy?" Fred glanced over the selection bemusedly.

"Yeah, though I don't know how they knew."

"The house elves know everything-devilishly clever, they are," George said, "At least this helps explain why you're so tiny."

"But you have to eat more protein," Fred said, grabbing a few hard-boiled eggs and putting them onto her plate, "Or you'll heal even slower."

Rigel shrugged agreeably, still eating. When she was finished they bade goodbye to the friendly elves, and Rigel promised to visit Binny again soon.

Fred and George walked her as far as the Potion's classroom, but there they had to stop. They already knew where the Slytherin

common room was, of course, but they didn't think her House mates would take kindly to them coming within a twenty-foot radius of it, particularly in the middle of a prank-war. They were reluctant to let her walk alone even through the dungeons, though, and it showed on their faces as they said goodnight.

"I'm in snake territory now," she reminded them, "Perfectly safe."

"You were attacked in the dungeons two nights ago," George rolled his eyes.

"And I got away, because I had home turf advantage," she said, "Seriously, I'm a wicked fast runner."

"You shouldn't have to run from anything," Fred said softly, "Not at Hogwarts."

You'd be surprised how much there is to run from at Hogwarts. The past. The truth.

"Hey!"

The three of them turned to see Adrian Pucey and a guy she only knew on sight as Lucian Bole, beater for the Slytherin House team, striding toward them aggressively. Pucey was the one who had called out.

"What's a pair of griffins doing so far from their tower?" Bole, who had long black hair and a superior expression, sneered.

George rolled his eyes and Fred yawned dramatically.

"These guys bothering you, Black?" Pucey looked her over swiftly and relaxed slightly when she appeared to be in good health. Her left hand was completely hidden from view by George.

"No, no, they were helping me, actually," Rigel said quickly, "They heard about the attack on Friday and wanted to make sure I got back to the common room safely."

"You were going to lead them straight to our common room? You stupid-"

"Luc, they already know where it is," Pucey said reasonably.

"And they were just leaving me here, in any case," Rigel smiled oh-so-sweetly at Bole.

Bole 'hmm-ed' disagreeably, "You must have some nerve showing your face down here if you heard about the attack."

"Well, now," George lifted his hands in a helpless gesture that no one there bought for a moment, "It's not yet certain that it's a Gryffindor that wants to hurt our little snake."

"But if it turns out that it is," Fred grinned in a rather frightening facsimile of Snape, "We'll be the first to defect to the Slytherin camp."

"And perhaps we'll start a little campaign of our own on the side."

"Personalization is the key to a good Hell, I always say."

"Night, Rigel," they chorused, winking slyly at her and waving sarcastically to the other two Slytherins as they made their way unerringly toward the closest set of stairs.

Pucey raised his eyebrows at their departure, "Well, that's good to know, at least. You have interesting taste in allies, Black."

"I don't trust those tricksters," Bole said. Rigel noticed he looked a lot less scary than he had a few minutes earlier, and wondered how much of the other Houses' opinions of Slytherin could be attributed to the Slytherins' acting abilities, "But if they're as good as their word, they might be useful."

Rigel looked up at the two of them questioningly, wondering if she should go on ahead or-

"We'll take you from here," Pucey said, and Bole nodded.

It wasn't until they walked into the common room and Rigel realized she'd been out after curfew again-and this time she'd walked in with two upperclassmen practically playing bodyguards-that Rigel thought she really ought to stop attracting so much attention. She really was receiving more scrutiny than she'd planned on. Then again, probably it was always like this the first few weeks back, with everyone wanting to figure out the new kids and still restless from the summer. Probably things would settle down very soon.

[end of chapter twelve]

A/N: So, in the books obviously Rosier is dead and Rookwood in prison, but in this AU there was no outright war, so a lot of the purebloods that would have died on either side are still alive and had kids that went to Hogwarts (not Durmstrang or wherever convicted Deatheater kids would usually have to go). This helps explain why there are still so many kids in the school despite no halfbloods or muggleborns. Yes, Edmund is the son of Evan Rosier and Aldon is the son of Augustus Rookwood. No I'm not trying to supplant the *entire* HP universe with OC's, but there aren't enough upperclassmen Slytherins mentioned in the books, so I invented a few.

A/N: Also: forgive me for butchering herbal lore and/or physics for any one who's actually smart out there, and not just faking it like I am. I had a lot of fun writing this one, though I'll probably go back to 8000-ish words after this. Thank you, really, seriously, thank you for reading. It's an honor.

Chapter 13

A/N: Big thanks to Son of Whitebeard and TamariChan and AlainnRain and CathyWillow for you reviews of chapter 12 :) you guys make my world spin a little faster. (Though I'd like to apologize for not getting this chapter out in my usual week; I, too, will try to spin this tale a bit faster). I've outlined Harriet's first year, and I think it will take about 25 chapters in total at this point, though with the way I tend to drag things out, it might be more ^^ There will be only a chapter or two more of setting the dominoes up, however, and I hope you all enjoy the way they fall.

A/N2: So in this chapter we have a major POV switch in the first part, away from Harriet, just a heads up. I'll try to be clear about where it switches back. This chapter is a bit disjointed in the beginning, though, because of all the little time skips. For any Chaucer fans-this one's for you (though you won't know why until later).

A/N3: Wow, idk what's up with the fanfic server, but did anyone else have problems logging over the last day? So that's partially why this is a day later than it already was-much apologies, everyone who's reading this. But still... 11,000 words (does smug little dance).

The Pureblood Pretense:

Chapter 13:

Part One-No POV

Every September, on the third Friday of the new semester, Albus Dumbledore met with his Heads of House to assess the progress of the term. They assembled in the staff lounge, instead of in the official meeting room, and took it in turn to bring up anything that might be of pertinence to the others, all very informally and off the record.

It was not, as Professor Sinistra so often claimed, an excuse for the closest-knit members of the staff (who just so happened to be Filius, Pomona, Minerva, Severus, and Albus) to gossip shamelessly about the school and everything in it, but rather it was a chance to address the more *delicate* matters that really should be kept within the Heads of House. Really.

"Well," Albus twinkled fondly at them all, his very own collection-nay, family-of some of the greatest minds in the modern magical community. The Headmaster was sitting on a rocking chair by the fire, his hands twiddling idly as he spoke, "Here we are again."

"Some of us more willingly than others," Filius chortled, glancing from his seat on a plushy velvet footstool at Severus, who favored them all with a sardonic twist of his thin lips as he sipped a very black cup of tea and sat in a very black leather armchair across from Albus.

Pomona, who was sitting next to Minerva on the couch, patted her co-worker's arm conspiratorially, "He does that so well, doesn't he?"

Minerva pursed her lips to hide her smile of agreement. She and Severus had a friendship that only worked because neither of them admitted to it, "A little too well. How many of my cubs have you traumatized this month, Severus?"

"No more than deserved it, Minerva," Severus smirked, "As always."

"Now, Severus," Albus paused in his rocking for a moment to summon one of the warm, knitted blankets Hagrid was always making and then leaving in the cupboard, "We know how much you value a controlled work-environment-"

"Potions is an exceedingly dangerous and in the presence of adolescents *unpredictable* art."

"-and none of us would ever dream of telling you how to run your classroom-"

"I highly doubt that any of you soft-hearted molly-coddlers would have the stomach to prevent the number of near-maimings I deal with every day."

"-but was it really necessary to tell your class of third-year Ravenclaws that you would personally make sure they failed their OWLs in two years if they didn't produce a satisfactory Weakening Solution by the end of the period?" Albus gazed mildly at the ceiling, "I'm told Madam Pomphrey ran completely out of Calming Draughts that afternoon, as you had apparently sent several Hufflepuffs into hysterics earlier that morning by insinuating that you would test their antidotes by poisoning them all."

"As I am the one who provides Poppy with those Calming Draughts, and therefore the one who will have to replace them all, I see no reason for anyone else to complain," Severus refilled his teacup unconcernedly, "Besides, every single one of those brats produced satisfactory results, so at the very least my methods are effective."

"Leaving the subject of Severus' notorious teaching habits for the moment," Pomona put in, "There were a couple of students I thought we should discuss."

"Yes, I would say the same," Minerva said tersely, "Who are you concerned about?"

"Well, first, I wondered what you all thought of Neville Longbottom," she said, "He seems to be quite bright," (Severus snorted incredulously), "but extremely timid, at least before he became friends with Ronald Weasley."

"His behavior is a bit unusual," Filius said, "Considering how lively both his parents were here at school. Do we have any reason to believe his home life is unpleasant?"

"Frank and Alice abuse a child?" Minerva huffed, "Never."

"The grandmother, though..." Filius grimaced apologetically at Albus.

"Ah," Albus nodded sagely, "As much as I admire Augusta, she always was a bit overbearing, especially when it came to children. I believe she lives with her son now to help in raising her grandchild, so it very well may be the case that she has induced a low sense of self-confidence in the child. Keep an eye on the boy, Minerva, and see that he makes a few friends."

"On the subject of students with troubled home lives," Pomona said tentatively, "I also noticed something off about Marcus Flint. After being forced to repeat his fifth year and denied his OWLs, I expected *more* resistance, if anything, but has anyone else noticed that his work so far this year is... well... good? It's always on time, and always done to specification. I assigned a diagram the first week, and it was so flawless that I would consider it a tracing, but I've no idea how he could have traced it through such thick parchment." She shook her head bewilderedly.

"Yes, I was going to mention Mr. Flint as well," Minerva said, "He has completed every essay I assigned, and yet... it doesn't *sound* like him. His tests and quizzes were always slightly sarcastic, as if he were bored and annoyed by the very idea that he be asked to prove what he knows," she set her mouth thinly, "Now, though, his quizzes are neutral, and his essays are factual, but peppered with conjecture and suggestions about the theory, which usually betrays a sense of curiosity and captivation with the material. I cannot tell if he has found a new, more subtle way to mock the assignment or if he finds it amusing to completely subvert our expectations of him."

Severus put his cup down on his saucer with a pointed 'click' and said, "Flint is not doing his assignments this year any more than he did last year. The handwriting charms are convincing, but he has arranged somehow for someone else to complete them. I've no doubt he has changed the tone of his in-class assignments to match the essays' and create less suspicion. I have been monitoring the situation from the second week of school, when he began turning assignments in to me. I suspect he knows that I am aware of his duplicity, but he also knows that without proof-that is, without

knowledge of the person doing the assignments-we cannot do anything about it. The fact is, as long as he doesn't cheat on any tests, which he has no need of doing, it will be impossible to prove that he isn't doing the assignments."

"What have you uncovered so far, Severus?" Albus leaned forward as if he were going to listen very carefully, but then he leaned back again and his incessant rocking continued.

"His home life is less than ideal, as you know, and so it used to be unusual for Flint to receive mail. Lately, however, he receives suspiciously thick letters from what I imagine are regular school owls, as they are never the same. It is my belief that he is receiving the work from another student, and not the help of someone outside of the castle, though I do not know whom. I have not seen a marked similarity to any of the other fifth-years' work as of yet, so I am reasonably confident the accomplice is not in Flint's year," Severus explained.

"We will have to watch the upper-years for signs of inexplicable stress or fatigue," Minerva frowned, "If this is true, someone at this school is carrying a doubled work load, which would be nearly impossible for an NEWT student to sustain for long."

"Could it be a younger student?" Filius asked thoughtfully, "Now that I consider it, there is a tone akin to naive fascination about Flint's essays this term, which would fit with a child who hadn't already covered the topic in a previous year."

"I doubt it is anyone younger than a fourth-year," Minerva said, "Much can be gotten from books, but Flint turned in a very complicated essay on Vanishment Theory recently, which showed a firm grasp on both non-being and the logical consequences of an object retaining properties after vanishment. No third-year at this school could have understood so much on their own."

"Since nothing is proven yet, continue to treat Mr. Flint's work as you would any other's," Albus said, "In the meantime, Severus, I trust you

to keep an eye on the situation."

"I keep both eyes on my Slytherins without your prompting, I assure you," Severus said shortly.

"Then I hope you'll be having a word with young Mr. Black, as well," Minerva sniffed, turning her head to pin Severus with a stern look, "I don't know what to do with the boy. He is becoming exceedingly difficult to teach."

Severus' eyebrows furrowed, "I'm sure I don't know what you are implying, Minerva. The boy is polite and hard working. His written assignments are well thought out, and his practical work is nearly flawless. And don't you twinkle at me like that, Albus, the past does not cloud my eyes so much that I can not see when potential lies undisguised before me."

"Well, it sounds as though we are acquainted with two very different Mr. Blacks," Minerva said, "I admit his written work is generally good, and in fact his impeccable comprehension of the theory behind the material is the only thing keeping him at a passing level. His practical work is non-existent. I have yet to see him perform a single piece of Transfiguration, though I have evidence that he succeeded rather quickly in the very first lesson."

Severus frowned, as did Pomona.

"I've not had any trouble," she said, "Mr. Black is a veritable fountain of knowledge when it comes to plants, particularly the ones useful in Potions," she nodded in acknowledgment to Severus, "And he certainly isn't afraid to get his hands dirty, though he's so un-ambidextrous it's like he forgets he has another hand at times." She chuckled, but the other Heads of House look seriously at one another.

"It's quite a discrepancy," Filius piped up, "I have to agree with Minerva, however. I try to give him as much credit for his written

work, which is supreme, but although he knows the incantation and the wand-movement, he never actually does the spell in front of me."

"He refuses to?" Albus asked mildly.

"No," Minerva tapped her foot agitatedly, "He seems to try very hard, numerous times, but it's as if... well..."

"Mr. Black cannot be a Squib," Severus snapped, "I have watched him brew, and he has no trouble unconsciously imbuing his Potions with magic-indeed, he puts a bit too much in at times, which I believe is due to his enthusiasm for the subject."

"Rolanda tells me that on the day Mr. Longbottom fell from his broom, his motion was inexplicably arrested before he hit the ground. Rolanda believed it to be an incident of accidental magic, but she says that Mr. Malfoy claimed it to have been Mr. Black who stopped Mr. Longbottom's fall," Pomona told them.

Filius raised his eyebrows, "I wondered why, on his first homework assignment, Mr. Black wrote that he could not use the Wingardium Leviosa Charm to levitate any of the listed objects, except a human being," he sighed, "But as far as I know he has never even made his feather twitch."

"It seems we have a puzzle on our hands," Albus said as his staff looked around at one another. He was rocking more slowly now, carefully braiding sections of his beard, "A young wizard has all the necessary understanding, diligence, and potential to perform magic-and yet, he doesn't. His ability reveals itself in spontaneous or unconscious ways, but he cannot seem to channel it on command. He is neither so traumatized nor so introspective as to have formed a natural block on his magic-indeed, he is purportedly highly social, with friends not only in his own House, but in Gryffindor, too. So, any ideas? Severus? He is in your House, after all."

Severus scowled, "I had not realized there was a problem until now, though certain things-like how he always asked Mr. Malfoy to light

his cauldron or Miss Parkinson to perform the protection charm on his eyes even after asking me for the proper spell-make sense in hindsight. I know that his interest is primarily in Potions at this time, but I had not thought he would go so far as to dismiss the other subjects completely."

"It isn't that, really," Filius said fairly, "Mr. Black does try, and his friends encourage him as well. I have even over-heard him say that he goes to the Library on weekends for extra study. He isn't using a hand-me-down wand or some such, is he?"

"Not to my knowledge," Severus said, still visibly irritated that such a thing had escaped his notice, "But I will schedule a conference with him this week, after I collect progress reports from all of his Professors. This will not be allowed to continue."

"Keep us abreast of you decisions, won't you, Severus?" Albus smiled when the Potions Master nodded briskly, "Very well, what else?"

"The prefects have presented me with a petition for increasing the number of Hogsmede weekends around the Holidays..."

Part Two: Rigel's POV(and small time skip)

The last week in September came too slowly for Rigel's peace of mind. Her wrist was feeling slightly better, and finally beginning the slow, torturous healing process, which would be complete by Halloween, the twins estimated. She was quite busy, keeping up with both her own and Flint's assignments, not to mention the punishments her teachers heaped on her for her poor spell-work, and she didn't see her friends as much as she would have liked, but part of this was due to Draco's own schedule, which was as arduous at least as Rigel's.

"We have practice every other evening," Draco bemoaned Thursday morning after he drifted off at the breakfast table and Pansy nudged him awake sharply, "It's like Flint doesn't have anything better to do

than play Quidditch, never mind that us mere humans can barely keep up with our classes on top of his schedule."

"Doesn't the captain care about his own grades?" Pansy asked, puzzled, before biting into a muffin daintily.

"That's the weird part-his grades are fine. Better than fine, according to some of the upper years on the team," Draco said, "I heard them say he must have a time-turner or something, since the other fifth years have started skiving off some of their assignments to make all the practices."

Rigel tried not to look guilty, though she supposed it wasn't really her fault that Flint had so much free time. After all, he hadn't done the assignments last year, either, but then he had to serve so many detentions for not doing his work that he couldn't schedule so many practices. This year though...

"Well, at least you'll be a shoe-in for the Cup," Rigel said, "None of the other teams are practicing so hard, are they?"

"I think Wood tried to enact a similar schedule, but apparently his beaters and chasers revolted," Draco sighed, as if thinking wistfully about inciting a revolution of his own.

"Maybe when you win the first match he'll back off some," Pansy said, "Until then, hurry up and eat so we can look over our Transfiguration assignments before Potions."

The three of them were packing up after a particularly interesting Potions lecture on the classification of dark and light ingredients when Professor Snape said, "Mr. Black, see me in my office after afternoon classes."

"Yes, sir," Rigel said automatically, finding no clue as to the Potion Master's intentions in his customary scowl. She hoisted her bag over her right shoulder and hurried to catch up with Draco and Pansy, who were waiting patiently at the door.

"What do you think he wants?" Pansy asked, "You didn't get caught doing anything, did you?"

"Nothing I know of," Rigel shrugged, "Maybe he has another assignment for me."

"He just gave you that essay on ingredients taken from magical beings," Draco pointed out as they climbed the stairs toward the Great Hall, "And he doesn't need you to come to his office to give you an assignment. If you're meeting after classes, it means whatever it is will take some time."

"I'll find out this afternoon, I guess," Rigel said.

Pansy looked as if she would nibble on her lip until she realized they had entered the Great Hall and smoothed her face into a poised mask, "Let us know, then, won't you?"

"Of course."

If Rigel thought a summoning to Snape's office would be less nerve-racking the second time, she quickly reevaluated this misconception as she stood before the solidly imposing door, steeling herself to grasp the silver handle and turn it.

A voice called impatiently from within before she got the chance, and she sheepishly entered the gloomy space and saw, to her surprise, that Professor Snape had provided her with a chair this time. She sat, quietly surprised at how comfortable the chair actually was, and glanced unsurely at the dark man sitting across the desk from her.

"I'm sure you are wondering why I have called you here, so I will not waste your time with pleasantries," Snape began, folding his hands before him precisely.

Rigel nodded her agreement, though it hadn't been asked for.

Snape considered her for a long moment, inhaling slowly and fixing a weighty stare in her direction. She tried not to fidget, but was glad when he seemed to come to a decision and began speaking again.

"Mr. Black, it is my duty as a Professor at this school and particularly as a Head of House to pay close attention to the students in my care, and when there appear to be... *discrepancies* in a certain student's work, it does not fail to come to my notice," he said. His voice was just loud enough to fill the small room without echoing, but it could not be called 'soft.' It was deadly.

Rigel felt her face blanch and tore her eyes from Snape's to conduct a detailed study of her knees. Her mind flew back to the last batch of corrected essays she'd received from Flint. In it had been the essay on Fusing Potions that she'd completed for Flint, from the same week she'd helped Percy with his, and written on the top of that essay in red ink where the letter grade should have been, were the words: *Well done, Mr. Flint, but not quite well enough. Make no mistake; the source of your newfound interest in schoolwork will soon be exposed.*

At the time, she'd written it off as untenable suspicion on Snape's part. After all, how could he ever suspect her? She'd taken extra care with the Potions essays to make them sound as unlike hers as she could. In Flint's essays, she used certain words and phrases repeatedly, and then took pains to make sure she never used those identifiers in her own papers. But what if she hadn't been careful enough? What if he knew...?

"I see you have some idea of what I mean," he drawled, and Rigel realized with a start that looking down ashamedly was as good as admitting her guilt. She raised her eyes slowly, widening them to a believable level of innocence as she did, until they rested steadily and blankly at the level of Snape's forehead. He was still speaking, but now a faint frown creased his brow as well, "I assure you, I am not the only Professor who is displeased with this incongruities, Mr. Black. Your Transfiguration, Charms, Flying, and Defense Professors

have all brought their concerns to me as well, since I am your Head of House, and as such it falls to me to deal with this situation."

Rigel willed herself fiercely not to allow her face to crumple even slightly, but her eyes became bright with suppressed despair. How could she have messed up so badly that so many professors had connected her to Flint's essays? She had been so careful, it just didn't make sense-wait. It *didn't* make sense. Flint didn't take Flying; it was a first-year class. Why would madam Hooch have any relevant concerns? Unless she had mentioned that Flint had unusual amounts of free time to schedule practices, which seemed a bit unlikely, it would certainly be unusual for Snape to include Hooch in the list of professors who noticed something strange about the essays...

Unless it wasn't about the essays.

Rigel cleared her mind of panic and tried to focus instead on what the Professor was saying. "I daresay I have never had a student with problems of this exact nature before," he said, making Rigel blink confusedly. Now she knew he couldn't be talking about Flint, after all, students probably copied essays all the time, but she had not the slightest idea of what he was talking about. "Usually when a student does poorly in one area, he performs poorly in other areas as well, or else his ineptitude is limited to one class in particular. You, Mr. Black, appear to be doing both remarkably well and impossibly abysmal in several of your classes, while at the same time showing talent across the board in other classes. Perhaps you can explain this phenomena to me."

Oh, Rigel thought, *right* .

"My interest is primarily in Potions," she prevaricated weakly. She really should have known that this would come up soon, but she'd been focused on so many other things that she was left without a plan for dealing with this sort of attention.

"That does not give you leave to disregard everything else, *foolish child*," Snape snapped. Rigel shrank back, not understanding why it mattered so much that he would become so vehement about it.

"I really haven't been," Rigel said, adding, "sir," hastily as Snape's nostrils flared, "I do all of my assignments and even study for the quizzes with Pansy and Draco."

"And your practical performance on these quizzes?" he pressed. "What can you say about that?"

Rigel dropped her eyes once more, "I try."

Snape sighed heavily, "You must understand that this cannot continue the way it has been."

She peeked up through her lashes at him, as if to say *why not* ?

"There are many kinds of magic that do not require the use of a wand to master," he said carefully, though his white knuckles from where his fingers clenched one another belied his calm tone of voice, "But no wizard can afford to ignore one part of his power entirely. It is folly, not in the least because it is vital for the development of your magical core that you exercise your magic consciously at this age. In addition to that, it is an embarrassment of a wizard who cannot manage basic spellwork. I will not have an embarrassment accredited to the House of Slytherin, do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," Rigel swallowed heavily. What did he expect her to do? Didn't he think if she could do the spells, then she would have? Certainly she wasn't earning detentions left and right from McGonagall and Quirrell-the later of whom seemed to delight in assigning her particularly disgusting work with Filch-and barely passing half her classes for kicks. She looked across the desk at the Potions Master with defeat in her eyes.

Something in her expression must have spurred a reaction, for he pinched the bridge of his nose carefully and said, "You truly are unable to perform these spells for some reason? And you suffered no magical accidents when you were younger? You are not taking any significant medicinals? Very well," he stretched one hand out toward her briskly. She stared for a moment, still caught in the rhythm of shaking her head yes or no.

"Let me see your wand, Black," he said, and she ducked down to rummage in her bag for it immediately, eventually handing it over when she found it stuck between two books near the bottom. He looked as if he would comment on her treatment of it, but held his tongue. He inspected it gently, his long fingers probing it for abnormalities or fissures, "Ash?"

"Yes. Twelve inches, unicorn hair," Rigel said.

"And you received it at Ollivander's?" Snape verified. She nodded. "What magic did it manifest?" She gazed blankly at him. "I mean, what happened when you first held it?"

"Oh," Rigel thought about it, "It got sort of warm, I think."

Snape stared. "That's it?" he raised an eyebrow, "No sparks? And Ollivander let you buy it?"

"He didn't have many left to offer me at that point," Rigel shrugged, "I went through most of his stock, trying to find one that didn't make things explode violently when I touched it, and this one didn't make anything explode, so I kept it. I guess he wasn't *too* happy, thinking back, but he said it's very well-balanced."

In truth, he'd said a bit more than that-something about apathetic customers sabotaging the wand-matching system-but she hadn't paid much attention, having been ready at that point to leave the creepy shop and pick up a new ingredient at the apothecary.

"Well-balanced it may be, but from the sound of it this wand doesn't suit you very well," Snape said, sounding exasperated at the world in general (and perhaps Rigel in particular).

"It was the best fit I found," Rigel said, a bit defensively, "Better this than a wand that just explodes everything randomly."

"Be that as it may, settling for an inferior match in a wand can be very dangerous. I suppose Ollivander only allowed it this time because this particular wand is so non-reactive it probably wouldn't cause any destructive problems. Unfortunately, not being a danger to your health is not the usual standard for wands," he glowered fiercely, "And if you cannot do magic with it, it might as well be a stick you found on the ground outside."

"It might not be the wand, though," she said, hesitantly giving voice to a secret fear, "Maybe I just can't do wand magic. Maybe I was meant to do Potions, and nothing else."

Snape snorted, setting her wand back on the desk with ill-grace, "Mr. Black, there is no difference between the magic which imbues Potions and the magic that turns a teacup into a rabbit besides the manner in which it is channeled. All magic is at heart the same, and if you can perform to a certain level in one area then you at least have the potential to do as well in others. That is why weak wizards and squibs cannot even grow magical plants properly, and why wizards who are Masters in their chosen fields are almost always extremely gifted in other fields as well, and simply haven't specialized in them out of personal interest. Power is power and everyone recognizes this fact. If you think that anyone will hire a Potion Maker who can't perform a hover charm-"

"But what can I *do* ?" Rigel interrupted loudly. She was standing now, glaring down at Snape and not caring that she was being rude or disrespectful, "I've tried, I tell you, I've done those spells again and again and *nothing happens* ." Rigel was shaking slightly, finally frustrated beyond her capacity to contain. All month her professors, her friends, and even her Housemates had been pushing her and

pushing her, as if being told again and again that she was wrong or weak or stupid was going to help. "I know I'm a failure as a wizard," she said quietly, her anger as unfamiliar to her as shouting was, "But I can't just leave. My whole future is here at Hogwarts, and if you can't teach me just because of something that has nothing to do with Potions, then all my hard work will have been wasted on nothing." *And it will prove them right, she added silently, if I fail then it will prove everyone who thinks that half-bloods don't deserve to go to school here or can't keep up with 'real' magic right .*

That was why she worked so hard to prove herself early on to Professor Snape and bent over backwards like a worm for Flint and pushed herself to her limits hiding her injury and doing normal things with her friends so that no one would be suspicious of her or find a reason to kick her out. She *had* to stay at Hogwarts, for all the kids who didn't get the chance, who didn't have a pureblooded cousin as kind and generous as Archie, who were scorned and practically exiled from their own country for something they could never change. And on top of standing up for everyone who couldn't take a stand themselves, she was taking all this crap for her dream, hers and Archie's.

And she'd be damned if she let something as stupid as a piece of wood stand in her way.

Rigel's temper flared once more, and she snatched her wand off the desk and whipped it down toward the row of glass jars sitting on a shelf beside the desk. The jars flew upwards like they'd been catapulted, crashing against the stone ceiling and shattering into a shower of glass and embalming fluid and dead, preserved icky bits, but Rigel was beyond caring.

"See?" she cried staring wildly into Snape's shocked face without really seeing it, " See ? I can do the spells. I can do them all!"

She slashed her wand in the pattern she'd slaved to memorize at the chair she'd been sitting in just minutes before and the entire piece of furniture *exploded* into hundreds of needles, each Transfigured from

a tiny splinter of the original wood, which flooded the ground in a shiny puddle, sounding like rain hitting a metal roof-only the rain was the metal.

She instinctively cast two simultaneous Shield Charms over Snape and herself to keep them from being embedded with flying needles, and by the time the dull haze of the Shield Charm flickered out she was left staring, exhausted and numb, at the utter wreck she'd made of Snape's office. Rigel would have sunk to the ground if there had been any spot of it that wasn't covered with needles or glass or animal parts, but as it was she merely swayed slightly, her sense catching up with her now that her emotions had been effectively drained off. She was almost too cowardly to look Snape in the face-almost. She raised her eyes in a kind of distant horror, physically steeling herself against his inevitable wrath. His office looked like an earthquake had passed through it at the same time as a museum of pointy objects, and the whole room smelled like preservation fluids.

"Well," Snape had found his tongue at last, it seemed, and Rigel prepared herself for a verbal lashing. "I would ask to see the Lumos Charm, but I've no desire to be blinded on top of nearly shredded."

Rigel's brain didn't process the words at first, and then-

"Sir?" she gaped, taking in his relaxed posture and half-lidded eyes. His face was blank, but his eyebrows were lifted sardonically, and there was something darkly amused about the way he held his mouth.

"I think it's safe to say that Ollivander was vastly mistaken in thinking that this wand was not just as destructive as the other ill-suited ones," he said calmly, taking his own wand out and methodically setting the room to rights. The needles and glass and ingredients were vanished, the fluids dried up, and a new chair conjured systematically. "The only difference is that this wand was so 'well-balanced' that it took monumental effort of will to push the magic into manifesting though it."

"But-I-" Rigel sat dazedly in the new chair, placing the ash wand carefully on the desk and rolling it out of her reach. She had shocked herself, yet again. Her magic, it seemed, had a wicked sense of humor, in addition to being violent and sporadic.

"That little demonstration, while indicative of repressed emotion unbecoming a child of Salazar Slytherin, was nevertheless very informative," Snape said, rolling her wand very pointedly back toward her and speaking very slowly and clearly to make sure she understood him, "I would guess that as a child your incidents of accidental magic were as rare as they were powerful, am I right, Mr. Black?"

Rigel shuddered, "It was horrible. It only happened when I was so upset I couldn't stand the world anymore, and my magic would... ravage the immediate vicinity. Luckily it never happened when anyone else was too close. It used to explode things, tear them, turn them inside out, and sometimes it just banished things completely, and we never found them again." Her face darkened considerably as she remembered. Such a thing had only happened three times in her youth, but each time was terrifying, and more disturbingly-exhilarating. She learned never to get too upset by anything, never to get too excited or disappointed by things, in order to prevent her magic from stepping in and taking over.

"Mr. Black, are you afraid of magic?" Snape asked, in what was for him a gentle tone.

"What?" she blinked in surprise, "No, of course not. How would I survive in a magical house or school if I was?"

"Ah, allow me to re-phrase that," he said, "Are you frightened by your own magic?"

Rigel opened her mouth to deny it, but paused, considering. Was she? Was Pansy right when she accused Rigel of not trying hard enough, of not really wanting the magic to work?

"You think I am... unconsciously preventing myself from using magic?" Rigel asked, the sinking feeling in her chest telling her she knew what his answer would be.

"It is one probable explanation," Snape said evenly, not a trace of pity or disgust in his tone, for which she was pathetically grateful.

"But then... wouldn't I have reason to be?" she bit her lip, "My magic seems to be unusually destructive."

"Not destructive, necessarily," her professor regarded her seriously, "Just improperly channeled. Magic is not inherently violent or mellow. It is we and our emotions that give it shape and force."

"So then *I'm* what's making it so dangerous," Rigel breathed, "It's my fault, not the wand or the magic. There's something wrong with me."

"There is nothing wrong with you," the Potions Master snapped, visibly reigning himself in once more and continuing in a more neutral tone, "It seems more likely that your first bout of accidental magic, which probably occurred when you were too young to recall, startled you in some way that made you reluctant to repeat the feat. You probably began unconsciously suppressing your strongest emotions in order to avoid catalyzing your magic, which then caused the magic to build up over time, until the next time you couldn't suppress an emotion, when it burst free all at once. Of course it took a negative shape; the emotions that are hardest to control are fear, anger, frustration, and the like."

"And so I became even more unnerved and suppressed more of my emotions and therefore more of my magic, until it became a cycle," Rigel's eyes widened with dismay, "So all this time I've been trying to carefully control myself was actually making it *worse* ." She let out a sharp breath and slumped in her chair dejectedly. "What about my wand?"

"You undoubtedly had such a strong control on your magic by the time you entered Ollivander's shop that it didn't call out to any of the

wands there, which is how Ollivander usually knows which wands to try. I suppose he tried to guess blindly and make you try every wand there, but of course your magic was so pent up that unless the wand was *perfect* it reacted violently," he explained, "The wand you ended up with was, I hesitate to say, probably the thickest and least-conductive of the wands Ollivander had. It didn't cause anything to explode, but it prevented you from using magic even when you consciously tried to, unless the force of your will flooded the wand and overrode the buffers."

"Oh," Rigel said weakly. She tried to think. What did all this mean? She wasn't a squib, obviously, but would her magic be able to stabilize itself if she tried consciously using it more, or would she need some kind of therapy to overcome the unconscious restraints she'd put on it? "So... what now, sir?" she asked, trying to collect her psyche into something resembling a rational young adult, "Do I have to get a new wand?"

"I suppose we'll have to see the Headmaster" (Rigel wondered why he looked so sour at that prospect) "about obtaining a waiver for someone to come and collect you this Saturday," he said tightly.

"Couldn't you do it, sir?" she blurted, new panic coursing through her at the thought of Sirius coming to get her- *her*, not Archie-from Hogwarts, "I mean, not that I'm trying to take advantage of your kindness" (she ignored the noise Snape made) "But wouldn't it be better if someone from the school took me, so it doesn't look like I'm getting special treatment? You already understand the situation," she rushed on before he could answer, "And it really wouldn't take that long since I've already tried most of the wands Mr. Ollivander has, and also, also... I don't think I'm ready to talk to my dad about this just yet. He might not understand it." She mentally congratulated herself for saying 'dad' instead of 'parents' and hoped her half-hopeful, half-shamefully forlorn expression was convincing.

Snape was silent for a long, brooding minute, before he said, rather tiredly, "I will speak to the Headmaster about this, but either way you

will be acquiring a new wand before you shame the House of Slytherin any further."

Rigel smiled gratefully at her Head of House; she rather thought he was only gruff and dismissive because he didn't know what else to be sometimes.

"Everything else can wait," he went on, "It is late and this meeting has been more taxing than either of us likely anticipated. I will appraise your other professors with just enough information to keep them from failing you in the meantime. You may go now if there is nothing else."

Rigel rose and was almost to the door before she cringed and turned back around to say, "I'm sorry for making a mess of your office, Professor Snape, especially about the preserved ingredients. Were they valuable? I can pay-"

"I do not require *your filthy father's money*," Snape was suddenly hissing, his face contorted into a spasm of loathing that froze her insides and stole her breath with its potency. For a moment neither of them moved, caught like statues and arrested in each other's gazes. Rigel didn't know what Snape could see in hers-confusion, perhaps, and a fair amount of startled fear-but in his she found hate, a hate so old that it had festered somehow, and she wondered how heavy a memory must be to sink emotion so deep, and how long a secret must be left in the dark to grown such fangs. Then he blinked-or she did-and the air was breathable again as some intangible darkness returned to the edges of the room, the edges of consciousness, where it belonged.

Snape's entire frame shuddered slightly, and his eyes went as blank as a new blackboard once more, "Forgive me, Mr-" he scowled fiercely at nothing, perhaps himself, "Forgive me. I-"

"It's fine," Rigel said, her voice making up for his in neutrality, "It's been a trying evening for us both. I was only going to say, though, that I could pay you back with work if you wanted. You know,

scrubbing cauldrons and the like, but that can wait as well. Good night, sir."

"Good evening."

Friday morning found Rigel sitting calmly at the Slytherin table, enclosed on either side by her friends, and pretending that she wasn't avoiding looking at the staff table. Her friends didn't seem to notice her preoccupation, but knowing them they'd noticed and politely declined to comment on it, for which she was grateful. For some reason the hatred between her Head of House and her father and uncles hadn't seemed real before. She had been aware of it, in snide comments James or Sirius would toss around when they noticed her reading one of Snape's articles, and in the way Remus carefully edited stories from their youth in deference to her respect for the Potions Master, but it had been nothing more than an abstract sort of obstacle to her. A barrier to be overcome like any other in her determination to be taught by the greatest (in her opinion) Potions Master alive. She hadn't thought of what that enmity meant for *Professor Snape*, who was faced with the child of his enemy and asked to shovel the foul mud of the past beneath a thin academic veneer every day, and for that she was ashamed.

Who was she to think that almost two decades of grievance-and the kind of emotions that could fuel a fire for that many years-could be swept aside with the work of a few weeks? She would try harder, and be more patient, she promised herself. She wouldn't give up, but she wouldn't expect to be seen entirely in her own light for at least a couple years. She could live with that. As long as he was giving her instruction, no matter how bitterly, she could live with the specter of her uncle's adolescent memory hanging about.

Her thoughts were interrupted when a speckled Eagle Owl swooped down and dropped a letter in front of her before sailing off once more, not even stopping to nip at some bacon. The letter was only saved from being dunked in her oatmeal by Draco's quick seeker's hands.

"Thanks," she said, taking the letter carefully from Draco and checking the envelope. It was definitely for her, but aside from the words 'Rigel Black' on the front, the envelope was completely nondescript. She tucked it slowly into her robe pocket, glad for once that her injury meant she only had to keep her one visible hand from shaking. She didn't recognize the handwriting, but if it was from Archie, an Eagle Owl meant an emergency letter that couldn't be read in front of others, so in case he'd used a handwriting charm for some reason, Rigel didn't dare open it with so many curious eyes around. Her fellow Slytherins might not come out and ask her about it, but her every reaction could be noted and weighed if she wasn't careful. Maybe she was being paranoid, and certainly she'd been accused of being overly cautious in the past (though Archie's exact words had involved a stick wedged in an undesirable place), but she'd rather be safe than thrown into prison for blood-impersonation.

She didn't get a chance to read the letter until halfway through Herbology, when Draco and Pansy (and everyone else) were distracted by two of the Venomous Tentacula plants trying to strangle one another. It took Professor Sprout ten minutes to calm the plants down, but Rigel didn't need even a fraction of the time to read the strange letter-it was more of a note, really.

Mr. Black,

Be at Greenhouse Four by sundown, or everyone will know your secret.

Come alone.

That was it. Rigel crumpled the parchment into her good fist and stuffed it into her pockets before anyone noticed, but the words played themselves over in her mind throughout the rest of the lesson, and even Nott mischievously 'brushing' some dirt off of Draco's forehead (while really streaking the dirt onto it) could not lighten her mood for long. The message was vague enough that she almost *had* to go. She wasn't stupid, she knew that it might be an elaborate trap-a bluff to get her on her own-and the person who

wrote it might not have any secrets she'd care about being exposed, but if they did... well, a bluff always worked if the one it was aimed at had too much to lose to call it.

The only thing to decide was how to slip away.

In the end, she reverted to the timeless maneuver often favored by toddlers when faced with a pile of vegetables: she faked a stomachache. She didn't fake it *well*, of course, and so her friends naturally assumed an underlying cause.

"Is this about whatever Professor Snape called you in for last night?" Draco asked.

"You can talk to us, you know," Pansy said.

Rigel insisted (in a rather convincing 'unconvincing' way) that it wasn't about that, and told them she was going to see the nurse and perhaps lie down for a while. They were appropriately unconvinced and thereby entrenched even deeper in the idea that her reticence was just about her meeting with Snape the night before, and so neither of her friends looked for a more hidden motive. They agreed to go to dinner without her, but she had been careful to leave them suspicious enough that if Rigel wasn't back by curfew someone would come looking for her.

While everyone else was at dinner that evening, Rigel was slipping past the cheery warmth of the Great Hall and out into the fading light of the setting sun. By the time she got to the greenhouses it was nearly twilight, and she waited with iron patience for the letter-writer to appear.

She had the strange feeling that she was being observed, which was validated when two figures appeared suddenly in the dim light, melting out of the shadows as if they'd thrown off invisibility charms after checking that she had, indeed, come alone.

"Well, well, what have we here? He really came."

"Looks like you were right; he did have something to hide."

Rigel set her teeth-she'd been prepared for a trap, but she hadn't thought showing up was the trap, and that by doing so she'd give away the very existence of her secrets. She'd have to reevaluate the estimation of her own intelligence.

The figures emerged from the shadow of Greenhouse Four and she recognized them with little real surprise-their voices alone were quite distinctive.

"Welcome, little secret-keeper," Aldon Rosier smiled like a saber-tooth tiger and his honey-colored eyes glowed eerily in the light of the fading sun, "It seems I had reason to suspect you after all. Come, won't you tell us what secrets you hold so dear that you willingly endanger yourself for them?"

Rigel backed away slightly, but too late she realized that Rookwood had come up on her other side and boxed her in against the greenhouse. She stopped backing away and lifted her chin with the kind of stubborn pride Draco would have shown in this situation, and Rosier's darkly whimsical laughter twisted the air before her face as he leaned closer to inspect her expression. Perhaps even more unnerving than Rosier was Rookwood's silent, watchful presence to her right.

"No? A shame," Rosier leaned back again on a sigh, "But, ultimately we did not come here to learn your secrets, petty though they undoubtedly are."

"What is it you want, then?" Rigel asked, barely able to keep her voice above a hoarse whisper.

"We don't trust you," Rookwood spoke suddenly, his ocean-deep voice pulsing through the shadows.

"That's right," Rosier smiled sadly, almost apologetically, "Pansy vouches for you, but as much as we adore that girl, she is young,

and innocent enough to be easily misled. By coming here you have shown us that you keep secrets, even from Pansy and Malfoy, or they would be here with you, and for that you can't be trusted."

Rigel's face was blank but her mind was incredulous. *She* couldn't be trusted? Who's the one sending cryptic, threatening notes to eleven-year-olds?

"And those who cannot be trusted," Rookwood said ominously, "Must be tested."

"Tested?" she repeated blankly.

"Yes, tested!" Rosier looked gleeful, now, like a child on his birthday, or like a crazy person with a bouquet of dead mice, "If we're to approve your friendship with Pansy, you must be worthy in some way, and since it is obvious you aren't *trust* worthy, we'll just have to see if you're another kind of worthy."

Rigel didn't like where this was going.

"It was very brave of you to come out here alone to face an unknown enemy," Rookwood said.

"Either that, or very cowardly-were you terribly afraid we'd spill your precious secrets?" Rosier asked tauntingly, "Shall we find out which it is?" Rigel's face must have given something away, for he said, "Oh, don't look so scared, little snake. We just want to see if you're worthy of your House, that's all. Just run a little errand for us, and you'll be on your way."

"What kind of an errand?" Rigel asked, partly relieved that they were finally getting to the point of all this.

"The kind that tests your resourcefulness, of course," Rosier said, still smiling that winning smile of his, "You really can't be a Slytherin without Slytherin's qualities. Of course, if you don't want to do it, all

you have to do is agree to break off your friendship with Pansy. If you won't be around her, we don't care how unworthy you are."

"No," Rigel said, louder than she'd intended. She glared at the two upperclassmen, "Pansy's my friend, and if you know her half as well as you think you'd know that Pansy doesn't let anyone decide her life for her, and she definitely won't appreciate this kind of maneuvering behind her back."

"Yes, that's true," Rookwood said, "But what Pansy doesn't know won't get us into trouble with her. You won't be telling her."

It wasn't a question.

"Well if you're sure Pansy's worth all this trouble..." Rosier trailed off airily.

"She is," Rigel scowled. Pansy wouldn't be happy with her if the blond girl ever found out about this, but Rigel wouldn't trade her friendship for anything, now that she had it. And if she had to do something to earn it in Rosier and Rookwood's eyes-so be it.

The two older Slytherins smiled at one another, and Rigel wondered if refusing to renounce Pansy wasn't part of the challenge in itself.

"Wonderful," Rosier pressed his hands together delightedly, "Then here is your task."

Rookwood spoke then, slowly and clearly, though not exactly reassuringly, "You will acquire two sprigs of fresh Canterbury and bring it back here. You have two hours."

She stood gaping at them. Canterberries grew in trees. In trees that would probably be found quite a ways into the Forbidden Forest, considering how little sunlight the plant required.

"Go," Rosier said, and laughed again at the disbelieving stare the young first-year was leveling at him, "Be glad it's not a full moon

tonight."

Rigel rolled her eyes disgustedly, but she had already agreed to do their ridiculous task, and the sooner she figured out how to get it done, the better.

She took off at a jog toward the edge of the Forbidden Forest, careful to give Hagrid's cabin a wide berth, in case his dog had sensitive ears. The only thing worse than traipsing through the Forbidden Forest at night would have to be being caught traipsing through the *Forbidden* Forest at night.

The forest, which seemed so hauntingly silent during the day, teemed with life and sound once the sun had set. The tiniest breeze set the leaves to whistling, and every twig snapping beneath her feet sounded like a gunshot going off in the middle of a concerto for strings-not eerily loud compared to the sounds around it, but awkwardly out of place.

Rigel carefully studied the trees that she passed. Canterberries grew in bunches on vines, much like common grapes, and the vines liked to wrap themselves around the widest trees they could find. The trees on the edge of the forest weren't nearly wide enough, so she'd have to keep going. She knew that trees got bigger as they got older or as they got closer to water. The older trees would be in the very center of the forest, where it had first begun, but that was also the most dangerous section of the forest. Since the trees seemed to be growing bigger in two different directions, she assumed that there was a water-source nearby and followed the trees that grew larger parallel to the edge of the forest to be safe.

About fifteen minutes of walking later, she came upon a good-sized stream, which judging by the current probably ran into the Black Lake eventually. At the edges of the stream, the trees were wide and stately, and sure enough the distinctive twisting vines of the Canterberry plant trailed conspicuously from the sturdy branches to skim the surface of the water. Rigel gazed up at the bunches of berries, hanging tauntingly out of her reach, even if she jumped. She

might have had time to run and grab a broom from the Quidditch sheds, but they were locked after sundown and her useless wand would probably freak out again if she tried an Alohamora with it. Instead she grimly surveyed her surroundings for something that would help her climb a tree one-handed. She thought she could manage getting the sprigs once she was up there, but reaching the lowest branches with one good arm was going to be a pain.

Rigel first pulled a few of the looser vines from a nearby tree and began braiding them together, using her teeth when necessary to get a good, tight braid. Next she shucked out of her robes, glad the slacks and shirt she had on underneath were fitted enough that they wouldn't catch on anything. She hefted her new rope-braid and after a few tries managed to loop it over the lowest branch (which was still a good eight feet above her head) of one of the trees. She tied one end in a slipknot and tightened it until she had one long strand of rope fastened securely to the branch above her.

Now came the annoying part. Her robes were wrapped quickly around her right arm from palm to elbow, and she looped all the excess rope around her forearm, outside of the robes. It cut off circulation slightly when she put her full weight on it, but it wasn't as bad as it could have been without the padding. Gripping the makeshift rope tightly in her right hand, she cradled her left wrist protectively against her chest and made a running jump toward the tree, pushing off against the trunk with her feet as hard as she could and wrapping the slack around her good arm furiously while in midair. She sagged with a grunt against the rope, but she was now about three feet off of the ground.

Rigel swayed back and forth on the rope until she could touch the bark with her feet. She dug in with her shoes and propelled herself upwards as hard as she could again, gaining another loop of slack around her wrist before gravity took over once more. She did this several more times, gasping and swearing each time her body weight pulled the rope taut across her arm, but soon she was high enough that one last push against the trunk gave her the leverage to

twist and swing one leg over the top of the branch she was tied to, and she lay, panting but victorious, across the thick branch as she slowly unwound the rope from her groaning arm. Her left wrist was only a bit jostled from swinging up onto the branch, and by the time she got her balance and sat up straight on the sturdy limb she was feeling pretty pleased with herself.

The Canterberries were growing on vines just a few feet higher up, and she easily broke off a few sprigs by standing and leaning on the trunk for balance. Getting down was much faster. She wrapped her right hand in her robes again and used the rope to slide down as slowly as she could manage, thankful that years of playing beater and weeks of relying solely on her right arm meant she had good strength and grip in that hand. Though it was more free-fall than repelling, she managed to get to the forest floor without spraining anything. Rigel was disheveled, her white shirt covered with leaves and dirt and her robes torn through in places the rope had rubbed too hard, but she was flushed and smiling cheerfully as she wrapped the sprigs of Canterberries in her ruined robes like a makeshift sack.

Her smug mood evaporated when an amused voice broke into the clearing from behind her.

"Quite pleased with himself, isn't he? Little popinjay."

She whirled, keeping a tight grip on the 'sack' of berries, and nearly groaned aloud when Rosier and Rookwood dropped Disillusionment Charms simultaneously.

"I'd say he's earned a bit of self-satisfaction," Rookwood shrugged, "He certainly made quick work of our task."

"Yes," Rosier looked a bit disappointed, "It seems our two-hour time limit didn't give Mr. Black enough credit. And he even retrieved them manually right off-I was so looking forward to seeing him try to sever a branch or summon one of them with those magic-resistant spells I cast on most of the trees in place."

"You've been watching this whole time?" Rigel frowned at herself for not noticing she was being followed.

As if he'd read her thoughts, Rookwood said, "Don't beat yourself up over it. We used muffling spells and were always out of your line of vision, so even if we hadn't been invisible I doubt you'd have spotted us."

Rigel sighed, "Well, I got these ridiculous berries. I doubt either of you really want to make bunion cream, which is about all these are good for, so do I really have to haul them all the way back to the greenhouses?"

"No, no," Rosier waved a hand dismissively, "The berries don't matter. What's important is that you completed your mission and showed resourcefulness. You pass, feel free to befriend Pansy, etc. Now what I *really* want to know," the slim young man walked toward Rigel until he was right in her face, which he seemed to think the appropriate distance for examining someone closely, "Is *why* you tried to climb that tree one-handed?"

Rigel inwardly groaned, of course they had seen that if they'd watched the entire thing. It figures that she would come out here for the exact purpose of keeping her secrets, only to reveal one (albeit a minor one that several people already knew) in the process.

"His left hand is injured," Rookwood commented, "Likely broken."

Rigel made an ungrateful face at the stoic upperclassman for pointing that out, but snapped her head back with a yelp when Rosier took it upon himself to prod the wrapped area firmly with the tip of his finger.

"Hmm, the wrist does appear to be fractured, at least," Rosier smiled like he'd found a new game to play, "Why on earth are you walking around with an injured wrist in a school with a certified Mediwitch on staff?"

"My reasons are my own," Rigel said shortly, moving her injured arm behind her back and stepping out of Rosier's reach.

"Ooh, it looks like we found a secret after all, Edmund," Rosier smiled conspiratorially at Rookwood, who raised an eyebrow in return.

"I guess making him complete the task was unnecessary, then," the taller boy said unconcernedly.

"Indeed, he has turned out to be trustworthy after all," Rosier laughed at Rigel's flummoxed expression.

"Now having secrets makes me trustworthy?"

"Mr. Black, try to think like a Slytherin once and a while, won't you?" the golden-eyed boy tutted admonishingly, "Us *knowing* one of your secrets makes you trustworthy, because a person can always be trusted to protect their secrets. Everyone has secrets, Rigel, and a person we know has secrets is always less dangerous than a person who appears to have none."

"If you say so, Rosier," Rigel shook the berries out of her robes and bundled them under her arm, "If our business is concluded, I would like to get back before my friends miss me."

"Oh, our business is far from completed," Rosier's smile was a dangerous blade, "But we'll be happy to walk you back to the castle now-wouldn't do to let Pansy's new friend get lost in the woods. But first-Edmund, would you mind?"

Rookwood stepped forward and drew his wand with a practiced grace. Rigel stumbled backwards but the quiet Slytherin grabbed her shoulder before she could retreat any further. Rookwood slid a broad hand down her biceps to bring her left arm back in front of her carefully. She flinched when he reached for her wrist, but it was only to peel the sleeve of her once-white shirt out of the way. Rosier came over to help with unwrapping her bandages, bringing his left

hand to seize her right wrist firmly when she tried to bring up a hand to stop them.

Once the wrist was uncovered they both bent their heads to study it critically.

"Hmm, I'd actually expected worse," Rosier said thoughtfully.

"The bone has already been set," Rookwood said, "It just wasn't healed." The stoic boy's fingers were gentle as he probed the area around the break, "How long ago was this broken?"

Rigel glanced between them confusedly. Rosier's magnanimous smile did not reassure her, but Rookwood's unflappable calm did, so she said, "I broke it the first Saturday of the term."

"How?" Rosier asked curiously.

"Fell down some stairs," she shrugged. Rookwood's mouth turned down in a puzzled frown, obviously comparing the pattern of the break to her story, so she elaborated, "The strap of my bag twisted around my wrist and probably caught against something when I fell, so it was pulled taut until it snapped."

Rookwood nodded easily, but Rosier winced sympathetically, "That must have hurt. I supposed you passed out?"

Rigel grimaced, but nodded.

"Thought so," Rosier said, "If you were awake when it happened the scream would have brought someone running, and you'd have been shipped off to the Hospital Wing. Still don't see why you didn't go there anyway, but I'm sure I'll figure it out eventually."

Rigel was distracted from Rosier's chatter by Rookwood pointing his wand at her broken wrist with a look of fierce concentration on his face that foretold a complicated spell of some kind.

"Don't worry," Rosier said cheerfully, "Edmund's uncle, the one who doesn't work on the creature reserve, is a resident at St. Mungo's. If he accidentally, oh, vanishes all your bone or something, his uncle will probably fix you up for free."

"Don't listen to Aldon's nonsense, Black," Rookwood said, his voice was rough but soothing, like sand being swept across a Zen garden, "I mend animals at the shelter my family runs all the time. Take a deep breath and hold still."

Rigel found herself automatically listening to the upperclassman's soothing voice. She could see how he'd make a good handler for temperamental magical creatures with his calmly capable demeanor.

Rookwood cast a numbing spell that made her ears roar strangely for a moment. She missed the incantation he spoke next, but a hot-then-cold sensation rushed up her elbow from the break and the next moment she was staring in awe at her perfectly mended wrist.

"You'll have to be careful to build up the strength in it again, but the muscle won't have atrophied much," Rookwood said, "I wouldn't recommend climbing any trees for a few days."

Rigel was completely confused, but also extremely relieved. She wouldn't have to do everything one-handed anymore, which meant she could stop failing Flying class, and she had one less thing to lie to her friends about now, "Thank you very much."

"It was no trouble," Rookwood assured her.

"Secrets aren't that interesting once you know about them anyway," Rosier yawned, "Now that this one is gone, I'll just have to find out another of your secrets before I can trust you." He winked playfully at her, but Rigel was too grateful to roll her eyes, and as they made the long trek back up to the castle, she thought maybe Rosier didn't really mean anything by it.

Even though they'd dragged her out to the Forbidden Forest and made her climb a tree for a bunch of useless berries, they hadn't really hurt her. They couldn't have known in setting the task that she had an injury, and they hadn't let her really wander through the forest by herself, though she hadn't known that at the time. Rosier had even had Rookwood fix her wrist, saving her another month of trouble in the process. Maybe she was being too forgiving, but Rigel was a big proponent of turn the other cheek and let bygones be bygones except perhaps in the most extreme of cases. It just wasn't in her to hold onto her annoyance in a grudge or vendetta. That was probably why she had a hard time understanding the level of hostility that lent itself to the twenty years of enmity that Snape and the Marauders had held on to.

Seeing the way Pansy's face lit up happily when Rigel entered the common room flanked by Rosier and Rookwood kind of made the whole thing worth it, too. She was clearly ecstatic to see that her oldest friends approved of Rigel, and Rigel didn't think the other girl even noticed that all three of them (though mostly Rigel) were strewn with leaves and twigs and smelled like moss. Later as she tried to fall asleep, after tossing and turning just because with her wrist no longer broken she *could*, Rigel thought that perhaps an easy, 'settled' life was overrated, anyway.

[end of chapter thirteen].

A/N: So, my apologies, again, for taking two days longer than I had anticipated to finish this-it gets away from me more often now, perhaps because more exciting things are soon to come. I wonder what you all think of Rosier and Rookwood. I sort of imagine them like the Weasley Twins' evil.. um... twins ^^'. As for Harriet's wand- don't forget she's Harry Potter, as well as an OC-ish configuration. Of course I wasn't going to leave her without the Holly wand. Prophecy or no, Horcrux or no, there will always be a connection between Harry Potter and Tom Riddle. Without that, it's too AU even for me to call it fanfic :) so, yeah, tell me what you think, and thanks for reading!

Chapter 14

A/N: Hello again, my pretties. I will start by saying that everyone reading has my most abject thanks for contributing your time to this story I'd especially like to thank: hentai18ancilla, Vaughn Tyler, Debate4life, Shaded Eclipse, TearfullPixie, greyRest, theoriginalolive, Cathy Willow, AlainnRain, Kenzieloveify, and Baltaine Shadow(p.s. sorry for misspelling your sn in my pm) for your wonderful, amazing, inspiring reviews of ch13 (I've never had so many on one chapter). I was going to post this hours ago at 8000 words, but for you guys I added part of the next chapter to this one so you'd have more to chew on this week. Hope you like it.

A/N2: All references to Harriet Potter will now be made using 'Harry' instead of 'Harri,' because it looks silly with an 'i' and I think everyone gets that it's short for Harriett now, anyway.

A/N3: Because something bad must always happen on Halloween-sorry Harry! But don't worry, life gets better soon... sort of. I am speeding this up a teensy bit, so I'm not sure how many chapters to expect until the end of year one now, especially since they're getting longer. As always, thank you so much for reading.

The Pureblood Pretense:

Chapter 14:

On Saturday, Professor Snape stopped by the Slytherin table while Rigel, Pansy and Draco were immersed in a discussion of one of their Transfiguration quizzes over breakfast.

"I just don't see how it's a Switching Spell if only one of the animals gains something," Draco was saying, "It's got to be a combination Vanishing and Partial Transfiguring, doesn't it?"

"No, because even though it seems like the nose of the Mouse just disappears, in truth it gets switched with the beetle's nose-the only thing is, beetles have no noses, so-" Pansy broke off her explanation when their Head of House loomed suddenly up behind them. "Good morning, Professor Snape."

"Good day, Miss Parkinson, Mr. Malfoy," he nodded curtly. The Potions Master was dressed in his usual all-black robes, but the protective overcoat he wore while teaching or brewing had been left off, "Mr. Black, immediately following this meal you will accompany me to Diagon Alley. I will await you in the Entrance Hall in twenty minutes time."

"Yes, sir," Rigel said after swallowing, though she wished she'd kept her mouth full when her friends turned expectant expressions on her.

"Why are you leaving the school with my Godfather?" Draco asked, "Is he taking you to buy Potions ingredients or something?"

"Well, not exactly," Rigel shrugged apologetically.

"Oh, dear," Pansy sighed gracefully, "You've forgotten to tell us something important again, haven't you?"

"Kind of," Rigel said, "Remember that meeting Professor Snape called me in for on Thursday?"

"The one you were being all mopey about? Yeah, we remember," Draco said, grinning a bit to show that he was teasing.

"Well, it was about my spell-casting, or rather, my lack of spell-casting," she told them. Pansy and Draco both leaned in closer to show their attention. "He examined my wand, and he thinks it may be part of the problem, so I'm to get a new one today."

"But that one is new, isn't it?" Pansy pointed out, "Didn't you get it at Ollivander's?"

"Yes, but I guess it wasn't an exact fit," Rigel said, trying to work out how to explain it. In the end, she told them everything she and Snape had figured out, though she significantly downplayed the part where she had lost her temper and trashed the entire office. When she was finished, Pansy looked a bit confused and Draco looked pensive, but they didn't have time to discuss it much as she'd used her entire twenty minutes relating the events of Thursday night, so she told them they'd talk about it when she got back.

Rigel made it to the Entrance Hall at about the same time Professor Snape did, and the two of them set off without a word between them, down the sloping lawn toward the main gates. They walked in silence to Hogsmede, and if Rigel thought it was odd that Snape would rather walk in the brisk morning air than take a carriage, she didn't question it. The little town did a bustling business on Saturday, and she and Snape wove their way to the Three Broomsticks with difficulty, but they got there eventually, and Rosmerta, the pretty-faced owner of the pub, allowed them to use her floo right away.

Rigel had never liked the floo, which for some reason always insisted on *spitting* her out, instead of sending her on with a gentle push, the way it did everyone else. Archie used to say it was because she tasted like Potions ingredients. She called out, "The Leaky Cauldron!" optimistically, however, and when she was indeed catapulted out the other end at least she had the consolation that Professor Snape had let her go first, and so wasn't around to witness her humiliation.

Tom, the barkeep, helped brush the soot off with a grin, and by the time the Potions Master strolled through the flames like he didn't even notice them, Rigel was once again presentable and poised. Snape took her through the back alley wall and glared a path through the throng of Saturday shoppers to Ollivander's dusty little shop.

When they reached the door, Rigel said, "There's no need to wait for me, Professor Snape. If you want to go down to the apothecary, I can join you as soon as I'm finished."

"Don't be daft, boy," Snape said dismissively, brushing past her into the shop, "I'm not leaving you unattended in Diagon Alley."

Rigel frowned, but followed Snape into the shop, hoping that Mr. Ollivander's memory was not really as good as people claimed.

The inside of the shop looked much like it had the last time she'd been there. It was dimly lit and packed with boxes of wands from floor to ceiling. Ollivander himself was whittling slowly at a piece of birch wood when they entered, but he set it aside easily enough and stood from behind the counter to greet them.

"Don't get many younglings once term's begun," he spoke softly, his milky-white eyes peering through the gloom at her-but he wasn't searching her face, she realized, he was looking at her hands, looking for a wand to identify her with. *He remembers the wand first, and who bought the wand second*, she thought, *how attached he must be to them*. Suddenly she felt a bit nervous about returning one to him, as though it were incredibly rude, or as though she were returning a child to an orphanage.

Snape held his own wand out for Ollivander to see, and Rigel realized it must be customary for a wizard to do so when he returned to the little shop, for Ollivander seemed pleased, but not surprised.

"Ah, yes. Thirteen and one half inches. Ebony and dragon heartstring," Ollivander smiled at the wand as if looking upon an old friend, "Highly non-conforming and good for combative magics."

Rigel glanced quickly at Snape's face, but there was no clue there to how he felt about such an assessment. Perhaps he had heard the description before.

"And you, youngling?" Ollivander looked so expectant that Rigel found herself pulling the ash wand from her pocket and holding it out to him. "Hmm, ash, twelve inches, and a hair from a particularly docile unicorn. I parted with this wand but a month ago. What seems to be the problem, Miss..." Rigel caught the ancient wandmaker's

eye and widened hers beseechingly. Ollivander hesitated, taking in her Hogwarts robes and masculine haircut in an instant, and continuing, "...ster, ah, Mister... forgive me, child, but I cannot recall..."

"It's Black, Rigel Black, remember?" she smiled gratefully at him, thinking that Ollivander reminded her somehow of the Hogwarts Sorting Hat, and missing the incredulous look Snape was giving Ollivander behind her back, "I came in with my cousin, Harry Potter? Harry got an elm wand, with a unicorn hair as well."

"Ah, yes," Ollivander smiled in a way that almost twinkled, which relieved Rigel but reminded Snape eerily of Dumbledore, "I know why I don't recall you-I didn't really consider that wand sold, after all. Knew you'd be back, Mr. Black, and here you are."

"Yes," she shrugged ruefully, "You were right, and this wand doesn't work for me."

"Well, give it here, no harm done," Ollivander said, "You've not bonded with it properly anyway, so I'll wipe it clean and it'll go to someone who really needs it. Now, this time I am going to find you a wand if it takes me all day."

He hummed happily and stowed the ash wand in the back room before tottering around the stacks and collecting boxes as he went. He sat Rigel down in a chair despite her pleas to let her help him with all the boxes, and when he had a good amount he took a stool next to her chair and held the first wand out for her to take.

"Maple and unicorn hair, rather springy, try-oh dear!"

The wand had bucked in her hand the moment she grasped it and a potted plant in the corner met an untimely end in an explosion of singed leaves.

"Ah, yes, I'd forgotten just how explosive your magic is, Mr. Black," Ollivander waved off her apologies with a smile, "No matter, no

matter, we'll have to do things a bit differently, that's all."

"Professor Snape thinks that I've suppressed my magic to a dangerous level," Rigel said, glancing at the silent professor, who seemed content to watch the process carefully from the sidelines, "Will it even be possible for me to bond with a wand as I am now?"

"Oh, yes, I should think so," Ollivander scratched his white head of hair, "It's true that usually I can sense a kind of magical leakage from younglings like you, and I believe that ambient magic is what the wand uses to choose the right wizard, but even if your magic is tightly controlled, the right wand would be sensitive enough to pick up on it."

"But there's no way for us to know without trying them all?" she clarified.

"Yes, I'm afraid without being able to sense the pull myself, it is difficult for me to know which wand to try," Ollivander said, "But you tried a great many last time, so we can eliminate those right off."

"How many does that leave Mr. Black to try?" Snape asked, his voice tight with annoyance.

"Oh, no more than six or seven hundred," Ollivander estimated, missing the look of horrified resignation on the Potion Master's face, "Unless... but of course I haven't used that in years..."

They waited patiently for him to continue, and he did, after sending them a slightly hurt look that suggested he'd been hoping for them to rise to the bait and say something like 'Unless what?' or 'Used what in years?' He puttered back behind the counter and pulled out a dusty old book that looked like it had been bound in the early days of parchment making. It was yellowed with age and cracked in several places along the spine. Ollivander cheerfully flipped it open, completely ignoring the musty smell that was so strong Rigel sneezed twice to clear her airways before she could breath again.

"This is a book that I haven't used since I was in training under my great uncle," the wandmaker told them, "It's a wand-predictor, useful for wandmakers who cannot yet sense the resonance between wand and wizard for themselves. It won't pinpoint the exact wand, but it gives a good idea of where to start."

He gestured for Rigel to come forward, and she saw that filling the pages were rows and rows of thumbprints done in some kind of red ink, with a suggested wand wood and core beside each one. When Ollivander seized her hand and pricked her finger with the tip of a quill, she realized belatedly that the thumbprints were done in blood, and she reluctantly coated her thumb with enough of her blood to make a clear print. Within a few minutes, a new word had appeared beside her name.

Holly.

"Hmm, good, good," Ollivander said, "Sometimes it takes a while for the book to figure out the core, but Holly would indeed fit you quite nicely I should think. It is a volatile wood, and good for dealing with impetuous emotions. It's also quite protective, and I daresay any holly wand that chooses you won't be quite so keen to give you up as that ash wand was."

He broke off as the next words appeared beneath the wood suggestion.

Phoenix Feather.

Ollivander was quiet for a long moment. He peered pearly eyed into her very soul, it seemed, before he said, "A rare combination. A phoenix's allegiance is hard won, Mr. Black, and they are creatures capable of both great detachment and great initiative. Combining the aloof nature of the phoenix with the passionate nature of Holly usually results in disaster, and as such I am afraid I have only one wand which fits these specifications at the present time."

Ollivander shut the book carefully and pulled a box from a shelf near the back of the shop. The box looked quite old, as if it had been waiting around for quite some time, and for some reason the back of Rigel's neck prickled as she gazed at it. Ollivander opened the box reverently, but instead of taking the wand out and handing it to her, he simply held the open box out toward her. "Holly and phoenix feather, eleven inches, nice and supple.* Go on and take it."

Rigel gazed at the holly wand with trepidation. Her neck was tingling fiercely now, as though Fate herself was breathing on it, and as she took the wand the tingly, prickly feeling moved from her neck to her head and swept through her entire body. She *thrummed* at the wand, and the wand *thrummed back*. Sparks like scarlet plumage shot out of the end of the wand, and for one moment it was as if she could see the phoenix that gave the feather for her wand, yes, *her* wand, and she felt its blessings like a rising sun.

"Oh, bravo, Mr. Black, yes, very well done," Ollivander was smiling at her, but it seemed strained for some reason. "How curious," he muttered as he wrapped up the wand for her. He refused to charge her, since she had returned the ash wand in good condition.

"What's curious? The combination?" Rigel asked, curious herself now about what could make a wizard of Mr. Ollivander's age curious.

Ollivander looked her very carefully in the eye, "Mr. Black, I will not lie to you-this wand was meant for great things. The phoenix whose feather resides in your wand gave another, just one other. When two wands share the origin of a core, spectacular things are known to happen. I wonder what this connection will mean for you. I am curious to see if you ever find your wand's brother."

Rigel wasn't sure what to say to that, so she thanked Mr. Ollivander politely and followed Snape quietly back to the Leaky Cauldron, thinking all the time.

Shared cores? Great things? Sure, Rigel wanted to do great things-what Slytherin didn't? -but not with a wand. Still, the holly wand had

chosen her, so who was she to say? She thought perhaps 'great things' came on their own time, and that the best she could do was focus on the present. She certainly had enough to be getting on with.

Her new wand was brilliant, Rigel found over the next few weeks, but temperamental. Sometimes she could perform a spell perfectly, while other times the holly wand would force more magic than Rigel had intended into the spell and magnify or distort it in some way. It happened once in Defense Against the Dark Arts, and Professor Quirrell was less than pleased when the straw dummy she and Draco were supposed to be casting the stunning spell on exploded into a million pieces instead.

"Don't worry about it, Rigel," Pansy said when Rigel had gotten a week's worth of detention for destroying school property, "It's not your fault. Quirrell's been looking for an excuse to give you detentions again since you started being able to do the spells properly."

"Does he hate my father, too?" Rigel said, half-serious-heh, half-Sirius indeed.

Draco and Pansy exchanged a guarded glance.

"Well, Quirrell is a big supporter of the S.O.W. party," Draco said carefully, aware that politics were a touchy area when you had a blood-traitor best-friend.

"Of course he is," Rigel sighed, "But he doesn't give the kids from other anti-S.O.W. families the same kind of trouble. Why is it me in particular?"

"Perhaps he feels that the Blacks, especially, should believe in the Save Our World organization's message," Pansy said, "Since in the past the Blacks were so... so..."

"Vehemently obsessed with blood-politics?" Rigel suggested. It had been a weak attempt to lighten the mood, and neither of her friends laughed, "Well, there's nothing that can be done this moment, so let's talk about something else."

When she asked Snape about her wand acting up, he told her it was likely siphoning off the built up energy in her magical core whenever it could, and that the solution was simply to do more magic with it. Rigel wasn't so sure. At times the wand seemed to have a will of its own, but it wasn't that the wand was doing things she didn't want it to do, exactly. More that it was doing things she wasn't *willing* it to do.

Once in a crowded hallway Rigel had stubbed her toe against a suit of armor on her way past. As she stopped to examine the toe, cursing and dreading being late to her Potions Practical class, she'd noticed the pain receding at the same time she noticed the wand in her pocket heating up. By the time she'd gotten her sock off, the injury was completely gone, despite the small amount of blood left on the inside of the sock to attest to its presence. Just as she'd thought this, however, the wand in her pocket thrummed once more, and the bloodstain disappeared as well.

By Halloween, she was ready to bury the wand in the deepest cavern she could find and pretend she'd never laid hand on the menace. It had taken to completing the spells she was supposed to learn in class almost before she could form the incantation. No one else noticed, but Rigel couldn't help but feel cheated. To prevent her from preempting her conscious direction, she had to very carefully *not* want the spell to work until she'd said the incantation and done the wand-movement correctly. Even then, she had a sneaking suspicion that her wand was only humoring her.

October had been extremely trying even setting aside the rather spirited nature of her new wand. Most of her professors had oh-so-generously assigned her extra credit work to bring up her grades in the classes she'd been failing most spectacularly at with the ash wand. While she understood that they were only trying to help, she was absolutely swamped with work (hers and Flint, who seemed to

be cheerfully accepting extra credit assignments of his own just for kicks) for most of the month, and her friends were getting rather sick of hearing that she'd been in the Library despite the fact that no one had seen her there (because she was still going incognito in deference to Madam Pince's completely unfounded paranoia).

Perhaps that was why Rigel was so looking forward to Halloween Feast that she sped recklessly through the dungeons on her way to the Great Hall. She was late, because she'd gotten caught up in an essay on basic ward theory for Flint's DADA class and had to rush back to the common room to stash her book bag (with her costume inside) before going back upstairs to the feast. She left her wand in her bag, too, to prevent it from doing something unpredictable at the feast. She just wanted to have a nice, quiet, uneventful few hours with her friends, thank you very much. By the time she eased into the Hall, the feast had started. Pansy had saved her a seat on her left, with Draco directly across the table, and Rigel took it gratefully, glancing around in awe at the mountains of food she had to choose from. She was fairly sure the house elves had invented some of the things on the table, if for no other reason than that there couldn't possibly have been that many dishes of edible things already in existence.

"We were beginning to think you weren't coming," Pansy nudged her jokingly by leaning her left shoulder on Rigel's briefly.

"Wouldn't miss it," Rigel said as she began filling her plate with bits from different dishes, "Just got caught up-

"In the Library," her friends chorused wryly.

"Of course you did," Draco said in what she thought was meant to be a conspiratorial tone. It came off a bit patronizing, as Draco was of the opinion that he was doing Rigel a gracious favor in humoring her every time she 'lied' to them about going to the Library. Rigel didn't blame him for doubting her-apparently her disguises were quite good.

"Well, wherever you were, you just missed quite a bit of excitement," Nott said, leaning around Pansy to grin cheerfully at Rigel.

"Oh?" she raised an eyebrow curiously. She was only about ten minutes late to the feast, but perhaps the Headmaster had started things off with a bang.

"Someone played a prank on the Hufflepuff table," Zabini smiled his usual, cryptic smirk.

"Stupid duffers," mumbled Goyle into his pumpkin pie. Rigel thought that was rather saying something in Goyle's case.

"What happened?" Rigel had a good view of the Hufflepuff table over Draco's shoulder, and nothing appeared to be wrong with the badgers.

"A couple of the jack-o-lanterns on their table exploded into fireworks," Nott said. Pansy had given up eating and simply leaned back politely while Nott filled Rigel in, "Nothing special, just a bunch of common Zonko's, but bits of pumpkin sprayed everywhere, and they went on for a good five minutes I think. It was amusing watching the 'puffs scatter like Cornish pixies while the professors tried to contain them."

"Strange," Rigel commented as she judiciously applied caramel in a faint drizzle over the apple slices.

"What's so strange, Rigel?" Draco said, "Hufflepuffs get pranked all the time."

"Does Ravenclaw House do much of this pranking?" Rigel asked.

"No, of course not," Nott looked just as confused as Draco, "It's all Gryffindors and Slytherins, mostly."

"Then it's strange that Hufflepuff would be attacked in the middle of a prank war in which Gryffindor and Slytherin are supposed to be

targeting one another," Rigel shrugged, "They must have really annoyed someone."

"Oh, yeah I guess," Nott turned back to his food once more and Pansy allowed herself to continue her own meal with a look of resigned indulgence you'd expect from a mother with her children.

The food was excellent, and Rigel made a note to tell the house elves that they'd outdone themselves between the feast and the decorations. The caramel was much thicker than she'd realized, however, and she made a face at the sticky feeling on her gums as she reached for the glass of pumpkin juice sitting by her plate.

The goblet was halfway to Rigel's lips when someone cried out in sudden alarm from behind her and a hand came flying over her shoulder to knock the pumpkin juice violently from her grasp. The goblet spilled onto the table with a loud clanking noise and the liquid inside splashed onto her right hand and arm. Immediately, Rigel knew it was not pumpkin juice. It *burned* in the places it had spilt onto her bare skin and her robes were smoking and fizzing where the liquid had splashed them. She leapt up from the table, shouting, "Stay away from it!" to everyone sitting near them. Rigel hauled Pansy out of her seat with the hand that hadn't gotten splashed and pushed the blonde girl behind her toward the Gryffindor table. The boys sitting near them had all stood and moved away from the area of the spill, and she didn't think any of them had gotten hit. Thank Merlin the House tables were widened to accommodate the extra food that night or Draco might have gotten a lap full of the stuff. As it was, only Rigel was hurt, but *gods* it hurt.

Pansy grabbed a pitcher of water from the Gryffindors' table and upended it quickly over Rigel's right hand and forearm. There was instant, cooling relief, but it was short-lived. Soon her skin was burning again, even as Pansy grabbed another pitcher and poured it over the affected area, going slower this time and trying to prolong the relief.

"Move aside, move aside," Professor Snape's loud growl cut a path for the teachers through the press of students, mostly Slytherin and Gryffindor as they were the closest, who were trying to see what was going on.

Rigel was spun to face the Potions Master, who took quick stock of the situation and with cool efficiency reached out and ripped the right sleeve off of Rigel's robe completely. Her arm was revealed as she'd only put on a short-sleeved polo under her robes that day, and the patches of bright red skin stood out like stripes on a candy cane. Snape pulled out his wand just as a matronly woman in a white habit, who Rigel assumed uneasily to be Madam Pomfrey, appeared beside them to pull hers out as well. They both cast Aguamenti onto Rigel's arm, and the steady stream of soothing, slightly cool water made Rigel sag with relief. Rigel eyed Madam Pomfrey as the older woman examined the arm, and prayed that the superficiality of the wound would insure that the Mediwitch didn't need to do any deeper or more general health scans.

Draco was there to brace his hands on her shoulders so that she wouldn't sway dangerously toward the floor, and when she looked over to smile gratefully at him she ended up wincing at the thunderous look on his face instead. He was tightlipped and shaking, and his anger seemed to be entirely directed at Blaise Zabini-no, wait, at the little blonde girl Zabini was holding tightly by the elbow.

Seeing the quizzical look Rigel was sending him, Zabini smiled in his peculiar way and said, "What shall I do with your little blonde butterfly? She seems to have become discontent with merely watching you, Black."

The girl flushed deeply, her pretty blonde pigtails quivering slightly as she shivered under Zabini's predator stare. Rigel blinked as she recognized the first-year Hufflepuff.

"Abbott?" Rigel asked blankly, "You're the one that's been following me?"

"She's the one that knocked the acid onto your arm," Draco hissed in her ear, glaring at the girl, who whimpered.

"Please, I didn't mean to," she said brokenly, and Rigel could see that she was crying now, gazing tearfully at Rigel's injured arm, which Snape and Pomfrey were taking turns keeping under water while the other teachers tried to reinstate order somehow.

"It looked pretty purposeful to me," Pansy said darkly, righteous indignation in every breath, "You were running right at him, and you practically *dove* for that goblet."

"I was trying to stop him!" Abbott blubbered fearfully, she looked back up at Rigel imploringly, "I thought I was too late when I saw you about to drink from it, so I panicked! I didn't know it would burn you, I just knew you couldn't d-drink it."

Snape left off treating her arm, apparently content to let Madam Pomfrey poke and prod at it now that Rigel was out of immediate danger. The water had washed away all traces of the chemical, and even as Pomfrey cast various disinfectant and healing spells over it, house elves were popping in to take care of the acid that had spilled over the Slytherin table. The wood was smoking underneath the puddle of the corrosive stuff, and all the house elves were wearing thick protective gloves and dental masks.

"If you did not know it was acid in the cup, then how did you know that the juice had been tampered with in the first place?" Snape barked at the diminutive girl.

Abbott began crying in earnest once more at the black look on Snape's face, but she choked out, "I over h-heard it. I left the f-feast to go to the bathroom, and I heard someone mention Rigel's name- Black, I mean."

Pansy shot Rigel a look that demanded to know why Abbott was using her first name. Rigel sent her a helpless, *don't-look-at-me*

shrug and turned her attention back to her attacker-who was looking more and more like her rescuer if her story was true.

"It was a b-boy, I think," Abbott said, still sniffing pitifully, "I was passing the alcove by the stairs, and I heard him say he'd gotten the t-tablet into Black's drink, and then he laughed, and he was thanking someone for setting off the fireworks at our table earlier."

Almost every Slytherin who had been sitting near Rigel's empty place scowled darkly at the realization that they'd been played for fools. The Gryffindors at the table behind them were listening in, some openly frowning as they put two and two together and realized that their House was the most obvious perpetrators, since the fireworks had ensured everyone was looking away from their table when they went off.

"I realized the prank m-must have been a distraction, and that whoever it was had used the confusion to slip something into Black's drink, and I ran back in as fast as I could to try and stop you from drinking it," Abbott widened her impossibly innocent eyes further, and Rigel felt strangely like someone expected her to kick a puppy, "Please, Ri-please, Black, I didn't know it was acid or anything, I just thought it was poisoned. I didn't mean to hurt you." She whispered the last part dejectedly, ducking her head in guilt but unable to turn her face away because Zabini was still holding onto her arm, albeit more gently now.

Rigel sighed tiredly. Pomfrey had patched her up with a bandage, and she broke into the conversation to say, "You should be good as new by tomorrow morning, Mr. Black, but I will leave a draught to ward off infection with Professor Snape tomorrow, and I expect you to take it." Rigel nodded meekly in the face of the Mediwitch's no-nonsense tone. She wondered why Dumbledore hired so many stern, matronly witches to work at Hogwarts.

Snape surveyed the lot of them balefully, "If I find out you are lying about this incident, Miss Abbott, you will rue the day you got your Hogwarts acceptance letter. As it is," he took a deep, fortifying

breath as his gaze shot from Rigel's newly bandaged appendage to Abbott's tearfully sincere face, "Ten points to Hufflepuff, for preventing grievous injury to another student."

The Hall gaped with silence, and Rigel was sure she saw Snape's lips twitch ever so slightly upwards as he swept out of the room with a sinister flourish.

"Prevented-" Abbott stuttered, "But-I caused-"

"Professor Snape is right," Rigel smiled tiredly at the other girl, "You couldn't have known it would hurt me to spill it-and even then, it would have been worse if I had drunk it like I was supposed to. I owe you one, Abbott."

"Oh, no," she smiled tremulously, probably relieved that the Slytherins didn't think she had been the one trying to hurt one of their snakes, "You saved me on the stairs that day, anyway. I'm just glad you're okay."

Rigel could have pointed out that the railing had saved both of them that day on the Owlrey stairs, but, as a Slytherin, she was obligated to take get-out-of-debt-free cards without asking questions. She smiled her thanks once more to the Hufflepuff and nodded at Zabini to release his 'prize butterfly.' She wondered if she imagined it, but he looked almost disappointed as he dropped the girl's arm and pushed her gently toward her House mates, all of whom congratulated and admired her for her heroic good deed.

The whole Great Hall was staring at Rigel, she now realized, and with a brief sigh, she said, "I'm gonna head back to the common room. You guys enjoy the feast."

She started to turn away, but-

"As if!" Draco caught her left arm and dragged it over his shoulder in a blatant show of support and Pansy gently set her hand in the crook of Rigel's right elbow, above the bandages. The two of them

escorted her proudly and defiantly out of the Hall. Rigel took note of several faces on her way to the doors. Rosier and Rookwood were both following her with their eyes, Rookwood carefully and Rosier lazily. Ron was sending her a sympathetic grimace, and Neville, sitting next to him with his head in his hands, looked decidedly green. She'd really have to stop injuring herself in front of the poor kid. Flint was seated at his end of the Slytherin table, looking for all the world as if he'd never gotten up, but he sent a pointed, unimpressed look toward her bandage that clearly said she was not going to be getting out of writing essays for this. She rolled her eyes discreetly at him. As they left the curious and calculating eyes of the students behind them, Rigel could not suppress the traitorous little part of her mind that noticed the Weasley Twins, usually so easy to pick out of a crowd, were nowhere to be seen.

They made it back to the common room in no time at all, and the three of them collapsed (well, Rigel collapsed and her pureblooded friends sat swiftly on either side of her) onto a low-backed couch. Pansy's eyes darted helplessly between Rigel's tired, resigned face and her bandaged arm, and she stood just as swiftly and strode off toward her dorm room. Draco made a move to go after her, but Rigel held his arm. "She'll be back, she just needs something to do." Sure enough, Pansy returned a minute later carrying a tea tray in her hands, with a tin of her grandmother's biscuits levitating shakily behind her.

As she set about making them all tea, Draco started what Rigel knew was going to be an awkward conversation.

"Who would do something like this?" he stared incredulously at her arm, and Rigel wondered how much worse it must have been to stand and watch helplessly while a friend was hurt. She laid a hand reassuringly on Draco's arm, and his eyes finally moved away from her bandaged leg. "I just don't understand. If it was a Slytherin, okay, one of them might resent you for your family's politics, but we already know it *isn't*, presuming this is the same coward who attacked you in the dungeons before, and besides, there are very

few who's pull something so nasty on a first-year, particularly a Slytherin first-year. It goes against everything this House stands for."

"I doubt it's a Hufflepuff," Pansy said, her voice perfectly poised though her hands shook ever so slightly as she passed out the tea cups, "You saw how pleased they all were with Abbott's actions, and presumably Abbott would have recognized the voice she overheard if it was a Hufflepuff."

"It would have been difficult to set off the fireworks without help from a 'puff, though," Rigel said after taking a sip of the sweet jasmine tea, "I think probably whoever it was had an accomplice in Hufflepuff, but the accomplice likely didn't know how serious the prank was going to be until it was too late. We can't count on them coming forward, since he or she will be too scared of both the instigator's retaliation and his housemates' disapproval."

"That leaves Ravenclaw and Gryffindor," Draco said, "But I think we can rule Ravenclaw out because their table is on the far side of Hufflepuff's in the Great Hall. The only ones who could have used the window when we were looking at the fireworks effectively are the Gryffindors."

"A lot of them didn't look too happy with the prank, either," Pansy pointed out, "It's no wonder the Weasley twins high tailed it out as soon as it was clear that Rigel was okay."

"What?" Draco frowned, "You think the Weasley twins did it? I guess they would be the most likely to have a supply of fireworks on hand."

"I don't know," Pansy shrugged, "But whether they did or didn't, people are going to suspect them. We know there were two people involved, and that at least one is probably a Gryffindor. We also know that there were Zonko brand fireworks used, and that they have a history for pulling pranks that are timing-sensitive, as this one was-oh I still can't believe they slipped something into your drink without anyone noticing, Rigel, I'm so sorry."

Rigel shook her head, "Don't worry about it, they might have floated whatever it was into the cup for all you know, and how could you have noticed that, with all the fireworks? And speaking of, what was that? I've never heard of a Potion that makes beverages into corrosive acid."

"It was a tablet," Draco said, "My father told me about them, because the Ministry's been having a lot of problems with them lately. They started out as a joke, sold-again-at Zonkos. It was supposed to be a gag; you slip the little tablet into your friends' drink, and it turns the drink to solid wood, but without changing the appearance of it, so your friend tries to drink it, the liquid won't come out, everyone laughs. The problem is, these converter tablets turned out to be a lot easier to tamper with than they expected. People were buying the tablets, tweaking the spells slightly, and turning their enemies' beverages to cleaning solution, or to tiny pellets of lead, and since it projects a sensory illusion of whatever was originally in the cup, people would ingest the stuff not knowing it was going to kill them until it was too late."

"Merlin, all this from a joke product?" Pansy shuddered, "Imagine if you had drunk it, Rigel. We'd have never known until it was too late, and I doubt your insides would rinse as well as your outsides did."

Rigel grimaced in agreement. She had never heard of such a tablet, but then, she didn't take much interest in her family's pranking unless it involved her hair falling out, and even then she just brewed up a Hair-Replacement Serum.

"Of course, they pulled the line at Zonkos after only a month on the shelves, and they tried to collect as many of the sold tablets as they could, but I suppose they were bound to miss some," Draco scowled, "But why'd it have to be you, Rigel? I thought you got on with the Gryffindors."

"I do," Rigel shrugged, "Or I thought I did. Maybe someone objects to a snake being so friendly with a few lions."

"Or maybe they resent your family, since before your father the Blacks were always associated with the darker side of Slytherin politics," Pansy suggested delicately.

"What is it with Gryffindors and that whole 'sins of the fathers' thing, anyway?" Draco asked, "I mean, we're all purebloods at this school now, so what does it really matter at this point who tricked who? But no, those stubborn Light-headed little griffins think it's their civic duty to try and undo everything we've worked so hard to accomplish. It's like they *want* to rub elbows with people who can barely hold a wand straight."

Rigel flinched before she could stop herself. That comment stung more than it should have-Draco didn't know she was one of the 'ignorant muggle-tainted' people of whom he spoke, and *she* knew that her spellwork had nothing to do with her blood. Still, it struck a painful chord to hear her friend unknowingly disparaging her and everyone like her. Pansy kicked Draco, dexterously avoiding Rigel's feet in the process, and glared fiercely until he cringed and started backtracking wildly.

"I didn't mean you, of course," he patted her awkwardly on the shoulders, "It wasn't your fault you couldn't hold a wand straight and-

"Draco!" Pansy exclaimed, exasperated at his rudeness.

"-and you do spells as well as anyone now, of course," Draco went on hurriedly, "And you're a proper pureblood, Slytherin and everything, no matter what unfortunate politics your family's wrapped up in. Why, I bet by the time you graduate you'd be easily accepted into the S.O.W. party. My father could get you a high rank, even, if he likes you."

Pansy groaned at their friend's tactlessness, but Rigel shook her head at the other girl, silently telling her not to bother.

"I'm afraid I don't care much for politics, Draco, pureblood or otherwise," Rigel said carefully, but politely, "Your offer is kind, but I fear I won't have much need of it. As for the Gryffindors, everyone is entitled to their own opinion, don't you think?"

"I suppose," the boy shrugged indifferently.

"Think of it this way," Pansy said lightly, "How can the Malfoys be right all the time if they don't let other people be wrong?"

"Very well, they can be wrong, but they certainly aren't entitled to attacking my friends," Draco's face was a mask of determination, "When we find out who did this, they better hope the Headmaster expels them."

"In the mean time, don't go running off with those Gryffindor friends of yours," Pansy said, holding up a staying hand when Rigel would have interrupted her, "I know you don't want to suspect your friends, but at least stay away from their common room. It's just foolish to go there alone when you know one of them probably wishes you harm."

Rigel hesitated. She hated lying to her friends when she didn't have to, but Pansy's face was drawn and worried, and if she could alleviate some of that worry, she would. Even if it meant lying. "Alright," she said softly, "I'll avoid their territory until the person who did this is uncovered." She wouldn't, not if she needed Percy's help with an essay (which she usually did if the essay was Transfiguration), but Pansy was relieved to hear the words, so she dismissed the guilty feeling inside of her and reached instead for another of Pansy's grandmother's biscuits.

Their talk turned to other things, like Quidditch, and the upcoming match that weekend against the Gryffindors. Draco wouldn't be playing, unless something really dreadful happened to Higgs, but he was so excited and proud on his team's behalf that the prospect of watching the whole thing with the other reserve players seemed nearly as wonderful to him as actually getting to play. Pansy was jokingly critiquing the Slytherins' strategy, which she neither cared

about nor understood one whit of, when the common room wall slid open and students from the feast started filing in.

Many of their year-mates came over to offer their sympathies (real or contrived) to Rigel, and even some older students stopped by their couch to assure the first-years that this would not go unanswered. Rigel half-heartedly tried to sway them from getting revenge on the Gryffins, since nothing was proven yet, but the general consensus was that the evidence spoke for itself at this point, and to take it lying down would just be an invitation for more abuse.

As Rigel lay in bed that night, she thought at least she'd be able to write Sirius that she was almost single-handedly responsible for increasing the number of pranks in the school by a factor of ten.

The first week of November was pure chaos. The Slytherins had launched a no-quarter campaign against the Gryffindors, and the Gryffindors, as soon as they realized what was going on, retaliated in kind. Nearly every meal involved a prank of some kind going off, and even Dumbledore, who always seemed so amused when people's hair turned a funny color or a student sang the school song at the top of their lungs, was looking worried and troubled by the third consecutive day of the prank war. It was all the Claws and Puffs could do to stay out of the warring Houses' way, and the only bright side was that the house elves had never been happier cleaning up all the messes that the chaos resulted in. Filch was on a rampage, giving detentions for 'looking suspicious' left and right, and the only places safe from pranks were the common rooms (mostly) and Snape and McGonagall's classrooms. Neither Head of House was at all pleased by the situation, though it was really all they could do to keep order in their own classes.

The situation was not helped by the looming Quidditch season. Anticipation was high the week before the first match, and players from both teams were targeted especially viciously in hopes of winning an edge before Saturday. Draco was relatively safe, being both a first-year and only a reserve player, but someone had left a

huge tarantula in his book bag on Wednesday, and it left a nasty bite on Draco's hand when he reached in for his Charms textbook.

Luckily, Draco wasn't allergic, and a quick trip to the Hospital Wing patched him up good as new, but the incident had them all paying closer attention to their things and the people they let near them.

The tension that had been building all week finally reached a fever pitch on the day of the match.

Pansy had woken them all up early again to help Rigel dress appropriately for both meeting the Malfoys and attending a school Quidditch game. In the end, she was dressed in casually-cut robes of dark grey with emerald green embroidery along the cuffs and a deceptively delicate scarf of the same color green, which was actually quite warm-she'd certainly need it up in the teacher's box. Pansy herself had on equally casual-yet-elegant robes of deep green, with silver trim and a black, cashmere scarf that made her golden blonde hair stand out brilliantly. "Of course, it'll still look common next to the Malfoys' hair, but there's nothing to be done about that," she'd shrugged when Rigel complemented her on it.

Draco ate just as heartily that morning as he had the day of tryouts, and it was all Pansy and Rigel could do to keep him distracted so he didn't work them all into states of agitation with his constant mutterings about the chances of such-and-such play working against so-and-so a player. Instead, Pansy and Rigel asked him questions about his parents and advice for meeting them.

"Well, Father is very proper in mixed company," Draco said slowly, never having thought too hard about his own parents, "So don't be offended if he's quite formal. Mother will probably be a bit friendlier, if only because she'll see you as family, Rigel, and already likes Pansy so well."

Pansy smiled brightly, "I do adore your mother, if you don't mind me saying so. She has the most marvelous tea sets she uses whenever my mother and I visit for the afternoon; I don't think I've ever seen the same set twice."

Draco rolled his eyes at Rigel, who dutifully sent a look that said she quite agreed that tea sets were a silly, girly thing. Pansy kicked both of them with her prim little shoes under the table.

"Whatever you do, don't mention politics or Father's work in the S.O.W.," Draco said suddenly, "He loves Quidditch, though you won't know it by looking at his face during the match, and he hates to have his leisure time interrupted with his work."

"Easy enough," Pansy shrugged, "I'm not eager to converse on such subjects with the Malfoy patriarch-I've no doubt I'd make a fool out of myself, being so out of my depth."

"Everyone is out of their depth when it comes to Father," Draco grinned, "That's what makes him a Malfoy."

Rigel and Pansy laughed. Flint finally stood and signaled his team (Wood following right after and doing the same for his team), and Draco stood, still grinning, and waited patiently for Rigel and Pansy to finish offering luck and well wishes (none of them acknowledging that he wouldn't actually be playing), before heading off after his team.

Pansy carefully smoothed her hands over the shoulders of Rigel's robes and brushed a few of her short curls into place before nodding, smiling, and standing to go. Rigel offered Pansy her arm, a habit she was finding less uncomfortable as she got used to it, and the two of them made their way slowly out toward the pitch.

The teachers' box was large and spacious, with comfort charms on all of the benches and plenty of room between the rows to stretch out one's feet, or else mingle congenially with the other people in the box. Most of the teachers were already present when Pansy and Rigel arrived, including the Headmaster, who turned twinkling eyes their way for a few moments when he saw them (well, mostly Pansy with Rigel being towed along) breeze into the box as if they owned it. Mr. Malfoy was already there, unless there was some other man in the wizarding world who looked as though he'd cloned himself in

Draco, rather than merely fathering him. He and his wife were seated in the second row. Professor Snape sat to the elder Malfoy's left while the seats beside Mrs. Malfoy, the ones farthest from where Rigel and Pansy stood, were empty and likely being saved for them.

Pansy smiled brightly as Mrs. Malfoy turned her head and caught sight of them. The regal, beautifully cool lady stood immediately and beckoned them forward with an outstretched hand. Her husband and Professor Snape looked around to see who had garnered her attention, and the Malfoy patriarch stood as well, followed a moment later by a sardonically amused Snape, who raised his eyebrows at the first-years, but said nothing as they strode forward in what Rigel hoped was a convincingly confident way.

The Malfoys were dressed to match in striking silver robes, and their hair did indeed shine like they held individual lights captive among the strands. Pansy stepped forward first, as was proper since she would be making the introductions.

"Narcissa, how wonderful to see you today," she smiled charmingly up at Draco's mother and dipped a small curtsy, "And looking as lovely as ever, I see."

"Pansy, my dear, I see formal schooling has not robbed you of your natural charm," Mrs. Malfoy inclined her head with a strange sort of regal fondness, "You remember my husband, Lucius?"

"Pleased to see you looking well, Mr. Malfoy," Pansy made a deeper curtsy this time.

"Likewise, Miss Parkinson," Mr. Malfoy said, his voice as elegant as his silver-tipped serpent cane, and, Rigel suspected, just as deadly when called upon. His hair was long and it framed his aristocratic visage perfectly. His jaw-line was just a tad stronger than most pureblooded men, and it gave him an especially powerful aura that Rigel could immediately tell was not contrived in the least. "Your father is well, I trust?"

"Quite well, thank you, sir," Pansy said. She then turned to Snape and dipped a shallow curtsy for him as well, for although it was well-known that Snape was not pureblooded, he was held in high respect by most of the pureblood circles, "Good day, Professor Snape."

"Indeed, Miss Parkinson," Snape nodded shortly, his dark eyes sweeping restlessly around the box even as he spoke.

"And who is your patient escort today, Pansy?" Mrs. Malfoy asked, a friendly smile playing at the edges of her mouth.

Pansy turned slightly to indicate Rigel to the three adults and said, "Mr. Malfoy, Narcissa, may I introduce to you Rigel Black? Rigel is a dear friend to me, and to your son. Rigel, this is Draco's mother, Mrs. Narcissa Malfoy, and his father, Mr. Lucius Malfoy."

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance at last, Mr. Black," Mrs. Malfoy held out a delicate hand, which Rigel bowed over respectfully, though she didn't kiss it in deference to the lady's husband.

"Likewise, fair lady," Rigel said upon raising her head once more, "Though word of your unmatched beauty did often reach mine ears, I fear the tales of your grace and poise were greatly understated, for never in my life have I known elegance until this moment."

Mrs. Malfoy's smile bloomed like the sweetest rose, and she said, "Though before I would not have thought such a feat possible, you are even more charming than your father, Mr. Black."

"Please, call me Rigel, Mrs. Malfoy, for I could not bear to risk being mistaken for my father in the eyes of such a queen," Rigel smiled with her whole face for a brief moment, tilting her head to catch the light of the afternoon sun across her contacts so they shined.

Mrs. Malfoy's laugh was as delicately sweet as the rest of her, "Very well, Rigel, then to you I must be Narcissa."

"As you wish, my lady," Rigel said gravely. She turned to look up at Mr. Malfoy, her face schooled into pleasant engagement once more, "I am honored to be making your acquaintance, Mr. Malfoy."

"The pleasure is mine, Mr. Black," Malfoy inclined his proud head just so as she bowed deeply before him, "Draco has told us much about you."

"I fear that Draco has far too good an opinion of me, so I can only hope our meeting does not pale in comparison to your expectations," Rigel said, allowing warmth to creep into her eyes as she spoke of her friend.

"I am not in the habit of forming inflexible expectations of people, Mr. Black," Malfoy said easily, "Particularly not on the word of my son, who I would be the first to admit is prone to idealization."

Rigel smiled in fond agreement, thinking it was perhaps best if Draco was not present to hear himself discussed with so much amusement by those closest to him.

"It seems as if at least some of the things Draco hinted at are quite true, however," Narcissa commented, and the sparkle in her eye made Rigel realize that the older woman was teasing her gently, "For instance, I will certainly be warning the other mothers in my tea circle to mind their daughters around you, Mr. Black."

Rigel affected a look of acute distress, "But what cruel inference is this? Pansy, my friend, you must put pain to this unfortunate rumor."

Pansy sent her a knowing smile, but played along, sniffing delicately and saying airily, "Alas, I would, if only the trail of broken hearts you leave behind you did not speak so condemningly for itself."

Rigel turned her gaze toward the Potions Master, wondering if she was mad to try and play on his notoriously thin sense of humor, but wanting to include him in the conversation nonetheless. "Professor

Snape, you aren't going to allow them to malign my good name so freely, are you, sir?"

Snape looked down at her consideringly, "I'm afraid your name is blackened beyond repair already," he said with a wry twist to his lips, "However, it is rather difficult to imagine you finding the time for such conquests when one considers the amount of homework I assign you every week."

Mr. Malfoy turned surprised eyes on his friend, perhaps not expecting him to join in the joke so easily, "I never thought I'd see the day when Severus Snape admitted to the inordinate demands he makes of his students."

"And you never shall," Snape rejoined, smirking darkly, "I am, if anything, too easy on most of my students."

Pansy shot Rigel an incredulous look, and Rigel smiled wryly back.

"Mr. Black, however, is not most students," Snape continued, ignoring the surprised and pleased look Rigel was giving him. To think that Professor Snape was subtly backing her in front of the Malfoy patriarch! Perhaps she'd made more of an impression on the dour Potions Master than she thought. "The demands I make of him are entirely warranted, and rather easily met if the incredibly insignificant amount of time he takes to complete my assignments are any indication."

Rigel fought a blush as the elder Malfoys turned appraising eyes on her. She was dancing like a fool on the inside, but now was not the time to show how relieved she was, as it would indicate that before that moment she had been unforgivably insecure about her talents. Instead she tried to look as though the praise were, of course, her due, though she didn't think she completely quelled the proud glint in her eyes.

Just then, Professor Quirrell broke into the conversation abruptly from the row behind them.

"Mr. Malfoy, so good of you to come watch our little game," he said a tad too loud to be genteel. His voice was so oily he might have been trying to ooze his way into their company.

"Ah," Mr. Malfoy turned politely to incline his head toward Quirrell, though the thin little man didn't seem to remember to bow himself, "Professor Quirrell. Good day."

"Yes, indeed, if you like this sort of thing," Quirrell waved a hand at the Quidditch stadium as if gesturing to an especially odious display of frivolity, "I was wondering, Mr. Malfoy, how the progress on that new bill is coming? You know the one--"

"Yes, I do," Mr. Malfoy pressed his lips together thinly and cast swift eyes over to where Dumbledore was chatting away with Professors McGonagall and Sprout, "That particular issue is still in the workings, and probably will not proceed apace for some time, due to certain immovable objects that at present stand in the way."

Quirrell looked quite disappointed, "Hmm, what a shame, I had hoped to see the changes wrought within the year, you know."

"Well, luckily this matter was not contrived for your convenience, Professor Quirrell," Malfoy was clearly impatient at this point, and Rigel thought Quirrell must be especially dense to bring up what was obviously a sensitive subject in mixed company-company including Albus Dumbledore, the leader of the opposition to the S.O.W. party, which had to be involved in whatever they were talking about. "It will move forward when the climate is more appropriate. Now if you will excuse me, I believe the match is starting soon."

Mr. Malfoy turned pointedly away from Quirrell and Rigel caught the look of utter disgust that flickered across his face before he turned back to face them, "My apologies for interrupting our conversation," he said, "It seems I am unable to escape my work even at my own son's Quidditch match."

Narcissa placed a gentle hand on her husband's arm. He immediately clasped it in his and gave her a small smile that likely meant something only she would understand.

"Not at all, Mr. Malfoy," Pansy demurred, "I believe you were correct, in any case, and the match is about to start."

Sure enough, Madam Hooch was striding onto the field as they turned to the pitch.

Rigel pressed Pansy's hand into her elbow once more, though she was only escorting her another few feet to their seats, and said, "I very much enjoyed our meeting, Narcissa, Mr. Malfoy."

"I am certain it will not be our last, Rigel," Narcissa said, moving aside with her husband to allow Rigel and Pansy access to their seats.

"I hope you enjoy the game, Professor Snape," Rigel said as she maneuvered Pansy around the Malfoys, trying to convey in her warm expression just how grateful for his tacit support she was.

"I will enjoy watching Slytherin win," Snape said confidently. Rigel noticed McGonagall throwing her college an unsportsmanlike look behind his back.

They settled in to watch the game, which was being commentated by Lee Jordan, of all people, and it soon became apparent that in terms of the short-term game, the scales were tipped decidedly in Gryffindor's favor. The Slytherin team had practiced hard, it was true, and it showed in how smoothly coordinated their chasers and beaters were, but no matter how finely they maneuvered through their plays, the Gryffindor chasers were simply better. They flew as if they had telepathic connections to one another, with the kind of teamwork that wasn't found in rehearsed drills, but rather in the perfect synchronization of movement, which allowed for improvisation and split-second adaptations in maneuvers that the Slytherin team just couldn't compare to.

The Weasley twins were like whirlwinds and seemed to be able to anticipate the bludgers' movements, for whenever a bludger veered off somewhere, one of the twins was there to steer it somewhere else. The Slytherin beaters were focused mainly on defending their players, not even bother to try offense with the Weasleys monopolizing the bludgers the way they were.

But although Gryffindor racked up a seventy-point lead in the next forty-five minutes, it was the Slytherin seeker that spotted the snitch first, and it was clear to everyone when the Gryffindor seeker tried belatedly to follow that he was no match for Higgs. Rigel happened to glance over at the Malfoys as the seekers went into steep dives after the little golden ball, and she noticed with surprise that Mr. Malfoy's face was rapt with attention as he fixed his cool grey eyes on the fast-moving players. It was the same, intensely focused look Draco affected when he was really excited about something but knew better than to show it. The engrossed look on his face faded a few moments after Higgs caught the snitch, but it made Rigel feels better about the aloof aristocrat now that she knew he could be passionate about something as benign as a school Quidditch game.

After the game, Rigel and Pansy politely thanked their hosts once more, and said goodbye to the Malfoys and Professor Snape.

"Give my regards to your father, Mr. Black," Narcissa said, her face betraying no discomfort in acknowledging her estranged cousin.

"I will, my lady, though it will be cruel of me to make him so jealous of my good fortune in meeting you," Rigel said, pulling out one last smile for her friend's parents.

Narcissa laughed delightedly as they left, and Rigel couldn't help but smile a bit proudly at how well she'd done in playing Archie. She was charming and proper, which was all anyone could really ask of a pureblood at their age. Rigel and Pansy spent the rest of the day with Draco, who was flushed with exaltation at Slytherin's victory and eager to regale them both with each and every play that he deemed interesting enough to dissect.

It wasn't until much later that Rigel would look back on that day and wish she had paid more attention to what a certain Malfoy had been saying... but then, that day was a long way off, and for now it was enough for the three first-years to share in their House's victory and celebrate as only the very young and very innocent are want to.

[end of chapter fourteen].

A/N: * All this information on wand woods and cores is taken from the HP Wiki page, so I'm afraid I can't take credit for making it up (including the tidbit that holly wands are known to act without their owner's consent at times-though of course I've expanded on this idea), and the quotes from HPSS belong to JKR, of course.

A/N2: Thank you all so, so much for reading (and reviewing, I can't believe I received eleven on the last chapter alone!). Only 10,700 words this time, but I hope I made it interesting enough to hold you over for another week. Until next time, my friends.

Chapter 15

A/N: Okay guys, hold on to your hats for this one ^^ . I've had concerns about pacing, and I completely agree, it's just that so much had to happen in the first month to set everything up. It *is* moving faster, but also still detailed, I hope. A lot happens in this chapter, spanning November and part of December. Resolution to a pesky problem (I wonder if anyone will guess?), and a couples of surprises as well (I hope). There's a POV switch in the middle, so don't get confused. As always, I don't own any of JKR or TP's stuff, and thanks for reading! Enjoy. P.S. I think I overused the parentheses in this one... ah, well.

A/N2: I can't believe how many people I want to thank for their reviews on the last chapter. I try to respond to most reviews personally, but I still want to mention you guys right now because it really means a lot to me (and I know everybody says that, but it can't be said enough in my opinion), so great thanks to: TamariChan, Vaughn Tyler, hentai18ancilla, TearfullPixie, Debate4Life, BaltaineShadow, Cathy Willow, AwakeZ, Kenzieloveify, AlainnRain, and Gemstones. I tried to respond to everyone in a PM, but if I missed you, let me know!

A/N3: Oh man, I feel so bad-I was halfway through answering reviews when the server jammed again, so even though I got people excited for the next chapter I didn't get a chance to post it. And then it wouldn't post, but I gifured out I had to re-affirm the terms and conditions on the site so... I fixed it, but again sorry, and so not intentional!

The Pureblood Pretense:

Chapter 15:

It was a good thing her academic load was lighter in November, Rigel reflected, because with the way her Housemates (and even

Neville and Ron) had been stalking her all month, it was becoming increasingly difficult to sneak off to the Library. Once she was actually in the Library, ensconced behind her alternate Pince-proof personas, Rigel could work in peace, but so determined were her friends and fellow snakes to keep her from being jumped on their watch (yes, Pansy had made up a watch schedule) that Rigel was hard-pressed to use the bathroom alone, much less run off to complete secret assignments in disguise.

Her marks had been steadily improving with the use of a (mostly) working wand, so without the extra credit assignments (she'd sent an owl to Flint begging him to stop accepting extra work until her friends stopped following her), Rigel was actually managing okay—at least with her written work. Her practical work was still hit-and-miss, and honestly Rigel came to prefer the 'misses' because she was less likely to get points off for failing to do a spell than she was for accidentally liquefying Quirrell's turban and revealing his awful comb-over to the whole class. Rigel stubbornly considered this an accident, because even though she might have *wanted* it to happen, and possibly she even secretly *wished* it would happen, she didn't actually will it to happen, so surely it couldn't be her fault, could it?

Quidditch season was in full swing, with Hufflepuff losing to Ravenclaw and then turning around and beating Gryffindor when Alicia Spinet was hit with a Boneless Hex the morning of the match. Pranks were at an all time high, and students on both sides of the war were becoming increasingly paranoid, particularly during meal times. By late November it was not unusual for Pansy, Draco, and Rigel to automatically scan their seats for potions spilled on them, duck down to examine the underside of the table, and pour themselves drinks from sealed pitchers (which the elves had begun providing the tetchy students with after Halloween), all before they sat down to breakfast.

"I'm not sure I can take much more of this," Pansy admitted on the last Wednesday of November after she discovered that someone had sawed halfway through the bench on her side, so that it would

collapse once enough students sat down on it. She simply sighed and moved to sit between Rigel and Draco, catching Professor Snape's eye and making sure he saw the hazard as she did so.

"It is becoming rather tedious," Draco said, "After all, what's the point of a prank that isn't a surprise?"

"Not to mention the students in this school appear to be a rather uncreative lot-that's the third dormouse I've found in my teacup this week," Rigel commented.

Draco made a face, "Don't let the Weasley twins hear you say that-they'll take it as a challenge."

"Speaking of," Pansy glanced over her shoulder at the Gryffindor table, "I honestly expected a lot more out of those two, considering their reputation."

Nott, who had just joined the table on Draco's other side, chimed in, "Oh, the Weasley twins haven't been participating."

"What?" Draco raised an eyebrow, "They've been trying to start a prank war for years, haven't they?"

"Well, if they are participating, it's to prank the *Gryffindors*," Nott said cheerfully, "Word is they're on Rigel's side, which makes them on the Slytherins' side, if you can believe it."

"It seems you inspire loyalty in all your friends, Rigel," Pansy said amusedly.

Rigel just shrugged. She really didn't know what to think about the Weasley twins. She hadn't seen them since before Halloween, and since then they'd been almost suspiciously inconspicuous. She'd been to the Gryffindor common room on several weekend days, when she could sneak away to get help from Percy on Transfiguration essays, but they hadn't shown their faces even once. Every now and then one of them would catch her eye at meals or in

the hallways, but whoever had seen her would always look away quickly or drag the other twin in a different direction. It wasn't like they owed her anything, she reminded herself when she thought about their strange behavior, but in truth she'd grown a bit fond of them.

The screeching of owls broke her from her contemplation, and Rigel automatically began clearing a space on the table as the post came soaring in-Pansy or Draco often received packages from home, and it was better safe than splashed with porridge as Rigel had unfortunately discovered the day an owl landed like a high-diver in her breakfast bowl.

Unfortunately, the space wasn't big enough for the two Eagle owls that both tried to land there at once. In the end, it was Draco's owl, Archimedes, that won the spot, and the owl offered its leg victoriously (and rather smugly Rigel thought) to the Malfoy heir while the second Eagle owl dropped its letter sullenly into Rigel's lap and took off to nurse its pride in the Owlrey.

Rigel turned the letter over in her hands, noting that it hadn't been delivered by the speckled owl Rosier and Rookwood had used. She thought the handwriting looked like Archie's, so she stowed it trepidatiously in her pocket for later.

Malfoy glanced over from his letter to say, "Mother sends her regards, Rigel."

"Would you be so kind as to send mine in return with your next letter?" Rigel asked.

"Certainly."

"You know, we've all met Draco's parents now, but Rigel, you haven't met mine yet," Pansy said thoughtfully, "It's too bad your father won't allow you to socialize with our Families outside of school, Rigel, or you two could come and stay with my parents for a few days over Christmas. They'd love to meet you, I'm sure."

"Perhaps we could arrange something at Kings Cross," Draco suggested, "The train station could *almost* be considered part of the neutral, school strata. What do you think, Rigel? Would your parents go for it?"

"Uh," Rigel's brain stalled painfully. How on earth was she supposed to field this? "Well," she said slowly, "I would certainly like to meet your parents, Pansy, however perhaps I should meet them first without my dad or uncles there to cast their social shadow, so to speak."

"Ah," Pansy was nodding with deep understanding, "I see, yes, it might be best for you to be introduced on your own first, then. In fact, that would be even easier. You can meet my parents before your family gets to the station-just send them a letter that tells them to meet you half an hour later than the train arrives."

"Good idea," Rigel said, "I'll do that."

It was just after DADA, when she'd slipped her bodyguards and hidden in a shaded alcove behind a suit of armor, that she got a chance to read the letter. It was indeed from Archie, and Rigel smiled as she read.

Harry,

Sorry if I freaked you out with the Eagle owl-it's not an emergency, I just couldn't figure out how to put all this in code, so I'm not going to bother. From now on, Eagle owl means un-coded, and if it's real urgent I'll write your name in red ink on the envelope, ok?

I got a letter from your dad. Uncle James said that Sirius received a notice from the school nurse saying you'd been injured somehow. James said you wrote Sirius explaining about it, and they both seem to think you're involved in some kind of prank war based on House rivalries and things. Quick thinking in keeping Sirius from going up to Hogwarts and investigating, but you haven't fooled me. Since I know you're really you, not me, I know you'd never get involved in a war

with pranks that could really hurt someone, if you even got involved at all. So how did you really get injured? I know the Mediwitch probably fixed you up (and I bet you panicked, thinking she was gonna find out your secret, because I know how paranoid you can be), but I'm still worried. It's not like you to make enemies. Are you in trouble? Do you need some kind of help? I know I'm pretty far away, but you can count on me for anything, you know that.

Speaking of, don't worry about the PJ Potion. I've got a plan to get my hands on some well before Christmas break. Expect a package in a couple of weeks, and for Merlin's sake don't open it at the table, ok?

Now that the serious (I kind of miss that joke, you know?) stuff is out of the way, how've you been? My studies are so interesting, Harry, and I can already heal bruises, minor cuts, and we're working our way up to broken bones in December. America is great! Well, I mean, not that I've seen anything but the AIM campus, but all the kids in my tract are really cool. You've really got to meet Hermione- she's as brilliant as you are, I think, and not as stiff-backed as I thought. She's instrumental in my daring plan to get the PJ Potion, so don't worry, because with her on board nothing could possibly go wrong.

And with those ominous last words, I leave you.

-Archie

Rigel read the letter twice more, then ripped it into tiny pieces, vowing to dispose of them in various trashcans around the school. Rigel realized belatedly that she'd have to start studying Healing theory in the Library as well-it would be suspicious if Harry, who was supposedly in the Healing program, came home without an ounce of Healing knowledge. She was relieved that she didn't have to worry about trying to make Polyjuice in the next month, but if Archie got caught it would mean a lot of awkward questions... Rigel shrugged off her worries. Nothing she could do but hope that Hermione girl was as clever as Archie said. Her cousin needed some sanity in his

life, and after a few months at Hogwarts, Rigel wasn't sure she qualified anymore.

Since she was already 'loose' she figured she might as well slip up to Gryffindor Tower and ask Percy about Selective Vanishment Spells. Pansy and Draco would have her hide either way, so Rigel tried to at least get something productive out of it. As usual, Percy and Rigel got carried away with their academic discussion, and Percy needed help on a Potions assignment, and so it was an hour after dinner when she finally clambered out of the Fat Lady's portrait hole.

She headed straight for the hidden stairway that would take her down to the fourth floor. Rigel wasn't looking for trouble, no matter that it always seemed to find her, and she honestly thought she had the best chance at passing through Gryffindor territory unseen if she used passages fewer people were likely to know about. In retrospect, perhaps it would have been smarter to chance being caught in the open than to ensure that if by some chance she was caught, it would be in a seclude area with poor lighting and no one around to yell for help.

Rigel had barely twitched the edge of the tapestry of young girls picking flowers that concealed the entrance on the seventh floor, when she was grabbed by the shoulders and dragged brusquely through the entrance, then casually passed off to another pair of waiting arms. She was too disoriented to struggle immediately, and when her eyes adjusted to the Lumos Charm her captors hastily cast she sighed in relief.

"Is there a reason you've resorted to kidnapping to get my attention?" Rigel asked dryly, "Unless I'm mistaken, *you two* have been avoiding *me* ."

Fred Weasley grinned infectiously in the dim light, "We're doing an experiment to see how people under stress respond to sudden, perceived violence. We knew you'd be coming back this way from your afternoon with Percy and thought you could be our first subject."

Rigel rolled her eyes, "Put me down for annoyed exasperation."

"Aww, you know you're glad to see us," Fred said.

"For the first time in nearly a month," Rigel allowed a bit of hurt to creep into her tone.

"We're sorry, little snake," George's voice was right above her ear and she realized with a start that she'd been standing within the loose circle of George's arms since Fred, who had apparently grabbed her, had passed her off to him. She turned, using the movement to dislodge the redhead's hands from her upper arms, and looked between them expectantly. George explained, "We have been avoiding you, but it was necessary. After Halloween..." he grimaced, "Those fireworks used for the distraction? They were ours."

Rigel blinked, not expecting that.

"We recognized them immediately, since some of them were bought a while ago, and would be pretty hard to get a hold of these days," Fred put in seriously, "But we couldn't figure out how someone else had gotten a hold of them. We keep all our Zonkos products well hidden."

"Obviously it was a Gryffindor, or at least someone with regular access to Gryffindor Tower," George said, "And as we started to narrow it down we realized that there was a possibility that we were the reason behind some of the perpetrator's animosity toward you."

"We suspected, of course, but we had no *proof*," Fred ran a hand through his hair, outwardly frustrated, "But we were pretty sure that if we stayed with our suspect you'd be safe-"

"Provided we weren't wrong about who it was-"

"And all the signs pointed to them-"

"The Zonkos products-"

"Especially the tablets-"

"And targeting you in particular, considering your family-"

"So as long as we kept away from you until we had solid proof, like a confession, we thought it would be okay," Fred finished. He then exchanged a dark look with his twin.

"But it isn't working," George said, "We're no closer to getting proof. That's why we thought we'd warn you in the meantime, so you don't get caught alone with-"

A sharp "*Meow!*" broke through George's hurried speech. The three of them froze under the lamp-like eyes of Mrs. Norris, who had just appeared at the top of the stairs.

"Oh, no," George groaned, reaching out to pull Rigel down toward the other end of the stairwell, "Come on, we've got to go."

"It's not curfew yet," Rigel pointed out.

"We're supposed to be in detention with Filch," Fred informed her, not sounding terribly concerned or contrite, "But it was the only time we could talk to you without him being suspicious of where we were-"

"Forge, move faster," George hissed, glancing behind them at Mrs. Norris, who was following them down the stairs and *meow*-ing even louder.

"I'm trying," Fred said apologetically, "But puppy's bag is really heavy-it's like he's got *books* in here or something."

Rigel grabbed her bag from Fred's hands swiftly, thinking he must have taken it from her when he yanked her into the passageway, "You guys run, it's not me that'll get in trouble."

The redheads hesitated for a split-second, clearly reluctant to leave her alone.

"Go," she shoved them forward, out into the fourth floor corridor, "I'll distract the cat."

"Thanks, pup," George called over his shoulder and he and Fred took off running. It wasn't until she was trying to coax Mrs. Norris into an empty classroom that she realized they still hadn't told her exactly who she was meant to be avoiding.

Rigel was hungry, but she knew she'd get it from her 'guardians' if she stopped by the kitchens before checking in, so she headed straight to the dungeons after making sure the twins had gotten a sufficient head start on Mrs. Norris.

She was halfway to the common room when she heard a rustle of cloth on stone from behind her. She whirled, ducking on instinct, but the spell shot at her from the deep shadows of an alcove she hadn't thought to check was aimed at her feet, and she fell hard as ropes exploded from the point of impact and wrapped themselves around her from knees to shoulders. She landed on her side, her arms secured straight against her body down to her wrists, and gasped as the breath was knocked out of her from the impact on unforgiving stone.

Rigel was twisting on the ground like a helpless worm, trying to at least face the caster so she'd know what was coming, when she heard her attacker's voice for the first time and froze in disbelieving recognition.

"You know, I'm almost disappointed," he said conversationally. She heard soft footsteps and stopped squirming. Apparently her tormentor had gotten tired of his game. "I would have thought the son of infamous Marauder Sirius Black would be a little more on his guard."

He stepped around her prone form so that she could look up awkwardly into his dark face.

"Jordan," she said, her tone evidencing her confusion.

"I'm sure I told you to call me 'Lee,'" the boy said mockingly. He tossed a dreadlock over his shoulder and she noticed he was wearing dragon hide gloves on his hands. She thought it strange, but pulled her mind to more immediate things as he squatted down in front of her and peered intently at her pale face, "But you Slytherins will do as you please, I suppose."

"Is that what this is about?" she asked. It came out more wheezing than she had intended, but the ropes were constricting her breathing somewhat, "My House?"

Lee smiled without humor, and though the familiar white teeth flashed in the semi-darkness of the flickering torches, she could see no evidence of the cheerful third-year prankster in his large brown eyes.

"Don't be tiresome, Black, even if you hadn't stolen the twins' attention from me, you must know what your family has stolen from mine," he spat vindictively onto the ground in front of her and Rigel wracked her brains for some clue.

Seeing her blank look, the older boy became, if anything, more enraged. He stood angrily and paced back and forth in front of her, "No, of course you don't know, you wouldn't care, would you? No skin off your back if my mother and sister have to live in squalor because your father and his little friends put my dad out of a job."

Rigel pressed her lips together exasperatedly. The position she was bound in was uncomfortable and she really wished Lee would get to the point, enact whatever petty revenge he seemed to think himself entitled to, and let her go on her way.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Jordan," she tried explaining, "I don't even know what your dad does, much less how my dad could have pushed him out of it-Sirius doesn't even work, for Merlin's sake."

"Exactly!" Lee paused in his pacing to round on her, his eyes cutting like razors in their scorn and righteous anger, "Your father's filthy rich off his twisted family's money, but is it enough? Oh, no, he has to take business from people who need it with his stupid little joke line-"

"That's what this is about?" Rigel said incredulously. Exasperated annoyance was probably only going to further anger the Gryffindor, but she couldn't help afford to let it segue into deeper, darker emotions that would undermine her control, "The Marauders' joke line at Zonkos? Look, whatever you've got against it, I have nothing to do with stuff like that. I don't really even enjoy pranks."

"Oh, I know," Lee sneered down at her, "Everyone knows you don't care about anything but your little Potions, but I see right through your ploy. You may have the other competitors fooled, but I know how many prank products are Potion-based. But *I'm* going to be the next greatest joke inventor. *I'm* going to salvage my family's fortune and my father's reputation, and I don't need the next-generation Marauder spawn getting in my way."

"But I won't be," Rigel said again, "I'm not going into prank development, Jordan. So just let me go, and we'll pretend this whole thing never happened."

"Maybe you're telling the truth," Lee said, his face once again calmly poised, "But the only way to know that you *won't* be in my way is to ensure that you *can't* be."

He reached slowly into his robes, as if savoring the moment, but as he pulled out a small, dragon hide bag that was squirming violently in his hand she realized he was just being very, very careful around something that was obviously very dangerous. Rigel eyed the wriggling bag apprehensively, her mind running through the list of

things that small that could really hurt a wizard. The bag was about half the size of Lee's fist, so it might hold a very small scorpion, but any snake that could fit in there would be too young to have developed fangs or poison of any potency. Judging by the erratic nature of the movements, it was something with more joints than a mammal, so probably not a mouse, and she had finally concluded that it must be some kind of insect when Lee laughed softly and began to open the lip of the bag slowly.

He dipped a finger, protected by the gloves he was wearing, into the bag and when he removed it a small, many-legged thing like a cross between a spider and a crab clung to the finger with barbed forelegs. It had a hard shell on its top, and a row of unnatural looking teeth on the underside of its belly, which Lee took great care to show off before her uneasy gaze.

"Isn't it beautiful?" Lee crooned and trailed a finger soothingly down the tiny insect's back, "A combination of painstaking genetic crosses and magical enhancement, this little guy is my father's greatest invention yet. Greater even than those tablets your little friends seemed to take such exception to."

"Bit dark for a joke-inventor, isn't it?" Rigel said, an awful feeling building in the pit of her stomach.

"Yes, that's what Zonko said," Lee curled his lip, "But what does that old fool know? This little beauty is the perfect prank. You see, after her venom does its work, it dissipates, leaving behind only trace particles, which make their way swiftly to the victim's brain and erase all the memories connected with my pretty's existence. So it can never be traced back to the prankster, and even the victim won't remember how they came to be in the state they are."

"And what state is that?" Rigel was struggling against the robes again, but they were too tight for any amount of movement to loosen them.

Lee watched her squirm for a bit before saying, "Oh, don't worry, Black. I'm going to let my pet bite your hands, but I promise it won't hurt a bit. In fact," he laughed coldly, "I promise you won't be feeling anything in those hands ever again."

Rigel froze, her mind rebelling at the implication behind the other boy's words. Permanent loss of sensation. What kind of a joke was that? Without sensation there could be no reliable motor control. Without reliable control, there could be no brewing. She'd lose everything. Her Potions-her Mastery- *her Potions*. *No!* She bucked wildly against her restraints and started screaming as loud as she could.

"HELP! Help, somebody, anybody, *please* !"

Her voice was muffled abruptly by the feeling of dragon hide pressed tightly across her mouth. Lee had darted forward and covered her screams with his spare hand. He was close enough now that she could feel his uneven breathing and the thought that he was excited by her horror made the thick wave of anger and denial swell up inside her so that she was nearly drowning in it. Lee pinned her legs beneath his knees and his other hand, with its ugly, malformed passenger perched menacingly atop it, moved steadily toward her left hand, which was balled helplessly in a fist, unable to move more than a centimeter or two away from the paralysis-inducing fangs.

"Maybe over the break I'll stop by and see how my dear friend Rigel is doing after his inexplicable accident," Lee whispered gleefully into her ear, "I do need to take care of your cousin, the Potter brat, too, after all."

Perhaps it was the threat against Archie that did it. Or maybe it was the vile little insect reaching out a leg to touch the sensitive skin on the back of her hand-sensation that she would never feel again if she did not do something. And she *had* to do something; she knew then that this was real, it was happening, and nothing was going to come along and stop it in the nick of time. A tear squeezed its way around her ugly grey contacts and blazed a trail silently down her cheek.

She let her emotions swallow her.

Her first rational thought as the thrill of power rushed through her was that it felt as though a light had gone on in her soul, and all the ugly, shameful things that had been hiding there like cockroaches began fleeing the premises at once. An oily, thick energy boiled through her veins, like the stagnant slime of water that had sat too long in one place. As it coursed out of her like liquid heat, something felt disturbingly *right* about it, as though the water had just realized that it used to be a mighty river, before the dam was built, and was reveling in its freedom once again. The feeling was heady, drug-like, and it was a good thing she was already on the ground for all her muscles relaxed weakly in the wake of her magic as it stretched, coiled, and struck.

The revolting insectoid that was poised a breath above her precious hand combusted into harmless ash, and Lee was thrown bodily across the corridor by a wave of uncontrolled magic to smack into the stone wall with an all-too satisfying crunch. Rigel gasped in air that her lungs had been screaming for around the dragon hide glove, and a fierce pain in her side made her realize that the phoenix wand she had shoved negligently into her pocket before breakfast that morning was burning a hole through the fabric.

Lee struggled brokenly to his feet, but her magic swept forward again and sent him careening into the wall on the other side of the corridor. A sharp snapping noise told her overwhelmed mind that his left wrist had been broken, either from the impact or from her magic's deep-seated need to revenge itself for the hurts he'd caused. And still it was not enough. Her rage, fuelled by the helplessness she'd felt and the threats against her family, her health, her greatest dreams and ambitions, would not be assuaged. It beat against her chest and swelled in her throat like a battle cry, but the part of her that wasn't anger and hate and frustration (and admittedly it was a small part), but the part of her that had spent years curbing her emotive impulses was whispering frantically in a voice that sounded

an awful lot like reason. *Don't kill him, can't kill him, be expelled, be feared and hated, don't, no more, no more* .

She tried to cast around for something to direct her magic toward. She took a deep, shuddering breath-or tried to, and when she figured out why she couldn't she set her restless magic to loosening the ropes that bound her before it could lash out at the unconscious Gryffindor any further. As the ropes fell away from her she channeled the leftover energy, still pouring from her magical core to her wand to the air around her, to unraveling the ropes strand by strand. She hoped that would give it enough time to settle down.

Rigel was just moving her stiff joints into a seated position when she heard footsteps running down the corridor toward her. She looked up to see Blaise Zabini sprinting in a most undignified way from the direction of the Slytherin common room. He was closely followed by Draco and Pansy, who themselves were followed (though more distantly) by Pucey, Rookwood, Rosier, and Bole, of all people. It was obvious that the upperclassmen had left the panicked running to the youngest three.

The three first years skidded to a stop as they reached the scene, gasping for breath. Rigel raised her eyebrows in what she hoped was a vaguely unconcerned way, but knew her weary body language would be a dead give away to her upset state. Pansy threw herself into Rigel's arms when she saw that she wasn't bleeding anywhere, muttering about crazy Black's who scare the living doxies out of their best friends, and Rigel patted her back awkwardly, inwardly amazed and grateful for the feeling of plain Hogwarts robes beneath her fingers. She was starting to come out of her dazed shock and realize that she really was okay, and her life wasn't ruined.

Draco took several deep breaths and swallowed hard at the sight of his friend's obvious distress, but he didn't dissolve into tears as Pansy was now doing (though she muffled them discreetly against Rigel's shoulder). Instead the young blonde aristocrat drew himself to his full height and turned his attention to the crumpled form of Lee

Jordan, apparently content to channel his concern into a disgusted glare at the unmoving boy.

Zabini was the first to speak up clearly, once he's regained his breath. He leveled deep eyes at Rigel and said, in a deceptively casual tone of voice that belied his obvious lack of detachment, "Heard you scream as I was coming from the common room, Black. Didn't want to try handling it alone like some brash Gryff, though, so I doubled back to pick up some reinforcements."

"Though it seems we were unneeded," Rosier said, signaling the arrival of the four older Slytherins as he slipped over to peer at the unconscious third-year, "Hmm, Lee Jordan, isn't it? How interesting."

"The Weasley twins' friend?" Bole swore softly, "They in on this too, then?"

"No," Rigel said, her voice somewhat hoarse from the brief but intense screaming she'd done, "They tried to warn me about him, I think. They just didn't get a chance to explain before he caught me alone."

Draco sent Rigel a dark look that clearly said they'd be having words about that later, but he held his tongue for the moment, merely saying, "The Jordans don't have a feud with the Blacks."

"As far as the Blacks know, anyway," Zabini said cryptically, "Did he explain why he was attacking you before you... actually, I don't know what you did to him."

They all turned to look at Lee, who was bleeding sluggishly from a cut on his temple, his wrist bent at an unnatural angle.

Rigel shrugged as best she could around an armful of Pansy, "Something about my dad's joke line. He wasn't making much sense."

Zabini's eyes held the light of understanding. When it was clear that everyone else was in the dark, he explained, "Jordan's dad works for Mr. Zonko as an inventor. He was quite successful for a number of years, having a bit of a monopoly on the market, but when the Marauders came out with their famous line, it was wildly more successful. Mr. Jordan continued to make prank and joke products, but he couldn't keep up with the Marauder Line's popularity and appeal. His jokes became significantly crueler and less light-hearted as he struggled to out-do his competitors and regain popularity, to the point that after the transfiguring-tablet fiasco, Zonko stopped stocking Jordan's inventions altogether."

"Jordan's father invented those awful tablets?" Pansy sniffed delicately and dabbed at her eyes with Rigel's robe sleeve before turning to face the other Slytherins, "That explains why he had access to them."

"Yes," Zabini said, "Although why he used Zonko's fireworks considering how much he must hate the man..."

"He stole them from the Weasley twins," Rigel said, "That's how they started suspecting him, I guess."

"How on earth do you know all this, Zabini?" Pucey asked incredulously.

"My family has several shares in Zonko Enterprises, so naturally it is vital that we have information about the company's suppliers," Zabini shrugged nonchalantly.

Rigel was deep in thought, piecing Zabini's revelations together with Lee Jordan's heated words. She supposed she could see how he would be angry, thinking that the Marauders, especially Sirius and James who were both rich off family money, were so much more successful in a business that Jordan's father needed to be successful in to make a living.

What she could have told him, though, was that the money made from the Marauder's Line didn't go to the Black and Potter family vaults. In fact, it all went to Remus Lupin, who couldn't hold a paying job due to Ministry regulations against werewolves. Rigel had overheard her father talking about it to her mother once, and he'd said that Remus thought he was getting an equal third of the profits, rather than all of it, because they knew he'd never take money from his friends, but he sorely needed it to be able to afford Wolfsbane Potion, among other things.

That, coupled with the fact that it wasn't her family's fault that Jordan's dad thought modifying someone's memory to be a good joke, stopped Rigel from feeling any sympathy toward the boy who had anonymously tormented her for the last few months. Pity, yes, but not compassion. Not after he'd tried to destroy the hands she needed to make *her* livelihood.

"Well, whatever his reasons, it's done now," Pucey said. He prodded Lee's ribs with a booted toe. There was no response.

"You didn't kill him, did you?" Rosier cocked his head to consider her like she was the finest entertainment, "Because we'll have to cover it up before a teacher stumbles along."

Rookwood scanned the Gryffindor with professional eyes, "Not dead. Probably passed out from the pain and shock when his wrist was broken. Unlikely to die of blood loss from that cut on his forehead."

"Oh, good, no rush then," Rosier smiled, his golden eyes glinting with satisfaction as he gazed down at Lee.

"Someone should get Professor Snape," Draco said suddenly. He crossed the corridor to sit on the ground next to Rigel and Pansy and the others traded looks among themselves.

Finally, Bole nodded evenly, "I'll go back to the common room and alert Salazar's picture, if someone else hasn't done it already." He left at a brisk trot.

Rookwood came over to take a look at Rigel and make sure she wasn't damaged in any way, and Pansy moved to sit next to Rigel, rather than on top of her. When she was pronounced healthy but magically exhausted, Rigel remembered the ropes that she had set her magic to dismantling. Where the tangle of ropes used to be was a pile of what looked like wheat. Rigel rolled her eyes inwardly when it dawned on her that her magic had not only un-spun the robe fiber by fiber but had in fact reverse-transfigured it into the original hemp stalks. She thought she felt a gentle tugging from within her, like the smug nudge of an errant dragon as it humors its captor by returning to its cage and going back to sleep as if it had never escaped and run amok in the first place.

A few minutes later, Snape, with McGonagall on his heels, walked briskly onto the scene from the end of the corridor that led up to the Entrance Hall. McGonagall gasped as she took in the seven Slytherins standing or sitting in various positions of repose and the single, unconscious Gryffindor that lay vulnerable on the cold, stone floor. Rigel immediately knew that she was going to jump to an unflattering conclusion, and judging by the rueful knowledge in the upperclassmen's eyes, they hadn't counted on McGonagall being with Snape.

"What is the meaning of this?" she asked in a shocked and highly affronted tone of voice, like a cat with its back up, "We received a message that Rigel Black had been attacked, but all I see is-"

"I received a message that one of my students was attacked," Snape cut across her firmly, "I just so happened to be in your office discussing final exam schedules at the time, Minerva, but think for a moment before you say anything unfortunate-if the situation were as simple as it appears, why would the Slytherins purposely bring it to their professor's attention?"

McGonagall flushed and cleared her throat brusquely, "Yes, well, Severus why don't you handle the questioning in this case? I'm sure there's a reasonable explanation."

"Thank you, Minerva," Snape nodded politely, if a bit sardonically, to the Head of Gryffindor before turning his sharp eyes on the rest of them. He spotted Rigel beside Pansy's sophisticated haircut and said, "Mr. Black, as you are the purported victim in this incident, you will enlighten us of the circumstances that led up to this unfortunate scene-that is, as long as Mr. Jordan is not in need of immediate medical attention?"

Rookwood cleared his throat, "Jordan is not in medical danger, just unconscious. It's kinder to keep him that way, until his wrist can be looked at."

"Very well, Mr. Black, if you would?"

It wasn't really a question, so Rigel cleared her throat, which was still a bit hoarse, and said, "The circumstances of tonight only, sir, or the events that led up to them as well?"

"If the incident on Halloween is somehow included in this narrative, I think you'd best start at the beginning," Snape said shrewdly.

Rigel grimaced, but she nodded her acquiescence. As she tried to frame the explanation in her mind, knowing that anything she left out would only be discovered later when Jordan was questioned by school or Ministry officials (depending on how much fuss was made over the incident), Pucey conjured her a glass of water, which she sipped on gratefully as she began. She decided to keep it as honest as she could without revealing her secrets, so that she wouldn't be accused of lying later on if something Jordan said contradicted her.

"I think it started the first Friday of school," she said slowly, "That was the day I met the Weasley twins, and also the day I met Lee Jordan. I think he was trying to warn me off his friends, the twins, even then, but he was interrupted before his intent was clear."

"Was Mr. Jordan jealous of your friendship with Messrs. Weasley?" Snape asked, his voice clinical and detached, which helped a bit.

"I'm not sure," Rigel admitted, "Looking back I think he just hated me, and saw Fred and George's interest in me, because I'm the son of one of their heroes, as a sign that I was like my father, who he already hated. I didn't see Lee again until much later, but the attacks started the very next day."

"Attacks?" Draco burst out, "How long has this been happening, Rigel? Merlin, don't you know when to ask for help? I thought we were your friends, I thought-"

"Mr. Malfoy," Snape said repressively, "Please save your questions until after we get to the bottom of this."

Draco subsided, but the wounded look he sent her made Rigel's next words come out more softly than before. In the silent dungeon, however, no one had a problem hearing them.

"I was on the East stairway on the fifth floor, the one that by-passes the fourth floor, you know? I got about halfway down it when I was hit with a Trip-Jinx. I fell the rest of the way and passed out, so I didn't see who it was until they were long gone," Rigel explained.

"Why did you pass out?" Pucey asked, raising his hands apologetically when Snape sent him a look.

"I... my wrist got tangled in the strap of my bag in the fall. It broke when the strap pulled taut, and I think I passed out from the pain," she admitted. Most of the others were staring at her now, bar Rosier and Rookwood, who already knew.

"I don't recall Madam Pomfrey mentioning any broken wrists the first weekend of the term," McGonagall pursed her lips and frowned down at her.

"I didn't go to see Madam Pomfrey," Rigel said, cringing at the disbelieving looks her friends were sending her, "I don't like Hospitals, or Healers, so I just... wrapped it up."

"You just *wrapped it up* ?" Pansy was the one shouting now, "That would have taken weeks to heal on its own. Of all the stupid, martyring *Gryffindor* things to do-"

"Enough, Miss Parkinson," Snape said shortly, though his eyes were piercing through Rigel as well, no doubt cataloguing all the things a broken wrist would have explained-one-handed chopping of ingredients, Sprout's comments about a lack of ambidexterity, poor performance in Flying lessons, etc.

"I can't believe you played Quidditch with me anyway," Draco muttered disgustedly, "Should have known... dicto-quills my ass..."

"So, then on Sunday something similar happened," Rigel said hurriedly, hoping to distract them from the whole broken wrist thing, "I was on the Northwest stairs coming back from the Owlrey when I got caught in a trick step."

"There are no trick steps on those stairs," Snape said, and McGonagall nodded in agreement.

"Yeah, well it was lucky, really, because by falling into the trick step I missed the curse someone sent at me from behind. I guess it was probably to make me fall down the stairs, or something, because they didn't bother re-casting it. They just tossed a dung bomb at me and headed off. Before you ask, I didn't see them because I was trapped in the stair facing the other way, and I couldn't get myself out of the stair because one of my arms was useless," Rigel said.

"You said Peeves threw that at you," Pansy said, her lips pursed in a good imitation of McGonagall.

"It could have been Peeves, for all I knew at the time," Rigel said evasively, "Flint happened along and helped me out of the stair. Nothing happened again until the next Friday, after I got out of my detention from McGonagall. I was approached from behind, again, and fired on from around a corner. They got me with a stinging hex

on my right arm, but I could run that time, so I lost them in the dungeons."

"That we can verify, sir," Pucey spoke up, "When Black came back into the common room that night, it was immediately evident he'd been attacked."

"And no one thought to inform me of this?" Snape's voice was soft but menacing.

"We didn't realize it wasn't an isolated incident," Rosier said smoothly, "The House felt that it was just random anti-Slytherin sentiment rearing its prejudiced head as usual, and treated it as such."

"Very well, continue, Mr. Black."

"Well, the next thing I guess was that Saturday. I was up in the Gryffindor common room doing homework with Percy Weasley," she determinately ignored the strange looks she was getting for that one, "When I met Lee again. He warned me pretty explicitly away from the Weasley twins, but I didn't think anything of it. I thought they'd had a fight or something. Things were quiet after that, and I think part of it was that the twins started escorting me when I was in Gryffindor territory so no one could try anything. Rookwood healed my wrist. Then came Halloween, and, well, you know about that."

The rest of them nodded, looking troubled at the reminder of that incident.

"Tonight I was coming back to the common room after studying with Percy again. I ran into the Weasley twins, who had by then suspected Lee, I think. But they had to go before they could warm me properly, and then, well, I found out for myself anyway," Rigel said.

She took a deep, steadying breath. This was the hard part, the part that was still a bit too fresh to look at objectively.

"You were walking alone through the dungeons?" Snape prompted, his voice uncharacteristically kind.

"Yes," Rigel said, "I was going to stop in the kitchens, but I thought my friends would want to see me right away, to make sure I was okay, but Lee was waiting in that alcove," she nodded toward the spot he'd attacked her from, "And he got me with an Incarcerous Spell before I even knew he was there. He was angry, ranting at me. He said my father and uncles were the reason his father was run out of the pranking business. He thought I was going to go into pranking like my father. He said he would make sure I co-ouldn't."

Her voice broke, and she hung her head, shamed by this weakness. Pansy wrapped one arm around her waist and Draco slung an arm of his own over her shoulders. She couldn't bring herself to smile at them, but she was grateful for the support.

"Jordan had this thing, like a bug or a crab, that his father had been breeding. It was supposed to cause localized paralysis, irreversible, and he claimed its venom carried a sort of neuro-toxin that would modify the victim's memory of the incident," Rigel was speaking faster now, just trying to get it all out so she could forget about it, "He tried to make it b-bite my hands, and I couldn't get away, and I called for help, but no one came, and-oh, sir, I didn't *mean* to," she gazed up at Snape, asking for his understanding with her eyes, "You know how my magic gets, and he was trying to take away my *hands*, my *Potion-making hands*, and I just got so angry and-and... it stopped him."

"What did?" McGonagall could not keep silent any longer, it seemed.

"My magic," Rigel said, "I was upset, and my magic is a little unstable sometimes when I feel things strongly, so it destroyed the little bug-thing and threw Jordan into the wall over there. I set it to work on the ropes so I could have time to calm down and not hurt him anymore," she gestured toward the pile of hemp sitting innocently on the floor, "And then my Housemates arrived."

Zabini took up the explanation from there, detailing how he had heard the screaming, but fetched help before investigating, and their subsequent arrival at the scene and decision to contact Professor Snape through the portrait system.

McGonagall looked overwhelmed, but she conjured a stretcher and lifted Lee Jordan onto it briskly. "This will be looked into further when the board of governors gets wind of it," she said, "But right now I would like to apologize on behalf of Mr. Jordan, as he is a member of my House, and I hope that in the future you realize that you can report this kind of thing before it escalates this far, Mr. Black."

Rigel nodded, just glad the other boy's limp body was finally being taken away.

Once the Gryffindor Head was gone, Professor Snape turned his dark eyes over them all, and most of those present cringed beneath them.

"Ten points from Slytherin, Mr. Black, for suffering needlessly like a melodramatic Gryffindor," he said, ignoring the look of disbelief on Pansy and Draco's faces. They didn't disagree with the sentiment, but there was no need to take *points*. He swept the rest of them with an assessing gaze, "And five points to each of the rest of you for assisting a Housemate in need."

"Lucian was here too, sir," Pucey put in mildly, "He was the one who alerted Salazar's portrait."

"Then five points for Mr. Bole as well," Snape allowed. I expect that the details of this encounter will stay, if not a complete secret, then at least within the House of Snakes."

They all nodded agreeably.

"Very well, then please escort Mr. Black to the common room. I will deal with the Headmaster and the school officials."

"Thank you, sir," Rigel spoke up as he made to leave.

"It is my duty as your Head of House to deal with problems of this nature. See that you remember that in the future," the Potions Master swept back toward the Entrance Hall once more, leaving his students to make their way back to the common room, where they would spend the rest of the evening answering question after subtly phrased question from their Slytherin Housemates.

Lee Jordan was formally withdrawn from Hogwarts by his parents in the face of charges of assault and attempted maiming, and rumor had it he was to be enrolled in Beauxbatons after the break. It was only after several frantic letters to Sirius that he decided not to come storming up to the school, demanding justice for his son, but the Black Family Head finally agreed to wait until the winter holidays to assure himself of his son's wellbeing, since it was only a few weeks away at that point.

The week before the break, Rigel did indeed receive a package from Archie, and when she opened it later that night behind the hangings of her bed she discovered the promised Polyjuice Potion. There was enough hour-long doses to last her an entire day of continuous transformation, and Rigel wondered incredulously how on earth Archie had gotten so much of it. Along with the package was a lock of Archie's hair to activate the potions, and a letter, which detailed the entire, hair-brained adventure. Rigel found herself laughing and shaking her head as she read Archie's account. Only her cousin would be able to pull such a thing off...

[Switch to: Archie's POV]

Archie never could have done it without Hermione. As he told her several times a day, she was the brain to his body, the light to his cave, the muse to his song, the-okay, okay, no need to hit so hard, Hermione.

Anyway, as winter break approached, Archie started thinking about how he and Harry were going to coordinate their return. His father would be picking Harry up from Kings Cross, of course, while James and Lily would collect Archie at Heathrow Airport in London. It would be a little awkward to explain why he didn't look like Harry and why Harry didn't look like Archie, so he knew they had to get a hold of some more Polyjuice somehow. He wouldn't even attempt to brew it- so Harry's thing-and there was no Uncle James to pilfer from this time, so the question became: who was he going to pilfer it from?

The answer came, like a beacon sent from one of those muggle torches, one Monday in Basic Healing. He and Hermione had all their classes together, because they were both in the Healing tract. He'd asked her why she decided on Healing even though she didn't have to choose a tract until third year, and she had told him it was the closest thing to a profession her parents would understand, since they were both dentists.

Archie didn't know what a dentist was, but the way Hermione described it, it sounded painful.

But back to the story, he was sitting in Basic Healing, which was his favorite class, and one of only two classes offered for the Healer tract first year that was not a gen-ed, the other being Magical Psychology, when Professor Marsh came in, dragging an upperclassman with messy brown hair and horn-rimmed glasses behind her. The upperclassman was in one of the Mastery tracts, as designated by his green-colored robes (Career tracts like Healers and Alchemists wore blue and Undecideds wore plain black), and the patch on the front of the robes identified him as part of the Potions Mastery tract. His reason for being in the Basic Healing class was clear when Professor Marsh presented the boy to the Healing teacher, Professor Willowweed, and pulled up the older boy's sleeve to reveal a nasty scrape along his forearm.

It was tradition for other professors to bring students who were only slightly injured to the Basic Healing classes, so that the beginners could practice on them. It helped out the young Healers-in-training,

while also discouraging other students from injuring themselves carelessly, lest they be made into guinea pigs. The students in the Healing tract were very dedicated and competent, and usually the students who were brought in as 'patients' didn't protest overmuch. This upperclassman looked mutinous, however, and he was complaining loudly to Professor March, who taught Flying and Physical Activity, about his presence there.

"I can't stay here, I have to go to Advanced Potions," he said furiously, "Look, it's just a scrape, and I get that they need the practice, but we're doing Polyjuice right now, and it's very time-sensitive, and Professor Tallum *always* takes all the stasis spells off at once! So if I'm not *there* to add the ingredients precisely when they need to be added, weeks of work will be undone and I'll have to start from scratch!"

"Well, you should have thought about that before you messed around in my class and crashed your broom," Professor Marsh sniffed unconcernedly, "I'll leave him in your hands," she said dismissively, and she left the small classroom deaf to the Potions student's pleas.

Professor Willoweed smoothed the front of her red teaching robes serenely, saying, "No need to be alarmed, Mr. Barnett, it won't take long at all to fix you up."

"Every second is too long, Professor Willoweed, *please*," Barnett begged, "I'm in the *Potions* tract, for Circe's sake, this is important."

"Professor Willoweed," Archie said suddenly, a mad, wonderful idea popping into his brain, "Why don't I go with Barnett to his Potions Class, and heal him on the way?"

Willoweed looked skeptical, but Archie threw her a dashing smile that Harry would have smacked right off his face if she'd seen it, "It'll be a good chance to learn to Heal under pressure, on the move," he invented, "And it helps the patient out as well, and shouldn't we always try to help the patient?"

"Oh, very well, Mr. Potter, but I expect you to come straight back here," she said, giving him a knowing look.

"Oh, yes, Professor, I certainly will," he smiled brightly at her, glanced innocently at Hermione, who was giving him a suspicious look from the seat next to him, and followed the relieved Bannett out of the classroom.

Archie examined the scrape as they moved briskly through the giant labyrinth of hallways and rooms that was the American Institute of Magic. "So, Polyjuice, huh?" he said conversationally as he ran the standard diagnostic spell they'd been taught back in September. It told him his patient had a scrape. On his arm. "Is it as difficult as they say?"

"More so," Bannett seemed happier now that they were on their way to his class, and was more than willing to talk about Potions, "It's so exact, so demanding, you know? If you don't do every step perfectly, you might as well start again. It takes slow, carefully controlled action-too sudden and you spook the ingredients into reacting. It's like the Potion wants you to *earn* it."

Archie personally thought that not even Harry talked about Potions like they were some kind of wild animal to be tamed, but he nodded gently-whatever Professor Willoweed said, he had a fantastic bedside manner when it suited him. "How long have you been working on this one?"

"Two and a half weeks. It'll be another week and a half before it's finished," he added, "And it's only going this quickly because Professor Tallum scheduled it very precisely so that certain steps lined up with the lunar-"

"Wow, sounds tough," Archie said absently as he coaxed his magic into the gentle waves needed to Heal minor scrapes and bruises. The marks slowly began to fade before his eyes, and when he finally declared it sufficiently healed he realized they were almost to the

Potions Labs, which were in the Basement of the school. "Do you at least get to keep it when you finish?" he asked.

"What? Of course not," Bannett shook his head at the silly little first year, "Polyjuice is highly illegal." Archie didn't think it prudent to mention that in general things were 'legal' or 'illegal' with no degrees of legality in between. "I'm sure Professor Tallum will dispose of our samples after he shows us our grades next Friday. As he should. Well, this is it, thank you, Mr..."

"Potter," Archie said, "Harry Potter."

[AbAbAb] (= see what I did there?).

Hermione Granger, Archie thought to himself as his muggleborn friend read him the riot act back in the Healer tract dorms that evening, was much more observant than any witch had a right to be.

"I don't know what you're planning, Harry Potter, but if you think you're going to ruin some poor seventh year's Potions grade by stealing the Potion he's been working on for *weeks*, then you'll have to go through me, because I won't stand by and-"

"Hermione!" Archie clapped a hand over his friend's rather loud mouth and dragged her to a more secluded corner of the common area, to a table they were less likely to be overheard from.

"Hermione, sweet Hermione, loyal, talented, *brilliant* Hermione," he began.

Hermione scowled suspiciously at him, but he bravely weathered on.

"You don't really believe me capable of such evil, now do you? Look- I solemnly swear that I am not planning on ruining anyone's grade, test score, or academic career."

"I-really, Harry?" Hermione still looked skeptical, "Because you seemed awfully interested in that boy once you heard he was brewing Polyjuice."

"I would *never* steal someone's Polyjuice potion before it was graded, Hermione, honestly, I thought you knew me," Archie shook his head sadly.

"Oh," Hermione looked abashed, "Okay then, I thought-wait. Oh, no."

"Oh, yes."

"Oh, *no* ."

"Oh, *yes!* "

"Harry you can't be thinking-"

"Hermione, my pearl, I couldn't possibly think without you, you know that."

"This is serious, Harry!" Hermione wrung her hands and glanced around the common area nervously, "If we get caught-"

"Lovely, knew I could count on you, Hermione," Archie kissed the bushy-haired girl's fingertips with extravagant devotion, and Hermione smiled ruefully, like she always did when Archie was playing the fool.

"I want this planned to a *T*, Harry," she said sternly.

"I was just about to suggest a diagram, dear Hermione."

[AbAbAb]

The following Friday, everything was in place. Hermione didn't approve of the plan at all, which Archie took to mean it would probably be great fun. Not that Hermione wasn't fun, because she was, but there were some kinds of fun you had to be a little crazy to appreciate, and as anyone in Britain could tell you, the Blacks were a predominantly crazy lot.

Professor Tallum was scheduled to give his seventh years their grades on their Polyjuice assignment that day. What that meant was that he would hand each student back the beaker they'd turned in the class period before, and each beaker had a letter grade written on them in ugly red ink. Once each student had noted their grade, with the option to hear in colorful recitation exactly *why* they had been scored that way (no one usually took that option), the beakers would be handed back in, accounted for, and disposed of.

Archie thought that was a very good system, but he had slightly different ideas for how the class period would pan out.

He glanced at his watch, one of the few things that actually belonged to him, besides his shoes and wand, that he had allowed himself to bring to America. It had been given to him by his mother and father, and he couldn't bear to part with it, and besides, he really didn't think anyone would recognize the family crest on it at AIM. So anyway, he watched his watch (a somewhat ironic pastime, to be sure) and when enough time for Professor to start handing out the sample had passed, Archie readied himself mentally for the superb and impressive feat of acting he was about to perform.

Hermione kicked him pointedly from beneath her Disillusionment Charm, which she had learned precisely for their little escapade, bless her brilliant mind, and Archie decided that was the signal to stop fixing his blonde wig to look 'frantically windswept' and get a move on.

Archie stole out of the empty classroom in the Lab section of the basement, which he and Hermione were basing their operations out of that day. He checked both ways before taking a deep breath and breaking into a sprint down the corridor, his shoes slapping wildly on the concrete floor and the unfamiliar Mastery tract robes he'd acquired for the occasion flapping like green sheets around his ankles. His exertion gave him a flushed and slightly crazed look, which would be vital to his deceit.

He tore through the Lab level, and once he reached the Advanced Potions Classroom he flung open the door dramatically and cried into the room full of startled students, "TRROOOLL IN THE BASEMENT!" there was a beat of pure silence, into which he added, "Thought you ought to know," before turning back around and sprinting the way he came. Archie ran all the way back to the empty classroom as quickly as he could, then froze, silent and motionless, until he heard the sound of a dozen or so students making their way past his hiding place and up the stairs to the Main level. He silently cheered and wished Hermione the best of luck. It was all up to her now.

(Change in **POV: Hermione**)

Hermione suppressed a sigh as she slipped, invisible, into the classroom in the wake of Harry's over the top entrance. She hurriedly moved to the side of the room while everyone was distracted, and she was well out of the way when Professor Tallum pulled himself out of his shock and ordered an immediate evacuation to the main level. Hermione thought this was rather ridiculous, considering that if there actually were a troll, it would be safer to remain in the classroom, but Archie had said the policy was to evacuate first and think second, and, though she would never say it to his face, he was usually right about these things.

When the room had emptied, Hermione took out a bag she had asked an upperclassman from the Charms Mastery tract to spell an Undetectable Extension Charm on to. She made her way as quickly as she could around the room, grabbing all the flasks of Polyjuice that had an 'A' written in bold red ink on the side and upending them into various empty vials she'd brought with her for the transfer. Really, she could *not* believe she was doing this, but ever since she'd met Harry Potter her life had been constant surprises-though not many of them *bad*, she had to admit.

When she had all the Potion that would probably be safe to ingest, she stowed the bag with the filled vials in it under her Disillusioned robes and left the classroom as silently as she'd entered it. She

made it back to the empty classroom just in time to avoid the approach of a dozen confused students and one very upset Professor Tallum. He was likely to be more upset, Hermione reflected, when he realized someone had upended all of the students' Polyjuice flasks onto the floor of the Lab. Archie had wanted to make it look like a prank, like someone was just making a mess, and not really stealing the Potion, and to do that all the flasks had to be *emptied* without seeming to have *gone* anywhere by the time the class got back from their wild goose chase.

(Back to **Archie's POV**)

Archie swung Hermione in a spontaneous little jig and inventoried the vials she'd collected.

This will last us for both coming home and leaving again after break, he thought gleefully, Harry will be so impressed when I tell her how I got this...

Rigel folded the letter with a fond smile. She couldn't wait to see Archie again. She just had to get through one more week, and then she would be home, with her own eye color and her own name, and Archie, wonderful, crazy Archie, who would surely know how to handle all the things that seemed so insurmountable when they were separated by an ocean. She liked Draco and Pansy, she really did, and Fred and George and Neville and Ron and even Flint wasn't so bad sometimes, but she couldn't talk to them about some things, not because they weren't as good of friends, but because she was lying about them, and they couldn't help with her problems unless they knew the truth. But Archie would know what to do. He wouldn't be scared or freaked out when she told him about what happened to Lee. He wouldn't judge her as weak or silly for being scared of her own feelings.

Two weeks without lies, Rigel thought, that's what I need.

How easy it was to forget that the people at Hogwarts weren't the only ones she'd been lying to.

{HpHpHp}

[end of chapter fifteen].

A/N: Well, there you have it. I hope the POV switches weren't too confusing, and that the bit of re-cap in the middle didn't bore you too much. In case you're wondering, AIM is not the only institute for learning magic in the states (the USA's population is about five to six times that of the UK, and with all the muggleborns and halfbloods being shipped over there from Britain, well, it just wouldn't be feasible to only have one school). On that note, hope you liked Archie's POV, since some of the reviewers requested it ^^ I live to serve, lol. The next update will span winter break, so look forward to that, and I'm still at about 22-23 chapters total for the first year, so it will move faster in the spring semester. I hope no one was too terribly disappointed that it was Lee Jordan. I wanted a Ralon-like figure, but more mysterious, to tide the story over until the real stuff starts happening in January, and I gave Lee a motive because... well, I hate to play the 'AU' card, but... there you go. Anyway, thanks for reading, I can't say it enough.

Chapter 16

A/N: My sincerest apologies for the last two weeks. Suffice to say, what was distracting me has been taken care of, but I fully acknowledge that I am now behind a week-essentially I owe you all a week of story-so I solemnly swear on my name as a writer that sometime before I finish year one I will update twice in one week to make up for it, deal? That said, thanks for hanging in there with me. People I'd like to thank for their reviews: Vaughn Tyler, Kenzieloveify, greyRest, Son of Whitebeard, TearfullPixie, BaltaineShadow, Cathy Willow, and AlainnRain. If I didn't respond to yours, let me know, and thank you jkl (since I can't PM you) for your kind review. As to Draco/Harry, there will be, but near future? Not exactly ^^'. Maybe in a year or two?

A/N2: This chapter is spanning Winter break. Sorry if you find it boring, but it's a very important transition into the next half of year one (in my humble opinion). I hope you all enjoy it! Cheers. Also: Just so everyone's clear (because I gloss over things that make sense to me sometimes), Archie's not hiding his sex, just his name, because in theory no one in America knows or cares that the Potter heir is supposed to be a girl so it doesn't matter. And because of the anti-muggle-blood legislation in place in England, anyone educated in America because of their blood would have a really hard time coming back to England to find a job or mix in society, so the chances of anyone at AIM blabbing are slim to none, make sense?

Also: nearly 14,000 words; Rejoice.

The Pureblood Pretense:

Chapter 16:

Rigel starred out the window at the blurred countryside as the Hogwarts Express sped toward London. She'd passed her finals (despite her wand's minor rebellion during DADA in which Quirrell's

dummy was once again blasted into smithereens), packed Archie's trunk, and patiently let Pansy dress her for meeting her parents at the station. Neville and Ron had made their goodbyes on the Hogsmede Platform before Draco and Pansy had ushered her into a compartment where Nott, Zabini, and Greengrass were already waiting. Her friends were still a bit sore with Gryffindors in general for what Lee had done and tried to do, but Rigel thought mostly Neville and Ron understood. Most of Gryffindor House was at least uneasy about the whole incident, which of course, in that peculiar way of schoolyard gossip, had spread like wildfire through the student body while leaving most of the adults in and outside of the school completely ignorant about it. In fact, almost everyone in the lion House either avoided Rigel or treated her like glass, so keen were they to prove to the Slytherins that they meant their first-year no harm. The Prank War had taken a toll on everyone, and no one was rearing to start it up again.

The compartment door burst open, making all six of them start.

"Puppy!"

Fred darted into the compartment, grabbed Rigel by the arms and lifted her bodily from her seat. He pivoted and tossed her across the room in one smooth movement, ignoring the other Slytherin first-years' gasps and glares of indignation and Rigel's resigned sigh at the sight of him.

George, who had been standing by the door, caught her easily by the waist and set her down in front of him with a magnanimous grin. Rigel wasn't particularly impressed. Fred and George, in direct contrast to the rest of their House, had taken to treating her like a chew-toy, partly because they could, having hit a growth spurt sometime when she wasn't looking, and partly so that she didn't start believing she was as delicate as everyone had been treating her.

Or so they said.

Rigel thought there was a chance they'd been just as upset and worried as everyone else had been, and she couldn't imagine the additional stress of thinking one of their friends had been trying to hurt another had helped at all. She rather thought that pulling, bumping, and even tossing her around was their way of assuring themselves that she was real and okay, and so she waved off Pansy's concerned look and Draco's disapproving scowl and stepped out into the hallway, knowing the twins would follow.

"I did say goodbye yesterday," she reminded them.

"We missed you already," Fred said, so seriously that she knew he was joking, "So we're decided to kidnap you and take you home to the Burrow with us."

"I suppose it would be difficult for you to survive the break without me if this is the result of only a day of withdraw," Rigel pretended to think about it.

"If you came with us, Mum would feed you until you're too fat for us to play catch with," George said persuasively.

"That *would* be nice," she admitted, "And just think of all the studying Percy and I could get done if we had the whole break together."

Fred sighed forlornly, "We'll have to try harder next semester, Fred. It doesn't seem we've gotten anywhere with this pup."

"I daresay you're right, George," George said, "He's definitely not ready for the Burrow yet."

They gazed apologetically down at her.

"Sorry, pup, but we can't kidnap you after all."

"Forgive us for failing you."

Rigel solemnly absolved them, and after a suitably flowery and artificial-tear-jerking farewell she rejoined her compartment.

"Done playing the Gryffindor lapdog?" Greengrass asked as Rigel came back in.

"A true lapdog's work is never done," Rigel reclaimed her seat unconcernedly.

"Well, I suppose you'd know," Greengrass sniffed, a snooty expression pinching her otherwise passable features.

"Yes, and I suppose you wouldn't, so..." Rigel trailed off, but Draco had no trouble finishing the sentiment.

"So why are you even bothering us with your opinion?" he glanced pointedly at the door and the offended girl marched indignantly off to find her more understanding friends.

"Vapid little chit," Zabini muttered once Greengrass had gone, "The girls in our year are particularly insipid."

Pansy angled her chin in a poised challenge and Zabini gestured with apologetic dismissal, "Not you, Parkinson, obviously. I doubt Black and Malfoy would hang around you all day if you were a twit."

Pansy inclined her head magnanimously and Nott laughed, "They'll grow out of it... eventually."

"Merlin willing it will be before we're married off to one of them," Draco shuddered dramatically.

Rigel tried to hide her distaste at the idea of arranged marriage, but she didn't quite manage it.

"Ah, but your father would look down on that sort of practice, wouldn't he, Black?" Zabini's mouth curled into a strange smile, "No underage betrothals for you to worry about."

Rigel shrugged, "Dad's never mentioned it. I doubt any of the families old enough to still believe in the practice would accept the son of a blood traitor for their daughters in any case."

"You might be surprised," Pansy said darkly, "All the other girls talk about in the dorms is prospective matches-everyone's name comes up sooner or later."

"We're *eleven*," Nott rolled his eyes, "Everything but our last names is going to change completely in the next few years, and even family fortunes can fluctuate without warning. It'd be mental to make a decision now."

"They won't have a say anyway," Draco added, "Their fathers will take whoever offers the most money for them, as usual."

Pansy scowled and Rigel patted her arm comfortingly, "We won't let you get married off to any of these duffers, will we Draco?"

The others laughed as Pansy put on a mopey-eyed stare and affected a breathy, oxygen-less tone, "My *hero* . How will you save me? Fight a wizard's duel for my honor? Battle my father's dragon-riding legions?"

"Marry her yourself?" Zabini's smile was even more twisted than usual.

"Alas, I am already married to my Potions," Rigel gazed forlornly into Pansy's dejected face, "But fear not, sweet maiden, for at the slightest lift of your brow I shall break my solemn vows and whisk you away to Bora Bora and keep you locked in my bungalow where an army of house elves will feed you mangos and where the sun cannot taste your innocent skin, so that every shade of palest pink I find in your ivory cheeks I can claim as my own. When the moon lifts her veil we will frolic like spring lambs in the surf, sipping on coconut nectar and crying our freedom to every wind, that they may carry news of our incandescent happiness to our unfortunate friends, who shall still be trapped like lonely rats behind their white picket fences and will perhaps waste away with sick envy when they hear the echoes of our joy on the breezes off the sea."

"This will of course please us greatly," Pansy agreed, her bright blue eyes twinkling with suppressed mirth, "For in our generous hearts we wish nothing more than for our friends to escape the dreary existence of arranged marriage life as well, even if death is the only door unlocked to them."

Pansy's words proved to be too much, and the stiff good breeding of the usually tightly coiled snakes collapsed beneath sheer farce and they burst into laughter. Rigel listened very closely, for it was not the controlled chuckles or the measured, faint-minded laughter of the socially repressed. It was the sound of surprised enjoyment, of childhood, and Rigel savored it before it died away.

"Sometimes I wonder if you were really raised by the Marauders, but then you do something like that," Nott dabbed at his streaming eyes with a handkerchief, "Imagine, keeping house-elves in Bora Bora to feed you like some despoiled emperor. You're crazy, Black."

"All the Blacks are crazy," Rigel said regretfully, "But we always do right by our friends."

"And that's why the Malfoys are there to step in and save their friends from the Blacks' idea of saving," Draco said, still smiling a bit at the ridiculousness of it all, "Pans, the minute this idiot starts talking about the French Polynesian islands, I will lock him up and send you my father's lawyer. No marriage contract will stand a chance."

Pansy laughed along with the others, but from the steady look in Draco's eyes as he smiled and the burning embers in Pansy's own when Rigel glanced at them, she realized that Draco was entirely serious in offering the not-insignificant Malfoy protection to his friend of only a few months, and Pansy, sweet, innocent Pansy, knew the very real possibility of having to draw on that aid one day, and was silently grateful.

Not long after, the train pulled into the station. Pansy fussed with Rigel and Draco's hair and robes as they waited for the other

passengers to depart and leave the platform empty enough to move through easily. They'd all had Pucey shrink their trunks, and when Pansy declared it time they bade farewell to Zabini and Nott and disembarked the train.

"You're parents aren't coming until later, right?" Pansy asked Rigel nervously.

Rigel raised an eyebrow in amusement, "Yes, Pan, I promise my family won't be around to murky the waters. I told my dad to come a half-hour later so I could say goodbye to all my friends on the platform without my dad around to embarrass me."

"A plausible fiction," Draco commented, looking as if he wasn't sure if he should be happy his friend lied so well or not.

In truth Rigel had told Sirius to give her forty-five extra minutes, saying she had a lot of people to say goodbye to, in order to give herself enough time to use the Polyjuice after her friends had gone. Archie had done something similar, arranging for his parents to meet him at baggage claim instead of right where the passengers got out so he'd have time to duck into a restroom and change. Archie had figured that Hermione would be the only one looking for him and since she didn't know what his luggage looks like (girls weren't allowed in the boys' rooms) and didn't know what the Potters looked like, she wouldn't think it odd when an unfamiliar girl picked his trunk up instead. Then all they had to do was keep sipping Polyjuice until they could meet up and exchange places.

"There they are," Pansy nodded discretely toward four imposing figures standing off to one side, well clear of the smoke from the train.

The Malfoys were easily recognizable, resplendent in soft lavender silk, their hair so matched in color that Rigel wondered if that had been the deciding characteristic when Mr. Malfoy was choosing his wife. The Parkinsons were striking also, but not for their similarity. Mr. Parkinson was tall and lean, with jet-black hair combed back

from his angular features and a sharp pair of glasses that glinted every so often in the light. Mrs. Parkinson was petite and energetic, with caramel curls bouncing about her shoulders and the dreamiest hazel eyes Rigel had ever seen.

The two were complete opposites, and Rigel wasn't sure at first how Pansy could be related to either of them. She supposed later that Pansy must have inherited her golden hair from a relative, or else one of her parents dyed theirs. Her personality, Rigel would realize later, was a strange fusion of her mother's innocent sweetness with her father's savvy insightfulness, tempered by a dash of something entirely Pansy.

"Good day, Mr. Malfoy, Narcissa," Pansy said politely when they were within speaking range, "Hello Father, Mother." Pansy's mother reached out a hand, which Pansy clasped and pressed gently, both mother and daughter smiling with suppressed emotion as Mr. Parkinson looked on with quiet fondness.

"How are you, Miss Parkinson?" Mr. Malfoy asked.

"Very well, thank you," she said, stepping away from her parents once more, "Mother, Father, you remember Draco Malfoy?"

Draco stepped forward to shake hands with Mr. Parkinson and receive affectionate nods from his parents as well.

"Your son does you credit, Lucius," Mr. Parkinson said, voice mostly devoid of emotion. He brought to Rigel's mind a human calculator.

"So wonderful to see you again, Draco," Mrs. Parkinson's eyes fairly shone with her cheerfulness, though her face was the usual blank pureblood mask.

"The wonder is all mine," Draco bowed gracefully before the couple.

"Father, Mother, may I introduce to you Rigel Black?" Pansy placed a hand gently on Rigel's elbow, "Rigel is our Slytherin year mate, son

of Sirius and the late Diana Black."

Rigel bowed formally to Mr. Parkinson and his wife, hovering just above Mrs. Parkinson's hand as she did so.

"A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Black," Mrs. Parkinson said warmly, "How is your father?"

"He is well, Mrs. Parkinson, and I dare say will be even better when he learns of your kind query," Rigel said, "I am very glad for this chance to meet you both, and I would like to formally ask your permission to befriend your charming daughter." She directed the last bit at Mr. Parkinson, whose only sign of surprise that Rigel knew of the old customs required for an unmarried male to make a close acquaintance of an unmarried female was a sheen of light obscuring his glasses as he tilted his head consideringly.

"What say you, Mr. Malfoy?" Mr. Parkinson turned to his friend, "As you have the advantage of Mr. Black's acquaintance I shall defer to your judgment."

Mr. Malfoy gazed seriously into Rigel's blank face for a moment, then said, "Although I have only had the pleasure of a brief meeting with young Mr. Black, he has the esteem of Severus Snape, a man whose opinion I trust implicitly, so I will indeed vouch for his worth in regards to your daughter's friendship."

Rigel bowed gratefully toward Mr. Malfoy before lifting her chin in open acceptance of Mr. Parkinson's decree.

"With such a recommendation, I would be foolish to turn your candidature away, Mr. Black," he finally decided, "May your friendship be long and mutually beneficial."

Rigel nodded and Pansy positively beamed at her. Even Draco looked impressed that she knew the proper courtesies. *They couldn't know I looked up every pureblood custom in the Black family library after deciding to try and pass as one.*

Mrs. Parkinson's blank mask melted away into a smile as bright as her daughter's, and she stepped forward to embrace Rigel warmly, even going so far as to straighten a curl or two around Rigel's ears as she leaned back, "Wonderful, simply marvelous," she said excitedly, "Now that we're all friends here, tell us about your first semester. I know Narcissa and I are dying to hear about all your adventures."

"What makes you think we had any adventures to speak of?" Pansy asked innocently.

"Oh, yes, why ever would we imagine that *our* children, along with the son of Sirius Black, would be involved in anything that could be considered exciting or dangerous?" Mrs. Parkinson shared a knowing look with Narcissa.

"Come, Draco, your letters have been unusually vague of late," the blond woman smiled teasingly, "You wouldn't want your parents to think you were hiding anything, would you?"

Draco and Pansy sent Rigel uncomfortable looks, and Rigel suddenly realized that for all Draco's claims that he would be using their friendship to spy on her, neither he nor Pansy had told their parents about any of the interesting things that had happened over the semester in order to protect her privacy. She was honored that they considered her friendship so highly, and so to repay them she would remove them from the position of having to lie to their parents. No child should have to keep secrets from a parent; she knew from experience.

"I'm afraid that's entirely my fault, my ladies," Rigel turned to smile self-deprecatingly at the adults, but from the glint in Malfoy Sr.'s eye and the slight lifting of Parkinson's brow she knew they had witnessed the silent exchange among the three first-years.

"Oh?" Mrs. Parkinson laughed, a light, tinkling sound that Rigel didn't doubt was entirely natural for her, "When the son of Sirius Black *claims* the blame for something I am sure it must be quite a tale."

"It is nothing so entertaining, Mrs. Parkinson," Rigel demurred.

"Please, I am Rose," she said, foggy eyes mischievous, "And I think perhaps you overestimate the bar at which something becomes amusing to us old timers. We need all the entertainment we can get, you know, and I think we are well prepared to handle it."

"For shame," Rigel said, dismayed, "What cad has put such ideas of aged dotage into so fine a queen's royal head? I admit I was hesitant to burden so lovely a heart with darker tidings, but I will of course defer to the Goddess' command."

"Darker tidings? How ominous of you, Rigel," Narcissa lifted a corner of her regal mouth to invite continuance, "But surely it could not be so terrible if we parents had not been sent word of it."

"Indeed, not even your esteemed Headmaster would keep news of a child's well-being from his family," Mr. Malfoy's eyes hardened slightly, and Rigel had to think fast to avoid that particular pit-snare.

"The good Headmaster would surely be loath to trouble you with news unrelated to your own son," Rigel suggested, "The more exciting events of the past semester have left Draco and Pansy completely unscathed, this I can assure you."

"And was your family equally assured of your own good health?" Rose pressed, her misty eyes inexplicably piercing.

"My father was of course kept abreast of all happenings," Rigel said evenly, "He will be honored to know of your consideration."

Draco eyed Rigel disapprovingly, but wouldn't outright say that she was being deliberately obtuse. Pansy's father had no such qualms.

"Her consideration was for you, Mr. Black, not your father," Mr. Parkinson said sharply, "As Pansy's friend, you must know that what is in your best interests is in our daughter's best interests. If you've been involved in something that could even potentially have

ramifications on our daughter's life, it is your responsibility to make her family aware of it, that they may better protect her. The same applies to your friend Draco, as well."

"Father, it isn't Rigel's fault," Pansy protested.

"Cassius," Rose added in a low voice, gently admonishing her husband.

"No, ma'am, he's right," Rigel nodded her head respectfully toward Pansy's father, "It was unforgivably selfish of me to entertain the conceit that my troubles do not affect those around me."

"I'm certain this is just a case of much ado about nothing," Narcissa said lightly, "What kind of politically charged intrigues are you imagining to have occurred in a schoolyard, Cassius?"

"One can never be too careful with one's children," Mr. Parkinson said, "And if Mr. Black has no qualms, I would rest easier knowing the full story behind my daughter's cryptic letters this semester."

"I admit to some interest in this as well," Mr. Malfoy said, his face giving nothing away, "Severus has made some rather infuriatingly offhand references to events around Halloween that I cannot begin to guess at, and your name was thrown in amongst them, Mr. Black."

Rigel glanced at her friends, both of whom nodded seriously to show they would support her telling their parents.

"It begins and ends with Lee Jordan, Mr. Malfoy," Rigel said, "As a member of the Board of Governors, you were no doubt made aware of his withdrawal?"

"His family has transferred him to Beauxbatons, yes," Malfoy frowned, "No reason was cited, though the Headmaster did not seem overly keen on asking questions."

"In truth, it was closer to an unofficial expulsion," Draco clarified, wincing slightly at the look his father gave him. There would be words when they got home about the family's position of superiority where loyalties conflicted.

"There hasn't been a student expelled from Hogwarts in fifty years, and the last time it happened a student was killed." Mr. Parkinson said, his mouth a severe line.

"No one died," Pansy reassured her father quickly, "It was a matter of honor. Staying meant disgrace to Jordan's family and the possibility of criminal charges."

"What did he do?" Rose asked quietly, "And how is Rigel involved?"

Rigel didn't miss the transition to her first name, but she didn't comment on it. Instead, she explained as shortly as she could, "Lee Jordan didn't care much for my father, and I'm afraid that enmity was transferred to me. Unfortunately, he took his dislike too far, and his actions caused enough harm that his continued presence in the school was considered unsafe. He didn't get near Pansy or Draco," she added, "And now that he has transferred the matter is satisfactorily resolved."

Draco and Pansy emitted identical scoffs of righteous indignation, and Rigel smiled wryly at them. They were just so similar, though in cases where they ganged up against her it was somewhat less endearing.

"He nearly killed you, Rigel," Draco said softly.

"He was attempting nothing of the kind," Rigel said firmly.

"Oh, yes, because permanent disfigurement isn't at all a cause for alarm," Pansy sniffed.

"I was talking about when you fell down three flights of stairs," Draco was glaring fiercely at her now for treating everything so

unconcernedly, "And perhaps you've forgotten the night you almost drank acid because of that-

"Acid?" Narcissa's hand flew to her husband's elbow, where he gripped it steadily.

"That must have been what Severus was speaking of," Malfoy said thoughtfully, eyes glittering with something Rigel couldn't define, "He asked me to put an ear to the ground for any un-reclaimed shipments of those joke tablets Jordan was written up for."

"The ones that didn't have the proper anti-amending charms on them?" Mr. Parkinson asked, "Dangerous things. I suppose Jordan's son managed to smuggle some into Hogwarts."

"Not only that," Pansy put in angrily, "He slipped one that was modified to turn solutions to highly corrosive acid into Rigel's pumpkin juice."

All four parents looked deadly in that moment.

"So it could have been any of you," Parkinson said darkly, pinning Rigel with a half-accusing stare, "What if Pansy or Draco had drank from the wrong cup? I think you'd best explain everything."

Rigel sighed inwardly, "Perhaps Draco and Pansy can explain everything once you are comfortably at home," she said, "It is a rather long story, and I had hoped our first meeting would be entirely pleasant."

"Yes, let's talk about something else, dear," Rose said brightly, "We'll speak of sad thing when we must, but I heard that young Mr. Malfoy made the Quidditch team this year, and I'd much rather hear about that."

"Only the reserve team," Draco said, smiling proudly nonetheless, "In a few years I'll be Slytherin's starting seeker, though."

Mr. Parkinson looked like he wanted to protest the change in conversation, but one glance at his wife had him pursing his lips and playing along, "Your father played himself when he was at school, didn't you, Lucius?"

"Chaser," Lucius agreed, "It was the only way I could capture this lovely creature's attention." He smiled charmingly down at his wife, who blinked up at him as if to say, *It was no more than I deserve*. The group chuckled easily at the pair, and the conversation became smoother from there.

"What about you, Rigel?" Rose asked, "Did you try for the team?"

"No, my lady," Rigel said, "I prefer to focus my energies elsewhere."

"But you had a broken wrist this year," Draco said reasonably, "If you can stay on a broom with one hand you're not a half-bad flyer."

"Indeed, I was under the impression that you were an avid Quidditch fan, Mr. Black," Parkinson adjusted his glasses and Rigel tried to think how he might have gotten that impression. It was true that Archie loved Quidditch, though he much preferred watching to actually playing, unlike Rigel, who loved playing more, but no one outside the family really knew anything about Archie, except...

"Are you per chance familiar with the Flint family?" she guessed.

"Flint was at school with us," Parkinson confirmed, his face revealing neither fondness nor hostility toward the man, "Rose and I happened upon he and his son at the Quidditch World Cup five years ago, and they mentioned you."

"I believe young Marcus Flint told us in no uncertain terms that he was saving the seat next to him for his friend Archie, even though he wasn't actually coming," Rose smiled fondly, "Such a sweet boy."

Draco lifted his brows in patent disbelief, no doubt thinking that nothing was sweet about Captain Marcus Flint.

Rigel remembered that year all too well. Archie and she were six, and he had gotten a seat in one of the highest boxes in the stadium. Rigel had never wondered how he'd gotten it, but now she knew the Flints must have had an extra and invited Archie, who they already knew from the Wasp games, to join them. Unfortunately (for both Archie and Rigel, who had to listen to him sigh sadly about it the rest of the summer) Archie never got to go.

"Yes, the Flints kindly offered me a place in their box, but due to an unexpected turn of events I was unable to attend that year. Marcus declared me an honorable attendee on the spot and brought back a picture of my empty seat to give to me as a souvenir at the next Wasps match." Rigel said as evenly as she could.

In truth, the week before the Cup was the first time Diana, Archie's mother, had fallen ill. At first, no one knew what it was. She recovered after a week or so and no more was thought of it. Until she fell ill again. And again. It wasn't until nearly eight months later that they had confirmed test results, simply because they hadn't know what to test for. When the news that it was a terminal sickness came, the family was devastated. Aunt Diana held on for over a year, but at eight years old Archie had clung to Rigel's hand and watched, dry-eyed with hollow resignation, as his mother was lowered gently into the waiting earth.

By the looks on everyone's faces, they had put the timelines together in their heads and knew as well as if she'd said it straight out why the younger Black hadn't made it to that Quidditch game.

Determined to break the awkward silence, and knowing that no one else would have to heart to, Rigel smiled as brightly as she could manage, "Draco's tryouts were almost as good as a Cup game, though. Flint was determined to scare the wits out of the Gryffindor team, so he turned the trials, which as you know are always spied on, into a sort of high-flying melee. Remember, Pansy?"

"How could I forget?" she said, an affected look of mild scandalization on her face. Rigel grinned at her for playing along and

got a slow wink in return, "He unleashed *four* bludgers and *three* snitches. I thought someone was going to be hurled to the ground for certain."

"My goodness," Narcissa's mouth was poised with amusement, but her eyes were sad. Rigel felt extremely uncomfortable being on the receiving end of compassion for Archie's mum, but she was grateful that Narcissa was helping them move past the gaping wound that was Aunt Diana's passing despite the fact that Draco had probably told her all about his tryouts in one of his many letters. "Hogwarts Quidditch sounds much more dangerous than it was in our day."

"It was fine, mum," Draco said, "It was just to scare off the Gryffindors, like Rigel said. Nothing really dangerous about it."

"Well, if you say so, darling," Narcissa looked the very picture of a mother concerned for her child's safety, and Rigel thought it was almost funny how *human* all these purebloods were turning out to be.

The conversation moved to other things, and before they knew it Rigel had to excuse herself to meet her dad. She said heartfelt goodbyes to Draco and Pansy and wished their parents a relaxing holiday. Glancing at one of the train station's clocks as she left the platform, she realized she had ten minutes to meet Sirius at an out-of-the-way café just down the street from Kings Cross Station.

Rigel ducked into a public restroom and stepped into a stall. She took one of the precious vials of Polyjuice out of her pocket and mixed in a strand of Archie's hair. Taking a deep breath and grimacing at the smell the electric blue (Archie *would* be such a jarring shade) goop gave off, Rigel knocked back the dose in one quick movement. *A few years of this and I'll be able to take shots of Firewhisky like it's water*, she mused in the seconds before her insides were set on fire. Her guts felt like they were twisting around inside of her, and Rigel supposed it made sense if the theory behind Polyjuice was that it changed you inside and out. She wondered if the pain would be less if she wasn't switching sexes, and then she

had no room in her skull for wonderings as the burning sensation moved to the outside of her skin and felt her limbs lengthening an inch or two, her shoulders widening a bit and her facial features shifting ever so slightly. Really, she shouldn't complain. If they were still doing this in a few years, the differences would start getting really pronounced, and it was lucky they looked somewhat similar to one another already.

An uncomfortable burning in her eyes well after the burning everywhere else had stopped made Rigel curse her own stupidity and stumble to the sink to take the contacts, which no longer fit, out of her eyes. Staring back from the mirror was her cousin, Archie, with a few small differences from when she'd last seen him, like longer hair and less musculature tone in the arms. She'd have to make sure he started exercising since he wasn't playing Quidditch anymore.

Sirius was waiting in the café like he'd promised-if by waiting one meant casually flirting with one of the waitresses. It actually warmed her heart to see his dashing devil-may-care grin lighting up the shadows that never seemed to leave his face, but she did feel a bit sorry for the pretty waitress when Sirius' attention waned the instant he caught sight of his 'son.'

"Archie!" Sirius leapt off the stool he'd been sitting at and bounded over like the overgrown puppy he so often was. He scooped her up and swung her around him in a circle, for all the world not noticing that his kid wasn't six years old anymore. Several patrons narrowly avoided being broadsided by Rigel's trainers, and if she hadn't already changed from her Hogwarts robes they would have caught on any number of things on the café tables. "You're back! And all in one piece, despite the attempts you've made to the contrary. Now I know what Lily feels like all the time-and it's awful! All this worrying is going to turn my hair grey. It's not grey, is it? Here, look at the roots for me, I'm a little worried about this section in the back because I can't really see it properly-"

"Dad!" Rigel pushed Sirius' head of perfectly black hair out from under her nose, "Your hair is fine, better looking than everyone else's put together, I swear. Honestly, you wonder why I asked you to meet me away from the platform."

If his face hadn't been so close to hers already, she wouldn't have seen it. A spark of something surprised and almost shamed flitted across her Uncle's grey irises and Rigel felt instantly like an ass.

"No, I mean, I didn't mean it like that, Dad," she backpedaled quickly. She had spoken without thinking, teasing like she would have if she were Harriet, not Archie, who had always had a peculiarly frank relationship with his father. Of course that's how it would look, asking Sirius not to pick her up from the station.

"It's cool, Arch," Sirius laughed, slinging an arm around her shoulders carelessly and leading them out of the café and onto the busy sidewalks, "I get it. Between House rivalries and politics and everything-well, when I was your age, I didn't want my parents within ten miles of my friends."

"No!" Rigel pulled Sirius off to the side out of people's way, determined to stop this right in its tracks before she damaged Archie and Sirius' relationship beyond repair.

"Hey, kiddo, it's no big deal," Sirius said, his voice betraying not a hint of the hurt she suspected lay beneath the surface.

"It is if that's what you think," Rigel said. She turned to face Sirius and looked very... *seriously* at him. "Dad, I love you. It's not anything like it was with your parents. I'm not ashamed of you or embarrassed by you in any way-I think you're the greatest, bestest, most charming, fun, magnificent, caring, cool-"

"You forgot devilishly attractive."

"-hilariously amazing dad in the whole world," Rigel continued, pretending not to notice how Sirius preened under her praise, "I was

only joking back in the café-spent too much time around Harry, I think-and I didn't keep you from the station because I didn't want everyone to see you picking me up. I tell all my friends about you, all the time. The Weasley twins worship the ground you walk on, you know, and Draco and Pansy would have loved to meet you."

"Then... why?" Sirius didn't look hurt or uncomfortably cheerful anymore, just slightly confused.

"Because, I was selfish," Rigel said, grimacing. She hated lying to Sirius, he was second only to Remus and her mother on the list of people she hated lying to. "Everyone at school knows you-or thinks they do. You're famous for your joke line, your Auror career, and yes, also your family. The truth is, I was meeting Pansy and Draco's parents at the station. I wanted to make a good impression-and I'm not saying I don't think you'd give a good impression, because you would, Dad, but I wanted to make a good impression on my own, you know? I wanted them to like or dislike me for *me*, not because my dad, the Head of the House of Black was there. My friends mean a lot to me, and I didn't want to muck up my first meeting with their parents by putting you in a position that would go against the Great Split and putting them in a position where they had to treat me like they'd treat you, and vice versa."

"Oh," Sirius put his hands on his hips and tapped his fingers against his denim-clad waist restlessly like he always did when he thought hard about something, "Okay, I can understand that. Though, you know I never took the Split all that seriously, not that I'd ever tell Lily and James that. Some of them are alright, you know."

"Yeah, I know," Rigel smiled Archie's easy smile at Sirius, "And I know you wouldn't have done anything to make it uncomfortable, dad, but you know how some people can be. I just wanted everything to go smoothly, but I should have told you. Did I hurt your feelings?" she asked the last bit slyly and Sirius sucked in an affronted breath.

"Why you little-hurt my feelings? I could have sworn that letter said you were a Slytherin, not a Hufflepuff," he sniffed, and started stalking away.

Rigel laughed like Archie would and started after him.

"Narcissa Malfoy asked after you," she commented as they strolled through London, looking for a good apparition point.

"Did she?" Sirius smiled genuinely at that, "How is dear Cissa?"

"She's good, as far as I can tell. Was she always that blonde? Because all the other Black's are, well, black-haired, aren't they?" Rigel asked curiously.

Sirius chuckled, "Oh yes, she gave my uncle Cygnus quite a shock when she came out Malfoy-blonde. Nearly called a formal duel with old Abraxas until they realized Cissa had exactly Cygnus' nose. And of course the Paternity Potion helped a lot, too. I believe when Lucius asked for her hand Aunt Druella told him to have at it, on account of Cissa had clearly been meant for a Malfoy all along."

Rigel grinned at the sound of Sirius' carefree laughter. Her uncle really was doing much better.

"So how's Marcus?" Sirius asked once he'd side-apparated her to Grimmauld Place, "You see him around much?"

"Sometimes," she said casually, as if she didn't have a mountain of the older boy's homework in her trunk at that very moment, "He's captain of the Quidditch team, of course, so I see him at Draco's practices, but the upper years don't mix much with the lower years."

"Yeah, especially in Slytherin," Sirius said, a far-off look in his eyes, "I remember Regulus going on and on about what an honor it was to be asked to sit with the Lestrangle brothers on their side of the House table when he was only a third year."

Rigel said nothing, knowing that Regulus was an uncomfortable subject for Sirius. She'd only seen Sirius's brother once, at Aunt Diana's funeral, but she knew he'd joined the Cow Party while still in school and severed almost all ties with Sirius as a result.

"But it's good he's well," Sirius went on. They were shedding their coats and scarves in the entryway now, and Rigel sneaked another dose of Polyjuice while Sirius was struggling with his boots, "It's best if he gets away from that house of his for the school year. He doesn't come home for breaks, does he?"

"No," Rigel said, remembering Flint signing up for the staying roster.

"Good," Sirius kicked his boots off to the side and then stood back and gestured to the hallway, "So? What do you think?"

Rigel glanced up from fishing her tiny trunk out of her pocket and her jaw dropped. "I thought Remus was kidding. I thought *you* were kidding."

"Course not," Sirius gave her a look that said she clearly should have known him better and she noticed he was positively wriggling with delight, "Your Sorting opened up a world of decorating possibilities here-to-for unexplored, so we just went to town! Do you like it? Feel right at home?"

The hallway where the heads of house-elves once hung looked like it had been a victim of a sudden tinsel storm. It hung like silver and green moss from the torch brackets, the chandeliers, the banisters, the doorframes, and it was strewn about the carpet like a sparkly grass meadow welcoming them into some sort of Slytherin-inspired fun house that any real Slytherin would be appalled at.

"Wow, Dad, I don't know what to say," Rigel just stared and stared at it.

"Yes, I can see you're overwhelmed," Sirius said, "Let me give you the full tour!"

He showed her the parlor, with its green brocade couches and tapestries so silver they were practically mirrors. They saw the kitchen with its new silver dishes (to replace the gold ones they been eating off of before) and the little snake salt and pepper shakers that hissed when you shook them. The library had been painted in electric green and metallic silver stripes, and Rigel made a mental note not to spend too long in that particular room if she didn't want her vision to get any worse.

Archie's bedroom was more tasteful, done over in deep, soothing green with subtle silver highlights in the doorknobs and the hangings, and Rigel had hope for the place until she saw the green, glow-in-the-dark toilet paper in the bathrooms and the stuffed snake pillow on the bed. Nevertheless, it was the garden that finally quenched her desire to admit Sirius to a facility where he would receive specialized care.

Remus had been half-truthful. Grimmauld Place didn't have a front yard, and besides that it was in a muggle neighborhood, so of course she'd dismissed the notion of actual snakes, dancing or otherwise, after she'd read it. More fool she. The enclosed little courtyard, which used to have Diana's vegetable garden in it, was now home to about twelve English grass snakes, which had been magicked bright green. The enclosure had been magically enlarged and was temperature controlled so the little wriggles (as Sirius had dubbed them) got all the sun they needed, and through her disbelief Rigel noticed that Sirius actually looked quite fond of them. When they opened the door, five or six came slithering over to them and Sirius bent down automatically to pet their heads and croon words of praise.

Rigel raised an incredulous brow, and Sirius pouted, "What? They're highly domesticated."

She took in their sprawled, lazy movements and playful tongue flicks, "They look a bit lethargic. I think you're over-feeding them."

"They get hungry!"

"Sure, Dad, whatever you say," Rigel shook her head.

A little snake began twining up Sirius' bare foot, and to Rigel's surprise, it said, " *Take me insside with you thiss time, oh, One Who Ssmellss Like Dogss. I want to sssee where you keep the ssnackss* ."

"Oh, oh that tickles!" Sirius laughed and pulled the little snake gently off of him, "This one always climbs on me, trying to get inside the house," he explained to Rigel, who was starting to wonder how much free time Sirius actually had if he was spelling snakes to talk to him. She'd talk to Remus about hanging out with the ex-Auror more often. Sirius had quit his job in law-enforcement when Diana fell ill, and since then he didn't work at all, just volunteered in the children's ward at St. Mungo's a few times a week and lived off the interest of his family's fortune.

"When will Harry be home?" she asked as they meandered back into the kitchen and dug around in the pantry for some lunch.

"Lily and James are picking her up as we speak, I think," Sirius scratched his chin, "They and Remus are coming over here for dinner tonight, but Harry will probably be over earlier. You know how she is, always checking up on you."

"Yeah," Rigel said, the dramatic irony nearly choking her, "Well, I guess I'll get re-settled in, then." She rinsed her plate, feeling odd cleaning up after a meal after months at Hogwarts, "Can you come un-shrink my trunk?"

"Sure thing, Arch," Sirius made to follow her upstairs.

"You know, I've been going by my middle name at school now," she said tentatively.

"Rigel? I never knew you even liked your middle name," Sirius said with a puzzled frown.

"Well, I'm growing up now, Dad. Archie is a bit young-sounding, but Arcturus is a mouth-full at my age, you know?" she explained, "I'll go back to Archie or Arcturus when I'm older, I think, and I can afford for my name to sound casual, and of course you can still call me Archie at home. I just wanted you to know in case someone from school mentions me as Rigel."

"Ah, I see," Sirius shrugged, "Not like I can talk about nicknames-not since I was the genius who came up with Moony, but school is a time for growing, so if you want to grow as Rigel, I say go for it."

"Thanks," Rigel smiled cheerfully, "So how many pranks do you think we can get set up before Uncle James gets here?"

Sirius's face split into an evil grin that Rigel hoped the Weasley twins never caught sight of, "He'll be expecting about four, so I think we should aim for twelve or so."

"You just like the number twelve," Rigel pointed out.

"It's a very austere number."

"Which is why it doesn't suit you at all."

"You'd better hope I don't set up thirteen, because the last one will be on you, little snake."

"If I thought an old dog like you had any new tricks I might actually be scared. You forget I've been among the next generation of pranksters now-the Weasley twins have taught me things you and Uncle James never dreamed of."

"Prove it!"

"You asked for it."

"We'll you'll be begging for it."

"For what?"

"Mercy!"

"Ah! No! Dad, where are you tickling?"

Archie and Rigel's mom and dad finally showed up a few hours later, and damned if Sirius didn't get exactly twelve pranks set up in the nick of time. Some of them were disabled right away (like the bucket of snakeskin placed over the front doorway-in keeping with the theme of the décor) and others would probably never be triggered (like the eyes of the non-moving painting of Salazar Slytherin now hanging in the dining room, which would turn your hair pink if you stared at them for longer than sixty seconds), but on the whole James had a lot of fun ferreting them out, Lily had a lot of fun scolding Sirius, and Remus had a lot of fun watching his friends get pranked and scolded. Most importantly, however, it gave Rigel and Archie the cover they needed to sneak away to Archie's bedroom unquestioned.

"Whew, that was close," Archie said when he'd bounded into his room and closed the door behind them. He pulled the usual chest of drawers over in front of the door and collapsed on the bed, "My 'juice is about to wear off, and I didn't fancy another hour as you, no offence."

"None taken," Rigel said, sitting on the bed as well, "I've got another ten minutes, I think. It's good to see you."

"Me? I've been worried sick about you!" Archie scowled, "And the only way I knew you weren't maimed somehow was by adding the hair you sent to this Polyjuice and then counting the limbs after I'd changed."

"What's to worry about?" Rigel asked innocently, "I'm not the one running around my school yelling about trolls and stealing illegal potions."

"Hermione stole the illegal potions," Archie said quickly, "And I don't know what you've been doing, that's the point. James said that Dad said that you'd been attacked by another student, but he didn't know why or how, just that you said you were alright. If it had been *actually* me at Hogwarts, then it would have been fine, because everyone knows I don't hold back if something's really wrong, but if they'd known it was *you* sending those letters like I did they'd be up in arms too. Do you know why?"

"Archie-"

"I'll tell you *why*," Archie said, raising his voice to cover hers, "Because even if you were *dying* you would never tell anyone! So you're gonna tell me everything right now or I swear to Merlin I'll, I'll-Ow!" Her look alike suddenly twitched and groaned. Archie doubled over, clutching his stomach as his skin started rippling, his muscles and Merlin knew what else sliding around inside of him. Polyjuice transformations were really quite gruesome to watch from the outside, Rigel decided.

A minute or two later, a panting Archie lay in his own body on the deep green comforter.

"Well, that sucks," he said. "But anyway, where was I?"

"Irrational demands?"

"Oh, yes," he cleared his throat, "You will tell me every single thing that happened while you were pretending to be me and then you will listen to all the things you did wrong-and I know there's gonna be a lot of them, because the only things you do right are Quidditch and Potions-and then you're never to do any of it again, understood?"

"Yes, mum."

"I... hmm, we seem to be experiencing a role-reversal," Archie frowned, "Aren't you supposed to lecture me about the stupid stuff I

do? Must be this Polyjuice. It's making me confused. Hurry and change so we can talk properly."

Rigel rolled her eyes, but a few minutes later she felt her insides squirm and her skin start to burn. When she was herself again, she and Archie turned their backs and switched clothes. She looked over herself in the mirror and sighed happily. She had her favorite blue sweater on and a pair of jeans that were slightly feminine in cut and she felt true freedom for the first time in months.

"I never knew how much I liked being *me*," she said reverently, accepting her glasses almost gleefully and perching them smartly on her nose where they belonged.

"I feel you," Archie was stretching his newly-acquired limbs, "Even though all I changed was my name, I still feel much lighter now that I'm 'Archie' again."

"I guess that makes me 'Harry' again," she smiled. Yes. Harry. Perfect.

"Okay, *Harry*, then start going over this last semester with me," Archie said, "And I don't mean the lies you're going to help me practice telling our parents, I mean what really happened."

Harriett sighed, but she started at the beginning, knowing that unless Archie knew everything that transpired when she was him and vice versa they might get their stories mixed up one day, which would be catastrophic.

When she was finished, Archie blinked several times, then said, "That is so wicked."

"What?" Harry stared at him in complete bemusement.

"Oh, not the part where you almost get your hands paralyzed, that part stinks, but your magic is so cool! It's like you have this *power* in you. It just whipped out and disintegrated that bug thing," Archie said

excitedly, "And the part where your stubbed tow healed over automatically-if my magic did that I could save anyone I wanted just by wishing for it!"

"Archie, it's not a comic book," Harriett frowned, "This is my life, and power like this is dangerous."

"Only to people who try to hurt you," Archie argued, "You can't honestly think it would turn on *you* ."

"What's to stop it?" she asked, "What if I got so embarrassed one day I wished I could disappear, and then I did. What if I was mad at you, and my magic lashed out? Don't you see? People shouldn't always get whatever they want or even what they need, because those wants and needs conflict with other people's wants and needs, and in the end it isn't fairness or justice that decides, but strength."

"So what?" Archie shrugged, "You're acting like this power was given to Grindelwald, but it belongs to you."

"Exactly."

" *Exactly*, exactly," Archie said, "Harry, you're the most cool, collected, level-headed, fair-"

"Don't forget honest," she put in wryly.

"-just, kind-hearted-no, don't snort at me-hard-working, deserving person I've ever met, and if you reach the point that your magic lashes out at someone, you can bet they're gonna deserve it. Look at Lee. Before that it never hurt anyone," Archie put a hand over her mouth to quiet her, his grey eyes perfectly serious, "Even when we were kids, and you used to freak out on the rare occasion that you did accidental magic, I never saw what the big deal was. You were scared it was violent and would hurt someone *but it never did*. It's because deep down your magic wouldn't do something abhorrent to you, because it's a part of you."

"You can't know that," she said quietly beneath his hand.

"I can think it," he laughed as he wiped his hand on the bed covers, "And I certainly believe it. You're a good person, Harry, so of course your magic is going to do good things."

Harry thought of Snape's wooden chair bursting into a shower of needles, then she thought about Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy, and where the line between good and not-good could be drawn, and she didn't think it would really be that simple. But to Archie, life really was that simple, so because she couldn't bear to spoil it for him, she changed the subject.

She had a lot to think about, but thinking about things wasn't something she did very well. Maybe her magic was mostly benign, but the point was that it was far too independent. It was beyond her conscious control, and that meant it was beyond the bounds of traditional morality that most witches and wizards adhered to for convention's sake. The only thing keeping the people close to her safe from her magic, it seemed to Harry, was her own inner moral compass, which, like every human being's, could swing wildly out of synch the moment her emotions or desires diverged from her rational constraints. It was dangerous, and like all dangerous things, needed to be monitored. But how could she monitor her own unconscious? You can't help the things you desire, can you?

Archie told her all about his year, the training he'd gotten in his basic Healing classes, and his friend Hermione, of whom she was expected to speak fondly. She learned the names of his teachers, some key classmates in the Healing tract, and in turn she told him major characteristics of Pansy and Draco, Fred and George, Ron and Neville, and of course her work with Professor Snape, though she wasn't sure if they'd be telling Sirius and James about that just yet. When they thought they were ready to face their parents again, they headed downstairs.

"There you two are," Lily said when they found the adults lounging in the kitchen, probably because it was the room with the least garish

color scheme.

"Hi, mum," Harry smiled happily up at the red-haired woman and stepped forward to give her a rare hug.

Lily gave her a strange look, but hugged her back briefly, "Uh, hello darling. My, my, two hugs in one day, you must have missed me more than you let on," she teased.

Harry smiled sheepishly at her mother but inside she was wincing. Of course 'Harry' already hugged her mum at the airport. She berated herself for thinking she could relax now that she was herself again. This was the most crucial stage. This is where the two lives overlapped, with the people who knew them best, and where they had to explain away any discrepancies. She had to keep her wits.

"Archie, come here, I barely got to see you before you ran off upstairs," Lily said, hugging Archie warmly, "Harry, aren't you going to give your Uncle a proper hello?"

Harry felt extremely foolish for going over and hugging Sirius as if it were the first time she was seeing him that day, but she greeted him in her usual manner, and she barely stopped herself from hugging her father and Remus in the same way. She promised herself to subtly work one in later to make herself feel better. She could tell Archie was itching to pounce on his dad, too, but he just grimaced slightly at her, so she sent him a commiserating smile.

As usual, Lily and Sirius cooked dinner. Those two, who so seldom agreed on anything, were like well-oiled clockwork in the kitchen. When Lily chopped, Sirius stirred, when Sirius put something in the oven, Lily set the timer. Even more amazing than the way they worked together was the way the food tasted when they worked together. It was like adding Lily's cooking to Sirius's cooking and multiplying by a factor of ten. Small wonder the families ate together as often as they did apart.

Dinner conversation should have been easy. They should have been able to fall back into old patterns and jokes as if they'd never been away. And it was, and they could, and yet...

"So, how do you like Hogwarts?"

A swift kick from Archie under the table kept Harry from answering automatically.

"It's great," Archie said enthusiastically, "The castle is grand, and I've made loads of friends, and the classes are actually kind of fun."

"So who've you pranked so far?" James asked eagerly, seemingly oblivious to his wife's eye-roll.

"Well... uh," Archie shot her a *now what?* look.

"You haven't pranked anyone yet?" Sirius looked scandalized, and was sending embarrassed glances at his friends, prompting another eye-roll from Lily.

"Give him a break," Harry said, "You guys were ground breakers, but it's hard to get in on the bottom floor when there's a tradition in place."

"Yeah," Archie smiled secretively at Harry, "I was involved in a lot of pranks, like fireworks set off in the Hufflepuff pumpkins, but I've been holding back on doing anything all on my own. I did start a pranking war between Slytherin and Gryffindor, so I've got a pretty idea of what the top players are capable of. Soon I can start on my own stuff."

"Good idea, getting a handle on the competition first," James said slowly.

"And without making yourself seem like a threat," Remus added thoughtfully, "If you come off as a joiner instead of a doer, they'll underestimate you."

"Oh-ho how did we end up with such smart kids, Prongs?" Sirius reached over to clap Archie on the back.

"You had good taste in women," Remus said dryly.

"It's true," James sighed, "Merlin knows all of Harry's brains come from her mother."

"Good thing, too," Lily smirked, "How are Healing classes, Harry? I was a bit surprised you went that route."

"Oh, well, Archie and I have it all worked out," Harry said casually, "We're going to try and fulfill each other's dreams." She ignored the slightly concerned look Remus was giving her, "In that vein, Healing classes are great! Soon I'll be able to mend broken bones, I think."

"Wicked!" Sirius crowed, "Ooh, Harry, I have a bruise from setting up the pie launcher earlier-heal it! Heal it!"

"What pie launcher?" Lily glared.

"Not the one at your house, Lil, the other-uh... I mean... quick, Harry, heal me up before your mum murders me."

"SIRIUS ORION BLACK!"

"Sorry, Uncle Padfoot, I'm, uh, not allowed to do magic outside of school," Harry said. *Not to mention the fact that I have no idea how to heal a bruise. I mean, I read up on the theory, but I've never actually tried...*

"Oh, come on, the house is warded," Sirius cajoled.

"I just *know* you're not encouraging my child to break the Decree for the Restriction of Underage Sorcery," Lily said, voice sugar-coated with sweet poison.

"It's actually called the Decree for the *Reasonable* Restriction of Underage Sorcery," Sirius began, "And I was only pointing out that-"

"I don't care what it's called!" Lily snapped, "Our children are not getting expelled because you bumped your knee setting up pranks in your own house."

"It was my *elbow*, Lily."

"Oh, you're impossible, Sirius Black."

"Even if I was possible, it would never have worked between you and me," he sighed regretfully. He then hightailed it out of the kitchen before Lily had time to pin him to the table with one of the butter knives.

"Just another quiet dinner at Grimmauld Place," Remus hummed merrily as he sipped his pumpkin juice.

"And since I have a feeling I know where the pies that were supposed to be for dessert went... can Archie and I be excused?" Harry asked.

James looked torn between wanting pie and wanting to see pie launched, but Remus excused them with a cheerful wink and they retreated to Archie's room.

"So..."

"Yeah."

"We haven't got it good enough," Archie said.

"It's because we're both trying to be two people simultaneously," Harry frowned, "And neither of them are completely honest, so there's really three versions of every story, and we can't switch between them easily enough. It would be better if we were pretending to be just one other person, so we could keep lies and truth strictly divided."

"What, like, switch places for good? Because it's a good idea, but I don't think that would work," Archie said gently.

"Oh, shut it," Harry tossed a pillow at her cousin, "Look, what if instead of me trying to be you and you trying to be me and then getting confused on who's who, we both try to be the same person more or less?"

"Okay... you lost me."

"We homogenize our alternate selves," Harry said, almost excited at the idea-it was so perfect. "So Rigel aka my alternate self, learns healing and starts pranking, while Harry-the-boy aka your alternate self, learns Potions and starts playing beater in Quidditch-but not just our alternate selves. Us too! So in the end we're the same."

"The same... yeah, so, we'd both end up being able to do and know everything all four of our personas are supposed to be able to know and do, so we can never be caught out when someone asks me to make a Potion or you to cure a cold!" Archie grinned, "That's a really good idea, if we can pull it off."

"It'll mean a lot of extra studying, for both of us," Harry agreed, "But this is what had to happen anyway, for us to be able to switch back eventually, right?"

"Right. So you become a Potions Master, but I study Potions too and I become a Healer but you study Healing in too, so then when we're seventeen, I take the Healing Exam as myself and you can take the Potions Mastery as yourself and... won't everyone be really surprised? Or will we tell them we're learning both?"

"Who cares if they're surprised?" she asked, "The point will be that if someone demands I do something I should know how to do after seven years in America I better be able to do it, or it'll be obvious what we've done. This way, no one can prove a thing."

"Unless they ask AIM why Harry was a *boy* when she attended," Archie said archly.

"I've got it covered," Harry said. "It's not illegal to hide your sex-just really weird. And I've got no problem being weird. If anyone asks, I pretended to be a boy all those years for, I don't know, kicks. But this means no one can ever know for *sure* that you're a boy, Archie."

"Yeah, yeah, no flashing my junk around," Archie nodded, "I'll be the shyest boy at AIM. Wait, does this mean no sex until I'm seventeen?"

"No, Archie, you just can't have sex while pretending to be me. Have all the sex you want over the summer," Harry said, amused.

"Okay, what about when we're older? Soon we won't look so much alike, you know. I'll get way taller, for one thing, and then when we switch back at seventeen there will be a lot of fingers pointing to us and saying 'that's not Arcturus' and 'why does Harriett Potter look so much like Rigel Black?'" Archie pointed out.

"I'm working on that, too," Harry said, "I'm going to try and come up with a variation on Polyjuice that will get us through the last few years of school, but it's still in the conception stage. Just don't worry about it for now, okay?"

"Okay, I trust you," Archie shrugged, "And if worst comes to worst we can both pretend to decide to get sex changes when we turn seventeen. That's sure to be a crowd pleaser."

Harry laughed, "You first, Miss Black."

"No, I quite insist, Mr. Potter."

"So, getting back on topic, we're going to have to spend as much time as possible studying together," Harry said, "We'll construct a syllabus for all the Hogwarts and AIM classes we're taking and then switch. Most of it will overlap, we just have to make sure we fill in the cracks in each other's knowledge."

"Man, it's like attending two schools at once," Archie groaned, "Who knew chasing your dreams was so hard."

"You can back out now, if you want," Harry said quietly. I'll cook up some Spattergroit for us to catch, we'll be out of school for a few months, and when we go back it won't be surprising that we look slightly different. Just say the word."

Archie took a deep breath, "Never. We're in this together, Harry, and I am going to be the second-best Potions brewer in our generation by the time we're through."

"And I'll be the second-best Healer."

"You'd better be," Archie sniffed, "If you pick up Healing faster than me I shall be very put out."

"You won't be worried when you see my wand-work."

"Oh, that's right I haven't even seen your new wand yet. Where is it?" Archie asked expectantly.

"Um, I think it's in my-I mean, *your* trunk," she paused to think about it. "Maybe."

"Jeeze, no wonder it's mad at you," Archie shook his head, "You've practically abandoned the poor thing."

"Have not," Harry frowned, annoyed with herself for feeling guilty about it. All the same, she crossed to the trunk and dug around in it until she found her wand rolled up in a pair of old socks. She winced at the magical back-lashing she was likely to get from the phoenix wand for that indignity, but it thrummed happily, almost purring like a cat, beneath her hand, so she guessed it was more forgiving than she'd thought. Or else it was saving up its energy to catch her unaware.

"Dad has probably come out of hiding by now," Archie said.

"That or Mum's pied him," Harry muttered, "I'm assuming your homework and stuff is in my trunk at home, so tomorrow let's

arrange to meet in the Potter Library for our first study session. We'll figure out what subjects we both know and what one of us needs to learn from the other and then go from there. Bring the school bag in your trunk with you, it has all the assignments I need, okay?"

"Deal," Archie gave a reassuring thumbs-up, "See you tomorrow, Harry. And don't worry-we'll get through this firestorm."

"And find stars on the other side, right, Archie?" It was something Aunt Diana used to say.

"And find *worlds* on the other side, Harry."

"You're a bit late," Harry commented as Archie drooped down into the seat next to her at the table in the Potter Family Library, "Rough morning?"

"I had to feed the snakes," he said dazedly, "When on earth did Sirius start liking snakes? I've never even seen one before and now we have twelve. Here's your bag, by the way." He dumped it on an empty seat.

"Thanks," Harry said absently, "And what's wrong with snakes?"

"Nothing, if they're carved into a shield or painted on a tapestry," Archie screwed up his face, "But twelve live snakes in our courtyard? My dad's crazy. And the little one kept climbing on me or following me around. I couldn't tell what the damn thing wanted but it tickled and it was slimy and-"

"Snakes aren't slimy," Harry said.

"Well, the *idea* of a snake crawling all over me is slimy."

"And what's so confusing about what they want? They're pretty chatty from what I saw, though I must admit your dad needs more friends if he's resorting to snakes for company," Harry turned a page

in Archie's Healing textbook and missed the strange look her cousin was giving her.

"They don't actually *talk*, Harry, they just dance around if you poke them with a stick."

"Poke them with a-never mind, you Blacks are crazy," Harry rolled their eyes, "And of course they talk. Unless you're suggesting they communicate mind-to-mind."

"Well, they talk to each other, I guess, but I don't see how that's supposed to help me understand them," Archie said puzzledly.

"What? Archie, you aren't making any sense. They speak the Queen's English, same as any of us," Harry was looking at Archie just as strangely as he was looking at her.

"Well... one of us is crazy," Archie decided, his expression clearly indicating which one of them he thought it was, despite the fact that the craziness of the Blacks was a well established point.

Harry narrowed her eyes at him and he held his hands up quickly.

"I'm just saying," he said, "Let's floo back to my place and figure out who's right, shall we?"

Harry half-suspected it was an elaborate ploy to get out of studying, but she went along with it, knowing they'd never get anything done until the great mystery was sorted.

They flooed to Grimmauld and went straight to the courtyard. It was teeming with snakes sunbathing in the artificial light. When Archie stepped into the grass the little snake, who seemed to be the youngest and most inquisitive of the bunch, made a beeline for his shoes.

"No, no, stay away, little snake," Archie laughed uncomfortably as the snake neared.

" *Why iss the One-Who-Tasstess-Like-Baby-Dog backing away from uss ?*" the snake hissed in serpentine puzzlement, " *Doess he want to play run-and-catch-prey ?*"

The snake coiled in playful, hypnotic movements, and Archie gulped loudly, "Harry, help me, Harry, the snake wants to eat me."

"Eat you?" Harry stared at her cousin's alarmed face, "She just wants to play."

"Play?" Archie's voice cracked slightly, "It's rearing to strike! It's going to kill me!"

"Oh, she doesn't even have fangs," Harry said, turning to the snake, " *Do you ?*"

The snake's head whipped around like a compass needle pointing north. All the other snakes in the clearing froze for an instant, then turned toward Harry as if *she* had just become the sun.

"Harry, what did you just do?" Archie whispered, watching the snakes watch Harry, "Was that a spell or something? Is this a prank you and my dad cooked up? Because I like the initiative but it's really starting to freak me out."

Harry frowned at Archie and shook her head, "I don't know what you're talking about. I don't know why they're doing this either." She looked at the snakes again, " *What do you want?* "

" *Sshe sspeakss,*" one of the older snakes said softly.

" *Whosse clutch did you hatch from, sspeaker ?*" another asked imperiously.

" *What do you mean?* " she asked them, " *What'ss a sspeaker and why doess it matter who my parentss are?* "

"Harry, stop this now, okay?"

Harry whipped her head around to snap at Archie, "Stop what?"

"Stop hissing!"

"I'm not-"

" *A sspeaker sspeakss to ssnakess, of coursse .*"

"-hissing. *Wait, what?* "

"What?"

"You can't understand me?"

"I can when you look at me."

" *Can you understand me ?*"

" *Of coursse we can .*"

"What in Merlin's name is going on?"

Harry looked very deliberately at Archie, "I can talk to snakes."

"Yeah, I sort of got that part," Archie looked nearly hysterical at that point, so Harry said a quick goodbye to the snakes and hauled him inside so that they could figure things out.

"We're going to the Black Library," she said, pulling him along with her, "I know the Potters have nothing about snake-charming, or whatever that was."

"That's because it's practically Dark Arts!" Archie hissed, almost sounding like a snake speaker himself.

They raided the Black Library for every book on snake-speaking they could find; admittedly there weren't many.

"It says here it's an inherited trait," Harry commented, scanning a passage from a diary of a Black wife who'd been having an affair with a snake-speaker: a parselmouth, as it was apparently termed. "I wonder which side of the family I get it from."

"Well, it's listed in *Magical Inheritances* as a Dark trait," Archie said.

"How can it be Dark Arts if it happens on accident?" Harry frowned, "It's probably more like a Metamorphmagus kind of a thing."

"But only Dark witches and wizards speak to snakes," Archie complained, "Merlin, if people hear you doing that at school, I'll never get hired as a Healer."

"Well, I won't do it around other people, okay?" Harry rolled her eyes. Honestly, it wasn't that big of a deal. Although she could probably get some pretty rare ingredients hassle-free if she could talk the snakes into donating instead of trying to steal eggs or skins like most Potion-harvesters did.

"But you said yourself you can't control it," Archie pointed out, "And I have a feeling this can't be taught like Potions or Healing. If it gets out that one of us can speak to snakes and the other can't, it'll be pretty obvious which is which."

"As long as I don't talk while looking at live snakes, who'd ever know?" Harry shrugged, "It's not like it's tattooed on my forehead. And we don't actually sleep with snakes in Slytherin, you know."

Archie took several cleansing breaths, and then said, "Okay. Okay, I'm sorry, I'm done freaking out now. You can talk to snakes. So what? No biggie. Remus can talk to wolves during the full moon. And my dad talks to other dogs all the time-well, if butt-sniffing counts as talking-but the point is, it's practically normal. Yeah, it's even kind of cool."

"I'm glad you think so. Can we get back to studying now?" Harry checked the clock, "We've wasted a lot of time already, and I have

Flint's assignments to do as well as my own, plus learning Healing in the next two weeks. Also, we should try out that mail-redirecting spell your friend from school helped you find. We'll need it before Christmas."

"Merlin, nothing fazes you, Harry, I swear. Anyway, I still can't believe Marcus is making you do all his assignments. He's always so cool at the Quidditch games. I thought he was my friend."

"He is your friend," Harry said, "Just not mine. He doesn't even know me, so of course he'll take advantage of an ace that just waltzes into his hand."

"Still," Archie said, "He'd better get me a kick-ass Christmas present."

[HpHpHp}

Winter break passed quickly after that, a long and tiring blur of studying and dodging awkward questions they weren't yet prepared to answer from their families.

Christmas morning dawned cold and grey (except in the ever-sunny courtyard, which both Harry and Archie had been avoiding like the plague). The Potters and Remus had all stayed the night at Grimmauld so the kids (who vehemently protested being referred to as such) could open presents together.

After Christmas brunch and opening their presents with their families, Archie and Harry snuck off to their room so that the adults could talk about adult things and the cousins could talk about... other adult things. Mostly they had to sort out gifts properly. Harry had gotten a basic Healer's kit, which she would pack with 'her' trunk so that Archie would have it, but she'd also gotten a beautiful set of platinum stirring rods to match her Potions knives from Remus and her mother (so that she could continue her passion even at AIM), which she gave to Archie so that he could pack them to ensure she'd

have them as Rigel when they switched again. And so it went in that vein.

Harry also handed over a heavy package she'd gotten by owl that morning. "This one's from Hermione," she explained, and she told herself she wasn't at all jealous at the way Archie's face lit up. It was thanks to Hermione Granger that the owls hadn't given them away, after all. They'd found a charm to conditionally re-route owl post to a different name and authorizing the spell with their magical signatures. Archie had performed the charm, since Harry still didn't mess with her wand unless she had to, and it looked like it had worked. They hadn't changed where letters addressed to Harry Potter went yet, so Harry still got Hermione's, but they'd transferred Rigel Black's letters to Archie for the holidays, and he'd gotten all of Harry's friends' post without trouble. Just before they switched back, Archie would fix the charm so that Harry Potter's letters got taken to Archie and Rigel Black's as well as Archie Black's got delivered to her.

"A book! I might have known," Archie chuckled as he unwrapped *A Healer's Guide to Magical Plants and Fungi* .

"That ought to help you with Potions, too," Harry noted, "And it's not like you can talk about giving people books."

Archie had given her a book called *Occlumency: Fortresses of the Mind* that he'd found in the Black Library. He'd said, "I don't fully understand it, but you said you wanted a way to stop your magic from reacting to your emotions, and this is supposed to help control emotions, so maybe it will help." She'd been more than grateful and vowed to add Occlumency to the list of things she'd study in her ever-diminishing free time.

"Yeah," he said vaguely, paging through the book, which appeared to be extremely well illustrated, "Oh, I have your other presents, too." Archie rummaged through his closet and came out with two similarly wrapped silver and green packages, "These came a few days ago, with a note not to open until today."

"From Draco and Pansy?" Harry smiled. They must have shopped together. She hoped they liked the things she'd gotten them, though it wasn't much.

Harry had sent Pansy a cookbook of dessert recipes and Draco a scarf that looked like a handkerchief until it sensed the person carrying it was cold, at which point it lengthened to its proper size and grew warm. It was a kind of joke for the time he'd forgotten his in the Owlrey. She'd also given them each a bracelet of braided unicorn hair dipped in a simple potion to keep it from fraying. Harry had a matching bracelet, and hoped they understood the significance. They were friendship bracelets, of a kind. Unicorn hair because Pansy liked them so much and because before she'd traded her ash wand for the phoenix one they'd all three had unicorn hair as a wand core in common. They were neither too masculine nor too girly, she hoped, and she'd had the hair already in her Potion's kit so it didn't cost her much.

Harry reached to take the gifts from Archie's hands, but her cousin pulled back, hesitating with a peculiar look in his eyes.

"What?"

Archie was staring at the elegantly wrapped gifts in his hands, "It's just... Parkinson and Malfoy... it's weird, you know?"

"We're friends," Harry said evenly, "Nothing weird about friends getting each other Christmas gifts."

"I know, but, well, don't take this the wrong way," Archie said, "But you know *they're* the reason you have to wear a disguise every day in the first place."

"They're just kids like us," Harry defended them, "They weren't responsible for anything."

"No, but their parents were," Archie said unhappily, not looking at her, "And you talk as if you like their parents. I can tell you think

they're charming and elegant, and I'm sure they are, but," he shrugged, "I just worry about you getting mixed up in blood politics."

"I'm not."

"You think that, but this is how it starts. They get you young. I'm well out of it off in America, but you..." he gazed sadly at her, "You know I often think you got the raw end of the deal. I don't have to lie about anything except my name. You've got to hide your feelings, thoughts, abilities-yes, I'm counting parseltongue as an ability-and even your sex. And if we get caught, well..."

"It's my soul that gets snacked on by the dementors," Harry said coolly, "I know. And I took that risk when I came up with the idea. I knew all this when I started, and to me it's worth it, okay? I promise, I'm happier doing this than I would have been at AIM, no matter how good their Potions tract it. It can't compare to working directly under Professor Snape."

"Okay, but be careful, will you?" Archie punched her lightly on the arm, "If you go and get yourself 'purified' by the Cow Party I'll never be able to find another Archie Black look alike on such short notice."

"Don't worry, Arch," Harry punched him back softly, "I won't forget who the enemy is."

[end of chapter sixteen].

A/N: So just so no one cries foul play (and so people who actually read these notes will have a leg up on the story), traditionally the Gaunts (and therefore Riddle) would have been descendent from both Slytherin and Cadmus Peverell separately, but in this fic Slytherin was a descendent of Cadmus (through the female line, and I've definitely made the brothers alive much earlier than they were in Canon) so in this way: yes parselmouth is inherited, no Harry is not a Horcrux, yes Riddle is descendent from Slytherin and got the parseltongue that way, no Slytherin was not the first wizard to speak to snakes-Slytherin himself inherited it from Cadmus Peverell's line,

yes all three Peverell brothers had that ability, meaning that the two of them who had children (Ignotus and Cadmus) passed the trait down, however recessively it may be in their respective lines. Make sense? So Harry got the ability 'fair and square' so to speak from the Potter's, who are descendant from Ignotus, but it might help to think that Fate is stepping in to bring Harry and Riddle ever closer in their inescapable clash. Harry must come to his notice somehow, right? But don't worry about it for now. Thanks for reading ^^ .

Chapter 17

A/N: Updates are gonna be slower until I graduate-so sorry, I'll make it up this summer, dear readers. For now, thanks to my inspiring reviewers: Kitsune-No-Youko-Sora, Vaughn Tyler, Son of Whitebeard, TearfullPixie, J.F.C., Baltaine Shadow, zeichnerinaga, samwaffleman, The Chaos Legionnaire, Giselle Pink, and Delia- since I can't PM you, thank you so much for you kind reviews :).

A/N2: This one is a little episodic, but I hope you enjoy. Any Alanna fans will no doubt see some elements bleeding through in this chapter. ^^ I don't own or charge for anything in this fic, so consider JKR and Pierce's bits disclaimed.

The Pureblood Pretense:

Chapter 17:

The break had been exhausting. Rigel-for indeed, she was Rigel once more with her dull grey contacts and her cousin's last name- watched the other Slytherins in the compartment smirk and joke, clearly rejuvenated from their two week vacation and felt something uncomfortably bitter in her heart. It was jealousy, she recognized with a detached sense of self-disappointment. She was somehow jealous of their relaxed, boring lives, and she turned her gaze to the window to try and suppress the unworthy feeling. She slowed her breathing and turned her mind inwards, like the book on Occlumency said to. *Empty my mind. My mind is a fortress. My mind is an empty fortress... but then, who will guard it? An empty fortress wouldn't be fortifying anything. Maybe if I have some mind-guards... yes... no wait, empty, empty -drat.*

Rigel sighed at the blurred scenery beyond the windowpane. She'd read the first few chapters of the book Archie had gotten her for Christmas, but she didn't think she was really getting anywhere. It said before she learned anything else, she had to learn to empty her

mind. This seemed, to Rigel, who had always sought to fill her mind with everything related to Potions she could, to be a rather silly way of making the mind into a fortress. Unless it was a fortress of stupidity, but she didn't see how that would help her control her emotions. Perhaps she could find another book at Hogwarts to supplement her reading. Not that her reading load needed any supplementing. She already had several thick Healing tomes from the Potter Library in her trunk to peruse whenever she wasn't doing regular work or Flint's work. What an illusion free time was turning out to be. On the other hand, she had chosen this path-complaining about it would be just as unworthy as being jealous of her year mates for something they couldn't help.

"Hey, Black," Nott drew her attention away from the countryside, "Did you finish the Potions essay on the list of rare ingredient properties? I've got enough inches and I looked up most of them, but I couldn't find anything about limbus grass in my parents' library."

"Rigel did that essay months ago," Draco said.

"Did you look under truth serums?" Rigel asked, ignoring Draco's not-so-subtle boasting on her behalf, "It's too rudimentary to be in any serious Potions manuals, but you wouldn't have found it with herbal remedies either since it's considered somewhat dark."

"Oh, I see," Nott was obviously confused as to why she'd done the work early but he politely turned to Zabini and said, "You have a book on precursors to Veritaserum, don't you, Blaise?"

"Indeed," the reserved boy said quietly, "I left it in the dormitories over break. You may borrow it after the feast."

Greengrass, who through sheer audacity had wrangled a seat in their compartment once again, was not so inclined to overlook the oddity in Rigel's schoolwork schedule.

"What, does the teacher's pet get a list of the assignments ahead of time so he can look smart by memorizing the answers early?" the girl

lifted an eyebrow in a crude imitation of the kind of eyebrow-lifting Rigel had seen Narcissa Malfoy and Rose Parkinson employ when the occasion merited it.

"Oh, my, didn't you know?" Pansy sent Greengrass a sympathetic look that oozed social poison, "Professor Snape has taken Rigel under his tutelage. He's on an accelerated learning program that will put him equal to the level of a post-NEWT student by the end of his third year."

Rigel bore the other students' awed looks stoically, though inside she marveled at Pansy's ability to fabricate so effortlessly. It was true that she was in an accelerated learning regimen, but Pansy didn't know the specifics, and the goal wasn't to bring her up to seventh-year standards by third. Instead, she would spend the first three weeks of each semester learning the theory behind what the rest of her grade would learn for the entire semester, then for the remaining three months or so Rigel would study things outside of the Hogwarts curriculum entirely, so that she wouldn't be too bored brewing in class, but would also learn all the things an Apprentice traditionally learned after his NEWT's. Professor Snape had agreed to give her a two-year trial run, and if at the end of those two years she proved competent, she would be given official Apprentice status. If she pulled it off, she would be the youngest Apprentice since the modern schooling system had been implemented.

"That's impossible," Greengrass said, though she didn't sound entirely sure of herself, "You'd never be able to keep up in the rest of your classes if you did that."

"So what?" Rigel shrugged, "All I care about is Potions."

Draco and Pansy exchanged rueful looks at that statement.

"Is that why you always just blow things up in Defense instead of learning the actual spells?" Nott asked curiously.

Rigel tried not to scowl, "The unfortunate explosions I am prone to in Professor Quirrell's class have nothing to do with my interest in Potions. My wand and I have differing views on what constitutes a flick and what constitutes a tap, and although I've taken the high road and agreed to disagree, my wand frequently takes matters into its own hands."

Nott laughed and even Zabini smirked a bit in amusement, neither knowing how true her words had been, but Greengrass ruined the joke by cutting across them.

"So in other words... you aren't good at anything else?" Greengrass smirked at Rigel, who lifted an unconcerned eyebrow in response.

"Who asked you?" Draco snapped. Rigel sent him a grateful smile at his defense, but shook her head as Pansy looked ready to tear into the other girl.

Unexpectedly, Zabini spoke up, "You ought to be careful what you assume, Miss Greengrass," he said, dark eyes giving an impression of deep fathoms that was only enhanced by the sly twist to his lips, "There is more to Rigel Black than Potions, you simply haven't had the honor of witnessing his true power just yet."

"And I suppose you have?" Greengrass rolled her eyes, "All you ever do is throw out obscure remarks like you know something the rest of us don't. Well, I think you're full of dragon dung."

"And I think you should leave," Draco glared at her, "We don't need people who toss around crude analogies and insinuate things out of spite in this compartment."

"You can't just kick me out whenever you don't like what I have to say," she fumed.

"I can't, but Crabbe and Goyle can. They're just one compartment over, you know, and they won't care how much money your daddy has when they toss you out on your ear."

"Ugh, *fine*," she spat, flinging open the compartment door and slamming it hard enough to rattle the window behind her.

The first years looked assessingly at one another in the silence that followed.

"All in favor of never letting that shrew into our compartment again?" Nott said wryly.

"Seconded."

"Agreed."

"Yes."

"Rigel?" Nott prompted.

She pretended to think very carefully about it, "Well, we still have an empty seat," she noted, "So it depends on who we have to let sit with us in her stead."

They mulled it over for a moment.

"Crabbe or Goyle?" Nott suggested.

"They really come as a set," Draco said.

"Davis isn't so bad... actually, yes, she is," Pansy sighed.

"Why can't we just put a trunk on one of the seats?" Nott asked.

"And have it fall on my toes every time the train brakes?" Zabini sniffed, "I rather think not."

"We'll figure it out before June," Draco said, "And besides, you're assuming there could be someone *worse* than Greengrass."

"Good point," Rigel grinned, "Motion passed."

After the Welcoming Feast, Rigel had waved her friends on to the common room while she headed to Professor Snape's office instead. She wasn't sure he'd be there the first night of the new term, but she had learned that Snape was something of a workaholic, so the chances were good.

She fiddled with her unicorn-hair bracelet as she stood before the familiar oak door. Pansy and Draco had both been wearing their gifts on the train, from which she inferred their appreciation. For their part, Pansy and Draco had shopped together for Rigel's gifts. Draco sent her a pureblood wizarding genealogy. Though the Black Family Library had several reaching back into the middle ages, the one Malfoy sent her was entirely up to date. It had all the who's who of modern wizarding society, and many of the newest entries were hand-written in her friend's carefully elegant handwriting.

Pansy had given her a blank sort of address book, but instead of short entries for name, number, and address like you might see in the muggle world, this book was entirely Slytherin in design. She had already filled out the first few pages with notable students Rigel was acquainted with, like Rosier and Rookwood. Each entry had a full-color moving photograph of the person (all obviously taken without the subject's awareness) as well as an abbreviated family tree, notes on the subject's strengths and weaknesses, talents and political clout, ambitions and dirty secrets. It was practically a book of dossiers. Pansy had only filled out the basics so far—it was up to Rigel to be Slytherin enough to fill the pages with truly invaluable information.

The silver door handle glinted mockingly at her as she stood before it. She should be comfortable enough to seek her Professor out by now, but the man intimidated the heck out of her even when he was being relatively kind. He was everything she wanted to one day be, and for all her efforts she felt so inadequate and weak standing before him. *Unworthy*, she thought, trying to stifle the bitterness that crept up her throat, *I feel unworthy around him more than anyone, because he and I have the same ambition, but he didn't have to lie*

his way to the top . Who was she, a dishonest little upstart, to seek out a Potions Master like Snape?

Shaking off thoughts which were not only unproductive but which would be down right dangerous if she were carrying her presumptuous phoenix wand, Rigel rapped in what she imagined to be an unassuming way on the heavy door.

"Enter if you must."

Rigel set her shoulders and stepped into the office. Snape had long since replaced the jars of pickled ingredients on the shelves around the room, though neither had ever again suggested she compensate the professor for them or anything else. Really, it was stupid of Rigel to offer in the first place. Anyone with eyes could see how proud the man was. It was in the tilt of his jaw and the sharp defensiveness in his eyes. There was pride in every vertebrae, in every reserved gesture and in every exact syllable he uttered. Rigel didn't really understand pride-perhaps because she had never done anything she was particularly proud of-but she could recognize it, in a doting parent's smile or in a hippogriff's stiff neck.

"Good evening, Professor."

"Mr. Black," Snape looked up from the notes he was jotting in the margins of a thick, well-read tomb. "I assume you have your essays."

"Yes, sir," she placed the three scrolls she had brought with her on Snape's desk and hesitated just long enough for him to notice.

"Was there something else?"

"Yes, that is..." Rigel clasped her hands behind her back in an effort to stop their ridiculous trembling. Snape wasn't going to cut all ties with her just for asking. The worst he could do was refuse. "I was wondering if I might appropriate one of the empty rooms in the dungeons for a lab?"

Snape scowled and opened his mouth to reply, but then he paused. He narrowed his eyes in a piercing stare and Rigel tried to look trustworthy. She thought vaguely that *trying* to *look* trustworthy probably indicated somehow that she wasn't before Snape leaned back in his chair and said, "Giving a student license to brew unknown potions while unsupervised in a dungeon sounds dangerous, foolish, and unnecessary."

Rigel winced, but nodded in acceptance. It did sound rather reckless when put like that.

"Convince me."

Her eyes widened, but she wasted no time wondering at the rare mood she seemed to have caught the professor in. "I enjoy the theoretical work you've been setting me, sir," she explained, "But I think I would also benefit from practical, well, *practice* . I would pick the room very carefully; somewhere a bit off of the main tunnels so that I wouldn't be distracted by students passing by, but close enough to your office that you could reach me if such an event became necessary. I would provide you with a list of the potions I intended to practice ahead of time, and all potions would be turned in to you once completed, so that you would know I wasn't keeping the potions when I'd finished. I would also keep diligent logs of any ingredients I used from the school stores, which I would also run by you ahead of time."

It was as impossible as ever to fathom Snape's expression, but when she paused for breath he inclined his head as if to say, *I'm listening* .

"It would be very little inconvenience to you, sir, although I would ask you to approve the room and set up monitoring charms to alert you if an explosion of some kind were to occur," she went on, practically babbling but eager to leave him no room for objection, "I would wear protective gear at all times, a full suit if you like, even if I was only brewing stink-sap remover, just so that there was no possibility of injury. It won't change the level of attention I give to the written work,

and I wouldn't invite other students to watch or, Merlin forbid, help out. Ever." She wracked her brains, but could think of no more assurances.

"I had planned on scheduling you an hour or two a week in the Advanced Labs," Snape said eventually, "I am not unaware that you need more opportunities to brew outside of the coursework, though I admit I was... unsure of how my NEWT students would respond to your presence."

Rigel grimaced. The last thing she needed was to offend one of the sixth or seventh year potions students by seemingly comporting herself as their equal in the labs.

"This is not an ideal solution," Snape gazed rather forbiddingly at her, "It requires a great deal of trust on my part, and frankly I have little enough faith in humanity without being asked to trust the spawn of a Marauder around an unsupervised flame. However," Rigel clenched her hands together so hard that even her stubby fingernails made indentations in her palms, "I am inclined to think that you are not accustomed to going so long without brewing, and I don't doubt that were I to refuse you would merely find somewhere I couldn't reach you in an emergency to set up your cauldron, so here is what is going to happen."

Rigel suppressed her triumphant grin and listened closely.

"All of the conditions you outlined will be effected, and in addition to that I will place a ward around the door that clocks your entrance and exit-I won't have you up at all hours of the night brewing, understand me?"

Rigel nodded, and Snape continued.

"You will not leave ingredients in this makeshift lab. You will not eat or drink in the lab. You will not leave potions unattended unless the recipe calls for more than three hours between steps, in which case I will place a ward around the door to keep everything else out while it

stews," Snape paused, but apparently could think of no more limits to put into place, "I will expect a list of potions you wish to begin with and a selection of no less than three possible rooms for my approval by the end of the week. I will, of course, be adding potions to your list, but I will allow you some discretion as to those you wish to peruse as well. Are we clear?"

"Yes, sir. Thank you, Professor Snape."

"Return to the common room, Mr. Black, it is quite late."

Rigel nodded, gave a tiny smile of thanks once more, and left the office thrumming with excitement at the prospect of finally *brewing* again.

Classes resumed, and with classes came disapproving looks from McGonagall and points taken by Quirrell, but she couldn't bring herself to care overly much. The phoenix wand took merciless vengeance for her neglect of it over the winter holidays, but Rigel would be brewing again soon, so no matter how pushy her wand got with her spell work-jerking mid-flick and making the parchment she was to be turning pink fold itself into a paper airplane and zoom around the room, for instance-Rigel contentedly ignored it, which in retrospect might have served to make it even more difficult, like a child looking for attention.

McGonagall didn't give her any more detentions, though she sighed very disappointedly when Rigel's teacup turned into a pocket watch instead of a pocketbook. Quirrell positively delighted in skimming emeralds out of Slytherin's hourglass every Monday and Wednesday, but diminutive little Professor Flitwick seemed to find her misbegotten Charms quite amusing, and almost always sent her off with encouragement to try harder again next time. Flitwick had a fundamentally unconcerned outlook on life, compared to a lot of people she knew.

Like Marcus Flint, for instance.

He cornered her on her way to the Library (thankfully not yet in disguise) on the first Thursday back. She was walking along the third floor corridor toward a bathroom when she was unceremoniously yanked sideways into an empty classroom.

Not quite over the whole Lee Jordan thing, Rigel instinctively wrenched her arm away and swung her bag around toward her accoster as hard as she could. Unfortunately, the older Slytherin's reflexes were faster than her heavy, blunt bag, and he simply ducked underneath the swing and grinned irrepressibly at her. She scowled, but lowered her bag to the floor and quickly shut the door to the classroom so they weren't overheard.

"What is it?" she said immediately, "If this is about your History essay, I haven't finished it yet."

"No, not that," he waved a hand negligently.

"I already gave you all the assignments I had from break," Rigel added.

"Yeah, I turned them in already, listen, would you?" Flint ran a hand through his dark hair, "Honestly, you've done better than I expected. Good, in fact. Too good."

Rigel swallowed deliberately, "Suspiciously good?"

"Damn right. Snape knows."

"Does he know I'm-"

"No, he doesn't *know* know, but he's unofficially known for a while and he pulled me into his office yesterday for a friendly little chat," Flint laughed humorlessly, "Don't look so worried, I learned Occlumency last summer, and I'm not great, but I can keep him out if he doesn't push too hard."

"What?" Rigel stared blankly at him. Occlumency was for controlling emotions, wasn't it? That's what the book had been about... probably. Admittedly it was a bit esoteric and abstract, so maybe she didn't understand as well as she thought.

"Oh, you wouldn't know. Snape can read minds," Flint said bluntly.

Rigel blanched, but Flint just chuckled darkly.

"Stop panicking-though it's kind of funny watching you change colors like that," Flint said, "He can, but he doesn't go around peeking into kids' heads for kicks. Only he's really riled up about this for some reason."

"Well, you are sort of cheating," Rigel said absently, thinking perhaps Snape had mentioned Occlumency the first time she'd met with him, after their minds had gone all weird, but whatever her magic had done that night had been much more focused on emotions than actual thoughts. "And he is a teacher. Maybe he takes it as a personal insult that you won't do his work."

"More likely he's upset that he hasn't figured out how I'm doing it yet," Flint shrugged, "Point is, you need to be extra careful from now on, okay? Don't bother changing the essays-at this point most of the professors have probably been told about what Snape thinks I'm doing-"

"What you *are* doing."

"-But they can't prove anything, and changing the style or handwriting charms will only let them know that we know that they're on to us," Flint said.

"So... do nothing different, but be more careful?" Rigel asked wryly.

"Brat," Flint rolled his eyes, "Keep the writing the same, but be extra careful you're not caught with an essay you shouldn't be doing. They'll be watching the older students if they've figured out it's

someone here at Hogwarts doing my work, so don't ask them for help if you can help it."

Rigel nodded, "I'll be more circumspect, in any case. Do we have a fallback story, in case I am somehow caught with one?"

"Don't be," Flint grunted, "But if you're caught red-handed say you were paid to mail them to me by an older student you don't know the name of."

Rigel raised her eyebrow, "You wouldn't take me down with you just because you could?"

"Hey, don't think I give two knuts about your hide, brat," he scoffed, "I'd just hate to have to explain to Archie why I crushed his dream by getting his doppelganger expelled."

"Sure, Flint," Rigel smirked daringly, "I won't tell anyone that you're not nearly as tough as your name implies."

"Oh, you think so?" Flint said conversationally, "I wonder what your friend Draco would think about that? You know, maybe he could benefit from a few extra Quidditch practices on the weekends."

Rigel sighed, "Forgive me, oh stony one, I should not have dared question your obvious and impressive mettle,"

"Forgiveness is overrated. You can do an extra credit project for McGonagall instead," Flint smirked, his angular face fierce even in his amusement, "I love that look on her face when I turn in shit I couldn't possibly have had time to do, and she knows she has to grade it anyway. Even better, she knows our Quidditch team is practicing about twice as often as her little lions can manage, but without proof she can't take away our edge."

"And people say I have a sick sense of humor."

"People have a lot to say about you, Rigel *Black* ." She was sure Flint's laughter would follow her to her grave. "Too bad they don't know the *half* of it."

She left the classroom without replying. As Pansy would say, it never does to dignify a bad joke with a response-it only encourages where honesty would be kinder.

"Why, Rigel Black, as I live and breathe."

Rigel looked up from the potion recipe she was copying from a manual Snape had loaned her. She had gotten her small private lab approved a few days earlier and she was looking forward to brewing something entirely new later that evening. First she had to transfer the instructions to fire-retardant parchment so that she wouldn't risk Snape's book around the flame though. She was sitting in an out of the way chair in the Slytherin common room when the taunting voice shook her concentration.

"Rosier, what a... pleasant surprise," Rigel said a bit insincerely, "And Rookwood as well, how unusual to see the two of you together."

"Isn't he amusing, Edmund?" Rosier perched his lithe form on the arm of her chair gracefully while Rookwood sent her a friendly, though characteristically reserved, smile. "Come now, young Mr. Black, it's really been too long. We want to hear all about your break, don't we?"

"Indeed," Rookwood said in his mountain-voice, "Perhaps you should sit, Aldon. I believe Mr. Black is uncomfortable with you hovering over him."

"Well I suppose I could," Rosier sighed a bit down-heartedly, "I am such a good hoverer, you know."

"I'll add that to your dossier," Rigel assured him. Rosier laughed in that whimsically shadowed way he had and obligingly levitated a pair of seats over by Rigel's chair so that they could chat comfortably.

"Well, Black, don't keep us waiting," Rosier pressed once they'd settled in, "How was your Yule? Judging by the stains on your fingers I'd guess you spent the whole two weeks in your lab."

Rigel glanced down at her hands, which were noticeably splotched in different places from the brewing she'd done since having access to a lab again. Though she'd promised to wear protective gear, it was understood by potion-makers that certain ingredients had to be handled barehanded for efficacy's sake.

"Not the whole two weeks," Rigel said, though honestly she hadn't gotten any brewing done at all between trying to learn Archie's textbooks by rote memorization, catching up with her family, and living in a constant state of deception that was so much worse than it was when she was Rigel all the time. "I wouldn't miss the chance to reconnect with my family after my first long stint away, after all. It is harder to be far from home than I had anticipated."

"Naturally," Rosier allowed with a peculiar twist to his lips that never really went away, "Though it's certainly candid of you to own up to such a thing. So many first-years pretend to an unrealistic self-sufficiency the moment they step onto the train. How refreshing to witness such open familial respect in these liberal times."

"No sense in pretending," Rigel shrugged artlessly, "I've always been a poor liar."

"Oh, now that I don't believe," Rosier shot Rookwood an amused glance, "In truth, I wonder what you seek to hide about your break, that you admit so readily to something most of your classmates would feverishly deny. I can only conclude that you've a much more interesting truth to keep hidden."

Rigel opened her mouth to reply, but Rosier held up a slender hand forestallingly.

"Ah-ah, no telling. I'll figure it out eventually," Rosier's smile had a sharp edge to it now.

"Pansy tells us you met with her parents over break to seek formal permission to befriend her," Rookwood said, "She believes it went quite well."

"I really couldn't say," Rigel gave a helpless smile.

"Yes, her father tends to have that effect on people," Rosier said knowingly, "But if Rose Parkinson likes you, everyone likes you, so I dare say you have nothing to lose sleep over."

Rigel couldn't think of anything to say, but Rosier was already switching topics again.

"Did you celebrate the Yule with any other families?" he asked, though the gleam in his golden eyes suggested he already knew the answer to that.

"Yes, our family is very close to the Potters," Rigel said, sending a silent apology to Remus, but still unwilling to bring up her controversial uncle around Rosier and Rookwood. People got a bit touchy when werewolves were mentioned.

"And how is the young Potter heir?" Rookwood asked politely.

"Harry is well," Rigel said, feeling that familiar sense of vertigo she got when talking about herself in third person, "It was nice to catch up for a couple weeks."

"You speak so fondly of Miss Potter," Rosier said slyly, "Childhood playmates, are you not?"

"Yes, I suppose we were."

"Hmm, betrothed, are you?" Rosier asked too-innocently.

Rigel nearly choked on thin air, " *What?* Harry and... No. No, nothing like that."

"Really?" Rosier didn't seem terribly convinced, "Years of friendship and no betrothal to speak of? Come now, Black, you can tell us about your blossoming romance."

"There is no romantic attachment between Harry and I," Rigel said firmly, "We are practically siblings, and shall always be nothing but close friends."

"Protests an awful lot, doesn't he?" Rosier said laughingly to Rookwood, "Well, if you're sure?"

"Quite sure."

"Then am I to understand that Harriett Potter is not yet betrothed to anyone?"

"Well, no she isn't," Rigel said slowly, trying to keep up with Rosier's conversational loops.

"Interesting," Rosier mused, "But of course she's at least had some offers by now."

"Not that I know of," Rigel felt strange-both defensive and incredulous at the way this discussion was going.

"None? Well, we'll have to remedy that, won't we Rookwood?" Rosier smiled breezily, clearly enjoying the look on Rigel's face at his pronouncement.

"Indeed we shall," Rookwood spoke blandly, but his eyes sparkled with a hidden mirth, "I for one have heard only good things about young Miss Potter-apparently her eyes are as green as finely polished serpent scales."

Rosier laughed gaily, "Oh, I'm telling Rose you made fun of her, Edmund."

"Then I shall tell her you teased her dear Pansy's new friend by asking for his cousin's hand in marriage," Rookwood replied unconcernedly.

"Who said I was teasing?" Rosier gazed penetratingly at Rigel, who was more than a little taken aback at that point, "After all, *someone* will have to marry her if the whispers I hear about the new legislation being pushed through this summer are even half-credible."

"Going to explain that?" Rigel asked, voice quiet but eyes intent.

"I wouldn't dream of counting my Ministerial reforms before they're ratified," Rosier said, his casual tone belying the seriousness of the subject matter, "But if one listens to rumors, which of course one always should, one might be a tad concerned for their lesser-blooded friends and family come June."

"Not 'concerned,' " Rookwood said swiftly, sending a warning look at Rosier.

"Oh, no, I'm sure I meant to say that one would be *excited* for their fortunate friends," Rosier agreed loftily, "After all, it's not every day social reform encouraging the lawful joining of mixed-blooded witches and wizards with their purer counterparts makes its way before the Wizengamot."

"And such encouragement," Rookwood said blandly, "Why the proposed legislation practically demands holy matrimony be established."

"And while certain parties still stand firmly in the way of this bold new step, you never know when something will happen to discredit those troublesome resistant groups. I'm sure your cousin will be thrilled to hear about the new opportunity soon to be afforded her," Rosier said,

standing, "Alas, we cannot wile away the rest of the day with you, dear little snake. Adieu."

"It was enlightening, as always, Rosier," Rigel stood politely as they left, "Have a pleasant evening, Rookwood."

"I'm sure we'll see you around, Black."

Once they'd gone, Rigel sank into her chair abruptly as her knees gave out beneath her. She needed to write home immediately. It was clear that Rosier and Rookwood had for some unfathomable reason saw fit to give her this warning-she had to make what she could of it. She would write Sirius, and he and James and Lily and Remus would put their heads together and figure out what to do. Yes, everything would be fine, she tried to assure herself. Even if it was true, after all, the Wizengamot would never allow such a law, which would surely be repulsive to both factions (for what pureblood would willingly force themselves into a marriage with a non-pureblood, not to mention how the half-bloods would feel), to be put into place.

Would they?

One Friday in mid-January found Rigel in the kitchens trying to learn a skin-cleaning charm from Binny to get rid of the splotches on her fingers from all the brewing she'd been doing since she got her own lab. Pansy had taken to staring pointedly at her black and yellow fingertips and sighing forlornly, so Rigel had mentioned it to Binny, who'd offered immediately to teach her a charm for lifting dye from skin. The problem was that house-elf magic didn't have any words to focus their spells. Binny said it was a mind-trick, and that one had to build up the spell in their head, gathering energy and intent, and then let it all out at once, using a finger snap to focus the energy, but Rigel couldn't duplicate it with her wand.

"You is pulling in the energy, Young Sir, but you is not letting it out," Binny tried to explain, wringing her hands worriedly as Rigel once again failed to remove any stains from her hands.

"I'm worried about letting out too much magic at once," Rigel said, "I don't want to accidentally erase my fingers along with the stains."

"It is not working like that," Binny shook her head so hard her ears flapped like little wings, "If you is not having intent to vanish fingers, then fingers is staying where they are."

"Sometimes my wand does things I don't intend," Rigel said, "I think it gets confused."

"Young Sir's wand isn't being confused," Binny said carefully, "Young Sir's magic is being confused."

Rigel glanced at the house elf, "Why's my magic confused, do you think?"

"Perhaps because Young Sir is confused about his magic, and his magic isn't knowing how to please him, because Young Sir isn't knowing what he is wanting?" Binny suggested tentatively.

Rigel thought that summed it up rather well. She was of two minds about her magic: on the one hand, she wanted to learn it so that at least she didn't stand out as a freak, but on the other hand, her magic was demonstrably dangerous. She couldn't go around casting spells willy-nilly, so each time she did cast a spell she was extremely careful not to want it to work *too* much, in case her magic got away from her. Rather than helping, however, her caution seemed to make her magic more agitated and, according to Binny, confused.

Everyone else thought she was being silly. She could see it in her teachers' exasperated looks and her friends' dismissive shrugs. But she hadn't asked for this power. She just wanted to brew Potions. Why wasn't that enough for everyone else?

"Not brooding, are we, Pup?"

She looked up to see George Weasley climb into the kitchen with an empty rucksack and an easy smile. Rigel raised an eyebrow when

Fred didn't climb through the painting after him.

"Just me tonight," George confirmed, accurately reading her look of surprise, "Contrary to popular belief we aren't literally joined at the hip."

Rigel smiled slightly, "I know more than a few girls who will be disappointed to hear you two don't actually do *everything* together."

"For shame!" George clutched his chest dramatically, "What knave hath stolen thy innocence this night? Although, incidentally, we *do* do that together. You know, in case any of those girls happen to ask." He wagged his eyebrows in a way that looked patently ridiculous.

"We isn't believing you for a moment," Binny sniffed squeakily and George grinned unrepentantly down at her.

"Never try to lie to a house elf," George whispered conspiratorially, "Those ears aren't just for devilish good looks."

Binny blushed and swatted George's knee reprovingly, "You is wanting to make jokes or you is wanting sweets, Young Sir?"

"Ah, you know me too well, Binny dear, fill 'er up then." He surrendered the bag and the other elves pounced on it.

Rigel shared an amused look with the Gryffindor, but then his face grew serious again.

"What were you brooding about?" He glanced over her person critically, "You haven't injured yourself again, have you?"

Rigel rolled her eyes. As if she'd never gone an entire day without a disaster befalling her.

"I'm fine," she shrugged, "Just thinking."

"About?" George kicked her lightly with his foot, "Come on, don't make me drag it out of you."

"I'm having trouble with magic."

He looked incredulous for a beat, "What, all of it?"

"Most of it," she muttered darkly, "I can't seem to really control my magic. Sometimes it works like I want it to, other times it does nothing, and sometimes it does something completely different than what I tell it to. And my wand," Rigel gestured disgustedly at the holly wand on the table in front of her, "It's possessed. And it's mocking me."

George looked like he wasn't sure if he should laugh or not, "Well, it can't be unfixable. Show me. Do a spell or something."

Rigel looked dubiously at the holly wand.

"It's not going to bite you," George said, "Go on, try a simple object-to-object transfiguration."

"Okay," Rigel picked up her wand and pointed it at one of the saltshakers on the table. A moment later it morphed seamlessly into a muggle postcard, complete with tropical beach background and '*Greetings from Bora Bora!*' written across the back.

"Wow, that's pretty cool," George picked it up to examine it, "See? You've just got to have a little confidence in-"

"It was supposed to be a brick," Rigel said flatly.

"Oh," George pursed his lips, "Well, if it's any consolation, the postcard is much more interesting than a brick."

Immediately, the holly wand pulsed hotly and all the saltshakers on the table became postcards.

"Antigua, Hawaii, Morocco-the North Pole!" George laughed heartily, "Well at least your wand has a sense of humor."

"It's mocking me!" Rigel growled moodily.

"Yes, I daresay it is, but is it really such a problem?" George asked, "I mean, has it ever let you down when you truly needed it?"

Rigel thought back. "No, I guess not. It always seems to work okay on real tests, actually." Rigel frowned thoughtfully. In truth, the only tests she'd failed were back when she was using the ash wand. And the holly wand had come through for her when Lee attacked even though she wasn't holding it and had no right to expect her magic to work.

"And has it ever hurt anyone? Made anything cruel or humiliating happen to anyone?" George smiled as Rigel slowly shook her head, "Then don't fret too much about it. Your wand might be a bit excitable, but it doesn't seem out of control in a dangerous way."

"That's kind of what my cousin said, too," Rigel admitted.

"You should listen to your cousin more, then," George stood and collected his now-full bag of junk food from the elves, "And try being a little nicer to your wand. Hey, can I keep these postcards? I want to show them to George."

Rigel smiled, "Sure, sure. Say 'hi' to Fred for me."

"Will do, little pup," George saluted her on his way out of the kitchens, "Stay sharp."

For all Flint's dire warnings, Rigel wasn't worried about being caught until the last Saturday in January when she went to Percy with a routine Transfiguration question and instead of answering he looked at her in slight confusion and remarked, "How odd."

"What's odd?" Rigel frowned, "Do you not know?"

"I can answer your question," Percy said slowly, "In fact, I can answer it perfectly, because it's the same thing we're doing in Transfiguration right now. What's odd is that now that I think back on

it, you're almost always confused about something my class is currently learning. It's just really strange."

"Oh," Rigel swallowed nervously, "Huh."

"It's not a problem," Percy said earnestly, "It's actually really helpful for me to explain what I'm learning. I'm getting even better marks in Transfiguration than usual, and McGonagall is pleased with all the questions I bring to class because of you. But it's a rather large coincidence to swallow. Are you doing it on purpose?"

"Yes," Rigel said, snatching the explanation and twisting it quickly, "Well, sort of. The thing is, I wanted to learn advanced magic, but I knew I wouldn't be able to learn Transfiguration on my own, so since you offered to help, I copied the syllabus from one of the Slytherin fifth years. That way, I thought I wouldn't be inconveniencing you much if I asked about things you were already needing to study."

"Oh, that was a really clever idea," Percy said, "Not that I would have minded helping you anyway, of course, but this does make things easier for me."

Rigel breathed an internal sigh of relief. Hopefully no one would think to ask the prefects which students they knew of who were doing work they shouldn't have been. Or at least she hoped Percy wouldn't think to mention her, since her interest was only in Transfiguration as far as he knew, and was explained.

"Are you thinking of becoming a teacher, Percy?" she asked curiously.

"Hmm?" he looked up from his textbook and frowned slightly, "No, I was planning on working for the Ministry after I graduate. Lots of room for advancement, you know."

"Well, sure, but it's all in someone else's hands," Rigel said dubiously, "I mean, the Ministry is great," when they weren't being a giant bigoted arsehole with a strong allergy to real social progress,

"But you don't seem like the type to want to rely on someone else to be successful. The Ministry is crowded with political and social competition, and often the best, most honest and hardworking people are those who never get any real power."

"I, well, you think so?" Percy adjusted his glasses unsurely, "My father works for the Ministry, you know, but he's never been really promoted. Our family isn't well respected because of it, so I thought I should try to fix that."

Rigel nodded in understanding, "It's really honorable of you to want to further your family's name, but are you sure your family isn't well-respected because your father doesn't get promoted, or does he not get promoted because your family isn't very powerful?"

Percy blanched and Rigel put a hand on his arm gently, "I don't mean to be blunt, but if it's the later then going into the Ministry yourself won't help you make a difference. You should work somewhere your voice can really be heard, because it seems like you have a lot to say. You certainly have taught me a lot."

"Well," Percy's voice was dry, so he conjured a glass of water and gulped it hastily, "Well, I daresay that makes some sense. I'll have to think about it. I'm not sure I'd be a very good teacher though, Rigel."

Rigel started to protest, but he held up a hand and spoke with a bitter wryness that could not be refuted, "I know how my personality comes off, especially to kids. I have several younger brothers, and none of them has ever listened to any of my advice or teachings. I could teach the Ravenclaws of the world, but those like my brothers would always resent me and undermine the effectiveness of my teachings because of it."

"I imagine it's hard for younger siblings to admit that older ones know better," she said tentatively, "Especially when the older sibling always seems to be perfect. Your younger brothers are probably a bit intimidated, and that Weasley pride won't let them submit to your authority."

"I wish I could believe that, but it's not only them," Percy sighed, "When I got my prefect badge, I thought people would start listening to me, or that I could help other students with their problems, but no one listens and no one asks for help. I'm too unapproachable to be a teacher."

"You can't be worse than Professor Snape," Rigel smiled, "And he's a wonderful teacher."

Percy laughed, "I think you're the only person in the entire school who thinks that."

"Well, forget being a teacher then," Rigel said, "Be something else, like... a lawyer."

"A lawyer?" Percy blinked behind his horn-rimmed glasses.

"Yeah, why not?" Rigel said, warming to the idea of Percy Weasley in trial robes, "Everyone respects lawyers, because they're terrified of them, and people have to listen to what they say. Your success depends on you, and it doesn't matter what your personality is like, because if you're good people will seek you out for advice anyway."

"That could be... yes," Percy grinned a bit manically, but Rigel thought he was just not used to smiling much, "Attorneys make a good chunk of galleons, too, and as a lawyer I could really help people. The Ministry is bound by the laws of the wizarding world-as they should be-but the lawyers *make* those laws. I could write laws that everyone would have to follow!"

Well, that was one way of looking at things.

"You'd know all the loopholes, too," Rigel pointed out, "So if someone tried to use your law the wrong way you could put a stop to it."

"I could, couldn't I?" Percy scrambled for some parchment and ink and began scribbling down notes, "This would be a big change,

though, I'd have to re-think my NEWT courses, of course, and my Head of House would need to be notified immediately." He stood distractedly, still muttering to himself, then glanced up and said, "Say, Rigel, you don't mind if I...?"

"Go ahead and see McGonagall," Rigel said, "I think I understand my reading now, anyway."

"Thanks," Percy grinned that slightly manic smile once more, "Really, thanks, Rigel."

He hurried off with his parchment and clambered out of the portrait hole like destiny itself were after him.

While Rigel was packing up her things, Ron and Neville came over to say hi.

"What did you do to my brother?" Ron asked curiously, "I haven't seen him that happy since he got his prefect badge in the post this summer."

"Good thing, too," Neville said uneasily, "Your brother's kind of scary when he's happy."

"He'll need to be scary if he goes ahead with switching his plans for after graduation," Rigel commented.

"He might not be going to the Ministry anymore?" Ron asked, looking pleased, "I didn't want to say anything, but he's fooling himself if he thinks he'll get anywhere with that useless bunch of bureaucrats."

"It's true," Neville sighed, "My Gran mentioned me becoming a politician once, but I told her unless you're in the Cow Party, you haven't got a chance these days. The only reason Gran's on the Wizengamot still is because they haven't revoked the Seniority Clause yet, though I've heard rumors that they've been trying to."

"Wow, Nev, you know a lot about this stuff," Ron stared at his friend surprised.

"My dad's an Auror, so he works under the Ministry, and he always says the key to keeping your family safe is understanding the flow of the government," Neville explained, "He has to be really careful to keep his head down at work since he's not in the Cow Party, and mum works at the Archives. All the laws go through the Archives, so she's always telling us about the new proposals people come to the Archives to get help writing. Apparently it's really difficult to introduce new legislation. You have to research precedents, word everything just right, and they go through lots of drafts that never leave the Archives, so mum can usually warn dad and Gran when something that affects us gets proposed. That way we can change our stance before it gets put into law if we have to."

"Merlin, Nev, I wondered why you always kept up on current events so obsessively, but I guess that makes sense. Lucky the Weasley's are so unimportant no one cares what we do. Haven't got anyone on the Wizengamot or anything," Ron shrugged.

"Not yet, maybe," Rigel said.

"What's that mean?" Ron asked, eyes widening, "Oh, no, what've you done? Tell me Percy's not going to try and run for the Wizengamot or something."

"I didn't do anything," Rigel said innocently, "I just suggested that Percy's might think about being something else besides a politician."

"Like what?" Neville asked curiously.

"A lawyer."

"Oh, Merlin, he took right to it, didn't he?" Ron groaned, "I knew we shouldn't have trusted you around Percy. Fred and George tried to warn me that you and Percy would only encourage each other, and now look what you've done!"

"What's he done?" Neville looked back and forth between them, confused.

"He's created a monster."

"Well, you should probably be a little nicer to that 'monster' from now on," Rigel smiled in a way that wasn't meant to be reassuring, "Percy could use his lawyer powers for good or for evil, and which he chooses will probably depend on how strong his ties to his family are. Would you consider Percy tied particularly strongly to his family at the moment?"

"Well, I... don't know," Ron deflated, "Merlin, I have to go warn the twins. If they aren't nicer to Percy he'll probably write a law that makes pranking illegal just to spite them."

"Give your brother a little more credit," Rigel said, "Percy's a good person. He wants to help other people as much as he wants to help himself. He just needs help knowing how to go about doing it."

"Yeah, yeah, you're right," Ron sighed, "You know, I think Percy will make a great lawyer. I just don't know if Percy being a great lawyer will be a good thing for the rest of the world."

"Then again," Neville said thoughtfully, "If he's on our side, the rest of the world won't know what hit it."

The first time the Potion she was brewing didn't turn out perfectly, Rigel was shell-shocked. The second time she tried the Potion with similar results, she nearly cried. After the fifth attempt, she did cry. Fat, silent tears fell unheeded to the stone as she stared into the cauldron of sky-blue Allergy Relief Potion that was supposed to be murky lavender. The consistency was right, the smell was correct, but the coloring was all wrong. Rigel bottled a sample numbly and put it next to all the other insistently blue attempts. Failure, these were tears of failure that made her eyes all puffy and sore. She couldn't even wipe them off until she'd cleaned up her workstation

and washed her hands of ingredient residue, and by then they'd mostly dried up anyway. She sat in the cold dungeon room-turned-lab for a good twenty minutes, going over and over the steps in her head and wondering what was wrong with her that they didn't work.

She berated herself for being dramatic, but it didn't help. She hadn't botched a Potion since she was six years old, and she'd never messed the same Potion up more than twice in a row. She'd followed the instructions perfectly, and yet it didn't work. This wasn't supposed to happen, she told herself, the whole point of Potions was that once you figured out the correct process it worked every time, otherwise there would be no point in a recipe. Rigel set her shoulders stubbornly. There had to be some mistake. She would get to the bottom of this. She put all five samples in her bag and locked the door carefully behind her. Snape would have her head if the equipment got stolen because she was too upset to lock up after herself.

It was late Sunday afternoon, and while any other teacher would be in their quarters relaxing, Rigel knew Snape would be in his office working, like he always was. He gave more essays and quizzes than most of the other core professors combined, and because of that he was constantly turning them over in his office. Sometimes Rigel wondered if he assigned so much work not to punish his students, though that was part of it, but to give himself something to do when he wasn't researching. He didn't seem like a man to sit idly.

As expected, his gruffly irritated voice sounded in response to her knock and she walked quickly into his office, determination emitting from her in waves. Snape looked up and trained his sharp eyes on her face. Rigel ignored the tightening of his lips as he took in her reddened eyes and freshly scrubbed face and instead fished in her bag for the vials. She placed them with fingers that shook slightly with the force of her upset onto his desk.

"What was this supposed to be?" he asked, examining one.

Rigel flinched, but said, "Allergy Relief Potion. As you can see, it's gone wrong every time and I can't-that is, I don't know-please, Sir, can you tell-" Rigel broke off with an exasperated toss of her head and took a deep, calming breath, "Why won't it work?"

Snape gazed at her for a long moment, his eyes assessing, distant. He said, "You followed the instructions exactly?"

"Yes, sir," Rigel pursed her lips unhappily.

"But it didn't work. What have you learned?" the Potions Master stared expectantly at her.

"Nothing," Rigel frowned, "I don't know why it isn't working."

"You don't know why the Potion isn't right, but you know what's wrong," Snape corrected.

How could she know what was wrong without knowing how to make it right? Rigel frowned. To know one was to know the other, wasn't it? She tried approaching it from another angle. Okay, what was *wrong* in this scenario? The answer was immediate.

"The instructions are wrong," she breathed, her face alive with betrayal.

Snape smirked, "Yes and no. I did not give you faulty instructions with the intent to make you fail, so stop looking at me like that." Rigel blanked her face again, slightly mollified. "The instructions you worked from are the same ones printed in every textbook or manual that contains the Allergy Relief Potion, and yet, as you correctly realized, they do not alone provide a perfect template for the successful brewing of this Potion. This will be the case with most NEWT level Potions, and it will be the case with most of the extra-curricular Potions I give you to work on from now on."

"Why would incomplete instructions be printed in a textbook or manual?" Rigel asked, openly disapproving, "Is it just a way to keep

the un-initiated from achieving success?"

"One wonders why you seek to become a Potions Master, Mr. Black, if you think them as a group to be so petty and exclusionary as to orchestrate a mass-conspiracy of misinformation in order to hoard true knowledge for themselves," Snape growled.

Belatedly, Rigel realized she'd insulted the man with her thoughtless accusation, "Forgive me, Professor Snape, I should have realized there was a reason I had not yet come to understand. Would you please explain it to me?"

"Better, but still presumptuous," Snape sneered, "Use your head, Mr. Black, what good could come of leaving recipes, for lack of a better term, incomplete?"

Rigel's brain stalled for a moment. Surely, no good could come of it. Incomplete Potions recipes made cauldrons explode. Then again, her cauldron hadn't exploded, so they obviously weren't leaving *dangerously* incomplete recipes lying around. What had Professor Snape said? *Use your head* . Oh.

"To make people think," Rigel said slowly, "Like a test?" But that didn't sound right either.

"Warmer, but what purpose could there be in a test that no one knows is a test?" Snape asked.

Well, if you didn't know you were being tested you couldn't cheat, Rigel supposed, but that didn't seem to be what Snape was looking for.

"Feel free to think out loud so that I can cut you off sardonically when you stray from reasonable paths of thought," Snape said still smirking. Rigel supposed that was his idea of a joke.

"If people don't know they're taking a test," Rigel said slowly, trying not to sound like an idiot, "Then they won't be trying to pass it. So it

must be a test you can pass without trying, right?" Snape nodded, looking smug. "And it wouldn't be very fair or reliable if it only caught the people who got lucky without trying, so it must be testing something that you can *only* do without trying." Rigel frowned, "But what would that have to do with Potions?"

Snape looked rather triumphant as he breathed, "Everything, Mr. Black, everything. Do you know why children can't brew complicated Potions?"

Rigel was taken aback by the non sequitur, but she answered, "Because they're really difficult. Children would have a hard time understanding all the steps, and they lack patience, and the fumes could be dangerous for them to inhale, and-"

Snape waved a hand impatiently, "Aside from all that. Say you walked a child through it, step by step, made sure they did everything right, made them wear a face mask, got rid of all the usual objections, what then?"

"I guess they could brew it then, sir," Rigel shrugged.

"Incorrect, Mr. Black," Snape said, "A child cannot brew Felix Felicis for the same reason a squib cannot and someone suffering from a magically draining injury cannot. What do they all lack, Mr. Black?"

"An adult magical core," she said slowly.

"A stable magical core," Snape corrected.

Rigel blanched, "But then, that's why the Potion isn't working for me? There's something wrong with my magic. I knew it. Does this mean I'll never brew anything more complicated than what I already have? That isn't fair," Rigel clenched her fists and glared at the damningly blue vials on Snape's desk, "I'm to be stuck doing theory work the rest of my life, writing papers about Potions I can never brew, for something I can't control? Why didn't you tell me I couldn't? Why'd you let me think-"

"Calm down, Mr. Black," Snape snapped, and Rigel glared furiously at the desk while she bit her lip to keep quiet. "I have better things to do than to crush my students' dreams for sheer novelty, I assure you, though I admit it says something about the sheer strength of your particular dream that after believing you could never brew you did not abandon the field, only your occupation within it," he mused thoughtfully, then said, "Are you a squib, Mr. Black?"

"No, sir," she muttered ungraciously.

"And have you recently been the victim of an incurable magical malady which attacks you magical core?"

"No, I haven't."

"Then stop sky diving to conclusions," Snape rubbed his temple, "I swear, there is nothing more dramatic than a Black. Cissa, Bellatrix, even old Walburga, and it's apparently not limited to the women of the family."

Rigel scowled at the Potions Master, but held her peace.

"As you will find as you progress in Potions, some students are seemingly 'talented' at this subject while others can't manage stink-sap remover to save their life," Snape went into lecture mode as if he'd been born reciting a dissertation, "This is not because the one is intelligent and the other mentally unendowed, but because one likely has an extremely stable magical core and the other a core which emits magic erratically, which causes a disruption in the brewing process. Your core, unlike either of these examples, does not emit magic either stably or erratically at this time. When you first started here, you emitted magic unconsciously without any trouble, however, at some point since the night you destroyed my office trying to force magic consciously out of a bad wand, you appear to have clamped down on your magic entirely, even what you had been doing unconsciously. At this point, your core does not emit magic at all."

"Why is that necessary for Potions making?" Rigel asked, feeling worse than stupid for asking such a basic question, but truly she had no idea what he was talking about. She could guess when she'd clamped down on her magic-probably just after it had gotten away from her and attacked Lee-but she didn't see why it was a problem.

"Potions are a kind of magic, not because they use magical ingredients, but because of the magic involved in the brewing. Yes, the ingredients are enough to imbue the Potion with magic for the low-level Potions you've been brewing so far, but the more complicated the Potion is, the more magic a Potion will be required to perform, the more important it becomes for the person brewing the Potion to be magical," Snape explained, "Wizards emit magic constantly from their core, and it is this magic which is imbued into a Potion and transformed by the properties of the ingredients to cause a certain effect. This is one of the reasons only wizards of considerable strength will be able to brew Wolfsbane no matter how hard they try; the change the Potion is meant to effect simply requires too much magic for the average person to give."

"Is that also why that Potion costs so much?" Rigel asked as comprehension dawned, "I thought it was the time and difficulty which made it so scarce, but it's also because a Potioneer can't brew it very many times without exhausting themselves, isn't it?"

"Yes, very good," Professor Snape acknowledged, "The drain to the magical core is considerable for upper-level Potions, which is why I don't want to hear of you attempting them until I deem you ready."

"I understand, sir," Rigel said.

"Good. I chose this Potion for you to attempt for a reason, Mr. Black. As you now know, it does not reach its final color until imbued with the necessary magic. What these samples show me is that your core is not emitting the energy necessary for Potions that require more magic than the sum of their ingredients allows," Snape said, "While that is not good, it does not leave us without recourse. You will simply have to learn to emit magic consciously, since your core does

not emit it unconsciously. This will not hinder you in the long run." Snape assured her seriously, "All Potion Masters eventually must learn how to do this, because Potions like Amortentia require more magic than even powerful wizards unconsciously emit, and so must be purposely imbued with raw magical energy. The only difference is that you will learn to do this with all the Potions you make, and while it will be difficult due to the nature of your attitude toward magic, you already have the necessary control-you must simply learn to invert it so that you push your magic out instead of keeping it locked in."

"So, I can't brew more complicated Potions until I learn this?" Rigel asked, thinking hard. It sounded a lot like what Binny had been trying to get her to do earlier.

"That is correct."

"Then, let's start right away."

Snape smirked, "I thought you might say that." He pulled out a bag from a drawer in his desk and passed it to her. Inside were about twenty rubbery balls in different sizes, some as small as marbles, others the size of her fist, all a striking shade of red.

"These are used to train Medi-wizards to consciously emit specific amounts of magic," Snape said, "You will practice pushing your magic into each one consciously. If you imbue a ball with the right amount, it will turn green. Too little and it will be brown, too much and it will explode. Come back to me when all are either green or exploded and we'll move on to the next step."

"Okay," she stashed the balls into her book bag, "Will this take long, do you think?"

"It will be especially challenging for you, Mr. Black," Snape admitted, "But if you are properly motivated the control will come, and it will probably help you in your spell casting classes as well."

"Alright, thank you, sir-"

Just then an alarming dinging noise sounded around the room and Professor Snape leapt from his seat to point his wand at a blank stretch of wall. At his unveiling spell, a fireplace appeared where there had been nothing only a moment before and the flames roared to life, acid green with the effects of floo powder.

"SEVERUS? ARE YOU THERE?" came the loud, frantic voice through the floo. A woman's head appeared in the flames and Rigel recognized her after a few seconds as the school Mediwitch, Madam Pomphrey.

"I'm here, Poppy, what is it?" Snape crouched down so that the head in the fireplace could see him clearly.

"Thank goodness," Pomphrey said shakily, "You must come through immediately, Severus. Miss Jones' case has worsened considerably. I need your talents."

"Very well, stand back. I'm coming through," Snape said, and Pomphrey's face disappeared from the flames. "Mr. Black, go back to your dormitory immediately. The door will lock behind you," the Professor said, and then he was gone, presumably to the Hospital Wing, through the fire.

Rigel gathered her bag and left the office, shutting the door firmly behind her. She wondered what kind of medical emergency could need a Potion Master's expertise so desperately. It wasn't as if one could make Potions at the drop of a hat, and a Mediwitch wouldn't need advice on which Potions to administer to a patient. The whole this was rather curious.

It only got more curious as January bled into February. The Headmaster made an announcement not long after the Sunday Professor Snape had been called out of his office that informed the students that the Hospital Wing was under strict quarantine, and that in the case of a medical emergency they were to seek their Head of House first and any other teacher if the Heads of House were for

some reason unavailable. A couple days of lessons were postponed while all the professors participated in mandatory seminars on emergency first aid, but after that things resumed as usual.

Until the next student fell ill.

Susan Bones and Hannah Abbot followed their year-mate to the Hospital Wing, and not long after that a couple of second year Hufflepuffs disappeared behind the magical barrier Dumbledore had set up around the medical wing as well. Justin Finch-Fletchly followed barely a day later.

"I heard there's a bad strain of Spattergroit going around," Nott told them in the Slytherin common room one afternoon.

"It can't be," Draco said, frowning, "Spattergroit causes extreme fatigue before the pustules ever start showing up, and all of the missing students were reportedly just fine until they collapsed."

"Well, I heard that Jones girl angered a vengeful spirit by sleeping with a mudblood and the spirit cursed the entire Hufflepuff House!" Davis said, a bloodthirsty smirk looking totally out of place on her otherwise unassuming face, "They say the curse won't be appeased until every last member of the House is taken beyond the grave."

"Oh, be quiet, Tracey," Pansy frowned prettily, "You don't know what you're talking about."

"That's right, Parkinson," Greengrass said nastily, "You're mother was a Hufflepuff, wasn't she? I suppose the curse will get her, too, before long."

"How dare you!" Pansy's composure visibly slipped and she glared at Greengrass vehemently, "There is no curse, and my mother's health is none of your business."

"Let's go," Rigel said, pulling Pansy gently up from the couch by her elbow. She walked the blonde girl back to the dorms room with

Draco close behind them. They all sat on Draco's bed as usual and Draco patted Pansy's hand reassuringly.

"It's not a curse, Pans, they're just full of nonsense as usual," Draco said softly.

"I know," Pansy sniffed disdainfully, though her eyes were wide and worried, "They just have no right, talking about my mother that way. Dumb harpies."

"Let's talk about something besides this weird quarantine thing," Rigel said, hopping up to find a deck of playing cards in Draco's bedside table. It was a mark of how close their friendship had become that neither of them thought anything of this breach of privacy.

They played exploding snap for a couple of hours, and then Pansy left to dress for dinner. A few minutes later two deafening shrieks were heard coming from the girls' dorms, and Draco and Rigel exchanged a dark look before leaping up and throwing open the door to the hallway.

They needn't have hurried, it turned out, as Pansy hadn't been one of the ones screeching.

The girls' dorms were set up so that Pansy shared a room with Bulstrode and Greengrass shared with Davis. The door to Pansy's dorm was ajar and she and Bulstrode were peeking out into the hall where Davis and Greengrass stood like frozen statues-not magically frozen, just too shocked after their initial bout of shrieking to do more than stare at one another in horror.

Both girls were covered in what looked like yellow paint, but more pressingly: they were both completely bald. A bucket suspended above their doorframe revealed how they had gotten themselves covered in the sharp-smelling yellow liquid, but the furious hate in their eyes as they finally broke their trance and swiveled their heads around to where Pansy was watching with awed shock from her

doorway revealed exactly who they thought was responsible for the malicious prank. Pansy started shaking her head slowly while next to her Bulstrode was clearly fighting an amused smile.

"PARKINSON!" Greengrass' fingers contracted and she leapt forward toward Pansy with an inhuman roar, Davis hot on her heels.

Rigel surged forward to catch the incensed Greengrass by a section of her robes the yellow liquid hadn't dripped to yet and Draco whipped out his wand to throw a Shield Charm in front of Pansy's doorway before Davis could reach it.

" *Let me go !* " Greengrass whirled on Rigel, "Look what that BITCH did to me!"

Rigel dipped her finger gingerly into the yellow stuff and brought it to her nose, "Eugh," she wiped it quickly onto her robes, "Yep, definitely Hair-Removal Potion."

" *We know what it is!* " Davis spat-literally, there was spittle flying from her lips, "Take down this shield right now! That little bint is gonna be sorry she did this!"

"I didn't do this!" Pansy called from behind the Shield Charm. "I was with Draco and Rigel for the past two hours, so I wouldn't have had time to set it up."

"Anyone could have done it," Draco pointed out, "The bucket's outside of your dorm, not inside. And Pansy *has* been with us this whole time."

"You're just saying that because she's your friend!" Greengrass growled. She was trying to flick the mess off of her robes but was only succeeding in getting it all over the hallway.

"We're saying that because it's true," Rigel said calmly, "Pansy would never do something like this. The girl can barely eat a chocolate frog-no offense, Pan-much less actually plan an attack on someone."

It was true. Pansy fought with words, not weapons, and even then those who knew her well could tell she mostly just made up insults for the fun of being clever. Pansy Parkinson didn't have a cruel bone in her body.

"Then who did?" Davis demanded, glaring at them all.

"You can figure it out later," Rigel said bluntly, "Because if you don't go wash that Potion off of your skin in the next five minutes it will start to burn like crazy. Professor Snape can re-grow your hair, but the rash the Removal Potion will give you won't go away for a week."

"Urgh! Out of my way!" Greengrass stomped into her dorm room, with Davis following after her, and slammed the door behind them.

Draco took down the Shield Charm and Pansy and Bulstrode stepped cautiously out into the hall.

"Will it really give them a rash, Black?" Bulstrode asked quietly.

Rigel pinned her with a frankly assessing stare, "Why? Feeling guilty?"

The thicker-set girl flushed slightly, "They deserved it. Megan Jones is a friend of mine, and those two have been spreading sick gossip about her all week."

"Maybe they deserved it," Draco said, "But Pansy got blamed for it."

"She has an alibi," Bulstrode lifted her chin, "And it's not like I hurt them. I didn't know about the rash."

Rigel smiled slightly, "The only way they'll get a rash is if they're allergic, so there's about a 2% possibility."

"Oh," Bulstrode grinned at Rigel, "Thanks. And sorry you got pinned, Pansy. If Snape somehow believes them, I promise I'll own up to it, okay?"

"In that case, well done," Pansy smirked, "I wouldn't have thought of it, but I can't say they didn't have it coming."

It turned out they needn't have worried about getting into trouble. Snape dismissed the incident in light of more pressing concerns. That night the first Ravenclaw fell to the mysterious sickness, and sent new waves of panic throughout the school.

Rigel didn't know what was going on, but she wasn't going to count her stars just yet.

The firestorm had only just begun.

[end of chapter seventeen].

A/N: Thanks for reading! Here's my justification for making Percy a lawyer: He'd be happier, and all my characters should be happy :), also, there is not mention of lawyers in the books, but at Harry's trial fifth year Dumbledore acts as a third party with the requisite legal knowledge to speak on Harry's behalf-sounds like a lawyer to me. And someone has to write all those laws that the Wizengamot enforces, so why not a lawyer?

Chapter 18

A/N1: Here we are again, my lovelies. I've had some requests in reviews, and I've tried to accommodate what I could, so I hope those of you who asked for more explanation of something or a different kind of character, for instance, enjoy ^^ . For all those who are interested in the romance side of things-I sympathize, and certainly that will be a large part of the story, but you won't see much during first year. Serious romance will be a long time coming, say around third year perhaps, so I'm truly sorry if you're hoping for any real action while Harry's so young. For now, she's dealing with her studies and various extra-curricular complications and just not interested in love. That will change, but it won't be in the next few chapters. In the mean time: enjoy!

A/N2: That said, thank you to everyone who's reading this story (which is not based off of characters I own, disclaimer, disclaimer). A special (if that work isn't clichéd in itself) thanks to the following for their reviews, which I hope I've replied to personally by the time you read this: TamariChan, Vaughn Tyler, Kenzieloveify, J.F.C., zeichnerinaga, TearfullPixie, The Chaos Legionnaire, Giselle Pink, Cathy Willow, BaltaineShadow, aureliasilver, and cheekysocerer. Also thanks to those I couldn't PM: coco: thank you for keeping me motivated by reminding me to update, kk: I'm glad you like the pacing and I hope I keep you interested (I promise not to drop the story, though I'm sure all authors say that), and delia: mind? I love constructive criticism, so thank you, thank you. I hope you can tell I've tried to take you advice and not throw things in without backing them up, and tried to hold back on over dramatizing things lol, as well as explain things better. I promise, I don't mean to tease. Thanks again, to you and everyone who gives me advice on my first story :).

Longest chapter yet! *cue raucous cheering* I hope this makes up a bit for being slower until May ^^ .

The Pureblood Pretense:

Chapter 18:

"Okay, I give up," Nott said a week later as he, Draco, Rigel, Pansy, Zabini, and Bulstrode, who was a semi-permanent addition to their group after the incident with Greengrass and Davis, lounged around their dormitory with nothing to do, "What are you doing with those things, Rigel? You've been glaring at them all week."

Rigel looked up with surprise from the little red ball she was holding- she wasn't sure but she thought that was the first time Nott had called her by her first name. "It's something Snape's got me doing," she said.

"What, frowning at anything Gryffindor red? Sounds like Snape, but how does that help you with Potions?" the brown haired boy asked.

"Those are Medi-minis," Bulstrode said, glancing over.

"What *are* they?" Pansy asked, peering curiously at the little red orb in Rigel's hand.

"They're for kids who want to be Medi wizards," the bigger girl elaborated, "You practice putting magic into them, like a Healer does when they heal someone."

Draco made a sound of understanding, "They're helping you control your magic, right, Rigel?"

"Yes," she shrugged, "It's more challenging than I expected. Sometimes they explode, but I can never get them to turn green like I'm supposed to."

"What do you visualize while exercising your raw magic?" Zabini asked while leaning against Nott's bedpost.

Rigel frowned thoughtfully, "I guess I just picture shoving my magic into the ball, if anything."

Zabini straightened from his relaxed position with an expression of incredulity, "Shoving?" he rolled his eyes, "No wonder you're destroying the poor things. Don't you think you should try picturing something less violent?"

My magic is violent, Rigel thought to herself, but she asked, "Does the visualization really make any difference? It's just a mind trick to help you focus."

This time it was Draco who gave her an incredulous look, "Did your parents lock you in the basement with a Potions Encyclopedia and teaching you *nothing* else?" He sighed, muttering, "Practically a muggle," under his breath.

"If you explained it to me, I might be able to understand," Rigel said in a tone she told herself was patient and not at all sarcastic.

"Look, just because it's in your mind doesn't mean it's not *real*," Draco said very slowly, "Magic makes it real. That's why mind-magic works so effectively, that's why it matters if you cast a spell without really meaning it, and you should know this because *that's why your magic does things without you saying a spell* sometimes." Draco ran a hand through his hair, "How else do you think accidental magic works? It comes from the mind, the will, which shapes the magic even before kids have the words to command it. If it didn't, it would appear without reason, but there's always a trigger for accidental magic, because magic does not have a mind of its own. So, yes, what you do with your mind while exercising your magic affects how the magic expresses itself."

Rigel thought about that, turning the words and ideas over in her mind and mixing them with what she already knew. *It would explain a lot* she mused *and Draco has no reason to lie*. If this was true, she needed to work on Occlumency more than ever. If mind was connected to magic, then a well-ordered mind should produce well-ordered magic. It also shed light on the idea of making the mind into a fortress somewhat. Apparently if she could trick her mind into thinking of itself as a fortress, then her magic would make it literally

so. Flint might have been on to something about mind-reading protection after all. Maybe she should listen to upperclassmen more. Probably she should listen to her friends more, too. Maybe-

"Rigel, are you listening to me?" Draco demanded.

"Yes," Rigel said, "So no more shoving?"

"... Yes, Rigel, please don't ever *shove* your magic again," Draco sighed.

"Okay," Rigel went back to staring at the little red ball. *No shoving. Pushing? No, probably not good either, but how else can I get magic into the ball?... Yanking? I could pull a piece of magic apart or maybe cut a piece away-* her body gave an abrupt shiver of disgust and rejection, and she quite agreed, *Yeah, definitely not cutting any of my magic up. I could leak it, but that seems really passive, like I wouldn't be able to control where it leaked. I could try shooting it out like a laser, but that's still really violent. Pouring, maybe?*

She tried mentally pouring a bit of magic into the little red orb. It slowly, gradually turned brown, and she could sort of feel the magic trickling out of her with a sixth sense she'd always known she had but never paid much attention to. It was hard, but satisfying work. Still, even as the ball faded into green and her friends congratulated her on her first success, it didn't feel quite *right*. She was still doing something wrong, and it felt uncomfortable. For all that most wizards saw their magic as a tool to be wielded, she'd been mentally assigning it a personality for so long that even though it had been given a negative personality in her head, it still felt too... arrogant, maybe, or presumptuous, to order it around if she didn't need to. In fact, it felt vaguely rude.

She took another ball from the bag and tentatively, feeling stupid but determined, *asked* her magic to fill the ball. The orb turned green so quickly it might have been a muggle traffic light, and if she hadn't been waiting for it she wouldn't even have felt the tell-tale thrumming that zinged through her like a weak current. She blinked in surprise.

That was easy . It was as if she'd been doing magic with weights around her neck all along and suddenly they were gone and it just flowed out of her. She marveled at how much energy she must have been wasting fighting with her magic when she could have just asked it to cooperate with her all along.

"Well, it looks like you've got the hang of it," Bulstrode said, eyebrows raised.

Rigel happily took the other 10 balls out of the bag (three had exploded) and one by one asked her magic to please fill them up. The other first years watched with interest, and, after the fifth one, incredulous unease. When all twelve of the non-exploded orbs were green, Rigel put them back in her bag with a satisfied smirk. *Take that*, she thought to Snape and Draco and everyone else who thought magic had to be a witless tool.

"Aren't you... tired?" Pansy asked what the rest of them were apparently thinking. Rigel wondered if she would ever get used to the sheer disbelief she was confronted with by people around her. Honestly, you'd think *wizards*, who could use *magic*, would be less narrow minded about the things they expected from the world. Not that she could talk, she reminded herself sheepishly, having only just thought of working with her magic instead of against it or independently of it herself.

"It's only six o'clock," Rigel said, deciding deliberate obtuseness was the way to avoid such questions.

"So much more than meets the eye," Zabini muttered in a way that didn't sound entirely complimentary.

"I'm done trying to figure Rigel out for the day," Nott said tiredly, "Let's just go to dinner."

The others shrugged or nodded their agreement, Rigel among them. After dinner Rigel went by Snape's office, still flushed (metaphorically

speaking; she rarely blushed at anything living with two boys these days) with success.

The voice that answered her knock was, empathetically, not Snape. Unless Snape was for some reason Polyjuiced as a teenaged girl.

A very pretty teenage girl, as it turned out when Rigel let herself into the office. The place looked even blander than usual without Snape's overwhelming presence filling up the meta-space. The girl lounging in Snape's chair with her feet up rather bravely on the Professor's immaculate desk had long black hair and heavy eye makeup that gave her too-pretty face a more down to earth edge. After an initial moment of confusion on Rigel's part (probably due to the fact that there was a *girl* in Snape's *chair*), Rigel took in the other girl's Slytherin tie and placed her as the prefect who had given them the password on the night of the Sorting Feast.

"Need something?" the prefect asked in a bored drawl without looking up from the magazine she was flipping through.

"Professor Snape," Rigel said.

"No, I'm Alesana Selwyn," the blue-eyed girl flicked a section of her long hair over her shoulder in an absent-minded movement.

"I meant I'm here to see Professor Snape," Rigel said, feeling a bit awkward explaining something fairly obvious, just standing in front of the desk while the girl ignored her in favor of scanning pages in her magazine.

"Hmm," the prefect finally looked up from what she was doing and met Rigel's gaze challengingly, "Why?"

"I've finished an assignment for him and was told to bring it by whenever I was done."

"Leave it here," Selwyn said, already turning another page with a blank look on her face.

"I'd rather give it to him myself," Rigel said as politely as she could while refusing the upperclassman. She probably could have left the bag of orbs on his desk, but then she wouldn't know what to work on next.

Selwyn rolled her eyes and huffed out an exasperated laugh, "I'm not gonna read your essay on frogsporn, kid. I promise I've got better things to do. Just leave it."

"It's not an essay," Rigel said evenly, "Can you tell me when the Professor will be back?" Remembering something the prefect had said the night she'd introduced them to Slytherin, she added, "I'd consider it a favor."

"Oh, really?" she raked Rigel with kohl-lined eyes, "And what could you possibly have to repay such a favor?"

Rigel considered offering to help with Potions, like she usually did, but somehow in the face of the older girl's unimpressed stare it would have felt like bragging, so she shrugged, "You never know."

"Right," Selwyn tossed the magazine down on the table and Rigel noticed for the first time that it was written entirely in Runes, "Somehow I doubt that, but it doesn't matter. Your name is Black, yes?"

"Yes," Rigel said.

"In that case, Professor Snape's in Lab One," Selwyn told her, a slight smile on her lips, "He mentioned you might be by. Of course, he mentioned that last night, and the night before, too, but in any case, I'm to point you in his direction."

Rigel cocked her head curiously, "You've been sitting in here for three nights straight?"

"All week," she corrected, tapping her foot to a soundless rhythm, "Someone's got to be available for answering questions and

handling other minor distractions while our Head of House is chained to his cauldron. At least you're not another second year wanting help with weather charms. One more kid conjures hail on my head and I'm putting *myself* in quarantine."

"Well, thank you for your help," Rigel said.

"I'd say 'anytime', but..." she trailed off, apparently considering the end of her sentence to be self-evident. Rigel nodded anyway and left the office.

Lab One was Snape's private Lab and as such was protected by a series of tightly woven wards, but since they didn't react to her presence, she assumed Snape left them 'open' while he was working in case he was needed. The Lab was a marvel of organization and efficiency, if indeed words so colorless could describe such sheer beauty. Glass cabinets lined the walls, filled comfortably with ingredients, which Rigel noted were arranged by use and classification rather than alphabetically as the student stores were. The actual workstations were set up in a horseshoe; the countertops were the same white stone as the floor, which would cause most ingredients to show up perfectly against it, and sinks were set at regular intervals between stations.

When Rigel entered, knowing better than to knock in case he were in the middle of a delicate stage, Snape was standing motionless in the center of the open circle, looking like a conductor overseeing his orchestra as his sharp eyes monitored several simmering cauldrons at once. She cleared her throat quietly once she was fairly certain he wasn't mentally timing anything and Snape turned around to raise an eyebrow at her, not seeming startled by her presence. Perhaps the wards were tied to him even when loose.

Though his eyes took in everything with customary alertness, Snape's shoulders lacked their usual stiff posture, and the harsh lines around his mouth spoke as eloquently of the Potion Master's exhaustion as if he had confessed it in his own words. "Mr. Black. I

admit I was not expecting to see you so soon, despite the message I left with Miss Selwyn. How is your assignment progressing?"

"Finished, sir," Rigel took out the bag of now-green Medi-minis and held it out with a grin, "Twelve out of fifteen."

"Indeed?" Snape took the bag after another quick glance around the lab, "These are perfectly imbued," he noted after taking one out and examining the color, "I am suitably impressed, Mr. Black. How did you gain this level of control so quickly?"

Rigel watched him stow the bag in one of the many cabinets and shrugged lightly, "My magic and I have come to an understanding, that's all."

"And do you believe that you are now capable of imbuing magic into a potion consciously?" Snape asked with raised eyebrows.

Rigel hesitated, "Can I ask a question before I answer?"

"You may," Snape's face was expressionless.

"When I was putting magic into the balls, I just kept going until they were full. Does it matter how magic gets put into a potion?"

"Very good question," Snape nodded in rare approval, "Unlike the exercise you completed, there is no need to imbue a potion with as much magic as you can stand. Every potion has a unique threshold where raw magic is concerned. Once that threshold is reached, the potion is effective, and adding more magic simply makes it more effective. Because of this, there is no need to go above the threshold for most potions. For example, there would be no purpose in making a potion which was extra effective at vanishing toenails, because once the toenails are vanished they cannot become *more* so. Exceptions to this rule include most potions for Healing as well as those that effect changes in degrees, such as Strengthening or Weakening Solutions. For those potions, the stronger the brewer, the more effective it will be, provided it is brewed correctly, of course."

"How does one know if the threshold is reached?" Rigel asked, frowning slightly, "Is trial and error the only way to gauge the level of magic needed to make a particular potion effective?"

"Thankfully, no," Professor Snape said, "At this point you should have enough awareness of your conscious magic to be able to sense its use. If you concentrate on that feeling while brewing you will be able to extend your sense to include the potion itself. This is true for any magical object you might find yourself working with; as long as your magic is connected to the object, consciously or unconsciously, you should be able to become 'magically aware' of that object. For potions, this means you will be able to sense when a potion's threshold has been reached and subsequently withdraw your magical connection with it."

"Do potions have an upper limit as far as magic is concerned?" Rigel asked, "If you put too much magic in, for instance, would it cause the potion to become unstable?"

"Generally speaking, no," Snape said, "Magic in potions usually makes things more stable, not less. That is why dangerous and complicated potions such as Wolfsbane can be... soothed, so to speak, by imbuing them with a great deal of magic. It holds the more reactive ingredients together safely. That said, some potions will indeed react negatively in theory if imbued with too much magic, but the amount of magic needed to provoke such a reaction would be too much for anyone not a Lord-level wizard to manage to put in. For practical purposes, the only consequence would be wasted magic and exhaustion for the brewer."

Snape took a moment to check each of his cauldrons while Rigel turned the information over in her head. He looked to have about eight different cauldrons brewing, though several of them seemed to be the same potion.

"I think I could correctly imbue a potion with magic now," Rigel said finally, "But I would like to test that theory before stating my competence with confidence."

"Very well," Snape gestured to an empty workspace on one end of the almost-circle of lab stations, "You may use that cauldron to brew an Allergy Relief Potion. If you are unable to recall the recipe, say so, do not attempt to brew blindly out of misplaced pride."

"Yes, sir," Rigel said, though she doubted she'd ever forget how to make the first potion she'd ever made wrong five times in a row.

Rigel stowed her things safely out of the way and began setting up the station, checking and double-checking the cauldron, stirring rods, and other brewing implements for rust or wear despite them being in Snape's personal lab. It was just good brewing practice. She found the ingredients easily, though the aloe was sorted with the lilies rather than with the asphodels, and began brewing. She and Snape ignored one another like they were old hands at it, and she wondered in the tiny part of her mind not completely engrossed in dicing and stirring whether the ability to focus on one thing to the detriment of all else was a trait common to potionneers or particular to she and Snape. Either way, it made for a relaxing, quiet atmosphere and let her concentrate even more closely than she usually did on the potion before her.

Once the base was brought to temperature and Rigel began stirring ingredients in, she focused on that sixth not-sense that was her magical awareness and asked her magic, very politely, to please imbue her Allergy Relief Potion with magic.

It began as a weak sort of current which felt like her magical core was humming softly, sending vibrations of magic out from around her middle to her fingertips, and on into the stirring rod, which conducted the hum of magic into the potion. By extending her magical senses outward she could feel the connection between herself and the cauldron, and a foreign, placid source of magic that was the potion itself. The potion felt incomplete, not just physically but magically as well, so she left her magical core 'running' as she turned her attention to completing the actual brewing of the potion.

Ten minutes later, the potion was complete, according to the recipe, but stubbornly sky-blue. She focused on the extension of her magical sense once more and noticed without surprise that the potion now felt complete in a physical sense but incomplete in a magical sense. There was a faint tugging on the connection that hummed between the potion and her magical core, so she focused on that tugging and mentally asked her magic to please send more energy through the link. Immediately, the humming grew to a steady thrumming, and the connection, a thin string of energy in her mind's eye running from her midriff to her hands to the stirring rod to the potion widened to about an inch thick to accommodate the more powerful current.

It didn't take long at the increased rate for the potion to feel complete to her magical senses. She kept the connection for another minute just for good measure, then asked her magic gently to break it off. Her magical core seemed to hum discontentedly for a moment, but the connection was withdrawn and she let her sixth sense go dormant while she refocused on reality.

The cauldron in front of her was filled with the most beautiful, wonderful, murky-lavender-colored potion she'd ever seen, and Rigel beamed with quiet success while she bottled a sample and cleared up her station to the level of pristine cleanliness it had been when she began. She was cleaning out the cauldron (after having already diluted the leftover potion and poured it down the sink) when a brisk knock on the door interrupted the tranquil activity of the lab.

Snape gave the cauldron he was overseeing one more stir and cast a stasis charm before scribbling down something on a piece of dark-tan, fire-retardant parchment (probably the number of stirs he'd left off on) and moving to answer the door.

It was Madam Pomphrey. The matronly woman started speaking even before the door had been closed behind her, and Rigel thought she looked as frazzled and exhausted as she sounded with mussed hair and dark circles beneath her care-lined eyes. There was also a faint shimmer in the air around her that Rigel recognized as a spell

Healers used when they needed to move between quarantined and non-quarantined areas. It trapped the tiniest particles within the air around a person and didn't let them escape until the spell was released. It only worked for about twenty minutes, though, as the oxygen in the trapped air ran out after that.

"Severus, I hate to do this, but I need you to brew another batch of True Determinant as soon as you can manage it," she said, not seeming to notice Rigel, who was still wiping down her cauldron carefully, as she leaned tiredly against one of the workbenches. Rigel recognized the Potion Pomphrey named as a basic diagnostic potion, which Rigel supposed Pomphrey must be using quite a bit of if she was checking each sick student carefully to make sure the were succumbing to the same illness.

Snape scowled in a way that was clearly not directed at the nurse, but rather the world in general, "What wrong with the batch I just brewed? I have a very strict schedule I must keep to as it is."

"I know, Severus, believe me," Pomphrey sighed, "But Longbottom succumbed to the illness just a few hours ago, and he's-"

"Allergic to hawthorn berries," Snape finished wearily, "Yes, I am aware. Very well, I'll start on a batch with something from the azalea family substituted for the hawthorn when I can. Perhaps rhododendron petals, crushed of course..." Snape trailed off to grab another sheet of fireproof parchment from a stack in one of the cabinets and scribble modifications down onto it.

"Neville's sick too?" Rigel asked, pausing in her cleaning to frown worriedly.

Madam Pomphrey started at the unexpected interruption, but answered, "Yes, Mr. Black, is it? Mr. Longbottom is indeed now under quarantine.

"Will he be okay?" Rigel asked, darting a glance at Snape to make sure she wasn't over stepping her bounds. He wasn't looking at her,

but at the cauldrons around the room, so she went on, "And the other first-years as well?"

Madam Pomphrey hesitated just a fraction of a second, but it was enough to make her next words less than completely reassuring, "He is in no immediate danger, Mr. Black. Best not to worry for now."

"Yes, ma'am," Rigel said, dissatisfied but not sure of herself enough to press the older woman.

"Have you made any progress in the diagnosis, Poppy?" Snape asked quietly, "Anything you learn will be of use to me in determining what potions may be needed before this is through."

"Nothing new," the nurse said shortly, "But at the rate it's spreading... well, I must say I'm glad you've recruited help, because I need as much Aurora's Breath and Snowhit Draught as you can make. I also need the Sweat Inducer more than the Fever Reducer, which doesn't seem to do much on its own. Don't bother with the Restorative Draught, though," she added darkly, "It isn't helping a whit."

Snape nodded, making another note on parchment, and said, "Mr. Black is not assisting me in this, but you will have the potions as I complete them, Poppy."

"Thank you," Pomphrey said in a voice so weary Rigel wondered why they hadn't called in additional staff from St. Mungo's yet. Then again, maybe they had and they were all behind the quarantine. "I must get back. Don't overwork yourself-I mean it. The last thing we need is for our Potions Master to fall ill."

"Unlikely, if the pattern of the illness continues," Snape said dismissively, "Go, Poppy, I have work to do."

The nurse swept out of the lab hurriedly and Snape immediately went back to work, taking the stasis charm off the cauldron he'd been stirring and adding ingredients to others as well.

"What did you mean, the pattern of the illness?" Rigel asked carefully, speaking quietly so as not to disturb the air of efficient necessity that now hung about the lab. No wonder there were so many cauldrons going if Snape supplied the entire Hospital Wing and some ten students had already fallen ill.

Snape glanced at her beneath furrowed brows, but said, "You yourself have noted that it is for the most part the youngest who are falling ill. If age is a determining factor in its spreading, the professors of this school are currently at least risk."

"What is the illness, if you don't mind me asking? What do you know about it?" Rigel asked, uneasy with the idea that she could very easily catch it, yet didn't know anything about it.

"We don't know much," Snape grunted, eyes fixed on the cauldron before him, "There are no symptoms before the sudden collapse, and only a fever after the collapse. Sometimes the fever goes away in a few days or even hours; sometimes it does not."

"And... that's it? Just a fever?" Rigel frowned at the back of Snape's head from her place beside the once-again immaculate workstation.

"Snowhit, Mr. Black, and Aurora's Breath. What do you know about them?" Snape asked, his voice the detached, lecturing tone he used while teaching.

Rigel answered automatically, "Snowhit, named for Snow White, who fell into a magical coma after ingesting poison. It's called a Draught, but it is usually administered intravenously or in vaporized form, because rarely can one in need of it drink the potion. It is essentially a nutrient potion designed for long-term dependence and used to keep coma patients from wasting away due to starvation or dehydration. Aurora's Breath is named for a girl who was cursed into an enchanted sleep. She had three nursemaids dedicated to keeping her alive; one kept her muscles from atrophying, one kept her heart circulating, and one kept her breathing regular. The potion was invented some time after Aurora was cured of her curse, but is

named for her because it performs all three of the functions that were required to keep her healthy while under the curse."

"That is correct," Snape said flatly, "and so?"

"The students don't wake up after they collapse, do they?" Rigel said slowly, the heaviness in her gut making it hard to wrap her mind around it, "They're all in comas, natural or magical, and Madam Pomphrey doesn't know how to fix them. She's just keeping them alive and healthy to stall for time."

Snape did not answer, but he didn't need to. Rigel slumped against the workbench to take several deep breaths, then pushed her fears and emotions aside for the moment and straightened up.

"Let me help," Rigel said, careful to keep her voice even and calm, "I can imbue potions now, and even if you think the Snowhit and Aurora's Breath beyond me I can at least manage Sweat Inducers."

"You are a first year," Snape said tonelessly as he shredded the leaves from an anise flower.

"I am a potions-maker," Rigel countered, "And what you need is a potions-maker."

"There are seventh year students more experienced than you I could ask to help," he said.

"But you don't have to ask them, because I'm offering," Rigel said, "I am less busy than a seventh year student preparing for NEWTs would be. I am also more invested in this *because* I'm a first year and know the kids falling sick. I spend several hours brewing each week in any case, so I might as well be of some use."

Snape put down his stirring rod and turned to face her. "Bring me your Allergy Relief Potion," he said, face still giving nothing away.

Rigel handed over the sample and waited, chin up and eyes steady, as he examined it.

"There is more magic than is strictly necessary in this, but it is satisfactory," he said, setting the sample aside and gazing seriously at her, "This is not a commitment to make lightly. Once you take responsibility for completing certain potions, those potions must be completed, do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," Rigel said.

Snape considered her for a moment more, before moving to find a fresh sheet of parchment and writing quickly on it in his spidery handwriting.

"You will begin making Sweat Inducers following this recipe exactly-it is slightly different from the one you will find in most standard textbooks, so do not lose this parchment," he said as he wrote, "You will make however many you find the time for, without overworking yourself. In two weeks, bring what you have to me and we will assess the rate and quality of your production level." He fixed her with a stern look, "More does not mean better, Mr. Black. Better three satisfactory potions than a dozen useless ones."

"Yes, sir," Rigel took the recipe, careful not to smudge the wet ink.

"You are free to take what you need from the student stores," Snape continued as he went back to overseeing his cauldrons, "If I hear that you have neglected your studies because of this, you will be banned from brewing anything until further notice. Do you have any questions?"

"No, sir."

"Then you are dismissed."

Rigel gathered her things and left the lab quietly, turning things over in her head. She already had a lot to do without taking extra brewing

on, but she couldn't do *nothing* while Neville and the other first-years were lying in comas in the hospital wing. She would have to make some sacrifices-less sleep, and perhaps some working meals since she couldn't neglect her studies without Snape finding out or Flint's studies without Flint throwing a fit. She also didn't think this was the time to neglect her Healing studies, considering the situation, and Occlumency could be practiced while doing other things, surely? Perhaps she could do homework during some of her classes.

When she got back to the common room, Pansy and Draco waved her over to their group by the fire and she mentally grimaced; her friends were not going to be impressed with how little time she was going to have for them, but hopefully they'd understand in the long run.

Over the next week, Rigel juggled to the point that she seriously considered a career in the Russian circus if the whole Potion's Mistress thing didn't work out. She got all of her work done (even Flint had nothing to complain about), studied up on Healing and Occlumency, both of which were beginning to make sense more now that she understood the mind's impact on magic and could consciously direct the flow of her magic, and still found time to brew Sweat Reducers every spare minute she had. It helped that the most of the professors apparently felt that the students needed a lighter work load to counteract the added stress of the illness going around. Snape was of course the exception to this, but his assignments weren't really work to Rigel anyway.

Pansy seemed to understand how busy Rigel was, though she didn't pretend to understand why, but Draco was not moved by pleas of responsibility and commitment and proceeded to drag Rigel outside Thursday evening to go flying over her admittedly thinly-worn objections.

"You're coming," Draco said as he pulled her out of the Library by her elbow, and that was that.

Admittedly, Rigel had needed a break from the stress of balancing her many different projects, and flying was a wonderful way to relieve the tension that had built up from being hunched over a cauldron or a thick Healing tomb. She hadn't flown outside of Flying class since when she was helping Draco practice for his tryouts, back when her wrist was still broken, so she took the opportunity to let loose a bit.

Unfortunately, she'd forgotten to warn Draco before letting loose, and consequentially scared the hair gel out of him when she performed a particularly dangerous-looking loop-de-loop through one of the goal hoops. He scolded her for about five minutes, then demanded she repeat the move slowly so he could learn it too. Rigel laughed like she hadn't in what felt like ages and happily obliged.

"You're not tucking your elbows in tight enough!" she called over the wind as Draco attempted the trick, "You're going to bang them on the-"

Crack . "AHH... bloody hell, OW !"

"... Goalposts," Rigel winced belatedly and flew after Draco's howling form. He was spiraling slowly toward the ground, left hand gripping his right elbow fiercely, and she caught up with him as he landed.

"Ow, ow, ow," he muttered to himself through gritted teeth, his voice slightly muffled through the scarf he wore around his neck and chin-the handkerchief-scarf Rigel had gotten him for Christmas.

Rigel dropped her broom and bent over his elbow with him. The fabric of his sleeve was intact, but bunched up over his shoulder so Draco could examine the hurt. His elbow was bright red and swiftly purpling, but the skin wasn't pierced at least.

"Banged it up pretty good, Draco," Rigel said, prodding it with a finger gingerly.

"Ow," said Draco pointedly, and though Rigel couldn't see his mouth beneath the scarf she imagined his pouting at her from the way his chin dropped, "And *no kidding*."

Rigel examined the elbow closely, then said, "Try moving it."

Draco carefully bent and unbent the joint, wincing elaborately to indicate that doing so hurt phenomenally.

"Not broken, then," Rigel said, and took out her wand, "Right. Hold still."

"No freaking way," Draco hissed, jerking his arm away from her and glaring.

"Seriously," Rigel said, holding out her hand, "I can fix it. Besides, Madam Pomphrey is in quarantine and Snape's not going to fix a *bruise* for you, so unless you want to let it heal on its own..."

Draco sighed with a very put-upon expression, but held out his elbow all the same, "If you vanish my elbow, I'm suing you for malpractice."

"Yes, Draco, please take away my non-existent license to practice Healing," Rigel rolled her eyes, "Just hold still, okay? It won't even hurt... probably."

Draco frowned at her with narrowed eyes, but Rigel just grinned slightly at him before leaning close to the swollen elbow once more. She'd learned how to heal bruises in theory, and she could theoretically handle swelling and tenderness, too. She just hadn't had much occasion to practice.

She placed her left hand on Draco's upper arm to hold him steady and used her right to point her wand directly at the wounded joint. Rigel sank into herself, pulling her magical awareness to the forefront of her mind, and focused on creating a connection between her magical core and the bruise surrounding Draco's elbow. Once that was established, Rigel could 'see' Draco's magic working slowly

on the area affected by the injury, doing what it could to protect the tissues around it and dull the pain somewhat.

Rigel took a deep, centering breath and began the careful process of 'directing' her magic into the wound. A human being wasn't like a potion, despite the similarities Rigel discovered in forging a temporary magical pathway between them. She couldn't just pour her magic into Draco, because if that was all that was needed then Draco's own magic would have healed it already. The magical energy had to be directed to Heal, which involved a series of very specific instructions based on the knowledge of how the human body should function optimally. 'Directing,' of course, was a rather assuming word for what Rigel was actually doing, which was *begging nicely* for her magic to do as she asked. She asked it to please reduce the swelling in the area by re-directing blood flow to its normal pathways, and requested it kindly assist her by knitting together tissue torn or battered by the impact of Draco's elbow against the goalpost. Her right hand grew warm under the flow of magic and her core thrummed contentedly as the bruise on Draco's elbow gradually shrunk and faded, until it was nothing but the palest-yellow reminder of an injury that once was.

Rigel closed the connection off completely and drew back to admire her work. She thought her first Healing had turned out rather well, all things considered, so she allowed herself a grin of victory and thanked her magic generously for good measure.

"Does it still hurt?" Rigel asked, half-afraid the bruise only looked like it was gone.

"Not at all," Draco said wonderingly, turning his arm this way and that to examine the elbow from all angles, "It's just sort of warm." He looked up at her suddenly through his lashes, and Rigel didn't need to see his mouth behind the scarf to know he was smiling at her. She thought she knew why Archie wanted to be a Healer so badly, if it got you smiles like *that*. As if every day the sun had squirreled away a little of its light in Draco Malfoy's eyes, and it all came bursting out at the fierceness of his joy, "Where ever did you learn to do that? I can't

believe you never told me you could Heal things! Is that what you've been doing in the Library all this time? It's really amazing. Just wait until I tell my father about this, he'll be so *impressed* ."

Rigel let Draco babble at her for a bit, still stunned into silence by the luminosity of her friend's happiness. She didn't comment on it as they made their way back to the common room, and Rigel headed off to her lab to brew more Sweat Inducer after changing her clothes, but it was a good thing she knew the recipe by heart at that point, because all she could think about while brewing was the wondering light in Draco's eyes. Rigel mulled that smile over again and again in her mind as she worked, wondering if her potions would ever prompt such a smile as Archie's Healing did. She truly hoped they would.

Friday morning Rigel finally heard back from Sirius about the hints Rosier and Rookwood had dropped a couple of weeks earlier. She also got a letter from Archie, delivered by an Eagle owl but with plain black ink on the front, so she tucked both letters into her robes to read in private and distracted herself with listening to Bulstrode and Nott argue about whether History of Magic or Divination was a more useless subject. Nott had a point about History as it was taught at Hogwarts being useless to most of the students, whose pureblooded families would have taught them History already, while Bulstrode argued that History was at least of some use in the general sense, while Divination was a subject whose sole purpose lay in distracting addle-minded twits from the banality of their real lives.

When her breakfast was finished, Rigel excused herself from the conversation, thinking she could read her letters in the privacy of her Lab, which was on the way to the Potions Classroom anyway, but she was waylaid outside of the Great Hall by a pair of red-haired trouble-makers with notoriously fluid identifiers.

"Puppy!"

Rigel wasn't even surprised by this greeting anymore, which probably wasn't a good sign.

"Hey Fred, hi George," she nodded to each in turn, "What can I do for you?"

Fred grinned widely as he looped a hand through her elbow and dragged her out of the way of the main flow of traffic through the Entrance Hall, "That is just the question you should never be afraid to ask, Pup. With most people we have to *ask* to get them to help us, and at that point we just look suspicious."

"I would make a smoke equals fire reference, but I have the feeling it would only inspire you," Rigel said, trying and failing not to smile fondly, "But you haven't told me what you need right now."

"You not running off on holiday to the Hospital Wing with the other first-years would be a good start," George said, eyes grave but offset by a determinately upbeat smile.

"And on that cheerful note," Fred shot a look at his brother, who immediately crossed his eyes and pursed his lips in response, before turning back to her with a salesman smile, "We've a mind to do something about the epidemic of doom-and-gloominess going round this school, but we've hit a snag in the works."

"What sort of a snag?" Rigel asked dutifully as Fred paused for effect.

"Well it's less like a snag and more like an essential step in the process that is our genius at work has been forcibly moved beyond our reach," George said, lifting his eyes to the ceiling as he did so, "It's not that we blame you, of course, but if you were a man of any kind of sympathy you surely wouldn't object to helping replace what you've taken away."

"What I've taken?" Rigel glanced between them confusedly.

"Our sounding board," Fred said helpfully, "We didn't keep Lee around for his looks, you know."

"Not that we wouldn't keep you around for your looks," George added helpfully.

"But it sure would save us the trouble of having to find yet another person in the school whose sense of humor hasn't been stunted by the choking vines of their Families' expectations," Fred said, shaking his head sadly, "Wizards just don't know how to have fun these days."

"You want me to... replace Lee Jordan?" Rigel said with raised eyebrows, a bit impressed that they would reference him so casually when her friends never so much as whispered Lee's name around her, "What does that involve exactly?"

"Mostly you have to stand there and look unimpressed while we explain our plans to you," George said, "If we can convince you it makes sense, we do it, and if not, then we think of something else."

"It sounds like you're giving me power of veto over *your* pranks," Rigel frowned, "I don't want that."

"Then don't use it," Fred shrugged, "But we ask this because we are not unaware of our tendency to... feed off of one another when we get excited about an idea. We need someone to stop us if we carry something too far or try to do something stupid."

"We won't come running every time we turn Quirrell's robes pink," George said.

"Mostly because that will *never* be a bad idea," Fred added.

"But if something sounds like it might be a bad idea, we'd ask you to help us judge," George continued, "Maybe eventually we'll be able to tell for ourselves, but at this point..." He trailed off and exchanged a grimace with his brother.

"At home Mum usually lets us know if we've gone too far," Fred said, "And we eventually learned to always ask Ginny ahead of time if

we're not sure about something. She can tell if Percy will react badly to cutting holes in his robes or if Dad is too tired to handle an imp in his pillowcase some nights."

"Before we learned to ask, though..." George sighed, no trace of laughter left in his face, "Once when we were younger we turned Ron's teddy bear into a giant spider as a joke. We thought it was funny, but Ron's been terrified of spiders ever since, and doesn't trust us with *anything* of his."

Fred nodded seriously, "We don't want to make a mistake that actually hurts someone again, so we need a system of checks and balances in place. We're each other's balance, but we need an objective check."

"Will you be the one to check us out?" George said, eyebrows wagging suggestively but eyes still and solemn.

Rigel thought about how much she hated being responsible for other people, but then she thought about how much she valued being able to go to Professor Snape now when she was unsure of something, instead of having to muddle through it on her own, so she said, "Sure, I'll be your sounding board. What are you planning?"

Fred grinned and George ruffled her hair and they launched into their explanation.

"See, this whole sickness has got people down," George said earnestly, "And kids are making themselves sick with worry over it, so we thought a great big joke was in order to cheer people up."

"But we also don't want to do something startling that would wind already tense kids up further or incite the scared kids into lashing out with surprise," Fred explained.

Rigel was honestly impressed they thought so carefully about the consequences of their jokes. Sometimes she thought her own uncles could afford to be more like that, but then again they had Remus to

check them. Maybe she could be a kind of Remus for Fred and George.

"So it has to be big, but not frightening or mean?" Rigel clarified.

"Exactly," they chorused.

"It sounds like you need someone who's in on the joke to be the target then," Rigel said thoughtfully, "So that you can control how they'll react, which will cue others how to react."

Fred and George turned away from her for a moment to stare at each other, clearly communicating something with their eyes alone. Rigel wondered if she'd ever know someone well enough to fathom every thought with a look, but shoved that thought to the back of her mind for exploration when she didn't have so many other things to worry about.

"Yes," George finally said out loud, "Length will be key. Something that lasts or is repetitive, so it becomes a running joke that can make people happy or relaxed over and over again whenever they think about it."

"Which means either a *really* good sport, or a series of targets," Fred pointed out.

"Why not start with a really good sport, who would be an example to others and inspire them to take the joke gracefully as well?" George suggested, tapping his finger against his thigh in a way that Rigel didn't think she'd ever seen Fred do while he was thinking.

"But who would...?"

"Dumbledore," Rigel said suddenly.

"You want us to prank the Headmaster?" Fred raised his eyebrows, then grinned manically, "I like it."

"He obviously doesn't care what people think about him," Rigel explained, "He seemed to enjoy some of the pranks that went on last semester, and it's his school, so he'll probably be glad to help liven it up a bit if he can."

"He never gets angry, does he?" George mused, "He would be a really good sport I bet, especially if he was in on it, and the other teachers would have to follow his lead. But wouldn't he be ethically obligated to stop us breaking rules if we told him about it ahead of time?"

"Does he seem like the kind of person who follows a lot of rules just for the sake of peace and quiet?" Rigel asked.

"Not at all, actually," Fred said, still grinning, "Ooh this is gonna be so great. Let's go talk to him after dinner."

"Alright, we'll do it," George said, smiling with excitement, "Thanks, little snake, and if we don't see you again beforehand-enjoy the show."

"Will do," Rigel smiled faintly, thinking at least her friends couldn't get in trouble for *this* joke if the Headmaster was involved.

She made it to her Lab with enough time to read at least one letter before class, and after dithering for a few moment, she decided to read Sirius' first.

She tore it open and raised an eyebrow at the length. Sirius never usually wrote so much. She read quickly so she could finish it all before class, but by the first sentence she knew she'd have to read it several times to really understand everything.

Archie (or Rigel, I guess),

Your last letter caused quite a stir around here, but I can honestly say I've never been more thankful for your Sorting (not even when I had an excuse to get the snakes, cuddly though they are) if it allows

you such knowledge. Now your auntie Lily would probably tell you not to listen at key-holes or whatever contextually appropriate metaphor fits for disapproving of eavesdropping on your classmates in general, but we Blacks know better, don't we? You have to know about something to plan ahead for it, and sometimes the only way to know things is to find out any way you can. I will say this: be careful. Even though your House sticks together more often than not, these are dangerous times for people whose existence stands in opposition to that Party of Bovines Mr. Riddle herds around the Ministry. People like us, and most particularly people like your cousin Harriett. Halfbloods with talent and ambition are exactly the kind of thing that Riddle fears, and from what Harry's said in her letters, there are others, like her friend Hermione Granger, who pose similar threats in the eyes of the supremacists. Now I don't say this to scare you, son, and I know Lily and Remus think you're too young to have to understand all this, but there are certain facts about your relation to me, blood-traitor that I am, and your cousin and aunt that will put you in a tight position in Slytherin House. I think you can balance the line you need too, but you'll need to be armed with information and forewarning, both of which I intend to give you.

Uncle James and I investigated the hints you picked up from your anonymous sources (he in the Ministry and I in my own circle of contacts) and what we found does not reassure us. There is talk of legislation being constructed that would rival the edicts of 1981 in both its controversial nature and its flagrant disregard for basic human rights. It is an effort to undermine the strength of what is left of the muggleborn population here in Britain by removing their only possible allies: the halfbloods. The big mistake the Cow party made in banning halfbloods as well as muggleborns from schooling and therefore from working influentially in Britain was that by alienating both groups, the Cow party gave them a common enemy. The proposed legislation is in essence a marriage law. It would require that all halfbloods marry purebloods, to 'keep magic in the family.' This would of course mean that no halfbloods could marry muggleborns, limiting the breeding pool of muggleborns to one another or muggles themselves, and because of the laws forbidding

children outside of wedlock to inherit, it would also mean that anything a halfblood gained would eventually revert to a pureblood's control; children, wealth, influence, everything. In addition to this, because it is unlikely that purebloods will be overeager to join with halfbloods in marriage, many simply won't ever be allowed to marry at all. No marriage means no legitimate children, means no way for the halfblood or muggleborn community to build a multi-generational power base to oppose the pureblood faction.

That said, do not be overly alarmed for Harry just yet, and don't do something rash like propose to her yourself to save her from a cold pureblooded marriage of convenience-I know you were thinking it!-the legislation is only whispers at the moment, because although since 1981 laws could not be overturned with less than a 3/4th majority, they also can still not be ratified with less than a 3/5th majority, which will never happen as long as Dumbledore and the Families that follow him stand in the way. Dumbledore, not to mention the rest of us who put our faith in him, will never stand for this, so despite the concern it raises in revealing the Cow party's agenda, it won't matter in any practical sense as long as the Light stands strong.

Enough of politics and dire warnings, my son: tell me of your latest adventures! I do hope that Map isn't growing dusty in your trunk (insert stern look that I never could pull off as well as Remus and Lily here), and that you've got a prank in the works. If you need any tips, you know who to ask. Things are quiet at home, though I think I've taught the little snake (the one who follows me inside sometimes) to roll over. Remus sends his love, and James and Lily too, of course. I met a kid in St. Mungo's the other day who had pretended to get dragon pox to get out of going to his little sister's piano recital. He reminded me of you. Remember that time you and Harry drew polka-dots on each other's faces with colored ink and tried to pretend you had an incurable case of 'the blues' (which you'd heard a muggle talking about on the street and thought was a grave disease of some kind)? You two used to always think you were so clever, but of course we saw right through you. Anyway, I know second semester's

hard, but push through, and please prank Snape at least once. Harry never even has to know.

Happy Pranking,

-Dad

Rigel allowed herself a fretful sigh as she folded up the letter and stuffed it deep into her book bag, in one of the pockets that she'd asked Lily to charm to stay closed unless she opened it over the break. *Oh, Sirius*, she thought guiltily, *If you only knew what your son and I were up to, this marriage law would seem like small pickings. I'm just hoping to make it to adulthood without being thrown in Azkaban. What's the threat of marriage compared to that?*

She practically flew down the corridors to Potions class. The whole lesson she shook with nervous energy, and several times Snape, Draco, and Pansy shot her questioning glances, Snape's tinged with disapproval and her friends' with concern. She ignored them as politely as she could and spent the lesson brewing on autopilot, turning her uncle's words over and over in her head. She felt guilty, yes, she could acknowledge that. Worried, too, about her fate years down the road, but it was a distant sort of worry compared with her other concerns. She was only starting to realize how dangerous she and Archie's deception really was. The political climate was worse than she imagined. She'd been harboring delusional half-thoughts that she could somehow prove something about halfbloods if she made it through her training and became a Potions Mistress. Once it was done, no one could take that away from her, she'd thought, but now she realized no one would ever be able to know. It was simply too inflammatory a ruse. It was the kind of audacious spark that would tumble into an inferno if let out among the kindling.

A firestorm indeed, she mused, *and I would be right in the middle of it .*

If she had any hope of preventing disaster from her actions, she had to be even more careful. She had to keep the Map away from prying

eyes, for it could so easily reveal her if someone happened to glance over her shoulder and see a dot labeled 'Harry Potter' on the parchment. Rigel also needed to do something about Flint. It was no longer safe enough to just take his word that he would keep quiet in exchange for her work. She'd talk to him the next opportunity she got that wouldn't draw suspicion, and hopefully convince him to take a Vow or protect the secret with a magical contract of some other kind. *No more loose ends*, she promised herself. *No one else ever finds out.*

Another thing she realized from her uncle's letter was that he had no idea kids were beginning to fall ill at Hogwarts. Such a thing would not have gone unmentioned if he had. That meant somehow it was being kept quiet, but why? Wouldn't the parents of the sick kids have to know? She supposed they could have all been asked to keep quiet, but eventually a child whose parents were not so sympathetic to Dumbledore's requests would be quarantined, and then what?

Rigel couldn't answer those questions yet, so she tucked them away in the part of her mind that cared for such questions, watched over them and tended them as they grew, and clipped at their edges when they grew unwieldy. One day perhaps she would take them out and see what they had become, but not yet.

Later that day she snagged a few minutes between brewing Sweat Inducers to read Archie's letter, hoping as she did so that he would have good news of some kind.

Dear Rigel,

First of all: what the heck do you mean your teacher can read minds! You nearly gave me a heart attack when I read that, I hope you know. I had Hermione help me look up everything on Legilimency-that's what it's called-and it's probably okay for now, because it's considered really unethical for a Legilimens to use their skills without permission or warning, but you need to learn Occlumency for more

than just keeping tabs on your emotions now. I'm going to try learning too, since I could endanger you just by knowing the secret.

*Ignoring that, though, the second thing I'm worried about is this sickness you wrote of. Keep sending me information about it if you learn more, because I've been reading medical journals for three years now and I've never heard of anything like what you've described. Kids dropping unconscious with no discernable symptoms beforehand? And if it's happening even after the quarantine is set up, then they must be contagious before they collapse, so everyone's at risk. I don't know why the youngest are falling sick first, but they must be somehow more susceptible than others to the disease. Rigel **you must not get sick!** You can't protect your secret if you're unconscious and what's under your robes is a dead giveaway. I don't know how you'll avoid it, but maybe just avoid other people as much as you can. What's really worrying me is that no one I've asked (subtly, of course) about an epidemic has heard of any such thing going around magical Britain. It sounds from here like it's confined to the school, which means it either started there, or it was sent there. Either way, it's nothing good. Be careful, cuz, I really would be cross if something happened to you.*

Also, your dad wrote to me about rumors 'I' had apparently heard about from my Slytherin Housemates. James says he spoke to Longbottom from his Auror department, because his wife works for the Archives I guess, and the talk about new anti-muggleblood legislation has me a little on edge. James doesn't seem to think it'll go through, but you know you can always marry me if you have to, right? Don't roll your eyes at me, I know it would be super weird for us both, but I won't let you get pawned off on some crusty old pureblooded Lord if I can help it. So I guess, just don't worry. If you want, you can even pretend to be me forever, and I'll stay here in America or something. Anyway, stay strong! And send me more information about this mysterious sickness if you can. I'll look into things from the outside and between the two of us we'll figure out what in magic's name is going on.

Best,

-Archie

P.S. we're learning to clear out pores and re-grow hair and other pilatory charms now, just so you know where you should try to be in Healing. I can recite all the most common poisons now, too, aren't you proud?

Rigel hid that letter away too, and tried to tell herself she felt better after reading it and not worse. She lay up all night wondering if she were doing the right thing. It wasn't too late to back out, she knew. They could always switch back at the end of the year, and it would be strange, but not too suspicious that they changed so much over the summer. They wouldn't, though, Rigel admitted. Nothing could stop the storm that was coming, and giving up on her dreams and Archie's wouldn't hold off the fire for long. They might as well push forward with all they had.

With that in mind, Rigel got up even earlier than usual the next morning, determined to finish all of she and Flint's assignments before lunch so that she could spend the afternoon studying Healing and brewing Sweat Inducers until she dropped. She was determined to do her part to help where she could, and though she accomplished what she set out to that morning, she was fairly burnt out by the time she trudged into the Great Hall for food.

She sat next to Pansy and across from Draco and started filling her plate. It was a mark of how not at all unusual it was for Rigel to disappear for hours at a time, especially on the weekends, that none of her year mates bothered asking her where she'd been. Millicent came in a few minutes after Rigel and took up the seat on her other side with a frown on her face.

"Hey, Malfoy, you're good with Transfiguration," Bulstrode tossed out across the table.

"Yes, I am," Draco said archly, spearing a piece of duck neatly as he did so.

"Well, I stink at it," Bulstrode said bluntly, "But I'm the best in our year at Astronomy, so if you help me learn how to do a decent inanimate Transfiguration I'll proof your star charts for two weeks."

"Three weeks," Draco sniffed delicately.

"Done," Bulstrode grinned, and Rigel thought the expression made her about ten times more approachable than the blank, stone face she usually presented to the world.

Pansy started to say something about making deals over the lunch table, but just then Dumbledore stood up at the Head Table and conversations died down as people swiveled their heads to look up at him. The old Headmaster stood there with a perplexed look on his face, as though he wasn't sure exactly what he was doing, and then, without warning, he was engulfed in a puff of golden smoke.

Professor McGonagall, who was seated closest, sprung to her feet with an alarmed look on her face, but as quickly as the smoke had come, it was gone, and in its place was a perfectly unharmed Dumbledore, except his robes weren't the magenta and yellow striped monstrosity he'd been wearing only moments before. Dumbledore was now dressed in sumptuous robes of gold and white, with a scepter in one hand and a fur-trimmed mantel across his shoulders. He looked more dignified than Rigel had ever seen him. In fact, Dumbledore looked like an old medieval king, complete with a golden crown on the top of his head. Students and staff alike stared in shock, but it was nothing compared to the incredulity that resulted when Dumbledore began to speak.

"Ah, our happy subjects," he said, smiling benevolently down at them all, "Though we know not how this hath come to be, we are gladdened this day to be thy king and sovereign. Yea, methinks this be a verily splendid gathering of souls indeed. Art thou young minds not now fuller and more beauteous than twere yester eve? But pray,

I bid thee feast a goodly length, that our good subjects may then go thither, and prosper. Fare thee well, good students, and Adieu."

The Headmaster dipped his head regally and sat once more, and the Hall exploded into excited and curious chatter.

"What on earth-?"

"Is he for real?"

"-got to be a prank."

Rigel glanced behind her at the Gryffindor table and caught sight of a pair of laughing redheads looking much too smug to be innocent bystanders. She caught George's eye and lifted a questioning brow. He swept her a half-bow in return and nudged Fred, who caught her looking and blew her a kiss between laughs. Rigel shook her head and smiled as she turned back to her lunch.

"Were you in on this?" Draco immediately demanded.

"Me?" Rigel blinked slowly across the table at her blonde friend, "I'm not much interested in pranks, Draco, you know that."

"Somehow I don't believe you," Draco said, but the glint in his eye as he stole another glance at the Head Table, where the other professors were frowning at Dumbledore and demanding explanations, told Rigel he was secretly amused by the joke.

"I don't think I do either," Pansy said, looking askance at Rigel from beneath her arched brows. Rigel didn't have time to answer because another poof of smoke went up at the Head Table and everyone turned once more to look.

Professor McGonagall emerged from the smoke, but the only remnant of the image she'd presented a moment earlier was her stern expression. She was now in delicate velvet robes that complemented Dumbledore's in color and her hair was twisted into

an elegant chignon. She had gloves of silk and from the way she glared down at her feet momentarily, probably silk slippers to match. She rounded on Dumbledore like an avenging angel.

"Wherefore have ye done this thing, your Majesty?" she snapped, then froze comically as she registered words she had clearly not intended to speak. "Wherefore do I speakest in this manner? By my troth!" She finally stopped speaking, as the words kept twisting away from her, and settled for glaring at Dumbledore ferociously.

"Be not cross, our Queen," Dumbledore said, a perfectly in-character expression of benign confusion on his face, which should have immediately revealed his part in all of this, and indeed Snape was staring that the Headmaster with narrowed eyes from further down the table. "Methinks such noble attire dost only bring accent to thine grace and bearing."

"I shalt gift thee grace and bearing, Majesty!" McGonagall snapped, before scowling in annoyance once more at the medieval words coming out of her mouth.

Before Dumbledore could answer, there was another poof of smoke, and Professor Flitwick had become a strolling minstrel, complete with an ornate golden lyre and a feathered cap.

"Verily, this be a fair-wondrous den," Flitwick said, but his voice came stringing out of him in a kind of musical free-verse speech, rather than with any natural intonation.

Most of the students were beside themselves with laughter at this point, and as they stared, transfixed, one by one the rest of the staff began to disappear into puffs of smoke. Madam Pomphrey was outfitted in a medieval midwife's uniform, Sinistra a white-clad damsel's gown, and Trelawney a nun's stark habit of un-dyed wool. Professor Snape clearly saw what was coming from his seat at the end of the table, but Rigel saw the stubborn set to his mouth and knew he would not allow himself to run. He was obscured moments later in a cloud of smoke, and one could practically hear the

collective breath-holding of the rest of the staff as they waited for the Potions Master's inevitable explosion of rage.

When the smoke cleared, Snape stood, not a miller or a pardoner, but a knight, shining in black and silver armor with a snake and cauldron coat of arms inlaid on the breastplate and a sword that glowed a bright emerald green in one gauntleted hand, which he promptly scowled at and banished to some unknown corner of the earth. While the rest of the Hall was still staring incredulously, Snape simply moved his chair back to accommodate the extra inches of armor and reclaimed his seat, starting back on his lunch seemingly oblivious to the incredulous and faintly perplexed looks he was receiving from his colloques. He had a cape as black as midnight, which he settled around him like physical manifestation of the aloof aura he always presented the world, and his hair was tied back from his angular face with a thin leather band.

There was a moment of silence, in which no one was quite sure they were brave enough to laugh again, and in that moment of hesitation Fred leapt up onto the Gryffindor table and swept a courtly bow down to a girl with large blue eyes and an athletic build, a large grin on his face and a hastily conjured feathered cap upon his head.

"Wilt thou honor me with thy hand, fair maiden?"

The girl rolled her eyes, but presented her hand and allowed Fred to pull it up into a parody of a gentlemanly kiss, that is until Fred began kissing up her wrist toward her elbow.

"I say, young lad, thou art *far* too forward," she laughed, pulling her hand away once more. The rest of the table relaxed into laughter as well, and all around the Hall people turned to their friends to try out their Middle English and laugh as they and their Housemates stumbled over the unfamiliar speech.

Rigel smiled with a quiet sort of satisfaction as her gaze wandered about the Hall and found relaxed smiles and puzzled entertainment where before there had been worry and glum anxiety about the

illness that permeated the awareness in the very air of the school. It was still there, of course, but muted and unacknowledged, at least for the time being. She lifted her glass in a silent toast to Fred and George Weasley, who deserved all the pranking points the trickster gods awarded them for this one. Even with Dumbledore doing the really tricky magic, it was still a fantastic idea for a joke, and after a few more token protests and grumbling the teachers didn't look all that upset over it anymore. The noticeably happier atmosphere in the Hall might have had something to do with it, but even McGonagall gave in gracefully and didn't wince too much when her words twisted themselves into the ancient speech patterns.

The prank lasted until halfway through dinner that evening, and when the spell had faded and the professors all wore their normal clothes once more a collective sigh went around the room-the teachers in relief and the students in disappointment. Still, the medieval theme became a running joke as George had predicted, and all around the castle students could be heard referring to the Headmaster as King Dumbledore, Snape as the Dread Black Knight, or even just telling their friends they had to visit 'ye old toilet.' McGonagall had a class of particularly audacious fourth years who had reportedly bowed as she entered the room, and Flitwick changed his lesson plans to let his older students learn the theory behind such complicated speech charms and natural translation spells since they were so interested.

Even the next Ravenclaw second-year to collapse unconscious in the hallway and get carried to the Hospital Wing couldn't completely douse the spark of optimism the cheerful aftermath of the prank had caused, and more than once Rigel caught Fred and George beaming around with pride as the ripples of their joke spread and became familiar, even comforting, currents throughout the school.

The next Thursday saw Rigel sitting tailor-style on her bed after classes, deep in meditation that was supposed to help her with Occlumency. The book said she was to clear her mind, because

apparently an empty mind was a well-protected one, but it seemed to Rigel that an empty mind wasn't worth protecting. Hadn't she spent all her life trying to fill her mind? It didn't make any sense, especially since Draco had said that what happened in the mind was made real through a person's magic. If she tried too hard to have an empty mind, wouldn't her magic erase all her thoughts to make it true? She shivered with undiluted fear. No, better not think of empty minds at all in her case. Instead, she would try the fortress idea again, which had seemed contradictory to the empty mind idea anyway.

What would a fortress of her mind look like? She tried to envision a castle of some kind, but castles were large and hard to protect without any help, so she turned the problem over to find a different angle to work from. What did she want to protect in her mind? That was easy: secrets. Secret thoughts and memories. She also wanted something else, though, she reminded herself. She had started all this to try and get a handle on her emotions, and while her magic had been almost suspiciously helpful of late, she wasn't willing to trust in its inherent good will all the time, so she added emotional controls to her mental list of requirements for her mind-fortress.

So what kind of environment should she create that would allow her to both protect some things and constrain others? It couldn't be something open, like a jungle or cityscape, she knew. Rigel also didn't think a man-made structure like a house of some kind would be strong enough for the kind of fortress she wanted to build. Eventually, she looked at the problem like a Potions Mistress would. Precious ingredients needed to be kept safe just like memories, after all, and potentially dangerous yet useful specimens would need to be monitored carefully in terrariums and cages, so why couldn't she build an artificial habitat of sorts for her emotions just as well? An idea began to form slowly. It would have to be big enough to store all the memories, emotions, knowledge, and thoughts she had in her mind, with room for expansion, and, like a Potions Lab, it should be clean but cool, perhaps underground so light-sensitive ingredients, much like thoughts and memories too dangerous to expose to outside 'light,' wouldn't be compromised.

Her mind became misty, but ensconced in the mists was an enormous shadow, which was lowly becoming clearer and more defined the longer she thought about her fortress. Just as the shape of something hulking, strong, and forbidding hunkered out of the mist in her mind's eye, Rigel was jerked rudely out of her meditation by a pair of frantic, shaking hands.

"Rigel. *Rigel!* " Pansy's voice accompanied her rough jolt back into reality and Rigel opened her eyes to stare disoriented into Pansy's wide and anguished blue orbs.

"What? Pan, what's wrong?" Rigel murmured, trying to shake the fog of deep meditation as she focused on her friend.

"It's-oh, Rigel, it's Theo," Pansy bit her lip as she backed off and waited impatiently for Rigel to recollect herself, "He's been taken to the Hospital Wing."

Oh, Rigel thought, sitting up straight and starring at Pansy as though she'd never heard the words coming out of her mouth before, *No*.

"What happened?" she heard herself ask, her mind still trying to catch up with the things that were happening in real time.

"I don't know," Pansy said, moving to sit on the bed beside Rigel and lean her blonde head on Rigel's shoulder in a numb sort of way, "I mean, I was *there*, but it happened really quickly." Pansy's voice was shaking slightly, but her hands were clasped together firmly and she made a visible effort to speak calmly, "He was fine, we were playing cards with Millicent and Blaise while Draco worked on his Defense essay, and then Theo's face went slack and he slumped to the floor like he'd fainted, only he didn't look faint or pale or anything before he collapsed. He seemed *fine* ."

Pansy fell silent and Rigel wasn't sure what to say.

"Where's Draco?" she finally asked, thinking perhaps the blonde would have better luck finding the words for a situation like this.

Purebloods were always good with words, she thought.

"He went to tell Professor Snape," Pansy said, sitting up once more and fixing her hair automatically as she schooled her expression back to the most neutral one she could manage at the moment. Rigel smiled a bit in bracing encouragement and Pansy sat up even straighter in response, "Vincent and Greg helped Blaise carry Theo to the Hospital Wing, though I guess they won't get to go inside in any case... oh, I wish we knew what was going on!" Pansy frowned helplessly, "Why won't they tell us anything?"

"The professors don't know very much themselves," Rigel said softly, "I heard Madam Pomphrey talking to Professor Snape, and she doesn't know what's wrong with the students yet."

"How can she not know?" Pansy demanded angrily, "It's her *job* ."

"It's something new, I think," Rigel offered her opinion based on Archie's letter and Pomphrey's own words, "It's got to be a magical disease no one's heard of before, so they don't know how to treat it yet."

Pansy paled and looked so hopeless that Rigel immediately rushed on, not knowing if her words were true, just knowing Pansy needed to hear them.

"Not to say they won't-they'll figure it out soon enough. And in the mean time, the students aren't in any danger," Rigel said, trying to sound authoritative, "Look, Snape is brewing Aurora's Breath and Snowhit for Madam Pomphrey, and those potions are used for people who are in long-term, but stable, magical... sleeps. So whatever disease it is, it's not harming any of the kids really, just sending them to sleep. Like Sleeping Beauty."

Pansy let out a half-choked chuckle, "So they've all got to be kissed?"

"We best hope Greengrass doesn't fall ill, then," Rigel said slyly.

Pansy giggled a bit more freely at that, "Oh, that's not very nice, Rigel. Thank Merlin I'm a girl, though. If they make you kiss Greengrass I hope someone gets a picture."

"Well, I'll be sure to return the favor if you have to kiss Crabbe or Goyle," Rigel sniffed.

Pansy shut up pretty quickly after that, but her eyes weren't wide with fear and helplessness any more.

"What are we going to do, Rigel?" Pansy asked after the silence had grown stagnant and unsatisfying once more.

"You're going to stay right here until Draco gets back," Rigel said firmly, "I'm going to brush your hair and when Draco gets here he'll braid it for you."

"He will not," Pansy said, a smile tugging the corner of her lips.

"Oh, yes he will," Rigel said loftily, "Or he won't get any help on his next Potions essay. He'll even put in a ribbon for you, as long as you swear on the Founders not to tell anyone he did it."

Pansy laughed lightly and dashed to her room and back to fetch her favorite hairbrush. Rigel sat behind her and brushed her hair diligently, even though it was too short to really need a brush. The simple task was soothing for both of them, and that was all that mattered.

"You've said what I'm going to do," Pansy spoke up a few minutes later, "But what are you going to do?"

Rigel's face was a blank mask as she answered, her voice low and determined, "I'm going to brew."

So saying, she relinquished her friend's hairbrush and searched out her private Potions kit from Archie's trunk. She had Sweat Inducer's to brew, and she'd used all the green hellebore from the student

stores earlier in the week, but she needed it in the fifth stage. She had a good collection of ingredients, some she'd never actually used before but had insisted on collecting in her private kit because they were essential to a true Potions Mistress, and hellebore was one of them, but she'd ordered more by owl when the school stores started running low, knowing her own supplies wouldn't be enough for the rate she was brewing at, and she'd added the extra to her kit when it had come by owl the day before. She set the kit on the bed and went to the bathroom to change into robes better suited for brewing.

Draco came back and told them Snape had been informed about Theo, and would speak to the rest of the House about what was going on later that day. Rigel pushed a couple of ribbons into Draco's palm with a stern look and a meaningful glance at Pansy's still lost-looking expression, and the boy sighed, but went to pick up the hairbrush without complaint.

Rigel left them there with nods of understanding from each and promises to fill her in on what she missed of Snape's speech to the House. Rigel fully intended to be brewing all evening.

She didn't go to see Pomphrey and try and check up on Nott-no, Theo-in the Hospital Wing, because she knew she'd be turned away, and there was nothing she could do for him there, anyway. Instead, Rigel made her way to her Lab and brewed in bulk. She had three cauldrons simmering constantly all through dinner and well into the night. She ran through her supply of hellebore completely by the last batch, but even the numb sort of satisfaction she felt as she corked the last few doses and cleaned out the cauldrons didn't assuage the guilt that was steadily corroding the edges of her nerves.

She knew it was illogical, and some would say unforgivably melancholy, but some small part of her felt as though the universe were punishing her for her presumption. What a cruel coincidence that Hogwarts should be hit with such a strange sickness the very year Harriett Potter, would-be Potioneer, takes the place of Arcturus Black, would-be Healer. Maybe Archie was supposed to be here, to help somehow with this magical sickness in a way she couldn't. This

sort of disease was exactly Archie's area of interest, after all, and though he wouldn't be a match for Pomphrey at this point, perhaps he was supposed to have helped in a more direct way than she could by just making generic potions and awkwardly comforting her friends, who had no idea that her deception might be costing them something irreplaceable. What if the universe had had it all planned out, and then Rigel had stepped in and messed everything up? No matter how she tried to tell herself that she was helping, and that it wasn't at all her responsibility to deal with this illness, the whole thing felt too coincidental for comfort.

She didn't know what it was yet, but something was off about this sickness. Not just the inexplicable nature of it, but the timing and the location as well. An epidemic that only hit Hogwarts? Possible if it began here, but there would have been a catalyst. A potions accident or a spell gone wrong. Instead it came out of nowhere, and at a time where the balance of the wizarding world stood on the rounded and knotted edge of a wand. Rigel stored the bottles of Sweat Inducer in the crates she had borrowed from the student stores for that purpose and sighed. She would figure out what was going on, and do everything she could to convince the universe to change its plans.

Two days later, Rigel once again knocked softly on Snape's office door, and once again the voice that bade her enter did not belong to the Potions Master.

"Oh, it's you again," the same dark-haired prefect, Alesana Selwyn, Rigel remembered, was lounging in unapologetic repose behind Snape's desk once more, this time with a book of what looked like shark anatomy open on her lap. Probably better not to ask.

"Is Professor Snape in his Lab this afternoon?" Rigel asked.

"Yes, of course," Selwyn said idly, not bothering to lift her kohl-rimmed eyes from the pages of her book after an initial, assessing

glance. "He's working on something volatile today, however, so he has requested that no one interrupt him unless strictly necessary."

Probably the Snowhit, Rigel thought, *I think I remember something about the seventh stage being particularly troublesome.*

"Did Professor Snape leave a message for me in case I sought him out today?"

"Hmm, presumptuous thing, aren't you?" the upperclassmen shot Rigel a mocking glance, but didn't answer her question, "As though the Professor plans for every eventuality involving you."

"He was expecting me today, I believe," Rigel offered, put out at being addressed like she was somehow bothering Snape with her presence. Selwyn didn't know he was mentoring her, probably, but surely she didn't think Rigel would bug the Professor so often if she thought the Professor considered her a nuisance.

The older girl smiled enigmatically, "Of course he was. As it happens, I was to tell you if you came in today to leave the samples in that corner," she nodded at an empty corner of the office, "But since you don't appear to have anything like samples with you, I assumed the message was irrelevant."

"It was a bit much for me to carry here without being sure I wasn't wasting a trip," Rigel said, feeling the need to explain herself to this older and therefore more powerful Slytherin, and vaguely annoyed at herself for feeling that way. She had nothing to be insecure about. Selwyn wasn't helping Snape with making Sweating Inducers. She was just sitting uselessly in his office, reading about sharks. With those thoughts to buoy her confidence, Rigel lifted her chin, saying, "Thank you for giving me the message. I'll go get the samples he wants then."

"You do that," Selwyn said, somehow managing to sound amused and uninterested at the same time.

Rigel trekked back to her Lab, but once she got there she grimaced at the piles of crates, not unlike muggle milk crates, stacked neatly by the door. It would take her numerous trips through the dungeons to carry them all. Each batch of Sweat Inducer took an hour to brew, and she'd been averaging four hours of brewing each day for the last two weeks. Less on week days, usually just an hour in the mornings before breakfast and perhaps two in the evening, but longer blocks on the weekends to make up for it. Each batch produced six beaker-sized samples, which would each amount to probably four to five smaller doses. Rigel also had taken to brewing two or three caldrons at once while she worked, meaning altogether she had made 130 cauldrons of Sweat Inducer and approximately 780 beakers of the stuff. The beakers the potion was poured into had stasis charms built in, of course, so there wouldn't be any trouble with potions going bad, but there would be a problem carrying it all to Snape's office, even secured in crates.

The crates held two-dozen beakers apiece, but they weren't charmed weightless because ambient, purposeful magic, unlike raw magic without consigned direction, could stick to and interfere with some potions, so Rigel doubted she could carry more than one or two at a time. There were 33 crates all told.

Sighing, Rigel hefted a crate, decided she could probably carry two since Snape's office wasn't that far away, and added another before heading out. She had to set the crates on the floor to open the door, so she left it open once she'd dropped off the crates in the corner indicated and left for the next trip. It was closed when she got back, so she carefully put down the crates again, opened the door, picked up the crates, stacked them in the corner on the others, and said, "Do you mind leaving the door open for me? I have several more trip to make."

Selwyn looked up, flicked her eyes toward the four crates in the corner, and shrugged, "Very well. You can close the door when you're done."

"Thank you," Rigel said, only barely sarcastically, and set off back to her Lab. Three trips later, Selwyn looked up with a frown on her face when Rigel tried to leave without closing the door once more.

"You've still more?" the older girl asked exasperatedly, "What does Professor Snape have you moving so many potions around for?"

"They're for the Hospital Wing," Rigel said, "And I have..." she mentally calculated, "eleven more trips, I think. Maybe twelve."

"Twelve-" Selwyn rolled her eyes with a moue of distaste and stood, leaving her book on the desk and coming around to join Rigel at the door, "Honestly. Ask for help when you need it, snakelet."

Rigel considered the older girl as Selwyn flicked a smooth ivory-colored wand out to ward the office to her signature until they returned.

"What will you require for you assistance?" Rigel finally asked.

The long-haired girl turned her head to look at Rigel with a gaze that felt heavy and considering, though it might have been the dark make-up that gave it that effect.

"Not thoughtless, then, just cautious," she said quietly, apparently to herself, then said more clearly, "For my help, I would have you perform a similar duty to one I have already performed for you. You will carry a message for me, since I cannot leave Snape's office for long enough to track down its recipient myself."

"Deal," Rigel said agreeably, "This way." She led Selwyn to the door of her Lab, then paused, "There are wards against other students from entering, but I do not know if there is an exception for prefects," she explained.

Selwyn flicked her wand and narrowed her eyes at the pulse of magic the wards sent in response, "Should be fine, the prefect badge acts as a kind of physical password for most castle wards,

and I don't see the extra ward that would deny prefect badges specifically."

So saying, the older girl strode forward and grasped the handle confidently. Nothing happened, so she entered the Lab and paused to take a look around. Rigel followed, feeling strange with another person in what she'd come to consider her Lab. Selwyn raised her eyebrows at the small but respectable Lab, looking over the small cabinets for ingredient storage, the recipe stands that were not unlike muggle sheet music stands, the four mid-sized cauldrons sitting on the pristine countertops, and the sink in the corner not being taken up by crates.

"All these need to go?" Selwyn gestured to the twenty-some crates left stacked by the door.

"Yes," Rigel said.

"Well, I can carry three, so we should only need about five trips between the two of us." She said, and promptly hefted three of the crates in her arms. Rigel was taken aback, having assumed the girl would try levitation charms on the crates first, but perhaps she knew as well as Rigel did that the crates couldn't be tampered with using magic.

Rigel quickly picked two crates for herself and set off after the older girl, her respect for the prefect increasing bit by bit.

Two trips later, Selwyn sighed as they picked up the next five crates, "You should have gotten a trolley, Black."

"Does Professor Snape *have* trolleys?" she panted back, the physical exercise starting to take its toll on her. She had pretty strong arms for an eleven year old just from brewing and playing Quidditch on and off, but she hadn't been sleeping much as focused on brewing and keeping up with her work as she'd been lately, and that much lifting was wearing her down.

"He better hope so," Selwyn said, "Because he's going to be the one ferrying these off to the Hospital Wing." The older girl smiled slightly at the idea of Snape doing psychical labor, and Rigel felt an answering smile bloom on her own face. It was a pretty ridiculous mental image from what she'd seen of the Potions Master so far.

They finally got all the crates unloaded in Snape's office, and Selwyn sank gratefully into Snape's chair, even going to far as to transfigure a quill into a chair for Rigel to sit on as well. Rigel offered the prefect a small smile of thanks as she sat, her back muscles rejoicing quietly.

"So am I to understand that those potions were all in your lab because you brewed them?" Selwyn waved a hand tiredly at the stacks of crates that now took up at least half of Snape's office space, "Is this like a year-long project you're doing, or what?"

Rigel shrugged, "I offered to help brew potions for the Hospital Wing when so many students started falling sick." Selwyn's face grew serious, as most people's did at the mention of the illness, and she nodded slowly for Rigel to continue. "Professor Snape gave me a couple weeks to brew as much Sweat Inducer as I could without interfering with my studies, so I did."

"A couple weeks ?" the older girl suddenly laughed, a low sound of utter bemusement, "You're something else, kid. Oh, I can't wait to see Snape's face when he walks in here. Thirty crates in a couple weeks. How amusing you've turned out to be."

Rigel wasn't sure that was a compliment, so she said nothing.

"Seriously, though, don't you sleep?" Selwyn asked as she settled deeper into the Professor's chair.

"I sleep when I need to," Rigel said, "But when your friends are sick, some things become more important than sleep."

"Yes, I suppose it's not surprising that a first-year was the first to try and do something, considering who the majority of the stricken are so far," the prefect said, her dark eyes distantly subdued. After a few moments of silence, she recalled herself abruptly, saying, "Now about the message you owe me."

Rigel nodded agreeably, "Would you rather write it down or have me memorize it?"

Selwyn smirked slowly, "Oh, it's really not the kind of thing one can ascribe to paper."

"Oh?" Rigel said, more cautiously now. If Selwyn asked her to pass on a hex for her, she would have to find a diplomatic way to refuse.

"Don't look so worried. It's nothing I'd be ashamed to do myself, I simply don't have the time," she said calmly.

Rigel wasn't overly reassured by that, but she said, "What's the message and who's it for?"

"It's actually both a message and a task," Selwyn said, smiling slightly as she explained, "First I need you to find something that came from a magical animal. It doesn't matter what, but it must come from an animal that is alive or recently was, so don't just grab something from the potions store room."

"Okay..." Rigel tried not to express how strange of a request that was, but Selwyn must have seen it in her face anyway, because she laughed softly.

"Yes, I know, but it's sort of an inside joke," she said, "In any case, find something like that-feathers, hair, eggs, you can even cut a tentacle from the giant squid if you really want, just as long as the animal it comes from has magical properties of some kind and hasn't been dead for more than a day."

"But alive is fine, right?" Rigel said, grimacing. She used beetle eyes as much as the next Potioneer, but she didn't kill things herself if she didn't have to.

"Yes, of course," Selwyn said, still smiling that odd little smile, "When you've got whatever it is, you're to find Edmund Rookwood and give it to him."

"And that's the message?" Rigel said dubiously. It didn't seem like much of a message if Selwyn didn't even know what Rigel would find yet.

"Yes, that's it. You won't need to explain anything to Edmund; he'll understand if you say it's from me," she said, and Rigel decided the smile on her face was almost fond in a way, "Edmund Rookwood is a year below me. He's usually in the company of-

"Aldon Rosier," Rigel said wryly, surprising another low chuckle from the dark haired older girl, "No kidding."

"Well, I don't have to describe him, then," Selwyn said, "And when you've done that, come back here and tell me what you gave him. That means you have to know what the animal you take something from actually is," she added, and Rigel nodded.

"Okay, I can do that," Rigel said, standing to go.

"What, no complaints about how much work it is? You sure you're a first year?" Selwyn asked in what Rigel realized was a teasing tone of voice. Perhaps she wasn't so stuck up or disinterested as she came off at first after all. Then again, all the Slytherins Rigel knew came off that way, and very few actually were.

So Rigel sent a wry glance at the stack of crates invading the corner of Snape's usually stark office and said, "I find I suddenly have extra time on my hands anyway."

Selwyn tilted her head in acknowledgment, "It's refreshing to meet a snakelet who doesn't shy away from work before he realizes how much of an advantage it gives one."

"Almost as refreshing as meeting an upperclassman who doesn't patronize first-years," Rigel said daringly, holding still in case she'd gone too far and Selwyn turned nasty.

The older girl just laughed again, though, and waved her out of the office, "Alright, I deserved that. Go on and find me a hippogriff heart or something, Black, before I decide you're not as amusing as you are impertinent."

Rigel grinned a bit, but obligingly left, shutting the door oh-so-pointedly behind her and earning another low chuckle from the prefect as she did so.

She felt satisfied now that the Sweat Inducer Potions were in Snape's hands. If Selwyn had thought it an impressive amount, then surely Snape couldn't be too displeased with her work. They were all viable samples with plenty of magic imbued in them for good measure-of that Rigel had made sure. She didn't know what on earth Selwyn's strange message was about, but the upperclassman had helped her, so she might as well return the favor, no matter how peculiar she found it. At least she knew who Rookwood was, and so wouldn't have to go wandering around the castle for the recipient.

Rigel stopped by her Lab to grab a phial and a cork so she'd have somewhere to store the bits of whatever she collected. She'd probably miss dinner, so she also went to the kitchens to beg a few rolls from Binny, thinking at the last moment to ask for something to use as bait as well, before making her way out of the castle and toward the forest. Her plan was to wander the edges of the forest, where there was no chance of meeting any of the larger and more dangerous creatures who dwelled within, and seeing if she couldn't come across a snake of some kind. She didn't know how to tell magical birds from non-magical ones in most cases, but she'd read up on snakes over the break with Archie, and she thought she had

the best chance of bargaining for a bit of skin from a creature she could communicate with.

The evening air was colder than she'd thought it would be, so she politely asked her magic to warm her up a bit while she walked. She normally wouldn't ask her magic to essentially perform a charm she hadn't learned herself yet, but she had read up on the warming charm for one of the papers she wrote for Flint, so it wasn't entirely cheating, she reasoned, and she really was quite cold.

Once she was far enough from Hagrid's hut that she didn't think she'd be overheard, she started calling softly for a snake. After only a moment or two, she realized she was calling out in English still, so she pictured the youngest snake who lived in Archie's courtyard as clearly as she could in her mind and tried again.

" Can anyone hear me? I desssire to ssspeak to a sssnake, pleassse. If you can hear me, pleassse come and ssspeak to me. I have a niccce juicccy mousse here for any sssnake kind enough to come and ssspeak with me..." she went on in that vein for a while, walking aimlessly and making sure not to call too loudly, though she doubted anyone would connect a wandering student with the sibilant hisses moving through the leaves of the forest like the smallest of breezes.

Eventually she turned around and started back the way she'd come, edging around the forest border toward the castle, still hissing loud enough for any snakes close by to hear. She was almost to the trees behind Hagrid's hut once more when she heard an answering voice just barely discernable over the crunching the leaves made beneath her feet. She paused, and the voice became slowly loud enough for her to make out.

" Wait ssspeaker! Don't ssslink off ssso fassst! I am coming, and I want the mousse!"

Rigel turned toward the direction she thought the voice was coming from, and smiled in awed delight when a thin snake about three feet

in length slithered through the underbrush and coiled near her feet, staring up at her expectantly. Rigel smiled at the pretty green snake and crouched down to get a better look, and because she thought it would be rude to conduct a conversation from so far above the snake's eye level. It fixed its black eyes on her with intensity, and said, *"You are the ssspeaker?"*

"Yesss," Rigel answered, trying to look non-threatening, *"You are a boomssslang sssnake, are you not?"*

"Yesss, I am. Where isss the mousse?" the snake, which must have been male based on its coloring (the females were brown), said bluntly.

Rigel smiled at her good luck as she pulled out the mouse Binny had wrapped in a handkerchief for her and held it out so the snake could see it. Boomslang snakes were calmer in general than the fiery ashwinders and much easier to reason with than runespoors.

"It doesss not look very juicccy," the snake mused doubtfully, *"I am hungry, sssso I will eat your scrawny mousse, but in the future you will need more tempting offeringsss."*

Rigel nodded gravely, *"Forgive me, I wasss unsssure of what would be acceptable. Do you have a name that other sssnakesss call you?"*

"I am Treessslider," the boomslang said, *"Who are you, ssspeaker?"*

"I am Rigel," she said, not sure why she gave the snake her false name, since no one else would be able to understand it anyway. *"If I give you this mousse, will you ssstay here and ssspeak with me?"*

"Ssstay forever?" the snake, Treessslider, recoiled suspiciously.

"No, not forever," Rigel quickly reassured him, *"Jussst for a few minutesss. I have a favor to assk you, that isss all."*

" *Very well,*" Treelider swayed forward toward the mouse once more, *"Give me the mousse now, and I will ssstay to hear your requessst."*

Rigel placed the mouse, handkerchief and all, solemnly on the forest floor between them, and the snake coiled around it protectively at once. It didn't seem keen to begin eating right away, so Rigel figured maybe it wouldn't be in the mood to speak to her while it was digesting.

" *I wasss hoping you could give me sssomething of yoursss that you don't need any longer,*" Rigel explained as best she could in snake terms, *"A bit of old ssskin, or perhapsss a few loosse ssscalesss."*

Treelider considered her gravely from his defensive position over the dead mouse. *"If I give you sssomething, what iss in it for me?"*

" *What do you wisssh, Treessslider?"*

" *I wisssh to keep thisss sssoft leaf,*" he said immediately.

" *Sssoft leaf?*" Rigel repeated blankly.

" *Thisss,*" Treelider nudged the handkerchief the mouse was lying on with his nose, *"I wisssh to put it in my nessesst."*

Rigel agreed immediately, and the snake hissed in wordless satisfaction for a few moments before speaking again, *"Musssst I give you ssscales or ssskin? I have nothing old or loosse, but I can give you my poissson inssstead."*

Rigel thought for a moment. According to Selwyn's parameters, it just had to be something from a magical animal, so venom shouldn't be a problem. She shrugged at the boomslang snake, *"Sssure, whatever iss mossst convenient for you."*

" *It iss interessting to be asssked for sssomething inssstead of chasssed for it,*" the snake mused quietly as he began tensing his

jaw as though he were preparing to strike at something,

Rigel quickly got out the phial and tore the cork in half so that it would be thin enough for Treesslider to pierce all the way through. When she held out the corked container, the handsome green snake delicately sank its fangs into the stopper until they dripped venom into the phial on the other side. When it was 3/4ths full, the snake disengaged and curled up around his mouse and handkerchief once more. Rigel used the hem of her robes to remove the pierced piece of cork and replace it with the other half of the original stopper so that none would spill out.

"Thanksss, Treessslider," she said, "I mussst return to the casssle now, sssso enjoy your sssnack."

"I know your ssscent now, ssspeaker," the boomslang hissed with no small amount of amusement, "Next time you are in the foresst, I will ssseek you out, sssso you better have a bigger mousse."

"It'sss a deal," Rigel laughed, "Goodbye, Treessslider."

"Goodbye, ssspeaker Rigel."

Rigel hurried back to the castle as the evening light began to fade. She felt rather proud of herself for using her unexpected skill quietly to her advantage. She knew her Slytherin friends would approve even if Archie didn't, though of course they could never know about it. If Parseltongue was connected to the Potter line, it would be way too conspicuous for a Black to inexplicably turn up with it. The two lines hadn't intermarried *that* much, and magic-related traits usually stayed bound within the direct lines of families for some reason Rigel didn't understand.

She got back to the castle and from the level of noise emitting from the Great Hall determined that most people were still at dinner, so Rigel decided to wait in the common room and catch Rookwood and he (and probably Rosier) came through on their way in, before he

went off to whatever it was the upperclassman did on Saturday nights.

She settled herself in one of the common room chairs with a Healing textbook and began reading about pilatory charms while she waited. She didn't get much in-depth reading done, looking up every time the common room wall opened as she did, but she didn't miss Rookwood and he stepped through behind Rosier either, so she mentally promised herself she'd re-read that section later as she stood and crossed the common room to intercept the fourth years as they made their way toward their dorms.

When they noticed she was walking toward them specifically they stopped and Rosier smiled broadly, "What a special occasion this must be: Rigel Black seeking us out."

"Good evening, Rosier," Rigel bent her head to the golden-eyed boy politely, before turning to her quarry, "Hello, Rookwood. I have a message for you."

Rookwood looked politely intrigued, and his deep voice sounded like a sleepy mountain when he replied, "How unexpected. Was the message contracted to you by anyone I know?"

"I certainly hope so," Rigel said with a slightly wry smile on her face, "Otherwise this will be a strange message indeed."

"Did a fair maiden ask you to pass along a kiss for Edmund?" Rosier asked with a curling smile.

"Not exactly," Rigel reached into her robes to pull out the vial of boomslang venom and hand it over. "This is from Alesana Selwyn. She intimated you would know what it meant."

Rookwood's face lit up with excitement, and he snatched the phial from Rigel's fingers with an eagerness that seemed entirely out of character from what she knew of the older, usually stoic Slytherin.

"Ah," Rosier said, seeming to lose interest and instead shaking his head in bemusement at his friend, "Still at that old game, are we?"

"Game?" Rigel asked curiously, watching as Rookwood held the phial of clear liquid up to the light and turned it this way and that as he peered at it.

"Selwyn and Rookwood have a similar interest in magical creatures," Rosier explained with a fond but detached glance at Rookwood, who was paying attention to neither of them at the moment, "They have played this game as long as they've known one another. One of them gives the other a sample from a magical creature. Feathers, livers, all sorts of things, and then the recipient gets a week to figure out what creature it's from, or they have to pay a forfeit."

"Oh, I see," Rigel said, interested now that she knew why her errand had been so specific, "Will he take it out of the phial to test it, then?"

"Well, I'd imagine he'd have to," Rosier shrugged.

Rigel frowned. Maybe she should have gone with scales after all. "Say, Rookwood?" she spoke up tentatively. He turned back to her politely, though she could see his mind was on the contents of his 'message.' "Not to give anything away, but don't touch that stuff with your bare hands, alright?" She winced at the disaster it would be if Rookwood got poisoned through an open wound somehow and didn't know what it was until too late.

"You know what this is?" Rookwood asked, suddenly intent on her. Perhaps she had overestimated his enjoyment of the challenge and winning was more important than playing fair.

"Well, yes, I collected it," Rigel frowned, "But I'm not telling you what it is. Just be careful, okay?"

He smirked, "Oh, but you've already told me so much, Mr. Black. I now know that she didn't apparate to India this time, and that it's from something a first-year wouldn't have trouble handling. That

narrows it down considerably. Yet it's apparently dangerous enough that you're worried," he frowned thoughtfully, "Interesting... I will be careful. Thank you for the message."

"You're welcome," Rigel said, a bit helplessly. She bade farewell to Rosier and waved to her friends as they came in from dinner and she went out, back to Snape's office for the umpteenth time that day.

She knocked, and the familiar low, female voice that answered told her Selwyn was still cooped up inside.

"It's me again," Rigel said obviously as she walked in, "I delivered your message."

"Oh, that's great," Selwyn leaned forward in Snape's chair and pinned her dark-lined eyes on Rigel with a quiet intensity that spoke of an unusual amount of investment in such a game. Rigel was starting to wonder exactly what the forfeit was for not guessing the right animal. "What did you give him?"

"Boomslang venom," Rigel said, "A vial of it. Is that okay? I didn't know he'd be handling whatever I gave him, so if it's too dangerous I can go get it back before he tries to test it."

"No, no," Selwyn waved a hand negligently, "I once gave him spines from a Shrake, and they didn't harm him a bit. What did he say when you gave it to him? How did you even get it? It was fresh, right?"

"Yes, it was fresh," Rigel said vaguely, "He practically snatched it away from me, he was so eager to get started. I did tell him to be careful with it though, so he wouldn't hurt himself, and because of that he found out I'd collected it myself," Rigel grimaced, "I'm sorry if I gave him too many clues."

"No, this is good," Selwyn sat back contentedly and smirked a bit, "Now he'll think it's something that is incidentally dangerous, but from a relatively harmless animal that a first-year could tame. He'll never think of a boomslang snake right away. Well done, Black."

Rigel breathed out in relief that Selwyn was satisfied with her payment. She glanced at the crates still stacked in the corner, "Snape been by yet?"

"No," the prefect said unconcernedly, "Some nights he doesn't, just goes straight back to work after dinner and I lock up and leave at curfew."

"Ah," Rigel nodded, but couldn't think of anything else she needed to say, so she just said, "Good evening then, Miss Selwyn."

"Evening, Black."

[Change to Snape's POV]

Severus Snape bottled the last of the Snowhit Potion with an emotion that in another man would have been relief. As he was unaccustomed to feeling emotions that implied any level of discomfort, even retroactively, the Potion Master considered himself satisfied, and left it at that.

He'd been brewing for hours, and although his magical stamina was objectively speaking impressive, an entire evening of brewing a Potion at the level of the Snowhit Potion was enough to drain him almost completely. He grimaced as he took inventory and realized he would be in no shape magically speaking to brew anything so complicated for a couple of days. He could combine the ingredients, certainly, but as he had not enough magic left to imbue them with, the resulting Potions would be less than useless: they would be a waste of time and energy.

Severus allowed himself a frown as he reluctantly rearranged his brewing schedule for the next few days. The Aurora's Breath would have to wait, though Merlin knew how many children would fall ill while he recuperated. He briefly considered contacting one of his acquiesces in the Potions community to assist in providing the requisite brews, but dismissed the idea almost immediately. For one,

he didn't trust anyone else to do his job as well as he did, and for another, Albus had impressed upon the staff the necessity of keeping the specifics of this inexplicable epidemic from the wrong ears.

And inexplicable it certainly was. The illness, if it could be termed as such considering the lack of identifiable pathogen, was so clearly magically constructed that it was a wonder it didn't come with a calling card. It existed nowhere outside of Hogwarts, and inside it incapacitated, but did not immediately maim or significantly endanger, the children of the most powerful men and women in wizarding society, beginning with the youngest and most vulnerable. Severus didn't have to be as batty as Trelawney to know what would happen if it became clear that pureblooded children were being struck down en masse on Albus' watch. The Potions Master habitually kept both ears to the walls and could well admit his unease at the whispers of even stricter anti-muggle-blood legislation soon to be proposed in the guise of a marriage law. Albus stood quite firmly in its path, but how firmly could he stand if his supporters withdrew their confidence in the wake of irrefutable evidence of the Headmaster's inability to control his own school? Comatose children would be difficult to explain to even the staunchest supporters of the Light.

Severus turned his thoughts from the political repercussions of the illness for the moment and instead focused on his own part, which was providing Potions to make sure the children affected by the sickness remained merely comatose and not dead. He glanced over his schedule once more and nearly groaned when he realized he's left no time to brew Sweat Inducer, though Poppy had specifically asked for-

But no, Severus frowned. He must have been more tired than he thought, for he now remembered assigning that task to the younger Mr. Black. In fact, Black ought to have dropped his work from the past two weeks off with Miss Selwyn already, so all Severus had to do was pick it up on his way to delivering the Snowbit to the Hospital Wing.

The Potions Master locked the Lab up behind him as he set off for his office.

I hope he's at least managed a full crate, Severus thought as he prowled through the empty dungeon corridors, That should be enough to last the week if no one else catches the sickness, and then I can concentrate fully on the Aurora's Breath. Severus knew better than to count his Lamias eggs before the mother went mad and ate a few, though, so he mentally prepared himself to adjust his brewing schedule accordingly no matter how few potions Black had managed to find time to brew.

By the time he reached his office, he was prepared for whatever lay within.

Or so he thought.

[end of chapter eighteen].

A/N: So, it's sort of a cliffhanger, but not really! In my defense, this chapter is now 20,000 words, and if I gave you guys the next scene, I'd have to give the next and the next because they're all related so closely. Sorry ^^ I hope no one's left hanging. Also, the game Rookwood and Selwyn play was indeed inspired by an analogous game mentioned in another of Tamora Pierce's books, in case anyone is wondering or wants to guess what it is. Finally, I know only King boas actually have nests, but in this story Boomslang snakes have nests too.

Chapter 19

A/N1: First off, as little as apologies mean after the fact, I wanted to say sorry for the wait. My graduation is on Saturday ^^ and after that I'll be free as a bird to write all day long lol. You guys will be so sick of the updates you'll get this summer, lol. So thank you for your patience, and I hope you enjoy this chapter, which is based off of two books I definitely don't lay claim to.

A/N2: Also wanted to note: this story officially has **over 100 reviews**, and it makes my heart burst a little just thinking about it, so a big big thanks to the following for reviewing the last chapter: hentai18ancilla, Vaughn Tyler, Geriana, PintoNess, J.F.C., TearfullPixie, zeichnerinaga, Cathy Willow, BaltaineShadow, Celena Black, Giselle Pink, Kenzieloveify, Son of Whitebeard, Plush, she-who-wanted-hyphens, DemonOfShadow, cheekysorcerer, Neidan, theoriginalolive, and Frecklefreak. I'll be replying to your reviews just before I post this, and to the following anonymous reviewers: to no one, I'm glad you laughed, to tosleepperchancetodream, my sincerest thanks for your kind review-I'm glad you like it, to delia, you flatter me beyond what I deserve, but thank you, to lara, I hope you have luck in your own writing and that you enjoy the chapter, and to kk, as always thanks for your friendly reminders :).

Enjoy ^^

The Pureblood Pretense:

Chapter 19:

Snape's POV:

Severus Snape approached his office door with the confidence of a man who knew precisely what he would find behind it. Being a man who could in most situations use the phrase "been there, done that" with complete truthfulness (not that he would, as that particular

phrase had too much bounce to be used by someone as serious as Severus Snape), he considered himself to be in general thoroughly unimpressed with life's little surprises.

It was in this frame of mind that Professor Snape entered his office, and looking back he could only be thankful that Poppy hadn't been with him at the time. Or worse, Minerva-nay, Albus! He didn't think he'd be able to live down being made to gape like a first-year encountering a three-headed dog if there had been any witness. As it was, the sight that greeted him upon disabling his wards and entering his office made him stop. Stare. Frown. Stare some more. Finally he reached up to rub tiredly at his eyes, sure that the fatigue must be getting to him at last.

His office had been almost entirely overtaken by crates. Part of his mind noted in a distant way that this explained where all his crates had been disappearing to, but most of his mind was still trying to wrap itself around the fact that his office was filled with crates-and not empty crates, but crates with potions in them.

There must be two dozen at least, he thought, moving forward finally and reaching in to the closest crate to pull out one of the beakers inside with his free hand. It contained Sweat Inducer; that much was immediately clear. What was less clear was how roughly 30 crates of Sweat Inducer-for indeed it appeared to be the same potion in every one-had gotten into his office. The obvious answer nearly made him growl with vexation.

Of course, he scowled, *Give a Black an inch...*

What was that fool boy thinking? Hadn't he told the little idiot that quality was more important than quantity? Severus would be lucky if any of them were viable, and even if he ended up with one good crate after all, the rest was a waste of ingredients so flagrant he was tempted to curse aloud. Severus carefully set down the two crates of Snowhit he'd been cradling under his arm to take to Poppy and rounded his desk to dig through the drawers for the Pepper-up potion he kept there. He wouldn't be able to deliver the potions until

he knew which were usable and which were duds, and with his magical core so depleted from brewing Snowbit Draught he'd need something to tide him over while he went through them all.

Face grim, Severus turned to the nearest crate and set to work, flexing his magic toward the first potion to get a feel for it. Sighing at the thought of doing this another 800 or so times, the Potions Master settled in for a long night.

Normal POV:

Rigel's breakfast Sunday morning was interrupted rather spectacularly by an irate Potions Master who looked as if he hadn't slept all night. Snape's robes were rumpled and his hair looked lankier than usual, but those things were completely eclipsed by his scowl, which Rigel thought worthy of epic poetry. The first years around her shrank back, not eager to be caught in even the peripherals of their Head of House's rage, and Rigel hastily scooted her butter knife out of Snape's reach, just in case.

Luckily for the Slytherins around Rigel, Snape didn't stay long. He barked out the words, "Black. My office. Now," before turning and stalking out of the Great Hall as quickly as he'd come.

Unluckily for Rigel, it didn't sound as though Professor Snape was inviting her to tea. Under the sympathetic and slightly fearful looks from her Housemates, Rigel stood and sent Pansy and Draco a small rueful smile before heading off toward the dungeons.

She had no idea why Professor Snape would be so angry with her, but she could only assume that a) he was angry about something else and happened to need to speak with her at the same time or b) it was something to do with the potions she'd left in his office the night before.

Did I not brew enough? Rigel wondered as she walked down the stone steps from the Entrance Hall, *I was sure he'd be happy with*

how much I accomplished, but maybe it wasn't enough. That would be strange indeed, for Rigel had yet to meet an adult who expected more of her than she expected from herself. *Maybe Mrs. Norris got into the office somehow and spilled them all? Or Peeves?* No, surely Snape would have wards against animals and poltergeists. *It's got to be something else,* she mused, *but what?*

The familiar office door stood half-open, and Rigel wasn't sure if she was glad she didn't have to pause and work up the nerve to knock or not. She knocked anyway as she entered the room, which seemed much smaller when it was filled with crates. After a moment, she realized that the crates weren't where she'd left them. They were stacked on the opposite side of the office instead, as if someone had methodically moved them from one side to the other. Snape was seated at his desk, and the look on his face was one of a man physically restraining himself from doing something rash. Rigel gently closed the door behind her and moved to stand before the desk quietly, hoping that by seeming unobtrusive she would be less likely to draw his anger onto herself. Given the fact that there was no one else present for it to fall upon, she felt she should take every precaution.

Silence reigned, grating on her nerves until Snape finally spoke, in a voice as hard as a grinding wheel, "Tell me, Mr. Black, do I seem to you to be an overly trusting sort of wizard?"

Rigel blinked, pretty sure there was no polite way to answer that, but Snape went on.

"When I give my trust to someone, let's say when I assign them a task, for instance, do you think it pleases me to have that trust abused?" he pressed, black eyes crackling with small lightning bolts of anger.

"No, sir," Rigel said carefully, mind working clumsily to try and figure out what Snape was implying.

"Then perhaps, Mr. Black, you understand why I am less than pleased this morning," Snape said darkly as Rigel stood rather taken aback at the fury in his tone, "No? You cannot think of any reason why I might have called you in here to explain yourself to me?"

Rigel swallowed heavily and cleared her throat when it seemed as though the Potions Master was in fact waiting for an answer.

"Is it... because I used all the hellebore from the student stores?" she guessed, unable to think of any other way she might have abused his faith in her, "Because I ordered more, and I was planning on replacing-"

"That is *not* why, you foolish child," Snape slammed one hand down on the desk and Rigel bit her lip to keep from flinching. Snape grabbed a flask from a crate beside his chair and thrust it into her line of sight, "What is *this*, Mr. Black?"

Rigel gazed at the potion helplessly, "A beaker of Sweat Inducer, sir."

"And who brewed this Sweat Inducer, Mr. Black, can you tell me that?"

"I did, sir," she said softly, still confused.

"How do you know this one is yours?" he asked, a snide tone to his voice she didn't understand. Had he been brewing Sweat Inducer, too?

"It is my handwriting on the label," she said slowly.

" *All* of these potions have your handwriting on their labels."

"Yes, sir," Rigel agreed, thinking, *Of course they do* .

"But you did not make all of these potions, Mr. Black," Snape said. It was not a question.

Rigel's eyes narrowed in frustration, "Excuse me, sir, but I did."

"Do not take me for a fool, boy," the Potion Master growled, "You expect me to believe that you brewed over 100 cauldrons of Sweat Inducer in two weeks on top of maintaining your studies, which the other Professors assure me have not slipped?" he scoffed dismissively, "You would have been smarter to deliver a tenth of these Potions and turn the rest in slowly over a course of a couple months. That would be, at least, believable."

Rigel frowned, the point of Snape's tirade finally penetrating her brain. She had been met with skepticism when it came to her brewing before, when she was younger, but never outright accusation. And still he was not through.

"But no, not you Black, you just had to try and look like a hero," he taunted, "Just had to try and impress us all with your talents and selflessness. Just like a Gryffindor to try and take credit for another's hard work and-"

Rigel had had enough. Her hands were shaking in clenched fists and she was not going to stand there and let him belittle her without just cause no matter how much she admired him.

"That's not true!" she said loudly, glaring at Snape, who looked ready to commit murder at having been interrupted so rudely. She went on before he could stop her, "Aside from the fact that a few beakers of Sweat Inducer wouldn't make anyone a hero, I didn't do whatever it is you're accusing me of, Professor." Her voice was back to a reasonable octave, but the tone was harsh and defensive. "I would never take credit for another's work, not least because mine is probably *better*," she said, missing the look of surprised recognition in his face as she ranted, "I worked my butt off brewing those potions, and you'd better believe that each and every one of them is *perfect*. I didn't ask for help, mostly because I don't like taking help from anyone but also because I know how important it is for this project *to remain a secret!* "

Rigel whirled around and stalked the few paces to the door, then whirled back again and advanced on the Potion Master's desk, "You

think I would really jeopardize both your trust and my classmate's health just so I could look cooler by contracting the potions out to other people and claiming them as mine? *I am not my father*, Professor Snape. Maybe I was trying to impress you, because you're everything I ever wanted to be and I respect your opinion, but I want to impress you on my own merits. Not because I want to show how hardworking and selfless I am, but because success matters to me, and it doesn't mean *anything* if it's someone else's work." Rigel was panting now but she had one more thing to say. She glared at her Head of House, "And I am a *Slytherin* . You of all people should know that."

It took her several moments after her tirade to realize that the roaring in her ears wasn't Snape yelling back at her, but rather the sound of her own erratic heartbeat and breathing. Snape was just sitting there, eyes narrowed and focused beneath a heavy frown. Finally, when she was starting to feel a bit embarrassed that she'd exploded *again* at the Potions Master, he said, "Swear on your magic that you brewed all of these potions."

Rigel bristled, but Snape snapped, "Spare me a child's pride, Mr. Black. You have spoken convincingly but I must be *sure*. "

Rigel took in a long, slow breath, and let it out as she thought. Considering the nature of the illness, she supposed, it was not an unreasonable demand. After all, if she had contracted the potions out, the potion-maker could have nefarious intentions and poisoned the potions somehow. Snape could not clear them for administering to the children at Hogwarts unless he had absolutely no doubts as to their origin.

"I swear in risk of my magic that if these are the same potions I and Alesana Selwyn delivered to this room yesterday, then I did brew every one myself," she said carefully, sure to word it so that if somehow a potion she hadn't made had gotten mixed in with the ones she'd delivered she wouldn't lose her magic on a technicality. Rigel felt the bone-deep thrumming in her core as the magic induced by the vow swept over her mind and soul to assess the validity of her

claim. Both she and Snape relaxed as the oppressive magic faded harmlessly away.

Snape cleared his throat, "I owe you an apology for-"

"Please don't, sir," Rigel cut across him quietly, "In truth I think I hoped to surprise you with how much I'd gotten done, so it is partly my fault that I did not consider how suspicious such a surprise would seem in the current climate." Snape nodded in placid agreement, and Rigel added, "That said, please don't doubt my word, whether given or implied, without reasonable proof from now on."

Snape's sharp eyes pierced her flat grey gaze, but she refused to back down on this. If they couldn't trust each other, they couldn't work together.

"Such a thing should not have to be asked for," he allowed, and Rigel nodded in acceptance of his unspoken concession, "Perhaps we should overlook the past ten minutes and start this meeting where it should have begun." Snape took out his wand and conjured a chair, "Please, have a seat, Mr. Black."

"Thank you, Professor Snape," Rigel said, taking the chair without hesitation, "I see you've received the Sweat Inducers. I trust everything was in order?"

"Quite," Snape said wryly, no doubt wondering why their every meeting devolved in such a way. Rigel thought it was likely a combination of Snape's approaching every situation involving her from a biased point of view because of who her father was and her reacting defensively to even the slightest hint of accusation or censure because she was constantly aware of her duplicity and the reasons behind it, thereby making her insecure and prone to overreacting. Whatever the Potions Master thought, he continued, "I am somewhat at a loss to explain how you managed to brew so many potions in two weeks, Mr. Black. Perhaps you could enlighten me?"

Rigel shrugged, "My average was four hours of brewing a day, and I usually had two or three cauldrons brewing at once. I was busy, but not overly burdened, sir."

Snape frowned, "It is not that you brewed almost 800 beakers of potion in two weeks that strains the imagination, Mr. Black. Had you turned in 33 crates of Boil Cure I would not have batted a lash, I assure you. Sweat Inducer, however, is not Boil Cure."

Rigel tilted her head to show her incomprehension, and Snape went on, "Boil Cure requires no magic to be imbued on the part of the brewer as it relies on the innate magic in the ingredients. Sweat Inducer is not viable unless magic is consciously imbued."

"Yes, sir," Rigel said, trying not to sound patronizing but really not seeing what the problem was, "You explained it to me when I got the recipe."

Snape sighed, sounding like he was like pulling teeth, "The magic required for a batch of Sweat Inducer is nothing for a first-year to sniff at. Last night I checked each and every one of these potions, and they are all viable, so the obvious question is how you managed not to pass out from magical exhaustion after brewing it 65 times a week. Were you taking Pepper-up at every meal?"

"No, sir, Pepper-up can have disastrous long-term effects on both neurological and magical pathways," Rigel said, reciting from a study she'd read in *Potions Quarterly* when she was eight.

Snape shot her a look that clearly said, *I know*, but he asked, "Stronger magical stimulants, then?" At her offended expression, he said, "I didn't think you would, but it simply doesn't make any sense, Mr. Black. You see now why I was so quick to jump to ignoble conclusions?"

"I don't see why it doesn't make sense to you," Rigel said plainly, "I imbued each cauldron carefully with enough magic, but it's not like it was all that hard. I never even felt tired, aside from the obvious

fatigue from brewing in the early mornings. I think you're overestimating how difficult imbuing is. I mean, it was hard at first when I was still figuring out the Medi-minis, but once I got the hang of it, imbuing was the easy part of brewing compared with the delicacy of adding the feverfew thistles in the third stage."

The expression on Snape's face was a lot like the one she was growing accustomed to seeing on Draco's when she did or said something that a 'normal' pureblood wizard wouldn't have done or said. A pensive expression crossed his face, and he said softly, "The simplest explanation indeed, but the likelihood..."

"Sir?" Rigel prompted when he'd stared at the wall behind her long enough to make her feel a bit sorry for the blank stone.

Snape blinked and leaned forward in his chair, looking at her like she was a puzzle he was close to figuring out, "The simplest explanation for this... chain of events also happens to have a simple, though rather delicate, test. I require your permission before I proceed, however."

Rigel eyed her Professor a bit warily. She remembered Archie saying that a Legilimens needed permission legally to look inside a person's mind. "Proceed to do... what exactly?"

"With your permission, I would establish a temporary link between our magical cores," he said, face inscrutable, "It is not unlike the link established when one imbues a potion with their magic, the difference being that another person's magical core is not a passive receptor like a potion is. It is the only way to get an accurate... read on another person's magical core, however, and I believe it would help clear up a few things for me to have a sense of your magical core in general."

"It isn't like reading minds, is it, sir?" Rigel asked cautiously, "What kind of things can you tell about a person with that kind of link?"

"It is not very like Legilimency, Mr. Black," Snape said, speaking slowly in the way she'd come to realize he did when he wanted to be honest and was therefore choosing his words with care, "The link is created between two magical cores, not two minds, and as such it can only reveal information about magical cores. It will tell me the depth and state of your magical core. I will be able to tell things like how often you exercise your magic, if there are any blocks on your magic, and so on."

"But it can't tell you anything specific about the person whose magical core it is?" Rigel clarified.

Snape narrowed his eyes sharply at her with what was probably suspicion, and she winced inwardly, but he merely said, "That is correct. If I may?"

Rigel nodded slowly. Snape pointed his wand at her torso and Rigel tried not to gulp. She wondered how many wizards had survived being held at wand point by Professor Snape, who seem altogether too fearsome to be a school teacher, and decided she'd do better not to think about it.

After a moment, Rigel felt something peculiar in the region of her magical core, and if she hadn't been expecting it she didn't doubt that her magic would have lashed out threateningly. As it was, she turned her magical senses inward and watched with fascination as foreign magic approached her core. Her core was a sphere of pure magic situated in her gut not unlike a ball of yarn in that it had strands and ropes of magic all coiled around the center. Unlike a ball of yarn, the coils moved and flexed lazily when the foreign magic, which felt a bit like an iron stick, prodded them experimentally. Like Devil's Snare, she thought absently, or like a pit of snakes. Quietly, she asked her magic to extend a tendril of its own out to the inflexible stick of alien magic and complete the connection. The two appendages of magic fused instantly, the edges melting together and forging a magical conduit, which *zinged* happily to life.

Snape jumped and Rigel's real-world senses watched him stare at her in surprise before he concentrated on the link between their cores once more. It was somewhat hard to tell where her rope of magic stopped and Snape's metal rod began at that point. Rigel felt Snape tug a bit on the connection from his end, and the link twanged with resonance that sent what felt like pulses of pure magic back along the rope toward Snape's core. The pulses seemed to tell him something, as her physical senses told her he was frowning with concentration. Rigel thought it looked rather like magical echolocation. She wondered if the link worked both ways, so she asked her magic to carefully poke the connection the same way Snape had. She felt a brief resistance, and then the tension eased and she could sense magical pulses relaying back and forth across the connection. When they came back to her magical core, her magic seemed to digest the pulses for a moment, then Rigel was hit with a bundle of knowledge that she hadn't had a moment earlier, and realized it was information gathered from Snape's core.

If her core was made up of snakes and tendrils of magical energy wrapped in a ball, Snape's core was shielded behind a thick growth of briar. The vines made up in flexibility what the razor thorns attached to them lacked, and it was difficult to tell what lay underneath with the briars curled around his core so protectively. The stick he'd sent out to bridge the gap between their cores was in fact an elongated thorn, but Rigel was right to think it felt like iron before. All the vines of briar were made up of various kinds of metals. Iron, steel, platinum, silver, all kinds of metals, some pure and some alloys. She supposed they might represent different kinds of magic Snape used, or perhaps they just allowed for a more versatile and many-faceted magical system.

It was fascinating, assimilating information via magical pulsar. She found out that Snape's vines moved more slowly than her snakes and ropes did because he was tired, having expended a good deal of his magical energy in the last 48 hours. A strange bit of magical energy floating around the peripherals of his core, but unattached to anything, told her that he'd taken something like a Pepper-Up

recently and was still running partially off that. She guessed that if he were to perform magic while the connection stood it would tell her even more about his core, but Snape withdrew his magic with a deft hand a moment later, unmelding it from her own and breaking the link as he did so. Her magical sense snapped back from his core to moment there was no longer a connection, and it took her a few moments to regain her orientation and then release her magical senses completely and focus on the tangible world once more.

"I trust you found that as enlightening as I did?" Professor Snape asked dryly when she'd regained herself. Belatedly, she realized she hadn't asked permission to view his magical core, as he had. She grimaced apologetically, but he waved her away unconcernedly, "Relax, Mr. Black, a magical pathway is usually offered two-way, for the sake of politeness, though I did not expect you to have so much control over your magical core that you would be able to take advantage of the link, considering where you were with magical control just a few weeks ago." He gazed at her rather sardonically as he added, "One day I will have to stop underestimating you, child."

Rigel didn't know what to say to that, so she asked, "Did it tell you what you needed to know?"

"Yes and no," Snape said, folding his hands on his desk thoughtfully, "Yes, because if the reading of your magical core is to be believed, you have quite extensive magical reserves beneath the first level of your core, which could account for why sacrificing magic for imbuing does not tire you noticeably. No, because your father's magical core was above average, but nothing at a level to be responsible for this." Snape paused, then went on delicately, "I did not know your mother very well. Was she magically powerful?"

Rigel blinked, taken aback at the question. Of course her mother was powerful. Everyone knew of how powerful Lily Potter was, no matter that she had muggle parents. She-

Rigel mentally smacked herself. *He means Diana*, she realized, feeling rather thick.

"I'm not sure," she said semi-truthfully, "Father doesn't like to talk about her much anymore, so no one mentions her around me. I suppose she might have been."

"Hmm," Snape mulled that over, "Well in any case, your magical core reads much stronger than I would expect from a first-year, in addition to having naturally deep wells of magical power. I suspect the strength of your core is a result of the suppression you exercised near constantly toward your magic as a child. It made your core dense and tough, but I believe you constrained it too much at some point, which is what caused it to lash out whenever you lost control as a result of strong emotional turbulence."

"So, my always fighting against my magic has made it... stronger? Because it had to struggle all the time?" Rigel clarified, and Snape nodded.

"I believe so. Also, your own control over your magic is unnaturally developed because you struggled against it so often," he said, "You and your magic were like old rivals, each improving in order to best the other, so the result is that you both become stronger for the competition."

"Were?"

"At the moment, your core isn't fighting much at all," Snape told her, "It flexes every now and then, but for the most part you and your magical core seem to be in tandem."

"Yes, I've come to an agreement with it," Rigel admitted, "I perform magic often enough to please it, and in return it doesn't do magic without my direction. Much."

Snape gave her an odd look, but Rigel had another question, "Sir, what did you mean by the 'first level' of my magical core?"

He went into teaching mode immediately, "Most wizards have two layers to their magical core. Some magical creatures have multiple

layers, some have only one, and some don't have a magical core so much as a de-centralized network of magic, but returning to the point, what did you notice when you used the connection to perceive my magical core?"

Rigel shrugged, saying, "It looked like a briar patch."

"What shape did it have?"

"It was spherical. Are all cores spheres?" Rigel asked.

"Not necessarily," Snape said, "The sphere is the most intuitive shape for consolidating power, so usually a person's core is roughly rounded at the least. In my case, the briars you noticed are only the outside of the core. They grow around the second level and act as both a primary defense for the magical core and as a flexible surface layer that deals with everyday magic. A wizard's first layer, briars in my case, is replenished by the true core whenever magic is used, so often a person's true core is depleted before the outer layer is expended. In this way it is difficult to gage the depth and state of a person's magical core without practice."

"Okay," Rigel said, "But what does a true core look like? Do I have one? I have never sensed anything but the surface coils from mine."

"The true core varies in appearance as much as the first layer does," Snape said, "According to how a person's magic naturally flows and how that person conceives it to be, to some extent. It takes prolonged meditation to glimpse your true core at first, though it gets easier in practice. All that is important at the moment, however, is that your true core is indeed deep enough to imbue potions on a higher level than most first years would be capable."

"So that means I can help you more with the harder potions, right?" Rigel leaned forward in her chair with poorly suppressed excitement, "Sweat Inducer only needs three doses a week even if given constantly. Those cases should last for at least three months even if 100 kids get sick. Let me help with something else, sir. Please."

Snape made a great show of considering her request carefully, but Rigel had seen his magical core, seen how tired he was all the time and how hard he worked just keeping up with the needs of the Hospital Wing, and knew he could use the help whether he liked it or not.

"I suppose Aurora's Breath is a good potion for an aspiring Master to know in general," Snape said carefully, and Rigel grinned openly in response, "I will give you the recipe I prefer during dinner tonight, Mr. Black, along with my notes on the potion." He fixed her with a stern look, "This potion requires even more magic than Sweat Inducer, though not quite as much as Snowbit. You will make no more than 25 cauldrons a week, is that understood? That will be plenty to keep Poppy stocked, considering each child needs only a beaker a week and one cauldron makes six beakers."

"Yes, sir," Rigel agreed easily. She was willing to trade less brewing hours for a new and more difficult potion to brew.

"You are doing a rare thing, Mr. Black," Snape told her after a moment of silence.

Rigel recognized his words as an unexpected and unofficial thank you, so she said, "It says more about the world we live in that using your skills to make a difference is a rare thing than it does about me for doing something rare, Professor Snape."

Snape's face was unreadable, but Rigel wasn't expecting an answer. Instead she asked, "Professor, have you learned anything new about the illness? How it spreads or what its goal is?"

"Goal?" Snape said sharply, "What do you mean by that?"

"Well," Rigel said, remembering something Archie had once told her, "Every illness has a goal, so to speak. Viruses often infiltrate living cells in order to facilitate their own reproduction, which they can't do without a host, for instance. What is this illness caused by, and what does it want with humans? Food? Shelter? Is it a parasite,

dependent on the continued existence of the host or does the death of the host make no difference to it? Does it attack children because they are more susceptible or because they have something adults don't have?"

Snape considered her words, "That is an interesting way to look at disease."

"I've toyed with the idea of being a Healer from time to time," Rigel said, "I'm interested in inventing and experimenting with Potions, and there are many obscure diseases that currently don't have a cure or even viable treatment options."

Snape gave her a look that made her uncomfortably aware that he most likely knew how Diana had died and was probably pitying her for something that happened to her cousin.

"Well, I can answer at least one of your questions in any case," Snape said finally, "The reason children appear to be more susceptible to the sickness is, we believe, related to the way the illness is transmitted. It moves mind to mind, though proximity seems to be a factor as well."

"How is that possible?" Rigel wondered, "Unless all the victims were practicing Legilimency on one another."

Snape snorted with amusement, "Magic, Mr. Black. Magical illnesses are transmitted via magical currents, including mental currents in this case. Unprotected minds leak mental energy, to a certain extent broadcasting their mental state to those who perceive such things. When unprotected minds spend a great deal of time around one another, the mental energies they leak tend to mingle and form tenuous ties to one another. Because of this, sometimes grown wizards who have been friends a very long time will know when the other is nearby. The illness is using these projected currents to move from one mind to another one, usually one 'familiar' to the original mind, and take up residence there."

"So the younger a child is, the more open and unprotected his mind is, generally speaking? And I suppose friends would infect other friends first, because their minds were peripherally familiar with one another," Rigel said, "That makes sense, I suppose, but what does the sickness do once it gets into the mind?"

"As far as we can tell, with the exception of the very first student to fall ill, Miss Jones, who slipped erratically into a coma, the illness comes on subtly, slowly taking over the mental faculties of a child until it reaches a point at which it can assume more or less complete control. At this point, it shuts down the mind it has taken over like a fortress, cutting it off from the outside world as completely as any Master Occlumens could."

"And the kid collapses into seeming unconsciousness," Rigel said, fitting the pieces together, "Is it contagious even after the mind locks down?"

"Yes," Snape said shortly, "Madam Pomphrey is careful not to spend too much time with any one patient, less she unwittingly facilitate the disease in spreading to her own mind by creating familiar mental pathways. It is not a high level of concern, however, as Pomphrey's mind is generally well protected in any case."

"What about the fever?"

"Sometimes the fever is strong, other times it is weak, sometimes it lasts, sometimes it doesn't," Snape said, "We know the fever can't be stopped with Fever Reducer, because that potion affects the mind directly, and none of our Potions that affect the mind have any effect on the sickness. The only thing that might account for the fever itself is if the fever corresponds to how violently a child mentally resists the sickness once he becomes aware of it, once the child is trapped in his own mind with it, that is, but we cannot know for sure. None of our scans can reach inside the mind when it is so well protected. All we can do at the moment is keep the body alive so that when the sickness leaves there is no lasting damage."

"To the body," Rigel said seriously, "How do we know their minds aren't being permanently damaged while the sickness maintains control over them?"

"We don't," Snape admitted, "But for reasons I will not share with you, I do not believe the illness will cause any significant damage once it has the mind locked down. It seems to be working much like a coma-curse in that respect."

Rigel frowned in thought. What Snape said didn't make much sense in terms of the way a disease worked, but he sounded quite certain. If it was something more like a curse, a contagious curse for that matter, and less like an actual illness, then Rigel supposed the goal of the sickness would depend not on what the sickness gained from infecting children, but what the intention of the caster was, like with any spell. That would assume that there was a person, a wizard, behind this sickness, but Rigel had a hard time seeing how such an illness could benefit a person. It could incapacitate your enemies, but it worked too slowly to be useful in battle, and she doubted Hogwarts children could be considered the enemy of anyone with enough power and skill to engineer an entire epidemic.

Rigel sighed, thinking that perhaps she should just trust Snape to know what he was talking about, and decided to concentrate on finding a way to keep *herself* safe from the illness first and foremost. Archie was right after all. More than just her health was at stake if she fell ill and was left to the mercies of immodest Healers. She knew for a fact that the doses for Snowhit were slightly different for girls than for boys, so if nothing else the Healer would have to double check her sex for that reason.

She thanked Professor Snape for telling her what he had, knowing he was under no obligation to satisfy her curiosity, and left his office with a new focus for her never-busy-enough life. If the sickness preyed on open minds, then she would just have to make sure her mind was as closed as possible.

A couple weeks flew by between brewing Aurora's Breath, keeping up with classes, and trying to ignore the ever-mounting number of children confined to Quarantine. It wasn't until early March that she caught up with Flint after what had looked like a particularly gnarly early morning Quidditch practice. He was checking over the team's equipment in the Slytherin section of the school storage shed, making sure his team members had cleaned and stowed theirs properly, when Rigel slipped into the shed and shut the door loudly after checking to make sure there was no one else inside.

Flint whirled, wand half-raised, and Rigel held up her hands in the universal "don't shoot" posture, making sure her face was clearly visible in the morning light that filtered through the grimy window to her right.

Flint grunted and lowered his wand, but he didn't turn his back to her again. Instead, he said, "What?"

"It's about our deal," Rigel said quietly, and Flint rolled his eyes before leaning back against a crate of practice quaffles nonchalantly.

"Oh yeah?" he said mildly, "Finally decided you've had enough?"

"No," Rigel said, frowning. Surely he didn't expect her to just quit and go home. "Look, it's not that I don't trust you Flint, and so far you've kept your word, but things are getting... complicated."

"Complicated," Flint repeated.

"Dangerous," Rigel amended, "Blood identity theft is a bit deal, you know that." Flint nodded, so Rigel went on, "If it was just that I was afraid of what would happen to me if I got caught, I would take your word and consider our business iron clad. Unfortunately, I don't have that luxury anymore. The political climate is too volatile. If me and Archie's deception came to light right now, there are some who would use it as an excuse to go after *everyone* with blood like me. I don't want to sacrifice my goals to some abstract chance that by following the rules things will work out, but neither do I want to

carelessly make myself into an excuse for an all-out war against muggleborns and halfbloods."

"Okay," Flint shrugged, looking particularly unimpressed, "So?"

"You're the only one besides Archie and I that knows the truth," she said, neglecting to mention that not even he knew all of the truth, "I need a guarantee that no matter what happens, our secret is safe as long as I hold up my end of the bargain and continue to complete your assignments for you."

Flint considered her silently, then said flatly, "You want a Vow. To ensure I won't tell."

"Not exactly," Rigel said, rather nervous about asking this but unwilling to show it, "Most Vows stipulate that a person can't do or tell something without suffering consequences, but the fact remains that the person who took the Vow could still technically break it, as long of he was willing to pay a price. I want to ensure that you *can't* reveal our secret, even under duress, even under a Truth Spell."

"And how do you plan to do that?" Flint said sarcastically, "Last I checked even if I took the strongest Unbreakable Vow, it wouldn't stop me from telling, it would just kill me."

"Well, there are two options, actually," Rigel told him, "The first is that you allow me to modify your memory when our contract is complete--"

"No."

Rigel took in the fiercely adamant look on Flint's face and nodded in agreement, "Right, well, that's good actually because I don't know how to modify someone's memory. The second option is a bit more intrusive, though."

"What is it?" Flint said tiredly, "Just spit out your demands already, I have breakfast to get to."

"It's a Sealing Curse," Rigel said, "I want you to let me Seal the knowledge of our duplicity in your soul. If done right, the spell prevents the knowledge from ever being shared or relayed in any way either voluntarily or involuntarily. It's not as bad as it sounds," she added quickly, anticipating Flint's objections, "It does take away free will just a tiny bit, but you wouldn't ever have to worry about accidentally slipping up ten years from now, and it gives you an easy out if the secret comes out some other way and the authorities ask you why you never told anyone if you knew. You just tell them I cursed you with a Sealing Curse, and you're off the hook."

Rigel was actually quite proud of herself for finding such a spell. It was one of the many contingent spells that purebloods had developed over the centuries to place guarantees or restrictions on matters of honor. There were Vows, Seals, and Bindings of all kinds, though most of them had fallen out of use, being rather... extreme. This one had been referenced as an example in one of the volumes on pureblood customs she'd borrowed from the Black library (which she was really planning on reading more carefully one of these days), and she'd tracked down a description in an old dueling book of all things in the Hogwarts Library the night before. Apparently the forfeits for lost duels used to be a good deal more restrictive.

Flint was staring at her with something like disbelief wrapped around the suspicion that he was witnessing something insane and didn't know what to do about it.

"You want me to let you curse me-permanently, so that I have no choice but to keep your little secret, which will probably be revealed in a year or two anyway because of the sheer ridiculousness of the nature of your duplicity, is that about the gist of it?" It was hard to tell what Flint was thinking, but Rigel nodded reluctantly. He'd pretty much summed it up, though of course she didn't think their pretense would be revealed so easily as he assumed. "What's in it for me?" Flint asked bluntly.

Rigel had to think for a moment to see what he meant, "You mean, since I'm upping the ante on our deal technically, you want an

additional concession as well?"

"Yes, I do," Flint said, smirking now.

"And in return for this additional concession, you'll take the Sealing Curse, just like that?"

"Yes, I will."

Rigel shrugged, aware that she was in no position to bargain at this point, "Then, you can have whatever you want, I guess."

"I can, can't I?" Flint mused, eyes glinting with amusement as he made her wait on edge for his decision, "Hmm, the possibilities are rather endless. I could have you carry my books between classes, or personally cut up my steak at dinner, but I really think a life-long curse merits something equally... how did you put it? Intrusive. Don't you think?"

"Now who's prevaricating?" Rigel muttered, though she didn't disagree with the upperclassman. She was demanding a lot, so she'd find a way to pull off whatever he wanted in return. Frankly he could have reported her a long time ago, and she owed him for offering to make a deal with her in the first place, if for nothing else.

"Well, the trouble is I can't think of anything I really want at the moment, what with you already doing my assignments for the foreseeable future," Flint said, "So I guess I'll just have to take a leaf out of your book and demand something rather similar."

Rigel swallowed nervously at the smug look on Flint's face. She could already tell she wasn't going to like this.

"I want a Vow of Undisclosed Debt," he said, flashing his canines at her in a feral sort of grin.

"That sounds pretty self-explanatory," she remarked.

"It is," Flint said, "It's a Vow that basically acknowledges an unfulfilled debt to another person, and when the person it's keyed to calls the debt in, the Vow activates and monitors the person who owes the debt until they satisfy it. It's pretty loose on the timeframe, unless the person who calls in the debt specifies something, but if it senses you don't intend to fulfill the debt to the best of your ability it steps in."

"Steps in?" Rigel frowned.

"The Vow has been known to take control of a wizard's mind and magic and ensure that the debt gets repaid if the opportunity arises and the wizard seems reluctant," Flint shrugs, "But you wouldn't try and weasel out of it, would you? So you've nothing to worry about."

Rigel sighed, seeing the many ways in which things could go horribly wrong, depending on what Flint asked for, but not seeing any other option if she wanted to ensure that the leak Flint represented was plugged, so to speak.

"Can I qualify that slightly?" she asked

"How so?" Flint raised an eyebrow, seeming surprised at something. Perhaps he'd been expecting a flat refusal? As if she'd give him the excuse to call the deal off entirely.

"When you call this debt in, can you run what you plan on asking for by me before you actually invoke the Vow?" Rigel widened her eyes imploringly, and Flint snorted.

"What for? Going to kill me if it turns out to be something you don't want to do?" He seemed amused at the very idea.

"Of course not," Rigel said, "But there are things you don't know about me, and if you happen to ask for something that would be literally impossible for me to do, I would like a chance to explain why it would be a bad idea to ask for such a debt."

"Like what?" Flint asked curiously.

"Well what if you asked me to kill my sister, but it turns out I don't have any sisters? What would the Vow do then?" she pointed out. She really didn't want to know what would happen if he called in the debt for something that would be physically impossible for a girl to do, simply because he assumed she was a boy.

Flint shrugged unconcernedly, "I doubt it would be something like that, but sure, I'll give you that."

"So the agreement is as follows," Rigel said, making sure she had it all straight in her head, "I will complete all the school assignments you ask me to for an unspecified amount of time, and I will also take a Vow of Undisclosed Debt to be paid at any time in the future. In return, you will allow the knowledge of my and Archie's duplicity to be Sealed permanently within you, and will warn me before you call in the Undisclosed Debt in case I have a reasonable objection. You also won't tell anyone of my secret before it is Sealed, and I will do my best to keep anyone from finding out that I am the one doing your assignments. Agreed?"

"Deal," Flint said, "We'll swap Vows and Seals on Saturday morning. Meet me here before the sun rises."

Rigel nodded. She went to leave the storage shed, but turned over her shoulder at the last moment and said, "Thanks, Flint."

"Don't thank me just yet, kid."

In the end, the exchange of promises with Flint turned out to be easier than she was expecting. They forwent a binder, for obvious reasons, and because there were only two of them in the room while they made the Vow and Seal, no names were required either, because the pronouns "you" and "me" were referentially obvious.

The Sealing Curse was child's play, as far as curses went. Because it was a precursor to the Fidelius Charm, it required the consent of the cursed to be effective, and it was for this reason, not any difficulty in the spell itself, that it fell into disuse. Once absolutes were considered honorable in pureblood circles, but nowadays most preferred to have a little wriggle room in their commitments.

Both ceremonies took barely twenty minutes, and when she left the Quidditch shed Rigel felt much lighter. No one could ever get her secret out of Flint now, and with both she and Archie working on their Occlumency as much as possible, their plans were that much closer to turning out successfully.

Speaking of Occlumency, she thought as she trekked back to the castle. Now would be a good opportunity to practice some more. She was determined not to let this sickness have a crack at her, and the best thing she could do based on Snape's description of the transmission would be to shore up her mental defenses whenever she could.

Rigel made her way to her dorm room to surreptitiously pick up her "Gryffindor" disguise, and then went up to a bathroom near the Library to change. She was getting good at ensuring she was unrecognizable in her disguises, and as she deftly tucked her hair into the red wig and slid the glasses up her nose she automatically assumed a slumped sort of posture and a faraway expression. She left her Gryffindor tie a bit crooked and shuffled out of the bathroom toward the Library.

She found a nice quiet corner where she could meditate undisturbed and curled into the chair in a way that made her look more like a bookworm taking a nap than a focused wizard exercising advanced meditation techniques. She retreated into herself. It was sort of like what she did when she used her sixth senses to 'look' at her magical core, but instead of her magic, she was focusing on her mind. The same sort of visualization took place, but unlike her magical core, her mind didn't move or react independently from her will. She could

act *on* her mental landscape, change it and shape it, but it wouldn't do anything she didn't specifically will it to do.

The mists that made up the peripherals of her mindscape parted before her awareness and revealed the great, white mountain that made up the center of her mind. It was huge in her mental estimation, and the whiteness came from the ice and snow piled on its face. She shivered in the cold wind that blew around her mountain and quickly made her way to the small opening near the base that was hidden behind an illusion of a wall of ice. Once through the illusion, her mind opened up into a warm cavern, which glowed with the light of a huge fireplace and several torches burning on the walls. The cavern looked like an underground Potions Lab, with crates and cabinets of ingredients filling the space. There were invitingly comfortable couches where she might sit and peruse the memories bound up in the various scrolls intermixed with Potions recipes. That is, she might if she didn't know that the main cavern was one big decoy, a reflection of what people would expect her mind to look like.

Since she had built these caverns herself, Harry-for indeed, this far in her own mind she was Harry and her mental avatar looked like she thought she would have if she'd never cut off all her hair-walked straight through the cavern to the big, woven rug that lay before the hearth. She pulled the rug back to reveal the trap door beneath, grinning a bit as she hauled it open. It was so cliché but she just loved having a trap door hidden under a rug in her mindscape. When she had first gotten a solid visual on the White Mountain, as she referred to her mental fortress when she was feeling particularly cheesy, she hadn't been sure what to make of it. It took several more meditation sessions before she could figure out how to enact changes in her mental scene that would remain permanent even when her awareness left. Once she'd gotten the hang of it, though, it was a lot easier than even working with her magic. She didn't have to ask for anything here, she just imagined it, and willed it into being.

Harry dropped through the trap door to the tunnel beneath, which was carved roughly from rock, but embedded with pale green

crystals that lit up automatically when the trap door swung shut above her head. The tunnel led in half a dozen directions currently, to help confuse any intruders, though the false branches didn't extend very far as of yet. She worked on them in her free time, but someday she hoped to have a labyrinth worthy of Daedalus carved out. As it was, she took the third path from the right and followed it as it sloped upwards, moving further and further into the heart of the mountain.

She emerged from the tunnel eventually into her favorite place in her mindscape so far. It was a vast, hollowed cavern that stretched as far as the eye could see, completely ignoring the laws of physics that would consider the encompassing of such infinite space within a mountain, no matter how large, to be an impossibility. And space it was. The cavern was dark as night, lit by the light of a thousand stars, which twinkled in a way that Harry knew stars really didn't as they floated by her in the enormous space. These stars were her true memories, not the decoy potion scrolls in the comparably miniscule cavern at the entrance to her mountainside. They drifted peacefully for the most part, though a select few zoomed by, leaving a trail of light behind them as they went.

In truth her Astronomy professor would be appalled to see this, Harry thought happily. In addition to the stars drifting aimlessly about the endless black space, there were planets too. The planets housed her more troublesome memories and emotions, the ones she wanted to keep a close hold on, and the number of rings around a planet corresponded to how securely she wanted the memory or emotion to be bound. The planets glowed with subtle light of their own as well, but they paled in relation to what lay at the center of her outer-space room.

Harry pushed off the floor of the cavern and drifted upwards without constraints of gravity to worry about, floating toward the center of the space so she could admire what lay at the heart of her Snow Mountain, the center of her universe. It was a sun, burning bright and brilliant, and in truth she could not even take credit for it. It had been

here when she'd first burrowed inside the mountain to seek shelter from the cold, windy mists, and it was what made everything possible. The sun was her magic. It was the energy that powered everything in her mindscape, from the snow on the peak of the mountain to the fire that burned merrily in the hearth of the decoy potions lab. Because it had looked like a sun when she'd found it, she'd fashioned the room that housed it to look like outer space accordingly, albeit a skewed and disproportioned version of it, considering that the 'stars' were so much smaller than the sun, when in a proportioned reality they would be roughly similar sizes.

When she reached the sun, she could feel the warmth and energy radiating off of it. She spent a moment basking in the feeling of pure life that wrapped around her mental form when she got close enough, but soon she drifted back toward the tunneled entrance to the Space Room. It wouldn't do to get too comfortable here, or she would wind up spending all her time in her head.

Harry touched earth and took a moment to steady herself as gravity kicked back in before heading off to work on carving more tunnels. Perhaps she'd see about implanting some explosives in the walls of strategic tunnels, so that she could collapse them remotely if she ever had to...

In real time, she spent about four hours meditating. She knew this because she checked her watch when she came back to herself. Mental time was a strange and not strictly speaking reliable thing. Rigel stretched out the kink in her neck and glanced around her corner of the Library. The tables around her were still empty and her book bag didn't appear to have been disturbed. Not that anyone would find much to disturb if they tried. Most of the important things she carried-Flint's assignments, the Map, and letters she was writing to her parents and Archie-were inside compartments that wouldn't open for anyone else.

She was just about to take out her Herbology book and get started on an essay for the following Tuesday when a sound caught the edges of her senses and she stilled, cocking her head to listen

closer. When she zeroed in on the sound, she realized it was someone crying, and they were somewhere in the stacks to her right. Whoever it was also seemed to be attempting to stifle the noises rather unsuccessfully. Rigel sighed, but picked up her bag and moved in the direction of the muffled sobbing. It wasn't that she was a Dora Do-Gooder or anything, but she couldn't exactly concentrate on her schoolwork with someone crying nearby, could she? She ignored the voice in her head that suggested she might simply move to a different table, and peered around the edge of the bookcase that sounded closest to the source of the noise.

Sitting on the floor, knees bent and hugged tightly to her chest, was a Ravenclaw girl with long dark hair and pale pink stockings that peeped out from under her robes. Her shoes had been discarded next to her book bag, which was upturned on the floor next to her, as if it had spilled and instead of righting it she'd sunk down to the ground and just broken down.

Rigel cautiously approached the girl, not trying to sneak up on her but not wanting to startle her either. Her bag brushed against the bookcase as she passed it and the Ravenclaw looked up at her immediately through straight black bangs. Her face had an Asian look about it, and Rigel thought she might be a second year. The girl wiped her sleeve across her eyes ruefully, as if she fully expected to be teased and wasn't going to bother being embarrassed about it. Rigel dropped her own bag to the floor and slid down the stacks to sit down next to the girl.

She fished in her bag for the handkerchief she (as a pureblood boy) kept in there, and offered it to the Ravenclaw, mentally thankful that Archie didn't have his handkerchiefs monogrammed like Draco did.

The girl took it after only a moment of consideration, which frankly surprised Rigel until she remembered she was wearing Gryffindor robes, not Slytherin. No wonder the girl didn't look like she was waiting for Rigel to hex her.

"Rough Morning?" Rigel asked, not sure how to get a stranger to open up, but deciding to start out general and then work her way to the specifics.

"It's this sickness," the girl burst out, "It got Marietta this morning, and I don't want to be next."

Or, Rigel thought bemusedly, they could just skip right to the point.

"You might not get sick," she started to say, but the older girl shut her up with a glare before she could get too far into the platitudes.

"All the first year Ravenclaws are ill, and it's just me and one other second year left in our dorm. Most of the Hufflepuff first through third years are sick, and Ravenclaws have the most classes with Hufflepuff, so of course I'm going to be next," she said. Her voice was sharp but her eyes were flat, "I watched Marietta collapse. She didn't even stir when Flitwick levitated her off to Quarantine. I don't want to just fall into darkness with no warning, no way to fight it or even accept that it's happened. Marietta was still *smiling* when she went unconscious. I won't even know before it gets me and-and-" she heaved a shuddering breath in and closed her eyes as she whispered, "I'm frightened."

Rigel sat in silence for a moment, not sure what to say. It was true that the illness had grown progressively worse over the past few weeks. Slytherin House was the least affected, probably because they seldom deigned to mix with the other Houses, and even then most of the first years were gone and almost half of the second years. Crabbe and Goyle were sick, as were Davis and Greengrass. Millicent had fallen ill just the day before. And Theo was still sick too, of course.

She'd known on some level how scary the illness was to most of her classmates, but she'd been so busy she hadn't realized what it must feel like to be able to do nothing. To have no choice but to sit around and wait for it to take you, and no one telling you anything. It was heartbreaking. Rigel hoped she never felt like that, and she made a

vow to keep twice as busy if this sort of hopeless panicking was the alternative.

Still, she could at least do something for the girl.

"What's your name?" Rigel asked quietly.

"Cho," she said, still sniffing a bit but mostly together, "Cho Chang."

"Cho, did you know that the sickness that's going around isn't deadly?"

The Ravenclaw stared at her before slowly shaking her head back and forth, "How do you know?"

"I overheard some teachers talking about it," she invented, unable to tell her about her unofficial role in making potions for Snape.

"So it's not true that the Quarantine is just to hide the fact that the kids die and aren't coming back?" she asked tremulously.

"No, that's not true," Rigel said firmly. She hesitated, not wanted to reveal too much, but a look at Cho's scared and lost expression had her giving in. *Please don't let her be an agent of evil*, she thought wryly. Truly she didn't think there would be any harm in telling Cho a few things about the sickness to make her feel better. If nothing else, the girl was right. If the sickness traveled on mental pathways, then those who spent a lot of time together would infect each other. If Marietta was a good friend of hers, Cho likely would be one of the next to get sick. "Can you keep a secret, Cho?" she asked seriously.

Cho narrowed her eyes at her, but she nodded slowly, "Yes."

"Good," Rigel said, "Then I can tell you that all the kids who are sick are still alive and not at all in mortal danger."

Cho opened her mouth, but Rigel shook her head, "I can't tell you how I know, but I do. The illness just put them all to sleep. The

Quarantine is because the sleeping *is* contagious, but when they cure it, all the kids will be fine."

"Sleeping?" Cho sounded skeptical, but hopeful.

"Yeah," Rigel nodded, taking the handkerchief back from Cho and stowing it in her bag while she talked, "When you go to sleep at night, can you remember the moment you stop being awake?"

"No," Cho said.

"And does that scare you? Do you think it would be scary if you fell asleep smiling because of something you were thinking about when it happened?" Rigel pressed, appealing to the Ravenclaw's logic.

"No, of course not," Cho said, smiling a bit.

"You see? The sickness is just like that. Like falling asleep," Rigel said softly, "And when you wake up, it'll be Springtime again, none of this dreary March wind. Think of all the boring History classes you'll miss."

Cho chuckled quietly, "Yeah, and maybe I'll sleep through finals too."

"And your friends won't miss you, because they'll all be asleep too," Rigel said.

"Yeah," the Ravenclaw sighed, "At least I won't be worrying about it anymore."

Rigel smiled, "Everything will be okay, Cho Chang. If nothing else, you'll get to catch up on your beauty sleep."

"Hey, what are you trying to say?" Cho laughed, shoving her shoulder indignantly.

"What? Nothing," Rigel said innocently, "I'm just saying it couldn't hurt."

"Alright, stop talking now," the Ravenclaw said. She reached for her shoes to slip them back on and started gathering up her spilled belongings as well, "Seriously though, thanks. I feel better now."

"No problem," Rigel shrugged. She stood and scooped up her bag by the strap.

Before she could leave, Cho said, "Wait. What's your name?"

Rigel hesitated. What could she say? Technically the red-haired, glasses wearing boy she was dressed as didn't exist. Oh well, it's not like Cho would go check the registry.

"I'm Reggie," she improvised, "See you around."

"Yeah, bye," Cho called as Rigel turned and headed out of the Library.

Really, what was one more lie?

She changed back into her normal Slytherin robes and stowed the wig and glasses in her bag before heading back toward the dungeons. She had an urge to see what Pansy and Draco were doing. It came to her rather suddenly that Pansy and Draco were first years too, and the thought of their vulnerability to the sickness made her acutely uncomfortable. She wanted to see for herself that they were both still conscious, even if it meant being scolded for disappearing all Saturday morning.

A few nights later, Rigel snuck out of her dorm at five minutes past midnight, invisibility cloak tucked under one arm and Marauder's Map tucked innocently in her robe pocket. She had letters to mail to Archie and Sirius and assignments to mail to Flint, and lately she'd been more on edge than usual about the attention others might pay to her correspondence. She knew it was mostly paranoia, but in general Rigel thought paranoia was a survival trait, especially for those who led potentially hazardous lives.

Perhaps it was this paranoia, on top of her admittedly rather potent curiosity, that had her slowing down, stopping, and narrowing her eyes at the Map when she caught sight of two unlikely figures standing awfully close together.

Two dots labeled Severus Snape and Quirinus Quirrell were barely a millimeter apart on the Map, and after a brief and rather disturbing moment in which she considered the possibility that they were having an "adult" moment, Rigel quickly discarded that ridiculous scenario (with no small amount of grossed-out-ness) and changed her course on a split-second whim. Letter mailing could wait in light of the information that two of her teachers were either trapped in close quarters by a band of rogue suits of armor or strangling one another.

Rigel wrapped herself in the invisibility cloak and set off toward the basement corridor the Map indicated. A few minutes later she quietly wiped and folded the Map, which was already heating up to indicate the impending presence of a teacher after curfew, so she'd have both hands to keep the invisibility cloak steady. When she was sure every part of her was covered, she rounded the corner silently and drifted down the hallway toward where she could now see Snape and Quirrell having what looked like a heated discussion.

She got just close enough to hear their conversation clearly, wishing she could get close enough to see their faces in the dim lighting but not sure she could keep her breathing quiet enough to escape Snape's notice at that range.

Snape had Quirrell backed against the wall, and looked to be keeping the reluctant Defense teacher frozen in place with his glare alone, "... need to know more, Quirrell."

Quirrell was muttering something indistinct under his breath and Snape growled menacingly in response, "Don't lie to me, Quirrell, you are the only one in this school high enough in His favor to have been charged with this mission. If you know *anything* about this sickness you must inform me now."

Rigel's eyes widened beneath her cloak and she frowned in concentration, straining to pick up what Quirrell was mumbling.

"If *He* didn't tell you, Severus," the pale-faced man said nervously, "I really can't-that is, perhaps you aren't supposed to know. Perhaps He doesn't trust-"

"He gives me no more information than necessary, that I might play my part convincingly, Quirrell," Snape snapped, "But what was necessary has changed. I must know how to end this sickness, should the need arise."

"It will be called off when the legislation has gone through," Quirrell protested.

"Fool! The sickness is spreading more rapidly than anticipated," Snape said impatiently, "I have already used up all my stores and the local suppliers are running dry as well. Without the ingredients to keep their bodies alive, it doesn't *matter* if the sickness is recalled when He's gotten what He wants."

"I don't know what you want me to do, Severus," Quirrell whined, flinching under the Potions Master's presumably dark expression.

"Tell me how to counter it," Snape pressed, "Just in case, Quirrell. The mission is important, but do you think *He* wants pureblooded children to end up dead? That will not sit well with His plans, especially if this ever gets traced back to Him somehow. Their parents will turn on more than just Dumbledore if these children come to any actual harm because you haven't given me enough information to step in if I judge it to be necessary."

"I can't, I don't know how myself, Severus," Quirrell said finally, speaking quickly, as if to convince Snape all in one breath, "But I will ask Him. I will tell Him what you say, when I am next called, and surely He will have a solution."

Snape growled wordlessly and spat, "You'd better hope you see Him soon," before turning and stalking off down the corridor at a furious pace without looking back. Rigel held her breath as Quirrell shakily adjusted his collar and walked slowly passed her, his eyes glazed with some combination of fear and relief.

When Rigel was alone in the corridor, she took out the Map once more and made her way slowly but surely back to her common room. She had to think, and to do that she needed to be somewhere she could afford to space out. Rigel hurriedly stowed her cloak and map in her trunk and then returned to the main common room area and sank down into a low-backed couch to figure out what she'd just seen and heard.

The first and most obvious conclusion she was faced with was: Snape knew who sent the sickness. There was no doubt that the sickness was magically constructed now, and it had definitely been sent to Hogwarts for a purpose. Also obvious from what Snape had said was that the purpose of the sickness was not to kill. It was an intimidation tactic of some kind, meant to undermine the confidence parents had in Hogwarts and therefore the Headmaster. Someone wanted people turned against the Headmaster, and it had something to do with legislation. Her mind immediately reminded her of the friendly warnings Rosier and Rookwood had given her about legislation that was being pushed forward in June. Just a few months away, and no doubt this was when people would begin to take sides on this issue.

Rigel nodded slowly to herself as the pieces began to come together. The SOW party wanted new anti-muggle-blood legislation, but to get it ratified they needed to sway popular opinion away from Dumbledore, as well as get a good amount of Light parents away from the Headmaster as well. To do that, they infected the children of the most powerful purebloods, both Light and Dark, in the country with a seemingly serious sickness while Dumbledore was supposed to be responsible for said children. Faith in Dumbledore wanes, new legislation gets pushed through, children are miraculously cured

when the sickness is called back, no harm done to them, but for muggleborns and halfbloods it's too late. The Marriage Law is already on the books.

But where did Snape come in?

Clearly he knew something about where this illness originated from, but if his words to Quirrell were truthful he didn't know how to cure it and seemed to be genuinely concerned about it in a practical sense. He didn't seem overly concerned in a moral sense that the sickness had been sent to a school full of *children* to make a political point, supposedly harmless or not, and Rigel wasn't sure how she felt about that.

Well, okay, she was pretty sure she didn't like it, but on the other hand it wasn't really her place to judge her Professor, who was older, wiser, and probably had a rational reason for most of the things he did. Also there was the fact that Snape might have been bluffing in his knowledge to Quirrell in order to trick the cure out of him, which Rigel sort of hoped for Snape's sake he hadn't been, or else things could get awkward when Quirrell told Him (whoever *He* was) what Snape had been fishing for.

All in all, Rigel was both more enlightened and more confused than she had been when she left for the Owlrey just half an hour earlier. She guessed she could still go to the Owlrey, but she was exhausted just thinking about it. Instead, she went back to her room and tried to fall asleep even though the sound of Theo's quiet breathing, which she hadn't even realized had been familiar, was conspicuously absent.

The next morning Rigel dragged herself up to the Owlrey to send her post, and on her way back down was waylaid in the Entrance Hall by Alesana Selwyn, who Rigel had trouble placing for a moment due to the fact that she'd never spoken to the upperclassman outside of Snape's office.

"Hey Black," Selwyn said after taking hold of Rigel's elbow, forcing her pause and peer tiredly up at her, "Wow, you look like crap."

"Thanks," Rigel muttered absently. Her brain felt like mush that morning and she hadn't had breakfast yet.

"Well, just a heads up," Selwyn said, "Rookwood's looking for you. He finally figured out what was in that vile you gave him, and he wants to rail at you for misleading him or something."

Rigel blinked at the smug smirk on Selwyn's face and repeated, "He just figured it out? Does that mean you win?"

"Well, this round, sure," Selwyn said easily, "It took him more than *two* weeks, which means I actually get an extra point for this one."

"You guys keep score?" Rigel frowned. How long did these games run?

"Of course," the older Slytherin said, "Whoever has the most points at midnight on December 31st wins, and then next year we start all over."

"What do you win?" Rigel asked, stifling a yawn.

"I'll tell you when you're older," she winked, then strode off down the steps to the dungeons, humming contentedly.

Rigel shook her head dazedly and stumbled into the Great Hall to find food and hopefully something to wake her up a bit more.

When she sat down at the table, the first-year end of which was looking depressingly sparse, Rigel barely had time to acknowledge Pansy's polite "good morning" before Rookwood squeezed his way abruptly between the two first years with a hurried, "excuse me, Pansy," and stared expectantly at the side of Rigel's head.

Rigel turned her head slowly to look at the large upperclassman, whose stare was moving from intimidating to creepy the longer he

sat there not saying anything. Finally she said, with as much emotion as she could muster after the night she'd had tossing and mentally turning over what she'd eavesdropped on, "It seems Selwyn wasn't joking about you wanting to talk to me."

"I can wait until you've eaten something," Rookwood said seriously, still turned in his seat to face her, eyes boring into her face like blank drills.

Rigel raised an eyebrow. *Like I'd be more comfortable with you watching me eat* . "No, that's okay," she said bracingly, "Go ahead."

Rookwood spoke immediately, "Why did you tell me you'd collected the sample you gave me yourself? Did Selwyn tell you to lie to me? I need to know if she's changing the rules of the game to include unreliable messengers, you see."

"Uh, she didn't, because I wasn't lying," Rigel said, frowning, "I collected the venom not twenty minutes before I handed it to you, Rookwood."

"Unlikely," Rookwood said thoughtfully, "Though of course its very unlikeliness is what made me dismiss the possibility of dangerous snake venom until it was too late. How *did* you get venom from a boomslang snake? Did Hagrid help you?"

"He did *what* ?" Pansy leaned around Rookwood to frown disapprovingly at Rigel, "What have you been getting up to, Rigel? You look just awful this morning, and Draco said he heard you come in way past curfew last night. You really should take better care of yourself. Honestly, snake venom? That can't be safe."

Rigel smiled fondly at Pansy and shrugged noncommittally just because she knew it would annoy the blonde. Pansy just sighed and went back to her breakfast. Rigel told Rookwood, "My dad really likes snakes, believe it or not. He raises them in our courtyard, so I've gotten pretty good at handling snakes in general." Technically all

of that was true, Rigel thought to herself, rather proud at how good she was getting at misdirection.

"Sirius Black, a snake-lover?" Rookwood shook his head wryly, "Well I suppose that explains it, but who could have guessed?"

"One of my father's many goals in life is to continually surprise people," Rigel said, a slight smile on her face as she thought of how true *that* was.

Rookwood was apparently satisfied with her explanations, for he stood and bade her good day, moving to join the other fourth years further down the table.

Rigel gratefully tucked in to her breakfast and listened to Pansy fill her in on the breakfast gossip.

That Friday evening Rigel went to Snape's office to deliver the latest batch of Aurora's Breath. She had taken to just bringing Snape the crates as soon as they were full, so that she didn't end up having to transport so many in one go again. He didn't answer her knock, but the door was slightly ajar so she pushed it open further with her foot and went in, carrying the crate carefully while at the same time trying to see if the Professor was there. She heard his voice, but she couldn't see him right away. After she set the crate down on his desk she looked around and realized that the stretch of wall that was normally blank housed a large fireplace as she had seen it do once before, and sure enough the floo network was activated, as evidenced by the emerald green flames casting eerie shadows around the room.

The head of a mostly bald middle aged wizard with a thin mustache was floating in the hearth, and Professor Snape was kneeling on the stone in front of it, looking not at all happy at what the bald man was telling him.

"You know I would if I could, Snape," the head said earnestly, "But you've cleaned us out. I don't know what the heck you need so much Ginseng for, but you know how hard it is to grow, especially in a northern climate. What did you expect after three months of snatching up every available crop?"

"Surely there is Ginseng somewhere," Snape pressed, "I need it, Horace, you have no inkling of how vitally."

Rigel silently agreed. Ginseng was one of the main ingredients in both Aurora's Breath and Snowhit Draught, due to its incredible nutritional value. If they were running low, things would go downhill very quickly.

"Well you won't find it in England," Horace sighed, "You know I'd never give away business, so if I'm telling you to look to foreign suppliers..."

"You truly don't have any recourse available," Snape finished wearily, "Damn. I don't like working with suppliers I don't know. This... project is too important to blindly trust in the quality of imported ingredients."

"Sorry, Snape," Horace said, "Have you considered using Acai berries? They aren't quite as potent, but the effect is similar."

"I have, but Acai berries cause other complications in the recipe," Snape said.

"Well, you're the Potions Master," Horace said, and Rigel got the impression that if his shoulders were visible they'd be shrugging, "Good luck with whatever you're doing."

"Indeed, Horace," Snape said shortly, "Good day."

The head disappeared and it occurred to Rigel that her presence in the room would now be a bit awkward, but when Snape stood and turned he didn't look at all surprised to see her.

"Mr. Black," Snape acknowledged.

"Hello, sir," Rigel said, not all that apologetically. She and Archie had come to the general conclusion in their youth that one could either feel bad about overhearing something one shouldn't or embrace eavesdropping and all the advantages and disadvantages that came with it.

"Another crate already?" Snape frowned at the Aurora's Breath on his desk for a moment and Rigel quickly reassured him.

"Still under my 25 cauldrons a week, sir."

"Ah," Snape said, looking tired and stressed, "Very well then."

"Sir?" Rigel ventured, "What are we going to do about the Ginseng?"

Snape looked at Rigel seriously, "Pray this sickness does not last much longer, Mr. Black."

"And if it does?" Rigel persisted.

Snape sighed, but took a moment to think seriously about the problem, "I will be honest with you, Mr. Black. We have no Ginseng unless you have any left over from this last batch of Aurora's Breath."

Rigel shook her head ruefully. In truth she had used both what Snape had given her and what she had in her personal kit to finish off the last cauldron.

Snape nodded as if he expected as much, "Then I will attempt to find alternate suppliers. I will have to go in person. I cannot accurately judge the quality of potential ingredients remotely. In the mean time, we will begin using Acai berries as a substitute in both potions. I will give you the revised recipes."

Rigel blinked at him in surprise, "Recipes?"

"Yes," Snape said, looking reluctant but resigned, "While I am gone you will be in charge of producing both potions. I do not know how long it will take for me to find a viable supplier. Ginseng is extraordinarily difficult to grow properly, so I've no doubt I will have to sift through scores of sub-quality crops to find something we can use."

Rigel's eyes widened and she swallowed. That was an awful lot of responsibility to give to a first year.

Snape eyed her knowingly, "It is a lot to ask. Normally, I would find an older student to handle things while I am gone, and indeed the prefects and other professors will likely pick up most of my duties, but I have no time to teach and test another student and you know how to make Aurora's Breath already. I've seen you watching me brew Snowhit as well. You know what both potions should look and feel like, and your magical reserves are deep enough to handle the strain for the days I am gone."

"Can the Hospital Wing afford for our production to be halved?" Rigel asked worriedly.

"It cannot," Snape said, "That is why as of Monday you are excused from all classes and assignments until I return."

Rigel took a deep breath, "What will I tell my classmates?"

"Tell them nothing except that you have a task related to your studies that will take up all of your time," Snape said, "I will speak to Dumbledore this evening, and leave tomorrow morning. If you have anything you need to take care of before you start brewing, I suggest you do so tonight. Snowhit is a demanding potion, more so than Aurora's Breath. I believe you can handle this burden, but only if you do not waste energy doing other things. You will eat three meals a day, you will sleep eight hours a night, you will brew, and you will do nothing else. Is that clear? Pomphrey will check on you periodically, and if she sees you overdoing it you will be forced to stop."

Rigel nodded, "I understand, sir. I won't let you down."

"If I thought for a moment you would, I would not have entrusted this task to you, I assure you," Snape said, "Go and rest up, Mr. Black. I will leave the recipes in Lab One along with the changes necessary to accommodate the Acai berries. The wards will be reset to allow you admittance. Any questions?"

"No, sir," Rigel said grimly, "Good luck, sir."

She left Snape to his planning and headed straight to her dorm room to grab her book bag. She had to finish Flint's assignments and mail them tonight, so that she would not be distracted from brewing while Snape was gone. Rigel wasn't going to mess this up, no matter what.

The weekend passed in a frenzy of brewing. Rigel had often been accused of eating, sleeping and breathing potions, and never had that been truer. She woke and headed straight to Lab One, brewed for two hours, went to breakfast, brewed for eight hours with a short break to eat the lunch Binny brought her, went to dinner, brewed another four hours, showered, and collapsed on her bed until she woke to her alarm and repeated the cycle.

The brewing was hard. She kept up a cauldron each of Snowhit and Aurora's Breath constantly, and by dinnertime each day she could actually feel her magical core getting tired. She wondered if this was how potion-makers were supposed to feel when imbuing high-level potions. It was a bit disconcerting to feel the loss of magical energy; she felt somehow vulnerable. She went to bed each day feeling pretty much tapped out, and knew that if she hadn't been getting a full night's sleep and three meals a day like Snape ordered her magic would be hard pressed to recover by the time she started brewing again each morning. Rigel knew that she was working just barely under her limit, and didn't know how long she would be able to keep it up before she had to cut brewing back to twelve or even ten hours a day. The Snowhit Draught in particular was noticeably

more draining than the Aurora's Breath, especially since it required extra magic to force the Acai berries to substitute relatively seamlessly for the Ginseng berries.

Her mind was entirely encompassed by her task, though she vaguely noticed the concerned looks she was getting from her friends. It wasn't until Tuesday evening as she tiredly moved toward her bed once more that one of her friends decided enough was enough.

"Rigel," Draco pulled her attention away from her welcoming pillow with a hand on her shoulder, "Rigel, don't go to sleep just yet, I need to talk to you."

Rigel blinked tiredly at her blonde friend, and turned to face him, sitting down on the edge of her bed to rest her feet, which ached from standing all day for the fourth day in a row, and looking up at him. "Okay," she yawned, "What's up, Draco?"

"Well that's what I want to know," Draco said, frowning down at her, "You've been like a ghost for days, and Pansy is really worried."

Rigel smiled slightly at that, raising an eyebrow.

"Well, *fine*, I'm worried too you prat," Draco rolled his eyes, "Because no school project is worth this. You work yourself into exhaustion every night, then get up and do it again. It isn't healthy, and the more tired you are, the more likely you are to catch this sickness when your immune system is weak. You need to take it easy."

"I can't, Draco," Rigel told him tiredly, "I'm sorry, and I know you're worried, but believe me when I say I have to do my best on this. I won't get sick, I promise. When Snape comes back I can take a break, but right now-"

She broke off, staring in confusion that rapidly turned to surprise as Draco's eyes grew unfocused before rolling back into his head. Her friend collapsed like a boneless doll, and Rigel dove off of her bed

instinctively to stop his head from hitting the corner of the bedside table.

She knelt with mounting horror, Draco's head still cradled in one of her hands, the other going to his shoulder to shake him first gently, then with increasing urgency, "Draco? Draco! Wake up, *get up*, Draco." She shook her head wildly, "Oh, no, no, please no." But Draco didn't answer, didn't twitch, didn't wake. He slumped awkwardly on the floor, unresponsive and rapidly growing paler. Rigel jumped up, no longer tired in the slightest, and ran out to the common room as fast as she could.

She skidded to a stop in front of Salazar Slytherin's portrait and gasped out, "Salazar, Salazar, get Snape. I need Snape."

The portrait looked concernedly down at her, "I'm sorry child, but Professor Snape is still absent from the school."

Rigel groaned, she knew that, damn it. *Think*, she scolded herself, *Draco needs to get to the Hospital Wing. But I can't carry him there, and I don't know how magic interacts with the sickness.*

She looked wildly around the common room, and spotted a familiar face watching her curiously from a low-backed chair nearby.

"Flint!" she called, relief evident in her voice. She could trust Flint with Draco. She ran over to him, panting, "Flint, I need your help. Draco's collapsed, and he has to go to the Hospital Wing, and Snape's gone, so you have to carry him-"

"Slow down, Black," Flint snapped, "Get a hold of yourself."

Rigel gulped down air as quietly as she could and waited for the upperclassman to do something.

"Now, Malfoy collapsed. It's okay, he's not in immediate danger," Flint said, oddly soothing, "Did he fall unconscious in your dorm room?"

"Yes," Rigel yes quickly, feeling a bit calmer now that Flint was taking charge.

"Then I can't go collect him, and neither can any of the other upperclassman. Only first-years can get into the first-year hallway," he said plainly.

Rigel cursed at herself, she had known that too, but had forgotten in her panic. Panicking wasn't helping. She had to think.

"Crabbe and Goyle are both sick," Rigel said, frowning unhappily, "I don't know where Blaise is and Pansy won't be able to lift Draco either."

"Then you'll have to do it," Flint said obviously.

Rigel groaned, "I can't, I'm-" she broke off to take a huge steadying breath before she said something she'd regret, "I don't have the strength."

"You just have to carry him as far as the common room," Flint said flatly, towing Rigel firmly across the common room and pushing her toward the first-year dorms, "Do you want to help Malfoy?"

Rigel nodded.

"Then go help him," Flint said.

Rigel nodded again and hurried back down the hallway to her dorm room. *It would have to be the last one in the hall*, she thought disgustedly and she propped open the door with someone's shoe and went to where Draco's prone form was still lying awkwardly on the ground. Somehow, she hoped Draco never found out she'd left him on the floor for a good few minutes while she panicked, as his Malfoy dignity probably wouldn't survive it.

Rigel bent and lifted one of Draco's arms around her shoulders, trying to get enough leverage to haul her friend up off the ground.

The angle was awkward and Draco was dead weight, no matter that he really wasn't much bigger than she was. He was denser because of the muscle he'd put on under Flint's Quidditch regimen. Rigel's arms were tired from stirring all day and her sore feet ached in protest and she dug them into the carpet and strained upwards against their combined gravity. She barely got them upright when she went staggering sideways into Draco's bed and accidentally dropped her unconscious friend down onto it when her arms gave out. She stared down at the now-disheveled blonde hopelessly while she caught her breath.

I can't do this, she thought, her frustration mounting, I'm just a weak little girl with no upper-body strength. If only I was stronger. If only I really was a boy. If Archie were here, he could do it.

She didn't know if it was her imagination, but she thought Draco looked flushed. The fever was starting and there was nothing she could do to help him.

No, she shook her head, despair is what won't help Draco. If I can't carry him with my arms, I have to carry him some other way.

With renewed determination, Rigel sat on the edge of Draco's bed and hauled his torso up so that his arms went around her neck. With a little maneuvering, she managed to get most of his weight on her back and stood carefully, gripping his upper arms and bent nearly double to keep her friend from slipping off onto the floor again. Slowly, with crab-like steps, Rigel carried Draco across the room, out the door, and down the hallway. She had stop and lean against the walls several times, but she eventually managed to make it to the end of the hallway where Flint immediately lifted Draco from her back and onto his shoulder in a muggle fireman's lift.

Rigel panted, hands on her knees, and Flint clapped her on the back bracingly.

"Well done, Black," he said, "I'll take him from here."

Rigel took a halting step after Flint as the upperclassman headed toward the common room entrance with his burden, but he waved her off.

"There's nothing more you can do, kid," he said firmly, "They won't let you in the Quarantine. Just go to sleep now, and deal with the rest of it tomorrow."

Rigel felt all the energy drain out of her once more, and realized the adrenaline from watching Draco collapse was probably wearing off. She thought about waking Pansy and telling her about Draco, but couldn't bring herself to do it. *Let her get one more night of sleep*, she thought, *Flint's right, there's nothing we can do tonight*. But tomorrow, when her magic and strength was recovered once more, Rigel would find a way to see Draco somehow.

She knew, logically, that Draco was going to be fine. She knew, objectively, that Pomphrey would take good care of him and that the sickness wasn't even meant to be fatal. But somehow, she had a really bad feeling in the pit of her stomach that had nothing to do with rational thinking.

[end of chapter nineteen].

Chapter 20

A/N: Warning: Lots of Malfoy. Also: I don't own Harry Potter or Alanna the Lioness.

A/N2: So this past chapter I had some of the most amazing reviews I've ever had. I hope I replied to each of you in a pm by this evening, but here's the list of people (or aliens, no judgment) I'd like to publicly thank: J.F.C., Vaughn Tyler, Giselle Pink, The Chaos Legionnaire, PrincessKitty25, zeichnerinaga, Frecklefreak, TearfullPixie, Neidan, jaz7, BaltaineShadow, xxGrAcExx, Katarinea, and Alkata. And to the anonymous reviewer: Nyctalops: thank you! I'm really glad the OC's work for you.

A/N3 : Whew. Longest. Chapter. Ever. I thought about breaking this up, but I couldn't bear to leave you with another cliffhanger, so here it is, all rolled up into one (mostly) neat little package. Enjoy.

The Pureblood Pretense:

Chapter 20:

Rigel woke the next morning and spent an entire minute staring up at the delicate hangings above her four-poster bed, wondering why she felt so sick to her stomach, before she remembered what had happened the night before.

Draco is in Quarantine.

Rigel was sorely tempted to close her eyes once more and go back to sleep. If she wished last night had all been a dream hard enough, surely it would become true. Wasn't that how magic worked? Rolling her eyes at her own thoughts, Rigel got out of bed and slipped on her shoes, moving quietly as if she still had roommates left to disturb and determinately not looking around the empty dorm room as she left.

She went straight to Lab One and brewed for two hours. Then she stored the flasks of Snowhit Draught and Aurora's Breath in their respective crates and locked up the lab behind her. She hadn't strictly speaking needed to brew for two hours before breakfast. Rigel was ahead in her production levels and could afford to take a couple of hours off, but to be brutally honest she was avoiding Pansy. Their other best friend would be devastated that Draco had fallen ill, and with their Head of House gone ingredient hunting Rigel didn't know who would be responsible for telling Pansy what had happened. If it were up to her, she would avoid it as long as she could, but Pansy would find out sooner or later, and Rigel knew despite her unwillingness to cause Pansy any pain that it would be better coming from her.

Because Rigel hadn't had time for their morning walks in a long while, Pansy had taken to sleeping in until just before breakfast started. Without Millicent there to wake her up either, Pansy just barely got to breakfast on time now a days, so Rigel wasn't surprised to hear a sleepy voice answer when she knocked on Pansy's dorm room door.

"Yes? Who is it?" Pansy called drowsily. She sounded exhausted, and Rigel winced, thinking perhaps she should have let her blonde friend sleep a little longer. But no, better that Pansy know before breakfast, so she could brace herself for the flood of commiseration she would likely receive from her upperclassman acquaintances. Pansy had many friends that were not yet affected by the sickness spreading throughout the school, and everyone would want to at least appear sympathetic in the wake of the Malfoy scion falling prey to the sickness.

"It's me, Pan," Rigel said, pitching her voice softly through the door.

"Rigel?" shuffling noises came from behind the door before the knob turned and it cracked open slightly, allowing one bright blue eye to peer through the gap at her. The eye blinked, and Pansy said, "Give me just a moment, okay?"

"Certainly," Rigel said, hiding a smile at the glimpse of mussed blonde hair she'd caught before Pansy had hastily closed the door once more. Even after seven months of friendship, she had yet to see Pansy at any state less than total perfection, unless one counted the time Pansy had cried in her arms after the Lee Jordan incident, but even then her tears had been hidden in Rigel's robes and her hair a study in flawlessness. Rigel regretted that Pansy might never feel comfortable enough proprietarily speaking to just hang out in her pajamas like Rigel and Archie often did together, but she supposed it was only fair that she lose some degree of familiarity with her female friend in exchange for lying to said friend about her gender. She certainly made up for it with the familiarity she now had with her male roommates. Thankfully Draco wasn't the type of kid to lounge about with no shirt on, but Theo had no such qualms. Rigel was thoroughly disenchanted with the male form at this point, or at least the eleven-year-old version.

Rigel took a seat on a couch by one of the fires to wait, and soon enough Pansy came striding out of her dorm with fresh robes and a determined look on her recently washed face.

"What is it, Rigel?" Pansy asked briskly as she sat next to her, "You haven't had time to catch up for months, so if you're taking time to talk to me now, there must be something going on."

Rigel winced, and opened her mouth to apologize, but Pansy cut her off firmly.

"I don't blame you, Rigel. I know that whatever you are doing is important, or you wouldn't spend so much time and energy doing it. Draco and I simply worry about you, that's all," Pansy smiled in a way that was all too knowing, "You have a tendency to keep things all to yourself for one reason or another, and while as a Slytherin I respect you for that, as a friend it's hard to help you when you do that."

"You don't have to help me with anything," Rigel said automatically.

"It's not a matter of 'have to' or 'need to' Rigel," Pansy said, "But what did you need to talk to me about?"

Rigel swallowed, remembering her original purpose in seeking Pansy out with a clenching feeling in her gut. "Pan, it's Draco," she said, but her throat stuck on the next words and she shook her head mutely while Pansy closed her eyes with an expression that looked trapped.

"The sickness," Pansy said softly, resolutely, "We knew it was coming, though I admit I had thought it would get me first."

"Pan?" Rigel looked questioningly into her eyes as if she could see whether the sickness was lurking like a shadow behind them, but all she saw was the same determination that Pansy had already shown that morning.

"Rigel, you and Blaise and I are the only first years unaffected in the whole school," Pansy said gently, as if she were the one who had come to break the bad news, "That Gryffindor first-year Weasley was taken to Quarantine yesterday, and he was the last of the first years from other Houses. They cancelled first year classes days ago because there was just no one left to take them really, but I guess you haven't been to class in a while anyway..."

She trailed off and Rigel felt like a complete prat for missing so much of what was happening to her own year-mates. Next year would be different, she promised herself. She would pay more attention to her friends, and she would be there for them instead of the other way around, but Merlin please let her just get through *this* year with all of her friends in one piece.

"Draco fell ill late last night," Rigel said finally, thinking she owed Pansy at least that much of an explanation, "It was in our dorm room, and Flint helped get him to the Hospital Wing. He seemed fine before he..."

"They all do," Pansy said, patting Rigel's arm with no small amount of pity. Somehow this conversation had not gone as Rigel had expected it to, but she couldn't help but be grateful. She really *really* hadn't wanted to see Pansy upset. *Perhaps that's why pureblooded women are so calm and collected all the time*, Rigel mused thoughtfully, *because they know that the rest of us couldn't handle their tears.*

Rigel clasped Pansy's hand in a way that was more awkward than it was comforting, and Pansy smiled a bit ruefully at the gesture, but squeezed back nonetheless.

"Thanks, Rigel," she said seriously, "I would not have wanted to find this out over breakfast, no matter how prepared I believed myself to be."

"Of course," Rigel said, "I wish I could do more. I'm so sorry I haven't been there for you and Draco lately, Pan. I promise what I'm doing is important."

"You're brewing for Professor Snape, now that he's gone," she said knowingly, "Aren't you?"

Rigel fidgeted a bit, "I'm really not supposed to say, Pan."

"I understand," Pansy said gently, "Just like I understand that in your own way you're doing all you can for Draco, and for all those other kids too. When I get sick, I want you to promise me-"

"Pan, don't say-"

"*Promise me*," Pansy stressed resolutely, "That you won't stop what you're doing. Don't pause to worry about me and don't let it distract you from helping Professor Snape all you can."

"... I promise," Rigel said, meeting Pansy's resolute eyes with determination of her own, "But Pan, I might get sick before you do."

Pansy smiled in a way that seemed much too wise for her age, "Something tells me you won't, Rigel, though I don't know what. I guess I just can't imagine you sick."

"I couldn't imagine Draco sick yesterday," Rigel said, a bit morosely.

"Draco?" Pansy smiled, though it was somewhat strained, "You mean you can't see him laid up in a bed of silk, a damp Egyptian cotton towel across his aristocratic brow, dozens of servants attending to his every muffled moue of discontent? I certainly could."

Rigel felt a smile tug at her lips and nodded with slow agreement. She could sort of see Draco draped dramatically in a languid posture, like a desert queen wilting gently under the rays of the sun. Then she remembered the way he'd collapsed like a stringless puppet the night before and she stopped smiling. There was nothing delicate or romantic about the way Draco had fallen sick. It had been purely terrifying.

"Come on, Rigel," Pansy said, standing and tugging Rigel's arm up with her, "Let's get to breakfast. Everything seems better after a good pot of tea."

Rigel rose and moved her arm so that she was escorting Pansy more than she was being dragged along by her, and they headed up to breakfast alone.

When they got to the Slytherin table, they sat as close as they could to what was left of the second year students, so that the loss of their own year-mates was not felt quite so obviously. Halfway through Pansy's second cup of tea, the post arrived, and Pansy put down her teacup with a sigh upon receiving hers.

"Oh, she *didn't*," Pansy muttered darkly, and Rigel looked up from the letter Sirius had sent her to see what had her friend agitated, "That Skeeter woman doesn't know when to leave well enough alone." Pansy was staring at a copy of the Daily Prophet with an icy scowl, and Rigel slid closer to get a look at the headline.

MYSTERIOUS MAGICAL MALADY STRIKES HOGWARTS

Rigel felt like cursing, but settled for a deep frown instead. So the news was out. She supposed Dumbledore couldn't have kept it quiet forever, but Rigel dreaded the repercussions that would come with such publicity. If the Cow Party wanted bad press for Dumbledore's faction, they couldn't do better than Skeeter. Resigned, Rigel began reading over Pansy's right shoulder, which was stiff with distaste.

Rita Skeeter, special correspondent for the Daily Prophet, writes to inform the public of the dangerous secret currently being kept from concerned parents around the country. Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry had been recently struck with an unknown and highly contagious magical disease, which has infiltrated the population and already infected upwards of 50 school children with its strange and baffling symptoms.

This disease, a here-to-fore unknown in the magical medical community, exhibits itself through the onset of a sudden and as far as this reporter has discovered irreversible magical coma. Despite the Quarantine that was reportedly enacted immediately following the outbreak of this epidemic, the disease continues to spread unchecked through the school, particularly affecting the youngest of Hogwarts' illustrious student body. The disease does not discriminate for House or family affiliation; scions of the light and dark both have been struck down by this viscous illness.

Just last night, Mr. Draco Malfoy fell to the sickness, an event that both shocked and disturbed the young scion's well-known parents, Mr. Lucius Malfoy and Mrs. Narcissa Malfoy-nee-Black. This reporter was graciously allowed a few moments of Mr. Malfoy's time, which she employed industriously on behalf of the deserving public, that her readers may know what exactly is going on at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

When asked whether or not Mr. Malfoy, as both a parent and a member of the Board of Governors was aware of this illness prior to his Heir's contracting of it, Mr. Malfoy replied, "I regret to say that

Headmaster Dumbledore saw no need to appraise either the parents or the members of the Board of Trustees of the situation at Hogwarts. To find out that not only has my son taken ill to a potentially lethal disease, but that he was the not the first, the second, but the fiftieth student to succumb to the illness, was of course a cause of deep concern for my wife and I. I sincerely hope that Dumbledore knows just what it is he is doing, as it does not seem to involve adhering to basic protocol for dealing with epidemics of this proportion."

This reporter certainly agrees with Mr. Malfoy's keen insight into the situation. What exactly is going on at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry? How is it possible that not until roughly 1/7 of the population lay in magical comas did the general public learn of such a risk to their children and Heirs? According to what this reporter has gleaned, Hogwarts has not even called for additional medical staff, though the Hospital Wing must have reached capacity some months ago. Is this truly the best environment to be entrusting the future of the magical world?

Well, it is too late to make that call, thanks to Headmaster Dumbledore. St. Mungo's has officially declared Hogwarts a general Quarantine Zone in an effort to prevent the disease from spreading to the rest of our world. What this means, dear readers, is that at this stage in the development of the epidemic, parents cannot pull their children out of school even if they want to.

" I know it seems harsh," one anonymous Healer at St. Mungo's said, "But since the Quarantine within the school doesn't seem to be making a difference, the only option is to keep everyone who's in the school, well, in the school. Honestly, it's quite a surprise that it hasn't spread to the general population yet, and until we know how to cure the disease, we'd like to keep it that way."

This reporter asked the Healer if the reason there had been no progress made on curing the disease was due to the elaborate cover up at Hogwarts, which prevented Healers from knowing and therefore studying the disease for several months.

" Well, not really," the Healer answered, "True we just learned of the illness a few hours ago, but Madam Pomphrey is truly a credit to her profession. We've got all her notes, and the illness seems extremely straight forward, while at the same time giving no clues as to how to cure it. Days or months won't make much difference with a disease like this. You either know how to cure it or you don't, and studying it won't help. It's not like a puzzle, you know, with a right answer if you just think about it hard enough."

This reporter was not convinced, so she asked the Healer what was being done to prevent the disease from picking off helpless students one by one. The Healer shrugged, and said, "Until the disease gives us another clue, there isn't much we can do. Now don't look at me like that. It's not as though these children are in any real danger at the moment. Magical sleeps can be kept up pretty much indefinitely with the right potions, you know. All we can do at the moment is wait, and hope a solution presents itself soon."

While the parents and friends of all those bright young pureblooded children 'wait' for a solution, there are many who do not pass the time idly. Instead, they question: why is this sickness only coming to light now, months after the initial outbreak of the illness? What does this epidemic mean for the students at Hogwarts and their families? Will there be any lasting effects? Could The Hogwarts Malady have been prevented in some way or perhaps cured faster if there had been information available from the start? Where is Dumbledore leading the future of the Wizarding World, which has until now been left so trustingly in the bastion of the Light's wizened hands?

For more on the standard protocol for magical epidemics, see page 3

For more on the precedents for magical comas, including the famous cases of Snow White and Aurora aka Sleeping Beauty, see page 4

For information on where to send a letter of complaint concerning Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, see page 5

Rigel sighed as she moved away from the paper in favor of concentrating on her breakfast once more. She felt a bit sick to her stomach after reading Skeeter's article, but knew that her body needed food in order to fuel her magical core with enough energy to get through another day of brewing.

Pansy huffed indignantly as she shoved the paper away from her plate, "I can't believe she'd just splatter the news of Draco's illness all over the front page like that. As if the Malfoy's really want people knowing their son and Heir is sick. Just think of the repercussions for the families of the students at Hogwarts now. They'll seem weak, unable to protect their Heirs, and the Malfoy's especially will lose a lot of political clout for this; the Malfoy motto is 'blood before honor' for Merlin's sake. How will it look if people think they can't take care of their own?"

Pansy continued to mutter along in this vein for some time, and Rigel quietly let her rant. In truth, the Malfoy's probably would lose a bit of political power until it became clear that Draco would be fine, but after that Rigel thought they would return to their usual state of unofficial royalty in the wizarding world. Rigel also thought Mr. Malfoy's interview with Skeeter was rather obvious in the way it sought to undermine the Headmaster, but she supposed she shouldn't be too surprised. After all, Mr. Malfoy was high in the Cow Party, so if they were indeed responsible for the illness then it stood to reason that Mr. Malfoy was in on the plan, and had been ready to slip the information to Skeeter as soon as he got the chance-which meant he knew that his son would likely catch the illness and was therefore fairly confident in the essentially harmless nature of the sickness.

If anything, Rigel actually felt better after thinking about that. If Malfoy was confident enough to allow his son to be used in the political gambit, then surely the illness was not actually harming any of the students after it locked away their minds. Though the true Malfoy motto was something like 'purity always conquers' Pansy had been right to say that the motto everyone remembered the Malfoy's

by was 'blood before honor' which basically amounted to blood before *anything*, as Malfoy's took honor very seriously. So if Mr. Malfoy let his own blood, his Heir, contract this sickness, then Rigel didn't need to worry about her friends too much in the long run. As long as she kept making Potions, nothing truly terrible would befall them.

Her heart more at ease than it had been in a long while, Rigel excused herself from the breakfast table and went to take the latest batch of Potions to the Hospital Wing.

The Hospital Wing was shielded from casual approach by line in the shape of a semi-circle gouged deep into the stone corridor in front of the big double door entrance to the Wing. It was much like an age line or any other kind of semi-permanent ward, but instead of keeping out people of a certain age, it kept out anyone not escorted in by a witch or wizard with a Healer's Badge. When Rigel approached the line, it flared blue in warning and she tapped her toe against the edge of the line, which hardened like a wall as she came into contact with it, and sent a faint bell-like tone reverberating down the corridor.

A few moments later, Pomphrey rushed out, looking harried, and said, "Mr. Black, good, good, just pass those through to me, won't you?" She held out her hand from her side of the Quarantine line, which allowed solid objects through if said objects were handed to a Badge-wearing medi-staff, but Rigel hesitated.

"I was actually hoping I could come in today, Madam Pomphrey," she said carefully.

The Healer sighed in a put upon way, "You can't, Mr. Black, no one can. You know that. Now give me the Potions, I've had a busy morning what with every Healer in the country trying to floo in and find out what's going on thanks to that Skeeter woman's article."

"Please, Madam Pomphrey," Rigel tried again, turning on the kicked puppy look for extra swaying power, "Draco's one of my best friends,

so surely if the disease passes mind to mind I've already caught it and just haven't shown the symptoms yet. Our mental paths are too familiar for me to not have been infected by now. I just want to see him for a few minutes. I won't be in the way."

The nurse pursed her lips, saying, "Regardless of the likelihood that you are already at risk, I really don't think it's a good idea to let what is at present our only Potions maker into the Quarantine area, especially as your age puts you most at risk."

"I understand that, Madam Pomphrey," Rigel said earnestly, "But Professor Snape will be back soon to take over the Potion making, and we've already enough to last us more than two whole weeks even at the rate the sickness is spreading now, so it won't really cause too much trouble if I fall sick, especially since I'm bound to succumb soon anyway with my friends all sick."

Rigel chose not to mention that she really hadn't been spending enough time with her friends lately to be sure she'd been exposed to the illness. She knew it was selfish to put herself at risk to see Draco, but she *had* been working hard enough that if she fell sick before Snape returned the Hospital Wing would still be well-stocked.

"Still," Pomphrey said, frowning, "I'm not sure Professor Snape would agree..."

"It's just so difficult making all these potions without really seeing what they're for, ma'am," Rigel said, sighing slightly for effect, "I think if I could see my friends I would understand better, and it would seem more real to me, so that I know what I'm doing is important and I can continue with renewed determination in my heart."

Rigel knew she'd laid it on too thick when Pomphrey rolled her eyes toward the ceiling and sighed, "It's like Sirius Black all over again." Rigel opened her mouth to try another tact, but Madam Pomphrey held up a hand, "Fine, fine, I know how you Marauder boys can be, and if I don't let you in you'll likely find some extremely dangerous and irresponsible way to sneak your way in. Don't disturb any of the

patients, and for Merlin's sake don't tell Severus about this." She reached through the Quarantine and pulled Rigel through by her shoulder, steering her through the big doors and into the Hospital Wing proper, which looked like it had been expanded five times over. The inside was a positively cavernous expanse of pristine white, with rows of beds filling up the elongated space industriously. There must have been about eighty beds lined up at least, though only a bit over half of them were occupied.

The eerie part was that the entire place was completely silent save for Madam Pomphrey's heels clicking against the white tiles and the potions in Rigel's arms clinking together gently as she carried the crates along after the Nurse. Though there were fifty children lying prone on beds throughout the room, none of them stirred as they passed. None of them even snored, though Rigel knew from listening to Zabini complain about it that either Crabbe or Goyle must have snored when sleeping naturally. Pomphrey stopped in front of a half-filled row of beds and took the potion crates from Rigel's arms.

"Mr. Malfoy is in the second to last occupied bed in this row," the nurse said briskly, "You have ten minutes, and then you should leave to reduce the risk of the sickness spreading to you."

"Thank you, Madam Pomphrey," Rigel said before moving quickly down the row of sleeping students. She recognized both Neville and Ron as she passed them, but she didn't pause until she reached the second to last student's bed. Rigel was somewhat ashamed to see that the last kid in the row was Blaise Zabini, who she had noticed vaguely was absent from breakfast, but whom she had not spared much thought on apart from that. She turned her eyes back to Draco, however, whose pale complexion looked washed out and sickly underneath the harsh infirmary light, and moved closer so that she could put her fingers to Draco's neck carefully.

The steady pulse beneath the pads of her fingers relaxed a knot of tension in her gut she hadn't realized was there until it was gone. Draco was fine, and he would remain so, she told herself, so the sourceless dark feeling she had obviously didn't mean anything. The

proof was right beneath her fingers. She moved her hand up to brush back a bit of white-blond hair from her friend's face, wondering morosely how long it would be before she was looking at Pansy in the same way. For whatever Rigel had told her other friend, she knew Pansy was probably right. Rigel was better protected thanks to her rudimentary Occlumency than Pansy was, and Pansy had spent more time with Draco, Blaise, Millicent, and Theo, all of whom had already fallen ill, than Rigel had in the past months.

"It's going to be okay," Rigel told Draco quietly, "Professor Snape and I won't let anything happen to you, and when you wake up I'll tease you something terrible for fainting on me. And you'll say 'Malfoy's don't faint' and Pansy will get that look on her face when she wants to roll her eyes but is too sophisticated to do so, and everything will be normal again. I promise."

At a stern look from Madam Pomphrey from across the room, Rigel patted Draco's head one last time and left the Hospital Wing to continue brewing.

Sometime in the afternoon, hours after Rigel had finished the lunch Binny brought her, one of the blank walls in Lab One shimmered for a distracting moment and then abruptly shifted until it held a modest fireplace. As Rigel asked her magic to put a Stasis Charm on her two caldrons, green flames sprung up in the fireplace and a chiming noise began echoing around the room. Rigel frowned for a moment, unsure how one went about answering a floo call in Snape's Labs. At Godric's Hollow, one just had to approach the fireplace, so Rigel stepped forward until she was bathed in the green light coming off the flames and sure enough the chiming stopped and a familiar head appeared in the fireplace.

"Hello, sir," Rigel said, crouching down so that she could meet his sharp gaze levelly.

"Mr. Black," Professor Snape said in his clipped voice, appearing to be just as larger than life as a floating head as he was in person,

"Good. I don't have much time before I have to meet with the next potential merchant. Progress report?"

"Potions wise, the Hospital Wing is currently stocked three weeks in advance," Rigel said, "The Acai substitution is working well."

"Are you overtaxing yourself?" Snape asked, eyeing Rigel knowingly.

"No, sir," Rigel said, "The Acai requires a bit more magic be imbued than the Ginseng does, but it's nothing I can't handle. I saw Madam Pomphrey just this morning, and she had no complaints regarding my health."

"Very well," Snape said, "I have asked my London supplier to send more Acai to you, so expect the shipment tomorrow morning."

Rigel frowned. More Acai meant there was no Ginseng on the way. "No luck with foreign suppliers, Professor?" she asked.

"None," Snape said curtly, and Rigel could see the lines of frustration and a hint of some darker emotion playing about his face, "Apparently the European suppliers have all experienced an unexpected demand of Ginseng in the past month. They are to a one drained dry of the ingredient."

Rigel's eyes widened, "The sickness has spread to Europe? Why haven't we heard?"

"It hasn't," Snape said darkly, "None of the European suppliers knows why their Ginseng was bought up or even who did the purchasing."

"Someone is cornering the market?" Rigel said incredulously. What were the odds that the very ingredient they needed in both of the potions vital to the continued health of the students was inexplicably removed from public trade at that exact moment?

"So it would appear," Snape said, scowling, "Since no one seems able to contact this mysterious buyer, I must look elsewhere. I am going East to continue searching, and will likely be out of touch for the next week. The wizards in those parts use other means of travel, so the floo system is spotty at best. If an emergency arises, send me an owl, but don't expect a reply for a couple of days. If there is nothing else?"

He waited expectantly and Rigel hesitated. Draco was Snape's godson, so the Professor would likely want to know that he'd fallen ill, but on the other hand, did Rigel really want to distract the Professor with news he could do nothing about while Snape was already doing something so important?

"Nothing that will not keep," Rigel said, deciding it best to tell Snape about Draco when he returned.

"In that case I will see you when I return. Rest, eat, and for Merlin's sake try not to fall ill," Snape said.

Rigel barely had time to say, "Good luck, sir," before Snape's head had disappeared and the green flames had extinguished themselves.

[HpHpHp}

When Rigel returned to the Hospital Wing with another couple of crates that evening, it was to the sound of tense voices emanating through the Hospital Wing doors, which had not been closed all the way after whoever had last gone through them. Tapping her foot at the Quarantine ward, Rigel was surprised to see that her foot went through it instead of hitting against it. She tentatively stepped over the Quarantine line, realizing that it must still recognize her as someone admitted by a Healer and therefore allowed to be there. She made a mental note to look up how such a ward would work

later, and used her shoulder to push the half-open door back enough to let her through.

None of the three people conversing on the other side of the Hospital Wing noticed her as she came in with her potion crates. Rigel, used to adults ignoring her by now and never one to pass up an opportunity for eavesdropping, carried the crates over to the staging tables in the middle of the infirmary and began unloading them quietly, Snowhit on one table and Aurora's Breath on the other. The voices carried over to her as she worked, and she realized after a moment that she recognized all three.

"... severe reaction to both of the necessary Potions. I didn't administer them until just a few hours ago, as it takes about half a day for the unconscious processes to stop working on their own after the sickness takes hold in a child, but only ten minutes later his body rejected both potions completely. As of yet, I have not determined what is causing this reaction, as there is nothing in his file that would indicate an allergy to one of the ingredients, let alone an ingredient in each of the potions." That one was Madam Pomphrey, and she sounded both defensive and very concerned.

The next voice took her a moment to place, only because she was not expecting to hear it there. "Of course there is nothing in his file, as my son is *not allergic* to anything in either of those potions. Clearly this reaction is a result of something else." It was Lucius Malfoy. Rigel turned her head to stare in alarm at the three adults, peering against the bright, almost blindingly white light in the Wing. Madam Pomphrey was speaking to Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy, who were standing with stiff shoulders and even stiffer expressions in similarly undecorated dark grey robes. Rigel could hear her breathing grow louder in her ears as she realized that if Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy were there it meant that the boy they were talking about was Draco.

"What's wrong with Draco?" Rigel blurted, causing the three older witches and wizard to turn and stare at her with surprised affront at the unexpected interruption.

"Mr. Black," Lucius Malfoy spoke in a clipped tone that did nothing to hide his obvious ire. Rigel took in the hard lines around the elder Malfoy's mouth and thought he looked nothing like he'd come across in Skeeter's article that morning. This was not the face of a man who knew his son to be free from immediate danger. Malfoy looked like a father barely restraining his worry and anger, and Rigel found that she did not like the look on him at all, especially if it meant there really was something wrong with Draco.

"What brings you here, Mr. Black?" Narcissa asked with an expression that seemed cold and blank until Rigel caught the hint of fear that laced her eyes in their too-wide irises and erratically fluttering lashes.

"Just dropping off the latest batch of potions, Mrs. Malfoy," Rigel said, "Is Draco okay?"

"He reacted badly to both Snowhit and Aurora's Breath, the two potions necessary to sustain the coma harmlessly," Narcissa told her, as if she was repeating something she'd read in a textbook, "It has not yet been determined why."

"But Draco needs those Potions," Rigel said blankly, unable to fully process what she was hearing, "They're all that keeps his body running healthily while his mind is locked away."

"We are aware of that, Mr. Black," Malfoy Sr. bit out through gritted teeth. Rigel winced. Of course they were aware of it. But this was bad. If Draco didn't get those potions he wouldn't last a week in the magical coma.

"Yes, sir," Rigel said, trying to be respectful of their obvious worry for their son but at the same time too worried herself for her friend not to keep talking, "Can you give me a list of his allergies? I made the potions, so I know exactly what ingredients are in each. I could tell you what he might be allergic to in each one."

The Malfoy's looked at Rigel with something that might have been incredulity.

" *You* are the one brewing the potions for these students?" Mr. Malfoy asked, the tone of his voice suggesting without saying that perhaps her presence explained some things.

Insulted that Malfoy thought she had made a mistake with the potions and thereby caused Draco's bad reaction, Rigel bit back a hot retort. She took a breath, telling herself that Malfoy knew little to nothing of her potions skills and that he was just a man worried about his son, as anyone in his position would be.

"I am," Rigel said when her voice was even enough, "Professor Snape is currently out of the country, so I assumed responsibility for brewing Snowhit Draught and Aurora's Breath while the Professor is away."

Narcissa put a hand gently on her husband's arm and spoke before he could, "No one else has had such a reaction to the potions?" At Madam Pomphrey's nod of confirmation, Narcissa went on, "Then the problem is still in Draco's reaction to the potions specifically. If Mr. Black knows how the potions were made, then perhaps he can enlighten us as to the problem."

Madam Pomphrey thrust a piece of paper she'd pulled from a manila folder at Rigel, saying, "This is Draco Malfoy's allergy listing."

Rigel reached to take it, but Mr. Malfoy cut in. "Don't bother," he said, pulling out a different sheet of paper from inside his robes and handing that instead to Rigel, "That list is incomplete. Take this."

Madam Pomphrey looked ready to launch into a tirade about irresponsible parents who didn't list their children's allergies completely for the school's files, but Narcissa interjected gently, "Draco has a delicate constitution. He gets that from me," and here she looked so guilty and regretful that even Madam Pomphrey softened a bit, "We aren't sure ourselves what all he is allergic to,

and we thought a complete list would be too much hassle for a school record."

Translation: we didn't want to so openly state all of our Heir's weaknesses in case anyone wanted to use that information to harm him, Rigel thought cynically. She could understand where they were coming from; the Malfoy's had a lot of enemies. Madam Pomphrey had a point too, however. It was hard to expect the Healers to anticipate your child's allergies if you hadn't informed the Healers of them.

"In any case," Malfoy Sr. said sternly, "All of Draco's allergies to ingredients or substances used in life-saving potions were included. Severus himself went over the list, and Draco is not allergic to *anything* in Snowhit or Aurora's Breath."

"Clearly he is allergic to something," Madam Pomphrey said waspishly, apparently at the end of her patience, "And until we figure out what it is, I can't administer those potions in good faith."

"Can't you just keep him under the charms?" Narcissa asked anxiously.

"Assisted living spells can only work for so long before the body needs to do the work itself," Pomphrey said tiredly, "I can keep Draco's lungs breathing and his heart pumping for three days at the most on those spells. After that, a wizard's magical core begins to reject the spells, sensing that the body itself is no longer active, and automatically detaching itself from the wizard's body to rejoin the wild magic of the earth. The potions are the only long-term solution we have at present, as they mimic the signals the brain would usually send to the body to continue performing natural processes. Even though we could keep him technically nourished intravenously, Draco's magic wouldn't recognize him as alive with the Charms doing the breathing and blood-pumping for him."

Three days. Rigel shook her head to clear out the fog that was rising up behind her eyes at that thought. No, she had to concentrate. All

was not lost.

"We don't need three days," Rigel said firmly, breaking through the ominous atmosphere left in the wake of Pomphrey's words. "As soon as we know what Draco's reacting to, we can work around the ingredients." Rigel looked down at the sheet of paper in her hand. The list of allergies was extensive; Draco really did have a rather temperamental immune system. As she scanned the list, rejecting each allergy as she came to it as either not related to Snowhit or Aurora's Breath or else not existent in the final product in a large enough quantity to manifest a reaction, her eyes caught on one substance and she paled with dread.

Acai.

"Draco is allergic to Acai?" Rigel whispered hoarsely, her mouth suddenly dry as parchment.

"Yes," Narcissa frowned gently, "Forgive me, but I do not believe that is an ingredient in either-"

"Substituted," Rigel murmured, still staring at the four neatly scrawled letters with something very much like horror uncurling inside of her. When she remembered herself, she tore her gaze from the page to look up at the Malfoy's miserably, "We ran out of Ginseng, which is in both potions, so we had to substitute Acai."

Malfoy looked exasperated, "Then order more Ginseng and get my son his potions."

But Rigel was shaking her head back and forth even as he spoke, "We can't, there isn't any Ginseng anywhere. That's why Professor Snape isn't here; he went to look for Ginseng, but he hasn't found any yet."

"How can he have 'not found any'?" Malfoy snapped, "Severus knows suppliers all over the country. Surely someone can procure some for us. We don't need much, just enough for Draco to last the

duration of this sickness." Rigel opened her mouth to explain, but he cut across her, speaking more quickly as he became more and more agitated, "Tell Severus to spare no expense. We will pay anything, just get the Ginseng to Hogwarts today."

"I can't," Rigel said, pleading with her eyes for them to understand, "There's no Ginseng anywhere in England or Europe. Snape's looked everywhere, but the market's been cornered in the last month or so, and whoever bought it all up isn't selling. The Professor went East to look for more, but he said he'd be gone another week, and he's off the floo grid. An owl will take days to reach him, and even if he gets it we'd have to hope he'd actually found Ginseng."

Rigel gripped at her hair in panicked frustration and tried in vain to calm herself down.

Meanwhile the Malfoy's were both as cold as ice, clamping down on their emotions so tightly that Rigel couldn't even guess at what they might be feeling anymore.

"Well," Madam Pomphrey said shakily, "Well, we have three days to come up with a solution."

Rigel nodded, turning her mind toward a specific course of action, "Madam Pomphrey, you're stocked up with both potions for at least another three weeks, so I'm going to focus all my attention on figuring out a way to make the potions without Acai, okay?" The nurse looked rather pityingly at Rigel, but Rigel just pressed, "Okay?"

"Alright, Mr. Black," the older woman said tiredly, "You may be excused for the next three days of brewing. I w-" Whatever she was going to say was cut off by a distracting beeping noise going off in all of their ears. "Oh, that's the Snowhit alarm. Excuse me, I need to administer the next dose to these children." The nurse bustled off to take care of her duties and Rigel and the Malfoy's stared at one another for a long moment.

"Until we can get a letter to Severus, it seems that our son is in your hands, Mr. Black," Narcissa said softly, "Severus speaks highly of you. I sincerely hope he was not mistaken."

Rigel set her chin under the purebloods' assessing gaze, "I will do everything I can to help Draco." *I promised him it would be okay*, she added silently. "Excuse me as well, Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy. I need to get to work. Is it alright if I keep this?" she gestured to the allergy list in her hand and Mr. Malfoy nodded jerkily, his eyes not on her, but across the room where his son lay still and pale as ice.

Rigel couldn't look at Draco, couldn't bear to see him under the yellow glow of the life-sustaining spells, so she bowed her head deeply to her friend's parents and left the Hospital Wing at a near run. She had work to do.

By the next evening, Rigel was more tired than she'd ever been while brewing for Snape. She had poured over the notes Snape had given her on both potions, as well as consulted the large stack of potions journals Snape kept organized by date in one of the cupboards in Lab One, and she kept coming back to the same, horrible conclusion.

She couldn't substitute a substitution. Everything she read agreed that trying to substitute an ingredient for another ingredient that was already a substitution for the ideal ingredient caused the potion to become too unstable to enact the change it was designed for. At best the potion was useless, at worst highly poisonous. She couldn't use anything in place of the Acai in either potion unless it was the original Ginseng itself. In other words, she had wasted a day and ended where she'd started, with Draco no closer to help.

The worst part of the whole thing was that even if Rigel had miraculously found a perfect substitution for Acai and gotten Draco the potions he needed, Draco would still be sick! She was wracking her brains and running herself into the ground just to keep him in

stasis, when what was really wrong with him was so far outside of her skill set that she couldn't even attempt to help him.

No, she corrected herself bitterly as she locked up the Lab and walked slowly to the Great Hall for dinner, *The worst part is that it's all my fault.*

Rigel was acutely aware of just how much the situation was her fault. Because Rigel was helping Snape brew, they'd brewed more potions faster and therefore run out of Ginseng faster than if Snape had been working alone. While that meant production would be less if she weren't helping, it also meant Snape wouldn't have had to leave Hogwarts for Ginseng for another few weeks, meaning he would have been at Hogwarts still when Draco fell ill. And if that weren't enough, it had been Rigel's decision not to tell Snape that his godson was ill. Only Snape, Madam Pomphrey and Rigel had known that Acai was substituted for Ginseng in the potions, and only Snape and the Malfoy's had known that Draco was allergic to Acai, so if anyone could have done something about the allergy before Draco had a bad reaction to the potions it was Snape, who knew both about the allergy and the Acai substitution. And Rigel hadn't told him. Now Snape was out of reach and Draco had three days before his magical core realized his body was not actually responsive and detached itself from him, and Rigel was left with the overwhelming and undeniable truth that she was to blame.

Just when she thought her heart couldn't sink any lower, Rigel sat down at the Slytherin table and realized that she was alone in the unofficial first-year section of the benches. Completely alone. She fisted her hands under the table tightly, and turned her head to scan the rest of the table, looking for one particular shade of blonde hair to prove her dreadful suspicion wrong. The look on Rookwood's face as she caught his eye was all she needed to know. Feeling as though she was choking on her own heart, which had suddenly risen from the pit of her stomach to her throat, Rigel pushed away from the table roughly, ignoring Rosier as he made an aborted gesture to

stand and follow her-aborted because Rookwood pressed a firm hand on the other Slytherin's arm and shook his head resolutely.

Rigel ran out of the Hall and didn't stop until she was outside of the Hospital Wing. She paused, hesitating for only a moment, not sure if she wanted to see Pansy laid up like a limp little doll in the too-bright hospital light, but a second later she passed unchallenged through the Quarantine wards and pushed open the doors to the Wing.

It was silent, more so than just the rows of eerily quiet sleeping children could account for, and after a quick glance Rigel realized Madam Pomphrey wasn't anywhere in the expanded room. The nurse must have been in her office, perhaps eating dinner. Rigel was grateful for the privacy as she crossed the ward to walk along the half-filled row that held the most recent patients. At the very end of the row lay Pansy, next to a Hufflepuff third year who must have fallen ill after Blaise.

Pansy looked like an angel, serene and innocent, with her halo of blonde hair spread out beneath her head, except that no angel should ever be so still. There were bare signs of life, a slow, almost inaudible breath here and the slight flush of fever there, but what struck Rigel most of all was how young Pansy looked in her enchanted sleep. She'd always seemed to Rigel like a mini-grown up, just a smaller version of Narcissa Black, but in sleep Pansy truly looked her eleven years, and Rigel was reminded how much bigger this sickness was than them, no matter how much it felt like she, Pansy, and Draco were in the center of the maelstrom. This sickness wasn't about them, wasn't really about any of the children who had succumbed to it. They were just chips to be gambled in a political bluff by the S.O.W. Party (at least that's who Rigel thought must be behind the sickness). And yet, for all the first-years' insignificance to the big players in the game, it was they who would be most affected by this mess.

Draco had two days before the life-sustaining spells could no longer disguise his body's unresponsiveness, and if the worst were to happen... Pansy would take it hard, and Rigel had to admit that she

would too. Not to mention Draco's parents and Rigel's gut clenched- Snape, if Draco were to pass before his godfather returned and even discovered he was ill. Because Draco *would* die, if his magical core separated itself from his body. The shock to his major systems would surely kill someone so young, especially without his mind aware enough to override his body's reaction to the sudden loss of magic in his system.

Rigel left Pansy's bedside and went to stand by Draco's. Did he look a bit thinner already? No, of course not. Madam Pomphrey would keep him manually hydrated and nourished for as long as she could. He did look a bit feverish though. It was a strange sort of fever. Draco didn't toss and turn or mutter as patients normally did under the influence of a fever. It was purely a fever of the body, and the mind remained untouched. Or perhaps a better explanation was that whatever was happening in Draco's mind was causing the fever, but not caught in the fever itself. Either way, the result was that though Draco's temperature was continually trying to rise, and he had to be fed Sweat Inducers to cool his body down as much as possible, he remained perfectly still, seemingly unaffected by the discomfort the fever must have been causing his body.

Rigel gazed down at her friend and felt something that was probably a pale comparison to what Archie must have felt watching Aunt Diana slowly fade away before his eyes. She felt defeated by this sickness. So many promises were going to be left unfulfilled in its wake. She'd told Pansy she would keep helping Snape as much as she could, but here she stood, not helping anyone at all, drained and weary. Snape would be disappointed in her too, and probably angry when he realized she'd deliberately held back information from him, as if she were in a position to decide what her Professor could or could not handle being told. What a joke her best efforts were turning out to be. But letting down Pansy and Snape was nothing compared to letting down Draco. She had promised everything would be okay, that *he* would be okay, and she'd promised his parents to do everything she could to help their son.

But what can I do? Rigel gritted her teeth with frustration, I can't invent a new potion in three days, and I can't substitute a substitution, and even if I could Draco would still be sick.

It was a very rare moment in her life when Rigel didn't know what to do. Things that would be stone walls to other people-Hogwarts' pureblood-only policy, a broken wrist-were just obstacles to her, and every minute of her life was spent moving forward, always forward toward one goal or another. Here she was well and truly stonewalled. A sickness like this was not an enemy to be fought, a spell to be figured out, or an upperclassman to be bargained with. Rigel could understand completely Archie's desire to be a Healer if only it meant she would never feel so helpless against something again.

Rigel was about to go in search of a chair, so that she could sit by her friend's side a bit longer, when she felt it.

It was a tickling sensation that niggled her awareness, a creeping that she felt with one of her senses she didn't use in the physical world. Something was brushing against her mind. She fell into meditation mode automatically, turning her consciousness inward to view her mindscape. She was certain that's where the uncomfortably foreign feeling was coming from. If she hadn't been so familiar with her own mind after so many meditation sessions, she likely wouldn't have even noticed anything, let alone been able to do anything about it. As it was, she swept through the fog in her mind cautiously, searching through the gloom for the intruder she knew had to be there.

She reached the great white mountain without seeing anything unusual, but when she stopped there and turned her inner eye around, her physical body inhaled sharply with what she saw. The foggy mists around the peripheral of one part of her mind, usually white or at most a light grey, were infected with black tendrils of... something that was steadily creeping through the air toward her mountain like a great insidious black weed. She shivered in a way that had nothing to do with the chilly mindscape and backed away toward the mountain, moving down its face and slowly heading for

the illusion of an ice wall that protected the inner sanctum of her mind. She could not tell if the black stuff had any way of sensing its surroundings, or if it simply moved forward on magic-bred instinct, but she moved as stealthily as possible through the ice wall so that she wouldn't draw its attention just in case. She felt the warmth of the cavernous potions lab behind the ice illusion just as she saw the black tendrils reach the peak of her mountain fortress. Her physical body shivered as the black thing felt about the tip of the mountain, clinging to it and slowly spreading further down the face, but when she entered the underground cavern fully she could feel her physical body no more, and instead she had a second awareness of what was happening at every level of her mind, from the Foggy Mists to the Space Room.

Using this awareness, she kept track of the inky black substance that was slowly taking hold of more and more of her mountain side while her avatar that represented her consciousness moved through the decoy potions lab and to the trap door beneath the great rug that lay before the fireplace. She dropped down into the tunnels beneath the lab and mentally willed the trapdoor to close behind her and the rug to return to its place. By the green crystals embedded in the walls' light, she moved confidently thorough the web of tunnels that branched from the third path from the right and a few minutes (in mental time) later arrived at the door that sealed off her Space Room. The door was a new addition, from her last meditation session. It had no discernable handle or latch and fit smoothly into the rough rock surrounding it. It only opened to a password, and that password relied on knowledge that only people she trusted would have. It was fitting, she thought, to guard her memories and secrets with a door that could only be opened if one already knew the most closely guarded of her secrets.

She cupped her hand around her mouth and whispered to the door, "My name is Harry Potter, and I am not a boy."

The door slid sideways into the carved stone wall, and Harry stepped through into the infinite impossibility that was her Space Room. The

door closed behind her as she pushed herself off of the ground and floated lightly around various memories, which were all trapped and focused into little stars and planets. The memories didn't orbit the sun in the center of the great space, and instead drifted freely in any direction they pleased. Harry did the same, floating aimlessly as she concentrated on her sense of the other portions of her mind to check on the black creeping invader.

It had settled like a cloak over most of her mountain, and Harry felt a bit ill as the sensation of tar-like sludge rolled over her mindscape. It would not be long before the black tendrils found their way past her ice wall illusion, for the thing seemed to be relying on touch more than sight, and the illusion wouldn't hold up against direct contact. When she had designed her mindscape, it was with the assumption that any intruders would be at least humanoid if not wizards themselves, and would be using eyes as their primary source of information about surroundings, and Harry was only now realizing how much of a liability that was.

She knew what the black thing was, or at least had a pretty good guess. It was the sickness, finally come for her. Just as Snape had postulated, it spread mind to mind, and Rigel suspected that the other kids affected by it hadn't had any mental awareness of it until it had completely taken over their mindscape and wrested control from them. Since she had experience with her mind through meditation and rudimentary Occlumency training, she had been alerted when the sickness first targeted her, though now that she was aware she wasn't sure what she could do about it. Harry would have to rely on the safeguards she had already put in place, having no idea how to fight a mental enemy head on yet. That, she assured herself, would be the next thing she studied when she got out of there.

If she got out of there. Harry was keenly aware that in retreating from the black sickness, she had well and truly trapped herself in her own mind. She had never built another exit from her mind, and wasn't sure it was even possible, especially now that so large a part of her mind was under the control of the creeping blackness. The only way

she knew to get out of her mind was to go back out of the mountain and leave through the mists, and with the mountain and mists now swallowed by the sickness, that really wasn't about to happen. She didn't want to know what would result from her consciousness coming into contact with the black stuff.

She could feel the black stuff sliding through the illusion now and into the bright, cheery cavern that held her decoy sanctum. It didn't seem to be in a hurry, and it didn't seem to notice that the scrolls of potions recipes it was smothering with its black feelers weren't her real memories, but mere mental constructs. In fact, the sickness didn't appear to be terribly clever, and Harry wondered if that was because it wasn't a part of a being with a real consciousness or if it had simply engineered to be that way because it was meant to target children. After all, it wouldn't suit the S.O.W. Party's purposes if the sickness really did become an epidemic and infected adults as well as children. A wizarding world in chaos did no one any good. So it must be that the sickness was only supposed to be effective against children, who hadn't come into the full mental awareness that came with growing up and really learning and knowing themselves.

If that was the case, Harry thought hopefully, then the sickness wasn't invincible-it wasn't bred to be. She just had to figure out a way to beat it. Not in herself, no. Harry frowned determinately; she had to find a way to beat the sickness in Draco. He was the one really in danger, because even if it meant her secret came out, Harry could be kept alive at least with Snowhit and Aurora's Breath until the sickness lifted. Draco would die if the sickness kept its chokehold on his mind for very much longer, and nothing, not even her deepest secrets, was worth a friend's life.

But how was she going to help Draco while she was trapped in her own mind? Should she fight off the sickness in her mind first, and then try to help Draco after that? No, her avatar shook her head, sending her long black hair floating weightlessly about her, she didn't know how much time was passing in the physical world. Her mental time could be moving faster or slower, and there was no way to get a

good read on her physical body unless she was out in the first layer of her mind, on the mountainside. Here she was too deep in her mindscape, and didn't even know if she was still standing, frozen by Draco's bed or if she'd collapsed on the Hospital Wing floor.

So she somehow had to get to Draco, or more specifically to Draco's mind, from within her own mind. She didn't know Legilimency, and was pretty sure it wouldn't work if you were already in your own mind, and besides that Snape had said that the sickness made Legilimency on its victims impossible.

Harry drifted close to her sun and basked a little in the warmth it gave off. She really did like how her magic felt in her mind. It was fiery and strong, but reassuring in a dependable kind of a way. Like the sun. Here in her mind she felt connected to her magic in a way that she didn't while dealing directly with her magical core.

Wait. Harry stopped drifting and spun midair to stare thoughtfully into the sun at the center of the Space Room. Connected. Connections. That's it!

Harry let a crazy smile bloom across her face as the plan came to her in a rush of insight. She didn't have to get to Draco's mind from the outside. She just had to forge a *connection* from the *inside* .

Pausing a moment to assess the situation in her own mind, Harry nodded in satisfaction. The sickness was still lumbering about in the main cavern, and even if it discovered the trapdoor and the caverns beneath it, she had fleshed out the tunnels in the last few meditation sessions. It would take a long time for it to fill up all of those tunnels, and it was unlikely that it would sense the Space Room by touch alone. Even if it did, there was no way an entity without a consciousness could get through the door that protected it. If nothing else, her memories and magic were safe.

Fueled by that assurance, Harry dove into the sun.

Connections, connections were the key. She couldn't believe she'd almost missed the most obvious one. Hadn't Snape told her when he'd explained about magical cores that usually a magical core was spherical? Each one was different, but the secondary level of the magical core, the true core, was what represented that person's magical power most appropriately for who they were. Her primary layer was coils, ropes and tendrils and twisting bits of magic all wrapped up around the center, but she'd never looked close enough to discern what her true core was. Yet it was so obvious.

If magic made events in the mind real, then it stood to reason that what was true about magic in the mind had some connection with what was true of the same magic in the 'real' world. Hadn't she created the Space Room specifically because she'd found the sun *already burning* at the center of her mindscape? If *she* didn't make her magic take the form of the sun, then it was a natural form for her magic to take, which meant that her true magical core must be something like a miniature sun. And that wasn't all. How did she use the energy of the sun to enact changes to her mental landscape if the sun in her mind wasn't somehow connected to the sun in her magical core? She couldn't. Every time she'd used magic before, the magic had traveled from her magical core to her hands to either the wand or the stirring rod she was using to conduct the magical energy. It didn't just manifest in the wand itself or in the air around her, though she supposed theoretically one could pull magic from the wild magic sources in the world like the ancient druids... she pulled herself back on focus, feeling the warmth of her own personal sun singing along through her consciousness as she delved deeper and deeper into the ball of magical energy, following the heat and pushing through what felt like tangles of energy until-

Yes! She emerged, breathless (though of course as a product of her own consciousness she didn't strictly speaking need to breathe), on the other side and found herself staring at the outside of a very familiar coil-covered magical core. She'd been right. Magic couldn't be transmitted without a pathway, and if there was a magical core in one place and the exact same magical core in another 'place' then it

only made sense if those two magical cores were in fact one, connected and simply manifesting in different ways and spaces, one physical and one mental. It made perfect sense... if she didn't think about it *too* hard.

Harry flexed her senses once more-magical, mental, *and* physical, as since she was no longer in the inner recesses of her mind she was peripherally aware of her physical body as well-and took stock of the situation. She was out of her mind, and that realization alone made her glow with success. She could still feel the blackness creeping about in her mind, but it was a distant sort of revulsion and her more immediate senses were concentrated on 'where' her consciousness was and what her physical body was doing. She was at the nexus of her magical core, like she'd been the day Snape had taught her how to perceive a magical core, and she could feel the warmth of the core on her consciousness the same way she could feel cool tile beneath her cheek with her physical senses. Turning her awareness outwards, she tried to perceive what was going on in the real world without breaking her own meditative trance. It was difficult. Using her five regular senses made her automatically tend towards operating on the conscious level, so she had to hold on to her mental and magical senses while at the same time focusing on her physical senses. The process was distracting, but what she heard when she concentrated on listening in the physical sense caught her immediate attention and made focusing much easier.

She was no longer alone in the Hospital Wing.

"Don't touch him," a voice said sharply. Harry recognized it as Madam Pomphrey, and wondered who she was talking about until she remembered that while she was completely herself in her conscious manifestation, in the real world most people thought her a boy named Rigel. She had separated the two parts of her life so completely that it was a bit jarring to witness from the outside while being aware of both parts. Like watching a movie.

"But surely he must be moved," that voice was Narcissa Malfoy, "The boy is obviously uncomfortable, particularly if he's been sitting there

since dinner, and if he's succumbed to the sickness-"

"He hasn't," Pomphrey said briskly, her tone brooking no argument, "If he had, he would be in a magical sleep like the others, but he is not asleep. He is not even truly unconscious."

"Then what exactly is he doing on the floor?" Mr. Malfoy's drawl was too distinctive to mistake.

"He appears to be meditating," Pomphrey said, and Harry could almost see her lips pursing, though she couldn't open her eyes without snapping herself out of meditation completely.

"On the ground?" Narcissa asked dubiously.

"I doubt he was expecting it," the nurse said, "No doubt he was struck by the sickness rather suddenly."

"You just said he wasn't-"

"Oh, he hasn't succumbed," Pomphrey said, and Harry wondered if Malfoy's eyebrow twitched when he was interrupted like Draco's sometimes did, "I wondered why Mr. Black hadn't fallen ill before now, considering how many friends he has in other Houses, but I chalked it up to his having so little time to spend with his friends once he began brewing with Snape for the students falling ill. It appears he must have some rudimentary training in Occlumency."

"Occlumency?" Mr. Malfoy's voice sounded tight, and Harry silently grumbled at having one of her most carefully cultivated skills revealed so carelessly. She knew nurses were trouble for people with secrets.

"Hmm, yes," Pomphrey said, "The sickness is spread mind to mind, on the loose mental pathways that are constructed through close acquaintance, and to an experienced Occlumens the sickness would pose no threat, as it preys on unprotected minds, preferably the open minds of children. Since Mr. Black is neither an experienced

Occlumens nor completely unprotected mentally speaking, he likely fell into meditation immediately upon detecting the threat the sickness represented in his mind."

"Will he be able to fight off the sickness?" Narcissa asked, "Now that he is aware of its presence, I mean."

"Impossible to tell," Madam Pomphrey said, in what was probably her lecturing voice, "From what we can tell, the sickness usually takes the mind unaware, clamping down once it has the mind under its own control and snapping up a barrier to prevent any communication into or out of the mind, so that the mind can't send signals to the body and can't be reached through the use of Legilimency. Once the child's consciousness is trapped within its mind by the sickness, the child might choose to fight back, which is what we believe causes the fever we see in some of the children. As to whether catching the sickness before it has complete control will give Mr. Black a fighting chance, well, it depends on how good his Occlumency is, frankly."

"Either way, he will be of no further help with Draco for the foreseeable future," Mr. Malfoy said coldly.

Narcissa spoke softly, but firmly, "Come now, Lucius. Neither of us really expected the child to be able to help. Letting him try and come up with a solution was more for his peace of mind than for ours. We must hope that Severus receives our message in time."

Harry curled her consciousness closer to her magical core, seeking reassurance from the warm sun rays coming off of it. Was she really so useless that her best didn't even merit the benefit of the doubt? She shook off that thought impatiently. She *would* help Draco. She promised she would, and she had a plan now. She just needed to know how much time she had.

As she turned her attention back to what was going on outside of her, she heard Narcissa say, "Can't we at least transfer Mr. Black to

one of the beds? If he does wake from this fight on his own, he should not be rewarded with a stiff neck."

"We will have to move him very carefully," Pomphrey said, stressing her words to emphasize that she didn't think moving her the best course of action, "If he is distracted physically, it could upset the meditation."

Harry silently agreed; if she hadn't known it was coming, the sudden, though gentle, feeling of disorientation as her physical senses registered a change in surrounding that was not self-orchestrated would likely have pulled her consciousness back. As it was, she braced her consciousness by focusing hard on the mental and magical senses and ignoring the weird sensations coming from her physical senses as her body was picked up by unfamiliar hands and moved sideways toward the row of empty beds. Belatedly, she realized that being moved too far away from Draco would make the next part of her plan much harder, and she desperately clung to her non-physical senses even as she willed her vocal cords to vibrate and her mouth to say "Draco." It was difficult, and came out more like 'Drayo,' which she thought had something to do with a good portion of her mind being infiltrated by the black sickness, though she didn't know exactly which parts of her mind controlled her body. She hadn't designated a portion of her mind to her physical body, though now that she understood how connected the two were she would remedy that, so she guessed motor control and communication in general between her mind and body would be tied generally to her consciousness, but still affected by the sickness to some extent.

She felt her body stop moving in the real world, and split her concentration as much as she dared between getting the words she needed out and remaining within the meditative state that was keeping her consciousness out of the sickness' reach. She knew instinctively that if she let her mental avatar dissipate and came back to her body, the sickness would have full control over her mind and body, though it wouldn't get to her memories or magic, which were

protected in the Space Room even without her there. She felt her lips form the words, though she didn't know how much was her actually getting her body to do what she wanted and how much was her magic helping to make her will manifest. Magic and willpower were funny things, and Harry didn't pretend to understand them very well.

"Stay. Drayo. Help. Drayo." There. That made sense. Or at least it was the best she could do, so hopefully they understood. She didn't have any more time to waste, as she still didn't know how much time had passed while she was meditating. She had been naïve to think one of them would conveniently mention the time of day, though she gathered it was still the same night. That meant she had less than two days to get into Draco's mind and help him get the sickness out of it. Harry vaguely felt her real-world body being moved closer to Draco's once more, and was grateful that they weren't making her task harder, but she didn't have energy left to waste on the real world at that point. Instead, she pushed her physical awareness back to the part of her consciousness that held her mental awareness and turned her attention to her magical senses. The next part of her plan was all theoretical, and she was relying a lot on sheer willpower to make it work, but it had to be done.

Harry asked her magical core for its cooperation in what she was about to do, and it thrummed happily, sending little pulses of warmth at her that she took for a wordless yes. Trying to remember how Snape had done it several weeks before, Harry coaxed one of the coils around her magical core into unwrapping itself while she extended her magical awareness in the same way she extended it when she needed to imbue a potion. Except she wasn't searching for the placid, passive receptor for magic that an unimbued potion was. She was looking for the active magical core belonging to Draco Malfoy.

There were four magical cores in close proximity to her, and other magical cores just a bit further away, but Harry zeroed in on the closest and smallest magical core, which had to be Draco's. She

flung the coil of magic that had unwrapped from around her true core out toward the foreign magical core, willing it to forge a connection. She felt it latch on to the other magical core, like a jigsaw piece fitting into place or perhaps more appropriately like the sear of flame hitting dry ice, and she sent out a pulse of magic like Snape had taught her to feel out another's magical core, ignoring the guilty feeling that reminded her she was supposed to ask permission before establishing this kind of magical pathway. The magical echolocation pulse returned to her and she digested the information it had recovered for a moment. The core she'd forged a connection to was definitely Draco's. It felt like him, in a way that only made sense to her magical perception. Draco's core, however, was nothing like her core. Quite the contrary. Where her core was coils of magic around a brightly burning sun, Draco's core felt like a little ball of ice. Her magic stung a bit where it met his and it was constant work to keep the connection up.

Harry steeled herself once she was sure it was Draco's core she was connected to. Then, instead of sending another magical pulse down the connection, she sent *herself* down the magical pathway. There was no time for doubts as her consciousness sped along the current connecting her core to Draco's, but Harry was fairly confident this would work. After all, if she could project her consciousness inwardly to both her mindscape and her magical core, and travel between the two using innate magical pathways, and she could send magic outwards to create more magical pathways, there was no reason she couldn't project her consciousness along those magical pathways as well, as long as the pathways all stayed connected. And if that logic failed, then if she had learned nothing else her first year at Hogwarts, it was that magic was good at breaking rules.

She felt strange, the links to her own mental and physical senses stretched thin and largely indecipherable to her as she moved closer to Draco's magical core, and she hoped her mental defenses would hold, as she imagined the only thing worse than being trapped in her mind by the sickness would be being trapped out of her own mind by it.

She could see Draco's core up ahead of her now, and she slowed until she was approaching it cautiously. It was one thing to poke at Snape's core while Snape was aware and in control of both his magic and the connection. It was another to blindly send her consciousness careening into another person's magical core while that person had no awareness of it. She didn't want to provoke an instinctive and likely defensive reaction from Draco's magic by appearing overly hostile.

His core looked like just how it had felt. It was a ball of blue ice, significantly smaller than Harry's was. Was this how big most first-years' magical cores were? Or was Draco's simply more condensed than hers was? She thought his core looked unnaturally still, but on the other hand she was used to thinking of magic as semi-independent moving energy, as her sun-core reflected. The more she thought about it, the more the ice core seemed to sort of suit Draco. His magic never did anything unexpected, after all. He used it for spells and the rest of the time it lay pretty dormant as far as Harry could tell. Perhaps his core reflected that. It certainly looked dormant.

The ice was unmoving, unyielding. She took a moment to consider it, seeing that she would have to modify her approach somewhat. Her theory was that if her mind was connected to her magical core naturally, then other people's cores must be connected to their minds in the same way. Even though Draco's mind was shut from the outside by the sickness' Occlumency-like barriers, his magical core was still connected to his mind from the inside. It had to be, because if that connection had been disrupted, his magical core would have immediately detached itself from Draco's body and dissipated. Since according to Pomphrey it would take his magical core three days to realize that Draco's body was only responding as living due to artificial magical influence, that realization was probably being delayed by the continued existence of the connection to Draco's mind. So her plan was to take the projection of her consciousness along magical pathways one step further, and send herself through Draco's magical core, and into his mind that way.

The idea was to do the same thing Legilimency did, which was to send one person's consciousness into another person's mindscape, except she would send her consciousness into Draco's mind by establishing and traveling along magical pathways instead of mental pathways. Several things could go wrong with this plan, and Harry was excruciatingly aware of all of them. She could be mistaken about how far one could extend their consciousness from their body before it snapped back. She could be wrong about the connection between the magical core and the manifestation of that core in Draco's mind being still connected. It could also turn out that while traveling through her own magical pathways was possible, traveling through someone else's would do something unspeakably horrible to her.

It didn't help that Draco's magical core was made of ice. Harry's magic didn't like it one bit. Still, needs must.

Before proceeding, Harry asked her magic to please make her avatar look more like Rigel did in the real world. She felt the magic tingle across her eyes and assumed it had turned them grey once more, but her hair remained stubbornly long. She shrugged, thinking that her consciousness was probably too deeply embedded for her to change her manifestation of herself very much, and figured that long hair wasn't too unusual for a boy. Archie Black used to have long hair anyway, anyone who knew him could support that.

Harry moved forward to lay a hand on the outside of Draco's magical core. The ice shivered a bit, but didn't budge. *Sorry, Draco's core, but I'm afraid I'll have to insist.* She pushed a bit more firmly, asking her magic to help her. The ice sizzled and melted around her hand and Rigel felt a strange rush of energy as she slowly melted a hole in the ice big enough for her to squeeze through. The ice was thick, and even when she'd gotten her whole body into the tunnel she was digging, she still couldn't see Draco's true core. She noticed the ice re-solidifying behind her and began to move faster, using both hands to push and mold the ice away from her. Strangely enough, she wasn't getting tired at all. If anything she felt more energized than

she had before. All of a sudden, her hand burst through the ice and hit something on the other side that was definitely not air.

It was water. Harry took an automatic gulp of air before the tunnel flooded with water, and then she realized that she didn't need to breathe, and shook her head at her own foolishness. She swam the rest of the way out, looking back to see the water in the tunnel already turning to solid and smooth ice once more. She looked around curiously as she swam deeper into Draco's true core. It was like being in a swimming pool, in that there was no vegetation growing along the edges and no fish swimming around in the core, just pure, light blue water all around, trapped by a thick layer of ice.

At the center of the true core there was a whirlpool. It spun too fast for Harry to see beyond it, but she could only assume that this was the wellspring of Draco's magic. Indeed, it seemed to be pushing water out of it instead of sucking water in, so she concluded that this was where Draco's body regenerated magic when it was used. It was also the connection between Draco's magic and his mind, if she was right. She began to swim toward it, but the current suddenly whipped up around her and pushed her back once more. She tried again, with no better results.

She growled with frustration. "Let me in!" Bubbles came out of her mouth and dispersed like a starburst in different directions, sticking to the underside of the ice layer and slowly absorbing into it. The whirlpool seemed to slow, or maybe it was just her imagination. "Please," she tried reasoning with it, "Draco needs help. I want to help him, but I need to get through here to do so." The whirlpool was definitely slowing down now. The lip of the swirling water seemed to tip toward her invitingly, and Harry gave it a dubious look, but shrugged, thinking, *Here goes nothing*.

She propelled herself into the whirlpool, and the world became a dizzying mess of rushing water before her vision went black.

Draco POV:

Draco was cold. Well, okay, not really, he admitted to himself as he idly tossed the ball of snow he'd been playing with for the last... how long had he been in here? Ah, well. The point is he *should* have been cold, considering his surroundings, but he really wasn't. He was sitting on a small iceberg, afloat in a little pond of ice-blue water. If this was real life, his legs would have been numb in the first few hours, but Draco didn't think he was *in* real life anymore. He didn't think he was dreaming, either. For one thing, he had never had such a boring dream before, even though it had been a little exciting at first, when the black octopus had chased him onto this iceberg. Or maybe it hadn't been chasing him. It hadn't seemed too concerned when Draco had escaped from it, swimming out into the pond, which seemed to be the only thing untouched by the black tar-monster. Lucky this iceberg was here, really. Or had it been?

Draco hadn't seen the iceberg when he started swimming. It was only after he'd gotten tired of treading water and looked for a place to rest that the iceberg had appeared. He thought maybe he'd made the ice appear, because he could sometimes make other things happen in this place if he tried hard enough. That's how he'd gotten his snowball to play with when the boredom had become too much. There were things he couldn't do, though, no matter how hard he tried. He couldn't wish the black stuff away.

Draco tossed the snowball once more and pretended it was a very fat and lazy snitch. He had given up figuring out a way to leave, and he was having doubts as to where exactly he was, in any case. He remembered talking to Rigel, and being particularly fed up with the boy's workaholic tendencies. His friend was nearly as bad as his father when it came to work, and that was saying something. He remembered telling Rigel to take it easy, and then Rigel telling him he couldn't, and then... had Rigel cursed him? No, Draco didn't think so. Rigel never got mad at anyone, much less used magic on them. The boy actually seemed to avoid using magic whenever he could, though he'd stopped making strange things happen by accident, so maybe his magic was settling down after all. Rigel was probably just

a late bloomer, with a little accidental magic left over from his childhood that was working itself out.

If Rigel didn't curse him, though, how did he end up here? His vision had gone black, and the vertigo he remembered made him think he'd fallen unconscious somehow. The most obvious answer that he really didn't want to think about but probably should was that the sickness had gotten him. Everyone at Hogwarts knew by now that the sickness had no symptoms until the kid collapsed, so if he had blacked out without warning it was probably because he was sick now, too. If that was the case, then maybe he was dreaming, since he'd heard rumors that the sickness made kids sleep for eternity.

He had a momentary flash of panic where he nearly missed catching his ball as it came back down. Would he be stuck in this place forever? He brushed that thought aside impatiently. No, of course not. Someone would get him out of here. If not him specifically, they would at least cure the sickness eventually and then he would get out of this boring dream by default. Not that he really thought it was a dream.

Draco sighed. He had a pretty good suspicion as to what was really happening to him, but he didn't like to acknowledge it. It was too horrible. His father had sent him a letter a few weeks ago that was very cryptic, even more so than usual. Draco could still remember the exact words his father had written at the bottom of the page.

Your mind is your greatest advantage. Keep your thoughts close, son, and your friends at a distance.

Draco scowled even now just thinking about them. At the time, the words had made no sense. As if thoughts could be anything but close. And Draco knew that although he wasn't an idiot like some of his less fortunate classmates, his mind wasn't his greatest asset. If anything, that would be his Malfoy good looks. He chuckled, and it echoed weirdly across the water. Seriously though, he was much better at doing magic than thinking about it. Pansy was better at theoretical problems. And distance himself from his friends? Draco

had thought his father approved of Rigel, and he *knew* his father liked Pansy.

In retrospect, and in light of the sickness, it all made much better sense. He was to keep away from his friends because the sickness spread from friend to friend. That much was clear just by observing the pattern of the kids who fell ill. Draco hoped Pansy and Rigel hadn't fallen ill because of him. Keeping his thoughts close sort of made sense, if it meant keeping his mouth shut about the things he thought, but Draco had a feeling it meant more than that. It had to do with his mind being a great advantage-not asset, but *advantage*, his father had said. If he thought about the sickness in light of his father's warnings about his *mind*, things began falling into a discomfoting picture.

The sickness made a kid's body go to sleep, but Draco didn't feel asleep, even though he knew he must have contracted the sickness. That meant that it looked to the outside that the kids were asleep, but on the inside they weren't. So his body was asleep, but his mind was not, and if he wasn't asleep, then he must be in the only part of him that wasn't asleep: his mind. From that conclusion, it was easy to guess that the sickness affected the mind, and that keeping his thoughts close was some sort of vague reference to protecting his mind, like Uncle Severus did. But how could a mind be an advantage when that was the vulnerable point the sickness attacked?

Maybe it's an advantage because it's my mind, Draco speculated, *Like a home-pitch advantage*. That suggested that he had some kind of advantage over the sickness within his own mind, which also supported the conclusion that Draco was, in fact, trapped in his own mind.

The downside to figuring all this out, Draco realized morosely, was that there was now no hiding from the fact that there was something slimy running around in *his* mind. Draco hadn't ever been told so exactly, but he was pretty sure Malfoy's did not let boorish black octopi run amok in their mental landscape. It was entirely too uncouth. As soon as he got out of there he would demand that Uncle

Severus teach him the mind arts during summer break. The black sickness-monster covered almost everything as far as he could see, and though he had never seen the inside of his mind before, he didn't have to be a Master at Occlumency to know instinctively that it wasn't supposed to be there.

At least the pond was safe. Draco relaxed against the iceberg he floated on and once again noted how strange it was to not feel cold, even though he was dressed in the summer clothes he wore to play Quidditch when he was home at the manor. And he was barefoot. Draco guiltily hoped his father would never find out about that, but he couldn't bring himself to wish for shoes. He loved going barefoot, even if Malfoy's were not really supposed to.

He sat up and wriggled his toes off the edge of the iceberg, watching the ripples he made in the pond, and was surprised to see the water begin to tremble. A moment later, it was churning and roiling and Draco snatched his toes back from the liquid as a whirlpool began to form in the center of the pond, just a few feet from where his iceberg rode out the waves calmly, much more stable than a normal iceberg should be.

The whirlpool began to swirl faster and faster, and Draco thought he saw a black hole forming in the middle, but the next moment something was projected out of the whirlpool's center like a cannon ball and hurled, spluttering, straight onto Draco's iceberg. Draco backed up quickly until he was on the very edge of the iceberg and stared, disbelieving, at the soaking wet person who had just been spectacularly spat out of his pond. Whoever it was wore dark robes that looked like the ones Uncle Severus used when he brewed. The person had long hair like Severus did, too, but they were too, well, *small* to be Severus.

The new addition to Draco's island groaned and rolled over, muttering something about people with unnaturally wet magical cores. He thought he heard the name Malfoy somewhere in the litany of complaints, but before he could question the new comer the person turned over, sat up, and caught sight of him.

"Draco!" the dark-haired person said happily, scrambling across the ice to fling themselves at Draco and squeeze the life out of him.

Draco just sat there, completely shocked by the fact that there was someone else in his mind with him. Someone hugging him, no less. Very few people hugged Draco Malfoy, and none of them had long, dark hair, excepting Uncle Severus, and he had already ruled him out.

"You're getting me wet," Draco said mildly, really not sure if this other person was a figment of his imagination or not. He didn't know why he would imagine someone glomping him, but he couldn't think of a different explanation for the presence of another in his mind. Though with the sick black thing roaming around... Draco supposed anything was possible at this point.

"Sorry, Draco," whoever it was laughed. "It's your fault for having a lake of water for a true core anyway."

"I don't know who you are, and I certainly don't know what you're talking about," Draco put on his best derogatory sneer that he mostly reserved for people who insulted his parents and Weasley's, "But if you don't tell me what you're doing in my mind this instant I'll kick you out of it."

Draco didn't know that he could actually do that, but it did seem to have some effect on the person currently dripping water all over him. It wasn't making him cold or really all that uncomfortable, but it was the principle of the thing. The new comer sat back and stared at Draco with wide, blank eyes that seemed really familiar.

"Dray? It's me," the other person said, and Draco blinked to show he still didn't understand. The other kid raised an eyebrow, saying, "Well, that'll teach me to help out a friend in need. I come all the way here to get you, and you don't even recognize one of your best friends."

Best-? Draco narrowed his eyes at the other kid and looked more closely at them. The eyes were just a shade darker than his own grey, and they were widened in a falsely earnest expression he really should have recognized instantly.

"Rigel?" Draco frowned into the now-familiar face, "Why do you have long hair? I didn't recognize you at all."

"That's alright," Rigel said, shrugging a bit, "I think the manifestation of my consciousness still sees itself as having long hair, even though I cut mine eight months ago. Look at you, you're not in Hogwarts robes."

Draco looked down at his summer outfit once more and nodded. It made sense that the way people saw themselves was not always the same as the way others saw them.

"Well, how did you get in here?" Draco asked, a bit more excited now that he knew just who had invaded his mental space, "And what did you mean you came to get me?"

"It's sort of a long story," Rigel said, "I'll tell you all about it later, but right now we need to get you out of here, or get the sickness out of here, as soon as we can. It's very important."

Draco studied his friend carefully, and Rigel gazed back at Draco just as blankly as he always did, as if there was nothing whatsoever going on behind his flat, grey eyes. Draco knew better though, and so he said, "Why are you here, Rigel? I'm glad you are," he assured the other boy, "But why you? Why not Pomphrey or Snape or even my father?" Draco guiltily clenched his bare toes again, but held Rigel's eyes steadily as he waited for an answer. He'd noticed that whenever Rigel said something that Draco thought was probably a lie, Rigel's eyes flickered with pained regret for just a moment before he steeled himself and said whatever it was he wanted Draco to believe. Draco had never mentioned this to Rigel, not least because it was useful to be able to tell the difference, and Draco didn't even really mind that Rigel lied to him sometimes. He'd as good as said

he would, after all, the night he agreed to be Draco's friend. Draco just wanted to see if Rigel was lying this time.

The other boy took his time in answering, but Draco saw no unease or regret flash through Rigel's eyes before he spoke, "You're sick, Draco. More sick than the others. We need to get the sickness out of you before it's too late."

Draco sucked in a breath slowly, digesting that information for a moment. "What's wrong with me?" he finally asked, feeling strange asking such a question about himself, "And it still doesn't explain why *you* ."

"So many kids got sick," Rigel said, and Draco was thankful that his friend's voice was so calm and even. It made him feel like nothing could go wrong as long as he was there to help, "We ran out of Ginseng to put into the Snowhit and the Aurora's Breath. We had to start using Acai to substitute, because there was no Ginseng left anywhere in the country."

"I'm allergic to Acai," Draco spoke his thoughts out loud, "Oh. I see." And he did see. Without those potions, his body would waste away the longer he was in a coma. He'd already been there for... how long? A day? Two? "I'm dying," Draco tested the words, grimacing at the taste of them on his tongue. They tasted like failure, like weakness, and he wanted to spit, but he couldn't bring himself to in front of Rigel.

"You're not," Rigel said firmly, and Draco dragged his gaze, which had been wandering over the blackened landscape beyond his pond, back to his friend's face, "That's why I'm here. To make sure you don't." Rigel put his hand on Draco's shoulder, and it felt like a fire was burning under Rigel's skin. Though Draco hadn't been cold before, he was suddenly warm and feeling very calm and sure. Rigel looked very seriously at him, "Draco, I know you didn't hear me before, because you were already asleep, but I promised you everything was going to be okay. Maybe it wouldn't have been if

things just kept on as they were, but we're not going to just let the world do whatever it wants, are we?"

Draco shook his head mutely.

"Good," Rigel nodded firmly, "We'll make sure everything turns out okay then. First we have to get you better, though."

"How?" Draco asked, wondering where on earth Rigel got his confidence from.

"Well, I'm not sure," Rigel said, and Draco looked incredulously at him.

"You somehow got into my mind, but you didn't have a plan for what you would do when you got here?" Draco shook his head, "Leave it to a Black."

"Hey!" Rigel said, mock affronted. It almost felt like they were back in their dorm, just joking around, except for the iceberg beneath their feet, "It's your mind, Draco, but if you want my opinion, I think we should try and use this pond to get rid of it somehow."

Rigel stood on the iceberg to get a better look around. Draco stood as well and surveyed the blackened wasteland his mind had become. The pond stretched about fifty feet across, and his iceberg was about five by five, though it wasn't really all that square. The shores the water lapped against seemed like they might be made of solid ice, but they couldn't see much of the actual terrain because the black tar from the sickness clung to absolutely everything. Draco couldn't see the edges of his mind either, though he thought he could make out black mists on the horizon in every direction he turned. Mostly his mind seemed to be a flat expanse of black-covered ice, with the light-blue pond in the middle, inexplicably untouched by the blackness.

"What are we supposed to do?" Draco turned to Rigel, frowning, "I don't think we have enough water here to cover the whole space,

even if we could somehow just wash the black stuff away."

Rigel shrugged, "Your pond should re-fill itself, though slowly, and I can use some of my own magic to help I think." The other boy seemed to concentrate for a moment, then a ball of fire burst into life in his hand. Rigel grinned, "Between the two of us, we'll be able to get rid of it eventually. From what I've seen, it's not very aggressive." He frowned again, "The only problem is time. It's always hard to tell how much time is passing outside while you're in your mind, so we'll have to work fast."

Draco stared at the little ball of flame that was dancing in Rigel's palm. How did he do that? Draco cut his eyes to the snowball he'd been playing with earlier, which lay abandoned and smushed on one side of the iceberg now. He concentrated, willing the ball of snow to condense once more and watched as it slowly became more rounded. Draco held out a hand and demanded the ball come to his hand. It flew upwards, and he caught it easily, noting with satisfaction that with a little extra effort he could make it harden into ice. He looked up at Rigel, who was smiling a little as he watched Draco control his snowball. Draco said, "I can make this happen because this is my mind we're in, but how can you control anything?"

Rigel blinked, and shrugged, "It's not really your mind that's making it happen. It's your consciousness willing your magic to effect changes in the mental landscape. Your magical core is water surrounded by ice, and it manifests itself here as a lake, with icebergs like this I guess." Rigel tapped a foot onto the ice they stood on and went on, "My magical core isn't water, it's more like fire, and even though I'm not in my mind anymore, my consciousness is still connected to my magical core even here. So I can effect changes on the mental landscape too, just like the sickness can, and I suppose like anyone else who broke into your mind could." Rigel looked embarrassed suddenly, "Uh, sorry about breaking into your mind uninvited, Draco."

Draco blinked. Rigel went off on the most unnecessary tangents sometimes. "No problem. Just keep the breaking and entering to

emergency situations like this one, and I think I'll manage to forgive you."

Rigel nodded, "Well then, let's get started."

They turned as one toward the bank closest to their little ice raft. Draco swallowed at the sight of all that awful blackness, but then steeled his nerve. They had a long way to go, but Draco wasn't going to stop until his mind was completely his own again.

Normal POV:

Harry glanced over at Draco's determined expression and smiled. It was good to see her friend was just as he always was, even here in his own mind. Though she had definitely noticed the bare feet, it seemed that mostly with Draco Malfoy what you saw was what you got. *That will probably change in a few years*, she thought, *One day I'll look over and I won't recognize this boy*. She shook her head to clear the melancholy thoughts away. Time enough for that stuff later. Now it was time to do some serious spring-cleaning in Draco's mind.

"Can you make the ice berg move closer to the shore?" she asked Draco. He nodded and furrowed his brow in concentration, and their raft began to glide easily toward the blackened bank. When they were close enough, Rigel nodded to Draco and the raft stopped. "Don't let it touch you," Harry said softly, "I'm not sure what will happen."

Draco smirked at her, "Worry about yourself, Rigel. This can't be nearly as bad as one of Flint's early morning workouts."

Harry grinned back, "After you then, Dray."

Draco paused for a moment, then shrugged and stuck his hand out over the side of the raft and held it there, rigid, until a column of water began to rise from the lake toward his down-turned palm. "It's so weird trying to do stuff without a wand or a spell," he commented,

then he jerked his arm forward and the column of water flew toward the shore, crashing against it and splattering in all directions. They watched as the water hit the blackness coating the shoreline. The inky stuff seemed to hiss, and then it was dissolving wherever the water touched it. Draco grinned broadly, "This is going to be like Quidditch without bludgers. Too easy."

Harry rolled her eyes, but agreed, "It's not even fighting back. I feel silly for running from it now."

Draco glanced sideways at her, "Running from it?" His eyes widened, "Rigel, it's in your mind, too?"

"Yeah," Harry said sheepishly, "I just sort of left it there so I'd have time to come and get you before the two days was up."

"Well after we're done with my mind, we can do yours next," Draco said.

"Fine with me," Harry shrugged, "But I won't die if I stay in a coma, so let's get rid of this stuff as fast as we can, okay?"

"Right," Draco turned back and lifted another stream of water from the lake, sending it toward the shore.

Harry contemplated her own fireball. Fire was more destructive than water. Would she end up scorching Draco's landscape if she threw her magic around in it? She concentrated on what she wanted her magic to do, then moved the fire to the edge of their iceberg to test it. Nothing happened. Harry smiled. Magic really was all about intention. She didn't want the fire to melt any of Draco's ice, so it didn't. Now to see if her magic would work on the sickness like Draco's did.

She lobbed the fireball at the right side of the shore, since Draco was working on the left. It struck the black terrain and instead of dissolving the black stuff like Draco's had, it set it on fire. The sickness writhed where the fire burned it and Harry could see it

melting away slowly under the flames. Though it was not as instantly effective as Draco's had been, the fire stayed and spread to the surrounding blackness, so that Harry only had to throw a few more fire balls and then wait while the fire did its work. When they had enough space, Draco directed the iceberg to land and they climbed off onto the mainland, which actually was made entirely of ice as far as they could tell. Harry was glad to note that none of the ice on the right side of their little semi-circle of cleared mental space looked scorched or melted. The mind was truly an impressive thing, Harry decided, surveying their work. She doubted anything like this would work in the real world, but here in Draco's mind, which was likely so flexible and open because of his age, there were very few rules that a pair of determined Slytherins with adept imagination couldn't bend or break completely.

They worked steadily, gradually moving further from one another as they each worked on their own flank, meeting in the middle and then moving further away once more over and over again as they pushed the sickness back with water and flame. The black thing wasn't fighting back-at all. Harry expected at least some resistance, but it seemed to not even notice that parts of it were being dissolved and melted away. It did seem to have an expanding instinct that kept it pushing back against them, but they worked much faster than the blackness could creep, so they moved forward inexorably, step by step, until a good portion of Draco's mind was plain, flat ice, unblemished by the sickness' sludge.

When they met in the middle once more, Harry tossed a grin at Draco over her shoulder and said, "Really gives a whole new meaning to the term 'brain-washing' doesn't it?" She gestured at Draco's water, which he was currently wielding like a whip to keep the black feelers at bay while his other hand directed a wave of water to crash down in front of him.

Draco laughed, a fierce sound that was really closer to a battle cry than a laugh, "I don't know why I didn't try this sooner! To think I was

bored when I could have been doing this. Though," he paused to stretch his arm muscles, "It's really exhausting."

Harry nodded in agreement. Though her magical reserves had been up because she hadn't brewed anything for a day or so before the sickness invaded her mind, the constant use of magic was taking its toll on her as well.

They parted again to work on their own sides, and soon they had nearly a third of the visible mindscape clear of sickness. Harry didn't know what they would do when they reached the blackened mists, and she also couldn't tell how much time had passed. She called out to Draco to get his attention, "Hey Draco, can you feel anything from your physical body yet?"

Draco turned a quizzical look at Harry, "What do you mean? Can I do that?"

"You'll be able to whenever we clear the section of your mind that relates to control and communication with your physical self," Harry said, checking on the edges of the on-fire black goo with the corner of her eye while she spoke, "I'm not sure when that will be, though, since it won't be clearly marked or anything. You'll just have to keep checking I guess."

Draco nodded thoughtfully, absent-mindedly coaxing another load of water from the pond. "If I concentrate on the idea of my physical body, I can feel... something. It's weird. I can feel myself laying down, even though I know I'm standing up right here."

"It takes a while to get used to the dual senses," Harry agreed, "Try moving your hand."

Draco waved his hand in a nonplussed kind of a way.

"Not that hand," Harry said.

"I know," Draco frowned, "But whenever I try waving my hand, it just waves." He waved his hand again and Harry had to laugh at how silly he looked standing there in summer clothes, no shoes, and a pointlessly waving hand in the middle of a background that looked like Antarctica.

"Try concentrating on moving your hand, but also think specifically about *not* moving *that* hand," Harry suggested.

"How can you think about two things as once?" Draco asked incredulously.

Harry shrugged. It was just something you did; she didn't know how to explain it to Draco. It was how a potion brewer had to think, in order to correctly count the 28 stirs counterclockwise while also adding the exact number of Affilla Beans to a Winter's Luck Potion, for instance.

Draco sighed, "Watch this side for me." He frowned down at the ice to concentrate and Harry dutifully went to his side to keep the black stuff back while Draco was distracted. It took a few moments to catch because the edges of the black tar were still a bit wet from Draco's magic, but soon there was a slow fire burning on that side as well and Harry took a break to watch Draco try and connect with his physical body. The blonde boy had a tendency to scowl at things when he was thinking very hard about something, even when he wasn't at all angry or upset. She wondered if he'd always done that, and had a sudden image of a little blonde five-year-old scowling darkly at his first toy broom as he tried to figure out how to make it work. She barely contained an amused snort.

Draco looked up suddenly, "I think I did it."

"Really?"

"Well I felt my hand move, but my hand didn't move, if that makes sense," Draco said, looking rather cheerful despite the backdrop of burning tar and soggy ice.

"That's great!" Harry said, "If you can move your body around enough, maybe you can get someone's attention. Madam Pomphrey should be checking on you, and your parents were around when I went under too, I think. That way if the three days you had under the sustaining spells, well, two since I went into meditation, run out, they can take you off of the spells before your magical core realizes something is wrong. By then you should have enough of your mind away from the sickness that your body will breathe and pump blood on its own once more."

Draco nodded, "I'll try moving it again a few times, and then we can get rid of some more of this stuff."

Harry was about to reply when a new voice cut across the icy landscape, making the two first-years jump in surprise.

"There won't be any need for that."

They turned toward the source of the voice and gaped at the sight of Professor Snape gliding across the ice toward them, an unreadable expression on his face.

"Professor!"

"Uncle Severus!"

Draco and Harry exchanged a look of relief mixed with sheer disbelief.

"How did you get in here, sir?"

"Are you here to save me, Uncle Severus?"

Snape raised an eyebrow sardonically. Harry noticed that his mental avatar looked very much like his usual physical self. Same robes, same hair, same attitude. It seemed that Severus Snape was a man who saw himself just as clearly as he saw everything else, "Only the

two of you would manage to do something so impressive without even realizing you'd done it."

Draco sent Harry a blank look, which Harry returned with a look just as uncomprehending.

Snape looked about two seconds away from rolling his eyes, "You destabilized the mental barrier that was preventing any Legilimency from accessing Draco's mind from without."

"How did we do that?" Draco blinked.

Harry turned her eyes toward the landscape with sudden understanding. There was only one entrance and exit from the outside of a mind. Sure enough, the fire they had left unchecked had burned a clear patch in the mists, which must have been what held the Occlumency-like barrier that protected the sickness from Legilimency.

Snape nodded as he saw where Harry was looking, "Indeed, Mr. Black. Even the tiniest flaw in a barrier is enough to allow a Master of the Mental Arts entrance to a mind. Once that part of the mists was purified, I could have come in at any time, but I didn't realize Draco's condition had changed until Narcissa noticed his hand move."

"See? I knew it worked!" Draco smiled triumphantly at Harry, who grinned back.

"So are you going to help us, Professor Snape?" Harry asked curiously, "We've gotten rid of a good chunk of the black stuff, but it's slow going. How much time does Draco have left on the sustainment spells?"

"It is currently Saturday at 6:43 am," Snape said in his emotionless drawl, "I am told that Draco fell ill Tuesday evening," here he shot Harry a look that made her wince, "Which means he was first administered the Aurora's Breath and Snowhit Wednesday around midday when his unconscious processes began to fail, and has

consequently been on life sustaining spells for approximately two days and 19 hours."

Harry mentally calculated. If it had taken her a day and a half to make it this far, would they have enough time to eradicate the rest of the illness? Granted, she didn't know how much time had been spent just getting through Draco's magical core, but still... it was going to be close. "With the Professor here to help, surely we can get rid of it in time," Harry said to Draco, trying to sound confident.

Draco frowned, obviously doing some calculations of his own, and looked worried.

Snape snorted. "Stand back boys, and watch a real Occlumens at work."

Harry blinked, but took a step away from Snape as Draco hurriedly did the same. The Potions Master raised an arm out in front of him, hand flexed as if it were gripping something fiercely. The air around them seemed to hum for a moment, perhaps with anticipation, and then Snape clenched his fist and exhaled sharply, glaring at the blackness still covering two-thirds of Draco's mindscape.

To Harry's utter shock, the blackness twisted and writhed like a sea of inky worms, and then it was flung back from the ice it had settled on like it was tumbleweed and Snape had conjured up a tornado. If the black thing had a voice, it would surely have been screaming as it was hurled into the mists, and then, without so much as a shadow left behind, it was *gone*.

Harry felt supremely inferior, and realized just how ineffectual she and Draco's efforts had been compared to Snape's. Of course, it had seemed that they were accomplishing something really difficult, because Harry had very little real experience with Occlumency and Draco had none, but Harry now understood that the sickness truly was aimed at infecting and subduing children and children *only*, if this was the power of an adult Occlumens.

Snape smirked at the look of utter amazement both Harry and Draco were wearing.

"How did you-?" Draco couldn't even finish the question.

"You two did an admirable job," Snape said, and Harry could feel the smugness the older Slytherin was too reserved to show, "But I have had many years of experience in the mind arts, and that with wizards whose Legilimency makes this sickness look completely harmless. While the sickness created an impenetrable defense from the outside, it was nothing more than an irksome fly once its barrier was breached."

Harry nodded thoughtfully, "Because it wasn't designed to actually do damage to the mind it possessed, it is easily defeated from within once its occupant knows how to go about it. The problem is that children's minds are the ones susceptible to it, and most children aren't taught mind magics at such a young age, so they don't know what to do once they're trapped in it."

Harry didn't miss the sharp look Snape sent her at the way she described the illness as being designed for a purpose, but she ignored it with the excuse of paying attention to Draco.

"But you knew about the stuff I could do with mind magic," her friend pointed out, "And you still haven't explained how you even got in my mind, since even Uncle Severus couldn't get in until we broke the barrier from within."

"I would very much like to understand that as well," Snape put in, frowning at her.

Harry glanced between the two of them, "Well, can full explanations wait? We need to get Draco to wake up, though that shouldn't be hard now that the sickness doesn't have hold of his mind anymore. And I have to get the sickness out of my own mind after this too. I'm not sure how far it progressed at this point, so for all I know I could wake up only to fall right back into a coma."

Draco frowned, "I guess I can't help you with your mind, since I don't know enough mind magic to move between minds. Sorry, Rigel."

"That's alright," Harry said, "Now that we know the trick, I'll just clear a path to the mists and disrupt the mental barrier the sickness has around my mind so that Professor Snape can get in to help me get rid of it. It shouldn't take much time at all, really."

Snape nodded reluctantly, "Very well. I will return to the physical world and explain the situation to Madam Pomphrey and Mr. Malfoy's parents. Mr. Black, you will return to your own mind... however you plan on doing that." Harry nodded easily. "As you will not be clearing enough of your mind to regain the physical control necessary to signal to me, I will simply attempt to breach your mind repeatedly until I am able to. Mr. Malfoy will wait until we have both exited his mind, and then attempt to wake himself up."

Draco and Harry both nodded to show they understood, and Snape nodded back. He strode on his heel back toward the mists and soon was gone from Draco's mind completely.

"Well, see you in real life then," Draco said cheerfully.

Harry gazed seriously at her friend. "I'm really glad you're going to be okay," she said, "I was so worried when I heard you-" she broke off, shaking her head. "I'm just so relieved, Dray. And you were amazing, picking up the mind magic so quickly like that."

"Only thanks to your help," Draco said, looking embarrassed. He glanced askance at her as he added, "Besides, what are you so relieved for? You promised everything would be okay, didn't you? Maybe you weren't so sure, but I never doubted you."

Harry didn't know what to say, so she just moved her gaze to the icy terrain that had been unveiled when the sickness left. "You should build something, Dray." Draco looked at her strangely, but she went on, "Not now, of course, but after you learn mediation and all that, you should do something with all this space."

"Maybe I will," Draco said thoughtfully, "Did you build something in your mind?"

"Yeah," Harry said, frowning as she wondered what sort of state she'd find her mind in when she returned, "Maybe one day you'll get to see it."

"I definitely look forward to it," Draco said, "But right now you need to get out of my mind and go clean up your own so Severus can make you better. I am not going to sit by myself at dinner this evening, and I'll just bet everyone else went and fell ill on us."

Harry laughed at how offended Draco seemed at the thought of eating alone and waved a hand as she turned and headed toward Draco's pond, "I can see when I'm not wanted. See you soon, Draco."

"See you, Rigel."

Harry took a deep, unnecessary breath at the edge of Draco's pond and silently asked his magical core to let her back out of Draco's mind, putting all of her will behind the request. A whirlpool began to turn at the center of the pond, faster and faster, and when Harry caught sight of the black hole forming in the middle she jumped straight into the center and let the confusing rush of water sweep her away once more.

She was spat out rather violently on the other side of Draco's magical core, and only saved herself from being smashed against the inside of Draco's primary core level by hurriedly bringing magic to her outstretched hands and blasting fire through the thick layer of ice to melt it out of the way as she hurled through it. Once out of Draco's core completely, she sought out the connection between Draco's core and hers and thrust herself along it, speeding toward the familiar feeling of her own magical core.

When she arrived back at the ball of restless coils of magical energy that was her core, she asked her magic to sever the connection

between she and Draco and began digging among the coils to reach the secondary layer. The coils of magic snaked around her playfully, tugging her this way and that until she sighed and asked her magic to please let her through to the true core. The coils parted and she caught a glimpse of the shining sun that lay beneath. Harry wriggled her way through the primary coils and let herself fall right through the center of her molten true core.

Her mental senses returned to her all at once, and Harry had to pause for a moment to digest all the information streaming into her consciousness as she emerged from the sun in her Space Room. The sickness now covered everything outside of the Space Room. The mountain, the mists, the false lab and every branch of the many confusing tunnels was coated in a layer of black. Harry drifted toward the door to the Space Room. The hardest part would be getting out of the Space Room without letting any of the black stuff in.

Using the energy from her sun-core, which Harry noticed guiltily was burning a bit dimmer than it usually did, Harry decided to stand as close as she could to the door, and then create a barrier behind her that would seal off the Space Room completely, as if she'd created an antechamber between the door and the actual room. It would serve as a buffer zone in case any sickness leaked through when she opened the door.

With that precaution in place, Harry opened the door quickly and sent a burst of fire from her hands into the tunnel beyond. All she could see at first was blackness, but soon the flames were eating away at the creeping goop, melting it until it disintegrated. She stepped into the tunnel, closing the Space Room door firmly behind her after making sure no sickness had gotten through, and started flaming the blackness out of her way once more. It was slow work, but she cleared a path through the tunnel and out of the trap door, through the decoy Lab, which looked like a thick layer of soot had settled over everything in it, and out of the ice illusion to the mountainside beyond. Harry aimed for the closest patch of mist, and eventually made her way over to it.

She took a moment to re-gather her energy. Her magic was definitely not in top form. It felt like she'd been brewing Snowhit for hours or maybe days. She summoned another fireball with effort and hurled it just a bit vindictively into the blackened mists before her. The sickness seemed to evaporate from the air, and Harry sighed with relief. She sat down to wait, but it wasn't more than a few minutes later that Snape appeared out of the mists next to her. She could feel when he did so. It felt a lot like when the sickness had first entered into her mind, like a niggling pressure that felt foreign and unnatural, but the feeling faded once she had identified the intruder as Snape and classified him mentally as not an immediate threat.

"Hello, Professor," Harry said, somewhat cheekily, "Welcome to my mind."

* *_*Hp

* *_Hp

*Hp

[end of chapter twenty].

A/N: What's that? 21,800 words? Why yes, yes it is. You guys rock, so thanks for reading, even though it was a lot of exposition to try and explain exactly what was going on. Please let me know if something didn't make sense to you, because some of the things in this chapter I had to think through several times to make sure there weren't any glaring holes in the logic. Thanks again. Lots of love. I'll be updating again soon because it's officially summer! I'm home, and I'm ready to write my fingers off! Yay!

Chapter 21

A/N: So I just wanted to say that my reviewers are clever, clever people! Several of you anticipated certain events in this chapter, so well done! I'm going to have to be more sneaky I can see in planning my plot elements... hmmm... yes, less foreshadowing and more nasty surprises? Lol, but really you guys sent in some amazing reviews this week, more than I've ever had on one chapter, so thank you so much for every single one. And a great big thanks to everyone who's been reading this story, especially those of you who've been reading since the beginning, even if you never reviewed-thanks for even trying the story out.

A/N2: Now for more specific thanks: Vaughn Tyler, J.F.C., PintoNess, theoriginalolive, .not., hentai18ancilla, TearfullPixie, Debate4life, Cathy Willow, Frecklefreak, zeichnerinaga, Kyandra, Geriana, Celena Black, jaz7, BaltaineShadow, Midnight Alwas, she-who-wanted-hyphens, skepsis66, PrincessKity25, Arana'a, Neidan, dhh, Sylva-Rose, and higitto. I'll try to respond to every review by tomorrow, though there are a lot this time (not that I'm complaining), and to my anonymous reviewers: to kk, thank you, I hope you like the ending; to Amarantha, I'm glad you like it! Honestly, I'm shocked to get this many reviews. Any more and I wouldn't know what to do with myself ^^; to grinninglikemad, you anticipate a lot of what's going down, both in this chapter and the future-I hope you're not bored. I also hope your questions will be answered by the story as it goes on, but as for Parseltongue thing, I'm tweaking cannon so that the Parseltongue ability comes from the Peverell line, not the Slytherin line, and so that Slytherin was descendent from one of the Peverells, making Riddle still descendant from a Peverell like he was in the books, but also making it so that Harry Potter can be a Parseltongue by being descendent from the Peverells too, without being a Horcrux; to Shinga, you totally guessed the last section of this chapter, so kudos to you and it means a lot to me that you'd defend my story like that, so from the bottom of my heart, thank you,

and I'm glad certain elements of the story are not so easily misunderstood.

A/N3: Well, this is the longest of all the chapters so far (24,300-and to think I originally planned on 3000 word chapters). It's fitting as this is also the last chapter in the first book of this story. The sequel will be up as soon as I get the first chapter written, but it will be under a different title/story, so look out for it if you're interested. Thanks to everyone who stuck with the story these past six months; at over 200,000 words and 160 reviews, I couldn't be happier with my first HP fanfic. I hope you enjoy the conclusion to book one in this series.

The Pureblood Pretense:

Chapter 21:

Harry felt decidedly self-conscious as she watched Professor Snape look around with interest at her mindscape.

"Usually it's much nicer," she told him as his eyes took in the huge mountain before them, "You know, when there isn't black tar all over everything."

Snape glanced at her, apparently unimpressed, "If you can still summon the energy to make obvious jokes, perhaps my presence is not needed here. Shall I leave you to tidy up around here by yourself?"

Harry backtracked quickly, "I wish you wouldn't, sir. Judging by the dimness of my magical core, I'd never get it all done myself."

"Where is your core?" Snape asked, looking around again, frowning in thought, "On the peak of the mountain?"

Harry shook her head, "It's inside the mountain."

Snape raised a brow, "You have built a passage into the mountain? That is to say, you have multiple levels to your mind?"

"Yes, sir," Harry said, "It seemed safest to get all the important things out of the open."

"Indeed," Snape's lips quirked for a moment, and Harry wondered exactly what the inside of Snape's mind looked like. "I need to see the sickness to banish it, so you will have to take me though all of the infected areas."

"Yes, sir," Harry agreed. She watched Snape concentrate on the blackened landscape once more and raise his arms imperiously. A moment later she felt her entire mind shiver, and some sort of power rushed through her mental awareness, like a strong wind blowing hair out of her face. The sickness was hurled out into the mists and beyond, at least all the sickness that they could see from that side of the mountain.

Slowly, Harry led Snape around to the other side of the mountain, then down to the base. She hesitated, not liking the idea of showing all of her mental tricks to someone else, especially a man that she knew she shouldn't really trust, for all that she respected him as a Potions Master. The fact was, Snape had spoken to Quirrell as if he were in league or at the very least working for whoever had sent the sickness to Hogwarts. That meant he was an SOW Party-liner, which meant he was against muggleborns and halfbloods to some extent, or passively okay with their mistreatment. In other words, he couldn't be trusted with her secrets. Still, Harry reasoned, she could always change her mindscape around after he'd left. Might as well get his help with the sickness as long as he's already here.

When they reached the ice wall, Snape stopped and looked at her questioningly.

Harry smiled, "It's just an illusion. Didn't stop the sickness any, but when I designed the place I wasn't expecting the intruder to rely on touch instead of eyes."

Snape smirked, "A valuable lesson in case you decide to pursue the mind arts further. A great number of wizards make the exact same

mistake, and have mental defenses that merely look impressive, instead of taking the time and effort to create more lasting protections."

Harry frowned, "Why would they rely solely on illusions? I only have the one."

Snape glanced at her, "Illusions in the mind take much less mental and magical energy to execute in comparison to solid creations."

"Oh? I hadn't noticed," Harry said absently, walking through the illusion to the cavern inside, "And what do you mean mental and magical energy? Isn't the energy the same, from the magical core, either way?"

Snape considered her question as he glanced around the black-coated potions lab, "When you create something with magic, be it in the physical world or the mental world, you use magical energy from your core, that is true. However, in each case you also expend mental energy. By that I do not mean that your mind actually produces any magical energy of its own, but that magic requires concentration and strong intent to wield, especially when attempting to create something from scratch instead of simply altering something existing. This mental requirement takes a toll on the mind; extended concentration tires the mind and strains it, whether you are cramming for an exam or building a log cabin in your mind, and over time the brain is able to concentrate less and less until it requires rest to recover. It is this loss of mental ability, or energy, that I was referring to, not physical energy as magic is generally seen as."

Harry nodded her understanding, "And it requires more concentration and mental power to create permanent structures in the mind than it does to create lasting illusions?"

"Much more," Snape said, looking like he wanted to shake his head at her and sigh, "Destroying requires the least amount of mental energy, illusions and tricks of the mind just a bit more, but solid creation is something extremely taxing... to most wizards. I don't

suppose you've been studying Occlumency since you were about four?"

Harry shook her head bemusedly, "I just picked it up this semester, really."

Snape did sigh this time, "You are going to be a lot of headaches, Mr. Black."

"Sorry, sir," Harry said, not sure what else to say.

"Do not be," Snape said, "With any luck you will also bring much acclaim to Slytherin House. Merlin knows we need it these days." He muttered the last bit as he turned to look around the decoy lab once more, and Harry tucked that admission away for later.

"Do you need to stand at the opposite side?" Harry asked curiously, "So you can blow it out the door?"

Snape sent her an amused look, "No, I can evaporate it directly from here, it just requires more concentration."

Harry nodded and stepped back. Snape closed his eyes once more, and when he opened them Harry nearly quailed, thanking Merlin those eyes weren't focused on her at the moment. He looked determined enough to simply wish her out of existence if he wanted to, and a few moments later it seemed as though that's exactly what he had done to the sickness. It was gone so completely from every surface that Harry had trouble convincing herself that it had been there in the first place.

He turned to her, "A potions lab? Creative, but a bit obvious don't you think? I suppose the recipe scrolls hold your memories."

Harry smirked, an expression she'd picked up from Draco and Pansy, "Entirely too obvious, sir." She walked over to the fireplace and nudged the rug out the way. She could see where the blackness had seeped under it and dripped down in between the cracks of the

trap door to the tunnels below. She grasped the ring and levered it up to reveal the tar-covered ladder beneath. "After you, Professor."

Snape raised an eyebrow, "We may make a Slytherin of you yet, Mr. Black."

If only you knew, Professor Snape.

With a thought from Snape (or so it seemed to Harry watching), the blackness on the ladder and the part of the tunnel he could see was gone, and they traveled down into the pale green light emitted from the crystals embedded in the walls of the hewn rock. Snape glanced around curiously. "Do all of these tunnels lead somewhere?"

"No," Harry said, "But they are all covered with the sickness."

"Very well."

They traveled the tunnels with Harry as a guide, and eventually they had gotten all of them cleared except the one leading to her Space Room. She reluctantly led Snape along it and stopped when they reached the seamless door. He noted what was left of the path she'd blazed through the sickness on her way to the mists earlier.

"Your magical core is through there, then?"

"Yes," Harry said, "My... memories and such are through there too, but there isn't any sickness in there."

Snape regarded her carefully, "You are certain?"

"I am. I took precautions coming through, and there is no way for the sickness or anything else to get through by touch alone."

Snape inclined his head slowly, "Very well. I am not unfamiliar with the necessity of keeping certain things private. In any case, this explains how your physical body is still in meditation and not in a coma despite you leaving your mind unattended with the sickness for so long. You must have locked most of your physical controls away

with your magical core and your memories, if perhaps inadvertently. You will inform me immediately if you sense any remnant of sickness within once I have gone, however."

Harry agreed. Snape eradicated what was left of the sickness, and the alien feeling that had been niggling at the back of her magical senses since she had first contracted the illness at Draco's bedside disappeared. She sighed with relief and led Snape back out of the confusing network of tunnels and up the ladder into the decoy cavern. "Thank you for helping me get rid of the sickness," she said as they walked through the ice wall and out onto the mountainside.

Snape turned serious eyes on her and said, "I would not have been able to, had you not broken through from the inside. That is especially true for Draco. My godson is... one of the few things I consider important in my life. It is I who must thank you for intervening as you did, though I expect a full explanation of just what you did when you get out of your trance."

Harry frowned slightly, "You shouldn't thank me. It was my fault to begin with. If I'd told you from the start that Draco was sick instead of trying to spare you the worry-"

"Then I would have rushed back, neglecting my important errand, and stood beside Draco's bedside just as uselessly as his parents and Madam Pomphrey did," Snape scowled at her the way he sometimes scowled at other kids in Potions class who gave answers that didn't make any sense whatsoever, "My expertise was not enough to save Draco or stop the sickness, and my knowing sooner would not have made any difference. You found a way when no one else did, and for that I expect you will have many people's thanks, including Lucius and Narcissa's. The other parents will be grateful if your method can cure their children as well, but the Malfoy's almost lost their son and Heir today. They will not forget that, and you should not treat your accomplishments so lightly."

Harry didn't know what to say, a situation that was occurring more frequently the more time she spent at Hogwarts. Luckily, Snape went

on to fill the silence.

"Do not worry about developing an inflated ego," he told her, looking down his nose at her, "I can spot one coming years before it swells, and the very moment I sense you to be valuing yourself more than you merit, I will be only too happy to intervene." Harry ducked her head to hide a small smile. "Now let's get out of here so I can dress you down properly for your numerous offences, beginning with omitting pertinent information from a report to your superior and ending with recklessly endangering another student's mind by mucking about in it without a license in Mind Wizardry."

Harry winced, "Will this be before or after Madam Pomphrey chews me up for sneaking into the Hospital Wing behind her back?"

"After," Snape said easily, "But before Miss Parkinson wakes up and scolds you for once again heedlessly endangering your good health."

"Right."

Harry watched Snape fade through the mists of her mind, which were pristine and white once again, and breathed a sigh of relief. It was almost over. All she had to do was wake her self up and explain things so that Snape could cure the other students too. Then she could go back to her little Lab and brew potions that were actually on the first-year curriculum for a change.

With that thought in mind, Harry finally stepped forward into the mists herself, letting her physical senses drag her back to the real world and leaving the peaceful, sickness-free mindscape behind.

When she opened her eyes, she flinched back with a start at the sight that greeted them. Draco was hovering scant inches away from her face, staring intently. He leaned back with a smile and Rigel could see that the Hospital Wing was more crowded than it had been... two days before? Whenever she'd last seen it. She felt

bleary, like she'd been swimming with her eyes open underwater for too long and forgotten what the world looked like without liquid obstructing her vision.

"He's awake," Draco said to nobody in particular, or perhaps to everyone in the room. Draco was perched on a chair next to the bed she was laying on. It was the bed Draco had been laid on when he was sick, between Blaise and a first year Ravenclaw Rigel thought might have a twin sister in Gryffindor.

Rigel levered herself upright, feeling extremely uncomfortable lying down in front of most of the people in the room. There was Draco, of course, and Snape, Narcissa, and Mr. Malfoy all standing near the foot of the bed. She was surprised, however, to see that Headmaster Dumbledore was there as well, and Professor McGonagall right beside him. Madam Pomphrey was also there, hurrying over from a patient she'd been checking on two rows away.

"Don't move about too much, Mr. Black," the nurse said crisply as she arrived, waving her wand at Rigel automatically, who tried not to cringe. She really didn't trust Medi-witches. "You've been in mediation for nearly two days, and your body will feel quite heavy and unwieldy because of it." She frowned and waved her wand again, "You also seem to have weakened your magical core somewhat, though the levels are not much below what is normal for a first-year."

"In that case, Mr. Black has weakened his magical core significantly," Snape drawled.

Madam Pomphrey raised her eyebrows, "Well that is more along the line of what I would expect if half of the things young Mr. Malfoy have been saying hold any truth. One moment, and I will get you a bit of Pepper-up. It's not as good as *bed rest and quiet*, of course," here she glared a bit at Headmaster Dumbledore, "But I daresay those things will have to wait until certain parties are satisfied."

She went off, muttering about people who put information gathering above a child's good health, and a moment later returned with a potion and a stern advisement to drink the whole dose.

Rigel did so, avoiding the curious gazes of the adults and Draco for a moment longer. When Madam Pomphrey had taken the empty vial back, Headmaster Dumbledore stepped forward, saying kindly, "Thank you, Poppy. Now that young Mr. Black is recovered somewhat from the trying few days he has had, perhaps he will be able to explain a few things." The Headmaster turned genial eyes on Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy, "If your family would be so good as to give us a few moments, I'm sure it won't take long. In fact, I doubt Draco need remain the Hospital Wing any longer, as he is clearly free of the sickness."

Draco looked startled at Dumbledore's not-so-subtle attempt to get rid of his family, but Rigel privately understood and even sort of agreed with the Headmaster. If he knew what she suspected, that the SOW Party was behind the sickness, then it might not be wise to explain exactly how the sickness had been countered in front of one of the most notorious supporters of the SOW Party, namely Lucius Malfoy. From the look on Malfoy's face, however, he was not intending to go anywhere.

"My son does indeed appear to be free of this illness," Mr. Malfoy said smoothly, "A fact that I am most interested in understanding. I believe it is within my rights as a parent to know exactly what has gone on here, particularly as it seems to have involved the infringement upon my son and Heir's mental sanctity."

Rigel winced inwardly and saw Draco frowned out of the corner of her eye.

"Father, Rigel was helping me. He would never have gone into my mind otherwise. He even apologized for it already," Draco tilted his chin up with just a hint of defiance, "And I've said I've forgiven him. So he has no standing offence against me."

Rigel looked at Draco in surprise, knowing quite well he worshiped the ground his father walked on, but Mr. Malfoy seemed more amused than upset by his Heir's slight censure.

"I'm sure I will come to agree with you, Draco," he said unconcernedly, but with a hint of steel underlying his words, "Once I've heard the whole story."

If Dumbledore had been trying to get rid of the Malfoy's, he certainly didn't show any disappointment at having failed. He smiled benignly, seeming to include everyone in the room with it, and said, "That's just fine, then. I can tell this is going to be quite a tale, though, so why don't we make ourselves more comfortable?"

He waved his wand in a gesture that seemed to be more for show than an actual wand-movement, and six handsome chairs appeared around Rigel's bed. She noticed that the beds on either side of her were moved back gently to make room for them, and shifted a bit uneasily as the six adults sat down around her with varying expressions of curiosity and impatience on their faces. There was something extremely strange and perhaps a bit morbid about sitting in a room full of comatose children, with a half-circle of people looking at her as if she'd called them there for story-time.

Rigel felt stronger physically after the Pepper-Up had kicked in, but she was still drained emotionally and mentally from the past couple of days, and she didn't know quite where to start. She glanced around at the adults helplessly for a moment, but Professor McGonagall must have sensed her predicament, for she said gently, "I think we all know what happened up until Thursday evening. Young Mr. Malfoy fell ill, and the Malfoy's have explained that after discovering Draco's allergy to Acai and subsequent inability to rely on the usual potions you set out to try and find a way to work around the Acai. Obviously you were unsuccessful-"

Here Snape broke in sharply, "It is impossible to substitute a substitution, though a potions student of even Mr. Black's level would

not have been expected to know that. There was nothing anyone could have done to make those potions work without Ginseng."

McGonagall nodded, lips pursed, "Of course, Severus, I meant nothing by it. Suffice to say that at some point Mr. Black gave up the search and came back here. It is there that the accounts become unclear."

The Gryffindor Head of House turned back to Rigel, who saw concern, but also kindness in her gaze.

Rigel nodded slowly, "Yes, I came to the same conclusion late Thursday afternoon. I went to dinner, and there I realized that sometime while I was working, Pansy had fallen ill as well. I came to the Hospital Wing-

"How did you get into the Quarantine?" Snape interrupted.

Rigel held in a sigh. Clearly this was going to be one of those accountings where someone stopped her every other sentence and demanded clarification. "Madam Pomphrey escorted me across the line on Wednesday morning, when I brought potions to the Hospital Wing," Rigel said, "I think the line has a recognition memory of some kind, because after that it didn't refuse me access."

Snape sent a look to Madam Pomphrey, who pointedly ignored it.

Rigel continued, "I stood by Pansy and Draco's bedsides for a while, I'm not sure how long, just thinking, and when I was by Draco I felt something... strange with my mental senses. It was like something was poking at my thoughts, distracting me until I paid attention to it. Once I focused on it, I became sure that something was happening in my mind, so I fell into meditation automatically."

"You speak as though you meditate often," the Headmaster pointed out mildly.

Rigel nodded, already resigned to this particular secret coming out after she had overheard Pomphrey telling the Malfoy's. "I began trying to learn Occlumency this semester."

"How convenient," Mr. Malfoy commented.

Rigel looked at him flatly, "Not particularly. It was actually Professor Snape that gave me the idea." Snape raised his eyebrows to indicate his confusion. "He's been helping me with my magic this year. I didn't have very good control over it and it had a tendency to react to my emotions, as Professor Snape explained." Snape's eyebrows raised a bit further at the way she stretched the truth, but he didn't contradict her, though they both knew her control was, if anything, too good, and her constant containment of it was what caused most of her magical issues. "Over winter break my cousin got me a book on Occlumency, because she'd read that Occlumency could be used to control the emotions, and so this semester I've been working on learning it."

"Alright, so you developed enough mental awareness to sense to sickness when it first attacked and go into meditation," Pomphrey said, writing on a clipboard as she spoke, "What did the sickness look like when you first encountered it in your mind?"

Rigel thought back, "It came through the mists first, turning them black." None of the adults seemed at all confused about what she meant by mists, so she continued, "The sickness itself is like a big, black..."

"Monster," Draco supplied, "Like an octopus, all fluid with tentacles."

"Yes," Rigel nodded, "It's a blob of tar-like blackness, oily and fluid, that slowly expands to blanket the landscape of a mind. The sickness appears to be mindless, and it moves almost automatically. Once it gains entrance into the mind, it spreads through the mists and I guess that's where it sets up the mental barrier to keep other Legilimency-users out. Then it creeps over the landscape in every

direction, spreading like a liquid would, except it goes against gravity if it needs to in order to reach all the surfaces of the mind."

Madam Pomphrey nodded, jotting it all down, "What does it feel like?"

"Well, mentally it just feels wrong, and maybe a little slimy, but I never actually touched it with my avatar. When I saw the black stuff moving out of the mists and across my mindscape, I retreated," Rigel admitted.

"So did I," Draco put in, "I mean I touched it once by accident, and it just felt sticky. My magical core washed it right off though."

"Hmm," the nurse looked up, "Continue your account, please."

"I barricaded myself in the place I keep my magical core," Rigel said, she spoke firmly so that no one would try and ask her for more details than that, "Once I was safe, I realized I was also trapped in my mind. Even though I was in meditation, and not a coma, I was still effectively cut off from the real world. This worried me because I knew that Draco only had another couple of days under the sustainment spells, and I was supposed to be helping him."

"You did help him," Narcissa spoke softly.

Rigel looked at the older woman and smiled, "I did. I was also very lucky, though." She hesitated for a moment more, still uneasy about explaining the 'cure' to the Malfoy's, but the look of grateful concern on Narcissa's face decided her. The Malfoy's didn't look to her like members of a political party. They looked like parents, worried and upset as any parent would be and many of the other kids' parents probably were. They, too, had been hurt by the sickness, no matter if they'd known of it before hand or not. They, too, deserved an explanation. "Professor Snape had taught me earlier in the semester how to imbue potions consciously, because my magic wasn't stable enough to imbue them unconsciously, and he also taught me to sense my magical core. Because of this, I knew about true cores and

about forming connections between magical cores. I just sort of put all of those things together and worked out a plan to both get out of my own mind and to help Draco get the sickness out of his."

She received a handful of blank looks and a couple of incredulous ones as well.

"I don't get it," Draco said, and since none of the adults tried to explain, Rigel went through it as best she could.

"I discovered that a person's true core manifests itself naturally in their mind," Rigel began, trying to sound as sure as possible, especially since Pomphrey seemed to be recording her word for word, "So from that I theorized that if my magical core was the same in my mind as it was in the real world, that is, since I could pull magical energy from the core in my mind the same as I could from my real core, then the two cores must be one in the same, connected, otherwise there would be no magical pathway for me to draw magic from my core into my mind. From there it was easy to see that my mind had a back door in the form of my magical core. So I could use that connection to get out of my mind."

"It is true that a person's mental core is a manifestation of their true core," McGonagall said slowly, "But I don't think I've ever heard of someone attempting to move between them."

"It is possible," Dumbledore said thoughtfully. "Because the magic moves from core to mind and back, a person's consciousness is able to move back and forth as well, with enough will power."

"Yes, but that does not apply to anyone else's magical core," Snape said, "It sounds as though you mean to say you projected your consciousness through your mental core to your physical core along the pathway that naturally exists between them. Then you used what I taught you about forging a connection between two cores to build a pathway between your core and Draco's, all while still maintaining your meditation status, I might add. While all of that would be theoretically possible if one ignores the fact that you are an eleven-

year-old wizard who has had a wand less than a year and has been practicing Occlumency for less than 6 months, that is as far as it goes."

Rigel frowned and opened her mouth to interject, but Snape held up a hand, "No, Mr. Black. I have many years of study in this discipline, and if you mean to suggest that you went on to project your consciousness into Draco's core, somehow using the natural connection between his core and mind to gain access to it, then I must disagree on the grounds of impossibility. Such a thing cannot be done."

"But that's what I did," Rigel protested. She felt the sting of betrayal as Snape once again refused to believe she had done something she said she had. "I forged a connection between our cores just like you did that one time, and then instead of sending magic along it I sent my consciousness. From there I moved through Draco's primary core to his true core, and then into his mindscape. It was the only way I could think of to get in to help him with the sickness' barrier still protecting it from the outside."

"I am telling you, it isn't possible," Snape said patiently, with a slightly apologetic look to his face that only someone who knew him well (which was pretty much everyone in the room) would catch, "You must have done something else. I don't mean to accuse you of lying. Perhaps you thought you went through Draco's core, but-"

"Now, now, Severus," Professor Dumbledore said cheerfully, "If this is what Mr. Black assures us is the truth, then we ought not to dismiss it too lightly."

"It is not for the sake of levity that I dismiss this," Snape said, glaring, "If Mr. Black had truly done what he said, the consequences would have been disastrous. For Draco."

Rigel paled and Draco looked confusedly between his friend and his godfather.

"Draco, cast a spell," Narcissa said abruptly. They turned to look at her, but she was staring very intently into her husband's eyes. Mr. Malfoy was glaring back, and the two seemed to be having some sort of silent argument. When Draco hesitated, Narcissa tore her gaze from her husband's and said, "Now, Draco. Any spell will do."

Mr. Malfoy clenched his jaw but turned to look at Draco as well. Draco straightened and pulled out his wand quickly. Apparently he had enough experience with his parents to know that now was not a time to disobey them. Draco pointed his wand at the cup that was sitting on the little side table next to Rigel's bed. A moment and a muttered incantation later, the cup morphed seamlessly into a silver snuffbox.

"Very nice," McGonagall commented approvingly.

Draco looked back at his parents, who were exchanging another long, though significantly less heated, look.

"Oh, for Salazar's sake, Lucius," Snape said, "I could have told you that Draco's core has in fact not been damaged. I was just in your son's mind, if you recall. That is why I maintain that Black could not have forced his way through it."

Rigel wanted to say that she hadn't forced her way through it, she had asked, but she didn't think anyone would listen to her at this point, and she didn't want to make herself sound crazier than she already did. She knew how other witches and wizards saw magic after all; as a tool, not an entity in its own right.

"But that is what happened," Draco spoke up. Everyone turned to look at him, and he flushed delicately, "At least, that's what it seemed like. I was in my mind by myself one moment, and then the next Rigel was coming out of my magical core. How could have he gotten in there without going through it?"

There was silence as the others mulled that over.

"Well, putting that aside for now, perhaps Mr. Black should continue his story?" Madam Pomphrey suggested hesitantly.

"There's not much to tell after that," Rigel said, "After I got through Draco's core, I saw Draco, and together we fought off the sickness until Professor Snape arrived to get rid of it completely."

Draco nodded his agreement, "Apparently all that work we did was for nothing, though, because Unc... ah, the Professor sent it off in about a second."

"How exactly did you engage the sickness?" Madam Pomphrey asked clinically.

"We just sent our magic at it," Rigel said, "It's destroyed on contact when it touches magic I think, which is probably why it left Draco's magical core alone even when it had covered the rest of his mind."

"You mean to say that you, too, could use magic while you were in Mr. Malfoy's mind?" Dumbledore clarified.

"Yes, Professor," Rigel said.

"Well, I'd say that certainly argues in favor of Mr. Black's actually being there, wouldn't you?" Dumbledore smiled at her, and Rigel blinked back, glad that someone believed her but not sure how genuine the Headmaster was in general. Then again, anyone who went along with one of the twins' pranks had to be okay, so she smiled slightly back.

Snape sent Dumbledore an exasperated look, "Albus, I want to believe Mr. Black. In fact I," he paused, and sent her a long look, "I have in the past dismissed his claims when they seemed fantastic, to my own detriment. But this time... it simply isn't possible. If wizards could go into each other's magical cores, affect them to the extent that Mr. Black proposes, they *would*. They don't, because it can't be done."

"Indeed," Mr. Malfoy was looking at Rigel as though he didn't quite know what to make of her, "A wizard's magic is one of the few things he can depend on in this world. If another wizard were to have free access to it as Mr. Black claims... well, the consequences would be enormous. Ordinary wizards wouldn't bother shooting spells at one another; they'd simply attack their opponent's magical core directly and be done with it."

"Perhaps," Dumbledore suggested, "Instead of enumerating the reasons Mr. Black's account cannot be possible, we should wonder instead how Mr. Black is able to do what is, for other wizards, certainly impossible."

Snape opened his mouth, but glanced at Rigel and snapped it shut again. His eyes pierced her, and he said, "It would not be the first time I have been mistaken when it comes to you, Mr. Black, and I doubt it would be the last. Instead of arguing about this, why don't we test it?"

"A wonderful idea, Severus," Narcissa said, looking rather glad to be sitting down during all this, "It's a wonder anything gets done around here with all you scholars waxing theoretical all the time." She smiled in a way that probably made a lot of people underestimate her as she spoke, and Rigel made a mental note to always assume Narcissa Malfoy was twice as clever as she acted, at least.

"How shall we go about it?" Minerva asked practically, "We didn't notice anything while Rigel was apparently in Draco's mind, and we were all sitting right here."

"Ah, my dear Minerva, we did not know what to look for before," Dumbledore said, "I think that this test will be most illuminating. Yes, now who shall we...?"

"Can I wake Pansy up?" Rigel asked immediately. Draco sent her an approving look.

"I don't see why not," Dumbledore agreed. "Let us adjourn to Miss Parkinson's bedside, then."

Rigel slipped from the bed, noticing as she did so that the only thing missing from her attire were her shoes, which were tucked neatly under the end of the bed. She moved down to Pansy's bedside and sat in the chair Dumbledore obligingly conjured for her.

"I don't know how long it will take," Rigel said, looking toward Snape, "Can you wait ten minutes, then try Legilimency every two minutes?"

Snape inclined his head, "Lucius, Albus, you two will monitor any magical connection formed between the two children?"

"Indeed, I know just the spell," Albus said, looking excited, "It was originally invented by a Russian puppet dancer who wanted to make his dolls come alive by transferring the consciousness of various people who came to his shows into... ah, right, well, the point is it tracks the consciousness it is directed at. If you will permit me..." He pointed his wand at Rigel and her whole body lit up like it was glowing a faint blue color. "Now, if this works as you told us, the light should change so that it encompasses only your mind, then just your magical core, then to Miss Parkinson's magical core, and then to Miss Parkinson's mind, and so on. Ready, Mr. Black?"

Rigel nodded and relaxed her physical body as best she could. She fell into the familiar meditation mode, falling, falling into her mindscape. It was a chilly as ever on her mountain. Harry wondered vaguely why her mind was actually cold when Draco's didn't feel cold at all despite all that ice, but then she was moving as quickly as she could through her mind toward her magical core. She was careful to close the door to the Space Room behind her, in case anyone thought to take advantage of her being out of her mind, so to speak, and took a moment to make sure her eyes were a flat grey before she dove once more into the bright burning sun at the center of her mind.

She followed the same path as before, but she didn't hesitate as much this time. Harry forged the connection between her core and Pansy's (and sent a pulse of energy along it to make sure it was, in fact, Pansy's), and then sent her consciousness shooting along the connection. She stopped at the outside of Pansy's core, which was shrouded in thick, green branches. Harry could actually smell pine and sap as she got closer, and the branches all seemed to be from different types of trees. She put a hand to the branches carefully, non-threateningly, and watched as the leaves curled around her hand and the branches parted just the tiniest bit. Vines wrapped around her and seemed to pull her in deeper. She leaned forward into the thick meshing of branches and leaves, seeing nothing but green all around her as she got deeper, and then, through the branches, she saw something else. The leaves around her grew silver as she stepped through them, and when they parted she came to a clearing, ringed by silver colored trees all around. At the center of the clearing was a pool of liquid that shimmered in non-existent light. It looked like a pool of mercury, or liquid platinum. It was thick and syrupy, and the trees around the clearing seemed to drink from it. She could see their roots dipping into the edges of the pool, and all of the trees that drank from it grew silver and shimmering too.

Fascinated, she approached the little pool slowly, projecting good intent as best she could. It didn't so much as ripple, even when Harry dipped a toe into the metallic substance. It seemed to absorb the motion calmly, and Harry thought it definitely suited Pansy to have such an accepting magical core.

"I need to get through here, to help Pansy," she said to the pool respectfully, "Will you let me through?"

In response, the pool shimmered and shifted until silvery liquid steps formed at the edge of the pool leading down into the well of magic. Harry thanked the pool and stepped forward onto the stairs. She walked down into the pool, which drifted over her head like she was going into a molten tunnel that led to the bottom of the pool. She

walked until she couldn't see the entrance and only then did a light appear on the other side.

Harry emerged in a peaceful little enclave. The pool of quicksilver substance smoothed out again behind her once she'd stepped all the way off of the stairs, and Harry glanced around. The clearing she was in had lush grass growing on the ground. It was surrounded on all sides by a thick layer of trees and tree branches, so much so that she couldn't see what lay beyond them. A patch of daisies was growing on one side of the forest clearing, and lying next to the patch on her stomach, idly stringing daisies together in a circlet, was Pansy.

"Pan," Harry called as she stepped across the clearing. Pansy looked over and froze, before a huge smile broke out over her face.

"Rigel!" Pansy got to her feet and greeted her like she was hosting a picnic, "What a pleasant surprise. You've grown your hair out. How are you?"

"I'm fine, Pan, and this is just how my hair is for my mental avatar. How are you doing?" Harry grinned at her blonde friend.

"As well as can be suspected, I suppose," she gestured vaguely toward the line of trees that Harry guessed hid the blackened portion of her mind, "What are you doing here?"

"Getting you out, of course. Not that this place isn't lovely," Harry glanced around the picturesque clearing, "But Draco and I need you in the real world."

"Draco?" Pansy asked, smiling hopefully.

"He's just fine, and woke up not long ago himself," Harry assured her, "Now we need to clear a path to the mists that border the outer edges of your mind. If we get a section of the mists cleared, Professor Snape can come in and banish the rest of the sickness from your mind."

"You mean that awful black oozing stuff? Yes, please," Pansy sighed, "It's just ruining the landscape. What do we have to do?"

"Well, we've so far just thrown magic at it," Harry shrugged sheepishly, "So whatever your magic does will probably help."

Pansy thought for a moment. "Alright," she said, "My magic is that pool, correct? I've been able to do some things, like grow grass and these daisies, so I'll see what I can do."

"Great," Harry said, "Also, don't be alarmed." She summoned a ball of fire to her hand, "I promise my magic won't char your landscape. It will set the sickness alight though, so it might seem like everything is on fire, but it isn't."

Pansy blinked, "Whatever you say, Rigel. Shall we?" So saying, she stared very hard at a patch of branches enshrouding their clearing until they shifted and moved apart. Beyond them lay a forest, blanketed in black, and Harry watched for a moment as Pansy summoned some of the mercury-like substance from the pool and sent it toward the black stuff. It moved gracefully, and much like Draco's waves seemed to dissolve the blackness it encountered instantly. Unlike Draco's water, it did so gently, almost teasingly, moving along in a strange and erratic dance that sent splashes of the silver liquid all over the place.

Harry followed, sending her fire where they met with a particularly dense section of black tar, but following Pansy's lead as far as direction. Soon they made it to the edge of the woods where the mists began, and Harry poured fires into the mist to evaporate the sickness out of it quickly.

A minute or two later, Snape was there with them, taking charge and willing the sickness away from Pansy's mind completely. He insisted on watching Harry go back through Pansy's core this time, so Harry obligingly approached the pond, which seemed to sense her intent and re-opened the passage, complete with shimmering stairs, for her to walk into. Harry waved to Snape and Pansy over her shoulder,

both of whom were watching her departure with interest, and traveled back along the pathways until she was in her own head again and could exit her meditative state by walking into her own mind mists.

When she opened her eyes, Snape was already explaining what he'd seen to the others.

"... nothing I've seen a core do before. It practically invited him through..."

Rigel tuned him out in favor of focusing on Pansy, who had opened her eyes and was staring at the people standing around her bed with polite confusion. Draco stepped forward to grin brightly into their friend's face.

"You're awake," he said brightly, "Good thing too, because we need more people of good sense in this Hospital Wing." He lowered his voice conspiratorially, "The adults are having a hard time grasping how we got rid of the sickness, even though they've just done a spell that proved to them that Rigel was telling the truth, not to mention Snape was there both times to witness."

Pansy's brow lifted, but like the poised and prepared pureblooded woman she was, she merely inclined her head to Draco to show that she understood the situation and turned to the Malfoy's, who were standing on Pansy's left side, "Hello Narcissa, I hope the day finds you in good health."

"It is I who should be concerned for your health, dear Pansy," Narcissa said, a smile in her eye, "I am truly glad to see you are recovered."

"All thanks to Rigel and Professor Snape, it seems," Pansy said, smiling warmly at Rigel and sending a look of thanks to Snape, who had finished recounting what he'd seen and was now paying attention to Pansy once more.

"Indeed it does," Dumbledore said jovially, "Well, things have certainly been explained to my satisfaction."

Snape and Mr. Malfoy shared a look that said 'satisfaction' would not have been the word they chose, but neither interrupted.

"Now all that's left to decide is how to wake the rest of the children up," Dumbledore continued, "I'm sure we can get several Legilimens from St. Mungo's here to help our Professor Snape-

"A fine idea considering the likely reaction of three-quarters of the afflicted students at finding Severus in their minds," Minerva muttered.

"-but it appears young Mr. Black will be working by himself on his end of the cure," the Headmaster finished.

Rigel frowned dubiously. She was exhausted even with the Pepper-up Potion from all the energy she expended in Draco's mind, fighting the sickness the hard way.

Madam Pomphrey settled it by breaking in firmly, "Not until tomorrow afternoon at the earliest. None of the other children are in immediate danger, and Mr. Black requires at least a day of no magic usage to recover his core levels."

"I can leave the Hospital Wing, though, can't I?" Rigel asked. At Pomphrey's disapproving look, she wheedled, "I don't need to be Quarantined anymore, and it would reduce the chances of me catching the sickness again from one of my other friends in here."

Surprisingly, Snape spoke up for her, "The boy has a point. It would not help his magic recovery at all to have to fight off another bout of the sickness tonight."

"Oh, very well," the nurse said, "But you will check in with me tomorrow morning, and you will not do anything strenuous tonight."

That goes for you two as well," she glared at Pansy and Draco, "And no Quidditch."

"Yes, ma'am," Rigel said, smiling slightly. Draco and Pansy nodded their agreement just as readily.

"Wonderful," Dumbledore said, "I have a few letters to send now that this business is all cleared up, so if you will excuse me. Minerva, I may require assistance, if you wouldn't mind? Splendid. Mr. Malfoy, Mrs. Malfoy, I trust Severus can see you out when you go." The headmaster gave a little wave and strode out of the Hospital Wing with a spring in his step and a whistle on his lips. McGonagall followed him out, and Pomphrey went off to file her medical report on the Malfoy case.

Snape surveyed them all for a moment, then said, "My absence has caused many things to pile up in my office. Come and see me before you leave, Lucius, Narcissa. Mr. Black, I will see you back here tomorrow afternoon to begin waking patients. Until then, no brewing, and no homework. I shall negotiate your missed assignments with your other Professors and inform you of which ones you will complete. The same goes for you two as well, Mr. Malfoy, Miss Parkinson." He swept off purposefully, leaving the Malfoy's, Pansy, and Rigel behind.

"I should get going as well," Pansy said demurely, "There are a few people who should be informed of my recovery, and I must write to my parents. Good day, Mr. Malfoy. Lovely to see you, Narcissa." She turned to Rigel and Draco, "I'll meet you guys at dinner."

"Give your mother my best, Pansy," Narcissa said. Pansy nodded and rose gracefully from her sickbed. Rigel rose from her seat as well and made to follow her, but Draco put a hand on her arm and shook his head slightly. Perplexed, Rigel relaxed her stance once more and turned to face the older purebloods.

"Mr. Black," Mr. Malfoy began stiffly, "No matter how it came about, the fact remains that were it not for your actions, Draco would be lost

to us. For that the Malfoy family owes you a debt, of equal value to the life of our Heir."

"You may call upon us to fulfill this debt day or night, now or twenty years from now," Narcissa continued, "A blood debt you have sown, and blood ties you shall reap. For safeguarding the life of our son where none other stepped forward, you, Rigel Black, shall be made a son in magic as though you were a son in blood, until such time as the debt that lies between us is fulfilled."

Rigel looked between the two adults. Narcissa's face was solemn and Mr. Malfoy's expression was harshly set. Both gazed silently at her, waiting for words she didn't know how to say.

"It means you're an honorary Malfoy," Draco leaned over beside her to explain quietly, "It's family tradition that when the life of either the Malfoy patriarch or the scion is owed to someone outside of the family, that person becomes a part of the family in spirit until the debt is fulfilled. You now have the informal social position of a Malfoy, and access to all of our connections and holdings." Rigel stared at Draco with what she knew was an expression of disbelief warring with overwhelming shock. He nudged her gently, "It's a matter of honor, and more importantly, blood. You have to accept formally. Go on."

Rigel turned back to Draco's parents and swallowed. She felt something hot in her gut that was part embarrassment, part shock, and part shame. Would they be so keen to appease their honor by inviting her into their family if she was a halfblood? And what would Sirius think when he heard that his son was rubbing elbows with the Malfoy's? Then again... Rigel thought about the pained and almost desperate looks on the Malfoy's faces when Madam Pomphrey had told them Draco rejected the coma-sustaining potions he needed to last out the sickness. She thought about the good she might be able to do with the advantage of the Malfoy name. Archie could get a job in any Hospital he wanted with a Malfoy backing. The Black name was nothing to sneeze at, of course, but aside from volunteering in the children's ward from time to time, Sirius was a veritable recluse since Diana died. Rigel's uncle had no where near the connections

the Malfoy's had, and while Rigel didn't approve of the way the Malfoy's went about acquiring those connections, she could not, as a Slytherin, deny their potential usefulness. And a life debt? Rigel was all too aware of how likely it was that someone in her position-that is, someone playing a dangerous game with even more dangerous people-would have a use for just such a debt.

"My actions were in the service of a friend," Rigel said carefully, "And not initiated with an ulterior purpose in mind. I accept the debt between us only with the understanding that I will never take advantage of your family's honor, and with the hope that I will not become a burden to the Malfoy name. It is my wish that this debt not hang between us, heavy and awkward, but rather that it be set from our minds and forgotten until such time as it becomes relevant once more."

Mr. Malfoy inclined his head slowly, "Well spoken, Mr. Black."

"Though your own family of course has the greater claim," Narcissa added, "We hope that you will come to naturally think of us as your secondary family. We don't mean to replace the ones already in your life, but instead to add to that life as best a family can."

Rigel's smile was small, but genuine, "Thank you, Mr. Malfoy, Mrs. Malfoy. In truth I have already begun to think of Draco as my brother, and surely no one could ask for a better second family than yours."

"Please, just call me Narcissa," Narcissa said, effectively breaking the tension in the room with a teasing smile, "All this Mr. and Mrs. doesn't feel very familial, now does it?"

"I suppose not, my lady," Rigel said, willing to forgo the Mrs. but not quite up to actually calling Draco's mother 'Narcissa' yet. "Well, I shall leave you to Draco, then. I hope the next time we meet is under more pleasant circumstances."

"Circumstances would be hard pressed to become worse," Mr. Malfoy said, and he seemed to have unfrozen just a fraction, "Good

day, Mr. Black."

"Good day," Rigel told them, and sent Draco a 'see-you-later' grin before leaving the Hospital Wing as quickly as was polite. She had letters to write before a certain uncle of hers got any ideas about charging up to Hogwarts and checking on his son. Not that she thought he would be allowed to. She was pretty sure Dumbledore was keeping all the parents away with the excuse of the necessary Quarantine. The Malfoy's were probably only let into the school because their son was in serious mortal danger, unlike the other children. Still, Sirius deserved a letter now that she was able to write one.

Dear Sirius-

No, no, that wasn't right.

Dear Dad,

I bet by now you've gotten some appropriately vague and unsatisfying letter from the school saying I was admitted to the Hospital Wing for the past few days or some such. I'm sure you've seen the papers, and to be honest I was briefly afflicted with the sickness that's going around the school. Don't worry though, I'm perfectly fine, and in fact they've recently figured out a cure for the illness, so all the other kids are going to be fine, too.

Okay, okay. To be even more honest, I was the one who came up with the cure. It was sort of an accident how it happened, but they're giving me credit for it, and I have to help out with waking the other kids up from their enchanted sleeps, too. It's going to keep me so busy-when am I going to find the time for a good prank? Feel sorry for me? You should. When I stumbled upon the solution for this silly sickness, I ended up saving Draco Malfoy's life in the process. Don't get me wrong, I like Draco, but his parents went and made me an honorary Malfoy on account of the life debt they owe me or something. I don't think it actually means anything, I mean, I don't

exactly want or need a second family when I've got you, do I? Anyway, one good thing is that this means the Cow Party can't use the sickness to undermine Dumbledore, right? There isn't any proof that they're the ones behind it, of course, but maybe it would help if you put out the word that the sickness was cured. Hint that Dumbledore played a strong role in the discovering of a cure if you can. I'll back it up, and since I came up with the cure, who's to gainsay me? Let Aunt Lily and Uncle Potter and Uncle Remus know that I'm okay too, won't you?

I can't wait to see you in June. Unless I fail all my finals because of the course work I missed and they keep me in summer school, but hey at least everyone else in my grade will fail too. Maybe they'll cancel final exams altogether. If you wanted to write to the Headmaster expressing your concern as a parent for your child's academic progress, perhaps emphasizing how unfair you think it would be to test the first-years who've been asleep since February on material they never covered, I certainly wouldn't complain. Don't get any funny ideas about coming up here to check on me once the Quarantine is lifted though. I love you, dad, but it would be so lame if my father had to come personally check up on me-they'd think I really was a Malfoy, instead of a Black, who everyone knows can stand just fine on their own two feet.

Anyway, I miss you tons (no one appreciates a good joke around here, except maybe the Weasley twins), and I fully expect you to pick me up at Kings Cross in your most embarrassing outfit to make up for not coming and checking up on me in person. Just please don't bring the snakes.

Give my best to everyone,

Love,

-Your son

P.S- what do you want for your birthday? I just realized I better have it planned out before I come home, since it's in mid-June.

There. Rigel stopped the Dicto-quill. She'd down-played the sickness, done damage control on the whole Malfoy-life-debt thing she was still trying not to think about, and played the embarrassed teenager card to make sure Sirius didn't come up to the school. Now all she had to do was send it. She would write to Archie as well, letting him know that everything was okay, but that could wait until later in the week.

Rigel stood from where she'd been sitting on her bed in the dorm room. Draco hadn't come back, so he was probably still spending some time with his parents. Theo, of course, was still in the Hospital Wing, but even so she retreated into the bathroom before changing into clothes she hadn't been wearing for three days straight. It wouldn't do to develop habits that weren't conducive to her secret-keeping after all.

She left the first-year dorms and was crossing through the common room to the false-wall entrance when someone called her name from a couch near one of the fireplaces.

"Black!"

Rigel turned her head. It was Flint. She slowed, then changed direction to walk over to him. He was sitting with Adrian Pucey and Lucian Bole, probably talking Quidditch. "What is it, Flint?" she asked, nodding to Adrian, who she knew, and giving Bole a polite look as well.

Flint smirked up at her, "Perhaps you can help us with something, Mr. Black. You see, not long ago we saw a girl who looked remarkably like Pansy Parkinson stroll through here. Now normally we would assume we were mistaken, as it is common knowledge that Miss Parkinson fell prey to the sickness on Thursday afternoon, but this girl was walking with Aldon Rosier and Edmund Rookwood, who are known to be close associates with Parkinson."

Rigel looked at Flint rather blankly, knowing what he wanted her to say, but not going to say it until he asked.

"So you see our conundrum," Flint went on blithely, "How is it that a girl who should by all rights be laid up in Quarantine is walking around the school with a skip in her step when Adrian here saw her collapse himself?"

Rigel smiled very slightly, "Why Flint, didn't you know? The sickness had been cured."

"Cured?" Pucey leaned forward with interest, "Are you sure?"

"Quite," Rigel said, "I was there when Pansy woke up, and Draco's awake as well. The other kids will start returning to their Houses tomorrow, I believe."

"How was it cured?" Bole asked, his eyes narrowed thoughtfully, "Was it Snape? He's been gone for a while. Was he researching a cure?"

Rigel tilted her head to the side, "Yes, Professor Snape was instrumental to the cure. He went on a trip to get supplies for some potions he was brewing for the victims of the sickness, and when he came back the illness was cured." Technically, Rigel thought to herself, that was all true.

"Interesting that Parkinson and Malfoy would be the first two to be cured," Flint remarked, a mocking glint in his eye.

"Yes," Pucey said, "You'd think they'd wake up the ones who'd been under the illness the longest first."

"Snape wouldn't want his godson to be afflicted a moment longer than he had to," Bole said dismissively, "And I hear Snape is good friends with the Parkinson's too."

"If that's the case those poor Hufflepuffs will never be woken up," Pucey said sadly, fighting a grin.

"A shame the sickness was stopped before it had time to infect the whole Ravenclaw Quidditch team, eh Flint?" Bole added.

Flint grunted, "No need. We'll crush them in the final match either way. All the better if they're conscious enough to see it."

Rigel lifted a mental eyebrow. She hadn't been paying much attention to Quidditch since she started brewing for Snape, but she supposed the season would be coming to a close soon.

"Oh, and Black?" Flint brought her out of her thoughts, "That letter you were supposed to send for me? Don't worry about it."

Rigel frowned, but quickly realized he meant the assignments she was supposed to be completing. She thought she was caught up, but there were probably a bunch due on Monday that she hadn't even gotten from him yet.

"No, I'll send it," she said, "Just remind me tonight."

"Didn't you hear me?" Flint frowned, "I said you don't need to-"

"I'll send it," Rigel said firmly. She wasn't going to give him any wriggle room in the Vows they had taken, whether he meant to be kind or not, "Really, Flint, I said I would do it so I will. A Black doesn't go back on his word."

Flint narrowed his eyes at her, but Pucey and Bole were beginning to look at them strangely, so he shrugged, "As you will, Black."

"If that's all?" she asked, "Actually I'm going to the Owlrey now if you want to get your letter." It was a bit of a risk handing off the assignments in person, but if she wanted to get them done by Monday she should get started tonight. Who knew how long she would be working with Snape and Pomphrey tomorrow.

"Alright," Flint said, getting up, "Wait here." He stalked off to his dorm room and came back quickly with a roll of parchment tied securely.

Rigel tried not to fidget under the curious stares of the other two Slytherin Quidditch players as she took the scroll and tucked it into her robes.

"See you around, Flint. Pucey. Bole," Rigel nodded to each of the upperclassmen, who either nodded or waved back, and left the common room, heading for the Owlrey.

Rigel spent the rest of the evening, save dinner which was a very uncomfortable affair involving numerous stares from the people around Draco, Pansy, and Rigel who didn't know the sickness had been cured, working on Flint's assignments. There were indeed several due on Monday, and Rigel thanked Merlin she had kept up on the extra essays she did for Flint before she'd gotten sick and subsequently spent two days in meditation. She hadn't missed one, but if she'd waited until the weekend was over to get those assignments she would have missed three. She was lucky Flint reminded her, and she told herself she would keep up on the assignments in the future so that if something unexpected came up again she wouldn't risk reneging on their agreement by default.

She managed to finish all three essays that night, though she relied heavily on the Map to make it back from mailing the assignments in the Owlrey without running into any teachers after curfew.

The next morning, she, Pansy and Draco met up at the Hospital Wing to get checked over by Madam Pomphrey. The nurse reluctantly proclaimed them fit, and Rigel was told to come back that afternoon to start helping Snape wake up the other students.

"Let's go outside," Draco said suddenly as they were walking out of the Wing, "We've been cooped up too long. I don't know about you guys, but I don't think my mindscape counts as fresh air."

"Good idea," Pansy said, "We're probably all due some vitamin D no matter what Pomphrey says. Especially you, Rigel. You haven't been out of the potions lab much in the past few months."

Rigel nodded agreeably. It would be nice to get out of the castle and remember that the rest of the world still existed beyond the sickness.

They strolled across the grounds, not going anywhere, just enjoying the sun and one another's company.

"You know my parents have invited you to the manor this summer," Pansy remarked to Rigel as they walked, "Draco will be over several times I imagine, but my father invited you specifically, Rigel. I wrote him about how you cured me of the sickness, and he is very interested to further his acquaintance with you."

"What exactly did you tell him?" Rigel asked uncomfortably. Snape had told her not to downplay what she'd done, but on the other hand every ounce of attention on her added to the likelihood that someone would see through her pretense. Pansy's father had struck her as an extremely intelligent and frankly ruthless kind of man, and that was exactly the kind of a man she didn't want to get to know too well.

"Why the truth, of course," Pansy said innocently, "That you were fulfilling the promise you made over Christmas break to look after my best interests admirably."

Rigel didn't remember actually promising to do anything, but she did remember Mr. Parkinson saying something about her duty as a friend to Pansy, and she supposed she'd tacitly agreed. Still. "Pan, I'd rather not make everyone think I'm some kind of hero, or super-powered wizard, or genius or something. I was lucky Snape had taught me enough this semester to guess my way through the whole thing, and I'm afraid if people make too big a deal out of this they'll expect me to be something I'm not."

"Something you're not?" Pansy raised her eyebrows, "Rigel, you *are* all those things, though maybe not in the way you mean. You did save Draco's life, on purpose or accident, so you're a hero by default. You also did something that apparently should have been impossible, twice, so technically you do have some sort of power that most wizards would consider extraordinary."

"And everyone knows you're a genius at potions," Draco put in, "How many first-years are competent enough to take over for Snape when he's out of the country?"

Rigel shrugged, "I guess. I just want to make potions, though. I don't want to be some great famous wizard, and if people start expecting things like that from me now, they'll only be disappointed later on."

"So let them be disappointed," Draco said like it was the most obvious thing in the world, "Who cares what they think? Just live your life how you want, Rigel, but don't deny something when it's so obvious. You are great, whether you like it or not."

Rigel smirked and simpered, "Aww, Dray, I think you're *great* too."

"Me too," Pansy giggled, " So great."

"Shut up," Draco scowled, but the corner of his mouth was twitching.

They laughed, teased Draco, and laughed some more. Pansy told them she had finally gotten her mom to agree to let her take cooking lessons over the summer, and Draco said his father was going to get him the new Nimbus broom before September. Rigel promised she would try and convince her dad to let her see them that summer. They were outside so long that when they came back in, the Great Hall was already empty.

"We missed lunch," Draco frowned.

"Madam Pomphrey's not going to be happy with us skipping meals," Pansy added.

Rigel cocked her head, considering, "You know I just realized you guys have never been to the kitchens."

"Have you?" Pansy asked curiously.

"Come on," Rigel said, turning and heading for the stairs that would take them to the basement level, "I should have shown you anyway."

"Yes, you should have," Draco said, looking torn between curiosity and indignation, "You never tell us anything, Rigel."

"It's his nature," Pansy patted Draco's arm sadly, "Unless he's been hit with a jelly-brains jinx, our Rigel is as closed-mouthed as a clam."

Rigel ducked her head, not thrilled to be reminded of that particular incident.

Draco chuckled, "I remember that." He put on an incredibly wondering tone and said, " 'the sky is going to rain honey tomorrow.' "

Rigel rolled her eyes a bit, "I did not say that."

Pansy joined in, snickering, "You did so. 'Oh, *are* you an angel, Malfoy?' "

Rigel nudged them each with an elbow, "Alright, you two. We're here, so stop making fun of me or you'll embarrass me in front of Binny."

"Binny?" they repeated blankly.

Rigel shook her head and reached up to tickle the pear. She turned the doorknob and led the way through the portrait hole. There was a moderate amount of activity, mostly centered around the sinks, and Rigel supposed they were cleaning the dishes from lunch. Draco and Pansy climbed in behind her, looking around with interest at the cavernous underground kitchen.

Rigel had barely closed the door behind her when a familiar house elf with a necklace of champagne corks skipped up to them.

"You is back, Young Sir!" Binny said cheerfully, smiling up at her before turning to the other two and sweeping them a curtsy with her pink doily, "Welcome to the kitchens, Young Miss and Young Sir. I is Binny. Is you needing anything today?"

"I'm afraid we missed lunch today on accident, Binny," Rigel explained, "Is there any food left?"

Binny giggled, "There is always food. Come and sit, Young Sirs and Miss." She gestured them over to a long table before bustling off to find food for them, and Pansy and Draco sat with raised eyebrows.

"Come here much, do you?" Draco said wryly, "I always thought you were so skinny because you skipped meals, but if you've been coming here to get food you must be naturally miniscule."

"You're only about an inch taller than me, Draco," Rigel pointed out, "And I'm taller than Pansy."

"Pansy's a girl, no offense Pans," Draco said.

Pansy shrugged, "Why would I take offense. It's a compliment to be a recognized female. He does have a point though," Pansy eyed Rigel skeptically, "You really should eat more or something."

Rigel smiled, "My aunt Lily will fatten me up when I go home, don't worry." In truth, she was frowning inside. She didn't think she was that small for her age, but she knew that in the coming years the difference between herself and the other boys her age would become more obvious. She made a mental note to think on that problem over the summer.

Binny came back with a selection of meats, cheeses, and for Rigel a salad with a side of strawberries. "Is you wanting anything else?"

"This is lovely, thank you, Binny," Pansy said politely. Draco looked at her askance and Pansy stepped on his foot beneath the table.

"Oh! Ah, yes, Binny, everything looks great," Draco fumbled, shooting hurt looks at Pansy.

"Young Miss and Sir is being too kind," Binny said happily, "You is coming back often, yes?"

"We shall certainly try," Pansy said, "Though the school year is almost over."

"Binny is being here always," the house elf shrugged, "If you is coming next year, then I is seeing you next year. Good day, Young Sirs and Miss."

"Bye, Binny," Rigel said, "Thanks."

The house elf waved off her thanks and went back to the sinks. The three first-years dug into their late lunch and chatted about the end of the Quidditch season coming up. Draco suggested that Rigel could win the game single handedly for them by making her patented baby-owl face at the Gryffindor team, and Pansy suggested Draco could win the game single-handedly by distracting the Gryffindor team with a well-timed fainting spell, to which Draco hotly replied that perhaps if Pansy would work on her feminine whiles a little more *she* could be the distraction. Rigel was really going to miss her friends when she went home, though she had to admit she was looking forward to the end of term.

After they'd eaten, Rigel and her friends parted and she headed up to the Hospital Wing to meet Snape and Pomphrey. She walked into the Wing to find the two adults already waiting for her.

"Ah, Mr. Black," Pomphrey bustled her over to the far end of the Wing, where the patients who'd been there the longest were sleeping, "Good, now we can begin."

Snape explained what they would be doing. Rigel was to use her ability to cross through people's magical cores to go into each child's mind and first explain to them what was happening if they were confused, then help them clear a path to the mists. Snape would wait five minutes then begin periodically checking the mental barriers the sickness erected for weakness, so that he could enter the child's mind and clear the sickness out completely. Once they had a better idea of how quickly she worked on average, he wouldn't have to check so often, and once Rigel got the hang of things Snape would

go back to his work as a Potions Master and professor and they would call in an Occlumens from St. Mungo's to help Rigel wake the rest.

Rigel was once again excused from classes for the duration of her work in the Hospital Wing, and she wondered how she would ever catch up in her classes for finals in a couple months if she missed so much school.

So every day for the next two and a half weeks, Rigel went to the Hospital Wing and broke into people's minds. The first day was the worst. The children she woke first had been trapped in their minds the longest, over two months for most of them, and as a result were rather skittish when she suddenly appeared in their mindscape. Most of them didn't understand what was going on, as when they had fallen sick no one really knew much about the sickness, so they weren't even aware of what had happened to them. Rigel had to explain everything, as calmly as she could, which took a lot of time. She then had to convince the students that she was trustworthy, or in some cases even real, because unlike Draco and Pansy, these kids didn't know her and had no reason to let her toss fire around in their mindscapes without an explanation. Usually they were more at ease once Snape appeared and banished the blackness from their minds, but getting to that point took more out of her than actually fighting off the blackness with her magic did. She was getting tired of explaining the same thing over and over, despite how necessary it was to be as kind and patient with the poor confused students as she could be.

That's not to say it was a boring job. In fact, it was fascinating. Each and every one of the students had a different magical core, and a different mindscape. Even kids she'd never talked to in any of her classes before seemed like good acquaintances by the time she exited their minds. She just felt like she knew them after experiencing their magical cores and exploring their mindscapes, though she knew most of them didn't recognize her in her mental avatar form, and were very surprised to find she was a Slytherin first-year upon waking up.

One Ravenclaw had a magical core that felt like a windstorm, with a tornado at its heart. A second-year Hufflepuff actually had a mindscape like a tropical island, with a huge volcano in the center that was the link to her magma-core. She'd been in her mindscape so long that she had actually mostly beaten the sickness back to the water's edge of her island, and used her magic to plant bright, colorful flowers along the sides of her volcano in complicated patterns. Another Ravenclaw told her blankly that the 'black stuff' crawling all over his mind didn't really bug him. He'd created a thick cloud with his magic and spent his time lounging about on it, occasionally tossing a lightning bolt, the manifestation of his magical core, down to the ground beneath him for fun. She got to see Neville's carefully tended mental greenhouse, which he proudly told her was blooming already, though he'd only started building it out of boredom a few weeks ago. Rigel met Ron in his scorching mindscape, which was a great desert. He told her that he'd gone to Egypt to see his brother at work a year before and had loved the desert immediately, though his actual core was a water element, manifesting in a little oasis.

Some kids, like Ron, or like Millicent, had figured out how to manipulate their magic against the sickness already, but had been unable to eradicate it fully because they lacked the stamina. These she merely had to point in the right direction, and they did most of the work clearing a path to their mists for her. Others had little or no conscious control over their mental magic and sometimes created things on instinct or out of extreme boredom, but were mostly no help in disrupting the mental barrier around their minds from within. Nevertheless, no matter how much or little help they were, no matter how easy or difficult it was to get their cooperation, Rigel kept at it. She treated each and every kid whose mind she entered with respect and patience, and by the time she was waking the last students up at the end of the two and a half weeks, word had spread throughout the school that the youngest Black, first-year Slytherin, was the one who'd been curing everyone of the sickness.

Everywhere she went, classmates and even a few teachers stared. It wasn't that noticeable when she was still working in the Hospital Wing with Pomphrey and Gina Whitefield, the Occlumens St. Mungo's had sent to replace Snape, but when Rigel finally resumed classes with the other first-years, the attention became obvious. Mostly the stares were curious, excited, grateful, interested, or some combination thereof, but Rigel didn't miss the looks that were puzzled, skeptical, calculating, and cautious either. There were whispers that she must have some kind of strange power, to be able to do something none of the teachers could do, and suggestions that her innocuous appearance was all a mask, but in spite of the suspicions of a few, most of the school was in better spirits than it had been all semester, and the prevailing opinion, according to Pansy, was that Rigel Black was to thank for it. And thank her they did.

She no longer received nasty looks when she went to the Gryffindor common room looking for Percy to study with, and more than a few of their Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff classmates found time to stop by Rigel's desk or table and thank her personally for helping them get rid of the sickness. Even upperclassmen would sometimes send her serious, thankful looks or nods, as it seemed almost everyone in the school had known someone in the younger years who had fallen ill, be it a team-member, younger sibling or cousin, or just a fellow Housemate.

All the attention was, quite frankly, driving her mad.

Rigel didn't want to be the school's latest darling. She didn't want people she'd never met before coming up to her in the hall and patting her on the back fondly. She didn't like the way Headmaster Dumbledore twinkled at her merrily as he awarded Slytherin House sixty points for her assistance in ridding the school of the miserable sickness for good. Rigel especially didn't like the way even her own Housemates had begun treating her differently. Draco and Pansy didn't, of course, but the others all changed their attitudes toward her just slightly after they'd woken up. Davis and Greengrass avoided

her entirely. Blaise sometimes sent her intense, brooding looks when he thought she couldn't see him staring at her. Millicent and Theo had started treating Rigel like a general or advisor of some kind, always asking her opinion on things and taking every word she said very seriously, as if she were some wise old guru. She was sick of the way people always looked at her when something interesting or challenging came up in class, as though she should be involved somehow.

When she couldn't take it anymore, she turned to the only thing that ever made sense to her. Potions. Rigel went to her lab and brewed whatever potion came to mind. Potions weren't complicated, she told herself soothingly as she worked. There was nothing abstract or unpredictable about them. When you got the recipe right, it worked, and when the formula didn't mesh, the potion flopped. Simple, reliable, and not at all extraordinary.

It wasn't that Rigel didn't want to be extraordinary. She did. She wanted to be the greatest Potions Mistress there ever was, and that would be something quite extraordinary indeed. What she didn't want was extraordinary attention and expectations before she'd even gotten to the point where she could let herself be extraordinary. Right now she was vulnerable. A minor, a liar, weaving a dangerous fiction over every inch of her life, and a criminal in the most technical definition of the word. She couldn't afford attention now, when someone looking too close would have such disastrous effects, and so she retreated into her potions lab, made excuses about missed schoolwork and studying to isolate and protect herself from all but her closest friends, and waited with baited breath for the school year to end. She just wanted to be Harry again, just for a little while. She wanted to talk to her mum, who she hadn't exchanged two words with since Christmas unless they were relayed through Sirius. She wanted to talk magical theory with Remus and relax with Archie in his dad's courtyard (even with the snakes) and play Quidditch with her dad and Uncle Sirius. She needed a break from all the confusion and intensity that hovered about her at Hogwarts. She needed to go home.

So she brewed, and stewed, and waited.

Near the end of April, she finally got a letter back from Sirius. She took it with her to the Library where she needed to check out a few books on advanced Herbology for one of Flint's essays. It burned a hole in her concentration all through the half-hour she spent looking up information on the chemical composite of flesh-eating pest repellent, and it was with trembling hands that she shut *Caring For Your Crops* and took out the roll of parchment sealed with the Black family crest.

If Sirius had decided to come to the school regardless of her wishes, she was done. She had a stash of Polyjuice for June that she could use, but anyone besides her father would immediately realize she didn't look quite like Rigel. She and her cousin looked a lot alike, especially with the short hair and the contacts, but the difference was still noticeable, and there was no way she would somehow be able to see only Sirius and no one else while Sirius was here. It just wouldn't work. What she needed was some sort of conditional illusion, where a person saw different things depending on how the illusion recognized and targeted them, but she hadn't learned how to do anything like that.

Rigel broke the seal with the thought that even if Sirius expressed his intention to come and see her in person she'd have time to at least get out of the school and meet him on her terms to explain. Better to be expelled than to be revealed and put into prison. She took a steadying breath, mentally prepared to meet whatever was in the letter with all the cunning and guile that got her into Slytherin.

Hey Arch,

I won't pretend I'm not upset with you. When I read that article in the paper I was scared half to death. The only thing that stopped me from storming the school and screwing the Quarantine was the fact that it was the Prophet that reported it. Everyone knows you can't trust what that old dishrag says, and Malfoy's endorsement

convinced me even less. I thought, if there really was something to be concerned about, Archie would have told me. After what we went through with your mother, I thought you of all people would know better than to keep something like a sickness to yourself. I understand that you didn't want to worry me, but I ended up being worried anyway and it would have been better if I could have at least had the comfort of knowing my son had been well enough to write to me. All of us were upset and confused when we got your letter. Dumbledore didn't send us any sort of letter about you getting sick, so to hear about it from you after the fact, once it was too late to do anything about it, was very upsetting. What if you hadn't been able to write to us? What if you hadn't gotten well? Would we have only heard of your death after the fact, too? I sent a few letters back and forth with Dumbledore and he explained things to me. I get now that you didn't actually ever succumb to the sickness, and since you didn't appear to be in danger Dumbledore didn't feel the need to inform me, but dammit Archie I shouldn't have to rely on the headmaster like all the other parents with crappy relationships with their kids do. I should have heard it from you. We expect this kind of thing from Harry, but you've always told me everything. I don't know what's happened since you went away to school, but I hate the feeling that we've grown apart so much that you don't even tell me when you're in trouble. I want to help you, Archie, but I can't do that if you pull away so much.

I'm not trying to lecture you, pup, you know I'm no good at that. I'm sorry it took so long to write back to you, but I needed some time to get my words straight. I was really frustrated when I read your letter, but Moony helped calm me down. James tried to help, but I admit I didn't listen to him as well as I should have. I guess I'm a bit jealous to be honest. He and Lily get letters from Harry every week, and I keep thinking how unfair it is that going away to school has improved their relationship with their kid, but its done just the opposite for us. I know you didn't want to go to Hogwarts, Arch. I'm sorry, okay? The whole reason I didn't want you to go to America was that I was afraid of letting you get too far away from me, but I guess that was for nothing if you feel like you can't talk to me anymore. So here's the

deal. I'm not angry, and I'm really only a little disappointed in you. I just want you to know that no matter how far apart we get, you can always tell me anything. You know that, right? I know you're growing up, and that's fine with me (though I'm sure I don't know why you would want to), but just know that you can always turn to me if you really need help. Even if you don't really need help. I'll be here.

I also want you to know how proud we are that you're finding ways to use your interest in Healing to help others even though you didn't get the Healing program you wanted. I believe you can do anything you put your mind too-you and Harry both, no matter where you go to school, and you've proven that by curing this sickness and saving your friend. The life debt with the Malfoy's... well, we can discuss that this summer. It'll have some repercussions I'm not sure you've thought out, but I would never tell you it would have been better if you hadn't saved a life. I've been dropping certain conjectures into a few ears here and there, and I've hinted at Dumbledore's involvement too. I even gave an interview with the Prophet, so look out for that even though normally I'd tell you to stay far away from that trashy tabloid.

I'll be at Kings Cross to pick you up from the train. Can't wait to see you this summer and check you over for alien probes. You can never be too careful. The snakes miss you. Moony sends his scolds, and also his exasperated look-no, wait, that one was for me. See you soon,

-Dad

Rigel rolled up the letter with a sunken heart. She felt worse than she had since Draco had fallen ill. How could she have been so stupid? Of course Sirius would expect more from his son, and of course she couldn't just pretend to sound like Archie in the tone of her letters and expect Sirius to be nice and fooled. Sirius and Archie were close, which was part of the reason Archie had to hide his going to America in the first place, and it wouldn't be enough to be falsely cheerful in her letters if she 1) only sent those letters every few months and 2) didn't include anything really important and personal

in the letters. In acting like herself while pretending to be Archie, she'd hurt Sirius really bad, and probably strained Archie's relationship with his dad as well.

She took a shuddering breath and cradled her red-wigged head in her hands. She had to fix this somehow, and that meant writing a long letter to both Sirius and Archie. To Sirius she would explain that she still thought of him as her closest friend, didn't mean to hurt him, and apologize profusely, promising things would be different (or rather the same again) when she got home that summer. To Archie she would apologize as well, and tell him what she'd inadvertently done, hoping he'd forgive her. Rigel felt hot shame pool in her gut as she thought about her mistakes in the past couple of months. She should have told Sirius about the sickness immediately. She knew exactly how sensitive both Black's were about illness of any kind, and keeping Sirius in the dark before springing it on him had been cruel and thoughtless.

But if she'd told him, he would have dragged her out of school before the Quarantine went up, she reminded herself. Sirius would have completely freaked out, understandably, and the ruse would have been over just like that. She really didn't want to worry him, and she'd only sent that letter because she'd figured Dumbledore had already sent one. Rigel supposed she hadn't technically ever fallen into a coma, so maybe Dumbledore had been justified in keeping Sirius from knowing, or maybe he knew as well as she did how Diana's death had affected Sirius, and didn't want to hurt him any more than she did if he didn't have to.

Still, Sirius was a grown man, for all that he acted with the exuberance of a child, and he deserved to be respected as such, and given the opportunity to make his own decisions. She'd done the same thing to Sirius that she'd done to Professor Snape- tried to spare him worry and pain and ended up treating him like a child. Dumbledore could get away with making decisions like that. Rigel could not.

Rigel rubbed her eyes beneath the fake glasses, feeling her contacts sticking slightly in her eyes. She'd have to put in a new pair soon, along with the numerous other things she was supposed to be doing. She stowed the rolled up letter in her bag and was about to stand and re-shelve the Herbology book when a sudden voice cut through the silence of the Library.

"Aha!"

Rigel glanced up with surprise to find a small finger pointing about an inch away from the bridge of her nose. She looked down the finger to the hand, arm, and person it was attached to and blinked up into the face of the second-year Ravenclaw she'd first met in March, and then again just a few weeks ago when she'd woken the girl up from the sickness. Rigel recalled that the girl's mind had been mountainous, but unlike Rigel's White Mountain, the Ravenclaw had several smaller mountains in her mind, interspersed with grassy knolls, and covered with wild wood orchids.

The Ravenclaw was pointing at her with what looked like elation and frustration mixed together, and Rigel raised an eyebrow at the older girl's accusing stance. She stood carefully, grabbing her bag and readying herself in case she had to run. Madam Pince was already looking over at them with a murderous glare.

"Cho Chang, right?" Rigel said, a polite note of question in her words.

"Yes, that's right," Cho said, retracting her pointing finger but still looking fiercely at her, "And just who are you?"

Rigel shifted, a bit taken aback. She'd thought the girl had recognized her, and if she hadn't then why was she talking to her?

"I'm Reggie," she said, "We met a few months ago-"

"Don't give me that!" Cho snapped, her long dark hair trembling slightly as she glared at Rigel, "I've been looking all over for you

since that day you were so nice to me, but I couldn't find you anywhere!"

Rigel glanced over, and sure enough Madam Pince was standing, clearly about to come and throw them out. Rigel held up her hands placatingly and smiled at the fearsome librarian. She took Cho's elbow and whispered, "Come on, let's continue this discussion more quietly, not in the middle of the Library."

"Why?" Cho hissed, "Afraid someone else will figure it out?"

"I'm afraid Madam Pince will come kick us out," Rigel said, steering them to the secluded biography section, "Now explain what you're so worked up about, please."

The Ravenclaw took back her elbow and flipped her hair back huffily, "Why did you lie to me when I asked you your name? Who are you?"

"What makes you think I lied to you?" Rigel asked carefully, "I mean, just because you haven't seen me around doesn't mean anything. I mostly stick to my common room anyway."

"Oh, please," Cho rolled her eyes, "Do I look like a Gryffindor to you?" Rigel wondered if she should take offense on principle of the Gryffindor robes she was wearing, but Cho kept talking, "After I couldn't find you for a couple weeks I checked the school registry Professor Flitwick keeps in his office. I checked all the grade levels, even though I knew you couldn't be more than a third year, and there is no Reggie anything in the whole school. There's a Reginald Turnblatt, but he's got blonde hair, and he's a Hufflepuff besides. There's a Roger Davis in my House, but he looks nothing like you. I even thought it could be a nickname for a last name, but all the close R-names like Rochester and such have dark hair. The closest red-head is Ronald Weasley, but he has way more freckles and is significantly taller than you."

Rigel was looking at Cho is sheer shock by the time she'd finished, "You did all that research just to find somebody who you talked to

once?"

She smiled a bit smugly, "Never underestimate a Ravenclaw. Ravens are notoriously tenacious when it comes to curiosity, as well as naturally opportunistic. Besides," her face lost some of its smugness and looked troubled for a moment, "You were really nice to me. I wanted to thank you properly, at least until I realized you'd lied to me about who you were." She was scowling again, "Seriously, what is up with that?"

Rigel sighed, scratching the back of the red wig she had on, "Well, it's sort of a long story."

"I like stories," Cho said bluntly.

"Ah, okay then. Well, as you've deduced my name isn't Reggie, and the reason I lied about that is because this isn't what I really look like. I'm here in disguise, and I didn't want to have to explain the whole reason why when I told you my real name, because it looks a bit suspicious for me to be walking around in robes that don't belong to me or even my House, disguising myself..." Rigel glanced sheepishly at Cho, who raised her eyebrows but gestured for him to continue. "So, the thing is Madam Pince sort of really hates me."

"What did you do?" Cho asked, frowning, "Did you do something to one of her books? Because you really shouldn't treat books so-"

"I didn't do anything!" Rigel exclaimed quietly, "I just walked in the first weekend of term and when she found out my name she flipped out. It turns out my father may have set fire to a few... rows of Divination books while he was here, and Pince decided to bar me from the Library on the suspicion that I would follow in my dad's footsteps. The problem is, I do a lot of extra studying, so I need to come into the Library, so I came up with the idea to disguise myself so that Madam Pince wouldn't recognize me and throw me out. I still can't actually check out books, because as you realized Reggie doesn't exist, but I can come here and look things up now."

Cho looked like she wasn't sure if she should laugh or not, "You're skulking around in disguise... to study? Are you a Ravenclaw?"

"No, I'm not a Ravenclaw," Rigel said nervously.

"You must be a Slytherin, then," Cho said decisively. "A Gryffindor would be brave enough to do it, and brash enough too, but you already admitted those weren't your real robes, so you must be a Slytherin."

"Uh, yeah I am," Rigel admitted. She winced a bit, waiting for Cho to stomp off, well aware of how Slytherins were perceived by most of the school.

"Huh," Cho said, "A Slytherin who's not afraid to waltz around in lion's robes. Interesting."

"You're not mad that I'm a Slytherin?" Rigel asked blankly.

Cho shrugged, "It would be pretty stupid to be mad at a quarter of the school just for being what they are, but I know what you mean. Normally I would be a bit leery of a Slytherin in disguise, because I really don't think you guys need an excuse to be sneaky, but a Slytherin did me a good turn recently, what with getting me out of my own head and all."

"So you're not going to rat me out to Madam Pince?" Rigel asked.

"I won't if you tell me your name," Cho said.

"I'm starting to think Ravenclaws are just the ones who were too smart for Slytherin," Rigel sighed, "You are one tricky girl."

"Thank you," Cho said.

"I'm Rigel," she told the older girl finally, "I'm a first-year Slytherin, and-"

"You're Rigel Black!" Cho exclaimed, staring at her, "Let me see." She reached forward to take off Rigel's wig with a snatch that tugged at the tucked strands of hair and made Rigel grit her teeth on a wince. Before she could recover, Cho plucked the glasses from her face and tilted her head interestedly, "Huh, well what do you know. You looked different with long hair, though."

"I cut it all off right before school started," Rigel said, "But I still kind of picture myself with long hair."

"I can't believe you're Rigel Black," Cho said, sounding almost disappointed, "You were so cool in my mindscape, like calm and collected, and here you are running around with red hair and Gryff robes and... did you draw those freckles on yourself?"

Rigel flushed and snatched the wig back from the Ravenclaw, "Maybe."

Cho laughed heartily, but reached forward to help Rigel straighten the wig once more and handed back her glasses nonetheless, "Man, that's too funny."

"Don't go telling people, please?" Rigel said, "I don't want it getting back to Pince."

"Oh, I won't," Cho said lightly, "I have a feeling this is going to be the kind of thing I'll want to be able to hold over your head when you're all grown up and famous."

Rigel rolled her eyes, "Why does everyone think I'm going to be famous?"

Cho looked at her incredulously, "Because you already are, at least here at Hogwarts. Every single kid who got sick, which is most of the first through third years at the school, knows exactly who woke them up and got them better."

"Professor Snape and a Mind Healer?" Rigel mumbled halfheartedly.

"We know who made it possible for us to be cured," Cho said seriously, "And none of us are ever going to forget that. Just you wait, Rigel Black. Your name will go down in history one way or another."

Rigel didn't say anything. She couldn't deny what Cho was telling her, but she was uncomfortably aware of how easily her name could go down in history 'the other' way.

Rigel said goodbye to Cho and left the Library. She had several serious letters to write, and she'd promised she would help Draco with his Quidditch game after dinner. Thoughts of fame and infamy could wait.

On the sixth of May, Rigel was pulled into a very serious conversation with a very unlikely group of Slytherin upperclassmen.

Alesana Selwyn caught her elbow as she was walking through the common room and effectively hauled her over to a corner by the far fireplace where Rookwood, Rosier, and Flint were sitting on a couple of couches that had been pulled close to face one another, bent over something on the table in the center and talking in low voices.

"Come here, young Black, you might find something to interest you."

Rigel would like to say she allowed herself to be pulled toward the group, but in truth Selwyn was significantly stronger than she was, so there was no 'allowing' about it. Yet another thing she'd have to fix if she was going to pull off being a boy in the long run. The three older boys looked up at them as Selwyn, and Rigel by default, reached their group. They leaned back enough that Rigel could see what they were bent over. It was a newspaper, the *Daily Prophet* to be exact, and they seemed to have been discussing an article with great interest.

"Alice, so nice of you to join us," Rosier said smoothly, "And you've brought Mr. Black as well, how fortuitous."

"Why is that, Rosier?" Rigel asked politely.

"It's because we were just talking about you, Black," Flint grunted with amusement, shaking his head at Rosier's lofty manner.

"Surely three such interesting upperclassman such as yourself have something better to talk about," Rigel said rather dryly, "Don't you have final exams to study for or something?" Probably she should be more respectful, but she was running out of her infinite patience as the school year drew to a close. She just wanted to rest for a moment away from all the lies and intrigues. Usually it didn't bother her, but the idea of three upperclassman who were all Heirs to an intimidating amount of political and social power pooling their information to discuss her made her want to groan with frustration. She knew Flint wouldn't give her away-couldn't-but it was still unnerving that they would even want to talk about her. None of them were stupid, and no matter how well she'd covered her tracks there was always a trail somewhere to her secrets.

The other three exchanged amused looks at the very idea of studying for something as trifling as an exam, and ignored her question completely.

Selwyn sat down on the couch between Rookwood and Rosier and stared pointedly at the other couch until Rigel sank into the seat next to Flint. "Show Black the article," she said, nudging Rosier in the arm.

He slid the paper over toward Rigel, who picked it up to skim.

THE HOGWARTS MALADY: AN IN-DEPTH EXPOSÉ

It looked to be an entire write up, from beginning to end, on the sickness, written, of course, by Rita Skeeter. There were little subtitles like: FEARFUL BEGINNINGS: THE JONES CASE and A TROUBLESOME TURN: ALLERGIES CAUSE A SNAG IN THE TREATMENT. Rigel sighed and began reading through it.

Surprisingly, most of the information was, as far as Rigel knew, correct.

It detailed the sudden appearance of the sickness, how it struck the youngest Hufflepuffs first, and slowly spread by House and age as people got their friends sick despite the Quarantine. It went through the symptoms, referencing notes that Madam Pomphrey had given the Healers at St. Mungo's, and it was remarkably on-target with what the illness actually did. There were short quotes from a few anonymous students who had fallen ill, describing the blackness that invaded the mind, and Rigel recognized a few of her own phrases and assumed the kids had just repeated what she'd told them when she explained how the sickness had erected a mental barrier that could only be broken from the inside, which kept them from being woken as long as it was in place.

They were all, Rigel was dismayed to see, quite adamant that it had been Arcturus Rigel Black who saved them from the sickness, with help from a Healer or Professor Snape once Rigel had taught them how to break through the barrier from the inside. Rigel groaned, "They make it sound like I'm some sort of super Legilimens."

"It gets better," Rosier said cheerfully, "Just keep reading."

She did, and he was right... if you stretched the meaning of the word 'better' until it came out looking like 'worse.'

Good readers, this reporter was shocked as well, but after a little more digging it was revealed that Arcturus Black was in fact the one responsible for the cure. That's right, Arcturus Black, first-year Slytherin and Heir to the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black, somehow accomplished what several anonymous Healers at St. Mungo's agree should have been impossible. How is it that Young Mr. Black was able to break through mental barriers that stopped even the strongest of Legilimens, but was not able to completely eradicate the sickness from the minds of those he helped without assistance? It sounds to this reporter as if Mr. Black is not a Legilimens at all, but something else entirely, someone able to

surpass mental barriers with a skill of his own. Surely the Headmaster will take measures to ensure Mr. Black's classmates' mental privacy, should that be the case. In any event it seems that Young Mr. Black is proving to be a very gifted young man.

Some, however, would disagree with this assessment. This reporter interviewed Young Mr. Black's infamous father, co-founder of the Marauder practical joke line and well-known ladies man in his youth, Sirius Black. Mr. Black had this to say about the accounts of his son's involvement in the sickness: "My son is no Mind Master," he laughs, "When I sent him off to Hogwarts he was just like any other eleven-year-old. He's always had an interest in Healing, that's true, but he's never been trained in it like you're probably imagining. Anything he's learned that aided him in discovering a way around the sickness was picked up at school. You mark my words, Dumbledore knows what he's doing at Hogwarts. He's teaching those kids right if a boy who's been learning magic there for only a year can find a solution to such a formidable illness."

Mr. Black has certainly given us some food for thought. If, indeed, Young Mr. Black has no special talents of his own, then we can certainly be proud of the education our youth is receiving at Hogwarts, but on the other hand does it seem likely that if a student succeeds where his teacher fails he was relying solely on his teacher's teachings? Only time will tell if Young Mr. Black is more than meets the eye, but for now parents everywhere can rest safe knowing that the Hogwarts Malady has been cured, the children safely awoken, and the Quarantine lifted. There are even rumors that the Headmaster is planning a complete reform of the medical operations at Hogwarts, which will offer safer, more efficient Healing services to the students and staff. All in all, things are looking up at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

"How in Merlin's name did Skeeter manage to make an entire article that was supposed to be on an illness about one eleven-year-old boy who didn't even have the illness?" Rigel muttered, scowling. She

really didn't want this kind of attention, though at least Sirius had warned her he was speaking to the paper in his letter.

"You should be proud, Black," Flint said, a glint to his eyes, "If your dream is to be a Healer, I mean. After this any Hospital would be mad not to hire Arcturus Black."

Rigel grimaced ruefully. Archie's career as a Healer would definitely be helped by this article in the future, but she knew Archie would hate the idea of taking credit for someone else's work. "It has nothing to do with Healing," she said, "I didn't Heal anyone, I just used what Professor Snape taught me to help *him* cure the sickness, which wasn't even really a sickness. It didn't make anyone sick. It was more like a contagious curse, so if anything what I did was creative curse-breaking, not healing."

Selwyn laughed, "Poor little snake. Not much for attention, are you?"

"I can't see why anyone would be," Rigel said, "All it brings is trouble."

"Says the honorary Malfoy," Flint smirked. Rigel's eyes widened and Flint chuckled, "Oh, yes, we've heard about that as well. Draco Malfoy seems to be under the impression that you saved his life, and that you're now his brother by magic as well as his cousin by blood."

Rigel looked down at her robes uneasily, "The Malfoy's are too kind."

"But not mistaken?" Rosier's golden eyes shone eerily in the firelight, "So you did save Draco Malfoy's life. How could that be when from your own account the sickness isn't even really an illness at all?"

Rigel shifted under his gaze, "Draco was an exception. He had an allergy to... one of the ingredients in the potions he needed to stay stable under the coma. I sort of saved him by default, by helping cure the sickness before the time he had on the life-sustaining spells ran out."

"So you weren't trying to save him?" Rookwood clarified.

"Well, I guess I was," Rigel said, "But I would have done it for anyone. I didn't need to be adopted by the Malfoy's. They're great, but I have a family."

"But you *did* save their Heir," Selwyn said.

"I saved my *friend*," Rigel corrected.

"Well whoever you saved or didn't save," Rosier broke in, "The fact is that it ended the sickness, and as a result Dumbledore's credibility is higher than ever. Now that the children are safe again, no one wants to admit they ever doubted the Headmaster."

"And with this article suggesting that Dumbledore's teachings are what gave you the power you needed to cure the sickness, most people are of the opinion that the Headmaster should keep doing what he's doing, in all areas of his doings," Flint added.

"In other words," Selwyn concluded, "Dumbledore's opinion is good as goblin gold in the wizarding world right now, and rumor has it that his opinion is very much against a certain set of laws that were supposed to come up for discussion before the Wizengamot this summer."

"The mixed-blood marriage laws," Rigel said flatly, "You think they'll be voted against in the Wizengamot now that Dumbledore's faction has the advantage once more?"

"Oh, I very much doubt the SOW Party would be foolish enough to push the laws into consideration while the political winds were not at their backs," Rosier said breezily.

"So they'll table the laws until they have the support they need," Rigel said, understanding dawning. In other words, the threat the laws presented was postponed, not defeated. The Cow Party would just keep the laws from being voted upon until they were sure they

could win the vote, and since they were the ones proposing the laws, they could wait as long as they wanted with the excuse of still working on the draft. That meant they could suddenly push the laws through at any time, as soon as they had the support they needed to pass it.

"No one wants to risk losing when they don't have to," Selwyn said vaguely.

"No doubt the SOW Party will be very interested in how exactly the sickness that so fortuitously arose in Dumbledore's school while the law Dumbledore would have so venomously opposed was being introduced came to be cured miraculously by a mere first-year," Rosier said quietly, "I know I'm interested. And you, Edmund?"

"It certainly is interesting, Aldon, that the truth about the cure is so muddled. Most Slytherins are under the impression that Professor Snape played a significant if not dominant role in stopping the sickness," Rookwood said mildly, not missing the slightly guilty look on Rigel's face at that. She might have given several Slytherins that exact, and not precisely false impression. "Most of the younger students, particularly those afflicted by the sickness itself, would say that you, Mr. Black, were primarily responsible for their recovery, with only supplemental help from the Mind Healers. Other reports say that Professor Snape was in fact out of the country when Draco Malfoy fell ill, and of course the Prophet article suggests that Dumbledore played a part in the cure."

"All anyone knows for sure is that somehow Rigel Black got involved-and what a first-year who wasn't sick was doing in the Quarantine no one seems to know-and that the first-year ended up curing the sickness, acquiring a life-debt from the Malfoy's, and becoming solely responsible for curing the rest of the patients as well," Rosier continued. Rigel was slowly sinking further into the low-backed couch, wondering how exactly Rosier and Rookwood had gotten so good as double-teaming a person.

"Your involvement can of course be explained by what Selwyn has told us-namely that you were brewing an exorbitant amount of potions for Professor Snape as far back as February. Presumably Snape had you brewing for the sickness and so just let you continue brewing for the Wing while he was out of the country. If he was indeed gone while Draco Malfoy was ill, then it would make sense that you felt you needed to become involved, both because Malfoy is your friend and because you were given a position of powerful leverage as Snape's replacement," Rookwood said, "What doesn't add up is why you personally had to help awaken every single student. It can't be because Dumbledore didn't want to involve anyone else, because he hired a Healer from St. Mungo's to take Snape's place in the cure."

"On the other hand," Rosier said, eyes gleaming cheerfully, "It *does* add up if for some reason no one else *could* cure those students. In other words, the only solution is that you, Rigel Black, were able to do something that no one else could do. Something that couldn't be taught, couldn't be passed off to someone older, and therefore something that had nothing to do with Snape or Dumbledore. And that is certainly interesting."

"What's also interesting is that you were so dismissive of the illness actually being an illness," Rookwood said, "That suggests you have Healer training or knowledge of some kind, though your father denied it in his interview and you yourself seemed impressed and curious when I healed your wrist last semester. Not to mention the fact that by your own admission you hate hospitals and Medi wizards. In short, the anomalies are beginning to add up, Mr. Black."

Rigel glanced back and forth between the two of them, "Are you finished?" At their amused nods, Rigel took a breath and said, "First of all, you have figured out most of it. I cured the sickness by doing something that I am told no one else can, though it doesn't seem so difficult to me, only a little confusing. Snape taught me some of the things I used to get around the sickness, though he didn't put them together the way I did, and that's why I said he influenced the cure

heavily. Dumbledore facilitated the cure, and since it's his Potions Master that taught me what I needed to figure out a cure, what was said about his school being responsible for the cure is true too. I have self-training for Medi-wizardry, and I only started that after the winter break, precisely because I didn't want to have to rely on other Medi wizards and hospitals. Did I get everything?"

"Everything but the actual *cure*," Selwyn said, rolling her eyes, "Aren't you going to tell us exactly what you did?"

"What do you think I did?" Rigel asked innocently.

"In other words, no he's not," Flint grunted.

"Fine, then," Rosier sighed, "Keep your talents secret. One day we will figure you out entirely, Mr. Black."

"And until then we will be watching closely," Rookwood said in his mountain's rumble.

Rigel nodded her acceptance, knowing that any protestation would only make them more interested. She left the four upperclassman to make of the situation what they would. She just wanted to get home for the summer.

The final Quidditch match was played in the third week of May. Unlike the first match, Rigel and Pansy sat with their classmates in the Slytherin section, cheering on their team and just letting off some of the energy they'd pent up while studying for final exams. Slytherin won, and the cheers in the actual student section were nearly deafening. The entire House glowed with pride for the rest of the week, though the boasting was kept to a tasteful amount by most of the upper years at least.

The afterglow didn't last long, however. Soon finals were upon them, and the students who'd been struck by the sickness were especially stressed out over the prospect of the exams. Though Dumbledore

had made an announcement that any student who failed the exam due to sickness would still pass and be able to take extra tutoring in the fall to bring themselves up to curriculum, no one wanted to be stuck in extra lessons the following year.

Rigel wasn't too worried. She knew she could at least pass the finals, and she had so many other things to do before summer that studying was something to be done when there was nothing else to be done. She was keeping up with Flint's assignments, and her own of course. She was studying Healing as much as she could, trying to bring herself up to where Archie would be, and therefore where her parents would expect her to be by the end of the first year at AIM. Her Occlumency could wait, but Rigel knew Lily wouldn't be able to keep James and Sirius from demanding to see some Healing for the whole summer, no matter the laws about underage magic.

So she studied the textbooks she'd taken from the Potter Library and by the first of June she was confident that she could heal a minor bone fracture (she'd only healed a bird's wing so far, and bird bones were very light and thin, but she had the basic concept down), which was right on schedule with where Archie would be, though he would be faster and more confident than she was and have a better understanding of the theory behind it. Rigel was learning Healing like most muggles learned algebra. She could follow the situation-specific formulas and come out even at the end, but she had no idea how or why the equations worked the way they did.

She was also sending letters back and forth to Archie, coordinating their return trip home, and so it was that the first Wednesday in June saw her writing yet another letter. This letter was unique because she was writing it with a handwriting charm instead of a Dicto-quill. Usually, Rigel dictated her letters to Sirius, Remus, and the rest, so that her handwriting wouldn't give her away, and only wrote her letters to Archie because it didn't matter if it was her handwriting on those, since no one in America would be able to tell. This time, she was writing to Archie with the new handwriting charm she'd learned so that he could compare it to his own and approve it before she

tried it on Sirius. The charm was two parts. First you cast the charm over the sample of handwriting you wanted to imitate, then you cast the charm over your dominant hand, and everything you wrote with that hand would be in the sample handwriting for approximately one hour.

She leaned back on her dorm room bed and admired her work. It really did look like one of Archie's letters. She was about to seal it when Theo spoke up from the bed next to her.

"Hey, Rigel, can you help me with this?"

Rigel looked over. Theo was sitting on the foot of his bed, both feet on the lid of his trunk, which sat just below him, and was clearly trying to get the over-sized trunk to close.

"Are you packing tonight?" she asked curiously. They would finish their finals the next day, but they didn't leave for a couple more days after that, on the first Saturday of the month.

"I just need to make sure it all fits," Theo explained, huffing as he strained his muscles to push down on the lid, "Otherwise I'll have to donate some of my shoes to the lost and found or something."

Draco glanced over from his own bed on the other side of Rigel and grinned, "I think the fact that you're standing on it means that all of your things do not, in fact, fit in that trunk."

"I really think I can persuade it otherwise," Theo said good-naturedly, "Come on, Rigel, help me."

Rigel got up and went to stand by Theo's trunk, "What do you want me to do?"

"I don't know," Theo scratched his head, "Sit on it or something."

Rigel shook her head, but went to sit obediently on Theo's uncooperative trunk.

Draco's POV:

Draco watched as Rigel went to contribute to Theo's impossible packing methods. He would never participate in something so ungainly himself, but he had to admit it was pretty funny watching his roommates make fools over themselves for a piece of luggage. His eyes drifted back to the letter Rigel had been writing, which was now lying quite exposed on his bed. He couldn't help thinking there was something different about it.

Then he realized with a jolt of surprise that the handwriting was different. Why, it wasn't at all like Rigel's usual handwriting, which was generally small, unslanted cursive. Instead, the letter that Draco had just watched Rigel write was in a large, loopy handwriting that moved erratically across the parchment instead of in the neat, near-perfect rows Rigel generally took notes in. Was he more lazy in a letter home? Was the handwriting some sort of code that meant different things depending on-no. No, he was being silly. It could be anything. He generally wrote his father with a dicto-quill, Draco knew, so maybe it was because he secretly had really bad handwriting. A bad habit he consciously broke to take notes. Every. Single. Day. Draco frowned, thinking. He supposed it made sense if Rigel had been writing with a handwriting charm, but why would he? Draco shook his head and turned back to his own letter home. He would just add weird handwriting fluctuations to the growing list of really strange things he knew about his friend.

All in all it had been a very weird semester. He'd come to Hogwarts expecting... not exactly what he'd found. The Quidditch was pretty much what he'd thought it would be. Classes, too, were fairly straightforward. But other things...

His friends, for instance, were not at all what he had been expecting. He'd known Pansy already, the little blonde girl who always hung around his mother when Mr. Parkinson came to talk to his father. He'd really expected, however, that he would mostly hang around with Crabbe and Goyle, both of whom had been constant fixtures,

rather like two ugly suits of armor, in his life before Hogwarts. Draco had fully expected to walk the halls of Hogwarts with his pseudo-bodyguards in the left and right wings, but then Rigel Black had walked up to that sorting hat and, completely ignoring other people's carefully thought out expectations of their time here at Hogwarts, gotten himself sorted into Slytherin.

Immediately, something changed. He would not be reporting on the Black scion from afar, like his mother had asked him to, but from the next bed over as a dorm-mate. And then Black had to make himself so interesting, and before Draco knew it he was Rigel, and Parkinson was Pansy, and they were all three best friends. Well, sort of. It was hard to claim to be someone's best friend while also being perfectly aware that they were keeping major secrets from you. Just like it was hard to claim that someone was your best friend when you were also sort of reporting on said best friend to your parents. Still, it was a Slytherin sort of friendship, like the kind Draco often suspected his father and godfather had, and that suited Draco just fine.

The sickness he had definitely not seen coming, and the thing with Lee Jordan trying to kill Rigel had come from complete nowhere. The strangest thing, though, was Rigel himself. The boy was, objectively speaking, odd. He was a vegetarian. He slept in his clothes. He had a strange, almost innate knowledge of the castle layout from the very first week. He spoke about his magic like it had a mind of its own, and all evidence that Draco could see seemed to support the theory that it *did* have a mind of its own. He was so good with potions that Uncle Severus had been immediately impressed. He could walk through people's magical cores. And despite everything he could do-levitating Longbottom in mid-air just a day after learning the spell, flying for weeks one-handed with a broken wrist, pulling a potions essay out of his own mind without references-he *didn't care*. Rigel treated everything he did like it was just something to keep him busy until he could brew potions again.

It drove Draco crazy, and even Pansy, Miss Patience herself, grew extremely frustrated with Rigel every now and then. How could someone have so much sheer ability and just not give it a thought? Magic was an inconvenience to him, and yet it was his unique way with magic that allowed him to save Draco's life. His father had made Rigel a Malfoy, and Rigel had just blinked like he didn't get why they would do something that he saw as being so unnecessary. Rigel Black was exasperating, confusing, and Draco knew he hardly agreed with anything Draco said or believed, though Rigel never actually came out and said it. But even though Draco had always imagined friends as people who supported and agreed with you no matter what, Rigel was undeniably one of the best friends he'd ever had. Pansy was the other best friend he'd ever had, and most of what made her so great was that she was the only other person who understood just how weird Rigel really was.

So even though Pansy was a girl, and even though Rigel lied to him all the time, Draco was pretty sure those things didn't matter, because after the year of craziness they'd had, Draco thought maybe friends weren't the ones who agreed with you. They were the ones who saved your life and then listened to you complain about how aggravating your life-saving friend was. Draco rolled up his letter to his father carefully, knowing that any smudged ink would be remarked upon, and thought as he tied it closed that even though it hadn't been what he expected, his first year at Hogwarts was one he would never forget.

Regular POV:

Their compartment was completely full on the train ride home, and they didn't hate anyone in it. Millicent had taken the empty sixth seat, and so they spent the ride talking and making promises to write, visit, and meet up over the summer completely sans the usual train-ride drama. The Weasley Twins came and said their goodbyes, along with Ron and even Percy, prompting Draco to mutter half-heartedly about their compartment becoming infested with Weasels. Neville

stopped by too, and surprisingly Cho Chang, whose appearance was unexpected enough to have all of Rigel's classmates looking at her with varying expressions that said 'who-are-you-and-why-do-you-know-all-these-people-who-aren't-Slytherins?' Rigel shrugged noncommittally and a collective eye-roll (except for Pansy, who didn't roll her eyes) went around the compartment.

Rigel had never been so glad to see the outline of Kings Cross station in the distance. She wanted to be home so badly it ached. Though her first-year at Hogwarts had been both everything and nothing she'd expected it to be, she was so tired. It wasn't magical exhaustion like when she'd been brewing Snowbit for Snape, and it wasn't mental exhaustion like when fighting the sickness in Draco's head. It was pure, soul-deep exhaustion that came from the strain of constant lying, constant deception, constant pretense. Her soul was wrung out, and she didn't think she could be Rigel for one more minute. She needed Archie. She needed Remus. She needed to see her mom and dad and Sirius and have them see her for her, Harry, not Archie or whoever she was pretending to be anymore.

She needed a break from the person she was at Hogwarts, even if just for a week or so before she'd visit her friends as Rigel again. She would sleep in her pajamas, see green eyes looking back at her from the mirror, and not talk about Harry Potter in the third person even once. She would brew all day long, she thought dreamily, and not have to pretend she cared about other classes and assignments.

Rigel stood as the train began to slow. "Well, it's been a great year, guys. I'll miss you all, and don't forget to write. I'll see you in September," she said. She waved in a show of exaggerated cheerfulness, and left the compartment before any of her dumbfounded friends could react to her abrupt departure.

Rigel ducked into the nearest bathroom and locked herself in a stall while she took out a vial of Polyjuice Potion from her pocket and the fresh lock of hair Archie had mailed her at the end of May. She downed the dose and gritted her teeth against the uncomfortable twisting sensation in her gut. A few minutes later she emerged as

Archie's twin and went to stand by the doors so that when the train stopped she'd be ready to go. She had her trunk in her pocket, along with enough Polyjuice doses to last her until midnight, and when the Hogwarts Express finally stopped completely Rigel hopped onto the platform with a step as light as her heart. She was almost there.

Sirius was hard to miss, and it wasn't because of the pink-and-yellow top hat he was wearing. It was his expression, half-hopeful and half-anxious, that was so out of place among the crowd of cheerful, waving parents and guardians. Rigel smiled as wide as Archie's mouth would allow her to and took off toward her Uncle at a run. His face registered a moment of surprise, and then he was holding out his arms to catch her as she rocketed through the air toward him.

"Dad!" she landed on him with all the finesse of a flying rhino, but Sirius caught her anyway and used her momentum to twirl her in a circle like he was want to do to people. She hugged him tight, but not as tightly as Sirius held her.

"Archie," he breathed with relief. He set her down carefully and looked searchingly into her face, "How are you?"

"Great now that I'm back!" she said. She grabbed Sirius's arm and began towing him out of the platform, determined to get away before her friends came looking. "It's so great to see you again, Dad. I'm sorry I didn't write more, but you won't believe all the things I have to tell you! No, really, I don't think you'll believe me at all, which is why I didn't bother putting it in a letter, but I'm going to tell you anyway. So much stuff happened this last semester! Did you know Slytherin won the Quidditch Cup? Ravenclaw won the House Cup, but the Quidditch one is the only one that really matters. Draco didn't play, but Avery Pucey did, and he helped me with my Herbology homework once."

She chattered on and on and on as they made their way through the winding streets of London to an apparition point. Sirius didn't once interrupt her, instead just watching and listening with his smile getting bigger and more relaxed the more she talked.

"And I'm pretty sure I passed all my finals, but Binns had us write three feet on a goblin rebellion he only mentioned like once in October. Three whole feet! And-"

"Woah, there, pup," Sirius broke in with a laugh, "You can tell me everything when we get home, and then again when we go to Godric's Hollow for dinner. Just tell me this," here he looked at her with a more serious expression, "Did you like Hogwarts? I mean, really like it?"

Rigel looked into the grey eyes that would always be brighter than what a contact could imitate and answered as honestly as she could, "Hogwarts was wonderful, Dad. It was everything you'd told me and more, but nothing is as good as coming home."

Snape's POV:

The office of Severus Snape was unusually bare. Some might say that it was always rather Spartan, and that the odds of it somehow becoming more so were rather impossible, but after spending most of the day packing up his office for the summer break, even Severus Snape had to admit, looking around, that his office was quite bare. Gone were the shelves of embalmed ingredients that served as both a macabre decoration to his admittedly offbeat sense of humor and as deterrent for any non-Slytherin student ornery enough to attempt a visit longer than the time it took to completely dismiss them. Gone was the comfortable chair that usually sat behind the desk. Gone were the papers almost always sitting on top of the desk, and as soon as he cleaned out the last drawer he, too, would be gone. Away from meddlesome old men with beards too long to be sanitary, away from children who didn't know the right end of a stirring rod from the sharp end of their sub-standard steel knives. Away from teaching and grading and worrying about how many of his students were going to cause near-fatal accidents because they couldn't be bothered to read the directions before tossing ingredients around like they were tossing around their mother's spice rack. He would have

three months of peace to brew, research, and experiment-in other words, to relax.

First, though, he had to pack away this one last drawer. The first thing on top was the bag of medi-balls he's given Black to train his magic with. A quick look in the bag confirmed that every single one of them was as bright, steady green as the day the little brat had handed them over to him. As if they didn't understand the concept of naturally declining magical energy at all. He shook his head. Was nothing that child did normal? Severus really didn't know what to make of Rigel Black. If someone had asked him at the beginning of the school year if he'd be taking the son of one of his enemies on as his trial-apprentice, he'd have taken 100 points from Gryffindor for asking such an impertinent question, because really only an idiotic Gryffindor would ask something so clearly ludicrous of a man like Severus Snape, who so clearly did not have time for lunacy.

Of course, that was before Rigel Black had gotten sorted into Slytherin and showed himself to have a stubborn will and an eye for potions-and more importantly, a *heart* for potions.

Severus packed the bag of medi-minis away in the box and pulled a few other odds and ends that always seemed to collect in his office when he had no where else to keep such things out of the drawer. The last thing, tucked into the very bottom of the drawer against the back, was a silk-wrapped bundle that he froze upon seeing. He sighed and pulled it out, lowering himself to the ground to sit and look tiredly at the bundle.

The Potions Master gazed at the innocuous little bundle and wondered how it had come to this. He unwrapped it slowly, and there, in the silk, was a pile of perfectly preserved ginseng. It didn't look like much, and indeed in the grand scheme of the sickness it wouldn't have been much, but it was enough to keep one child supplied with Snowhit and Aurora's Breath for several months at least. Severus Snape stared at the bundle for a long while. There was nothing special about the ginseng itself, but rather what it represented.

The ginseng symbolized a lie, *his* lie to be exact. There was nothing remarkable about the fact that he had lied-Severus Snape lied for a living, as many, many people would attest. It was this particular lie, however, the why and how of it, that merited deep contemplation.

He had lied to Rigel Black, lied in the boy's own mindscape, when he told Black that his telling Severus about Draco's illness would have made no difference. In truth, Severus had set aside this ginseng and preserved it the very moment he realized they were running low. He had looked over Draco's allergy list himself when Lucius had turned it in, and he had known that it was only a matter of time before his godson fell sick as well. So he had made sure that when Draco fell ill he would be taken care of. Of course that plan only worked if he was made aware of the fact that his godson was ill, but instead of telling Black that, instead of explaining about the hidden ginseng, he had lied.

He told the boy that he hadn't made anything worse with his mistake, and let the boy go on believing that Draco's life truly was still in danger even though Severus had only stopped by the Hospital Wing to check up on Draco before getting started on brewing him the necessary potions when Narcissa had noticed Draco's hand twitch. He let Black think he'd saved Draco when nobody else could, let Draco and even Lucius and Narcissa think it, not telling his oldest friend of the stash of ginseng he'd prepared, though he knew what that would mean to them in terms of the Life they felt they owed the boy.

Severus could have easily justified his actions by saying that if he'd told the truth the sickness might never have been cured. If Black didn't think his best friend was in mortal danger, he wouldn't have tried so hard to save him. But the truth was that the sickness was cured the moment Black had gotten into Draco's mind, and he had done that before Severus had shown up and lied to him.

So why had he lied? It was simple, and yet it was so complicated he could scarcely fathom it. Severus Snape simply, and impossibly, didn't want to hurt the boy. Black had felt guilty already for what he

thought he'd done, and he'd done much for Draco, despite the fact that his godson would have been okay without Black's help. He didn't need to make the boy feel worse after the fact, so he'd invented a fiction in which Black really had saved Draco from certain death. If Severus thought about it long enough, it really wasn't much of a lie. Black had been operating under the assumption that Draco was going to die, and even if he was wrong, he had still done a hero's work, for a hero's reason. Surely, then, it wasn't so much to ask that he receive a hero's reward. Narcissa and Lucius could afford the Life Debt-Severus knew Black was not the kind of boy to demand an impossible payment, or more likely any payment at all. No one got hurt, in the end, and his pseudo-apprentice gained both confidence and acclaim, both of which would help him later.

The trouble was that Severus Snape had shown sympathy and even kindness for someone who was not just a student, not just a Slytherin, but a Black. A *Black*. He hated the Blacks. Hated the whole, diseased family. Sirius Black was a name etched with hate on Severus' every schoolyard memory, and to behave in such a way toward his son-to show kindness and go out of his way to avoid hurting the child-such a thing even Albus would have considered beyond him. Yet so it was.

Severus wrapped the bundle of Ginseng back up and placed it in the box with the rest. He stood and hefted the box under an arm, using the other to douse the lights and lock up behind him. As he walked the dungeon corridors for the last time until September, he couldn't help but shake his head at the way the year had turned out. Last August he never would have imagined that he'd find the perfect heir to his potions expertise in the child of his most bitter childhood enemy. Things were changing. He was changing. Only time would tell if the world could really change for the better.

[end of chapter twenty-one].

A/N: This is the end of The Pureblood Pretense, book one in this series. I will be posting the epilogue to this book at the same time as

I post the first chapter of the next book in the series, that way if you have this story on Alert, you should receive a notice that this one has been updated, and you'll know to find the next story on my profile. Look out for: The Serpentine Subterfuge .

Much love,

-Violet

Epilogue

A/N: This is the epilogue, which segues into the next part of the Pureblood Pretense series, also posted now. I don't own anything you recognize as Harry Potter or Song of the Lioness. Thanks for reading.

The Pureblood Pretense:

Epilogue

Lucius Malfoy was never nervous. Nervousness was an affliction of people sensitive to fear. Lucius had nothing to fear, because he belonged to that elite group of men in the world that truly are untouchable in the realest possible way. So if his heart beat a little faster in the presence of one Tom Marvolo Riddle, it was not because he was nervous, anxious, or otherwise suffering from fearful anticipation. He could not deny that he was in suspense, bent nearly double in a bow lower than any he would give outside of his leader's presence. He had reported to Riddle as soon as he'd quit the Hogwarts anti-apparition wards and was waiting for Riddle's response, whatever it may be.

It was true that Riddle would probably not be happy with the news Lucius had come bearing. Lucius himself was not quite as disappointed as he might have been, but his son's life had, after all, been in grave and unforeseen danger because of the sickness that had so recently been thwarted. And that was just it. The sickness had been cured.

Lucius wasn't sure how Riddle was going to take that news. He knew how long his leader-he hesitated to use the word Master, both because a true Malfoy had no master and because that wasn't really the sort of image the S.O.W. Party wanted to give off-had worked on the sickness. It had been perfect-or so they had thought. Draco's reaction was of course, unanticipated, and Riddle had apologized for

the event already, though of course it was not Riddle who was at fault. When Lucius found out who had been buying up the ginseng crop he would see to it they paid dearly. Still, the sickness was formidable. To think that a boy of eleven had developed a cure, and such an unconventional one at that, well, Lucius was not at all certain what Riddle's reaction would be.

His spine was slowly stiffening, but he remained with his head and shoulders bowed, staring at the elaborate Indian silk carpet beneath his booted feet until Riddle spoke. To Lucius' immense surprise, when Riddle bade him rise it was with a soft laugh-a laugh!

"Stand up, Lucius, and come closer so that I don't have to shout across the room to be heard," Riddle said, and when Lucius looked up it was to find a smile playing across Riddle's mouth. Not a politician's smile, though he was very good at those, but a real one.

Lucius moved forward until he was directly before the golden throne Riddle sat upon in the middle of the cavernous reception room. It was a private joke among the upper tier of their Party that Riddle was King of the Cows. Oh, they knew what their opponents called them. The fools knew nothing. Lucius had had the throne encrusted with emeralds for Riddle's last birthday, and they winked at him in the light of a hundred candles as he approached his leader.

Tom Riddle was an impressive specimen of a wizard, Lucius could admit that freely and without insecurity. He was tall and well formed, with a politician's perfect hair and a card sharp's piercing gaze. Yes, Tom Riddle was impressive in every sense of the word. Then again, Lucius himself was rather impressive if one believed his wife when she was at her most revealing. It was not his physique or political charm that had drawn Lucius to the man and allowed him to bow before him when none other would do. It was his magic. Riddle had the magic of Merlin himself; of this fact Lucius would swear to Mordrid. It was wild, it was powerful, and it was wielded by the most capable political mind of the century. Lucius would go far at Riddle's side, oh yes, he would go very far indeed, just as his father might have were it not for his untimely demise.

Lucius looked Riddle in the eye and said, "Yes, Mr. Riddle?"

"So a first-year was able to get around my little bug's defenses, is that what you're telling me, Lucius?" Riddle asked, that strange smile still tugging at the edges of his mouth.

"Yes, Mr. Riddle," Lucius said.

"Interesting," Riddle drew out the word as if tasting it for potency, "Yes, very interesting. I admit, I did not think that anyone would be able to penetrate the sickness until I called it back. Not even Severus should have been able to lift the mental barriers from without. I made sure of this, of course, as I knew that his position under Dumbledore's watchful eye would prompt him to attempt it. Yet from your account this child was able to unravel the defenses from within?"

"That is correct, Mr. Riddle," Lucius said, "The boy demonstrated this unusual ability in front of my wife and I. It appears that he is able to enter the mind through a person's magical core, however ridiculous the idea seems to common logic."

"Common knowledge is sometimes the least reliable," Riddle admonished gently, "This ability is most suspect, however. You have felt the boy's magic?"

Lucius faltered, "Sir, since you have taught me how to sense the magic around a person I have met with great success in my exercise of the ability, however... I have felt nothing from the boy."

"Nothing, Lucius?" Riddle gazed at him with half-lidded amusement, "We both know that cannot be so."

"Yes, Mr. Riddle," Lucius said quickly, "I am sure that something is preventing me from accurately assessing his power levels, but through secondary sensing alone I can detect nothing around the boy. I have met him thrice, and each time it is the same. There is none of the wild aura of magic a child of eleven would usually have,

especially a magically strong child who does not yet know how to control his power. However..."

"Continue, Lucius," Riddle said, "Speak your thoughts."

"The boy intimated that he learned primary sensing from Severus in an effort to learn conscious potion imbuing earlier in the semester," Lucius said, "So it is likely that Severus has a better understanding of the child's magical depths."

"I shall be having a chat with Severus very soon, it seems, though I know how he dislikes being pulled from his summer experiments," Riddle chuckled softly, "In any event, the boy does not appear to be a threat to us at the moment. You say he is primarily focused on school work at this time?"

"Yes, sir," Lucius said, "My son reports that the boy does little besides read about and brew potions when he is not completing his other school work. I, too, believe he is of no danger to our goals at this time."

"Time, indeed," Riddle said thoughtfully, "Time is very much on our side. Lucius, you will see that the legislation is tabled for the moment. I have a few changes I'd like to make to the proposal while we have the chance."

"Yes, Mr. Riddle," Lucius paused, "And the boy?"

"I very much desire to meet this young Slytherin lad, this Rigel Black," Riddle said, gazing off to the side as he thought, "You will arrange it, Lucius."

"Of course, sir. What are we to do about Dumbledore, Mr. Riddle? He has gained a great amount of support in the wake of the sickness' cure," Lucius ventured.

"Dumbledore?" Riddle laughed softly again, "Do not trouble yourself about the good Headmaster. Plans are already being made for

September. Not even Dumbledore's phoenix will be able to rise from the ashes of the next storm I send his way."

[end of epilogue].

So ends the final chapter of The Pureblood Pretense . Thanks to everyone who has read this far, whether you started in December or just yesterday. The sequel, The Serpentine Subterfuge, is now up. Thanks again, for making my first story something unforgettable. I never expected to get ten reviews, much less over 200, and really thought-provoking and encouraging reviews at that. Can't thank you all enough. Much love. -Violet